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GeoSemantics / *I Fight, Therefore I Am. Sacrifice Zones: A Contribution to the Geo-social Dimension of Environmental Struggles* / Candela de la Vega

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(<https://asapjournal.com/author/cdelavega/>)



Figure 1. Not empty, dead, or silent land.

Sacrifice territories. This is the allegation of more than 100 environmental collectives in Argentina, whose emergence began just as they stopped seeing their territories as immobile surfaces with bodies and objects embedded in them, ready to be sacrificed at the first promise of “progress” and (mis)development. The term *sacrifice zones* has been coined by these assemblies to describe what is happening in their territories, but they stress promptly that their lands are not empty, dead, or silent.

Contrary to what might be expected, in *sacrifice zones* there are subjects and movements, there are alchemies, there is noise. Specifically: there are political struggles whose outcome holds a geological force in those territories. And along this path runs what we from the sacrifice zones want to show in this essay: Why is today’s notion of *sacrifice zones* one of the most stinging contributions of environmental struggles to narratives from Global South territories? Five elements are introduced and explained in the following paragraphs.

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Lifeless and empty lands? There is no such thing. First, in *sacrifice zones*, there are active human and nonhuman agents doing something.

According to Agostina Constantino¹, after the devaluation of 2002, foreign acquisitions of land in Argentina increased significantly. These investments were made mainly by the United States, and new investors such as China, India, and Saudi Arabia—who directed their investments to frontier agricultural regions within the country. These are transnational companies, some of them state-owned, that acquired Argentine land for three main objectives: agricultural commodity production, mining operations, and land control to ensure the supply of raw materials and food for the investing countries.²

For this reason, *sacrifice zones* are territories that have been intervened and divided by interests that do not represent the communities who have lived there for decades. These foreign interests not only do not match the living needs of the inhabitants, but they have also brought death to these lands. The destruction of natural resources for export, the pollution of waterways and air, and the forced migration caused by the advance of the agricultural frontier for agribusiness are all detrimental practices that serve as foreboding indications of potential harm and mortality for certain individuals or communities. It is not a dead land, but a land where death is produced and manufactured through devastating fires and ecological destruction.

There, ecology is political because it is a war zone. Far from a romantic image that assumes that nature “unites” subjects and communities, it can also be the cause of profound social divisions and inequalities. Under the overwhelming mandate to generate value for the capital process, degradation, dispossession, pollution, or extinction are not “natural”: they are produced. And not by the agency of “man”, “humanity”, or “the species” as an abstract and generic euphemism. It is not everybody but a few people: those very living agents of neoliberal, colonial, and patriarchal capitalism. It is not the Anthropocene, it is the Capitalocene.³

Second, *sacrifice zones* are zones of suffering, both bodies and territories.

Suffering becomes present in the constant threat of death, the realization of what is lost day by day in one's own body, or the plight of those who have been displaced or who have already died from poison or lack of water. "A particular form of social suffering caused by the concrete polluting actions of specific actors."⁴ The land suffers, the communities suffer, and it makes sense to speak of *bodies-territory*.⁵ This expression aims to make visible the inseparable relationship between the damage to nature and the damage to the bodies of those who inhabit each territory. The enunciation of a *body-territory* is in itself a dissident action that places both bodies and territories in the field of power and its violences

This is also the name of a famous poster created in 2020 with the assistance of *Iconoclasistas*, a social communication laboratory producing graphics (posters, publications, cartographies, etc.) and street interventions.⁶ This poster was collectively produced based on the testimonies of Latin American communities affected by the health impacts of extractive activities in their territories. Each testimony identified the extractive activities that predominated in their territories and the resulting damage to the inhabitants' organs or body parts. The poster visually represents this relationship, choosing to depict a female body due to the majority of those denouncing and fighting against this new form of colonization are women and feminized bodies.

