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Title

Enchantment in Place: an Archive of Roots, Martabel Wasserman



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Abstract

With archives and museums closed and the classroom and conference moved to virtual space, research practices and the form and content of academic conversations also changed to meet the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic. The re-enchantment of place facilitated by the pandemic has revealed intersections of socio-political-environmental issues and the persistent contradictions and productive continuities of American environmentalism. Through an enchanted engagement with the San Lorenzo River, an art historical archive emerged. This paper will explore the possibilities of politicized enchantment and pandemic collectivity and the ways in which these modes can inform an analysis of place and representation. This essay considers works by Carleton Watkins, Gregory Rick, histories of nature and display, pandemic related memes and the idea of abolition ecology.

Keywords: Environmental Conversation, Carleton Watkins, Abolition Ecology, Enchantment, Trees

“And what better way to come under the spell of countermodernity than to listen to the stories told by trees? After all, the word *radical* is related to the word *root*”(Miller 2018, 11)

I had hardly noticed the San Lorenzo River prior to March 19th, 2020, when Governor Newsom issued the Shelter in Place order for the state of California in an effort to stop the spread of COVID-19. The 29-mile river which begins in the hills above Silicon Valley and rolls down through the Santa Cruz mountains into the Pacific was something I mostly experienced from the

vantage point of the Trader Joes parking lot in the unceded Awaswas-speaking Ohlone territory now known as Santa Cruz, California. The Shelter in Place order allowed me to reconsider my surroundings. On a sidewalk buffer, two concrete salmon perpetually swimming up the river memorialize a once vibrant Coho salmon run. Wild mugwort springs up in the patches of landscaped greenery framing the concrete slab of the parking lot. Ducks, hawks, and great blue heron peruse the leveed banks of the river. The perceptual possibilities afforded from being “in place” also apply to my art historical methodology, which has similarly been simultaneously restricted and expanded by the pandemic. With archives and museums closed and the classroom and conference moved to virtual space, research practices and the form and content of academic conversations must also change to meet the challenges of the moment. Through an engagement with the San Lorenzo River, I have composed a re-enchanted art historical archive.ⁱ

The re-enchantment of place facilitated by the COVID-19 pandemic has revealed intersections of socio-political-environmental issues and the persistent contradictions and productive continuities of American environmentalism. This paper will explore the possibilities of politicized re-enchantment and pandemic collectivity and the ways in which these modes can inform an analysis of place and representation. Experiencing the parking lot as a site of re-enchantment, in which plants consumed for lucid dreams grow and a body of water becomes alive to me for the first time, points to a discourse of enchantment and its attending issues. In Max Weber’s 1917 lecture “Science as Vocation,” he famously describes disenchantment as a condition of modernity, “The fate of our times is characterized by rationalization and intellectualization and above all by the ‘disenchantment of the world.’ Precisely the ultimate and most sublime values have retreated from public life either into the transcendental realm of mystic life or into the brotherliness of direct and personal human relations” (Lassman 1989, 20).

Modernity's disenchantment drove mystical experience out of the public sphere and into the realm of the personal. Over 100 years later, the challenges remain as to how to experience re-enchantment, which Theodor Adorno described as a "sensuous immediacy"

(Rajaram 2002, 356) of nature, not merely as an individual pleasure but as a collective political endeavor. COVID-19 exacerbates this challenge, pushing us to rethink how we collectivize as we are increasingly atomized by social distance protocols.

In the "Trouble With Wilderness," William Cronon writes, "Idealizing a distant wilderness too often means not idealizing the environment in which we actually live, the landscape that for better or worse we call home" (Cronon 1996, 85). The Trader Joe's parking lot is not an idealized wilderness but a site in which capitalism disenchant the world. Inside precarious frontline workers scan products such as "Heart of Darkness" Mango Passion Fruit Blend. The juice—one of many cheekily named Trader Joe's products which often play on variations of the name Joe and ethnic stereotypes such as Trader José salsa or Trader Joe-San Wasabi peas—references Joseph Conrad's 1899 novel of the same name. This object encapsulates racialized colonialist imaginary, the alienated labor to produce the fruit in the globalized context of neoliberal capitalism, and the disenchanted ways in which we can ignore these conditions and slurp up its sweet tasting nectar. Frederic Jameson writes in his discussion Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, "We must ponder the anomaly that is only the most completely humanized environment, the one most fully and obviously the end product of human labor, production and transformation, that life becomes meaningless and that existential despair first appears as such in direct proportion to the elimination of nature, the non- or anti-human, to the increasing rollback of everything that threatens human life and the prospect of well-nigh limitless control over the external universe" (Jameson 1981, 241). The parking lot, as much as

the spectacular redwood forest connected to it by the river's body, are necessarily both sites of re-enchantment of place. The river took my upstream to Henry Cowell Redwood State Park. Where Trader Joes, Costco and other chain stores now have parking lots, this magnificent ecosystem of redwoods that is partially preserved once prevailed.

