

Co-habiting the Urban Space from the Interspecies Framework:

Art and Environmental Affection for Other Forms of Attention and Territorial Defense



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Abstract

In this paper, I will discuss an artistic research project situated in Mexico City, which aims at fostering non-anthropocentric modes of attention to our urban living. This project seeks to interrelate processes of listening, sowing, and writing about territory, in order to counterbalance a mere extractivist view of urban dwelling, as it is grounded in a modern-colonial binarism of culture and nature. Recognizing the importance of the aesthetic-affective dimension, both in socio-environmental struggles, and more-than-human ways of living, I show how the milpa (a traditional farming system), sound documentary, and collective walking can be approached as perceptual and convivial tools (Illich, 1975). These tools offer ways to understand and defend land, beyond a dualistic approach, such as countryside-city, tradition-modernity, human and non-human. In this way, the milpa, the documentary, and collective walking become opportunities to foster poetics of constitutive relationality, a term coined by Arturo Escobar (2014), which points to a radical ontological-political project about ways to understand and operate life.

This approach enables us to think about the contributions of artistic processes in cultivating experiences of living, where a more-than-human ethics and ontologies come into play. This work also proposes an account of the artistic potential of agro-political ecology for understanding the milpa as a biocultural practice. Finally, this work engages with Omar Giraldo and Ingrid Toro's ideas on environmental affectivity (2020); with Steven Feld's acoustemology (2015), as well as with Mark P. Wright's reflections (2022) on ecology and field recordings.

Keywords: political ecology and art; more-than-human aesthetics; environmental affectivity; sound ecology; sound documentary

Co-habitar o espaço urbano a partir da estrutura interspecífica: arte e afetividade ambiental para outras formas de atenção e defesa do território

Resumo

Neste artigo discutirei um projeto de pesquisa artística situado na Cidade do México, que tem como objetivo promover modos de atenção não antropocêntricos à nossa vida urbana. Este projeto busca inter-relacionar processos de escuta, semeadura e escrita sobre o território, a fim de contrabalançar uma visão meramente extrativista da habitação urbana, pois está fundamentado em um binarismo moderno-colonial de cultura e natureza. Reconhecendo a importância da dimensão estético-afetiva, tanto nas lutas socioambientais quanto nas formas de vida mais do que humanas, mostro como a milpa (um sistema tradicional de cultivo), o documentário sonoro e as caminhadas coletivas podem ser abordados como ferramentas perceptivas e conviviais (Illich, 1975). Essas ferramentas oferecem maneiras de entender e defender a terra, além de uma abordagem dualista, como campo-cidade, tradição-modernidade, humano e não-humano. Dessa forma, a milpa, o documentário e a caminhada coletiva se tornam oportunidades para fomentar poéticas da relacionalidade constitutiva, um termo cunhado por Arturo Escobar (2014), que aponta para um projeto ontológico-político radical sobre maneiras de entender e operar a vida.

Essa abordagem nos permite refletir sobre as contribuições dos processos artísticos na construção de experiências de vida, onde uma ética e ontologias mais do que humanas entram em cena. Este trabalho também propõe um relato sobre o potencial artístico da agroecologia política para compreender a milpa como uma prática biocultural. Finalmente, este trabalho se envolve com as ideias de Omar Giraldo e Ingrid Toro sobre afetividade ambiental (2020); com a acustemologia de Steven Feld (2015), bem como com as reflexões de Mark P. Wright (2022) sobre ecologia e gravações de campo.

Palavras-chave: ecologia política e arte; estética mais do que humana; afetividade ambiental; ecologia sonora; documentário sonoro.

Co-habitar urbano desde el entramado interespecie: arte y afectividad ambiental para otros modos de atención y defensa del territorio

Resumen

Este trabajo da cuenta de una investigación artística situada en la Ciudad de México, que tiene como finalidad cultivar modos de atención no antropocéntricos del habitar urbano. En ella busco vincular procesos de escucha, siembra y escritura en torno al territorio, como una forma de contrarrestar el sentido netamente extractivista de lo urbano, fincado en la oposición moderno-colonial entre cultura y naturaleza. Reconociendo la importancia de la dimensión estético-afectiva dentro de las luchas socioambientales, así como en la producción de modos de vida más que humanos, expongo cómo la milpa, el documental sonoro y la caminata colectiva, pueden ser abordadas como tecnologías perceptuales y convivenciales (Illich, 1975) que aportan modos de entender y defender el territorio, sin recurrir a dualidades entre campo-ciudad, tradición-modernidad, humano y no humano. De este modo, la milpa, el documental y la caminata colectiva resultan instancias para generar poéticas de relacionalidad constitutiva, término abordado por Arturo Escobar (2014) que apunta a un proyecto político ontológico radical sobre las maneras de entender y operar la vida.

Este abordaje facilita incorporar y pensar la aportación de los procesos artísticos en el cultivo de experiencias del habitar, donde una ética y ontología más que humana se hagan presentes. El trabajo propone, a su vez, dar cuenta del potencial estético y artístico que he encontrado en la agroecología y la ecología política para entender la milpa como una práctica biocultural. Asimismo, el trabajo dialoga con la noción de afectividad ambiental de Omar Giraldo e Ingrid Toro (2020); la acustemología planteada por Steven Feld (2015), y las reflexiones de Mark P. Wright (2022) sobre ecología y grabación de campo.

