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RETHINKING WATER, PLACE & COMMUNITY

# WATER & ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE

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from multiple perspectives within and beyond the academy.

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FEATURE (PEER REVIEW)

# LIFE OTHERWISE AT THE SEA'S EDGE

By Macarena Gómez-Barris

*Editor's note: This feature article has been peer reviewed.*

As part of a longer project on sea edges and coloniality, this essay studies ways of being that exceed the human, nonhuman, and colonial divide, and that find historical nodes of power and affective density at the boundaries of the Americas oceanic.[1] It does so by thinking with and alongside the work of environmentalist and writer Rachel Carson and multimedia mestiza artist Cecilia Vicuña to find sources for ecological

feeling, connectivity, and praxis across the hemisphere. Their views have shaped my own understanding of ecological memories and how the surround has shaped a way of being and living at the sea's edge.

In the midst of the Anthropocene's destructiveness, how can we theorize sea edges as places of coloniality, conquest, encounter, financial



*Along the North Atlantic Seaboard, image courtesy of Macarena Gómez-Barris (2019).*

speculation, yet also as sites of hidden imaginaries and potentiality, and even sites of ongoing resource resurgence and individual and collective resilience?[2] What can we take from Rachel Carson's view despite knowing it is steeped in the settler logic and scientific gaze of Western domination of the natural world? How does Cecilia Vicuña's visual art and performance offer a form of decolonial play that exposes extractive capitalism and also finds sources for living otherwise? Thinking from the liminal and harsh pounding spaces of the sea's edge is one way to consider the beautiful and terrible current condition of planetary existence. Attuning our attention to a historical grounding of place and to the global

ecologies of the sea is requisite for producing action and for unspinning the network of colonial-capital relations. Rachel Carson peers into tidepool communities and is able to name the fragile and resilient condition that exists at the sea's edge. Yet without Cecilia Vicuña's attention to the Global South, to extractive industries, and to the buried and omitted Indigenous histories in the Americas, we risk reproducing our fascination with the ocean and its sea edge without a tethered sense of the colonial Anthropocene. Both of their forms of encounter and observation have profoundly influenced the sea edge epistemology I begin to outline here.[3]

## Pacific Encounters

From an early age, I yearned to live otherwise, between land and sea, between liquid worlds and those constituted as solid. As a small child, I spent long hours searching for anemones in the dense tidepools along Chile's central coastline, where the accumulated secretions of the natural world overpowered my sensibilities. Making my way slowly through the sharp rocks of the tidal pools, navigating around the omnipresent purple sea urchins, I sought ways to feel and peer into microbial worlds. Standing on flat surfaces along the Pacific Ocean in northern Chile on Aconcagua territories, I would extend my view to the sight line along the magenta horizon to imagine swimming submerged as the mermaids, or *pincoyas*, did, moving for days beneath the water's surface. Gulping ocean air, I would pretend to rise slowly from the depths to fill my half-human, half-fish lungs. Being at the shore allowed me to feel the precarity of the Southern geography and the sense of wonder, otherness, awe and exhilaration that came from edge-based living. Looking across the Pacific and perceiving the continental edge space gave me the sense that we lived at the world's margins, far from any planetary center.

The sea's edge offered a refuge from the expectations of normalcy and from the confines of a life indoors. On claustrophobic family Sundays, when most public life retreated to the space of the hetero-domestic, my desire to be at the sea's edge grew even stronger. Even though I knew I would later be scolded for my transgressions, I would wake up early and put on an old pair of grey boots to quietly make my way outdoors. Once on the corner, I would hail a small *colectivo* to take the short ride to the Valparaiso port, where those working in the market invited me to touch the still-living sea creatures on offer. This was the oceanic life that thrived prior to the arrival of transpacific fleets. Those I met at the market worked closely with the Mestizx artisanal fishermen and women in what more than forty years later has become a ghost enterprise. I never saw the *picoroco* sea creature at the edge of the ocean or hovering in the crevices of deep rock formations where they encouraged me to look for them. Yet by visiting local stalls I could observe the *picoroco*'s alien-like movement within barnacle shells. For what seemed like hours I would watch a single claw emerge and withdraw



again, remembering that Pablo Neruda had once called the animal prehistoric. Indeed, the diversity of species, oceanic life, and smells at the marketplace stretched my young mind like the sea's limitless horizon.

Such experiences were my first forays towards developing a decolonial queer femme perspective that centers intimate human and nonhuman relations and the letting in of the surround as key to imagining life otherwise.[4] Awe, amazement, and play in relation to the environment were how I perceived these early worlds, even as I could not yet attend to the histories of colonization and eradication that undergirded these experiences and that would later become central to my decolonial praxis as a non-Indigenous scholar. In this essay, I begin to work out how edge perception

contributes to a *cuir* femme method that engages the surround and remembers the sweep of colonization and histories of social and ecological disappearance. In times such as these that demand politically committed research, writing, and activism, we might consider wonder, curiosity, porosity, and imagination as superfluous to our worldly engagement. Yet these forms of living and perceiving are not immature or secondary, but deeply invest in sensual experience as a way to oppose the colliding structures of amnesia and loss represented by racial and extractive capitalism. In other words, play and perception are key to our imaginary of life otherwise on the other side of the colonial divide.

As Southern ways of thinking, knowing, and being opened this inquiry, my reflections and search



*Shelter Island, image courtesy of Nicole Hayward (2019).*

for sea-edge imaginaries have also been deeply imprinted by a more Northern geography, both in terms of embodied experience and through a vast literary tradition on ecology written in English and troubled by the workings of empire. After September 11, 1973, we fled U.S.-backed authoritarianism in Chile, seeking refuge and becoming settlers in the belly of the beast. We arrived at another Pacific horizon, first moving to Los Angeles upon Gabrielino and Tongva territories and then to Northern California where we rented a home upon Maidu lands in the foothills of the Sierra Nevada Mountains near the fork of the American and Feather Rivers.