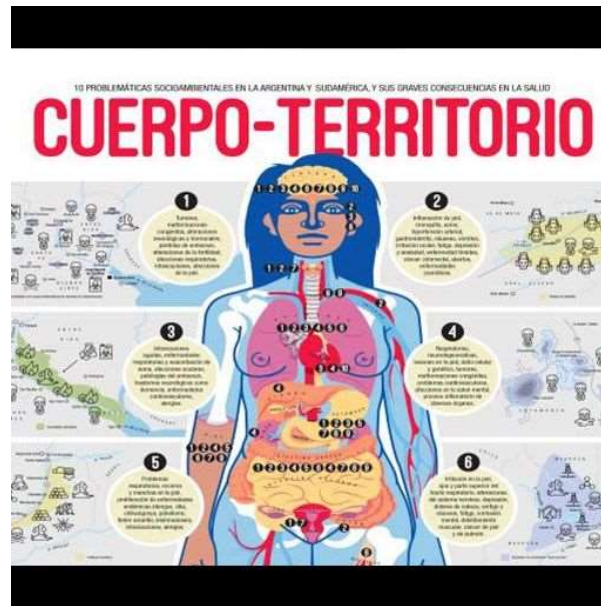


Figure 2. Bodies-territory, part of a *Iconoclasistas*' poster.

In the video below, a volunteer women squad who gathers and fights fires in the mountains and hills, proclaims as a collective voice: "Warning, warning, be on the alert, neither mountains nor our bodies are a conquering terrain". Both bodies and territories are spaces hosting the conditions for the flourishing of life (human and non-human) and life cycles—therefore, this is also where the dispossessing violence of colonial and patriarchal capitalism is directed.

egas.brigadistas.organizadas
 egas.brigadistas.organizadas · Audio original



Figure 3. A volunteer member of an organized squat that fights forest fires. Instagram screenshot.

(<https://www.instagram.com/reel/CpdRYbwAW1W/?igshid=YmMyMTA2M2Y=>)

Third, the *sacrifice zones* do not merely produce victims or bodies reduced to *bare life*⁷— life that no longer deserves to be lived. Rather, in these zones, solidarity and struggles also emerge.

The concept of the *body-territory* allows us to contemplate the bond between communities and their territories but also it sheds light on why residents' struggles against the threat of death over their territories emerge. It is the strength of that bond that forces the opening of a propitious space for the key alchemy of Global South territories to occur once again: the one that is capable of transforming pain into struggle.

Samanta Schweblin's novel poetically showcases this latent potential of transforming individual agony into a collective battle. Originally published in Spanish as "Distancia de rescate" in 2014, and later translated into English as "Fever Dream" in 2017, this novel depicts an ecological dystopia. It starkly illustrates how a peaceful countryside home can turn into a catastrophic tragedy, as the toxicity of water and soil in the Argentine agricultural lands, primarily dominated by agribusiness, poisons the inhabitants of the regions near soybean plantations.

In one of the most intriguing and suggestive dialogues, the protagonists of the novel wonder:

"Is it about the poison? It's everywhere, isn't it, David?"

The poison was always there.

Is it something else, then? Is it something I did wrong? Is it something I caused? The rescue distance.

The pain comes and goes.

When we were on the grass with Nina, between the plastic drums. It was the rescue distance: it didn't work, I didn't see the danger. And now there is something else in my body, something that turns on or maybe turns off, something sharp and bright.

It's the pain.

Why don't I feel it anymore?

It stabs into the stomach.

Yes, it pierces it and opens it, but I don't feel it, it comes back to me with an icy white vibration, it goes all the way to my eyes.

I'm touching your hands, I'm here.

And now the rope, the rescue distance rope.”⁸

In that context, collective solidarity emerges as the lifeline for ailing bodies and sick lands. As we infer from the aforementioned excerpt, the phrase “I'm touching your hands, I'm here” vividly portrays the significance of physical proximity and contact in reorganizing one's subjectivities and political dispositions. To attain a better and sustainable life in these territories, it becomes crucial to establish precise distances and practices for rescue and defence.

Fourth, *sacrifice zones* are not silent territories: they are noisy and complaining.

The magnitude of the catastrophes in the *sacrifice zones* could make us believe that political action is suspended or paralyzed. But there is a sound: you can hear “fire alarms.”⁹ And at times, songs are being sung to unite more voices in collective opposition to the demand to become an offering that, with almost heroic connotations, is being handed over to the market in the name of progress and civilization.

And it is said with melodies, like the one that plays below in the video: whoever is born in this land should know that the earth is beating, and there's freedom in each beat. In this sense, there is a descriptive as well as a prescriptive burden for those who inhabit sacrifice zones. If the land in sacrifice zones belongs to those who defend it, then the birth of a person in these zones is inevitably followed by a baptism of struggle.

Figure 4. “Para aquel que nazca en esta tierra” (For those born in this land”), by the music group La Insurgencia del Caracol. Included in the musical project “Canto al monte nativo” (Song to the native mountains), from the record label “SURA, hay otra música” (SURA, there is other music).

