

Cinema flows, like Water

Dalida María Benfield

Two of the world's most important resources for sustaining human life, water and information, are in similar conditions of imposed scarcity, a result of neoliberal economic imperatives of privatization and efficiency. The metaphor of “global flows” of information is ubiquitous. But does information really flow freely, globally? Or is it dammed, enclosed, and rerouted in unequal flows to people? Like water?

My mother grew up on the banks of the Río Tabasará, in Chiriquí Province, Panama. In my film, *La Zona del Canal (Canal Zone)* she tells me:

The family, my family, that I grew up with, was dedicated to farming. The little region where I was born is very beautiful, with many mountains, where it is very cool in the summer. And also there is a river where my grandfather, and my uncle, well, now they have died, but where they used to have their land. This is where I grew up, then, a very beautiful place, the river full of fish and shrimp. At that time, the land was good (Benfield, 1994).

Her story is visually and sonically intersected with the story of the United States' presence in Panama, from the building of the Panama Canal to the 1989 military invasion of Panamá, “Operation Just Cause.” The river of my mother's youth, in both this work, and my family's imaginary, operates as a space of autonomy, distant from the social constraints of her migration across the time-spaces of Panama City, the militarized Canal Zone, and finally, the United States. The constraints of her racial classification as an indigenous Panamanian, and her gendered identity as a *campesina* (peasant), produces hardship along these routes.

While the water of my mother's river flowed with plenty to sustain my family in Panamá and its surrounding communities, the waters of the Panama Canal carried flows of racialized and gendered stratifications, seeping into everyday life. The building of the canal, and the military occupation of the Canal Zone, a two-mile wide strip of land around it, required the construction of a social, economic, and aesthetic architecture of coloniality that continue to frame the habitus of the nation of Panamá, itself formed solely to incorporate the Canal.¹ It depended on racialized political and economic classifications.

1 See Anibal Quijano (2000) for an introductory discussion of the “coloniality of power” and the senses of “coloniality” and “decoloniality” which I use throughout this essay.



Still, *My Mother Tells Me of Her River*, Dalida María Benfield. Video, 3 min. In *Agua-cine (water|cinemas)*, collective project organized by Dalida María Benfield. Installation with video, photographs, text, and workstation. *Decoloniality/Indigeneity/@rt* exhibition, Fredric Jameson Gallery, Duke University, April 2014.

The canal builders were paid either on the “gold roll” if they were “white Americans,” or the “silver roll” if they were anyone else, including Europeans (mainly Eastern and Southern), Chinese, African, or indigenous Panamanian. This stratification was only another turn of the wheel of a centuries-old system of a colonial racial order in the region, initiated by the “discovery” of the Americas.

My mother's river was distant, though, from this iteration of colonial racial order, and its temporal imperative of “progress.” The Río Tabasará flowed, and still flows, with other beings, practices, and cosmologies, through mountains occupied by indigenous people, the Ngabe Buglé, who fled the lowlands during the campaigns of Pedro Arias de Avila, who Bartolomé de las Casas, the chronicler of early Spanish atrocities in the Americas wrote, was “the cruelest of tyrants” and who “cut great swathes through the interior, driving the locals out, killing left, right and centre, and dispatching everyone he countered to Hell” (1454). The autonomy of the river from the blood of its colonial tributaries holds the possibility, in my imaginary, of an other future for my mother, perhaps another starting point for her story, and therefore my own. My commitment to the river, and to other bodies of water, persists as an other starting point for decolonial pasts and futures. This sense, however, hovers in an unstable space: My mother also tells, in the same story in my film, about staring up at the stars, next to her river, and dreaming of going to “*los Estados Unidos*.” Where did this thought flow from? Perhaps it emanated from the luminosity of the *estrellas*? Did the river already carry this story, deep in its currents? This river itself may have already been mapped, positioned in a global flow of information, a one way current, flowing from the North, from the *yanquis*, to the South.