As a teenager, I continued to feel the pull of the sea's edge, though I had not yet been able to make connections between my own exilic condition and how extractive capitalism had already organized so much of the global economy. In my public high school, I took courses in marine biology, learning the scientific names of the ocean's life zones and its myriad shelf ecologies and species, such as the *pyncopodia helianthoides*, or sea sunflower. It was with my mother and sister that I began my field research on sea edges, taking weekend trips to Mendocino and later to Fort Bragg, staying at a clean, budget motel that clung to the very threshold of the North Pacific Ocean. Oceanic life brimmed in deep tidepools until recently when unconscious tourism and the warming of the oceans has gutted much of this sea-periphery density. Armed with a small camera, I would arise at dawn, making my way to the still-dark ocean edge to explore and trample upon the slippery rocks filled with glistening green and blue sea life that responded to the galloping tides.

These smaller, barely discernible worlds fastened me to the submerged spaces of the oceanic as a life-long obsession, a way of imagining otherwise that liberated me from our state of unbelonging toward fluid ways of relating and being in tune with our liquid planet. Only later would I come to know that the Mendocino Coast was Indigenous Pomo territory named for the Spanish explorer Antonio de Mendoza, the Viceroy of Spain, and to understand how regional histories of the founding of the Noyo Reservation in the nineteenth century represented yet another iteration of colonialism's violent trace. These hemispheric histories of exploration, domination, and occupation continue to haunt the landscape and connect the geographies of the Americas.

If we are to understand the destructive capacity of the colonial Anthropocene, its sheer power and capacity to make lively worlds extinct, then we must also reckon with our ecological memories and affective sensibilities in relation to the natural world that sustains us.[5] We must also acknowledge our intimate knowledge of the Earth as that which moves and shapes our affective, psychological, and collective attachments to the delicate web of social and biological life. Partial memories along the shores of the Southern continent organize my view of the Pacific and living otherwise, a personal story that connects to a shared inheritance of disappearance. These experiences guide my desire to better understand the in-between zones of land and sea, and where sea edges meet with oceanic histories of enslavement, occupation, transit, migration, empire, and industrial impact.

## Salvaging the Sea

The river is within us, the sea is all about us;  
 The sea is the land's edge also, the  
     granite  
 Into which it reaches, the beaches  
 Where it tosses  
 Its hints of earlier and other creation:  
 The starfish, the horseshoe crab, the  
     whale's backbone;  
 The pools where it offers to our curiosity  
 The more delicate algae and the sea anemone.

–“Dry Salvages” by T. S. Eliot (1943)[6]

What modes of writing, enacting, living, and being route us out of the colonization of the senses to open up an ecological imaginary of what is to be salvaged? T.S. Eliot's mid-twentieth-century poem “Dry Salvages” describes the relational connections between the human and nonhuman, where the substance of water is literally “all about us.” It reminds us how we, too, are deeply linked to and with the planet's water, its rivers and the oceanic as liquid bodies shaped by lunar ebbs and flows. Eliot's poem, with its ecological vision of curiosity and wonder from the Anglophone literary canon, was available to Rachel Carson as she wrote her famed ocean trilogy.[7] At that time, Rachel Carson was struck by how similar T.S. Eliot's language was to her own poetic descriptions of the sea, a language that came on the precipice of global social and cultural awakening in relation to environmental justice.[8] Almost seventy years later, overfishing, industrial activities, the shipping industry, and real estate overdevelopment have vastly changed the coastlines of the North Atlantic seaboard. Perhaps an Anglophone writer's ecological connection during the mid-twentieth century had a different structure of feeling than our current condition, when we cannot write ourselves out of the practices of contamination and extraction, especially in relation to Indigenous dispossession, the structure of racial segregation, and dangerous

overexposure to waste, hazards, and polluted environments within communities of color.[9]

Ten chapters from Carson's first book, *The Sea Around Us*, first appeared in consecutive issues of *The New Yorker* on June 2, 9, and 16, 1951, with the title “The Sea: Unforgotten World.”[10] As her biographer describes, Carson challenged the magazine's readers “to think of the sea as a living entity,” matching the long form of the articles that wound around the pages of the magazine.[11] The opening of *The Sea Around Us* describes the geological origins of the ocean:

Beginnings are apt to be shadowy, and so it is with the beginnings of that great mother of life, the sea. Many people have debated how and when the earth got its ocean, and it is not surprising that their explanations do not always agree. For the plain and inescapable truth is that no one was there to see, and in the absence of eyewitness accounts there is bound to be a certain amount of disagreement. So if I tell here the story of how the young planet Earth acquired an ocean, it must be a story pieced together from many sources and containing whole chapters the details of which we can only imagine. The story is founded on the testimony of the earth's most ancient rocks which were young when the earth was young; on other evidence written on the face of the earth's satellite, the moon; and on hints contained in the history of the sun and the whole universe of star-filled space. For although no man was there to witness this cosmic birth, the stars and the moon and the rocks were there, and indeed, had much to do with the fact that there is an ocean.[12]

Carson's work engaged her audience by using scientific material that revealed a long timeline of evolution and geological change. Despite the fact



that some of the science she relied on at the time was later revised or disproven, the thick descriptions Rachel Carson provided of oceanic life, of “wind and wave and salt, the life of the darkest deep ocean, the great currents that traverse the globe and set the climate,” helped to develop an environmental imagination in the United States that was sensitive to ecosystems and the earth’s natural climate cycles.[13]

Attending to the local ecologies and dynamics of the intertidal zone, Carson writes that “although abandoned briefly and rhythmically by the sea, it is always reclaimed by the rising tide.”[14] This permanent reclaiming by the pull and force of the ocean offers a mode of being that is non-linear yet constant, an oceanic rhythm of time and space that is recurrent, insistent, and that withdraws and abandons only to return again. Through a scientific and poetic lens that names the sea’s force, Carson understands the ocean as an entity of relational ebbs and flows. How can we theorize this nonhuman force at the center of the earth’s webbed ecologies? How do we remember the power of the ocean’s connectivity to lunar and to cosmic extra-planetary gravitational forces?