What do I see when I look at a redwood? The desire to go into the woods to theorize the political and aesthetic is entrenched in American discourses of environmentalism and its corresponding problems and points of tension. Thoreau, being an obvious touchstone for this genealogy, allows for a historical and theoretical starting point for thinking through this impulse. In *Bird Relics: Grief and Vitalism in Thoreau*, Branka Arić argues for an affirmative reading of Thoreau's descriptions of nature. She offers the idea of literalization to "read nature right," by despiritualizing it, that is, "by passing through the curtain of metaphors to reach the material itself." Arić's offering of literalization creates a lens through which to better understand how, "Our epistemologies have filtered the wonderous out of the real to reach a truth that has in fact relocated us in imaginary real. Paradoxically, we have ended up living in a fantasized real from which the fantastic has been expelled" (Branka 2016, 6). The slow pace and encouragement to deep introspection that has come from *Sheltering in Place* has allowed me to experience what is wonderous in the world I inhabit and the objects I study. As Thoreau writes, "I frequently tramped eight or ten miles through the deepest snow to keep an appointment with a beech-tree or a yellow birch... or an old acquaintance among the pines, when the ice and snow causing their legs to droop" (Thoreau 1999, 198). While contact with humans became restricted, I found myself making similar literal appointments with trees, the river, and other non-human comrades.

On a the heavily trafficked trail known as The Loop in Henry Cowell Redwoods State Park located in coastal Northern California, stands the Giant. The largest tree in the park, at 270

feet tall and 17 feet wide, the maintained trail opens up to provide 360 ° view of its splendor. It is surrounded by a wooden fence, functioning as a framing device that both highlights the tree and discourages park go-ers from having a tactile encounter with the tree. The fence, the informational signs, and the parking lot where I entered frame my visual experience of the tree. A cross-section of a fallen tree is suspended at the entrance of the park just beyond the parking lot and gift shop. Its rings are marked with tiny plaques with dates such as the birth of Jesus Christ, the invention of the printing press and the founding of America. Western epistemology is projected onto its surface. The brochure State Park that is handed out at the parking lot kiosk reads, “On a fateful afternoon in 1900, Andrew P. Hill, photographed what is now known as the Giant. When the proprietor objected to the unauthorized pictures, demanding the negatives, Hill angrily refused. Hill resolved that there should a public park where the trees belonged to everyone” (California State Parks, 2011). Hills used the medium of photography to advocate for the designation of public lands. The representation of the tree allowed it to escape the regime of private property. When I look at a redwood, I am also looking at the history of photography and the corresponding conservation efforts based on the spectacular visual evidence it was able to provide.

To theorize the relationship between photography and conservation, consider the career of Carleton Watkin. As Martin A. Berger writes,

The role played by Watkins' photographs in helping to convince Congress to set aside Yosemite as a federally protected area in 1864 is often recounted, but the images played just as decisive a part in encouraging capital investments in mining, lumber, railroad, and real estate concerns. Watkins may be best known today for breathtaking scenes of nature, but through his work for corporate and industrial patrons, the photographer also created images that celebrate the transformation of the land by European-American business interests (Berger 2003, 13).

His photographs helped convince Congress to set aside land for National Parks and in doing so also contain within them a foreshadowing of the continuous contradictions of American environmentalism. Conservation creates the conditions for otherwise severely underregulated resource extraction. Watkin's photographs of Sequoias were primarily taken in Mariposa Grove (now known Calaveras Big Trees State Park). While the trees that initially inspired this research are Coastal Redwoods, I turn to representations Sequoias in a different part of the state. Their overwhelming similarities allow for a useful point of historical comparison for understanding the entanglements of grandeur, extraction, representation, and conservation that continue to frame how we see trees.