Palabras clave: arte y ecología política; arte y milpa; estéticas no antropocéntricas; afectividad ambiental; ecología sonora; documental sonoro

In this text, I share some artistic and conceptual principles that I have developed since 2017 through interaction with human communities and ecosystems. I explore new ways of perceiving and interpreting the territories I inhabit, whose needs and languages invite us to unlearn anthropocentric ways of seeing and listening. These concerns have led me to engage with the complexity of socio-environmental conflicts, which are fueled by sociohistorical dynamics of (auto)coloniality and inequalities —epistemic, racial, gender-based, and class-based. These conflicts cut across the interactions between forests, rural areas, and cities, implicating our urban ways of life, consumption habits, production models, and relationships to what Moore (2015) calls the “web of life,” ultimately drawing us into these struggles. ¹ Within this horizon of epistemic contradiction —where the micropolitics of our everyday actions and shared ways of inhabiting are contested— this research takes shape in the south of Mexico City, near the Ajusco-Chichinautzin mountain range: one of

the country’s most biodiverse ecological corridors and a key source of water and ecological balance for the city. Weaving together the fields of political ecology, sound studies, environmental humanities, and phenomenological approaches, this research seeks to develop transdisciplinary methodologies that recognize the contribution of the arts in cultivating attentive forms of listening, cultivation, food-related practices, diverse forms of writing, and walking as practice —through an ecology of knowledge. This suggests an invitation to speculate and talk about non-anthropocentric aesthesis within situated knowledge, adaptable to other territories. In what follows, I am interested in sharing three instances that have nurtured this research, raising questions about the nature and contributions of art in these processes:

I will discuss how milpa —understood as an ethical and aesthetic space of more-than-human contact from an artistic perspective— the sound documentary, and collective walks can be understood as forms of writing, landscape technologies, and tools for conviviality —a concept borrowed from Iván Illich (1975)— to nurture

¹ “web of life” is a concept that encompasses all forms of relationships between nature and social history. It includes all the layers of nature and humanity interwoven with one another.

our interspecies dialogues. This affective, theoretical, and artistic web resonates with what authors such as Arturo Escobar (2014), among others (Esteva, 2012; Mamani, 2005; Zibechi, 2006, etc.), call *constitutive relationality*: a radical ontological-political project about the ways of understanding and enacting life. Furthermore, this paper interrogates: What do these instances (milpa, sound documentary, and collective walks), treated as forms of writing and technologies, propose to artistic research, our way of life, and our understanding of territory? How do their aesthetic-affective potentials, viewed through the lens of artistic methodologies, enable a particular production and care of territory? Guided by these concerns, I aim to argue for the importance of including artistic methodologies within an ecology of knowledge, with the intention of fostering an ecology of life. Following the definition offered by Tim Ingold (2000), this involves thinking that

Organic life [...] is active rather than reactive; it is the creative unfolding of an entire field of relationships, within which beings emerge and take on the particular forms that each generates in relation to the others. [...] A proper ecological approach [...] would take as its starting point the whole-organism-in-its-environment, and an ecology of life—in my terms— would be one concerned with the dynamics of such systems. (Ingold, 2000, pp. 18–19)

If life has this generative potential through its interactions, one might consider that the arts—and the act of listening—or rather, the act of listening and sounding— 2 could be part of the same *poiesis* of the web of life, creatively participating in its ecology.

Milpa: ethics and aesthetics of more-than-human contact through an artistic lens.

Cities erected under the paradigm of capitalist modernity have operated by maintaining a hierarchical opposition between culture and nature as an ontology that, through philosophical, scientific, and technological development, has been established as the legitimate way of understanding the world—one that claims to explain the



2 From the notion of acustemology, proposed by ethnomusicologist Steven Feld (2013; 2015), there is no separate activity or function between listening and sounding: "I understand acustemology as the investigation of the reflexive and historical relationships between hearing and speaking, between listening and producing sound" (Feld, 2013, p. 222).



nature of reality as it *truly* is. However, as has been shown in science studies by authors such as Latour (1999; 2005), Haraway (1988; 2019), Stengers (2003), among others, “ontologies do not precede mundane practices; rather, they are configured through the practices and interactions of both human and non-human agents” (Blaser, 2009, p. 877); we might even add, by essentializing the distinction between the two terms.

This means that, in our daily life, in our way of interacting with the environment, in our scientific language and common sense, in our affective and sensorial configuration, and from our instruments of analysis and representation, we make that modern ontology, that hierarchical separation between nature and culture exist and, in fact, acquire greater strength. Every day, we embody this ontology in our way of understanding and inhabiting urban life, which recurrently operates by rendering invisible the processes, materials, and entities involved in the productive chains upon which our way of life is geared, beyond the (inter)disciplinary fields to which we are affiliated. We embody this dual ontology through our lack of knowledge or experience with the land, which we deem useless, irrelevant, or unnecessary for urban life. This also justifies our emotional detachment from the biocultural processes that sustain our basic diet —processes that, across much of Mexican territory, are rooted in the milpa system.

