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Burning the Devil: Art as Counter-Law and the Jurisprudence of the Senses

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Burning the Devil: Art as Counter-Law and the Jurisprudence of the Senses

What forms of justice remain possible for communities subjected to state-sanctioned violence when juridical recognition has failed and historical justice is inaccessible? The conventional pillars of historical justice – the rights to truth, justice, reparation, and memory – presuppose an institutional will to investigate, acknowledge, and redress harm, as well as full commitment to procedure. In the absence of either, communities turn to other forms of justice. Within many Indigenous frameworks, traditional justice is grounded in reciprocity, communal deliberation, and ritual reparation: Practices that seek to restore balance among humans, ancestors, and the land. Emerging from a different genealogy, anthropologist David Howes describes »law as both targeting and anchored in corporeal experience«, implying that legality is not confined to the written or procedural but extends to the embodied, the performative, and the affective.[1] Within this expanded juridical sensorium, collective artistic practices can operate as alternative forms of redress, producing sensorial and relational modes of accountability.

The events in Arantepacua, Michoacán – where a state-led massacre in 2017 left four members of the P'urhépecha community dead and no one held accountable – expose the persistence of injustice as a haunting force.[2] What returns is not only the mourning of the dead, but the specters of injustice themselves: the fear of the police coming back translated into intergenerational trauma, the impunity of high-ranking officials transmuted into rage, and the repetition of state violence across the national landscape. The ghosts of Arantepacua resonate with those of Ayotzinapa (2014) and Nochixtlán (2016), where state repression, denial, and the silencing of rural and Indigenous voices reveal a continuum of necropolitics; an order sustained by the management of death and the normalization of impunity.[3] The specters of coloniality are also present in this tragic ensemble: the devaluation of Indigenous life, the violation of communal existence, the erasure of situated epistemologies, and the desecration of the land itself.

Against this backdrop of juridical silence and haunting forces, I turn to what I have termed a poetics of violence: an anticolonial aesthetic practice through which acts of destruction become not only catharsis but also a communal projection of desire and a multilayered revelation.[4] The aftermath of the massacre in Arantepacua exposes the persistence of injustice as a haunting force. It is through this lens that *Kurhirani no ambakiti (Burning the Devil): Since That's the Only Way They Listen to Us* (2019–20) emerged as a form of aesthetic redress. Conceived in collaboration with the Indigenous Communal Council of Arantepacua and with the participation of artists from the neighboring P'urhépecha communities of Cherán, Turícuaro, Ocumicho, and Pichátaro, it reconfigures rage into an embodied, participatory act of justice. Its central element – a life-size papier-

1 David Howes, Prologue: Introduction to Sensori-Legal Studies, in: Canadian Journal of Law and Society 34,2 (2019) 173–189; idem (ed.), Troubling Law's Sensorium: Explorations in Sensational Jurisprudence, special issue, in: Canadian Journal of Law and Society 34,2 (2019), https://muse.jhu.edu/issue/41595.

2 Jacques Derrida, Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International, trans. Peggy Kamuf, New York 1994.

3 In Arantepacua, Michoacán (2017), Michoacán state police opened fire on members of the P'urhépecha community during an operation to allegedly recover seized trucks, killing four and injuring dozens. In Ayotzinapa, Guerrero (2014), 43 students from the rural teachers' college were forcibly disappeared by police and military forces – a paradigmatic case of state violence and impunity. In Nochixtlán, Oaxaca (2016), federal police violently repressed a teachers' protest, leaving at least eight dead and more than 100 injured. See Achille Mbembe, Necropolitics, trans. Steven Corcoran, Durham 2019 (NC).

4 Adela Goldbard, Políticas de la memoria / Poética de la violencia, in: Johanna C. Ángel-Reyes, Sergio Rodríguez-Blanco (eds.), Inoculaciones. Comunicación crítica y pandemia, Ciudad de México 2021, 167–186; eadem, »Since that's the only way they listen to us«. Notes Toward a Poetics of Violence, in: PARSE Journal 15,3 (2022), https://doi.org/10.70733/12oireb673nz.

