

5 KARANKAWA CARANCAHUA CARANCAGUA KARANKAWAY

Centering Indigenous presence in Southeast Texas

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An opening

In 2016, Mexican artist Nuria Montiel and I collaborated to build a visual and sound poem called *Karankawa Carancahua Carancagua Karankaway* at Project Row Houses in Houston, Texas.¹ The poem installation was a meditation on language and memory in the context of colonial structures of power that have historically worked to eradicate and erase one of the Indigenous cultures that inhabits Southeast Texas: the Karankawa.

The seeds of this project emerged from my investigation into archival documentation of Karankawa language assembled by colonial settlers, explorers, and scholars in Southeast Texas. That early investigation resulted in an initial, ephemeral poetic form, an artist book I titled *Loyatene*. *Loyatene* featured a section titled “Anti-Glossary” in which I reprinted all the words from nineteenth-century botanist, geologist, and colonial agent Juan Luis (Jean Louis) Berlandier’s glossary of Karankawa. In my artist book, however, I used a mixture of paint and sand from Brays Bayou in Houston to paint over the words in Spanish and English, in order to erase the corresponding translations in these colonizing languages. I was interested in erasing settler vocabularies, gesturing toward the sound and resonance of these Karankawa words. The “Anti-Glossary” eventually appeared as a section of my book, *Ford Over* (2016).

In 2016, a collaborative process with Nuria led me out of the archive and into dialogue and conversation with contemporary Indigenous peoples of the Texas Gulf Coast.² The dominant historical narrative in Texas contends that the Karankawa people were driven to extinction; however, members of the Texas Carrizo/Comecrudo tribe, along with other Native Texans, refute these accounts. Elders in the Carrizo/Comecrudo tribe state that in the mid-nineteenth century, bands of Karankawa fled the coast and colonial oppression, seeking and finding refuge with the Carrizo/Comecrudo in Central Texas. Based on these narratives,

