

Some passages invoke a distributed agency, encompassing both relatively affluent visitors from afar, whether the Global North or more proximate sub-imperial metropolises, and representatives of indigenous communities. The medium of both critique and eventual transformation appears to be something like “direct” access to the cultures and landscapes of the Global South. In what sense is this access direct? It is not only enabled by the economic and cultural capital such journeys require and also reproduce but also mediated by an array of sophisticated social theories. In other passages, the first person narrative, emphasis on embodied sensations, and the interactional form of encounters with individual artists and performers, suggests that transformation happens through the rather singular, *individual* experiences of travel, escape, reflection, and renewed perception, experiences that in turn uplift submerged epistemes. How does an individual “pull away from coloniality” (p. 61)? Wouldn’t such a process of decolonization—in all its political, economic, epistemic, cultural, and psychological dimensions—unfold through a deeply *collective* process of struggle and emancipation?

To conclude, Gómez-Barris’ rich, multilayered text is notable for its explicit attention to the methodological and analytical pitfalls of the academic study of the periphery, pitfalls that academic scholarship alone will never overcome, as the latter both reflects and reproduces the stark inequities that structure the global order. *The Extractive Zone* raises thorny questions that we ought to grapple with more broadly, as a community of scholars with distinct perspectives on decoloniality as theory, method, and political-ethical practice—a shared project to which I hope this conversation contributes.

References

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Perceptual methods

Thomas S Davis, *The Ohio State University, USA*

I suspect most readers of *The Extractive Zone* (2017) will agree that Macarena Gómez-Barris has given us a book that merits and rewards close, intensive engagement. I find it exemplary in terms of the archive it builds, the methodological coordinates it plots, and its elegant braiding together of aesthetic practices and political realities. As someone working on climate change and aesthetics, I find most compelling Gómez-Barris’ argument that aesthetic experiences enact methods of thinking and doing. In the conclusion to *The Extractive Zone*, Gómez-Barris (2017) offers an inventory of verbs to describe what aesthetic practices do in this book: “[they] exceed, escape, mediate and invert the extractive view” (p. 133). The first thing to say is that this is not the standard language of representation. Instead, aesthetic practices initiate methods of seeing and rethinking social ecologies. Gómez-Barris does not bend her objects of analysis to fit a pre-given method or set of

concepts. Rather, she develops what she calls a “perceptual method” (Gómez-Barris, 2017: 9) through encounters with the visual art of Francisco Huichaqueo and Carolina Caycedo, the embodied experience of Indigenous directed ecotourism, and performative activism. *The Extractive Zone*, then, is a record of thought unfolding in relation to a collection of aesthetic practices and objects. Over the course of the book, we see “how renewed perception offers a method for decolonized study” (Gómez-Barris, 2017: 2); in that way, aesthetic experiences should instigate a critique of settler colonialism’s extractive view of land, nature, and people. Refreshingly, the book does not stop at critique. Where other scholars have rigorously and creatively unveiled the multi-scalar damage of extractive capitalism, Gómez-Barris’ (2017) perceptual method allows her, and us, to witness harm and violence but also to engage “life that is unbridled and finds forms of resisting and living alternatively” (p. 3). Documenting these enduring cosmologies and burgeoning forms of life should also vivify our political imaginations.

In what follows, I want to think alongside the book’s perceptual method and outside of its chosen sites. To think alongside it, I trace out the distinctiveness of Gómez-Barris’ perceptual method and examine the central role of aesthetics; in the latter half of this essay, I move outside of the book’s terrain and consider how it might enable us to approach sites, situations, and art objects that emerge from outside of the Global South. I turn to the Bakken region of North Dakota where the fracking boom has generated a wide range of petro-aesthetics, including museum exhibitions, documentary realism, and activist art at Standing Rock. By moving from Latin America to the Bakken, I suggest we can map extractivist cultures and politics across hemispheric divisions while remaining attentive to the differential histories and lifeworlds that cut across these conceptual and material spaces.