In May 1852, a hunter named A.T "Gus" Dowd was employed by a mining company to supply food for the workers. As the legendary story goes, while hunting he stumbled upon Mariposa Grove. In awe of what he saw, he convinced miners to trek back to the unbelievable trees he saw by claiming he had killed a bear too large to carry back to the camp on his own. With this encounter, he ushered the sensational Sequoias into a settler imaginary. Jared Farmer writes, "Giant sequoias entered public consciousness in the midst of the Gold Rush and the conquest of California. In the 1850s the discovery of gold, the disclosure of scenery, and the dispossession of native peoples—who of course already knew about the trees—happened in rapid, interrelated fashion" (Farmer 2017, 43). The trees quickly became imbued with monumental meanings of nationalism.

The question of how to represent these trees and make their scale fathomable was of immediate concern for this project of meaning making. As Daegan Miller writes, "these trees were seen as undoubtedly American the equivalents of the Egyptian pyramids and Roman ruins,

national monuments conferring the sort of ancient cultural capital that would allow the United States to hold its head high among other modern, civilized nations” (Miller 2018, 179). In order to make the trees visible, Indigenous populations had to become obscured. This process of erasure is not a metaphor but a description of violent colonial practices of genocidal removal and dispossession (Tuck, Yang 2012). One of the ways in which the meaning of the trees was claimed by settler culture was through a naming process. As Farmer writes, the “designations clustered around a few themes, starting with domesticity and gender.”(Farmer 2017, 43) Names included Faithful Couple, Old Maid and Three Graces. One such tree, the Discovery Tree, was cut down shortly after Dowd stumbled upon it by speculators participating in the emerging economy of spectacle of display exemplified by P.T Barnum. The remaining stump of 1,244-year tree was 25 feet in diameter and used as a dance floor, a literal stage for race, gender and class to be iteratively performed through a quickly established tourist economy.

While Watkins photographed many named trees, I will focus here on his images of The Mother of the Forest which he photographs 1865-66. The Sequoia was a 2520-year-old tree, about 328 feet tall. Its bark was systematically skinned over a 90-day period so that its form could be reconstructed for display. It was destroyed in order perform the abundance of the American frontier for the world. After being skinned, the bark was sent to be displayed at the World’s Fair, at the New York Crystal Palace in 1855, and the Great Exhibition in London Crystal Palace in 1856.



Carleton Watkins, *The Mother of the Forest*, albumen silver print from glass negative, 1865-66, printed ca. 1876, public domain courtesy of The Metropolitan Museum of Art

The scale of the Mother is immediately felt in this 1865-66 photograph (printed ca. 1876). It is as if the man at the base of the tree is performing as a prop for scale. While initially it reads as a testimony for the magnificence of the tree itself, it reveals itself to be documentation of destruction. Unlike other photographs of logging, where a massive cut surrounded sinisterly grins behind a line of men with axes and makes visceral the tree's destruction, this photograph requires knowledge of the tree and its context. Compared to another photograph, for instance a similarly framed image of the Grizzly, it becomes clearer this is a different type of photograph.

In the top left of the image, a piece of scaffolding juts down. In the Grizzly photograph, Watkin's photographs Galen Clark, an early conversationist who advocated for the legislation to protect Yosemite. Clark is framed by an organic vaginal like form at the base. The bark of the Grizzly stands in contrast the smooth and marked skin of the Mother. He is both enveloped by the tree and on guard as he stands holding a gun.

As Donna Haraway writes "... the camera and the gun together are conduits for the spiritual commerce of man and nature, how biography is woven into and from a social and political tissue" (Haraway 1984, 29-30). The camera and the gun as tools of the frontier shape individuals (as Haraway alludes to as biography), which in turn creates collectively understood (social and political tissue) ideas of a relationship to the landscape. In this instance, we see Watkins representing Galen in relation to these two tools of capture, the gun and the camera. In the case of the Grizzly, it as if the tree is birthing him and the early conservationist movement. Through these tools which mediated the settler relationship to the landscape, we can read the image of him in the Grizzly as one of rebirth on the frontier. Tragically and ironically, the tree named The Mother is literally barren. No longer functional as a giver of life, we see the damage caused by the desire to represent her

The bark of the Grizzly stands in contrast to the smooth and marked skin of the Mother. The tree is marked by both horizontal bands and strategic holes that testify to rods that were inserted into the trunk in order to support the scaffolding necessary for the process of skinning it of its bark. The inclusion of both the human and scaffolding the other image allows us to read as documentation the destructive desire to display the tree. Without assuming intent or claiming Watkins as an early environmentalist, we can nonetheless visualize the contradictions of representation and conservation at the moment these ideologies are beginning to crystalize.