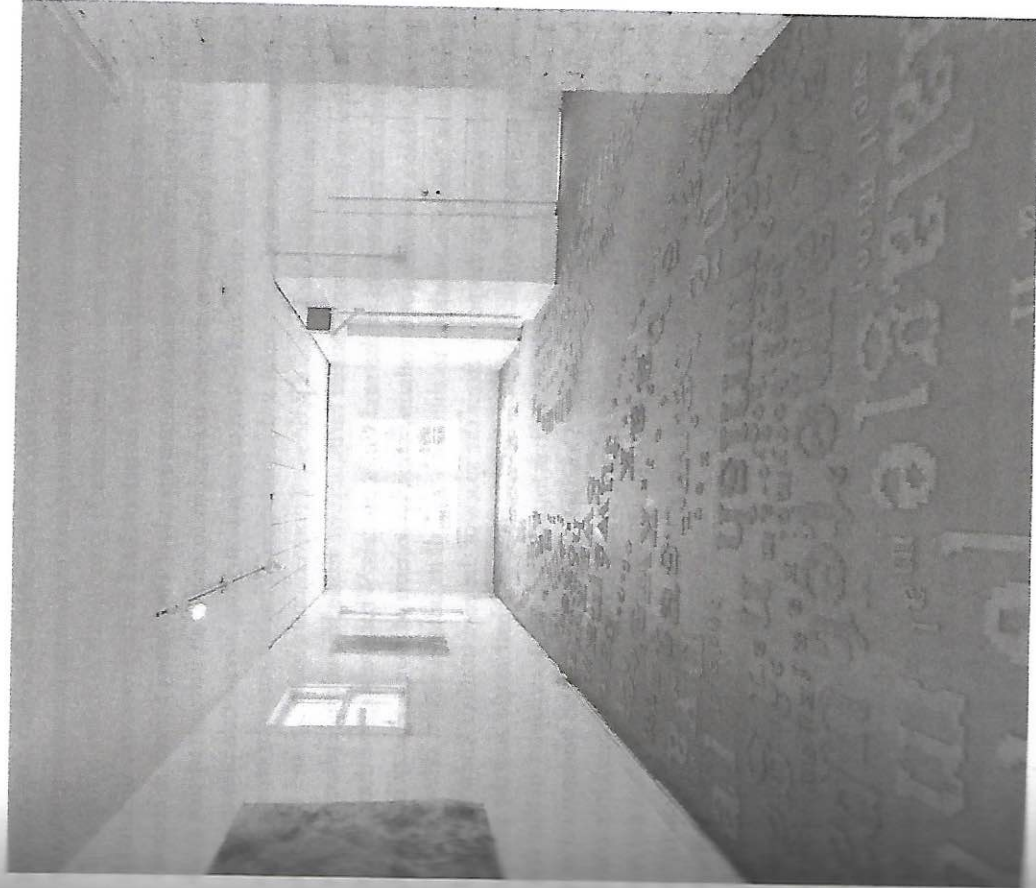


FIGURE 5.1 Installation shot of *Karankawa Carancahua Carancagua Karankaway*. Source: Photograph by Alex Barber.

members of the Carrizo/Comecrudo tribe say that, “We are them, and they are us.” In this way, tribal members reclaim their own Karankawa ancestors, grounding their identities in the stories and lifeways of their own families. Through this sound and visual poem (with audio work by Lucas Gorham, a sound artist and musician of Karankawa descent), we ended up asking: Can languages be completely eradicated, or might they survive in ways that are both perceptible and imperceptible? How might they be heard? How might inhabiting the nexus between poetry and geography provide tools for disassembling or reimagining the colonial archive?

How might artistic research and creation become methods for combating ongoing colonization and erasure? How can listening and requesting permission become modalities for a different kind of conversation?

Now, years after the installation, I want to look back at the process we initiated to realize this project. What we made was not a product, but instead a series of connections with local Indigenous peoples that led us to create an installation that made Karankawa language visible and gestured toward ongoing lifeways, despite the official historical record of eradication and elimination. What is more, our creation was not simply an installation: It was a process of conversation, learning, and listening. We ended up forming shapes out of earth, and we made something ephemeral, not final—just one concretion in the midst of a process. What we suggest through our project is that a poem is not a container or a collection of words. Poetry is, instead, a process of “being in relation” to the earth and all its inhabitants.³

After de-installing the poem from the space of the row house, I knew I wanted to write an essay to think through what Nuria and I had made and the process by which we made it. Now this essay has found a home as a chapter in this very book on geopoetics. So I ask myself: How might this project be understood as a geopoetical project? As Eric Magrane writes, “Geopoetics might be mulch or compost or the building of earthworks to collect stormwater runoff and plant the rain in the desert” (2018, 39). Magrane is gesturing toward a larger sense of poetry as object and material, made out of earth or organic materials and not necessarily out of simply words. Though Nuria and I were not aware of geopoetics as a term as we were doing our work, reading geopoetical work now makes it clear that our project is in dialogue with this field, especially insofar as it relates to the creation of a “speculative more-than-human geopoetics: a reflective and refractive earth-making that imagines and speculates on alter-subjectivities” (Magrane 2018, 40). The term geopoetics is derived from the Greek for “earth-making” (“geo” meaning earth and “poesis” meaning “making”). Our process for this project was not so much about making something out of the earth; rather, it was about seeking to allow the earth and our relation to it to remake us, if only for a fleeting moment.

A definitionless glossary of dirt

In a shotgun house in the Third Ward, a historic African-American neighborhood in Houston, the words of a colonial glossary were arrayed on the floor. The words were formed using laser-cut stencils made of soil and sand that Nuria and I had collected from the bayous of Houston and from Carrizo/Comecrudo ancestral lands in Central Texas. With her training in typography and printing, Nuria Montiel created the stencils that utilized the same font found in the mid-twentieth-century books through which we accessed the glossary. We built a physical space around these terms within the row house—a space for a glossary that had crystallized a spoken language into a temporary and error-filled orthography. We erased the English and the Spanish to allow the Karankawa words to exist as independent elements.

The text, that is, the glossary, became very literally a social space: One where people met and interacted, one where visitors navigated along narrow pathways through the words of the glossary, one that people wanted to inhabit for a moment. As Stefano Harney and Fred Moten write, “To say that [a text] is a social space is to say that stuff is going on: people, things, are meeting there and interacting, rubbing off one another, brushing up against one another—and you enter into that social space, to try to be part of it” (2013, 108). What is it to inhabit a social space of Karankawa language in contemporary Texas, to invite visitors to immerse themselves in a different kind of language space? What are the possibilities that emerge from a space like that? What are the potential failures?