The Extractive Zone opens with an aesthetic encounter not in the Global South, but in California. Gómez-Barris recounts her meeting with May Stevens, a landscape painter, whose renderings of the muck, grime, and sediment of rivers and oceans foreground what often escapes perception; this is the first instance of what Gómez-Barris calls submerged perspectives. In the extractive zones of the Global South, those perspectives become inescapably political. Submerged perspectives constitute the dialectical antagonist of the visualities generated and normalized by extractive capitalism. For Gómez-Barris, capitalist modes of seeing reduce land and nature to commodities; they treat indigenous territorial claims and ecologies as obstacles to wealth accumulation. In this way, Gómez-Barris weaves together the imaginaries, histories, and material realities of settler colonialism with the extractive view. Submerged perspectives make capture what is lost as well as what endures and what emerges; they “allow us to see local knowledge that resides within what power has constituted as extractive zones” (Gómez-Barris, 2017: 11). Because they disorient and reorient us, the works of Stevens, Huichaqueo, and Caycedo are never treated as case studies for theoretical, historical, or political claims. Gómez-Barris (2017) states rather directly that they model and enact their own critical methods:

By reckoning with the thick opacity of what lies below the water’s surface, [artistic practices] have been essential to crafting this book and its decolonial methodology ... these artists have prodded me to see differently and to question what lies beneath the visible world of *the*

extractive zone and to seek out less perceivable worlds, life forms, and the organization of relations within them, while creating new methods that allow for this tracking. (p. xiv)

Scholars working in the environmental and energy humanities will likely hear echoes of other work on aesthetics and visualizations. There is, for example, Stephanie Lemenager's imperative to document the normalization of oil culture; Anna Tsing (2015), Jason W. Moore (2015), and Jedediah Purdy (2015) have noted the reciprocity between various ways of seeing nature and capitalism's role in pushing us out of the Holocene. Gómez-Barris' project shares with these others, I think, the idea that extractivism emerges from, and binds together, regimes of knowledge, modes of sensuous apprehension, and capitalism's organization of nature and political life. There is also Nicholas Mirzoeff's (2014) "counter-visibility," a concept Gómez-Barris modifies for the histories and struggles of the Global South. But here is the difference: far more than just documenting or countering capitalist violence, submerged perspectives instigate, however temporarily, alternative ways of being and model other possible futures. They are negative *and* creative; they are multiple and site specific.

The aim of the perceptual method is to make legible the life forms and political possibilities emerging in extraction's wake. The implication is that *how we look* at environmental justice is equally as important as *where we look*. In other words, we should be wary of importing methods and concepts radiating from North American and European schools of thought; those concepts may only see what they have been made to see. Gómez-Barris' (2017) focus on the "micro-spaces of interaction and encounter" (p. 2) in Latin America compels us to think more carefully about the limitations of recent theoretical turns and newly minted critical vocabularies. *The Extractive Zone* looks skeptically on the explanatory power of the Anthropocene and the portability of the so-called new materialism. Despite the provocative cross-disciplinary discussion the Anthropocene has catalyzed, many, and Gómez-Barris is one of them, have cautioned against its universalizing pull; if we allow the Anthropocene to figure the human species as a collective agent remaking Earth systems, historical, social, and racial differences (to list only a few) vanish. In the process of revealing the multi-dimensionality of human and planetary relations, the Anthropocene may obscure the histories of capitalism and settler colonialism. Gómez-Barris does not dismiss the Anthropocene outright (nor does she, thankfully, coin another -cene); she does, however, wonder how the disastrous human futures it imagines fit with her sites, many of which have been unlivable for some time. In the sacrifice zones of the Global South, "the paradigm of 'no future' has already taken place and we are now on the other side of colonial catastrophe" (Gómez-Barris, 2017: 4). By foregrounding damaged and emergent forms of life, Gómez-Barris (2017) aims to "decolonize the Anthropocene" (p. 4), to reassert power, capitalist violence, and indigenous struggles and lifeways in the debates over how we conceptualize planetary change.

If the Anthropocene emphasizes species-level agency and scales up to the planetary, the new materialism prioritizes distributive agency and often scales down to complex, smaller scale interactions. Gómez-Barris' (2017) perceptual method allows her to move across multiple scales of analysis and to highlight the nonhuman, and yet, like the Anthropocene, she keeps new materialism at arm's length:

The work on posthumanisms and new materialisms has been important as shifting epistemes that function with European logocentricity and the human-centered approaches that much of European continental philosophy has labored upon ... Yet Global South epistemologies and philosophies of race and racism, ranging from postcolonial and decolonial theories, to Indigenous critique, to Afro-based thought, to Black Studies to perspectivism and relational models, have long anticipated the ways to differently imagine knowledge and perception as the foundation of planetary inhabitance. (p. 100)

The “new” in new materialism—the fact that matter matters—bears the allure of something radical and novel within Western philosophical traditions primarily because they have centered human action, history, and agency for so long. Gómez-Barris takes seriously indigenous knowledges and their various arrangements of nature and culture, non-human and human. Our obligation to those epistemologies and traditions, she argues, should be to amplify and engage them on their own terms, not retrofit them with the latest terminologies of Western philosophy. Following Boaventura de Sousa Santos, she writes, “it is the task of scholar-activists, and, I would add, artists and performers, to lift up those submerged epistemes and juxtapose them within a Western canon that cannot apprehend its own limitations” (Gómez-Barris, 2017: 99).