Particularly in the 20th and 21st centuries, the modern/colonial/capitalist world-system depends on the unequal distribution of information from the North to South or West to East. In the 1970s and 1980s, what is known as the “MacBride report,” *Many Voices, One World* (1984), commissioned by UNESCO, studied the geo-politics of communication and concluded that it was in a state of ongoing coloniality. The documents analyze what it calls the “new world information order” of global communication inequality, including a critique of the United States' domination of global media content and delivery systems. This

caused the United States such consternation that it withdrew support from UNESCO. The *Many Voices, One World* report states the following:

An analysis of the cultural flows between countries shows how serious the imbalance is. The media in developing countries take a high percentage of their cultural and entertainment content from a few developed countries, and chiefly from a few large producers in those countries. The flow in the other direction is a mere trickle by comparison. But the problem cannot be stated purely in quantitative terms. The developed countries get the selected best of the culture (chiefly music and dance) from developing countries; the latter get a lot of what on any objective standard is the worst produced by the former. This unequal exchange is inevitably harmful to national culture in developing countries. Their writers, musicians, film-makers and other creative artists find themselves shouldered aside by imported products. Local imitations of imported culture and entertainment do not improve the situation; they too lead to the imposition of external values (175).

The report clearly delineated the lingering state of coloniality of global communications, and pointed towards the still unfinished project of their decolonization. The colonial politics of extraction and importation of cultural information mirrors that of other resources. In the contemporary context of the Internet, global information flows have become more complex, with multiple sites of cores and peripheries, but patterns of diffusion and content echo the colonial situations described in *Many Voices, One World*.

Global flows of information, and water, both contest and carry the coloniality of life. Like my mother's river, these waters carry all of the detritus and whispers of colonial histories, while carrying decolonial imaginaries, flowing with the transboundary temporality of our ancestors. Water and information are more than material resources. With places and people, they produce ways of being. The production, through water, of decolonial cosmologies is a creative act of affirming a diversity of forms of life and knowledge. A constant process of reclamation and renewal is occurring, now, through diverse methodologies of cultural production, including ancestral practices as well as digital information production and diffusion. In the recent digital cinemas of contemporary artists Fabiano Kueva, the Raqs Media Collective, Michelle Dizon, and Enrique Castro Ríos, decolonial currents are produced and followed. Each of their projects engages in a process of epistemic delinking that frees bodies of water, and information, and renews their sources, creating new tributaries, routes, and common pools of knowledge



Exhibition still, *Agua-cine (water|cinemas)*. Collective project organized by Dalida María Benfield. Installation with video, photographs, text, and workstation, with contributions by artists including Pierre Archambault, Teresa María Díaz Nerio, Tom Jones, and Alan Strassman. *Decoloniality/Indigeneity/@rt* exhibition, Fredric Jameson Gallery, Duke University, April 2014.

that offer new ways of understanding water, and therefore, life.

The colonial project of mapping rivers is undone in Fabiano Kueva's ongoing project, *Humboldt 2.0*, in which he re-enacts the journeys of Alexander von Humboldt in Latin America, re-signifying Humboldt's relentless quests for naming, cataloging, and mapping of flora, fauna, land, and water. Humboldt's quest was to fix the meanings of all that he encountered in the Americas. His impact can be seen in the scores of things that bear his name; the Humboldt squid; and indeed, the Humboldt Current. Humboldt creates an epistemic map of people, place, resources, knowledge, and water. Through a series of performances, video, photographs, writings, and publications, Fabiano Kueva retraces Humboldt's steps, recites his writing, and does he what did: collect, map, and document.

Fabiano Kueva interrupts Humboldt's episteme in this work. In the most recent chapter of the project, Kueva redirects the flow of information about a river, extensively researching Humboldt's project of mapping the *el Río Magdalena*. Intervening in the colonial flow of information, Kueva extracts information from the south, from the *Río Magdalena*, but the information he now extracts is precisely the colonial story that is told about it. He extracts it like lost property, to return to its owner. But to frame this colonial history as a performance is also to create the conditions for our surpassing its finite temporality, and to have the river's many other stories and infinite possibilities returned to it, and to us. He goes to the epistemic source of the coloniality of knowledge of the river, exposing the connection between the mapping of the river by Humboldt and its appropriation as property. He thus extracts details of the rise of the nation-state in "Latin America" and how Europe's colonial strategies of knowledge production were taken up in new forms of governmentality. Kueva writes:

The *Río Grande de la Magdalena*, named after the Spanish colonizers of the 16th century, has since ancient times been a focal area for the material and symbolic life of many villages, related to a complex ecosystem that covers much of the current Colombian territory. Its flow runs 1,500 kilometers from the mountain ranges of the Andes before emptying into the Caribbean Sea. But the Magdalena is an area that has historically lived under pressure from exploitation and plunder projects by the Spanish colonial regime and subsequently extractive projects of the national state, which has produced major environmental changes over time. In 1801, Alexander von Humboldt as part of his American itinerary covers the Río Grande de la Magdalena and raises a detailed mapping of the same document that becomes an important geopolitical value as a tool for territorial control and natural resources under the logic of "progress and wealth of nations"



Hundimiento del Viajero, Fabiano Kueva. Digital photograph. In *Humboldt 2.0*. multi-media art work series, dimensions/duration variable, 2013 – 2015.