To find the Karankawa words, we drew on multiple glossaries found in colonial records. We kept in mind the Indigenous people who gifted the colonizers with these vocabularies. We read the work of Ohlone/Costanoan-Esselen poet Deborah Miranda (2013) and noted how she valorizes the contributions of Indigenous people, particularly women, to the colonial archive of Indigenous languages. These individuals made time to dialogue with the colonial linguists, perhaps thinking that this would be a way to transmit these words into the future, despite the death and destruction brought on by colonization. We rummaged through the historical records and found mention of the Tonkawas Old Simon and Sally Washington, both of whom gifted words to the linguist AS Gatschet during the 1880s (Swanton 1940, 6). We sifted through all of the different glossaries that we could find and created an Excel spreadsheet, into which we entered all those Karankawa words.

Later, after much dialogue with local Indigenous residents of the Texas Gulf Coast, we decided to stencil the words on the ground, creating precarious structures of sand and dirt, fixed together with the slime of the nopal cactus. These letters were always crumbling, continually breaking apart and cracking. They were sometimes even stepped on and crushed by inattentive visitors. We decided early on not to rope off the words or to place any kind of barrier between the visitor and the glossary; visitors decided what attention to give or not to give to these precarious sculptures, thus mirroring a larger awareness or lack of awareness of indigeneity in this city and wider region. Every step on the wooden floor of the tiny pier-and-beam house shook the words, loosening some grains of sand and disfiguring the anti-glossary.

In the space, in addition to the words on the ground, an audio track by Lucas Gorham featured recordings of the words of the glossary, which we had asked Indigenous residents of Southeast Texas to pronounce. We conceived of this as a way of circulating the glossary, gifting it to people who largely had never seen these words in print before. Lucas is Mexican-American, with stories in his family of Karankawa ancestry. As I’ve been friends with him and his family for many years, I’d first heard those stories more than 15 years prior to our installation at a family barbecue. Hearing those accounts was the first experience that led me to question the dominant historiography in Texas that insisted on the long-ago extinction of the Karankawa.

Dominant historiography and other accounts

As I explained earlier, my work with the Karankawa glossaries and language was, initially, purely archival. In working on my first book of words and images, *For'd Over*, I spent years with the diaries and documents amassed by a series of men who traveled through what is now the state of Texas: Fray Morfi, Alvar Nuñez Cabeza de Vaca, Juan Luis (Jean Louis) Berlandier, and Frederick Law Olmsted. Typically, these men are called “explorers,” but I question the use of this apparently objective, even adulatory, term. I didn’t want to become another “explorer,” as if this term was neutral or even flattering. For if “exploration” happens by settlers in the context of conquest, this is not a disinterested adventure. Colonization has rendered its agents “explorers,” and “exploration” is a term that is still repeated uncritically in numerous settings, whether museums or educational institutions. Scientific progress and research—in both the social and hard sciences—are still orchestrated around this same idea of the impartial benefit wrought by “exploration.” In response to this problematic perspective of history, I tried to conceive of these men as “colonial agents,” men who were doing the work of empire-building, albeit slowly through the collection of materials, the recording of travel, and the documentation of language. I also tried to think of ways to explode that archive from the inside, which I subsequently aimed to achieve through a de-ordering of colonial language, that is, a process of remixing and shape-shifting.

Despite all the work I did in the archive of Karankawa language during the making of *For'd Over*, I had not engaged in dialogue about this archive with Indigenous people in Texas. I was conflicted about leaving the archive and becoming an “explorer” of unknown things or Indigenous spaces. This timidity, or unwillingness to occupy or invade spaces, was a double-edged sword. Over 15 years working as an organizer and Spanish-language interpreter, and just by living and sharing space with people in progressive circles in Houston, I made friends with many people of Indigenous descent. However, as I reached out to these friends for this project, I realized I knew nothing about the narratives of the Carrizo/Comercudo that turn the dominant history of Texas on its head. I began to hear these Indigenous narratives only after working more closely with Nuria and leaving the quiet of the archive. I saw more clearly that ignorance of Indigenous lifeways is the default in a settler culture that breeds a lack of consciousness among its own.