In its thick descriptions of liquid sea life, reading Rachel Carson’s oceanic chronicles demands that we suspend our own present-day knowledge of ecological destruction and this suspension highlights how the scientific ecological view is informed by the settler colonial imagination. As John Gatta discusses, Carson’s *The Edge of the Sea* expresses a mystical sense of the world that, while not explicitly theistic, is far from narrowly positivistic.[15] Carson’s view rests somewhere between the scientific and the mystical, or what we might call a phenomenological or experiential perspective that considers scale and complexity. Its close attention to the surround and to the sea’s edge with its animated tidal waters teeming with the nonhuman: little fish, willets, flying skimmers, and searching ghost crabs. Rather than a pure space of organic matter, however, the intertidal zone is also a metaphor for life that is

defined by Carson as the “delicate, destructible, yet incredibly vital force that somehow holds its place amid the harsh realities of the inorganic world.”[16] Though this bumping up of organic and inorganic in Carson’s ocean does not yet assign life force to anthropogenic change, the trilogy perhaps anticipates a posthuman or new materialisms theorization of oceanic vitality.

Written largely from her individual observations and time spent along the northeastern seaboard, the intertidal zone provided Carson with a fecund site for her research on oceans. Sitting and walking alongside the coastline of Maine allowed her to describe algae worlds where clinging life resists the pounding waves and the subtle relationships that bind each living thing to its community and patterns of life, creating a complexity of earthly seashore design.[17] In her observations along the Maine coast, Rachel Carson imagined the sea edge as a geography as old as the earth itself, where “life first drifted in shallow waters—reproducing, evolving, yielding that endlessly varied stream of living things that has surged through time and space to occupy the earth.”[18] Entering the earth’s older geographies, Carson views from the stream of living things.

What is striking is Carson’s laser-sharp attention to and focus on the intertidal zone, or the area that is defined between tide marks, or above water at low tide and under water at high tide. There is a fluidity to the taxonomic methodology of Carson’s trilogy that scientifically observes from the sea’s edge. Indeed, her biographer notes that though one imagines Carson as a high adventurer type, most of her work was spent in quiet libraries or pondering from relatively small geographies along the Maine coast, rather than immersed deep in the Pacific and Atlantic Oceans. Carson’s delicate view of sea life is powerful in its scalar vision and also represents an ecological commitment to illuminating the web of life by focusing very directly on the sea’s edge.

There is also a grounded epistemology at work in Carson's narrative, where organic matter is captured both through a sense of wonder and through the affective and intimate relational edge networks. For instance, Carson creates physical and emotional ties between the worlds of the Atlantic coast near her home and her earlier life "memories of a southern coast, where the sea and the mangroves, working together, are building a wilderness of thousands of small islands off the southwestern coast of Florida, separated from each other by a tortuous pattern of bays, lagoons, and narrow waterways." [19] By spinning a geography of intimately known places, Carson uses the technique of memory and her own visceral response to the textured oceanic ecologies as ways to experientially connect the edge of the Atlantic seaboard to the archipelagos of the southern coast of the United States.

For those of us reading the text nearly seventy years after its original publication, the trilogy produces feelings of nostalgia as it documents the life cycles of a plethora of oceanic species that are disappearing or already extinct in our increasingly contaminated world. We might also ask why

## Sea Edge Disappearances

A growing environmental movement reading Carson's *Silent Spring* during the 1960s placed renewed value on the notion of a webbed planetary ontology, or more simply put, an ecological perspective. [21] Yet during the 1950s, mainstream U.S. culture benefited from Jacques Cousteau's accounts of undersea life and Thor Heyerdahl's rediscovery of seafaring as part of an expanded consumer market of ocean voyeurism. In an illuminating paper, Amanda Hagood writes that in the sea trilogy, Carson participated in this view by avoiding "the human bias" that worked against "the background of the United States' growing geopolitical expansion into the world's oceans—and with it, the assumption that the sea was a virtually unlimited resource, as well as a

the Indigenous ontologies of the North Atlantic seaboard, such as the First Nations territories of the Penobscot organized in relation to the Penobscot River that flows to the sea's edge, were not in Carson's purview? Further, the oceanic trilogy is not yet focused upon naming the toxic disruptions of industry or what we might directly call the destructions wrought by racial, extractive, and financial capitalism. [20]

I am taken with how Carson documents edge-based systems whose geological temporality predates the colonial imaginary of the ocean. Yet the exclusive focus on the nonhuman in the ocean trilogy both omits coloniality and industrialization, and evacuates Indigenous social ecologies. Such an extractive scientific and monocultural view has the capacity to objectify the sea as a mere site of pleasure, speculation, and even as a commodity resource. At the same time, the vitality of Carson's edge work in conversation with her later work on industrial toxicities, the pollution of waterways, and the ambient concentration of chemical substances provides a multiscale analytical resource for our own ways to critique and imagine the planetary otherwise.