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In *sacrifice zones*, life reinvents itself in insurgency against the attempts to empty, kill, silence, and depopulate it. After all, struggles are about life, about a way of life that has been invaded and violated. Indeed, something else is shaking, speaking, and resonating. In this broth of struggle, subjectivities in the making are cooking and expressing themselves in geosemantic codes embodying and transmuting antagonisms and contradictions: “We are the water that extinguishes their fire”, reads a poster in a street demonstration against intentionally caused wildfires.

Fifth, the *sacrifice zones* do not debate their existence only in rural areas; they also fight and gather in the streets of the city.

The traditional socio-territorial division between rural areas and cities is being challenged by the struggles of settler communities. Their complaints and resistance against sacrifice, damage, and contamination are increasingly voiced on the streets of large cities. Similar to carnival times, massive mobilizations on the concrete avenues create a relatively safe time-space where roles and meanings can be subverted. During defence demonstrations, when their protagonists dress up as trees or animals, the scenes are flooded with

color and aesthetic transformations that blur the Modern lines between humans, animals, and plants. And what is more: they dare to fight with some of the enemy's weapons—let it not be the forests that burn, but “extractivist capitalism”, reads a poster in a march.

Taking all the previous elements into account, as Bruno Latour and Nikolaj Schultz explain, conflicts and struggles for emancipation and equality clearly have an understanding of their geo-social dimension when they revolve around occupation, nature, the use and preservation of territories, and subsistence conditions.¹⁰ And, for these authors, the revolutionary promise needs to be forged as a new relationship between two zones: the world we live off and the world we live in.

Those struggling to change the world have some clarity about the structures of exploitation and oppression that constrain them, and therefore have a better understanding of their limitations and possibilities. This knowledge arises from their life experiences, but becomes more precise through the struggle to transcend these conditions. At the end of the day, environmental activism not only produces knowledge of the domination apparatus that operates in a particular place, but it also trains activists to become “intellectuals (<https://thetricontinental.org/the-new-intellectual/>)” of their own struggles. In sacrifice zones, first you fight, then you are and think.

The notion of *sacrifice zones* is not an idea created on some academic island: it is part of the language of struggles, of their allegations, and their political willingness to change the system . That is why it stings, burns, and pushes those who speak from it. (applewebdata://CBDEC888-7EBF-4FC8-B86C-CC2597E02264#_ftnref1)

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Endnotes

1. Costantino, Agostina, ¿Quiénes son y para qué? El proceso de extranjerización de la tierra en Argentina a partir de 2002. *Ambiente y Sostenibilidad*, 5(1), 43–56., 2016.
<https://doi.org/10.25100/ay.s.v5i1.4301>
2. According to the National Registry of Rural Lands (RNTR), the country has 266,711,077 hectares of rural lands suitable for agricultural, livestock, viticulture, or mining exploitation. This area represents 15 times the total area of Uruguay, nine times the area of Italy, or five times the area of Spain. Between 2015 and 2020, the percentage of foreign-owned land ranged between 5 and 6%. Due to its

- mineral and freshwater resources, the regions with the highest levels of foreign ownership are located in the Northwest, Northeast, and mountainous areas of the central and southern parts of the country.
3. Jason Moore, *El capitalismo en la trama de la vida. Ecología y acumulación de capital* (Madrid: Traficantes de sueños, 2020).
 4. Javier Auyero & Débora Swistun, *Inflamable. Estudio del sufrimiento ambiental* (Buenos Aires: Paidós, 2008), 38.
 5. See, for example, the reflections of Gladys Tzul Tzul, the Mayan K'iche' community activist from Totonicapán, Guatemala.
 6. The complete poster has a creative commons licence and can be freely downloaded at: <https://iconoclasistas.net/portfolio-item/salud-y-extractivismo-2021/> (<https://iconoclasistas.net/portfolio-item/salud-y-extractivismo-2021/>).
 7. Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer* (Buenos Aires: Adriana Hidalgo Editora, 2017).
 8. Samanta Shweblin, *Distancia de rescate* (Ciudad Autónoma de Buenos Aires: Penguin Random House, 2022), 22.
 9. Michael Löwy, *Walter Benjamin: aviso de incendio* (Ciudad Autónoma de Buenos Aires: Penguin Random House, 2002).
 10. Bruno Latour & Nikolaj Schultz, *Manifiesto Ecológico Político* (Ciudad Autónoma de Buenos Aires: Siglo XXI, 2023), 38.

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