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# LIQUID ECOLOGIES IN LATIN AMERICAN AND CARIBBEAN ART

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### 3 Acts of Remaining: Liquid Ecologies and Memory Work in Contemporary Art Interventions

Liliana Gómez

#### Acts of Remaining

The current environmental crisis, linked to a long and violent transformation of landscapes with the related political conflicts against soil and people and their psychic and material implications, has been contested by art interventions that brought up and experimented with the motives and media of fluidities and bodies of water. By understanding liquids as ontological materials, this chapter addresses the memory work by a series of contemporary artworks that are critical ecologies. In the way they critique universalism and the opacity and the invisibility of displaced and forgotten histories of violence, such as the “histories of racial thought and settler colonialism,” the artworks discussed are also interventions into the narratives of the Anthropocene.<sup>1</sup> In Western narratives the use of the term Anthropocene reproduces the lacunae of history about the diverse forms of violence, economic, racial, or political, into which environmental transformations are embedded. The artworks brought together in this chapter, I will argue, interrupt these silences and omissions as they use liquids against the obliteration of a social crisis, deeply entangled with the violent man-made transformation of landscapes. The chapter further discusses the use of liquids and bodies of water in these artworks as a media-reflexive dimension of art, mirroring a long engagement in Latin American and Caribbean arts with fluidity and liquidity as cultural metaphors that ground new analytical terrains.

The chapter specifically focuses on the recent installation *Alchemy of the Soul, Elixir for the Spirits* (2015), by Cuban-born artist María Magdalena Campos-Pons, and its relationship to two of her earlier works, *Everything is separated by water* (1990) and *Sugar/Bittersweet* (2010). In her latest, site-specific installation, *Alchemy of the Soul, Elixir for the Spirits*, Campos-Pons examines the Cuban sugar trade, offering a material and architectural inquiry into the Atlantic passage, the industrial landscape, and its ruins, recreating the material transformations of the landscape through sugar and rum distillation. These works are brought into dialogue with two video installations by the Colombian artist Clemencia Echeverri, *Treno (canto fúnebre)* (2007) and *Río por asalto* (2018). Echeverri has worked on diverse forms of violence related to the Colombian armed conflict, specifically forced disappearance. She stages the river in her audio-visual work to visibilize it as a place of burial and death and, significantly, as a counter-memory against the lacunae of Colombian historiography and its silences. Both artists problematize through the medium of liquids the hidden and forgotten histories of violence in the form of a social and ecological crisis, through forced disappearance in Colombia and forced displacement related to the transatlantic slave trade

in Cuba. Campos-Pons reconnects the ocean with the sugar industry and Echeverri re-narrates the agency of the river against the backdrop of modern mega-infrastructural river dams, entangled with ruins and processes of ruination of a present past. Art has the capacity, they suggest, to reveal and make perceptible the psychic and material sedimentations of forms of violence and thus the economic history that often lies behind them. Their interventions reflect a new sensibility to engage various contexts for the understanding of fluids and liquids as ontological materials that are bound to the material histories of Latin America and the Caribbean.

The chapter adopts a theoretical perspective to engage with the use of liquids and, in particular, water in these artworks and to connect them to the discursive depth that liquidity has experienced in recent discussion.<sup>2</sup> I also wish to connect this approach to the emergent discussion that orients itself towards the decolonial practice of slow histories of violence<sup>3</sup> that problematize the deeper implications of the “interstices of exile, displacement, and memory,” that materialize a social crisis.<sup>4</sup> My approach is thus inspired by a body of theoretical literature that grounds my discussion of liquid ecologies and memory work. First, I adopt the notion of *performance* elaborated by performance scholar and Latin Americanist Diana Taylor.<sup>5</sup> Contrary to Phelan’s argument about the “‘ontology of performance,’ stressing the liveness of the performative event, the *now* in which that performance take place,” I take performance to be a practice that deepens our understanding of a temporality beyond the present.<sup>6</sup> Further, as Taylor productively elaborated, contrary to Phelan’s reasoning, performance participates not only “in the circulation of representations of representation” but relates to a human time anchored in cultural memory.<sup>7</sup> I thus follow Taylor’s rereading of performance as aesthetic practice that is bound to memory and archive, orienting it towards a temporality that we conceive as history. Accordingly, performance “participates in the transfer and continuity of knowledge,” Taylor insists, against the primacy of the written and documented word as the sole constitutive element of memory in Western modern culture. Echeverri explores this continuity of knowledge in the forms of mourning and loss as lived experiences of the Colombian armed conflict through the psychic and material impacts on the river, the main performative element in her audio-visual installations, inquiring into the memory work of the waters of Colombian rivers. In both her video and sound installations, *Treno (canto fúnebre)* and *Río por asalto*, she delves into the river as a site of mourning and witnessing political and environmental violence, while she recreates through the echoing of the water the evanescence of memory. Campos-Pons, for her part, productively uses performance as an aesthetic practice to make tangible the submerged gestures of violence of the slave trade that embody the ephemeral materiality of memory work. With her performance work *Agri dulce* (Bittersweet), making herself present as an artist in her installation in Salem, she consciously employs performance to reenact what remains, anchoring this bodily knowledge of resistance in a time of cultural memory.

Second, I wish to bring together this understanding of performance with the perspective of the posthuman feminist phenomenology that helps sharpen my discussion on liquid ecologies and the conceptualization of liquids as ontological material. With *Bodies of Water*, the cultural studies scholar Astrida Neimanis laid the ground to reorient the discussion on water as perceived through the female body towards a more analytical framework of water as an inherent perspective of human and non-human relationships.<sup>8</sup> This of course has consequences for a Western epistemology that underlines the discussion of the dichotomy of nature and culture, and thus memory.



Adopting a phenomenological perspective means to recognize corporeity (*Leiblichkeit*) as central to the perception of the world and meaning in human time and experience, as sustained in the earlier works by the philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and, I wish to add, memory. Further, the idea of corporeity refers to the body (*corps propre*) as a condition of experience and constitutive dimension of the perception of the world that lays the ground for an embodiment of a feminist consciousness.<sup>9</sup> This is particularly pertinent for framing the work of María Magdalena Campos-Pons but also to contextualize the use of river water in Clemencia Echeverri's audio-visual and sound installations. As underscored by Neimanis, water reflects resistance to the omissions and neglect in debates on the Anthropocene, understood as Western hegemonic discourse, and thus constitutes the "most urgent, visceral, and ethically fraught sites of political praxis and theoretical inquiry."<sup>10</sup> Both artists, I will argue, reimagine through their artworks the embodied relation we have to water, critically inquiring into the broader impacts on "the man-made currents of the Anthropocene," with its long history of violence, that seem to pull us further away "from any 'safe operating humanity.'"<sup>11</sup> As acts of remaining, their artworks inquire into the submerged gestures that materialize the cultural impacts of violence on humans and non-humans alike, to thus become a powerful memory work.