readily available dumping ground, for the growth of American industries." [22]

As commodity culture expanded during the mid-twentieth century, the ocean became increasingly represented through the logics of the extractive view, a view that is epitomized by the ocean documentary. [23] The sea was not only an object of voyeuristic pleasure, national entertainment, fascination, leisure, danger, and scrutiny, but especially a geography of use-value, where the primary modes of mediation fetishized the ocean. To address the destruction, we might bring forward the forceful tone of Carson's *Silent Spring* which states, "The time had come...when it must be written. We have already gone far in our abuse of this planet. Some awareness of this



problem has been in the air, but the ideas had to be crystallized, the facts had to be brought together in one place. If I had not written the book I am sure these ideas would have found another outlet. But knowing the facts as I did, I could not rest until I had brought them to public attention.”[24] The urgency of Carson’s political tone in this quote matches our own climate justice moment, when denial, planetary damage, and the need for remapping local ecologies represents a monumental, yet necessary, future-oriented challenge.

Even as Carson’s trilogy either ignored or was not able to attend to the theory of rising levels of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere caused by human activity as amplification of the natural greenhouse effect, these absences were not out of step with the 1950s moment and its growing ecological awareness, a landscape of already irreversible ruin. By the 1960s and 1970s, with the rise of the Red Power movement led by Indigenous youth, the work of anti-nuclear coalitions, the Delano grape strike, and other new environmental justice efforts, Carson’s focus in *Silent Spring* would ride the crest of a new ecological awareness within U.S. politics. How can we reconcile the expansive and wondrous imaginary of the sea trilogy with the acute political urgency of *Silent Spring*? Is there room for writing about the poetic and supple in-betweenness of earth and liquid life that does not dilute or contain modern/colonial extractive violence?

Though Carson’s writings contribute to an ecological ethos, what has remained unsaid in the celebrations and revitalization of her work is the degree to which she participates in a Western scientific and extractive view, a view of the earth and the oceanic that is based upon a relational network that binds the human and nonhuman and writes out the contributions and presences of America’s Indigenous ontologies, critical scholarship, and the theories and practices of its social and environmental justice.[25] Carson’s omission of Indigenous inhabitation at the sea’s edge and its contribution to an “American”

ecological perspective contributes to how Native peoples are representationally evacuated from the narration of the U.S. mainstream environmental movement.[26]

Carson did not live long enough to witness the acceleration of anthropogenic toxicity, especially in relation to the toxification and depletion of the world’s oceans. The mega-real estate developments of our times, the long effect of the shipping industry and port industrialization, and the complex land-fill urban infrastructures located along the sea’s edge have dramatically reshaped the shoreline. Indeed, after the 1970s neoliberal and deregulatory turn, the sea became the dumping ground for sludge, waste runoff, and sewage justified through the logic that the deep sea and the sea floor could absorb human and chemical pollution without being harmed. With respects to the Atlantic and New York City, in 1986, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency reported that the 106-Mile Site designated area of sludge would not affect the ocean floor. Contradicting this report, in 1995 an interdisciplinary team of scientists researched the waste area and collected evidence of the impact of the sludge. The stain that was supposed to be only 106 miles had at least doubled; the fecal matter in the sludge tripled the population of surface deposit feeders, the animals that feed upon small specks of organic matter, expanding the population of polychaete worms, sea cucumbers, and sea urchins as part of a carbon dense environment. Though *Silent Spring* offers plenty of tools to reckon with ocean extractivism and dumping, including important warnings about the urgency of contending with planetary toxicity, the method of Carson’s earlier ocean trilogy does not express the empirical view of the sea’s edge as an environmental disaster zone.

We might read Carson’s edge perspective not only as descriptive of nonhuman life, but as a missing archive of coloniality and industrial capitalism, where a partial edge perspective of scientific wonder and exploration stands in for

a deeper analysis of the extractive zone. From a universalizing nostalgia of the present, the natural beauty Carson describes in relation to the ocean is disorienting. Describing the sea's biotic worlds, Carson writes, "Each time I enter it I gain awareness of its beauty and its deeper meanings, sensing that intricate fabric of life by which one creature is linked with another, and each with its surroundings." [27] How can we attend to both the beautiful and awful as a methodology of the sea edge? When referring to the writings of Edouard Glissant, Dionne Brand, and Toni Morrison, geographer Katherine McKittrick has suggested their collective works enact a "beautiful attention to space and place." [28] As McKittrick says in an interview, "by beautiful I mean pleasing and delicate and dazzling and brilliant even if it is putting forth a sense of place that is wrapped in awfulness." [29] Is it possible to construct an edge view that attends to both the beautiful and awful embedded within the geographies of over-extraction?

## *Kon Kón* as Sea Edge Knowledge

Situating much of her work in the Global South and in spaces that tether ecological views to the quality of fragility, Cecilia Vicuña's vision over her more than forty-year artistic career has aimed at expressing the intimate violence of coloniality and its devastating impact upon social ecologies. Yet Vicuña's body of work also attends to life's plurality and forms of being and knowing otherwise that cannot be fully eradicated by the civilizational paradigm, or by what Nelson Maldonado-Torres refers to as "the paradigm of war that is modernity." [31] Cecilia Vicuña's precarious art weaves a web of connections and relations by showing us life otherwise at the sea's edge.

