

RESEARCH

Creating Collaborative Learning Spaces for Critical Environmental Social Scientists

By Ángela Castillo-Ardila, Sebastián Rubiano-Galvis, María Villalpando Páez, and Andrés Caicedo

In April 2023, ten graduate students and early-career scholars from UC Berkeley, UC Merced, and the University of San Francisco met at the Center for Latin American Studies (CLAS) at UC Berkeley in a three-hour forum to explore and discuss the craft of narrating the political and environmental lives of plants, animals, elements, and infrastructures from different parts of Latin America and the Caribbean. During the event, participants shared texts depicting these “more-than-human actors” encountered during their fieldwork in Latin America and the United States.

These experimental accounts included an array of subjects: a hydroelectric dam, a chemical substance used in gold extraction, a fungus collapsing the Latin American

oil palm industry, a contentious encounter between a dog and a possum, and a montane hummingbird living above the treeline in the tropical Andes. Each piece narrated a unique story about a socio-environmental conflict, offering an account from an experimental and unconventional perspective. The stories were all carefully read and discussed by the participants, who identified different issues in their accounts of these beings. In some examples, the entities were attributed agency in seemingly artificial ways. Conversely, there were cases where more-than-human bodies appeared to possess no capacity to influence the world at all.

This activity was part of the workshop, “Narrating More-Than-Human Politics in Latin America,” facilitated

The meeting of the “Transformative Agro-Ecology” workshop held at CLAS, March 2023.



Photo courtesy of the Latin American and Caribbean Sociocultures Working Group.

by Professor Gregg Hetherington (Concordia University) and sponsored by CLAS. As a political and environmental anthropologist with extensive expertise in bureaucracy, agriculture, and the state, Hetherington has pioneered approaches that examine the dynamics of agrarian reform and development projects in Latin America through the lens of multispecies relationships. In the context of the growing field of environmental studies, Hetherington and the workshop participants aimed to develop innovative conceptual and narrative frameworks to address the connections between human and more-than-human worlds that permeate Latin American and Caribbean politics. The workshop provided participants with a theoretical perspective, while simultaneously fostering a collaborative space.

This workshop was part of the event series, *Latin American Natures in Times of Crises*, organized by UC Berkeley's Latin American and Caribbean Socionatures Working Group (LAC Socionatures). Funded through a one-year grant from CLAS and the U.S. Department of Education, the series looked at the tensions and forces that shape environmental conflicts in the region, exploring how these disputes intersect with politics, economics, race, ecology, and gender.

Natures in Crises:

Water, Food, and More-Than-Humans

LAC Socionatures is an interdisciplinary community formed in 2021 whose members are dedicated to exploring the histories, dynamics, and conflicts related to the co-constitution of nature and society (hence the group name) throughout Latin America and its shifting boundaries. As part of our efforts to offer a collective space where graduate students at UC Berkeley can learn about and discuss current research projects on environmental politics in Latin America and the Caribbean, we designed an event series consisting of public talks and workshops focused on three topics: water, food and agroecology, and more-than-human beings. Our nontraditional format, which pairs an expert presentation with a participatory activity, emerged from our own dissatisfaction with the conventional 45-minute talk followed by a curated Q&A



Photo by thilbaudanson.

The bronze-tailed comet (*Polyonnyx caroli*), a hummingbird native to the Andes.

session and other graduate students' frequent complaints about the isolating conditions of academic research. To address those issues, we proposed a format that encourages extended conversations, experimental writing, and collective learning and feedback.

The three-part event series *Latin American Natures in Times of Crises* was designed to provide participants with an initial exposure to the event topic through a public talk based on current research, followed by an environment conducive to sharing concepts, methodologies, and techniques. Adhering to the traditional definition of a workshop as a place where skilled individuals learn and practice the art of creation, we envisaged our workshops as both material and relational forums for practicing the craft of thinking with and against "socionatures" throughout the Americas.

The first event, "Disputed Water Worlds," featured a talk by Andrea Ballesterio, Associate Professor of Anthropology at the University of Southern California. Her presentation examined the concepts that have emerged from ethnographic encounters with the "techno-legal devices" used to understand, produce, and govern water in Costa Rica. Following her talk, Ballesterio facilitated a workshop



Photo by Walter Canadío

Pirris Hydroelectric Dam, San Carlos de Tarrazú, Costa Rica.

with more than a dozen graduate students who presented “flash ethnographies”—short, incisive ethnographic pieces inspired by their fieldwork—that explored water as a relational substance, always in tension or articulation with other elements, beings, infrastructures, etc.

In our collective discussion of these pieces, Balletero introduced four interpretative categories for the consideration of emergent water scholars: form, temporality, infrastructure, and relationality. These categories, she suggested, offer a condensed yet illuminating perspective on the crucial dimensions that structure global waterscapes.

At the second event, “Transformative Agro-Ecology,” Mateo Mier y Terán Giménez, a member of the Agroecology Group at El Colegio de la Frontera Sur in Mexico, facilitated an interactive talk and workshop on both agroecological markets in Chiapas and the transformative power of participatory research methods for the study of food systems. While graduate students are used to sitting down and listening (or sitting down and discussing), Mier y Terán surprised us by starting the workshop with a prompt to go outside. He encouraged us to move around and embody our hopes and expectations, instead of simply stating them.