Dominant historiography—in textbooks and mandated middle school Texas history classes—affirm that the Karankawa are now “extinct.” The Texas State Historical Association Texas Handbook narrates the slow process of extermination of the tribe, hounded in Texas and driven south into Tamaulipas in Northern Mexico. The Handbook explains:

By the late 1850s the Karankawas had been pushed back into Texas, where they settled in the vicinity of Rio Grande City. Local residents did not welcome the tribe, and in 1858 a Texas force led by Juan Naranjuceno Cortina,

attacked and annihilated that small remaining band of Karankawas. After that last defeat, the coastal Texas tribe was considered extinct.

(Lipscomb 2010)

This narrative of extermination was, for a long time, the only one I had ever heard. It is surely the only one the vast majority of residents on the Gulf Coast have heard, whatever their racial or ethnic background.

Sarah de Leeuw and Sarah Hunt write:

To not acknowledge who we are, or to leave unspecified our authorial position in relation to this paper and events unfolding all around us, is to risk perpetuating the idea that writing and knowledge is not produced by people who occupy specific temporal and sociocultural positions, positions often bound to or by colonialism.

(2018, 3)

Following from this, it seems critical here to locate myself. My ancestors colonized Karankawa and Carrizo/Comercudo lands. They were mainly Germans—but also Irish, Swedes, and others—who came to these lands in Texas, some as far back as the early-nineteenth century when these lands still belonged to Mexico. On the oldest branches, my family has been here for seven generations. I was not ignorant of the almost two centuries of abuse, colonization, exploitation, and profit visited upon Indigenous peoples, both indirectly and directly. In fact, my own work has focused on this history and on continuing forms of colonization and oppression in Texas; this work cannot be separated from my settler identity in these lands. While I think silence is an important strategic decision, especially for settler colonists, I don’t think permanent silence or non-engagement is an ethical option; if we were to be silent, this work would be necessarily assigned to those Indigenous folks who are already most burdened by the ongoing colonial project. Though of course Indigenous peoples should lead this effort, there is a concomitant necessity for self-interrogation and participation by settlers as well.

When Nuria and I began to think about what we would do, we started from our own bodies, myself as a white-settler and, in Nuria’s case, as a mestiza from Mexico City. We did not think to ask for permission to do this project. But we did think to be in conversation with Indigenous people in the Houston region, to ground our work in dialogue with these individuals of diverse backgrounds and identities. We worked to consciously undercut the assumption that we could guide the project, instead aiming to ground our work in listening and in sitting together with Indigenous folks in the region. Nuria and I designed a process of *convivio* (i.e., living together with) to find our way along the path of making this installation.

Initially, we only reached out to friends of mine who come from a variety of Indigenous backgrounds and communities, not all descended from the Karankawa. Some of those friends recommended we speak with *their* friends. Nuria and I had some initial ideas about how to orchestrate these very open-ended conversations.

We had some general ideas about topics for conversation, but we did not want to do a survey. Instead, we landed on some general and very open-ended sparks for conversation. We told my friends and theirs about our vague idea of doing a project—about our work on a glossary. We talked broadly about who we were and what we were doing. We thought to ask people where their own memory and experience of Indigenous lifeways and/or languages came from, as well as to ask about people's particular connections to Indigenous peoples and history in Texas and in other places. We thought of other questions: How much of Indigenous lifeways and languages have been eradicated? How much remains? What can be done to reclaim Indigenous lifeways and languages that have been eradicated? In the future, what place do you think Indigenous lifeways and languages should have in Texas?

Nuria and I reached out to these friends of mine to listen and to converse, to be clear who we were as human-animals and to learn more about these friends and to share our own thinking. In the end, we reached out to listen to these interlocutors and to attempt to unlearn after so many generations of learning how to abuse, colonize, exploit, and profit.

At some point, we thought to ask each person to read out loud the words they would like to read from the glossary of Karankawa. We thought to ask what it felt like to pronounce the Karankawa words. We thought to ask them if they would like to share other things, such as songs or music or poetry. It could be whatever they wanted, or nothing at all: We tried to exert no pressure or to assume anyone would want to share.