Expanding on the posthuman feminist phenomenological perspective, it becomes urgent to reread the work of Campos-Pons, as it critically reconfigures various bodies of liquids that bind together the ocean water of the Atlantic passage with the bodies of the slave trade, her reflection on the embodiment of water, as materialized in her work *Everything is separated by water* (1990). Understanding liquid as an ontological material that becomes the thread of Campos-Pons's work, my discussion of her aesthetic production thus leads us beyond the narratives of black diaspora, race, and ethnicity that have often framed the reception of her artwork. Accordingly, unfolding the ecocritical engagement of both artists by discussing fluids and liquids, as used as ontological materials in their art practices, I also aim to work out how they contest on a meta-level the forgotten history of the landscapes to which their artworks irreducibly relate. Liquids and bodies of water thus become counter-narratives of these neglected and omitted histories of the social crisis and the embedded imperial debris revisited in a subtle, critical way by both artists.<sup>12</sup>

Campos-Pons explores in her late work the powerful usage of forms and signs "to historicize the unruly legacy of displacement, dispersal, and loss in which transatlantic slavery and modernity are violently bound."<sup>13</sup> Throughout her work she materializes "the discrepant temporalities—broken histories that trouble the linear progressivist narratives of nation-states and global modernization."<sup>14</sup> Accordingly, as evincing "the plenitude of the African diasporic archive," her work challenges the reduction of the use of this archive "to the narrow context of racial identity rather than as a vehicle for freeing the imagination of contemporary art and its resilient embedment in classical Western art" pushing beyond such essentialist reading.<sup>15</sup> It is precisely this thread of a media-reflexive dimension of art that will guide us through the reading of the artworks. They contour a neglected discussion delving into the violent transformations of environment and personhood against the backdrop of the modern capitalist production of space. Both artists use the figure of thought of liquidity as another temporality, with its resiliences and non-linear time lapses, and as creative movement to unfold ambivalences, contradictions, and the incommensurable of cultural work giving shape to their interventions that "offer the analytic capacity to join the waste of

bodies, the degradation of environment, and the psychic weight of colonial processes that entangle people, soil, and things."<sup>16</sup> The artists' works, as acts of remaining, thus engage with what anthropologist Ann Laura Stoler elaborated as "imperial debris," in the way they recreate liquids—such as rivers, water, or alcohol—to materialize omitted or submerged gestures that embody the ephemeral materiality of memory work, and in so doing foreground situations of political or environmental conflict and social crisis against forgetting.<sup>17</sup>

### Bodies of Water: *Alchemy of the Soul, Elixir for the Spirits*

The theme of liquids and water has been a recurrent one in the works of artist María Magdalena Campos-Pons. Its first materialization was with her early mixed-media relief *Everything is separated by water, including my brain, my heart, my sex, my house* (1990). From a feminist perspective, Campos-Pons problematizes her body and embodiment, as an Afro-Cuban artist and her experience of "double exile," through a "critical and aesthetic language, disruptions and divisions between gender and sexuality, the politics of race and class, and the representation of the imagined community" that entangle diverse bodies of water together.<sup>18</sup> In this early work a painted column of water divides the image of a female body with barbed wire that encloses the halves of the figure, while on the feet rest the renderings of seemingly Aztec temples. This relief certainly alludes to the history of ritual practices of sacrifice in the Americas and thus foretells the importance ancestral rituals will have in Campos-Pons's oeuvre.<sup>19</sup> With *Everything is separated by water* Campos-Pons grounds her long feminist engagement with "embodied materiality, inflected with an affective and political subjectivity."<sup>20</sup> Curator Lisa Freiman underscores that this early work, besides the numerous themes that are part of Campos-Pons's conceptual work, "provides a strong framework for understanding her aesthetic production" to come.<sup>21</sup> Further, as a conceptual artist, Campos-Pons explores materials as signifiers in her work, as "the decision to work with one medium or [material] is based on how that particular material embodies the concept of the work."<sup>22</sup> The title further suggests that water is thought of as body of water, a female body encircled by water, "including my brain, my heart, my sex." As has been acknowledged "the body as a medium for subaltern artists stems from the 'specific relationship between mind and body for colonized and enslaved peoples and their descendants.'"<sup>23</sup> Experiences such as traumatic loss and familial destruction, "severing the body from will," seem to "ground New World subjectivities."<sup>24</sup> In the Women's Art movement, which started during the 1970s, the "idea of self-conscious body imaginary and female experiences as source material for creating earth sculptures, imagined rituals, and performances" thus became an effective strategy for critical inquiry.<sup>25</sup> Sharing this discursive context, I argue that *Everything is separated by water* seems also to be a conceptualization of water, as an embodiment of water, used here as an ontological material that resurfaces in the later aesthetic production of the mixed-media installation *Alchemy of the Soul, Elixir for the Spirits*, referring explicitly to an understanding of the body as "both nature and culture, both science and soul, both matter and meaning."<sup>26</sup> Reflecting explicitly on the body of water in a double meaning of the female body, marked by the experience of being Afro-Cuban and of embodiment, expanding it to the idea of the oceanic conditions of her native place, the island of Cuba, the title refers to the insularity of the island and the restricted movement due to the economic embargo of that time.



In her recent installation *Alchemy of the Soul, Elixir for the Spirits*, Campos-Pons works with constellations of sugar using various materials to relate to the landscape of Cuba and her childhood experience there, to the rusty industrial architecture of the former sugar mills, to the transformation processes of rum distillation and of the packing and shipping of sugar. This allegory of material transformation of landscape and personhood through sugar is not at all trivial. The installation was shown at the Peabody Essex Museum in Salem, Massachusetts, in 2015, a place deeply interwoven with the sugar industry and the hidden history of the slave trade, which later becomes an important place for rum distillery. Originally not intended as such, the mixed-media installation became a site-specific artwork entangled with the place's economic and environmental unconscious.<sup>27</sup> As a material inquiry into the Atlantic passage and the industrial landscape, Campos-Pons explores both the material and psychic impacts of sugar and rum distillation, with which slavery and her own ancestry and family history have been entangled. Mimicking the industrial-looking, now ruined landscape of Cuba with the architecture of sugar refineries, Campos-Pons not only connects the island with the area of Salem and the rum distillery but also evokes the psychic ruins and processes of ruination and how the sugar industry impacted on the degradation of landscapes and personhood. In her installation, the materiality of this landscape is transformed into elliptical bulbous glass and tubular glass sculptures combined with steel elements as a resilient industrial material in luminescent colors ranging from a purplish brown and oceanic blue to a dark bottle green and transparent golden yellow or beige (Plate 13). This color range certainly alludes to the earlier sculpture work *Sugar/Bittersweet* (2010), where Campos-Pons problematizes racism and slavery by mimicking the colonial classification of skin colors.<sup>28</sup> Art historian Adriana Zavala reminds us of the parallelism of "the process of refining sugar and . . . the long, fraught history of Cuban colorism, both as lived experience and as cultural discourse."<sup>29</sup> Further, as a system of interconnected tubes, the installation mobilizes liquids as flows to overcome the sedimentation of the land and the archive, vis-à-vis the mobilization of memories by involving the spectator through the embodiment that is in constant flux.