In the evocative film *Kon Kón* (2010), Cecilia Vicuña pays homage to the Pacific Ocean and to the disappearing Concón beach within Chile's

Rachel Carson's study of the planet's oceans remains a vital chronicle of an animated sea prior to late capitalist intensification of extractive tourist, fishing, industrial, military, and chemical intrusions upon liquid environments. In describing the vast oceanic currents that carry great volumes of water across great distances to maintain the temperatures of the shoreline, Carson writes, "The importance of climate lies in the fact that life, even as broadly defined to include all living things of every sort, exists within a relatively narrow range of temperature, roughly between 32 degrees F. and 210 degrees F.," making planet Earth "particularly favorable for life because it has a fairly stable temperature." [30] Noting the tidal zones sensitivity to temperature change, Carson describes a sense of what is to come, what we have yet to become fully aware of: the killing of our own planet and its sea edges by not heeding the warnings. What can we learn from the resiliency of the sea's edge where life is constantly battered yet evolves to resist extinction?

Central Valley, offering a way to imagine the interactivity between sea, sand dunes, mountains, marshlands, and the local ecologies of an endangered future. [32] Rather than disconnect the political urgency of the ocean's acidification and the rising algae blooms (that are sometimes referred to as red tides), Vicuña directly addresses the operations of global power by showing regional human and nonhuman changes and disappearances. Through long takes and her direct addresses and performances, she anguishes over the sand dunes' fragility where extensive new condominiums have been built. Vicuña also ponders the meaning of the Concón oil refinery's presence as central to the region's history of colonial evacuation. Vicuña's attention to Incan Andean cultural histories in the film provides an experimental mode and form of seeing that critique the extractive capitalist present.



*Kon Kón* was filmed at the foot of the Aconcagua mountain in the rich valley where the Aconcagua River meets the Pacific Ocean, and where Andean Indigenous dance rituals once took place that Vicuña recreates. As a mestiza artist with deep connections to Indigenous communities in South America and as someone whose art has always been intertwined with Indigenous praxis, I am cautious to define this as resurgent *Indigenismo* since the term harkens back to the nation-building period of the Andes, when literary, photographic, and visual artistic production had a very specific middle-class politics that sought for entry rather than dis-identification with the nation-state. Vicuña's work is distinct in that her family's long-standing connection to the region and her preference for submerged perspectives over the span of her artistic work does not claim an authentic Indigenous past, but resurfaces collective amnesia over buried histories of coloniality.

Comprised of twelve films that were each made separately and then re-edited into a new narrative structure, *Kon Kón* draws upon oral histories with fishermen and women, images of the coastline now overdeveloped by real estate companies, dances at the sea's edge, and documentation of Vicuña making improvisational sculpture made from refuse, plastic, and bits of drift wood. By inserting environmental testimonials, the vanished livelihoods of artisanal fisheries, and her own narration of an enlivened childhood, Vicuña offers a series of experimental videos that incorporate local cultural and Indigenous memory. Vicuña's locus of enunciation takes a poetically damning stance on the speculative capitalism that has overrun delicate and intricate micro-ecologies located at the sea's edge; she visualizes this by showing us the overbuilt condominium in the sand dunes, a monstrosity looming over a delicate local ecology.

In the film *Kon Kón*, we learn that the region was once an important site of artisanal fishing that thoughtfully considered the complex system of

the ocean's ecological balance. As I attended to briefly in the opening paragraphs, this way of life is currently endangered by the transpacific industrial fishing companies that dominate the Central Coast shores. Chinese, Japanese, and North American companies routinely vacuum the ocean floors and "fish down" to extract the most sought species, such as Chilean sea bass, inadvertently netting several tons of smaller varieties of sea life. In Vicuña's film language, the emptying out of the ocean's life forms, and the resultant impending death of its layered ecologies, is multiply equated with the colonial evacuation of Indigenous memory, especially of the Aconcagua peoples that populated the region along the mountain, river, and Pacific basin of north-central Chile.

As Vicuña told me, she first conceived the film *Kon Kón* in relation to *The Night of the Species* (*La Noche de la Especies*, 2009), an exhibition that attended to the sea as a subject of extinction through tall glass panels that encrusted small forms of sea life within them. *Kon Kón* represents a phenomenological view of place, regional history, and ecological sensibility, but one that is powerfully decolonial in its view from the sea's edge. In other words, Vicuña's 52-minute composite study of the Concón region becomes a direct alternative to the deadening effects of global capitalism, primarily through lifting up Aconcagua Indigenous and popular cultural memory that experiments with minor viewpoints, dissonant soundscapes, unusual juxtapositions, performativity, scale, and oral history to ritually and collaboratively envision a way out of the oft-stated inevitability of the planet's dystopic future. Put differently, the film reckons with the dialectics of life and death, creativity and destruction, presenting critically hopeful local alternatives as modes of cultural memory and resurgence.

Like Rachel Carson, Vicuña narrates the memory of place: "Since childhood I played on these beaches. One day I felt the sea sense me. In this instance, I knew the body and the sea dialogued

in a language I needed to hear.” A few minutes into the film, Vicuña reveals that the Concón beach is located just a short distance from her childhood home, near what continues to be her mother’s residence. Vicuña’s situated viewpoint offers an intimacy into the region’s historiography, where the insertion of autobiographical notes allows her to comment authoritatively upon the pre-colonial archaeological archive. This personal lens does not overwhelm the film’s narrative; instead, the filmmaker portrays the ocean as a protagonist, possessing its own autonomous and interactional vitality. Vicuña assigns

the pronoun “she” to the Pacific, visualizing the ocean’s capacity to reach out, sense, and orient to other life forms, including dynamic communication with the filmmaker.

What Vicuña crafts in *Kon Kón* is relative proximity and distance between her physical form and that of the Pacific body through the strange subject-ness of the declaration, “One day I felt the sea sense me.” That the “the body and the sea dialogued” is a poetic phrase that shifts one’s perspectives out of the Western and Kantian division of the human as separate from the natural world.