(2015).

Humboldt's voyages were a colonial semiotic project, transforming what he understood as nature and water in its pure state – without people - into a resource to be privatized and exploited. Kueva's project underlines the multiple epistemic processes that produce *el Río Magdalena*. Meanwhile the river, understood with its indigenous histories, and its own transboundary logic, flows through and beyond the temporalities of coloniality.

The activity of claiming global waters for national and private economic interests is contemporaneous with a key moment in the opening phase of the capitalist world-system, the “discovery” of the Americas. In the 16th century, Spain and Portugal attempted to divide up the oceans of the world: “The two countries claimed exclusive rights of navigation on the newly discovered seas. Portugal got the eastern Atlantic and the Indian Ocean, Spain the western Atlantic and the Pacific” (Hannesson, 2004). Since then, the oceans and other bodies of water have been subjected to ongoing claims of ownership and territorial rights, abrogated by nation-states and transnational corporations, “discovered” by explorers such as Humboldt. On the global scale, the epistemic and material struggle continues over water. This struggle engages the question of the flows of information and who controls the meanings and uses of bodies of water.

Local and traditional communal understandings and uses of water consistently constitute instances of decolonial practices resistant to incorporation by the logics of the world-system. In Cochabamba, Bolivia, local communities had for centuries used ancestral knowledge of the flows of underground water in order to access it. An epic struggle ensued when Bolivia, in 2000, under pressure from the the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, agreed to privatize Cochabamba's water resources with a United States based corporation, Bechtel. The corporation prohibited access to communal wells, insisting that all water be supplied only by it, at exorbitant rates. In a massive social movement, *La Coordinadora del Agua*, over a hundred thousand people took to the streets, eventually overturning privatization. After this transformative social movement, a national water law resulted that recognized “usos y costumbres” -

traditional practices. Bolivia's "Law of the Rights of Mother Earth" now gives legal rights not only to the Mother Earth, but to water: "It is the right of the preservation of the quality and composition of water to sustain life systems and their protection with regards to contamination, for renewal of the life of Mother Earth and all its components." This is a repositioning of the resources of water for not only the sustenance of life but also indigenous cosmologies. In the face of privatization, these become, in fact, indivisible.

Yakshas infuses the contemporary and historical visual cultures of India and its diasporas; often appearing on or amongst the rhizomatic lotus. In the Raqs Media Collective's video, *Sleepwalkers' Caravan (Prologue)* (11 min., 2008), Yakshas are the central figures in a sparse urban tableau. The two figures, adorned with wreaths, are circled by a moving camera, which sets them adrift in a landscape of a river, a riverbank, and distant signs of urban life: electrical wires, poles, and cement buildings. These signs of "life" stand in stark contrast to the ancient spirituality that the stone Yaksha and Yakshi convey. They stand between us and the water; and between the water and the city. The Yaksha and Yakshi emerge from ancient water-cosmologies of Indo-European culture, source of a powerful set of global cultural flows that understand water as the source of all life. They famously appear in the *Mabharata*, engaging in what they are now most associated with: The posing of riddles, keeping the traveler from continuing until questions are adequately answered. In their recent exhibition, *Luminous Will* (2015), the Raqs Media Collective juxtaposes the video of the Yakshas alongside their text work, *The Riverbank Episode* (2008), which is a conversation between Raqs and a Yakshi and a Yaksha:

Yakshi: What distinguishes a current from currency?

Raqs: A current, or whirlpool, or any force at all, acting to agitate a river or any massed body of water is a manifestation of how the push and pull of distant objects affects a liquid. The moon can cause a tidal bore to rush into a river's mouth, agitating it with turbulent currents that flow upstream. Currency, on the other hand, is the name we give to value in its most liquid and volatile form. It circulates in the bloodstream of nightmares and the vortices of hallucinations. Sometimes, a currency too encounters a strong current. Tidings of remote sentiments, wars, oil leaks and volcanic eruptions cause the sudden appearance of downdrafts of panic or despair. Then, money flows like water.