*Alchemy of the Soul, Elixir for the Spirits*, a title consciously chosen, is also a metaphor, and metaphors "are anything but seamless similarity" but rather "disturbances": "They can be disruptive, suggest new analytic space and new associations, even as they seem smoothly to line up with that to which they refer," Stoler points out. "Metaphors can be political actors when they stretch our visions to new domains."<sup>30</sup> Both alchemy and elixir allude to the imaginaries of liquids materialized here in the form of alcohol that appeals to the soul and the spirits (Figure 3.1). Campos-Pons unfolds liquids as formless and ephemeral materials. They reshape a sacred aura inscribed into the spirits of the Yoruba gods and goddesses, who are also materialized in the diverse range of colors in this specific installation, which embeds a cultural resistance and a counter-narrative to the violent history of slavery. The color blue, embodied in the glass tubes (Figure 3.2), seems to refer to the water deity from the orishas of the Yoruba religion while materializing liquids as cultural signifiers. Further, the color certainly reconnects to both themes of bodies of water, ocean water, but also the laboring bodies of slavery. *Everything is separated by water* foretold how water is related in particular to the female body. Accordingly, it embeds a mythical depth, a cultural time, in which Africa is entangled with the Americas through the Atlantic passage, articulating resistance to the invisibilized and violent history of slavery and

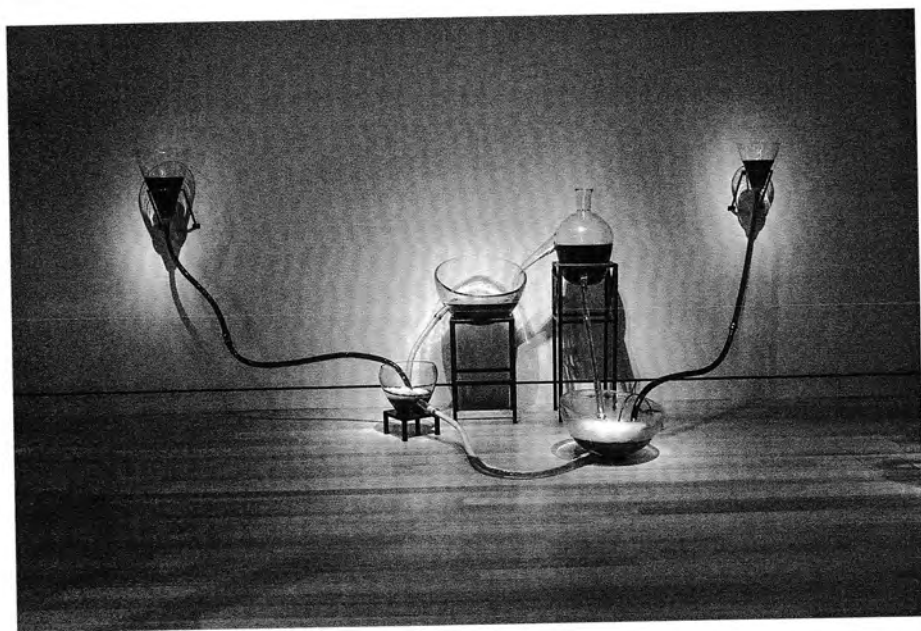


Figure 3.1 María Magdalena Campos-Pons; *Alchemy of the Soul, Elixir for the Spirits*, 2015, Peabody Essex Museum Salem.

Source: Photo by Peter Vanderwarker.



Figure 3.2 María Magdalena Campos-Pons; *Alchemy of the Soul, Elixir for the Spirits*, 2015, detail; Peabody Essex Museum Salem.

Source: Photo by Peter Vanderwarker.



the Afro-Cuban diaspora. The meaning of alchemy and elixir refers to this mythical depth and sacred realm where liquids are cultural substances in these religious and ritual practices that challenge the space of modernity projected by an ever-expanding capitalism spurred by the sugar industry and the slave trade. Using liquids as cultural metaphors, "alchemy" and "elixir" seem to ground new analytical terrains that anchor the reading of this installation as memory work. Further, through this material and metaphorical use of liquids, this recent artwork is an expanded reading of the artist's previous works. Liquids have become, I argue, the main signifiers in Campos-Pons's œuvre, which seem to correspond to a new paradigm of fluidity in emergent Latin American and Caribbean arts.<sup>31</sup>

But liquids, in this installation specifically, are not only materialized as colors but also as sound. The real sound of different liquids was materialized as "gurgling sounds" and "swelling vocals," emitted from various speakers. "These evoked the pouring of rum, a precious 'elixir' and the culmination of the histories and arduous processes evoked by the sculptures arrayed," Zavala points out.<sup>32</sup> This sound effect, staging liquids through the installation of these anthropomorphic sculptures "laden with the tragic historical circumstances that made turning sugar into rum possible," is one the main performative elements to re-materialize and reveal the omitted and submerged gestures of cultural memory.<sup>33</sup> As sound and color, liquids become part of a phenomenological dimension constitutive of the perception of the world, in which corporeality is central to the making of meaning. I argue that the use of liquids, as performed in the works by Campos-Pons, makes of water and alcohol ontological materials to reflect on the relationship between the vulnerable body and the world and to reflect on memory as an ephemeral and haunting form of being. This is especially problematized in both the installation and the recurrent real performance by the artist that accompanies this site-specific installation. Campos-Pons relates "not just to the invisibility of the laboring bodies that make the sugar we consume so voraciously in the first world, but also our sometimes willful ignorance regarding structures of violence and injustice that compel certain bodies to labor."<sup>34</sup> The installation of sculptures of glass and steel, which gives a temporary form to the formless liquids, are thus part of a memory work that the artist has elaborated since her early art interventions.<sup>35</sup> Liquids are used in her work as material signifiers of this cultural memory and the hidden history of violence that she delves into with this inquiry. The installation at PEM in Salem is thus brought to its full comprehension by Campos-Pons with the performance *Agridulce* (Bittersweet), which she uses to thematize explicitly the vulnerability of the body in "all its fragility . . . what it means to be there and breathing."<sup>36</sup> She underlines that "I only do performance when there is an urgency to really be there myself."<sup>37</sup> In this repeated performance, the artist, dressed in a green robe with white painted face and feet, enters the installation's room and confronts the audience, offering freshly cut sugar cane, while calling out, "Try it. It's sweet."<sup>38</sup> The language game in this performance materializes the bittersweet irony of the installation staging the production of sugar and rum. Through her body presence, the artist reenacts the omitted memories of plantation slavery but simultaneously alludes to the complex ritual of the *orishas* gods, invoking by her use of a machete the warrior deity Ogún of the Afro-Caribbean Yoruba religion. Juxtaposing the submerged knowledge of ancestral rituals of dance and resistance with the "specter of enslaved black women's labor on Cuba's sugar plantations," her performance and her bodily presence embody the forgotten gestures of the ephemeral materiality of memory work.<sup>39</sup> Performance thus becomes

here the act that remains against a reproduced obliteration and historical forgetting. Zavala reminds us that the use of the performance by Campos-Pons

calls to mind the ways that artists of color must negotiate the contexts within which their work is shown. Fundamentally, it was through her performance and her bodily presence in *Agridulce* that [she] brought the violence of transatlantic and global trade “home” to Salem, home to New England, and home . . . to the East India Marine Society’s cabinet of curiosities.<sup>40</sup>