*Aconcagua Refinery. Photograph by Mariela Morales, (CC BY 2.0).*



Moreover, rather than romanticize the deep past, Vicuña finds interest in the meaning systems of recent local and popular culture.

I am drawn to Vicuña's feeling that the sea sensed her because it regenerates ideas in relation to ecological thinking and its activism, and compels renewed thinking about the sea as a protagonist. In conversations with her, Vicuña notes how this ecological view is part of who she was; she did not have to learn it and it was ingrained in her from a very young age. The perspective that Vicuña has in the film is also not naïve or childish; indeed the film is a fully realized work of awful beauty and sublime terror, an aesthetic that explores through a porous relationship to the surround referencing disappearance, extraction, oil, and real estate development along the sea's edge.

Over the course of almost five decades, Vicuña developed important and novel strategies of representation that address local and global precarity

by drawing our attention to what Candice Amich describes as a refiguring of the "fragility of life and culture under conditions of neoliberal globalization." [33] In *Kon Kón*, a nearby oil refinery is a recurrent visual trope that symbolizes many layers of buried histories. In juxtapositions between the extractive industry and more pristine views of egrets and the surrounding landscape, Vicuña visualizes how purity and contamination, nature and artifice, untouched and industrial worlds co-exist in proximate, if unstable, orbits.

Vicuña narrates on the soundtrack what cannot be seen above ground, namely an ancient Aconcagua burial site that underlies the oil refinery. Thus, she layers the continuities of hidden genocidal histories through a lifting up of minor and submerged perspectives. The colonial irony here is that Aconcagua simultaneously refers to the Aconcagua Indigenous people, the river, and the Concón oil refinery that is owned by the transnational Chilean oil company Aconcagua.



*'Kon Kón' inundated excavation, photograph by James O'Hern, image courtesy of Cecilia Vicuña.*

The Aconcagua oil company has made efforts to extract petroleum deposits from the pristine natural preserves of the Mississippi delta in the United States, an important connection that situates another kind of web of relationality that we might weave by working from Vicuña's regional perspective.

If precarity organizes Vicuña's ephemeral installations and performance work, then in *Kon Kón* it is expressed through fragile ecological relations as well as Vicuña's use of found materials such as pebbles, seashells, and sticks. Through the layered use of both found and elaborated materials, and scenes where she engages all of these, Vicuña produces a fragile sense of time, space, and instability of place. For instance, she invites the ocean to play with her as she picks up sticks and forms a beautiful sculpture along the shore made up of odds and ends and different heights of found objects. Vicuña says she is "arranging them for the high tide to erase and knock them down,

completing the work." Vicuña's camera views the tide retreat and return. The ocean completes the work as the word vanishes in the air.

Toward the end of the film, we begin to understand Vicuña's full investments in shifting our way of seeing and relating to the sea's edge. Alongside several other dozen local residents who are banging on sticks and drums and digging with their feet into the sand, Vicuña dances. On the soundtrack, she narrates, "These are sacred sites, where the ancient people created middens... the people came to the beach. They came at low tide to dig the sand dancing with their feet in the sea." Following this scene, she says that "this is a war against the dunes, and it's a war against the connection we have with the land...30,000 clams, the clams disappeared." With the dissonant note of the Andean stone pipe in the background, she mourns and whispers, "The way it sounds is kinship as a crying flute...the cultures died and died, and the names died, and this love for this sound



*'Kon Kón' found object sculptural edge, photograph by James O'Hern, image courtesy of Cecilia Vicuña.*



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continues.” In these lines, Vicuña insists that this regional landscape is a site of colonial occupation and disappearance that must be counteracted.

How might we think with the porous boundary between land and sea, through intertidal zones, and at the same time consider these spaces as racialized geographies rather than pure and untouched spaces? Like ecotones, areas that transition between two biomes and between distinct plant communities (such as forests and

grasslands), intertidal zones have historically been fecund and vital spaces teeming with heterogeneous life forms. Yet these geographies have historically been cross-cut and violated by real estate speculation, shoreline industry, colonial shipping systems, and contact-sites with Indigenous peoples that live in close proximity to the sea. The sea’s edge is not only increasingly vulnerable in the Anthropocene, but a site of *mare nullius* where extractive capitalism increasingly disappears human and nonhuman life.[34]



*Images on lines, screenshot from ‘Kon Kón,’ image courtesy of Cecilia Vicuña.*



*'Kon Kón' red stained hands, photograph by Pllar Polanco, image courtesy of Cecilia Vicuña.*



## Reimagining the Ocean

In transits between continents and archipelagos, between North and South America, between the western and eastern United States, I have come to see the sea edge as a conditional space, an in-between geography where the land meets the sea, a transitional zone between solid and liquid, where heterogeneous and biodiverse life once populated dense and lively sea shores. During the latest phase of anthropogenic climate change, these delicate worlds that both Rachel Carson and Cecilia Vicuña describe have become untethered, destroyed, and all but extinct because of overfishing, over-tourism, and overconsumption,

and because of the human exceptionalism that ignores our responsibility to oceanic life.

The representation of the ocean in Rachel Carson's trilogy is not what we encounter today; instead, we encounter seas filled with plastic swirls, algae blooms or red tides, and the tremendous loss of sea life species diversity. Pondering from the sea's edge, the evolutionary process looks different during the anthropogenic era of species loss and contaminated waters. Most of the earth's sea edges are colonized by real estate speculation, by urban cities and



*Red tide algal blooms. Photograph by Marufish (CC BY-SA 2.0).*



petrol-infrastructures, by sewage and waste systems, and by industrial toxicity. We might consider the scales of precarity and global wealth that live along sea edges, the loss of sustenance for fishing communities, the lost imaginaries of living with and being with the ocean, the buried histories of colonization and the visible evidence of industrial ruin.