Raqs' answer insists on an other cosmology in which to position the question, one that emanates from the



Exhibition still, *Luminous Will*. Raqs Media Collective, installation with *Sleepwalkers' Caravan (Prologue)*, digital video, 11 min. (2008), and *The Riverbank Episode (2008)*, text, dimensions variable. Barbara and Steven Grossman Gallery, School of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, 2015. Photo: George Bouret.

Yakshi's predilection for locating divine meaning in the very materiality of human life and the earth. Pre-dating "religion" and "philosophy," the Yakshi insists on materiality and its intrinsic spirituality. Life's finity provides a space of contemplation for the fleeting concerns that nevertheless insist on their overarching and immortal importance, such as currency. The conversation continues:

Yaksha: Why do cities forget rivers?

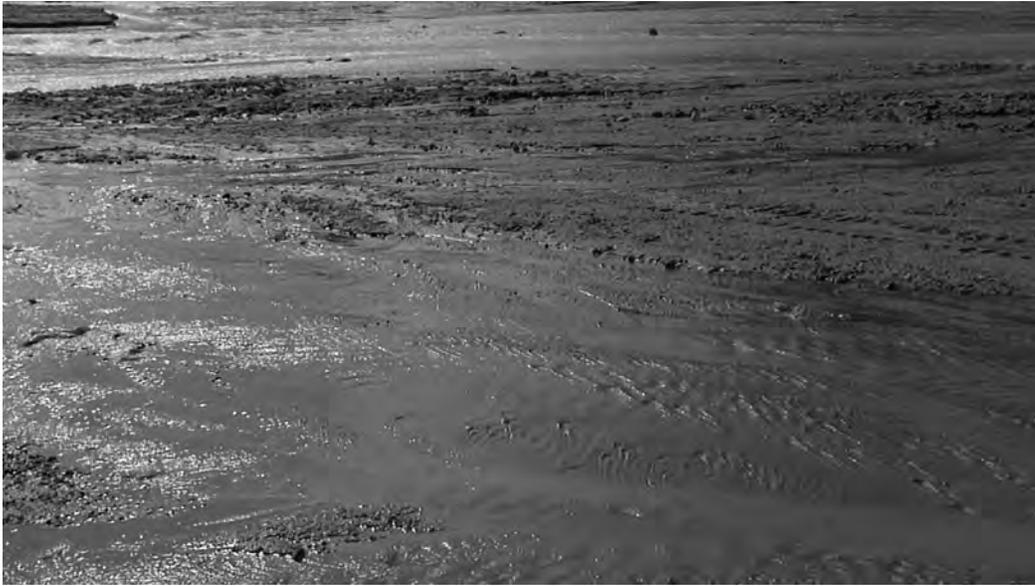
Raqs: Because when money begins to flow like water, cities – oblivious of how thirsty it makes them, or how parched it makes the ground on which they stand – forsake currents for currency and riverbanks for banks.

Water, the carrier of life, is forgotten for currency, and riverbanks forgotten for banks. The will towards immortality creates a forgetfulness of the need for water.

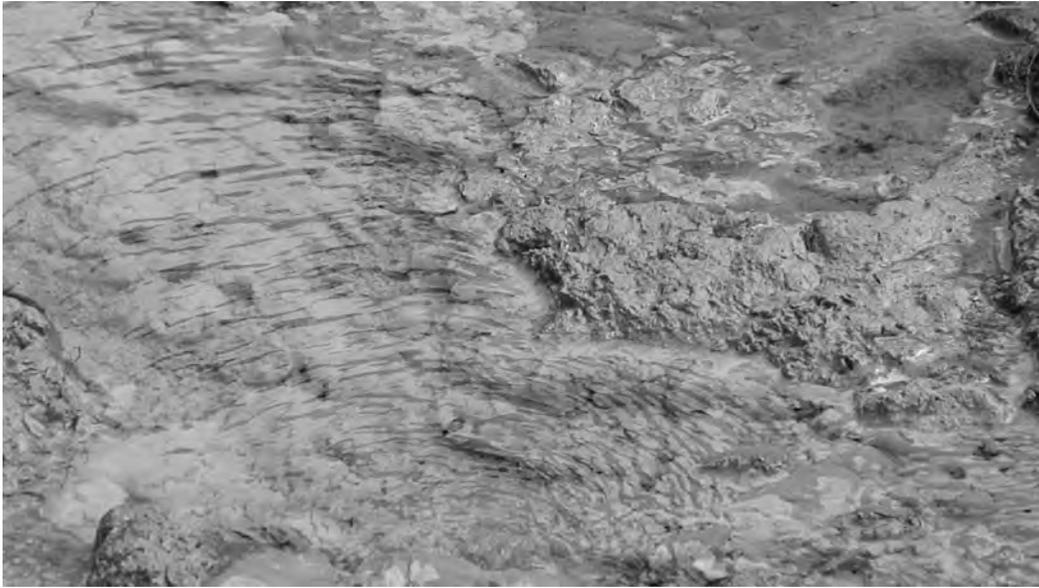
Yakshas are a reminder of the certainty of death, which is the only reminder of the certainty of life. Life and water are indivisible in the cosmology from which they emerge, the Atharva Veda, as the scholar Ananda Coomaraswamy explains:

All the life charms of the Atharva Veda are directed to the restoration to health, or to longer or fuller life, never to immortality in a literal sense. And while in early India, and probably in a remoter past, all conceptions of well-being were thus connected with life on earth, and its perpetuation in offspring, the later development of philosophy altogether precluded the possibility of the development of any theory of personal immortality, inasmuch as it was clearly realized that whatever comes into being must again disintegrate, and that only that can never die which has never come to birth (19, 1931).

This death that signifies birth, and the centrality of water to life in a cosmology that exceeds the claims of immortality of the world-system is echoed in Michelle Dizon's single channel digital cinema work *Basing Landscapes* (2013), which, in her words, "explores the question of land, landscape, and place through a post-military lens. Set in and around the former U.S. military bases in the Philippines, the work approaches landscape as a feminist and ecological practice." The work traces the impact of the military bases in the people, water, and land around them. The physical, and meta-physical, aspects of this devastation are made present through voices of women who worked as prostitutes, as well as activists who are working on exposing and rectifying the ecological toxicity of the bases. In a series of wide shots of the landscape, slowly tracking towards a volcano, bodies of water are shown flowing across the landscape, down and away



Still, *Basing Landscapes*. Michelle Dizon, 2013. Single-channel HD video, 49 minutes.



Still, *Basing Landscapes*. Michelle Dizon, 2013. Single-channel HD video, 49 minutes.

from the bases. The capacity of water to carry the memory of the devastation as well as the memories of what was before, and what is to come, is insisted upon by the voices. Their stories propose another beginning for these flows, with the temporality of the volcano creating a horizon of possibility. In this horizon, the devastation wrought by the bases will be met by the insistent flows of critique, spiritual renewal, activism, and unstoppable waters.

Returning to my mother's river, its flows are now the site of a life and death struggle. The Barro Blanco dam project, constructed by the Honduras-based GENISA, and funded by Dutch and German banks, is 95% complete. As noted in one of many news articles about it: "The negative impacts of Barro Blanco have been identified by scores of technical teams, independent experts, international observers, and the United Nations. Those same impacts are nowhere to be found in GENISA's Environmental Impact Assessment" (Arghiris, 2015). The indigenous Ngäbe-Buglé people have fought against the construction of Barro Blanco for over 14 years. The dam would flood homes and inundate agricultural lands, such as the farmland my mother grew up on, and destroying a portion of the river ecosystem that the Ngäbe-Buglé depend on for fishing. In protest, the Ngäbe-Buglé regularly block the InterAmerican highway, and have suffered casualties due to police and military brutal suppression of their protests, most recently in July 2015. SENAFRONT, a para-military organization funded by the U.S. State Department, is now occupying the region. The Ngäbe-Buglé do not relent, and are instead reacting with renewed interest in religious and cultural traditions. In recent years, they have been working on developing a form of writing of their language for the first time, allowing for new flows of information that reclaim the meaning of the Río Tabasará in their cosmology.

Arundhati Roy (1999) discusses the construction of dams in India as acts of economic, territorial, and epistemic violence. These are memorialized by the structures themselves. The dam provides a vehicle through which the national is written, with its displaced "citizens" stripped of "rights." As she writes,

Dam-building grew to be equated with nation-building. Their enthusiasm alone should have been reason enough to make one suspicious. Not only did they build new dams and new irrigation systems, they took control of small, traditional systems that had been managed by village communities for thousands of years, and allowed them to atrophy. To compensate the loss, the

government built more and more dams. Big ones, little ones, tall ones, short ones (13).