Contesting this submerged landscape of violence by entangling different geographies together, the performance becomes a form to remember the related embedded processes of ruins and ruination, and thus an act to intervene in the cultural memory. The performance meant to render transparent the more opaque installation of all other objects, “While these objects exemplified a delicate, metaphoric, and decidedly nonconfrontational modality, one suggestive of a desire to impede the viewer’s ability to know directly, quickly, or completely, *Agridulce*, by contrast, spectacularized the bitterness of sugar and slavery.”<sup>41</sup> Accordingly, Campos-Pons seems to establish a productive relationship with the audience and invites them to “reconsider the whole meaning of the work.”<sup>42</sup> Sugar with the fluids of water and rum, as material signifiers of modern capitalism, becomes here a powerful allegory and “sign of colonial violence” and thus the continuation of the artist’s work of “survival and witnessing.”<sup>43</sup> Her installations and performance seem to interrupt the established yet “incomplete historical narratives” in the way she unfolds the present past with its long unspoken history of violence.<sup>44</sup>

Campos-Pons’s installation and performance certainly establishes a formal dialogue with *Sugar/Bittersweet* (Figure 3.3), a sculpture installation that thematizes the history

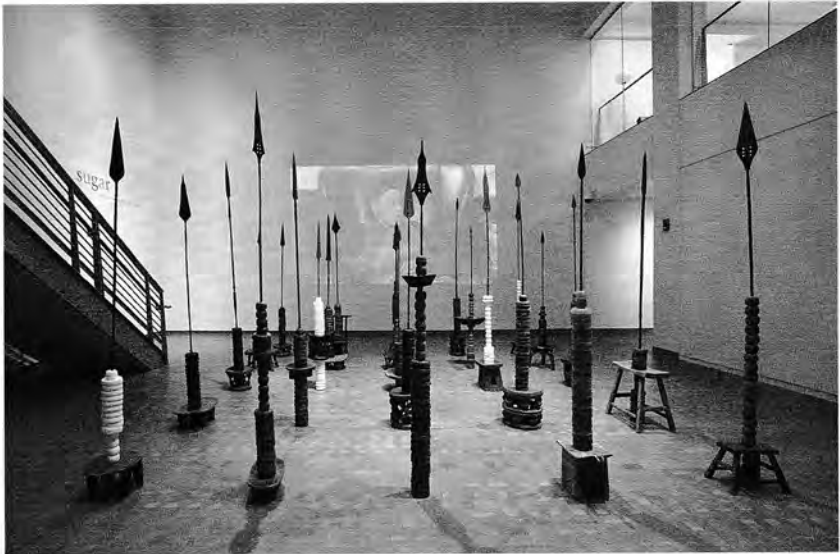


Figure 3.3 María Magdalena Campos-Pons; *Sugar/Bittersweet*, 2010, mixed-media installation, dimensions variable; Smith College Museum of Art.

Source: Photo by Stephen Petegorsky.



of violence of slavery and its “legacy in Cuban colorism” that “was suggested by the spears piercing the colored disks, the multiplicity and repetitive spatial arrangement of the threaded disks, and their sorting by color, all expressive of an ‘accumulation of sorrow and pain.’”<sup>45</sup> In her early art intervention, relating to the diasporic memory and Afro-Cuban history, Campos-Pons begun to problematize the invisibilized processes of ruination of landscape and personhood. Yet, with this recent work on rum distillery at PEM in Salem, Zavala underscores, “she issued an epistemological challenge to locate meaning both *within* the art object and phenomenologically *within* the contingencies of its institutional context.”<sup>46</sup> Further, read as a criticism of the plantation economy, both installations thematize the long-lasting cultural and environmental degradation, contesting the forgotten history of this political violence, loss, and diasporic displacement. Herewithin, the use of liquids is explicitly related to the trans-generational trauma and degradation of personhood that become central to Campos-Pons’s elaboration of the bio-history of landscape and bodies.

In the way she recreates, with this latest installation, a complex body of smells and colors, sounds and surfaces, she reflects on the modern materialities and technologies of the sugar production and rum distillery that have become the memory of the landscape. The relationship between these landscape transformations and the darkest history of the slave trade and bonded labor remains only implicit here, yet it articulates latencies and crises, repetitions and differences, repressions and possible “après-coups.” Overall, Campos-Pons’s works problematize the experience of the effects of history for individuals and for cultural communities. With *Alchemy of the Soul, Elixir for the Spirits* she creates her own archival structure choosing materials that she uses as “primary sources” such as blown glass, cast glass, steel, cast resin, silicone, acrylic, polyvinyl chloride tubing, and liquids such as water and rum essence. With these “archival” materials she aims to contest the spatial and historical amnesia of forced labor and environmental degradation, encountering it with the use of totemic, futuristic and ancestral sculptures that oscillate between the unsaid and the invisibilized, the familiar and the displaced, material space and unconscious time. Curator and art critic Okwui Enwezor once argued that Campos-Pons’s work reflects the powerful character of the unruly legacy of displacement, dispersal and loss. Her work, through the suggestive use of liquids, has created evocative soundscapes that relate to modern time and the rhythm of industrial architecture such as the sugar mill. But she never demands a confrontational engagement with the cruelty of the slave trade and sugar production of past centuries. Liquids such as water and rum are thus mobilized here as ontological materials as they embody the visceral history and memory of this violent transformations of landscape and personhood against a spatial amnesia, inasmuch as these sites of sugar production and its ruins, both in New England and on the island of Cuba, largely remain forgotten.

### Contested Waters: The River as Memory Work

From a different perspective and in particular from within the perception of the body of fluvial water, the Colombian artist Clemencia Echeverri has worked since the mid-1990s on the psychic and material sedimentations of the slow history of violence and the impact of economic development on the Colombian river landscape. Significantly, her œuvre stands for a new sensibility to engage the various contexts for understanding fluids and liquids as ontological materials that are bound to the complex material

histories of Latin America since colonial times. The psychic and material impact of diverse forms of violence that shaped the experience and reality of Colombia in the 1980s has been thematized since the return of Echeverri to her home country in the late 1990s, particularly in her video art and installations.<sup>47</sup>

In an earlier work, *Treno (canto fúnebre)*, which I consider to be a significant piece to unlock the meaning of her entire work, Echeverri explores mourning and loss as lived experiences of the Colombian armed conflict and, in particular, forced disappearance. The sound and video installation was shown for the first time in 2007 at the Gallery Alonso Garcés and later in 2009 as “Actos del Habla” (Acts of Speech) at the Museo de Arte of the Universidad Nacional de Colombia in Bogotá, and later on many other occasions (Plate 12). With the piece set up as a video installation, with two or more simultaneous video projections, Echeverri stages the river as both powerful material and protagonist to remember and mourn the losses resulting from political and environmental violence. Art theorist María del Rosario Acosta López points out:

Art, however, has another way of *remembering*, because its aims are different to those of an archive-type memory. Art actively transforms facts into past; it produces the very experience of their passing by and consequently interrupts their *immutability*. Thus, by means of art and yet within its boundaries, the past appears ungraspable and mutable, it appears as what the present will never be able to store and keep to itself. Nonetheless, and precisely for this reason, the past—in its ungraspable form—proffers new possibilities of comprehension. Therefore, art neither resolves nor leaves what has happened behind; it does, however, clear a different pathway for remembrance by *revisiting the past*, by *accompanying its loss*, and by *mourning* it. Thus, due to art’s fragile procedures, this path has its own way of “exercising justice,” another kind of justice.<sup>48</sup>

Both her evocative video works and installations *Treno (canto fúnebre)* and *Río por asalto* relate to what Acosta López has framed as art that resists oblivion “by means of its own fragility, that is, without attempting to solve the problem of memory but rather by way of disclosing its *aporetic* features.”<sup>49</sup> Staging the river in its own materiality of watery texture and sound, presenting it as powerful formless liquid and fluid force, both video works render the lacunae and silences of loss and non-narrated violence tangible, irredeemably contoured by the river. With *Treno (canto fúnebre)*, Echeverri shows the river Cauca that has absorbed so many disappeared corpses, while she recreates through the echoing of the water the evanescence of memory.