Cecilia Vicuña's film *Kon Kón* connects these histories of human and nonhuman disappearance and extinction. The film locates itself between the disappearances of Indigenous Aconcagua histories in relation to Spanish colonization, the disappearances of U.S.-led Cold War, and the disappearances of oceanic life.

Writing during the aftermath and continuation of the devastating practices of colonial, financial, and industrial capitalism, how can we represent the layered world of extractive violence at the sea's edge? In transitioning between the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans as places of mutability, murkiness, violence, and wonder, we might consider how the sea and the sea's edge themselves reveal the layered histories of what Anibal Quijano first called the coloniality of power.[35]

I have written about rivers, below-surface oil deposits in the dense eco-pools of sub-tropical forests, mineral-filled mountains that exist within Indigenous biodiverse territories, and my research and writing practice now takes me to the sea's edge. The conversion of living matter into surplus depends upon violent acts and states of terror by which governments and corporations cast Indigenous communities and other land and water defenders as criminal others in the latter's quest for environmental and multispecies justices. By turning to the sea's edge, where rivers pour into the ocean and where oceans connect us through shipping routes, I investigate what is

specific about this extractive zone and edge-based land and sea defense.

Given that both Carson and Vicuña's work both dates back to the mid-1950s, we might see with them the damaging consequences of late colonial and consumer capitalism. Making these interconnections, Silvia Federici similarly reminds us that to recombine what the social division of labor in colonial capitalism has separated requires a profound transformation in our everyday life.[36] Federici writes, "The distancing of production from reproduction and consumption leads us to ignore the conditions under which what we eat, wear, or work with have been produced, their social and environmental cost, and the fate of the population on whom the waste we produce is unloaded." [37] Federici addresses how globalization has worsened the social and ecological crisis, "widening the distances between what is produced and what is consumed, thereby intensifying, despite the appearance of an increased global interconnectedness, our blindness to the blood in the food we eat, the petroleum we use, the clothes we wear, and the computers we communicate with." [38] By focusing on the edge we make a profound shift towards understanding what Federici names as "the quality of relations, a principle of cooperation, and of responsibility to each other and to the earth, the forests, the seas, the animals." [39]

How do we act in the world both to dismantle colonial structures and revitalize the ocean as connective tissues of living otherwise? How can we make lively connections between seemingly disparate oceanic geographies? [40] At this time of crisis, rather than retreat into nihilism which only perpetuates the logics of capitalist destruction, we might sense and approach sea edges as a way to better understand our capacity to live otherwise.

## Footnotes

[1] See my book *Beyond the Pink Tide: Artistic and Political Undercurrents in the Americas* (Berkeley: UC Press, 2018), and forthcoming work *At the Sea's Edge*.

[2] The list of works to cite here is extremely long and the space for essay footnotes brief. See Jodi A. Byrd, Alyosha Goldstein, Jodi Melamed and Chandan Reddy's "Predatory Value: Economies of Dispossession and Disturbed Relationalities" (*Social Text* 36 (2), 2018: 1-18), an important essay that brings forward the potentiality of grounded relationality. On emotional and intellectual labor in relation to Indigenous critique, see Joanne Barker's "Decolonizing the Mind," (*Rethinking Marxism* 30 (2), 2018: 208-231).

[3] Given that it has been twenty years since Linda Tuhiwai Smith published *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples* (London: Zed Books, 1999), we might remember the author's explanation that her book "identifies research as a significant site of struggle between the interests and ways of knowing of the West and the interests and ways of resisting of the Other" (2). The ability of knowledge production to settle and rule over its findings is a pitfall I seek to avoid by articulating a sea edge epistemology that eschews a universalizing or singular disciplinary frame of analysis, and that takes into account multiple submerged perspectives as well as poetic and scientific viewpoints.

[4] See Macarena Gómez-Barris' *The Extractive Zone: Social Ecologies and Decolonial Perspectives* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017).

[5] By colonial anthropocene I refer to human led planetary climate change and environmental destruction as a spatial and temporal structure with accelerating consequences, one that spans more than five centuries of colonial domination. Put more simply, it is the war against the Earth, Indigenous and racialized peoples, and the nonhuman. See my essay, "The Colonial Anthropocene: Damage, Remapping, and Resurgent Resources," for more elaboration, Antipode, <https://antipodefoundation.org/2019/03/19/the-colonial-anthropocene/>.

[6] T. S. Eliot, "Third Quartet," *Four Quartets* (London: Harcourt, 1943).

[7] See Rachel Carson's Sea Trilogy, *Under the Sea Wind* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1941), *The Sea Around Us* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1951), *The Edge of the Sea* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1955).

[8] For early work on migrant labor and Chicana contributions to environmental justice movements in the United States, see Laura Pulido's classic book *Environmentalism and Economic Justice: Two Chicano Struggles in the Southwest* (Phoenix: University of Arizona Press, 1996).

[9] See Rob Nixon's *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011). Also see Dorceta E. Taylor's *Toxic Communities: Environmental Racism, Industrial Pollution, and Residential Mobility* (New York: NYU Press, 2014).

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[10] Rachel Carson, “The Sea: Unforgotten World,” *The New Yorker* (June 2, 1951); “The Sea: The Abyss,” *The New Yorker* (June 9, 1951); “The Sea: Wind, Sun, and Moon,” *The New Yorker* (June 16, 1951).

