

# **gathering, weathering**

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*Sybille Neumeyer*

Sybille Neumeyer is an independent artist and researcher who was artist-in-residence at the MARKK in Hamburg throughout 2022. As a focus for the residency, the MARKK chose the topic of 'Water, Climate, Materiality'. The museum was looking for an artistic or (social) design project that explores strategies at the intersection of knowing and imagining, and who would engage with the museum's holdings as a storehouse of ecological knowledge in the face of water-related effects of the climate crisis. Neumeyer was especially interested in the museum's climates and conservation measures, and how these mute the potential atmospheric and ecological knowledges embedded in the artefacts.

During her residency, Neumeyer focused on the restoration of multispecies relations in weather(ing) worlds. Listening to the muted (hi)stories of animated water embodied by pre-Columbian Peruvian pots, she reflected on stor(y)ing biocultural relationships in weather(ing) worlds. Across our planet, conflicts arise due to competing claims for access to water, its use, and management. The responsibility for, and effects of water-related climate crisis are unequally distributed; Indigenous and formerly colonized people are disproportionately burdened by its acute consequences.

Fig. 1: Archival material © Museum am Rothenbaum (MARKK), Hamburg; Collage 'Vessels of Water' © Sybille Neumeyer, 2022.



## collection climates

While visiting the MARKK, the Natural History Museum and the archives of the DWD – Deutscher Wetterdienst (German Meteorological Service) in Hamburg, I find myself in temperature- and humidity-controlled storage spaces and exhibition halls monitored by conservation teams that serve to prevent archives and collections from withering.

In 1912, the MARKK was moved from a building it had shared with the Natural History Museum to a new facility, allowing for the expansion of both collections: so-called 'Naturalia' on one side, and masks, tools, garments, pots, and human remains on the other. Searching for traces of water in these 'seasonless' spaces, I am looking at the diversity of containers on display at the MARKK – much like those still used today all over the globe – just to find them empty.

## **gathering(s)**

In her discussion on human evolution, Elizabeth Fisher claims that 'the earliest cultural inventions must have been a container to hold gathered products'<sup>1</sup> like pots, baskets, or nets that served to collect, carry, and store grains, seeds, berries, fruit, shells, and water. Earthenware replaced containers made from bottle gourds, which were also utilized as moulds for early pots. Eventually, the potted containers stimulated social gatherings for sharing food and stories. Considering these origins of bio-socio-cultural interrelations makes me ponder about the relationships created, or disrupted, by modern modes of collecting.

## **drought**

At the MARKK, I walk along a corridor that houses vessels from pre-Columbian Andean cultures. In spite of a pending silence, I feel vibrancy around them. My friend Imayna Carceres explains to me that some of them are whistling vessels that make a variety of sounds when liquid is poured out of them, giving them voices of birds and animals. I try to imagine them whistling and soon realize that, beyond lacking water and sounds, they are muted in other ways. The labels provide limited information: dates, numbers, and short iconographic descriptions mirror the interests of the collectors rather than unveiling lived cultural values. I am looking at a troubling display of items violently extracted from sacred places, and still, despite being drained from both their fluid content and cultural and environmental context, these vessels invite me to ponder about water, drinking, and distributing liquids, and thus about life.

## **carrier bags**

In the library I browse books full of narratives on political upheaval, bloody sacrifices, and warriors. These stories were dug up by many male archaeologists who gained fame with their souvenirs from adventurous journeys.

Referring to Fisher's discussion in her 'Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction', science fiction author Ursula LeGuin examines how stories of and stories as bags, pots and nets offer grounding alternatives to heroic narratives focused on weapons and mastery. They offer more inclusive stories that hold 'things in a particular relation to each other and us'.<sup>2</sup> Which stories do these pots convey beyond those about leaders, invaders, priests, collectors, and archaeologists?

1 LeGuin 1989.

2 Ibid.

## stor(y)ing hydrological cycles

While contemplating the shapes of Moche pots I sense something hopeful and activating: there are animals, human portraits, fruit, vegetables, and assemblages or hybrids of all of these. Trying to understand interactions with these vessels, my imagination starts animating the water flows. Both as containers for distributing liquids – such as *chicha*, a maize beer – and as portraits of living bodies that contain, circulate, ingest, and excrete liquids, these pots narrate watery relationships. Stories of blood, rain, floods, tears, mountains, rivers, and seas come alive, in this miniature world of what Astrida Neimanis calls 'bodies of water'<sup>3</sup>. Humans and nonhumans alike are embedded in 'webs of physical intimacy and fluid exchange' that create and sustain life on our planet.