Modern-colonial ontology takes shape not only in the destructive extractive practices we denounce —such as mining, water privatization, or rampant logging— but also in the environmental knowledge that, over several generations, we have unlearned or ignored, deeming it unnecessary for urban life. I am referring to the gestures of planting, the languages of the land, its rhythms and dynamics; the processes and geographies of water; and the biophysical, atmospheric, astronomical, and sociocultural interactions that unfold in our immediate surroundings —ones we could well trace on a patch of earth, a sidewalk planter, or a vegetable garden set aside for observation. The colonial ontology of nature has led us to believe that these are merely disciplinary “subjects” — matters for the biologist, the fieldworker, the eco-artist, or the environmental activist— insofar as our identity and interests as “urban people,” including the intellectual class “as an aboriginal urban class” (Roszak, 1985, p. 6), have been shaped by the hegemonic ontological model of “the urban.” But if we assume that ontology

does not precede practices but rather unfolds and takes shape through them, then is it not possible to develop new ways of doing that challenge what urban life entails —without resorting to a new exoticization of “nature” or a presumed return to the “original”? Could other ways of doing be generated that allow us, as an urban class, to explore experiences of cohabiting with —and allowing ourselves to be consciously inhabited by— the times, processes, and languages of a more-than-human environment? These concerns, which took me some time to put into words, now allow me to articulate what for years had been a purely intuitive desire: to start planting corn and other vegetables, without the slightest idea that this would slowly bring about a cross-cutting transformation in my language, in my modes of attention and sensitivity, in the way I perceive my own body and those of others —awakening in me an existential need to reclaim that corporeality and affective dimension— systemic and multi-scale —of situated knowledge. An embodiment of knowledge, not only reaffirmed in the garden and the act of observing it, but also in teaching, writing, and in the kinds of participatory dynamics I began to seek and foster in the interstices between academia and self-organized study circles —transforming my position of enunciation and even the themes of my research and artistic production.³

What I will attempt to do next is to show how the milpa, understood as an ecosystem, a medium of perception, and a form of technology, generates alternative ontologies to modernity —ontologies that are not limited to its immediate environment and reality, but rather enable the development of an ethical sensitivity toward the relationships we establish with the world in other spheres of daily life, beyond the dichotomy between human and non-human, emotion and rationality. To recognize how these ontologies, as lived through the milpa, allow us to explore other ways of living and understanding the urban, inviting us to challenge —not without crisis and contradiction— the anthropocentric disciplinary categories upon which the entire edifice of Western thought has been built, categories born in and for an industrial city project that threatens and undermines the web of life, our very

existence. Because, once again, it is not a matter of choosing between countryside and city. As Theodore Roszak argued back in the 1970s,

It is often overlooked that beneath the classes that come and go, each at different times dominating the economy of the land, lies the *land itself* and all the life it has always sustained. Alongside the sociology of class relationships in rural areas, there is the ecology of human relationships with the land — a relationship that cannot be approached as people approach machines, factories, or money, for the Earth is not merely a factor of production, but a living being that demands our loyalty as an ethical imperative. (Roszak, 1977, pp. 7–8)

Can we propose ways of living and new forms of urban-environmental know-how emerging from other mundane practices —artistic ones among them— that take this ethical imperative into account?

The word milpa originates from the Nahuatl language (*milli* – cultivated plot, *pan* – on/upon). It means “what is sown in the plot.” Although it refers to a polyculture system typically centered around maize, in combination with squash and beans, it more accurately describes a productive system based on the association of crops that perform symbiotic functions with one another. In Mexico, this system includes approximately 300 types of edible plants, which vary depending on the soil conditions, environments, and regions of the country. This symbiotic associative capacity of polyculture enhances nutrient availability, and encourages the generation of fungi, bacteria, insects, and other soil microorganisms. Through their interaction, favorable conditions emerge for soil fertility, pollination, and resistance to pests —areas where monocultures are highly vulnerable. Moreover, intercropping facilitates year-round food production and greater diversity without depleting soil fertility, unlike monocultures, which often force producers to use inputs unsuited to local conditions. These industrial inputs have been promoted by the Global North in our countries since the Green Revolution, both to mass-produce specific crops and to eliminate local biodiversity under the pretext of pest control —even though pests can adapt to the chemical components of such poisons, which we end up

³ Previously, my research had focused on contemporary music composers, mainly European, and, since my doctoral thesis, on the formation and aesthetic expressions of the electronic arts circuit, sound experimentation and free improvisation in Mexico, which led me to a postdoctoral research on the forms of interaction between science, technology and contemporary art, especially sound art.

ingesting through our food (Ferrera Caneiro et al., 2016; Petersen, 2022; Rodríguez Gerrero et al., 2007).

Experiencing, through three annual planting cycles, the relationship between polycultural diversity (including the interaction of cultivated and herbaceous plants), soil regeneration, and the gradual appearance of new pollinators and terrestrial organisms has provided fertile ground for reflecting on the ethical and epistemic potential made possible by these co-inhabiting associations and processes. The ethical potential can be observed if we adopt a Spinozan understanding of ethics —one that, incidentally, has influenced many theoretical positions within the affective turn in the humanities over the past decade (see, for example, Ticineto and Halley, 2007). Ethics, broadly defined as what a body can do —its capacity to affect and be affected by others— requires transcending the anthropogenic and anthropocentric boundaries of ethical thought, in order to consider the systemic assemblage of intercorporeal affections and affects in which the individual and social human body is implicated. The milpa can be understood as a system: a constellation of heterogeneous bodies that emerge throughout the process (including pests and other unexpected pathogenic agents), with properties, functions, and interactions that, in synergy, invite us to engage in a non-anthropocentric ethical relationship. An ethics in which contact and its diverse expressions —manifested in pigmentation, morphogenesis, scents, sounds, presences or absences— begin to shape a story of gestures and affections in which my own body, by observing, listening, pausing, and intervening, becomes implicated, leaving its own trace. Here, affect is referred to as “the capacity to affect and be affected, or as the increase or decrease in the body’s capacity to act, to become involved, to connect; in such a way that self-affectation is linked to the very feeling of being alive —that is, to vitality” (Ticineto, 2007, p. 2). If the emerging affects within the milpa are akin to a dynamic and multidirectional assemblage, then the ethics embedded in the affective power that this assemblage of entities exerts upon me —and in my own involvement within it— can give rise to a vital reflexive process that opens up and renews (once again following Spinoza) the “ontology of the human” (Michael Hardt, as cited in Ticineto and Halley, 2007, p. x).