[11] William Souder, *On a Farther Shore: The Life and Legacy of Rachel Carson* (New York: Crown Publishers, 2012), 146.

[12] Carson, *The Sea Around Us*, 1.

[13] Souder, *On a Farther Shore*, 150.

[14] Carson, *The Edge of the Sea*, 4.

[15] John Gatta, *Making Nature Sacred, Literature, Religion, and Environment in America from The Puritans to the Present*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

[16] Carson, *The Edge of the Sea*, 5.

[17] For a well-written account of algae and a poetic view of coastal Maine see Susan Hand Shetterley’s book *Seaweed Chronicles: A World at the Water’s Edge* (New York: Algonquin Books, 2018). She too does not include marine coastal Indigenous epistemologies, yet her ecological imaginary considers the elaborate network of algae in useful ways.

[18] Carson, *The Edge of the Sea*, xiii.

[19] Carson, *The Edge of the Sea*, 5-6.

[20] For a discussion of racial capitalism see Cedric Robinson’s *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1983).

[21] Rachel Carson, *Silent Spring* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1962).

[22] See Amanda Hagood, “Wonders with the Sea: Rachel Carson’s Ecological Aesthetic and the Mid-Century Reader,” *Environmental Humanities* 2 (1), 2013, 60.

[23] By the extractive view I refer to a host of monocultural practices of visibility that shift in their technologies from the sixteenth century to the present, but share the continuing conversion of land, territory and liquid geographies into commodities for capitalist accumulation. See my book, *The Extractive Zone: Social Ecologies and Decolonial Perspectives* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017).

[24] Rachel Carson, quoted in Paul Brooks, *The House of Life: Rachel Carson at Work* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1989 [1972]), 228.



[25] For a discussion of grounded relationality see Jodi A. Byrd's "Variations under Domestication': Indigeneity and the Subject of Dispossession" in "Economies of Dispossession: Indigeneity, Race, Capitalism," *Social Text* 36 (2), 2018: 123-141. There is a very long and important body of work to cite, and I can only point to a few works here. On Indigenous resurgence, see Leanne Betasamosake Simpson's *As We Have Always Done: Indigenous Freedom through Radical Resistance* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017). On Indigenous lands, settler law, and the concept of Ea, see J. Kēhaulani Kauanui's *Paradoxes of Hawaiian Sovereignty: Land, Sex, and the Colonial Politics of State Nationalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018). For a fuller discussion of this in relation to Patagonian Ona and Selk'nam peoples see chapter five in my book *Beyond the Pink Tide: Art and Political Undercurrents in the Americas* (Berkeley: UC Press, 2018).

[26] On Indigenous approaches to environmental justice see Kyle Powys Whyte's "Indigenous Environmental Movements and the Function of Governance Institutions," in Eds. Teena Gabrielson, Cheryl Hall, John M. Meyer, and David Schlosberg's *The Oxford Handbook of Environmental Political Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 563-580.

[27] Carson, *The Edge of the Sea*, 2.

[28] James Hudson, "The Geographies of Blackness and Anti-Blackness: An Interview with Katherine McKittrick," *The CLR James Journal*, 20 (1-2), Fall 2014: 234.

[29] Hudson, "The Geographies of Blackness and Anti-Blackness," 234.

[30] Carson, *The Edge of the Sea*, 18.

[31] See Nelson Maldonado-Torres, *Against War: Views from the Underside of Modernity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008).

[32] Cecilia Vicuña, *Kon Kón* (Concón, Chile, 2010), digital film.

[33] Candice Amich, "From Precarity to Planetary: Cecilia Vicuña's Kon Kon," *The Global South*, 7 (2), Fall 2013: 134.

[34] By *mare nullius* I am referring to the emptying out of the sea's inhabitants and absencing of rich social human and nonhuman ecological histories.

[35] See Anibal Quijano's classic essay "Coloniality of Power, Eurocentrism, and Latin America," *Nepantla: Views from the South* 1 (3), 2001: 533-580.

[36] Silvia Federici, *Re-enchanting the World: Feminism and the Politics of the Commons* (Oakland, CA: PM Press, 2019).

[37] Federici, *Re-enchanting the World*, 2019: 109.

[38] Federici, *Re-enchanting the World*, 2019: 109-110 .

[39] Federici, *Re-enchanting the World*, 2019: 110.

[40] We might also refer to this in non-binarized terms as the inhuman. On this point, see Dana Luciano and Mel Y. Chen's "Has the Queer Ever Been Human," *GLQ* 21 (2-3) 2015: 183-207.

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Macarena Gómez-Barris is author of *Where Memory Dwells: Culture and State Violence in Chile* (UC Press 2010), *The Extractive Zone: Social Ecologies and Decolonial Perspectives* (Duke University Press 2017), and *Beyond the Pink Tide: Artistic and Political Undercurrents in the Americas* (UC Press 2018). She is co-editor with Herman Gray of *Towards A Sociology of a Trace* (University of Minnesota Press 2010) and co-editor with Licia Fiol-Matta of *Las Américas Quarterly*, a special issue of *American Quarterly* (Fall 2014). Her essays have appeared in *Antipode*, *Social Text*, *GLQ*, *Journal of Cinema and Media Studies* as well as numerous other venues and art catalogues. She has been a Visiting Professor at New York University and a Fulbright Scholar and Visiting Professor at FLACSO-Quito. Her new book project is *At the Sea's Edge: On Coloniality and the Oceanic* and another on Global South epistemes. She publishes on decolonial praxis, space and memory, and submerged perspectives. Macarena is founder and Director of the Global South Center, and Chairperson of the Department of Social Sciences and Cultural Studies at Pratt Institute.