I want to turn to Gómez-Barris’ chapter on Carolina Caycedo to demonstrate what the perceptual method yields in practice. Caycedo’s art addresses hydroelectric development in Colombia; she targets the extractive view that sees water as an energy source waiting commodification. In her analysis of Caycedo’s 38-minute video work *Yuma: Land of Friends* (2014), Gómez-Barris shows a submerged perspective that negates the extractive view while holding out the possibility of non-extractive attachments to the vibrant ecologies of the Magdalena River. After displaying images of the landscape and satellite views of the El Quimbo dam, Caycedo’s camera plunges into the water, blurring the screen with “cloudy water, with pieces of leaves blocking the view” (Gómez-Barris, 2017: 103). Gómez-Barris likens the esthetic experience to “seeing what a fish sees” (Gómez-Barris, 2017: 103); viewers are able to inhabit a non-extractive view and to apprehend the forms of life that flourish within the river. In another long take, Caycedo’s camera pulls viewers “in the river’s brown flow, surrounded by loud insects and birds” (Gómez-Barris, 2017: 104) before inverting the camera 180°, an act that disorients and reorients the viewer. These formal techniques—submersion, inversion, long takes—make a political claim: the river does not exist to be transformed into something else, to be reconfigured as a source of profit or even to supply humans. It harbors its own liveliness, its own set of complex ecological relations; the river’s challenge to us is to see it in a way where we might imagine being with it and being a part of it, not taking from it. Caycedo’s film, and Gómez-Barris’ sensitive reading of it, invites us to become disoriented, to think, and to feel the way extractive technologies restrict our attachments to nonhuman nature as resources. We are left with a sense that our perceptions of the natural world have been multiplied, made apparent, and are ripe for being remade.

Resource wars and indigenous struggles in the global north

Gómez-Barris' commitment to grounded, site-specific experience allows us to see anew the tangled webs of extractive capitalism, indigenous survival, and political possibility in Ecuador, Peru, Chile, Colombia, and Bolivia. The question now is how we chart the struggles in extraction zones across territories and hemispheres. While North Dakota is not the Global South, the indigenous struggles over water and land rights in the heart of an extraction zone replays many of the problems Gómez-Barris analyzes in Latin America. Like other extraction zones, the areas in the Bakken region of North Dakota are tragically generic: the oil boom has lured capital and labor from distant locales; we've witnessed further displacement and dispossession of indigenous peoples, most spectacularly at Standing Rock; and environmental despoliation has been treated as collateral damage. On the other hand, as we learn throughout Gómez-Barris' work, extraction zones also exhibit unique qualities and their historical, ecological, and cultural specificities might enable us to think of new networked connections to other extractivisms, as well as the aesthetic engagements with extractivisms. What methods and aesthetic practices allow us to perceive emergent alternatives to capitalist plunder in other geographies? By way of answer, I examine the artworks of Cannupa Hanska Luger produced during and about the protests over the Dakota Access pipeline at his birthplace, Standing Rock. Luger's aesthetics unmake and remake our attachments to land, resource use, and the trappings of extractive capitalism.

The lifting of the ban on oil exports by the United States Congress in late 2015 greatly increased the demand for, and profits from, American petroleum. With China, Singapore, India, Mexico, and an ever-growing list of purchasers in Asia and Latin America vying for American petroleum, a sprawling network of pipelines meandering down to the Gulf of Mexico became crucial for transporting oil from frack sites like the Bakken region of North Dakota to the global market. The construction of the Dakota Access pipeline shifted the narrative of the Bakken away from population increase, infrastructure failures, and labor issues squarely to environmental justice. Initial plans for the pipeline placed it about 10 miles away from Bismarck, North Dakota. An environmental assessment by the US Army Corps of Engineers blocked this route; its proximity to residences and water was judged too dangerous. Energy Transfer Partners adjusted the route. The pipeline would now travel beneath Lake Oahe and the Missouri River near the Standing Rock Reservation. The pipeline's path offered evidence of the ongoing violence of settler colonialism: white lives around Bismarck were valued and protected, while indigenous peoples and their water were deemed disposable. The pipeline construction was quickly figured in artworks and activist discourse as a realization of Lakota prophecy that foretells of a great black snake that will move across the land, destroying everything it touches. The snake's arrival heralds the end of the world. The pipelines and the extracted material they shuttle around the country were figured as inimical to life itself. "Water is Life," "Mni Wiconi," became the cry that drew together tribal nations, environmental activists, and settler allies.