## multispecies weather worlding

The Moche inhabited the coastal deserts of today's Northern Peru, an area between the mountains and the sea that experiences drastic shifts in climatic conditions during irregular monsoon events. In the phenomenon known today as *El Niño Southern Oscillation (ENSO)*, heavy rains and floods precede extreme and prolonged droughts, destroying villages and crops.

Drawing on contemporary scientific papers, I study how such events lead to drastic changes in terrestrial and marine ecologies. *El Niño* causes the Peru Current to warm, which results in an influx of species from tropical regions like *Argopecten purpuratus*, while at the same time threatening other species like the *Engraulis ringens* who is at home in cooler waters, and the local *Pelicanus thagus*, who exclusively feeds on the former. The autochthonous *Scutalus sp.*, on the other hand, thrives in the continuous rain, becoming a food supplement in times of scarcity.<sup>4</sup>

All these creatures are informed by water streams, temperatures, rains, and humidity that fluctuate in and around them.

For local communities, shells, fish, snails, birds that herald the torrential rains must have informed fears, hopes, rituals, and survival strategies. I find them carefully embedded as comrades, gods, and cohabitants within the potted worlds. Moreover, as the vessels were integrated in rituals as well as in daily life practices, the boundaries between stories and lived environment became fluid, too. In a cosmovation attentive to interdependencies of cycles of life and water and attuned to multi-

3 Neimanis 2017.

4 Wolff 2011; Passuni, et al., 2016.

species kinships that emerge within 'weather worlds'<sup>5</sup>, pots and beings are likewise carrier bags of liquids and carrier bags of storied *biosociocultural* relations.

It remains unclear whether the demise of the Moche people was caused by ecological disasters such as a three-year super *El Niño* or by political upheaval. What we do know is based on interpretations from distances of time, space, and culture. However, the vessels of succeeding cultures, like Huari and Chimu, continue the multispecies motifs, indicating that local modes of dwelling *with* rain, mountains and rivers, plants and animals created habitability despite the harsh conditions.

## weathering knowledges

Today, some Peruvian/Andean highland farmers called *arariwa* (Quechua for 'guardians of the fields') still rely on the nesting of *huacana* and *totorelo*, the call of *atuq*, and flowering of *sancaya*, amongst many other weather voices, as signals for upcoming rain or seasons. This helps them take decisions on planting and harvesting, and to carefully choose their crop from a diversity of plants, providing modes of resistance in difficult climate circumstances.<sup>6</sup>

However, such local ecological knowledges in rural communities all over the world, which stem from accumulated experience and provide an ability to respond to extreme weather events, are eroding amid collapsing climates. ENSO events are likely to become more frequent by 2040, exposing biodiversity and people to tremendous threats.<sup>7</sup> In Peru, colonization by the Spanish in 1532 was the onset of an increasing and continuous extraction and translocation of beings as/and resources, and of disruptions of local modes of cultivating the land. Local (hi)stories and cosmovisions were muted in atmospheres of ongoing separation of cultural tools, animals, plants, and weather phenomena through disciplines, classifications, and collections. Despite such discription of nature-cultures, these pots conserved biocultural values, multispecies politics, and environmental knowledge. They mould an eco-logical way of living with and learning from non-human and meteorological beings. And, as carrier bags for stories of relationality in ever dynamic weather worlds, the vessels also hold time. By stor(y)ing what indigenous scholar Kyle Whyte recounts as kinship time,<sup>8</sup> a relational time eluding imposed chronologies and concepts of past, they invite us to remember our futures.

5 Ingold 2010.

6 Claverías 2000.

7 Ying et al. 2022.

8 Whyte 2021.

## forecast

July 2022: As I am leaving the MARKK, my body starts sweating in the shimmering air of an early heatwave. I notice the withering leaves on the bushes. With increasing extreme weather events all over the world, what stories are needed to reconnect biological and cultural worldings? How can we weather the climate crisis by altering troubled bio-socio-cultural atmospheres? Listening to the voices of marginalized holders of knowledge, and to the songs of our ecosystems as living archives, creates grounds for restoring relationships between humans and nature, and amongst us. Thinking with Moche pots is an invitation to remember ourselves as carrier bag bodies, gathering (around) relational stories.

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