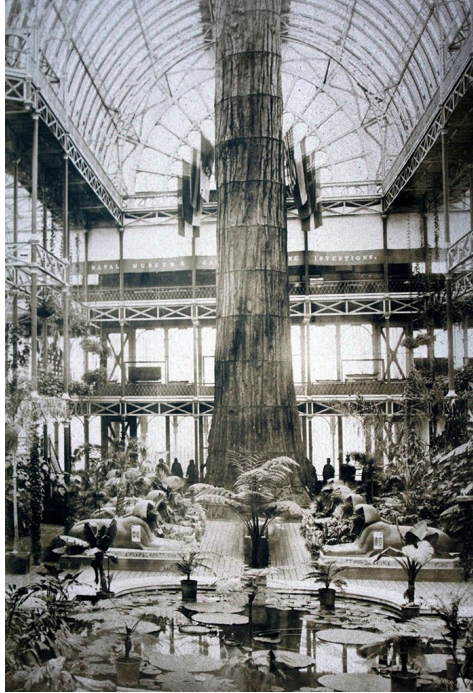


Carleton Watkins, *Section of the "Grizzly Giant"*, albumen silver print from glass negative, 1865-66, public domain courtesy of The Getty Institute

George Philip Lebourdais describes of the original books containing the Watkins prints of redwoods: "It seems fitting to conclude a luxurious publication, which features a veneer of redwood burl on its cover, with images of its material origins; wood is both materially present and photographically indexed. A kind of recursive quip connecting the world of the image and

the world of the viewer, this relation folds the layers of the tree into the leaves of the book.”(Stanford University Libraries 2014, 209) While logging practices were not driven by the rise of printing photographs on paper rather than glass, it nevertheless draws attention to the entanglement between extraction and representation that persists in the materiality of seeing. Shelter in Place created an over saturation of screen time which pushed me to look at where I was in new and enchanting ways, which I will return to in relationship to environmental politics later in the paper. It is important to note when considering the redwood forests today, mere 4% of old growth in California remain. They have become so saturated with symbolism that they must be siphoned off and framed by plaques and fences so as not to as confuse them as part of their surrounding ecosystems. As Thoreau wrote of Concord residents, “They love the soil which makes their graves but have no sympathy with the spirit which may still animate their clay” (Thoreau 1999, 241).

The entangled relationship between photography and conservation has been discussed by Elizabeth Hutchinson. Hutchinson writes, “By 1864, the Calaveras Grove had already been developed into a crass commercial wonderland where visitors could dance on a tree stump, ride horses through another fallen giant, and climb the scaffolding that entrepreneurs had erected in order to flay the bark of the ‘Mother of the Forest’ for display in the East. But while the Grizzly Giant was protected from such vulgar treatment, it was subjected to photography, which is, in its own way, a method of ‘skinning’” (Hutchinson 2004, 61). I argue that the photographs of the Mother, as compared to the Grizzly, demonstrate a present awareness of the relationship between representation and destruction in Watkin’s work. The photograph of the Mother creates visual evidence of this damage in situ.



Philip Henry Delamotte, *Crystal Palace*, 1859, public domain

Consider the differences in Watkins’ representation of the Mother, and its display at the Great Exhibition at the Crystal Palace. As Haraway writes, “Taxidermy was about a single story, about nature’s unity, the unblemished type specimen. Taxidermy became the art most suited to the epistemological and aesthetic stance of realism. The power of this stance is its magical effects: what is so painfully constructed appears effortlessly, spontaneously found, discovered, simply there is one will only look.” (Haraway 1984, 34) The taxidermic Mother was surrounded by Amazonian water lilies and other spectacular specimens. The display worked to “annihilate space and time” in the words of Karl Marx, rendering the process of collection and preservation invisible in order to present the whole world underneath a crystal dome. The colonial gaze spectacularized and made specimens out of the living (and skinned or taxidermic) beings on display in the Crystal Palace. Celeste Olalquiaga writes of the natural displays in the Crystal Palace, “Whereas it used to provide a model for understanding or organizing a certain sense of the world, now nature became an icon of itself, valid for representing the beauty of a supposedly

orderly and predictable phenomenon which humans could refer to for ontological orientation”(Olalquiaga 1998, 44). The framing device of conservation, in particular the formation of the National and State Parks, transforms nature into an icon of itself.