Luger used his artwork to contest the march of fossil capital and its continuous war against indigenous peoples and their land. Luger's experience at Standing Rock

motivated projects like “Mirror Shield” (discussed below), a short video with the Winter Count Collective called “We Are in Crisis,” the “We Have Agency” sculpture series, and a recent installation, “This Is Not a Snake.” “This Is Not a Snake” will instantly recall Rene Magritte’s *Ceci n’est pas un pipe* for those schooled first and most thoroughly in Western art history. Luger’s title is more than reference and the work is more than ironic; the work retains the apocalyptic force of the Lakota prophecy while foregrounding the snake as metaphor, not a natural being. Luger’s snake is composed of debris from the extraction industry: oil barrels, shredded tires, and ammo cases that refer to the forms of state and corporate violence deployed against Standing Rock and other environmental activists. The terror of Earth’s end comes not from nature, but from the rapacious, wasteful practices of extractive capitalism.

His “Mirror Shield” project went viral in 2016. Inspired by the use of mirrors by Ukrainian protestors to turn the police into witnesses of their own violence during the Euromaidan, Luger’s shields were intended as an act of critique and protection. In a short video tutorial, Luger demonstrated how to make six mirror shields from plywood and reflective mylar. The making and use of the shields enacted its own scalar aesthetic, one that linked the makers spread across the United States with the water protectors in North Dakota:

Those shields could stand on the frontline protecting hundreds behind them in prayer for the water, and right behind that line stands a camp where there are thousands of people standing for the water protection for the 8 million people down river, who all use the Missouri River as their water source. And so the Mirror Shield project demonstrates how one person can help protect 8 million. (Luger, 2016)

Drone footage captured a performative dimension to this project. With shields raised skyward, water protectors marched in the shape of the river, making less distinct the lines between human bodies and nonhuman natures. Moving bodies and shields interact with sunlight from above as would a body of water. This refiguration of vertical relations as non-extractive is an activation of being with, of loosening the extractive view that sees the natural world as resource for human use, or as a reflection of human desires, or as an impediment to human flourishing.

Like the submerged perspective in *The Extractive Zone*, Luger’s work is not primarily representation or critique, but an alternative mode of thinking, experiencing, and feeling. His projects renew perceptions, initiate solidarities, and, ultimately, aim to do something to those who encounter them. In the closing pages of *The Extractive Zone*, Gómez-Barris acknowledges the profound effects of these sort of encounters: “Perceiving through the extractive divide has changed me by allowing for dreams, imaginaries, and forms of living as forcefully and continually emergent. There are clear proposals here” (Gómez-Barris, 2017: 135). Aesthetic objects and experiences, again, are not only records of devastation but proposals for how to see, how to engage, and how to imagine the collective futures we actually want. In terms of our research and writing on environmental justice, Gómez-Barris teaches us that we should not seek to situate and master our objects of analysis; rather, we should allow those them to contest and undiscipline us. That does not necessarily equate to brash amateurism

or reckless dilettantism; it does mean, I think, a genuinely dialectical encounter whereby we acknowledge that we arrive at objects of analysis with a host of conceptual determinations, methodological commitments, and knowledge-forms, and yet we should attend to these proposals and allow them to rescript what we bring to bear on them. We can, for instance, dwell with these objects and the unsettling questions they pose. How should we reconfigure our relationships with energy, with indigenous ecologies, and with nonhuman worlds? What solidarities do we need now? What will constitute environmental justice and livability in the Anthropocene? The perceptual and world-making capacities of aesthetic encounters can deepen and unfold such questions for us; they can allow us to see what flourishes and emerges even in the wake of extractive capitalism. There may be no direct answers or guarantees, but there are possibilities, proposals, and, indeed, urgencies.

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