Soon after beginning the project, the curator for the round of installations at Project Row Houses, Raquel deAnda, recommended we speak with Bryan Parras, who had spoken with her about the Carrizo/Comecrudo tribe and their connections to the Karankawa. Bryan has been a friend of mine for years, but we had never really talked about the Karankawa, for the same reasons of reticence I mentioned previously. Part of what Bryan emphasized was that progressive white folks and other outsiders are often interested in Indigenous lifeways and want to engage in research; however, such a process often fails to take into account all the work already done by Indigenous people to document and un-document their own lifeways. He emphasized how many Indigenous people had been protecting sites and traditions to try to keep them from being used and abused. He highlighted how a lot of non-Indigenous people had stolen teachings from Elders, writing books—for profit—based on these teachings. He reminded us it was important to allow space for some narratives and some knowledge to remain with Indigenous folks, that it was crucial that we not set out to take possession of everything or to present everything we heard for public consumption. He mentioned that he learned the most when people corrected him, when people told him what he was doing wrong. He emphasized the importance of lifting up the words we had found and to present those words in Indigenous communities where people could reflect on them.

Bryan's words and recommendations helped to guide the project. He also told us to speak with the Carrizo/Comecrudo, and specifically with Eddie Garcia and Juan Mancías from that tribe. Bryan's words would radically reorient our process.

When Nuria and I reached out to the Carrizo/Comecrudo tribe in Central Texas, we learned that the dominant historical narrative on the elimination of the Karankawa was simply not the story that the tribe accepted as history. Eddie Garcia told us that tribal Elders had passed down the history that a band of Karankawa was driven off the Texas Coast in the middle of the nineteenth century. This group ended up in Central Texas, living with the Carrizo/Comecrudo. So according to tribal knowledge, the Karankawa went to live with the Carrizo/Comecrudo in the mid-nineteenth century, at the exact moment when dominant historiography insists the Karankawa were extinguished. The Carrizo/Comecrudo have their own understandings, namely that, as Eddie said and later Juan Mancías would repeat, "The Karankawa are us and we are them."

Eddie recommended that we begin our work by asking for permission from his own tribal Elders and other Indigenous people native to the lands of Texas. He gently suggested that we begin with, "I am on your land. I am here for you. What can I offer you? What do you need?" The emphasis was on asking for the right to be in dialogue, not assuming that there was any obligation from the colonized to talk with either a colonizer (in my case) or a *mestiza* from lands from the south (in Nuria's case). The emphasis was always on the fact that words are not just words, but indicative and productive of lifeways. As Eddie and Juan spoke of lifeways, they were gesturing toward an expansion beyond a sense of words as static elements on a page, into the lived experiences and cultural practices contained within those words.

Can a culture die or become extinct? Can a language die or become extinct, be extinguished?

Perhaps it hides or it intermixes. Perhaps death is not the proper metaphor. Because a language or a culture is not exactly the same as a life.

To understand these stories, we can turn to contemporary Indigenous scholarship and activism that gives credence and asserts the veracity of claims and oral histories within Indigenous communities. As the Sisseton-Wahpeton Oyate scholar Kim TallBear writes:

Thus, the fight for indigenous peoples—and for communities more broadly who are regularly subject to the scientific gaze—is to debate which meanings and whose meanings inform law and policy. That is where we should be working. To make sure that science, and the state, are more democratic, that our stories are heard as clearly as those of anthropologists and geneticists when the state acts to influence our lives. Or rather, that our stories should be heard more loudly than theirs when we have more at stake.

(2007, 423)

One life is one life, and a life can end or be ended. But a language or a culture is collectively held and collectively nurtured. How does a collectivity end? Or does a collectivity end? Or are collectivities perpetually changing and morphing to create new collectivities always connected to those previous to it?

If there are people who still identify with the Karankawa, does that culture somehow still exist? It's obviously altered, but isn't there something there nevertheless? Isn't it a colonizing move to insist that a nation has been eradicated when there are living, breathing people asserting their connections to that same nation?

In what ways might a poetic gesture—whether in a row house or in an essay form—serve to generate a wider collective awareness of Karankawa presence?

There are reasons to hide one's existence or one's presence. There are reasons why one looks to protect oneself or to preserve oneself in the face of a dominant culture that is consistently hostile, negating, and attacking. And while a project like Nuria's and mine seeks to undermine colonial structures that marginalize and invalidate Indigenous thinking and work, it is important to remember that this does not effectuate decolonization. As Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang remind us, “decolonization specifically requires the repatriation of Indigenous land and life. Decolonization is not a metonym for social justice” (2012, 21). For this reason, I am not even sure if this project was a decolonial one, but it definitely attempted to work against and in opposition to the ongoing project of erasure and eradication of Indigenous peoples.