A Walden-like retreat is not possible in our neoliberal landscape, so we overcrowd the parks and beaches isolated in our fear, our rage and longing to be together when social distance protocols create further atomization of individuals from the collective body. While public spaces are saturated with people looking for solace in the limited social landscape of a global pandemic, paradoxically stories of animals reclaiming public spaces and emissions being curbed due to shelter in place orders proliferate. A debunked story of dolphins returning to the Venice Canals created a sense of optimism that quickly gave way to internet irony and a series of “The Earth is Healing; We are The Virus” parody memes. One iteration of this meme captions psychedelic rainbow Lisa Frank dolphins, “This photo of the Hudson River was taken yesterday. The earth is healing. We are the virus.” The meme captures the ways in which the story of the dolphins in the Venice Canal embodies the wishful thinking that a temporary slowdown in response to the pandemic could heal centuries of ecocide. This is part of a Walden-esque desire; a belief that immersion in the forest and river is a disruption to business-as-usual practices, such that a deeper relationship to the land that will help heal a landscape ravaged by extractive practices initiated during the Gold Rush.

Another meme in the genre shows a police car on fire with the caption “the earth is healing itself (prayer hand emoji).” It points humorously to the complex ways in which nature needs to be theorized in this current racial climate in which it is increasingly obvious that the police are a public health crisis. Kai Bosworth writes, “There might be little in the above memes that would define them as ‘environmentalism’ according to its conventional scenes and affects.

Yet the ‘nature is healing’ meme genre clearly accomplishes two tasks many environmentalists consider to be crucial: critiquing, at a cultural level, the supposed naturalness of everyday life, as well as the boundary between nature and human” (Bosworth 2021, 17). Institutional racism and structural inequalities shape the natural environment. Access to water, clean, air and space for leisure are racialized issues shaped by the historical forces of colonial genocide and the legacy of enslavement which continues to deeply shape the North American landscape. Practices of isolation and social distancing must be weighed against other life-threatening emergencies. The uprisings sparked by the police murder of George Floyd – who died on May 25, 2020, in Minneapolis, Minnesota, after a police officer knelt on his neck for over eight minutes – demonstrates the need to rethink isolation. The murder of Breonna Taylor on March 13, 2020, while she slept in her Louisville apartment makes clear that, for many people of color, self-isolating does not guarantee safety. Masked protestors rallied against police brutality across the United States. Protests led to the defunding of the Minneapolis Police, among other concrete and cultural changes ushered in by the uprisings.



Gregory Rick, *Bury My Heart at 38th and Chicago*, Painting on paper, 6 feet by 8 feet, 2020, courtesy of the artist

In a painting by Gregory Rick, a helicopter shines a thick yellow spotlight across a man's arm that is pointing to the 3rd Police Precinct in Minneapolis. In the other hand he holds a Molotov cocktail. Rendered in black and white, his arm penetrates the yellow light as it points towards its destination. A giant cop straddles the station glibly with his knee pressed down neck on George Floyd. Collage creates temporal holes in Rick's painting. An anthropological drawing of an Indigenous warrior with a spear is reclaimed from its colonial origins and punctures the police station so as to join protestors. His points in the same direction of that of the man throwing the cocktail directed at the officer. The collage bubbles float through the expressively painted scene of the station in flames, creating both a tonal and temporal rupture. A flamingo walks under the police helicopter and another one is pecked by a bird. The body of a jellyfish mirrors the glass bubble enclosure of a helicopter. The pilot is focused on the conflict on the

ground while the body of the sea creature floats past him. A photograph of Thoreau emerges from a green field that engulfs the street conflict between protestors and police. When I first viewed this painting, I did not immediately recognize the photograph looking back at me. I was moved by the artwork's urgency and determination. The collage elements create pause and connect the work to other moments in the history of struggle against the violence of the state. What is so striking is the inclusion of the animals, initially depicted as specimens, reanimated and repopulated the scene of uprising in solidarity. Thoreau caught my gaze like he did in the early days of Shelter in Place as I looked to the forest. Months later he reappears, this time in the streets.