The forces of the torrent run into a vortex, growing inside us and presently cropping up into the surface. Human voices draw echoes in that density. Those are calls—voices traveling through remote silences, in the darkness of the water’s depth. What is working on us here is the power of a subtle allegory that consigns us to war, to violence among men, and to mourning,

the curator María Belén Saez de Ibarra reminds us.<sup>50</sup> With this installation, Echeverri lines up two river banks, unable to be crossed, that powerfully work as metaphor that alludes to the “impossibility of shifting positions in the midst of the conflict—to the death experience itself.”<sup>51</sup> The video installation thus delves into the unspoken social



crisis that the river as a tomb unfolds, enclosing the unmourned dead bodies while it speaks of the unspeakable experience of death and, on the meta-level of this artwork, of the interruption of the otherwise “communicative capability of language.”<sup>52</sup> Resisting oblivion, the river remains as a reflection of death and thus becomes an act of speech.

Echeverri is one of a number of contemporary artists who have started to work explicitly on the Colombian armed conflict and specifically on the form of violence that is forced disappearance. The river Cauca, which is present in many of her audio-visual works, is one of the deadly rivers of the Colombian fluvial landscapes, embodying many nameless corpses, making it the river of burial and death. Yet Echeverri's intervention not only uses the river water as a material in which to bury the victims but rather documents in a suggestively poetic way the many human practices of burial rituals in the form of the search for the leftovers and remains of a violent death. Suddenly, in this video work, the currents of the river throw up a shirt or trousers that become the only evidence of a human body, caught by someone, who in this act, next to the river, is the only witness who mourns the lost body in the form of a fluvial funeral rite. The installation invites us as spectator to participate in the act of waiting and searching in the dark black river water that offers a testimony, carrying the clothing forward in its streams. Echoing a human voice calling someone's name, the water seems to become a material signifier to mourn disappearance and death. Echeverri's audio-visual installation, set up on two or more big screens, immerses the spectator in texture, sound, and liquidity as the sole testimony to absence sensed here as the elusive present past. In this fragility of disappearance, the river water contests a landscape that buried countless disappeared bodies while witnessing their absence in a moment of embracing their memory of a past presence. Acosta López points out that Echeverri's work is on the fragility of memory of the complex long-lasting armed conflict in Colombia; it is about the fragility that surrounds “every attempt to resist oblivion and the strength that nonetheless seems to arise from fragility itself.”<sup>53</sup> I wish to argue that Echeverri does this through the motifs and use of water to inquire into the mourning and death of unmournable disappeared bodies. Furthermore, in her installation, water and bodies of water are burial places to become the materials of mourning and for mourning practices and thus a resistance to oblivion. This is also suggested by the chosen title, *Treno (canto fúnebre)*, alluding to the mourning chant. As a material part of ritual practices of mourning, chanting and thus the human voice give form to and perform pain and death, becoming next to the river's own “chanting” the echo of the body of pain. The river water thus materializes these archaic ritual practices while embedding them into human time. As liquid, the material of water not only appeals to this profound symbolic function but also makes us participate through the sensorial realm of the body. As body of water expanding the perception of human time, the river that mourns seems to give meaning to death (if at all possible) and thus becomes part of a profound human experience. Echeverri seems to suggest with this installation that corporeity, here both of the river and the human body, becomes the constitutive dimension of the experience and perception of the world and its past. The “attempt to preserve the past as a living memory,” Acosta López underlines,

must always be carried out in the form of loss, that is, in the form of its “absenting.” Art, therefore, must attempt here to present the past as what can never be

fully present, i.e., as that which always exceeds the very same possibilities of its own representation.<sup>54</sup>

Echeverri's audio-visual work alludes to this quality of art, as her artwork certainly functions as allegory for the history of violence in Colombia and particularly of forced disappearance. Her work relates further to "the potentiality of art to evoke the unforgettable, to let it form and dwell in the vanishing representations that withhold it in its paradoxical character. It is here," Acosta López sustains, "that the past is remembered in its resistance to being forgotten, moreover, only remembered as this resistance through the repetitive experience of its loss."<sup>55</sup>

As sensible work, Echeverri's intervention particularly molds the materiality of the sonic and visual that give the river its fluid form. In this audio-visual work, she materializes through the echoing of the water and the voices calling out the names of the disappeared, the psychic and material sedimentations of violence, suggesting in the form of a funeral song a last journey, an intimacy, as well as the possibility of mourning the disappeared, whose bodies often never surface or reappear. It is the stream of water that allegorically carries along history's pasts as it materially carries the disappeared corpses, secretly enclosed in the river, as a non-narrated, non-audible, and non-visual knowledge. In the way the river binds its knowledge to memory and thus the history of violence of disappearance, the artwork gains a performative character.

Performance genealogies draw on the idea of expressive movements made and remembered by bodies, residual movements retained implicitly in images or words (or in silences between them), and imaginary movements dreamed in minds not prior to language but constitutive of it,

Taylor argues. "Whose memories, traditions, and claims to history disappear if performance lacks the staying power to transmit vital knowledge?"<sup>56</sup> In the repeated gesture of mourning and remembering the disappeared, staged visually and sonically in this art intervention, the river water becomes the main performative element that constitutes memory against oblivion, whereas on the level of language we are unable to contest or mourn. Echeverri's installation is thus an intervention in the impossibility of speech, in order to "document" or narrate the violence of disappearance and its absence. Yet as a *speech act* it works on the embodied gestures of a possible mourning, an embodiment the river performs against the silences.<sup>57</sup> It is water that constitutes the beginnings of a shared and collective remembrance of a violent past and an experience of human time, both as repetition and mourning. As ontological material in this sense, the river becomes the memory of the landscape related to the embedded history of violence. Further, the river seems to be the "body-archive" and embodiment of memory.<sup>58</sup>

This idea has been further explored by Echeverri with her recent audio-visual installation *Río por asalto* displayed at the Shanghai Biennale 2018, curated by Cuauhtémoc Medina with María Belén Saez de Ibarra, Yukie Kamiya, and Wan Weiwei. As a multichannel video installation on six room-enclosing screens, the work plunges the spectator visually and acoustically into the river Cauca, traversing the locations of Bocas de Ceniza and the Atlantic coast at Ciénaga, where the river finally rests as dead matter (Figure 3.4). Yet this time the dark black river beginning as torrential water bursts into the space of the spectator, and along the evolution of the work it becomes smooth, seeming to have mutated into dead water full of wooden logs and all sorts