Study

Since engaging in this project, I've spent a significant amount of time trying to think through what we did and trying to think about the kinds of methodologies we used in our own work. What we did was not a series of interviews or a research project oriented toward “Human Subjects.” Rather what we envisioned was to have intentional conversations with people whom I knew or people whom I had met over the course of 17 years living in Houston. We were not reaching out blindly into organizations or tribes, looking for people to speak with. Rather, we attempted to have more in-depth conversations with people I already knew. In this sense, what we were doing had much to do with what Stefano Harney and Fred Moten refer to as “study” that happens outside of the university: An undercommons of contact, play, and struggle that exists outside of formal academic channels. Harney and Moten write:

Study is what you do with other people. It's talking and walking around with other people, working, dancing, suffering, some irreducible convergence of all three, held under the name of speculative practice. The notion of a rehearsal—being in a kind of workshop, playing in a band, in a jam session, or old men sitting on a porch, or people working together in a factory—there are these various modes of activity. The point of calling it “study” is to mark that the incessant and irreversible intellectuality of these activities is already present.

(2013, 110)

The project began years before, when it was not even a project. And perhaps “projects” don't actually ever begin or end. As I mentioned earlier, it began at a

barbecue in the home of old friend from a Chicano movement family in Houston. It began at a house party *tamalada* raising money for a sick relative. It began in a domestic workers' organizing group that invited me to work with women in the group to write their own stories. It began at the Indigenous-grounded marriage ceremony in San Antonio between two old friends, one an immigrant from Northern Mexico and another a descendant of generations of Mexican-American Texans. It began in a million different ways—tiny strands of connection and friendship nurtured over 17 years. All of these “various modes of activity” gave rise to this project. Without the “incessant and irreversible intellectuality of these activities,” the project would never have existed. I value these kinds of long-term connections and contacts perhaps more than anything else. And because we are enmeshed in long-term relations, I am extraordinarily careful about how I nurture these ties.

In their introduction to an anthology of Lakota/Dakota/Nakota writing about the Mnisose (Missouri River) called *This Stretch of the River*, Craig Howe and Kim TallBear think through the particular predicaments faced by Indigenous people writing individually authored texts. As Kim TallBear writes, “Conscious of being accountable to our communities and families in the things that we write about and, perhaps more importantly, in the things that we do not write about, interesting conflicts can arise as we produce texts under our individual names” (2006, x-xi). Related to this, I have been exceedingly slow in writing this piece because I've been navigating all of these questions. As it is individually authored, I have been thinking endlessly about what to write about, and most importantly, what not to write about. These “interesting conflicts” continue to reappear as I set out to write and rewrite this contribution, as I consider what is mine to share and what is better left to others to tell on their own. There are great potentials to be found in this kind of slow, decolonial “study,” but also great risks and a million opportunities for failure.

In response to an individualistic way of writing, *This Stretch of the River* doesn't solely compile texts by individuals but also includes an edited transcript of a communal conversation between a number of writers from the anthology. In the transcript of this multi-party conversation in the book, writer Kathryn Akipa mentions a story about a particular moment of trauma and pain that affected the tribe as a result of the damming of the Mnisose (Missouri River). Akipa mentions the story in the dialogue but not in her individual writing. A footnote explains that she was uncomfortable mentioning the story of trauma and pain in her individual essay because she did not want to capitalize on painful memories in her individual piece, but that in the dialogue it seemed appropriate because it represented “an exchange of mutual remembering rather than an individual promulgation” (101–02, 2n).

There are some stories I won't share here, some dynamics that I—a seventh-generation settler in these lands—have no business discussing on my own. No one told me not to expose these stories, but I can feel in my gut that to do so would be a mistake. Or, more than a mistake, it would be a taking, an appropriation, of something shared with me but that nonetheless is not mine to tell.

Other people's stories, their autonomy

Nuria and I didn't do this work to occupy a space or to explain Indigenous lifeways still present in Texas. We did it to attempt to learn how to occupy space differently in a time of rapaciousness, greed, and profit.

Of the various Indigenous interlocutors, there was a mix of different ethnicities and tribal affiliations.⁴

I am not going to define the identities of all of these people here because I don't think it is my business to do that. Identity and affiliation are delicate formations, and I don't think it is my place to represent them. They each represent themselves every day.