mâché rhinoceros built by pyrotechnicians *(coheturis)* in Cherán, the first autonomous P'urhépecha community – served as a proxy for the armored »rhinoceros« tank used by police during the 2017 assault. The effigy became a commemorative procession, culminating in its destruction with fireworks in the town plaza, while local *pireris* (musicians) performed newly composed *pirekuas* and rap songs honoring the deceased and reclaiming justice. Through the performance of destruction, music, and the sharing of food, the community subverted the narrative of the attack and reclaimed pyrotechnics – once colonial instruments of fear – as tools of celebration and remembrance. In this sense, the burning was not only allegorical – aiming at the symbolic destruction of the harm and evil embodied by the effigy – but revelatory. As Michael Taussig suggests, it is in the negative that the mimetic faculty finds its power that is, in acts of destruction that reveal and reconstitute meaning.[5] Here, unmaking becomes not an erasure but a form of memory-making, a way of disclosing what violence seeks to obscure. Yet what is revealed is not only the truth of the past, but the potentiality of the future; a spiral unfolding of time where the known returns transformed within the struggles yet to come.[6] The act of burning thus does not erase but exposes; it turns violence upside-down transforming it into futuristic and restorative *poiesis*; a creative force exorcising harm while reclaiming agency over the politics of memory and futurity. It is an omen – a collective and sensorial performance of justice that is felt, sung, and shared. Destruction turned into renewal and collective power.

Archivo Bordado de la Resistencia continues the community's pursuit of truth and memory through tactile testimony. Created with female embroiderers from Arantepacua and Turícuaro, it translates community photographs into cross-stitched textiles that materialize memory through labor and care. Each embroidery, based on images from the community's archive and by *comunero* Auani Pascual, functions as a tactile counter-archive. Through the slow, repetitive gesture of stitching, these women inscribed grief and resistance into a canvas, transforming a colonial craft into an instrument of political and affective visibility. The textiles became part of a larger installation that also included the video documentation of the public burning and the mutilated head of the rhinoceros hung as a trophy. Crafted collectively across the P'urhépecha communities of Pichátaro and Ocumicho, the installation also featured *El enjambre*, composed of 85 wooden and clay toy-size replicas of police vehicles and hundreds of small *diablitos* – clay devils dressed as soldiers and policemen – »marching toward Arantepacua«, replaying the violence of the 2017 assault. In this work, the perpetrators are transformed into grotesque miniatures of their own violence. By reimagining instruments of repression through communal craft, the work exposes the necropolitics of state power and channels rage into critical reflection with subtle dark humor. The sonic components of the installation – an assemblage of traditional *pirekuas*, rap songs, and testimonies from the community – formed an expansive, multisensory field of justice.[7]

The collective mobilization that followed the massacre marked a critical juncture in the community's struggle for autonomy – a moment that demonstrates how violence, though devastating, can become a generative force for transformation and collective empowerment. Supported by intercultural human-rights lawyers, Arantepacua achieved recognition as an autonomous Indigenous community six months after the attack. Yet autonomy and the demand for justice remain ongoing struggles, continually haunted by political factions and capitalist interests rooted in the extractive economies of wood and avocado. *Burning the Devil* contributed to this process by opening spaces for the expression of rage, for collective memory-making, and for critical reflection and intergenerational dialogue that continued through participatory workshops held one year after the burning of the rhinoceros.

A brief art-therapy initiative invited the relatives of the victims to process grief through collective acts of creation and destruction, while children

5 Michael Taussig, Mimesis and Alterity: A Particular History of the Senses, New York 1993; idem, Defacement: Public Secrecy and the Labor of the Negative, Stanford (CA) 1999.

6 Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui, Ch'ixinakax utxiwa: A Reflection on Practices and Discourses of Decolonization, Buenos Aires 2010.

7 The phrase field of justice designates a sensorial and relational space of accountability – an expanded aesthetic and communal terrain where justice is enacted through affect, memory, and collective creation.

repainted the miniature police trucks from *El enjambre* as *kuaricha* (community police) vehicles – transforming symbols of oppression into emblems of Indigenous autonomy and strength. These gestures of creativity and play sustained the intergenerational transmission of memory.

The poetics of violence thus articulates an alternative framework of justice – one that confronts violence not through the abstraction of law but through collective, embodied, and creative action. Justice, in this sense, is cosmopolitical: It unfolds within a sensorial, relational, and political field open to beings ordinarily excluded from modern regimes of representation and extending across more-than-human worlds.The creative praxis enacted in Arantepacua operated simultaneously as counter-law – revealing the violence inscribed in the state's juridical apparatus – and as a jurisprudence of the senses: an embodied and affective mode of enacting cosmopolitical justice oriented toward the restoration of disrupted social and cosmogonical equilibria.[8] Developed in solidarity with Arantepacua's ongoing struggles, these creative methodologies were not merely symbolic but integral to a broader ecology of justice-making – one encompassing protest, legal advocacy, and practices of self-governance. By unsettling the boundary between the legal and the aesthetic, they do not merely respond to what justice is but ignite a reimagining of what justice might become: a jurisprudence at once sensorial, insurgent, and incendiary.

■

8 I conceptualize the jurisprudence of the senses as an anticolonial, embodied, and performative modality of justice – one practiced and apprehended through collective sensorial experience rather than mediated by institutional legality.