The participatory and interactive activities, as well as our subsequent collective reflections, challenged us to

reconsider our research methods and the way we formulate questions. By offering ideas on how to defy the notions of expertise and scientific knowledge, Mier y Terán provided a glimpse into the possibilities of engaged research and the importance of bridging the knowledge we generate in classrooms with the insights and experiences of the people with whom we conduct research.

During the third event, “Narrating More-Than-Human Politics in Latin America,” Gregg Hetherington, Associate Professor of Sociology and Anthropology at Concordia University in Canada, offered a preview of findings from his ongoing research on the “future of facts” in Latin America. His presentation examined the history of science and agribusiness in Paraguay, in particular, the legacies and multiple temporalities of the Green Revolution in Paraguay.

Hetherington discussed how the production of agricultural knowledge implied the participation of scientists, politicians, academics, and private investors. He also drew attention to the impact of current neoliberal agendas on the logic of fact-making in agricultural research in Paraguay. Hetherington then conducted a workshop on speculative writing about more-than-human actors, which features in our introduction to this article.

The Promotion of Collaborative Learning

The most significant outcome of Latin American Natures in Times of Crises was the opportunity to foster a collaborative learning space for graduate students who aim to become environmental social scientists able to deploy critical perspectives in the analysis of environmental issues in Latin America and the Caribbean. Despite ubiquitous public discussion about the climate crisis, specific disciplines, scholars, and academic perspectives are underrepresented in and often excluded from these debates. Such exclusion stems partly from the belief that social sciences and the humanities cannot provide insightful, innovative analyses of environmental struggles, but is also a result of scholars of color being left out of certain debates and spaces.

Our event series addressed those issues by creating a space welcoming to scholars of color, many of them students and early-career scholars who are Latinx (or from the Latin American diaspora) and interested in advancing critical perspectives for the analysis of environmental crises throughout the continent. Latin American Natures in Times of Crises convened graduate students from various departments at UC Berkeley, including Environmental Science, Policy, and Management; Anthropology; the Energy and Resources

Group; and City and Regional Planning. It also attracted students from other UC campuses, such as UCLA, UC Merced, and UC Davis. Additionally, the series drew scholars from other institutions in the Bay Area and California, like Stanford and the University of San Francisco, as well as participants from Latin America and Europe who logged in via Zoom.

Our innovative format of talk+workshop allowed us to accomplish at least four interconnected goals. First, it gave scholars specializing in Latin American Studies a platform to share their cutting-edge research in environmental social sciences and humanities within Latin America and the Caribbean. By highlighting Latin American voices, experiences, and landscapes, the event series has significantly contributed to showcasing current work in critical environmental studies on campus. This exposure likewise provided UC Berkeley students and faculty the opportunity to become familiar with research originating from places such as Paraguay, Costa Rica, and Mexico. Second, the tripartite series offered students and early-career scholars a venue to explore diverse formats for maintaining collective scholarly discussions and experimenting with academic writing on environmental issues, thereby deepening their understanding of the history and composition of various environmental crises

>>

Lands in Paraguay that have been deforested to make way for cattle ranches.



Photo by Peer V.

on the continent. Third, the workshops offered hands-on experiences to graduate students and early-career researchers, who were keen to integrate new concepts and methodologies into their work while studying environmental politics in Latin America and the Caribbean more broadly. Lastly, this format served as a catalyst for initiating collaborations, spawning new projects, and further developing our professional skills.

The working group and the event series served as important formative and experimental spaces for graduate students, particularly for those lacking consolidated scholarly communities within their departments. These students often encounter obstacles such as limited opportunities for funding and publishing or for receiving detailed, constructive feedback on their work. In particular, the availability of funding and administrative infrastructure is vital to support the work of Latin American and Latinx scholars in U.S. academia, as they are often marginalized, underfunded, and underrepresented within their fields or departments.

As various scholars in the social and life sciences have demonstrated, certain inequalities have a substantial impact on the scholarly agendas of Latin American and Latinx graduate students and early-career scholars. These

inequalities arise from a lack of access to technology and funding, the dominance of English as the preferred language for disseminating scientific knowledge, and the imposition of research questions deemed valid and intriguing by scholars in the Global North. They profoundly affect these emerging academics.¹

In this context, the financial and administrative support provided by CLAS, coupled with the initiative shown by the working group organizers, effectively created and nurtured a collective forum for emerging critical environmental scholars. This type of support is crucial in shaping the future of critical environmental studies throughout the region.

Ángela Castillo-Ardila (PhD Anthropology, '23), Sebastián Rubiano-Galvis (PhD Environmental Science, Policy, and Management, '22), Maria Villalpando (PhD [c] Energy and Resources Group), and Andrés Caicedo (PhD [c] Environmental Science, Policy, and Management) are members of the Latin American and Caribbean Sociocultures Working Group. You can learn more about our work at www.lacsociocultures.com.

1. For more about this topic, see Valeria Ramirez-Castañeda, (2020), Disadvantages in preparing and publishing scientific papers caused by the dominance of the English language in science: The case of Colombian researchers in biological sciences. *PLOS ONE* 15(9), e0238372. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0238372>.

The talk from the “Transformative Agro-Ecology” workshop, March 2023.



Photo courtesy of the Latin American and Caribbean Sociocultures Working Group.