Nuria and I consciously did not build a platform for Indigenous folks to speak because those platforms and organizations have already been made by Indigenous people themselves. These Indigenous spaces—whether protests or ceremonies or ritual spaces or barbecues—are there for people to assemble and engage in dialogue. There are particular dynamics and ongoing tensions and conversations in those spaces, and it is not my place to amplify those dynamics or attempt to explicate them.

Settlers have an eye for conflicts and divisions within Indigenous communities. It is a way to regain power for settler bodies and lifeways, a way of pointing to disagreement and dissension and thus avoiding power imbalances between Indigenous and settler. I am wary of settler colonists who—after generations of abuse, colonization, exploitation, and profit—now arrive to extract the stories of peoples who have been so thoroughly marginalized and erased. These are not my stories to tell.

At a certain point, we asked for permission to build an art installation from the Elders of the Carrizo/Comecrudo and other Indigenous folks with whom we were in conversation. We asked for permission to make a visual and sound poem. We asked for help from our interlocutors, whom we eventually identified as “counselors” (i.e., counselors). But we also asked if our own project was in alignment with their goals, or their thinking, or their feelings in their guts. We believed in feelings in guts. We asked what their work was, how they thought of their own work and their own identity. What we had to offer was very little—certainly not enough. We were *humbled* by the meagerness of what we had to offer.

And just because I received permission at one point to sit and listen to these friends talk does not mean that I have permission to repeat them. I don't actually have much of a desire to go back to them to ask them for permission to tell their stories. They own their own stories, and I do not envision encroaching on that native sovereignty. Their stories are their own to tell, and they are not mine.

I remember how the process of conversation with these friends unfolded: stories told around my dining table in my house in the East End in Houston, how the light filtered in as these friends told stories. I remember tears, I remember the quiet pauses and sighing. The difficulties of telling certain stories of loss and yearning. What has been torn away is more than a language or a culture; they reminded us. What has been torn away are lifeways.

The stories are grounded also in particular places. The stories of a place are formed by that place and take the form of that place. And this piece is formed by all the places and spaces where the stories were birthed—though it is also removed from those places where these stories were told: It was written on my computer, in my office, in my home in Houston's East End.

If you want to hear those stories or to be in relation to the people we spoke with, then you can ask for permission to do so. If you want to hear those stories, then you need to be in relation to the people where the stories were told. I can't tell you those stories unless you are in relation to those people, those places, the species in that place. Does that make sense?

The installation and this composition are mere gestures toward the existence of something else. Another kind of relation. It seems important that my relationship with most of these interlocutors was as “friend” or “friend of friend,” that is, as someone who continues to have a relationship, someone who continues to be in relationship with. In some ways, it is a return to the root word for “Texas,” which is *teysha*, the Indigenous Caddo word for friendship.

Whenever we had conversations with Indigenous people throughout the course of the project, we emphasized that we were not scientists or experts or even academics. One of us is an artist, we would say, and the other is a poet. We were honest about not knowing what we were planning to do.

As an essay—an act of trial and error—I've had trouble knowing where to begin this chapter or where to end it. This makes sense, because this process of working in relation with Indigenous groups in what is now colonized as Southeast Texas has not been linear. It has also not been simple.

There are stories that are not to be mined—mined in the sense of “made mine,” and mined in the sense of extraction, removal, unearthing, probing. As colonialism extracted numerous glossaries from Indigenous peoples, they created these collections of words and phrases in isolation from their communities. The glossaries had no relationality with the community, in the sense of “being in relation” that Kim Tallbear has written about extensively. Words and narrative do not exist in isolation; as the Carrizo/Comecrudo *consejeros*, Eddie and Juan, talked about, these words and narratives are part of the collective lifeways of the tribe, so it would be impossible to make them individual belongings (“made mine”) or to extract them from the community.

As Eddie Garcia and Juan Mancías from the Carrizo/Comecrudo tribe both emphasized: Who asked you to be on this land? Who have you asked permission from? Who do you continue to ask permission from? When we say *who*, we can think of humans, but also of the earth and the trees, the insects and the grasses, the rivers and the detritus. We can enlarge our sense of personhood to include the dirt below us, the dirt that carries the bones of ancestors within it. This land is not separate from the Indigenous people who have walked it for millennia. Eddie and Juan emphasized that every day in Texas, people—settlers and descendants of enslaved peoples and Indigenous alike—are walking on their ancestors. This is because the bones of Karankawa and other Indigenous nations are literally in the dirt. There is separation between the dirt or the trees or the human and non-human animals.