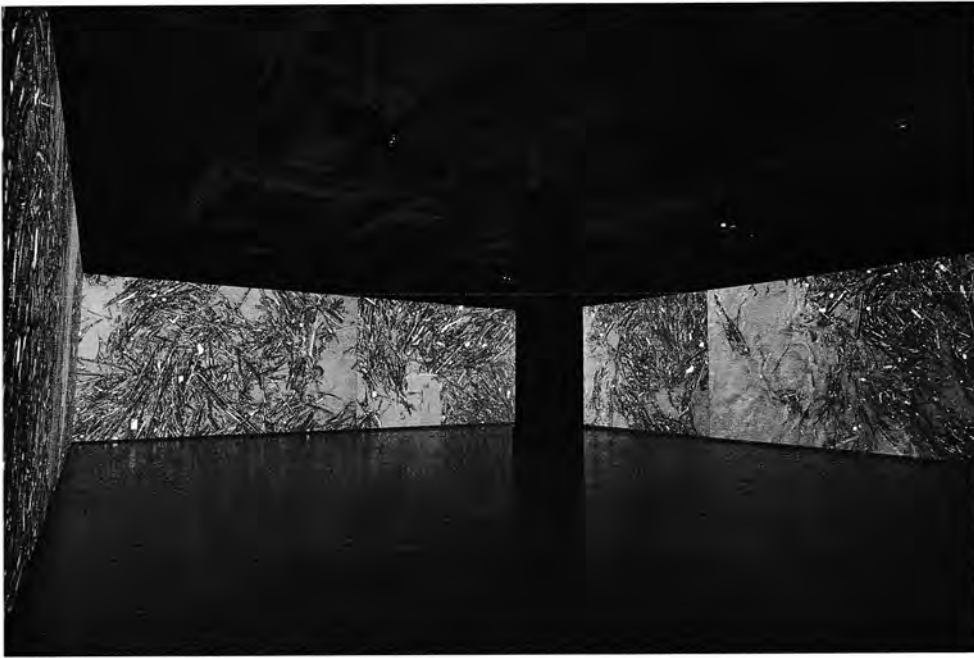


Figure 3.4 Clemencia Echeverri; *Río por asalto*, duration: 9:44 minutes, loop; video multichannel installation, six screens, Sound 7.1, XII Shanghai Biennale, 2018–2019.

Source: Photo by estudio C. Echeverri.

of trash and leftovers. The video work draws on the river's mutation and its death foretold, following a powerful stream that turns into black, calm, dead water before plunging into the Atlantic Ocean. The installation seems to be an orchestration of the river's life cycle and subsequent violent stages of ruin and processes of ruination, when the river's flow is brusquely stopped at Ituango, Colombia's interior riverscape, and its hydroelectric power station with its large artificial lake, into which the river water is submerged, becoming a coffin to the adjacent villages and other human and ecological relics. The video installation seems to foretell Colombian waters and fluidities, its liquid ecologies that are part of the slow violence witnessed by the country and its landscapes. In this installation, this river can also become a cadaver that does not leave space for any more mourning. Echeverri's installation contests the disappearance of this rich fluvial Colombian landscape, the result of environmental violence; in the installation, nevertheless, "The river defends itself, attacks, expresses, hides, and overcomes itself."<sup>59</sup> The artist seems to ask: Can we really kill the river?<sup>60</sup> As a chronicle of a death foretold, Echeverri's installation is also a "madrigal, a Lied, a song, an anthem, a requiem and an elegy," and as a shout of protest it is thus a resistance to the long history of political and ecological violence, as the title "river by assault" suggests.<sup>61</sup>

In the video installation, the body of the river performs its resistance to death. Through the medium of the sonic and the visual, the artist gives voice to the river that becomes the main protagonist of resistance to the man-made modern and industrial

mega-projects Colombia has witnessed for many decades that seem to ultimately threaten all of humankind. As a subtle critical-poetic intervention in the West's oblivion of nature as agent, Echeverri delves into the rivers' past, plunging into its powerful and untamable materiality and the soundscape of water, which binds us to a deeper ancestral time of resistance and knowledge. *Río por asalto* becomes a decolonial gesture as well, gaining its momentum from the fluidity the river materializes as resistance to oblivion. In another context, Acosta López reminds us of the intimate relationship between memory and fragility:

Rather than being a coherent and comprehensive narrative created to make the past and the present coincide and, thus, rather than attempting to reconstruct and preserve the continuities that the violence of history interrupts and dislocates, art can be an answer that stands in solidarity to the past's fragmented memories—which, in tension with the present, resist being sacrificed as well as being resolved.<sup>62</sup>

Both audio-visual installations by Echeverri, *Treno (canto fúnebre)* and *Río por asalto*, reflect this kind of critical and sensual memory work in the way they unfold the diverse temporalities and materiality of the river water as liquid ecologies, not so much to resolve the contradictions of the past but rather to create a new sensibility to form and articulate a meaningful relationship with the environment's present past, allowing for political engagement by the audience and a new bodily perception of landscapes, thus creating new and unexpected alliances.

### Liquid Ecologies and Embodied History

I have shown how Campos-Pons and Echeverri foreground situations of political and environmental conflict contouring a social crisis of the present past through their art interventions by using the medium of liquids and water in a subtle critical way. Understanding their ecocritical engagement as "Feminists and anticolonial campaigns for environmental justice," their interventions also expand the narratives of the Anthropocene to include the histories of racial thoughts and the inherent colonialism into a critical reflection on environmental violence.<sup>63</sup> Campos-Pons's work in particular understands and criticizes colonialism as "carried by currents in a weather-and-water world of planetary circulation, where we cannot calculate a politics of location according to stable cartographies or geometries."<sup>64</sup> Both artists' work relates to what Neimanis considers to be the meaning of contemporary toxic transits "as structured by a latency, a temporal lag."<sup>65</sup> Their works reflect on different temporalities, thus contouring the psychic and material impacts of violence on both landscapes and personhood. Using liquids and specifically water as a material signifier while inquiring into its nature as an ontological material, the artists unfold liquid ecologies as critical entanglements of humans, non-humans, and the environment, against a background of cultural memory in the Americas with its latencies and eruptions, resiliences and omissions. Their work, which I understand as *performative acts*, makes available past and present environments in the form of resistance, remembrance, and renovations allowing for new semantic situations and alternative horizons to contest the complex history of environmental violence, tracing it back to political and economic forms of conflict.



Campos-Pons, for her part, argues for an interactional and contra-punctual constitution of cultural identities and memories. She critically articulates the Caribbean experience of slavery, environmental degradation, contamination, and violence in her aesthetic work, which finds its reverberations in Echeverri's long engagement with the history of violence in Colombia. In their works they both embody gestures of witnessing against forgetting, and thus they establish an intimate but powerful relationship with the oceanic and fluvial landscapes respectively. Overall, they make palpable "new de-formations and new forms of debris of violence that work on matter and mind to eat through people's resources and resiliences as they embolden new political actors with indignant refusal, forging unanticipated, entangled, and empowered alliances," as underscored elsewhere by Stoler.<sup>66</sup> And they intervene, on the meta-level, in the genealogies of the present, working "through the less perceptible affects of imperial interventions and their settling into the social and material ecologies in which people live and survive."<sup>67</sup> Let me remind you at this point what performance scholar Rebecca Schneider observed about the relationship between performance, body, and the archive as something that may describe the concerns shared by these art interventions. She writes:

When we approach performance not as that which disappears (as the archive experts), but as both the act of remaining and a means of reappearance . . . we almost immediately are forced to admit that remains do not have to be isolated to the document, to the object, to bone versus flesh. . . . Still, we must be careful to avoid the habit of approaching performance remains as a metaphysic of presence that fetishizes a singular ›present‹ moment. As theories of trauma and repetition might instruct us, it is not presence that appears in the syncopated time of citational performance but precisely (again) the missed encounter—the reverberations of the overlooked, the missed, the repressed, the seemingly forgotten.<sup>68</sup>

Schneider, in her study, analyses the place of body, event, and performance in the Western archive culture. In doing so, she focuses not on language or its connotative contextual remnants but rather on the body-event and its multiple mediatization as a specific historical archive. This means a radical reversal of perspective to not only study the corporal practices as forms of recording, preservation, and actualization of history but also to allow a reflection on cultural phenomena in which culture as a space of mediation in an active act between body and body, and as a field of a visceral and embodied history, becomes tangible. Following this, both artists' work and long engagement with the various forms of embodiment of water outlines, I argue, a possible transfer of the past onto the present through the medium of liquid, specifically water, understanding this bodily transmission as a form of counter-memory. Schneider in her analysis does not only conceive the event as performance as a form of documentation but also the gesture of the archiving itself as an event that succumbs to the order of the ephemeral yet is the constitutive part of memory. Every form of documentation, including those supposedly more permanent forms such as texts, photographs, or films, could be detached from its "source" and the restrictive principals of the "archontic house arrest" and become an autonomous force that is able to blur the semantic difference with its original.<sup>69</sup> Following this, I wish to sustain that through the medium and material of water, inquiring into liquid ecologies and its embodied history, Campos-Pons and Echeverri have elaborated a complex model of

memory work that reflects the capacity of art of creating a new powerful sensibility. As acts of remaining, these art interventions contest the long-lasting degradation and processes of ruination of landscapes and personhood, thus interrupting the forgotten and invisibilized histories of environmental violence with its embedded economic and political conflicts.

## Notes

1. Gómez-Barris reminds us that the term "Anthropocene" has been used to identify "the crisis of future life on the planet" yet omitting the "histories of racial thought and settler colonialism that are imposed upon categorizations of biodiversity, spaces where the biotechnologies of capitalism accelerate." Gómez-Barris points out that the Anthropocene has been used to demarcate "the temporalities and the spatial catastrophe of the planetary through a universalizing idiom and viewpoint that hides the political geographies." Macarena Gómez-Barris, *The Extractive Zone: Social Ecologies and Decolonial Perspective* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017), 4.
2. See here the study by Kassandra Nakas, *Verflüssigungen. Ästhetische und semantische Dimensionen eines Topos* (Munich: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 2015).
3. See here the discussion led by Rob Nixon with *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011).
4. Okwui Enwezor, "The Diasporic Imagination: The Memory Work of María Magdalena Campos-Pons," in *María Magdalena Campos-Pons: Everything Is Separated by Water*, edited by Lisa Freiman (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), 65. See also the conversations with the artists in: Bell, Lynne, "History of People Who Were Not Heroes: A Conversation with María Magdalena Campos-Pons," *Third Text* 12, no. 43 (1998): 33–42; María Magdalena Campos-Pons and William Luis, "Art and Diaspora: A Conversation with María Magdalena Campos-Pons," *Afro-Hispanic Review* 30, no. 2 (2011): 155–166.
5. Diana Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas* (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2003).
6. *Ibid.*, 142.
7. *Ibid.*
8. Astrida Neimanis, *Bodies of Water: Posthuman Feminist Phenomenology* (London: Bloomsbury, 2017).
9. See, for instance, the discussion on the aesthetics of Merleau-Ponty: Emmanuel Alloa and Adnen Jdey (eds.), *Du sensible à l'œuvre. Esthétiques de Merleau-Ponty* (Brussels: La lettre volée, 2012).
10. Neimanis, *Bodies of Water*, 20.
11. *Ibid.*, 20.
12. Here I follow Neimanis' argument: "A feminist figuration of bodies of water . . . extends the key critique of an Anthropocene talk that pits Man against Nature 'out there'. *Bodies of water* insists that if we do live as bodies 'in common,' this commonality needs to extend beyond the human, into a more expansive sense of 'we'." Neimanis, *Bodies of Water*, 12.
13. Campos-Pons's work on slavery is part of a long engagement with the psychic and material impacts of slavery in the contemporary US, shared by other leading Afro-American female artists. See here: Huey Copeland, *Bound to Appear: Art, Slavery, and the Site of Blackness in Multicultural America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013).
14. Enwezor, "The Diasporic Imagination," 65.
15. *Ibid.*, 65.
16. Ann Laura Stoler (ed.), *Imperial Debris: On Ruins and Ruination* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013), x.
17. See also Ann Laura: "We thus start from the observation that the less dramatic durabilities of duress that imperial formations produce as ongoing, persistent features of their ontologies have been set aside as if less 'at hand', less pressing, and less relevant to current global priorities and political situations than their more attention-grabbing counterparts. We attempt to broach, albeit indirectly, a set of questions not often addressed: What conditions the possibilities by which some features of colonial relations remain more resilient,



persistent, and visible than others? If 'violent environments' are made so not by a scarcity of resources but by grossly uneven reallocation of access to them, the disposessions and dislocations that accompany those violences do not always take place in obvious and abrupt acts of assault and seizure, but in more drawn out, less eventful, identifiable ways. Our focus is on the more protracted imperial processes that saturate the subsoil of people's lives and persist, sometimes subacently, over a long *durée*." Stoler, *Imperial Debris*, 5.

18. Enwezor, "The Diasporic Imagination," 71.
19. Lisa Freiman(ed.), *María Magdalena Campos-Pons: Everything Is Separated by Water* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), 13.
20. Neimanis, *Bodies of Water*, 28.
21. Freiman, *Everything Is Separated by Water*, 13.
22. *Ibid.*, 14.
23. *Ibid.*
24. *Ibid.*
25. *Ibid.*
26. Neimanis, *Bodies of Water*, 33.
27. The idea of the site-specificity of the installation has been developed in detail by Adriana Zavala with "Blackness Distilled, Sugar and Rum: María Magdalena Campos-Pons's *Alchemy of the Soul, Elixir for the Spirits*." *Latin American and Latinx Visual Culture* 1, no. 2 (2019).
28. "Given the association in Cuba of gradations of sugar with gradations of racial whitening, and how these were imposed onto the bodies of mixed-race women as receptacles of social meaning, I suggest (acknowledging the risk of an overly literal interpretation) that the yellow and pinkish beige sculptures Campos-Pons created for *Alchemy of the Soul, Elixir for the Spirits* might be interpreted as evoking the racial trauma of this system of gendered bodily signification." Zavala, "Blackness Distilled," 21.
29. Zavala, "Blackness Distilled," 20.
30. Stoler, *Imperial Debris*, x.
31. See here the chapter by Elizabeth DeLoughrey and Tatiana Flores in this present volume.
32. Zavala, "Blackness Distilled," 21.
33. *Ibid.*
34. *Ibid.*
35. Also see the study by Flora M. González, "Possession and Altar Making: Reconstruction of Memory as Artistic Performance in the Multimedia Installations of María Magdalena Campos-Pons," *Cuban Studies* 31 (2000): 102-117.
36. Zavala, "Blackness Distilled," 30.
37. *Ibid.*
38. *Ibid.*, 29.
39. *Ibid.*
40. *Ibid.*, 30-31.
41. *Ibid.*
42. *Ibid.*, 31.
43. *Ibid.*
44. *Ibid.*
45. *Ibid.*, 17.
46. *Ibid.*, 31-32.
47. Also see the discussion in the chapter by Gina Tarver in this present volume.
48. María Del Rosario Acosta López, "Memory and Fragility: Art's Resistance to Oblivion (Three Colombian Cases)," *CR: The New Centennial Review* 14, no. 1 (2014): 73.
49. *Ibid.*, 74.
50. M. Belén Saez de Ibarra, "Deep Inside the River. Treno: Video and Photography Installation." 2009. Accessed October 17, 2019. [www.clemenciaecheverri.com/clem/index.php/proyectos/treno](http://www.clemenciaecheverri.com/clem/index.php/proyectos/treno)
51. *Ibid.*
52. *Ibid.*
53. Acosta López, "Memory and Fragility," 76.
54. *Ibid.*, 76-77.