Figure 1. *Milpa of fava bean, bean, and blue corn. Home garden. Personal archive.*



Figure 2. *Harvest of blue corn and cempasúchil flower. Home garden. Personal archive.*

Agroecology is the term that, in contemporary times, encompasses, on one hand, “the ecosystemic and cultural relationships of agroecosystems”, and on the other, “agrarian struggles surrounding land tenure, and finally, a way of practicing agriculture—a production system grounded in various philosophical principles of respect for life, expressed in forms of agriculture that avoid the use of toxic substances” (León-Sicard, 2019, p. 396). With regard to these different senses in which the milpa, as an agroecological system, can be understood, I am particularly interested in highlighting the “symbolic dimension”, which includes the relationship between the technologies involved in cultivation and the forms of social and symbolic interaction we maintain with the entities (both material and immaterial) that make up the milpa. From this perspective, I propose to consider the milpa as both a form of technology and a narrative form that integrates us—a system capable of generating an aesthetic order that not only expresses, but gives rise to “worldviews,” “configurations of meaning” (Lugo and Rodríguez, 2018, as cited in León-Sicard, 2019, p. 397), and consequently, alternative ontologies that move beyond the dualisms of culture and nature, system and environment, human and non-human. In this vein, I highlight the conception of the milpa as a technology that, beyond involving the tools, materials, and arrangements of peasant know-how—both ancestral and contemporary—engaged in seed selection and exchange, procedures for genetic modification/diversification, optimal growth, or pest control, also offers us modes of environmental perception, attuning our senses to the particularities of place, season by season, among bodies and presences in transformation. This is the perspective that Giraldo and Toro associate with environmental aesthetics:

It is the place itself that frames the inhabitant who perceives it. The territory is what invents the eyes capable of seeing it, the ears attuned to hearing it, the skin able to experience its tactile sensations, the sense of smell that can come to caress its aromas, the tongue that savors its harvests. (2020, p. 106)

This relational ontology, lived in ways that are relative to each place and that adopt elements from different cultures, habits, and also urban perceptual technologies—a form of symbolic polyculture!—also entails an understanding and use of technology that contrasts with—and in fact

would render inadequate, if not obsolete—the principles of mechanization, standardization, and pragmatic instrumentalization of the modern-capitalist-industrial technological paradigm, which has also been imposed on food policies under neoliberalism. In contrast, the idea is to think—starting from aesthetics and environmental affectivity—about technologies that do not standardize but rather individualize our perception and experience; technologies that diversify our sensory-affective-gestural repertoire, our bodily movements, and our modes of attention in relation to other scales of motion and time—toward other ways of attending that come to matter, as Vinciane Despret (2022, p. 12) would say—, pushing the diversification of our language toward one that is antidisciplinary, indeed transdisciplinary. This ontological-epistemic shift, while it challenges our sensory, conceptual, and disciplinary education, as well as the beliefs shaped by our affections allows for a diversification of the ways we act and transform our immediate surroundings; it expands our modes of cohabiting, communicating, and *world-making among existing and possible worlds*. This is the work that the arts and their methodologies—oriented toward the recognition, construction, and defense of territories—can undertake. I deliberately bring back the questions posed by the Mexican artistic collective Electrobiota⁴ regarding their project *Eisenia, Organic Printing Machine*, in order to

rethink the notion of the machine, 3D printing technology, and digital fabrication by focusing on the intelligences that inhabit a vermicompost system. [...] When we began working together, we asked ourselves not only how we communicate with nature, but also: how does nature communicate with us? What sensory organs can we extend in order to approach those other semiotics? And how can we decentralize human languages toward more-than-human ones? [...] How can we consider these very processes of co-creation—those between the earth, worms, fungi, and microorganisms—as technologies intrinsic to nature? From there, we began to unfold ways of thinking in which technologies are not solely human; although it is a human becoming, we believe it is a continuous thinking-doing

4 See Colectivo Electrobiota: <https://colectivoelectrobiota.wordpress.com/>.

together, where perhaps the collective and the multispecies also come into play. (Electrobiota Collective, 2022, pp. 96–97)

The arts have a unique ability to propose, through sensibility and with great conceptual, material, and methodological freedom, the interconnection between dimensions of the environment and realms of reality — connections that are often not permitted, considered, or are approached differently due to the conceptual and practical limitations of scientific research, agricultural production, the technological industry, or (socio)environmental activism. In this sense, the artistic dimension encourages —through its capacity to integrate media, languages, and *sentipensares* (it refers to ways of knowing that combine feeling and thinking) —the singular shaping of our environmental sensibility as a project in itself. This project, in turn, may call for the unique development of technologies aimed at embracing a plurality of voices, experiences, and situated knowledges for inhabiting, which foster coexistence and even the regeneration of other ways of dwelling at various scales, including urban settings. In doing so, it becomes possible to move toward what Iván Illich refers to as “convivial tools,” understanding conviviality as “the autonomous and creative relationship among persons, and the relationship of persons with their environment” (Illich, 1975, p. 34). Continuing with this author:

Individuals require tools to move and inhabit
[...] people not only need to obtain things
—they need, above all, the freedom to make
things with which they can live, or to shape
those things according to their own preferences,
and to make them available for the care and
attention of others [...] tools that give each
person who uses them the greatest opportunity
to enrich the environment with the results of
their vision. (pp. 33–34)

The arts, through their diversity of symbolic, narrative, technological, and embodied formats, can contribute not only to expressing what occurs in those singular interactions with the milpa or other specific environments (every environment is always a more-than-human multiplicity), but also to engaging with those interactions in an experimental and profound manner —even fostering them— thus enhancing the ethics and aesthetics of more-than-human contact; above all, however, they reveal the

consequences of sustained interdependence over time. Inspired by the research philosophy of Mauricio de la Puente, a food engineer and advocate for designing pedagogies for environmental regeneration, I propose that the aim is to integrate the arts into the environment in order to study and generate a language that encourages the recognition of a “relational subject”: not an object of study, nor of artistic contemplation. Given the relevance of this author’s contributions to an ecological proposal for the arts and art as a means for fostering environmental sensibility, I take the liberty of quoting him at length:

We need to construct a language that allows us to organize ourselves according to the dynamics of the territory, to accept that reality is what sets the terms. The first step toward doing that is to become aware of the territory and its dynamics [...] To decolonize language. (De la Puente, 2022, p. 175)

And later on:

In the specific case of what I am doing, it is about narrating, for example, that this nopal (a species of edible cactus native to Mexico and central to its culture) comes from this river, which comes from these mountains; that these clouds brought the water; and that they come from a place where certain things grow. In other words, it is about beginning to understand that these references constitute the identity of that nopal, not just the amount of protein, minerals, or the specific location where it grew, but all the territorial and temporal relationships it holds. This is its story, its identity, and its meaning. We also want value to be built from that understanding, and for people to commit to doing what that subject needs in that territory. (De la Puente, 2022, pp. 176–177)

This is not about imposing language, but about establishing multiple mechanisms of translation. [...] For me, it was important not to measure the territory, but to understand the different landscape units for the different inhabitants of the territory. [...] There exists a

territorial organization rooted in this diversity, which requires a distinct participatory approach. (De la Puente, 2022, p. 177)

Beginning to cultivate the land, for those of us who grew up in urban environments unaware of the importance of perceiving these processes, can lead not only to a deep epistemic crisis but also to a rupture in our affective regime. According to Giraldo and Toro (2020), this “refers to the distribution, selection, and governance of the sensible that [socially] organizes bodily experience, determining what our sensitivity is directed toward; establishing which elements are allowed to be loved and in relation to which others we remain anesthetized” (Giraldo & Toro, 2020, p. 124). The affective rupture is a process of recognizing how our ways of thinking, acting, and perceiving have, in certain ways, been shaped and oppressed (Giraldo & Toro, 2020, p. 124), leading us to value only certain bodies and beings, specific forms of knowledge and needs that matter within the affective and material economy of hegemonic cities developed under the capitalist-extractive-colonial model, which imposes a particular cultural model and policies for managing nature in urban spaces.

Shaped by certain affectivities and sensory experiences around a narrow idea of “the urban,” I approach both planting and the milpa while recognizing the limitations of my linguistic and sensory framework (Sabido, 2021; Howes, 2014), which are incapable of fully understanding, in a broad sense, the processes that take place there, processes that are closely tied to specific geographical and cultural contexts. Many of these forms of sensory learning can only occur through interaction with experienced individuals who are part of what some sociologists call a “sensory community”: “groups of people who share common ways of using the senses and making sense of sensations” (Vannini, 2012, as cited in Sabido, 2021, p. 250).

Even though my cultivation practices emerged from an individual curiosity that fostered learning through intuition, trial and error, and hands-on observation—an ethic of enabling, letting be, and observing—there came a point when learning alongside others became essential. This was not only to deepen practical knowledge of agroecology, but also to understand its significance as a political project—one capable of connecting alternative models of urban food production with new forms of social participation, beyond the producer-consumer dichotomy.

At the beginning of 2024, I joined a citizen-led call shared on social media, organized through an alliance between agroecological producers from Mexico City, participants in the network of the Alternative Market of Tlalpan⁵ and Xochimilco (southern boroughs of the city), and researchers involved in projects on agroecology, food sovereignty, and solidarity economies. The aim has been to develop a cooperative investment model for a collectively leased plot of land located in the town of Topilejo, in the borough of Tlalpan, to grow corn using agroecological practices (eventually through a traditional milpa system), with the previously mentioned alternative markets serving as distribution and commercialization channels. The work on the plot is carried out by the same collective of investors and is guided by the expertise of the producer and the researchers who initiated the project. One of the producer’s motivations is to share the risks he would usually shoulder alone—risks that threaten the sustainability of his agricultural activity and knowledge, especially in the context of climate change and the ongoing social pressure from urbanization to change land use. Another key motivation for the producer has been to narrow the gap with consumers and make them more aware of the production process—its stages, uncertainties, and risks. For their part, the non-producing individuals involved in this project have been motivated to learn about agroecological processes, in order to foster a more sensitive relationship with maize and the network of mediations that make its production possible. This stands in contrast to the industrial food model—which, as all participants in the project acknowledge, impoverishes both ecosystems and producers, while also weakening our civic knowledge and ability to influence

5 See Mercado Alternativo Tlalpan on Instagram: <https://www.instagram.com/mercadoalternativotlalpan/>

food policy in urban centers. The collective maize plot project I have joined, called Atepetl Tlaocentli,⁶ seeks to build consumer profiles and urban ways of life that neither disassociate from nor stand in opposition to the capacity to work, learn, and feel with the land —thereby challenging the countryside-city duality as separate modes of being and knowing.

