Landscapes of Hope

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This presentation unpacks ideas in a paper Local Landscapes of Hope in Darien and Atacama: Material Narrations in the Anthropocene written collaboratively with social scientist from the Countryside Community Research Institute, Daniel Keech for Folklore Journal's Special Edition- Folklore, Geography, and Environment: Ways of Knowing Water, Landscape, and Climate in the Anthropocene.

Effects of human-induced climate change continue to make themselves felt in disruptive ways. There are calls for cross-disciplinary approaches and nuanced examination of local responses to climate adaptation and resilience in the Anthropocene and the value and validity of several types of knowledge. Such narrations are often lost, perhaps overwhelmed in the disaster reporting. The visual arts can play a positive role in materializing and exposing local meanings, gleaned through shared local interactions to create hope.

Fieldwork took place in the Panamanian coastal rainforest, a place of abundant water; and the Chilean Atacama, the driest non-polar place on Earth. This conference presentation shows three moving image works, Where the Jungle Meets the Sea, The World is Split in Two and In Solidarity which were made in collaboration with Emma Elliott and Ayni which I shot solo. The films include performance as a way to show embodied experience of place and to describe adaptive practices pursued by residents living within extreme conditions. To explore, through performative and visual creations, associated cultural ritualizations of living in wet and dry places as forms of narrations. I also think of the sculptures I make and the exhibitions they are shown within as a type of performance. In this way, my artistic narrative interweaves with the stories shared with me by my hosts. With thanks to them.

The work takes an autoethnographic approach and can help to underline the urgency of climate change, requiring a shift towards action. I compiled fieldnotes each day and

edited these on return to the UK. Fieldnotes were then read aloud and audio-recorded, then added to moving image works that situate myself within the locations.

The two locations for the fieldwork were chosen because both residencies were supported by La Wayaka Current (LWC), a research project curating connections to remote natural environments. A further influence on the choice of locations was my interest in Latin America, linked to my family history. My mother was born, and lived her early life, in Venezuela, during a period when my grandfather, a Dutch cartographer, was working there. He also worked in other parts of Latin America, such as Peru. La Wayaka Current links artists with indigenous communities in these remote areas, inviting artists to collaborate with people in their ancestral lands. The organization has gradually established a relationship with the communities in both places selected for the residencies over several years and the communities invite the artists to join them on their land.

I worked in Panama with another artist, Emma Elliott, following earlier collaborations which explored water as a physical and metaphorical connector, and its relationship to survival. The collaborations connect memory and ritual, and link folklore with material water.

In 2022, I lived and worked within the Guna community in Armila. In the Darien rainforest, everyday adaptations help people to live with an abundance of water. The Darien jungle which connects South America to Central and North America and is the only land-based pathway between these continents. The region, also known as the Darien Gap, is the only break in the 30,000 km Pan-American highway, which stretches between Alaska and Argentina. The area remains roadless due to the cost of building in this location and the environmental impact a road would have on the rainforest, which is preserved for its diversity of flora and fauna.

It is a difficult and dangerous place. As well as the inherent more than-human hazards, it obscures an infamous route used in 2022 by 280,000 migrants through the rainforest, controlled by criminal networks of armed guerrillas, drugdealers,

and human traffickers. The dense jungle has high humidity, often more than eighty per cent, with temperatures above 30C. Rainfall is frequent and heavy, making walking difficult, while feeding fast-flowing rivers. Pathways through the jungle can become impassable and must be adjusted after flash floods. Walkers are forced to cut new routes in the jungle, which can make passages disorienting and time-consuming. Falling trees and mud can add further impediment.

My time in Armila was a chance to experience an autonomous indigenous matriarchal culture. Experimenting with movement, dance, and sound recordings, Emma Elliott and I placed plants as protagonists in performance work. Distinct from Western ideas of plants and land as exploitable resources, in Armila plants are a gift and symbol of kinship which is re-emphasized linguistically through Guna mythology.

The artworks emerged from observations of local practices organized into narratives (e.g. through plant-lore and rituals) about the natural world in both places. These works examine and form materialities of natural elements as a way to study place.