But water, like information, is transboundary, disregarding dams, and national projects and borders. As much as new forms of territoriality seek to limit information flows, they seep, in resistance. Global waters also produce resistance, despite the dams, the canals, and their incessant epistemic enclosure as private property. The Panama Canal is a space of the imposition of a grand, global economic narrative of commercial exchange as well as the construction of the idea of “Latin America” (Mignolo, 2005) and an example of the “triumph of white men in the tropics” to paraphrase William Gorgas, Chief Sanitary Engineer of the canal (1909). But within this space, in the intersections of the African, Indigenous, and other “silver people” epistemologies, including Eastern and Southern Europe, forms of resistance and decolonial knowledge are also produced. Syncretic cosmologies and cultural production emerge, creating strategies of survival that have endured for the people who descended from those on the “silver roll,” far longer than the occupation of the Canal Zone by the United States. In this context, Enrique Castro Ríos' film *wata*, one of several pieces produced by the artist exploring the conditions of water in Panamá, imagines a world without water. In it, the dripping of water creates a backdrop for a psychological drama of a woman and her child. Through the unfolding of the sequences, played out in a sparse domestic space, not defined in time or space, the woman continually dreams of floating and swimming. When she awakes, she seeks out vessels that she has set out to collect water, and finds them barely filled. The drought begins to impact her spirit. We feel her life force draining, and the slowly growing terror of the child. Thinking with the work in the context of Panamá, where water has been both the site of crucial indigenous cosmologies and life worlds, as well as the site of multiple colonial occupations, the work becomes particularly painful. Perhaps it is a crucial strategy to imagine a world without water, given that Panamá is the site one of the world's most excessive movements of the earth to create a more efficient water route for the territorial claims of a nation-state and for the exchange of global goods, with enormous ecological and human cost. In other works produced by Enrique Castro-Ríos, he examines, with a documentary voice, the rivers and bordering oceans of Panamá and their ecological significance, as habitats for fish and other



Still, *Wata*, Enrique Castro-Ríos, 2012. Single-channel HD video, 13 minutes.

beings, and as central sustaining economic and cultural factors in local and indigenous communities. This includes a video about the impact of climate change on the Río Tabasará. In this video, one of the villagers who lives along the banks of the Tabasará says: “Nothing is the same.”

The Humboldt Current is weakening, also due to the impact of climate change, and one hopes that another current will take its place (Institut de recherche pour le développement, 2015). This could mean, perhaps, a realignment of global flows to allow for the sharing of our collective abundance, of water and information. And yet, the abundance of information is under the constant strain of enclosure, by business firms or governments, most recently resulting in the “Access to Knowledge Movement” (Verzola, 2010), which takes up the questions introduced by *Many Voices, One World*, in the context of the Internet. The struggle to define the flows of water is also global and ongoing, with the UN and other transnational rights organizations working under the assumption of water as a human right (Ingram, Whiteley, and Perry, 2008). In the multiple contexts of the global digital cinemas being produced by artists in diverse locations discussed here, there is another struggle in play, an epistemic intervention. These artists are engaged in a process of redefinition and reclamation of water, centering it in critical, decolonial critiques of contemporary geo-politics, as well as in emerging, syncretic, or ancient indigenous cosmologies. To access the depth of these acts of semiotic delinking, to access these flows, it becomes necessary to situate ourselves differently in relation to them, as well as to engage with the questions of our own local flows, of both information and water. Understood through the lens of the geo-politics of knowledge, which produces a hierarchy of knowledge resulting from the colonial division of the globe, this work challenges us to consider our own location and the ways that we understand our relationship to the sources of water, and information, that sustain us. We are called upon to search for flows that may be unofficial, underground, unmapped. How might we produce new flows? What is our equivalent of the communal well? What ancestral knowledges might we draw upon to strengthen our understanding of our local waters, as well as to connect to others? What will the Humboldt Current be replaced by? In the digital cinemas discussed here, water is understood as local, global, and cosmological, carrying political and spiritual

commitments, anchored in the nested spaces of coloniality and decoloniality. These visions of water are carried by contested global flows of digital information, precious and delicate ripples, sustaining future forms of communal life.

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