55. Ibid., 79.
56. Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire*, 5.
57. Interestingly, Taylor further sustains: "For Phelan, the defining feature of performance—that which separates it from all other phenomena—is that it is live and disappears without a trace. The way I see it, performance makes visible (for an instant, live, now) that which is always already there: the ghosts, the tropes, the scenarios that structure our individual and collective life. These specters, made manifest through performance, alter future phantoms, future fantasies." Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire*, 143.
58. See here in particular the essay by Dorota Sajewska, "Körper-Gedächtnis, Körper-Archiv. Der Körper als Dokument in künstlerischen Rekonstruktionspraktiken," in *Seien wir realistisch. Neue Realismen und Dokumentarismen in Philosophie und Kunst*, edited by Magdalena Marszałek and Dieter Mersch (Zurich: Diaphanes, 2016).
59. María Belén Saez de Ibarra, "Texto Curatorial." 2018. Accessed January 13, 2020. [www.clemenciaecheverri.com/clem/index.php/proyectos/rio-por-asalto](http://www.clemenciaecheverri.com/clem/index.php/proyectos/rio-por-asalto)
60. Ibid.
61. Carlos Jiménez, *Río por Asalto*.
62. Acosta López, "Memory and Fragility," 79.
63. Neimanis, *Bodies of Water*, 35.
64. Ibid., 36.
65. Ibid.
66. Stoler, *Imperial Debris*, 29.
67. Ibid., 4.
68. Rebecca Schneider, *Performing Remains: Art and War in Times of Theatrical Reenactment* (New York: Routledge, 2011), 101.
69. Sajewska, "Körper-Gedächtnis," 346.

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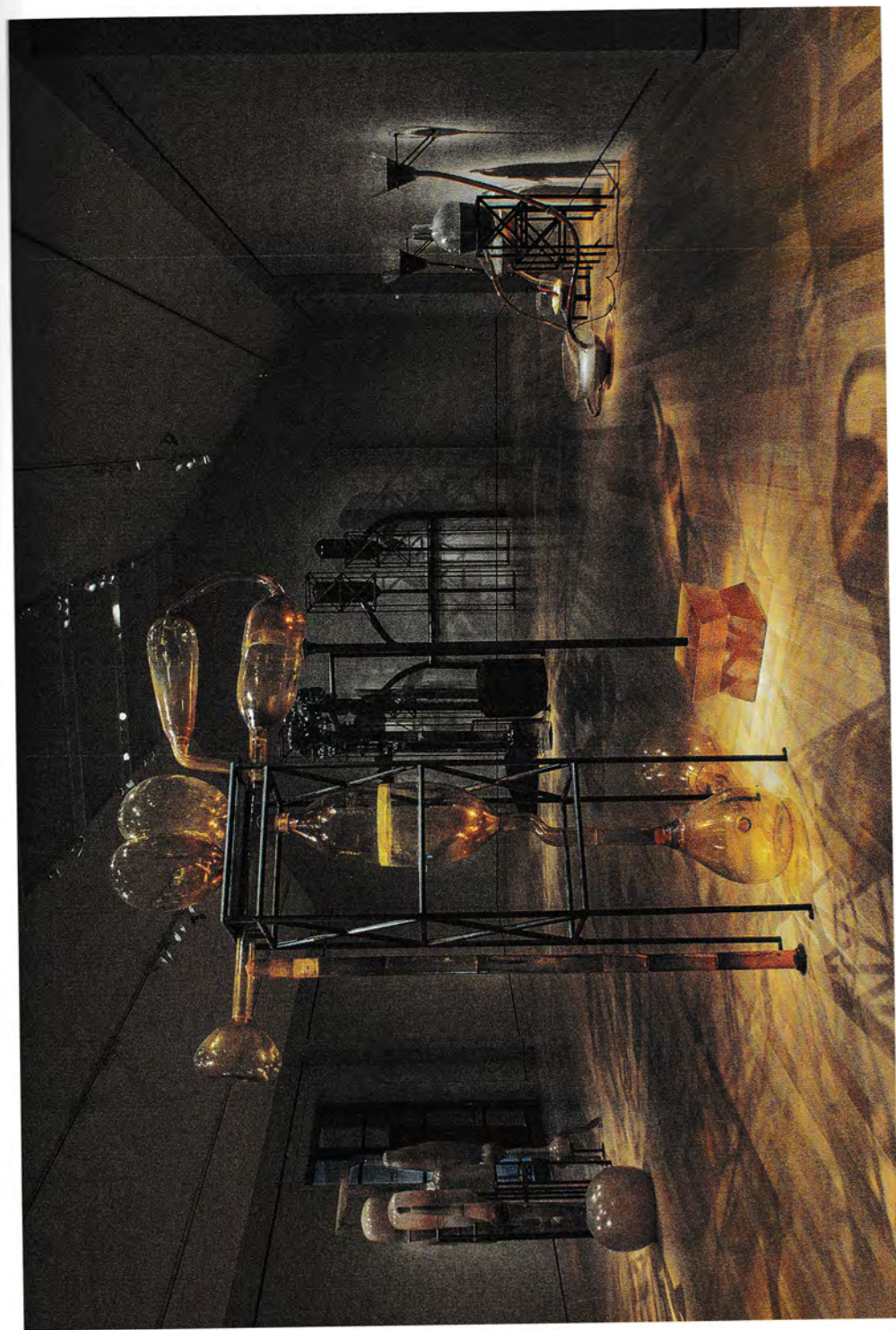


Plate 13 María Magdalena Campos-Pons; *Alchemy of the Soul*, 2015, blown glass, cast glass, steel, cast resin, silicone, acrylic, polyvinyl chloride tubing, water, and rum essence, dimensions variable; Peabody Essex Museum Salem. Photograph by Peter Vanderwerker.





Plate 11 Yeni y Nan, *Simbolismo de la cristalización—Araya* (1984–1986/2013). C-print from ektachrome slide, 13¼ × 19½ in / 33.7 × 49.5 cm.



Plate 12 Clemencia Echeverri; *Treno, canto fúnebre*, video installation, exhibition *Actos del Habla*; Universidad Nacional de Colombia, Bogotá, 2009.