Likewise, the project promotes a mode of production that does not involve land ownership and allows us to combine the unpaid work we do on the plot with the paid labor of farmworkers who, under the producer's coordination, have carried out essential maintenance and equipment-handling tasks that, at this early stage of organization and learning, we were unable to do ourselves. This experience of cultivating maize, understood as a social technology, has allowed me to glimpse a distinctive way of thinking about the communal, not as a romanticized essence, but as a project of continuous political reinvention (which, by the way, challenges organizational categories such as left-right, center-periphery, and tradition-modernity). It's not about first having a community in order to work toward the common good, but rather about *“making maize to make community.”* This is a self-organizing process born of a project of cultivating and caring for maize as an emerging common good. Cases like this one, as Arturo Escobar (2014) argues, invite us to *“de-otherize the community —that is, to disconnect it from being seen as relevant only to distinct ethnic groups or those attached to rural or forested territories”* (p. 56), and instead to envision the communal as *“a community in motion, rather than a preconstituted entity”* (Escobar, 2014, p. 56).



Figure 3. *Planting Day, Atepetl Tlaocentli Project. Personal archive.*

6 The name derives from Nahuatl and means “community of maize.”



Figure 4. *Corn shelling, Atepetl Tlaocentli Project. Personal archive.*



Figure 5. *Maize from the planted plot, Atepetl Tlaocentli Project. Personal archive.*

I should note that my interest in this project also stems from my geographical and emotional proximity to the area where the plot is located, in the town of Topilejo, adjacent to San Miguel Xicalco, where I have lived for several years. Both towns have precolonial roots and autonomous, communal organizational structures that, in addition to having an agricultural vocation (currently in marked deterioration), are part of Mexico City's designated Conservation Land.

The value of this region—due to its agroforestry systems that have historically provided the valley with numerous springs, food production, and timber resources, has given rise to a longstanding dispute and a highly complex territorial dynamic, that continues to this day through a chaotic and ongoing reconfiguration of the biocultural landscape, property regimes, and land-use practices.

This results in discordant assemblages: gentrification alongside local economies; uncontrolled logging and the emergence of cartels involved in it; autonomous and state-led projects in defense of agrobiodiversity and the forest; and opaque territorial reorganization reforms which, under the state government's duplicitous rhetoric, diminish the recognition of traditional structures and the legal presence of the communities—at times even attacking their environmental defenders.

Living closely with these contradictions and territorial disputes has made me highly sensitive to the historical and political dimensions of ecology, as well as to the importance of more-than-human entities that lie at the heart of disputes which are not only environmental, but also ontological.⁷ These disputes occur in territories located within the Conservation Land of Mexico City land that, "according to the General Program of Ecological Zoning [...] makes up 59 % of the City's total surface area" (Secretaría Ejecutiva de la Comisión Intersecretarial de Bioseguridad

7 According to Giraldo (2022), "*Political ontology* seeks to account for the misunderstandings that arise when the ontology of the moderns—that which conceives of a single world populated by inert objects that can be dominated through reason and scientific and technical means—assumes that, in a territorial conflict, the various actors are talking about the same thing, when in fact we are faced with *conflicts between worlds*. For the worlds of the peoples—to cite the cases described here—the threats posed by projects include *chikones*, *tzuultaq'a*, or *nawales*, whereas in the dominant world, there are only resources, objects, and environmental services available for development purposes. *Political ontology* aims to show that, rather than a 'cultural' conflict between the ideology of progress and local beliefs, we are facing an ontological conflict between different realities, in which one of the parties—the subordinated one—demands symmetry in the terms in which the dispute is framed" (p. 13).

de los Organismos Genéticamente Modificados, 2019, p. 4). All of this further complicates the artificial separation between city and countryside—rooted in the dominant affective regime—as well as the hegemonic ways of living and producing culture for "the urban."

Engaging in the Altepetl Tlaocentli project has allowed me to glimpse the relevance of emerging urban-digital⁸ communalities for contributing to: (1) the strengthening of agroecological systems and sustainable production practices; (2) the regeneration of soils in farming areas at risk of disappearing due to urbanization; (3) the profitability of agriculture within frameworks of social economy; (4) the reinforcement of local markets; (5) the promotion of pathways toward food sovereignty; and (6) the development of environmental awareness and knowledge that had previously been disconnected from my urban sensory experience.

Ultimately, my engagement with the milpa as a relational technology and as an experience of new communalities has become a way of turning the fold of the mountain where I live into a space for theoretical, environmental, and artistic expression—something I have only recently begun to understand as an entangled framework. A way of life and work, a way of cultivating "an appetite for new commitments with other beings that come to matter [...] to elicit, induce, bring into existence, make desirable other modes of attention", in the sense described by Donna Haraway and Vinciane Despret (2022, pp. 12–13). As part of this fabric, I would also like to highlight my approach to the sound documentary as an artistic form of writing, inhabiting, and engaging with territory—interwoven with the milpa. What follows are some reflections.