The moving image work Where the Jungle Meets the Sea . . . The World is Split in Two considers concepts of ecological decline and the intrinsic human connection to plants. Our artistic collaboration with the Guna Yala engages with materials to examine the processes of making shelters and using plants. The work considers the relationship between plants and people, local culture compared to modern Western culture, and how globalization can affect even the most isolated of communities.

The moving image work highlights the unequal experience of climate change in the Global North and Global. Our exertions and fulfilment of collaborative practice also took place against a backdrop of regional instability and poverty, and their material experiments reflect the struggles of the location. Rope is used as a binding material that joins us as two artists, simultaneously entangling, limiting, and supporting us. Materiality is a presiding creative theme, and the video introduces the four elements of earth: riverside clay to purify the skin; air—the rainforest as global lungs; fire—to cook

food and burn waste; and water—the river connecting and flowing into the sea: The Video footage aimed to convey the materiality of the baskets used to skim the chicha. Collective interest and cooperation were a key part of life in the Guna culture and were an important inspiration for the collaboration.

I was inspired by the local rituals while living with my hosts as a way to consider hopefulness. Local narratives become thin layers that contribute to a detailed landscape patina within which hopeful ways of facing climate challenges can be identified. In this respect, hope becomes a narrative process, not an end in itself; indeed, hope as an end can obstruct the possibility of hope emerging as a means or a process of social change.

A later work that draws on hope in Armila is In Solidarity. Shot with Elliott along the Cornish coastal path, the work was part of a group show about walking called Wanderland with the Royal Society of Sculptors in Cornwall at Tremenheere in 2023. The work combines first-hand accounts of experiences from Panama with footage shot in coastal Cornwall in 2023. In Solidarity considers the significance of walking and water throughout human existence and the connection of both to survival, in offering spiritual enlightenment, healing, and leisure.

The performance work also responds directly to the migrant crisis in Armila. Sound clips from my Panamanian fieldnotes are intentionally embedded within In Solidarity. Walking connects the two locations; at times the sound is overlayed and becomes cacophonous and difficult to decipher. This echoes the disorienting nature of the jungle the migrants face. The sound clips flood in and out of the frames at different intensities and rhythms. The work also continues to focus on the theme of water, linking its reflective qualities to mirrors and other reflecting materials, which invite viewers to reflect on their own ideas around migration. Circular and cyclical motions and other formal aspects of the video footage link to movements evoking tidal currents within the imagery. At times, myself and Elliott and structures are submerged or appear to be floating in the water. The footage shows us reaching out for water, trying to drink from the available streams.

The second field work location where I worked alone forms dry comparison to the work in the rainforest. The Atacama Desert forms a large plateau 2,400 metres above the Pacific coast of Chile, bordering Bolivia and Argentina, and is geographically unique: it is the only true hot desert to receive less precipitation than polar deserts. It is also the largest fog-desert in the world, meaning that fog-drip supplies most of the moisture needed to sustain animal and plant life. The oldest desert on earth, it has been arid for the last million years. Parts of the desert receive less than 5mm a year of rain while others are entirely dry.

In the clear-skied desolation of the Atacama, people have adapted their lifestyles over many generations to cope with intense ultraviolet radiation, lack of water, salty ground, and other extreme conditions. Art is presented as a form of narrative about the places visited, as well as a vehicle for the narrations offered by local people.

In Coyo, an oasis filled with trees, medicinal plants, herbs, and cultivated crops is a source of traditional ecological knowledge, which includes the uses of plants for healing and nourishment. My Coyo host family were llama herders, moving their animals seasonally across one of the harshest environments on earth. Essential place-knowledge is passed between generations, for example where to find the salt absorbing helafites desert plants Cachiyuyu (Atriplex atacamensis) and Tamarugo (Prosopis tamarugo) on which the llamas feed.

Ayni was filmed in Chile and across the border at Laguna Colorada in Bolivia in 2023. The title means reciprocity in the Lickan Antay community's native language Kunza. They have inhabited the Atacama Desert region of Chile for over 10,000 years. This film celebrates their unique way of life. As a nomadic community, they move around the desert with their llama searching for water. The title of this work refers to the name of the ceremony performed when they first arrive at a place to ask Mother Earth for protection and in return, they try to look after the places they reach.