An enchanted methodology led me to investigate how the landscape I see every day was shaped by historical forces. Through my investigation of representation of the land, I am able to better understand the complexity of ecology as an intersectional political issue. I return to the Trader Joe's parking lot along River Street. Now, walking along the San Lorenzo, I co-lead a walking tour on Abolition Ecology. Guided by enchantment, the political issues surrounding the landscape emerged in stark relief. Abolition Ecology walking tours are a project in which identify the effects of policing, the prison industrial complex and surveillance in the material landscape and contextualize this in relation to capitalist exploitation of the planet's ecosystems. With comrades, we identify points of convergence between carceral capitalism and ecological destruction, working to imagine an ecologically flourishing horizon beyond the police state.ⁱⁱ The notion of "abolition ecology" is inspired by the work of prison abolitionist Ruth Wilson Gilmore. She states: "abolition has to be 'green.' It must take seriously the problem of environmental harm, environmental racism, and environmental degradation. To be 'green' it must be 'red.' It must figure out ways to generalize the resources needed for well-being for the most vulnerable

people in our community, which then will extend to all people.” (Intercepted 2021) To be red and green points to the work of Red Nation, who theorize “red” as both indigenous and socialist. In their 2020 pamphlet, “Communism is The Horizon, Indigenous Feminism is the Way,” Red Nation writes, “Communism is our past and our horizon. Indigenous people have always been communists. We call for communism in our prayers because communism is our rightful relation with the earth. When we hear “from the bottom up,” we think of liberation achieved from reflecting on the experiences of life from the grassroots to the next world—literally that which emerges from below the earth and grows upward to greet the sun” (Editorial Council 2020, blog). This walking tour of the San Lorenzo River began at the San Lorenzo Mission – the formative site of incarceration and changing ecology, the legacy continues to shape the landscape. In this tour, we discuss the histories of lime mining, tanneries, and logging, all impacting San Lorenzo River ecosystems, and on-going racialized displacements, houselessness, and securitized development in Santa Cruz.

The early settler representations of California’s abundant and magnificent ecology, such as those of Carleton Watkins, provide critical insight into how colonialism and extraction frame what I see when I look at a tree. The San Lorenzo River allowed me to compose an archive of re-enchantment as the environment around me became animated by the stillness of the pandemic. The uprisings surrounding the police murders of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor demonstrate how we must find new forms of collectivity and more complicated understandings of the environment. It is here that we can also see the twin legacies of Thoreauvian thought bringing together civil disobedience and living deliberately in the company of trees. In order to meet the challenges of the current crisis, this remaining strong hold of this legacy must make space for an expansive collectivity- one that is attentive to non-human comradeship as much as it is the need

to find safe ways to take to streets. A re-enchanted methodology is not always an ecstatic one, although it can be. Like a double-edged sword, it points simultaneously back to past histories of displacement and extraction and future possibilities of abolitionist ecology. Enchantment cuts both ways.



San Lorenzo River, photograph by author, 2020

About the Author

Martabel Wasserman is a PhD candidate in Art and Art History at Stanford University. She received her MFA from University of California Irvine and a BA from Harvard University. She currently lives and works in Santa Cruz and has an interdisciplinary practice at the intersections of art making, activism and academic research. She has exhibited at Gracie Mansion Gallery in New York City, Human Resources in Los Angeles, and AS220 in Providence, among other spaces. Past curatorial projects include *Fire in Her Belly* at Maloney Fine Art, *Queer / Art / Film*, *LA and Coastal /Border* as part of Pacific Standard Time LA/LA. Publications include work in *Atlántica Journal of Art and Thought*, *Yes Femmes*, *Jewish Currents* and the *Journal of Aesthetics and Protest*. This essay catalyzed a larger project about the history of redwoods and photography through the 1960s.

ⁱ The river as composer references a collaborative art project along the San Lorenzo River, *The River Composes Us in Concert Together*, <https://www.santacruzmah.org/events/multispecies-tribunals/2020/10/03>

ⁱⁱThis was collectively conceived with the Ecosocialist Working Group of Democratic Socialists of America, Santa Cruz, see our video <https://abolitious.org/abolition-ecology/>

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