Desgranar la montaña: narrativas del Ajusco [Unraveling the Mountain: Narratives of the Ajusco]

As a sound creator, I have been interested in addressing how the political ecology of territories manifests in their sonorities, and how, through field recording, we interact with the ecology of these relationships, considering the role played by, and made to be played by, the microphone during that encounter. How to avoid anthropocentrism and destabilize this duality of subject-object, human

8 Digital in the sense that it is simultaneously convened through social media.

non-human, at the moment of recording, analyzing the file, and working in the studio? As Mark Wright states in his book *Listening after nature*, more than an affirmative act of “the position of the *Anthropos*,” that is, “what constitutes the human,” we are in a historical moment that exposes the geological magnitude of social actions driven by capitalism, which have caused irreversible harm to the web of life that sustain us as humanity. Therefore, it becomes urgent to recognize and dismantle, ethnographically and artistically, the role that the Eurocentric ear has played in field recording practices and its extractive relationship with the otherness. To ask: What happens when sound is captured? What about the very meaning of *capturing* in context of interaction between human and non-human? I quote:

When we speak of the Ear, whose ear exactly are we referring to? Who has the historical right to press record, to remain silent rather than be silenced? [...] We can say that the ear that has built the field is not benign; it is manufactured from the ruptures that have caused violence, separation, and subjugation of all species. (Wright, p. 2)

In a reflective exercise, I can recognize with whom I listen and what or whom I am neglecting to hear, integrating into the field narratives the tensions that arise while recording: between expanding the act of listening and recognizing its boundaries, alongside the ethical, and sensory limits involved in *capturing* other presences, listens, ways of sounding, feeling, and knowing, which partake in the field.

The sound documentary *Desgranar la montaña: narrativas del Ajusco*⁹ was my first foray into the listening and narration of social dynamics rooted in the land and the mountain, in a place where the chaotic junctions between countryside and city fiercely transform the landscape, which in turn resists any attempt at categorization or ontological dualism. In the documentary, I explore what my place is there and my way of inhabiting it, what I can do from my cultural and material condition to strengthen the memory of the territory where I live, what role I play for others, and what role I want to play in that territory.

Unlike what the composer Murray Schafer proposes in his studies of soundscape, which have become canonical in the way of approaching the relationship between sounds and spaces, my research does not aim to characterize the ‘sonic identity’ of the place, nor to establish valuations between native and foreign sounds, or those that deserve to be preserved or eradicated. The documentary’s wager is to *narrate as a way of making territory*; to turn field recording into a conscious *space* of fictionalization that does not capture the sonic essence of any entity out there, that does not seek to preserve any voice, nor present to anyone how the people or the “nature of” Ajusco sounds. There is no landscape before the ears. There is no mastery of the space through listening as a sense clearly differentiated from the others, or of the territory to which it adapts. The approach sought is more in line with what ethnomusicologist Steven Feld (2013/ 2015) has termed *acoustemology*—in contrast to acoustic ecology and the notion of soundscape—.

Acoustemological approaches, while concerned with the dynamics of localized space-time, focus on the stories that emerge from a relational listening—in the methods that allow for hearing *sonies* of listening—always with an ear or agency of the *sonies* of listening, which are understood as relational and contingent, situated and reflective. (Feld, 2015, p-15)

For *acoustemology*, embracing that relationality means destabilizing any assumed ontology that distinguishes between “human”, “mountain”, “animal”, “plant”, or different manifestations of the sacred. For instance, it advocates not reducing listening to the sonic or to a preconceived (anthropocentric) idea of the sonic, calling for the act of *listening to listen*, and destabilizing listening through its relationality: listening (to oneself) *with* the corn, *with* that three, *with* the microphone, *with* the river, *with* the violin, *with* the truck engines that transport and distribute water across the mountain, *with* the people participating in the celebration.

If there is something that the recording expresses and seeks to emphasize in the editing of the documentary *Desgranar la montaña*, it is the contingency, positionality, and fragile, momentary relationality of my body in tension and relation with others, including the body of the

⁹ An excerpt from this unpublished material can be heard at <https://soundcloud.com/rossana-lara/extracto-documental-desgranar-la-montana-narrativas-del-ajusco>.

microphone with its own agency of capture, intervening in my own listening, I am interested in what the microphone does in me and “what the recordings do” (Wright, 2022, p. 4). In this regard, the American collective Ultra-red,¹⁰ which for many years has explored formats of sound journalism and research on various social struggles through sound—serving as a latent reference in my work—highlights the type of affective, political, and analytical mobilization to which the microphone and the *record* mode lead us.

amplifying, directing, organizing, conjugating, configuring, and mediating the desire to listen. As a device that amalgamates headphones and the recording apparatus, the microphone is an instrument for listening to a field undifferentiated between need, demand, and desire. Listening is organized in the name of microphone. This does not mean that it is the only means for practicing analytical listening. (Ultra-red, 2008, p. 2)

The sound documentary, willing to narrate and speculate on the reflexivity of those who listen there—with the imprint of moving away from the anthropocentrism—is a way of accounting for how the territory changes when speaking of the territory, to become a testimony of *my listening- without*: what I have left put by choice, misunderstanding, inaudibility, or untranslatability, and which implies “a legitimate position for practice and research that is not based on representational knowledge” (Wright, 202, p.8). During the experience of producing the documentary, I found myself motivated to generate actions that modified my bodily relationships with the territory (improvising in the rain, preparing to attend to the regularity of bird songs at a certain hours of the day, facilitating certain encounters and conversations about corn, or about the names of shrub plants and native fauna, recording the corn planting action at my house, organizing group walks to a nearby volcano, chatting with the hill caretakers, going on a drift, attending local patron festivals, following the route of the local river, and finding, on the way, the existence of a family that