The Atacama Desert is home to the Alma observatory, the Altiplano, salt lagoons, valleys of ancient cacti and the rainbow-coloured rocks. Despite the beauty of the landscape, it faces some ecological challenges. The region has been used for mining for many years, previously heavy nitrate mining took place, now leaving ghost town like disused mines throughout the desert landscape since it can be created synthetically. Today copper and lithium mining impacts on the natural environment and water availability in a place where it is already so scarce. The problems are not only extractive but also additive. The area is also home to a large pile of disused fast fashion that is so large it can be seen from space.

This film considers water in the driest place on Earth, some parts of the Atacama Desert have had no recorded rainfall. Ayni celebrates the way of life in this location despite these challenges and extremes. It is an opportunity to celebrate the beauty of the landscape calling for a more hopeful and resilient future. My own rituals are performed within the desert. The slowness of walking becomes a ritual act, marks made in the desert sand which remain for days, and sand slips downwards like sand timers.

The film highlights human interventions and natural adaptations. The red algae in the bordering bolivian region of Laguna Colorado has adapted to be more resilient against the high and low temperatures and UV radiation. I connected with the materials used locally to build simple but necessary shelters, making clay and performing with the vessels used to hold water and by the rocks that are made to try to control the river. Making sculpture using found natural materials cut down in the garden to create forms based on water dowsers or tools to find water.

The footage shows the vibrancy of the region, the colour within the desert, the oasis of Coyo where I lived with the indigenous community amongst the medicinal plants. The work celebrates the irrigation and terracing systems that allowed for life to thrive despite the most difficult of circumstances and crops only being allowed to be watered once every 21 days, life flourishes within the oasis. The Cachiyuyo plant that absorbs the salt from the lagoons and allows for other plants to thrive, the Rica-rica that the

llama feed on and the Tamarugo tree with deep root systems to reach the extensive underground endorheic water networks and that stop the desertification.

This work uses layered imagery to consider the deep geological time which holds the layers of history of the region. Camera pans are used to unveil the landscape and to show the relationship between the soil beneath our feet and the cosmological network above us. In most filmmaking this filming technique is used to pan towards a subject, here the landscape becomes the protagonist. This footage interweaves the micro and macro of the landscapes; The volcano that was ever a guiding form, Ideas of the mirage and the distortions of distances and the intensity of the sunlight. Field recordings and notes from time spent in Chile are interwoven throughout including the sound of the flamingos in Bolivia and in Chile, the song of the llama and a traditional ocarina.

Inspired by my exposure to rituals in the telling of water stories, my work in Panama and Chile led to new ways of producing art compared to conventional routines of creating work in a studio. Taking sculptural works into the desert, I then performed movements with them to create new moving image works as rituals, using my body with the materials and the landscape. Understanding human bodies as bodies of water places people in a different relation to water as a material and positions them as inseparable from nature. This performative practice-based approach helped me to understand the location of the desert and the significance of the oasis through the direct comparison between trying to make similar sculptures within the sheltered oasis and then dragging them out to the desert to perform and then trying to make similar sculptures with discarded natural materials within the exposed desert.

My artworks are reciprocally made, through the receiving of local narratives which I transform into material pieces that reveal local responses to climate challenges. The Anthropocene is becoming a visible layer in the planet's geology. Similarly, places are socially constructed through the layering of detailed stories. By sifting through and continuing to add layers of narrative, new ways of living with climate change can emerge. The reciprocal interaction of local knowledge and artistic practice becomes a method for uncovering adaptations to social and environmental challenges at a

graspable and lived scale. Further exploration is needed of the potential for cultures in already-extreme places to support climate adaptation and mitigation elsewhere in the world. In this task, it is important to question what kind of speculation about the future emerges and whose voices are included within it. Both Chilean and Panamanian communities expressed hope that artists who engage with them would spread their stories, especially their dependence on the (challenging) local environment and their uncertainty about future economic development imposed in the name of sustainable innovation. The final UK comparative point for this project will be made this summer in the UK's desert in Dungeness and through a collaborative exhibition and outworking of the paper at School Gallery in Folkestone with artist Rachael Champion.