We are all made of the same primordial substance. Settlers are not just on *Indigenous land*: This land is *literally composed* of Indigenous peoples' ancestors. This was the initial impetus for making letters out of earth: However temporarily, to place the glossary back into relation with the land, and with the people who inhabit it. Though there are many stories that do not feel mine to tell, this is one that bears repeating, and it is a story that came to form the basis for our aesthetic and poetic decisions about the form of the poem/installation.

Kim TallBear always emphasizes in her speaking and writing that this land is not *sacred*, because *sacredness* is a Western concept that sections off some things as higher than others that are mundane or *not-sacred*. So the earth we used to make the Karankawa glossary is no more or less special than any other earth. And this different relationship to earth remade us and remade our art and our poetry.

The limits and the garage

The sand that we used to make the letters of the glossary on the floor of the row house is still stored in my garage. Nuria and I have had many plans or ideas over the years since the installation about what to do with it, but we still haven't landed on something definite. We are taking our time thinking about it. About what to do with the earth we used for the installation. We are still not sure. We have thought to bottle it and give it to the people of Indigenous descent who were generous enough to assist us with the project. We have thought about returning it to the bayous or to the tribal lands of the Carrizo/Comecruedo. Perhaps what we really need to do is just ask the dirt. Or ask the Carrizo/Comecruedo members who gave us permission to use it.

Since doing this project, I've continued to live in relation to the land and to the Indigenous friends who were kind enough to participate in the project. These conversations have led to other invitations. In 2017, Bryan Parras invited me to participate in a large-scale Indigenous-led protest in Eagle Pass, Texas, on the Mexican border to demand the closure of an open-pit coal mine. More recently, Bryan asked me to help to welcome a delegation of Lummi tribal members from the Northwest part of the US on a pilgrimage they were making to Miami to demand the return of a blackfish to its ancestral waters (what settler culture tellingly calls "killer whales"). In the process of writing this piece, the Indigenous *consejxrs* that we worked with continue to be engaged in social justice struggles for workers' rights, immigrant rights, against the border wall, and a number of other struggles. I shared this piece with a number of them, initially to get permission to publish this. However, they did not have the time to read it through in the midst of the intensity of attacks here in Texas coming from both the Trump administration and the right-wing politicians who control state government. I am committed to bringing this piece to them in the future, to make sure that the words in this piece—especially those that are theirs—are returned to them. The installation was just one point in this process; this piece is another point in an ongoing relationship.

A poem became a reason to converse more deeply, to engage each other in dialogue. It became a ground upon which we might continue to engage. The poem is

that row house and this chapter do not seek to retell a story: A story of colonization and dispossession, broken treaties and virulent racism in an endless settler loop. The poem and this chapter attempt to breach the dominant historiography and the hegemonic lifeways exploiting and ravaging these lands, even now, in this petrochemical landscape of refineries, pipelines, ship channels, and tankers.

There is something poetic and important about how we decide to handle the earth housed in my garage. That earth stands in for the earth as whole, or for these lands I inhabit—these unceded Karankawa territories. What do I do with these lands? How do I live in relation to them and to all its human and non-human inhabitants? What is to be done?

Notes

- 1 More information about and related visuals for this project can be found here: www.johndpluecker.com/keck-w-nuria-montiel-2016.
- 2 In this piece, I use first names to refer to friends, that is, to people with whom I have a relationship of friendship. I think it is important to use that level of informality that corresponds to closeness and intimacy, since closeness and intimacy are key parts of this writing. I refer to people who I do not know personally by their last names.
- 3 I use the term "being in relation" as Sisseton-Wahpeton Oyate scholar Kim TallBear uses it in her own work. For example, she wrote on her blog (accessed January 15, 2019), *The Critical Polyhistorist*: "Being in relation requires doing and asking. This is because we cannot do everything for ourselves, or for others." The thinking in this paper is very much in debt to all of her work in a variety of academic and public forums.
- 4 I would like to thank those *consejxrs* (counselors) here by name: Ana Reyes Bonar, Julia De León, Laura Floyd, Eddie García, Liana López, Juan Mancías, Bryan Parras, Rain-Howa, Angela Sánchez, and Monica Villarreal.

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