produces *pulque*).¹¹ The documentary became a way of inhabiting and transforming this existence through listening and editing of the sonic recordings; an encounter that gave rise to new affections and rearrangements with the territory as a symbolic space. A space shaped through sound design, which suggested, in the process, new modes of attention, new walks, ideas of recording and post-production, dialoguing, mobilizing, and stretching the territory. More than a narrative format, a priori, the sound documentary is an assemblage where the becoming of my body, the becoming of the microphone, the becoming of the landscape that I recreate while walking, the becoming of the script, and the post-production means are negotiated, where each instance recursively affects the other, impacting the imagined territory and my way of inhabiting and acting upon it materially. Therefore, it is possible to think of the sound documentary as a convivencial tool, in a sense given by Illich: the documentary process allows me to narrate, while at the same time producing, the conditions of my relationship with living being and with what makes me alive. And, what I consider even more important: while serving as an assemblage of tools to pay attention to the biocultural singularity of territories in dispute, it encourages the care for and of others, key in the comprehension of Illich’s view on the “convivencial”. To this regard, the ways of thinking and doing sound documentary, presented here, should be socialized as a second moment of artistic research, and accompany processes of collective storytelling, as means to rethink/perform the relationships that are established with our more than-human environments.

Finally, the reflections deposited in this text regarding the milpa and the sound documentary as convivial technologies, perceptual tools, and collective writing are made possible by the group walks that have accompanied this process as a way of feeling and questioning together, especially, through the collective *Contra el soundscape. Toward a Non-Anthropocentric Listening*.¹²

10 Ultra-red <http://www.ultrared.org/mission.html>. Last accessed: October 9, 2024.

11 Fermented beverage of pre-Hispanic origin, extracted from a type of agave called *maguay*.

12 Study Circle Against the Soundscape: Toward a Non-Anthropocentric Listening. https://www.instagram.com/circulo_contraelsoundscape/



Figure 6. Study circle walk to Ololica Volcano, San Miguel Xicalco. Personal archive.

This group was formed in 2022 following a call I made on social media, with the intention of engaging in dialogue and collectively establishing frameworks for listening and sensory exploration, aimed at facilitating a non-anthropocentric approach to ecology and the more-than-human relationships that underlie our urban interactions, grounded in situated knowledge and modes of expression.

Collective reading, writing, and walking —nourished by interdisciplinary and undisciplined perspectives across the humanities, biology, and the arts— invite us to seek forms of knowledge and expression attuned to the places we traverse: suburban areas, forests, rocky terrains, volcanoes, and the bodies of water that survive in the city. Walking is what creates space, says Francesco Careri in *Walkscapes: Walking as an Aesthetic Practice*. It is the journey —collectively shaped by what each person perceives and shares, making the group turn, move forward, or step back— where

the territory is read, memorized, and mapped in its becoming. Thanks to the absence of stable reference points, the nomad has developed the ability to construct their own map at every moment. Their geography undergoes continuous mutation; it deforms over time according to the movement of the observer and the perpetual transformation of the territory. (Careri, 2002, n.p.)

The singular landscape that emerges and dissolves during the group walk reveals the importance of walking as a convivial practice that teaches us how to dwell. The responsibility of dwelling also involves cultivating shared ways of expression that nurture diversity, detail, relationality, and narrative speculation, between material and symbolic assemblages —within the conflicted, eroded, and contradictory state of ecosystems, allowing us to reflect on the poetics that emerge from them: what artistic creation does with erosion.



Figure 7. Poster for the public sound walk organized by the study circle within the context of the Murmuro Festival 2024. Image by Lucía Rodríguez. Courtesy of the artist.

Conclusions

This work has shared reflections and ways of inhabiting that incorporate both the ecological-political and aesthetic-affective dimensions of interspecies encounters, with the aim of embracing alternative ontologies beyond modernity —ontologies that may inspire new ways of living, understanding, and narrating the urban beyond anthropocentrism. The aesthetic and artistic orientation that may accompany constitutive relational processes —through urban milpa projects, collective walks, or documentary work centered on territory and attentive to the ethics and politics of representation— offers a way to deepen our engagement with the affects and ways of sensing-thinking (sentipensares) that mediate and shape our relationships with more-than-human cohabiting entities and processes, with the goal of questioning their instrumentalization. When approached as forms of writing, as perceptual and convivial technologies, the milpa, the walk, and the sound documentary can foster co-creative processes with specific territories, promoting the singularization and diversification of language, experiences, and dwelling technologies. These are processes that require the decompartmentalization of knowledge and the unveiling of the roles that aesthetics and affect —thus the power of art— play in socio-environmental struggles and political ecology. As this work has shown, these dimensions are integral to ontological configurations and their political contestation in lived territories. While a community may also sprout from maize —renewing the ways and conditions through which existence is usually conceived and solidified—the documentary, as a writing technology, offers a possibility of resisting the temptation of representational knowledge and the sonic capture of the other.

Still pending is the task of activating these singular learnings within diverse groups and populations, and of exploring their tensions with the struggles and agendas of Indigenous peoples absorbed by the city, burdened with their own genealogies and toponymies within deeply violated and eroded environments. Environments where prehistory and present, hegemonic time and ceremonial time, coexist in messy and incongruent ways, as Rivera Cusicanqui proposes in her concept of “ch’ixi epistemology” (Cusicanqui, 2010). In this sense, the poetization of planting, eating, walking, and narrating may acquire significant political weight —enabling us to co-inhabit and reimagine urban life through other ontologies, as part of an interspecies macrosystem.

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