

Carolina Caycedo
***La Siembra* –
The Sowing**

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Eudicot navy bean, *Phaseolus vulgaris*, germination from seed to seedling, showing roots, cotyledons, and first true leaves. Photo: B. Domangue. License: CC BY-SA 4.0.

La siembra, or “the sowing,” is an expression used by communities in Latin America when one of their members, leaders, or elders is killed for their activism in defense of territory, water, or life. They refer to the violent act of killing as the sowing, in order to turn around their loss and understand it through the abundance of the legacy it leaves. The murder of an activist sows a legacy, because the person who is buried – planted, in a manner of speaking – becomes a seed for the ongoing political and organizational processes of the community. The person who is sown is part of a resistance that takes place on all levels of life, including on the level of language. The appropriation of language in ways such as this is a vital part of the perpetuation of life, a means of cultural survival, especially within Indigenous contexts where local languages are endangered. This conversion of meaning through language requires political and poetic sophistication, as well as richness of spirit. Use of this word overcomes the terror imposed upon the community and directs the death of a beloved leader toward a process of collective strengthening and healing.

One could say that the sowing creates coherence, a union between thinking and doing. Different Colombian Indigenous groups, such as the Nasa, call this *caminar la palabra*, or “walking the word,” where each step of the resistance represents an action that defines an idea. Walking the word is a concept-practice with a long history, and is one of the fundamental ways of framing community organization among the Colombian *mingas*, or activist mobilizations.¹ The Public Program of UNAM’s Third Biennial of Arts and Design (2022) defines walking the word as “a doing-thinking that involves knowledge of and connections with nature, as well as constant

negotiations between all those involved when it comes to the needs of the community, from its daily life to social and political problems.”²

The Chilean artist Cecilia Vicuña includes the concept of the sowing in her series of “PALABRARmas,” a term that combines the Spanish words for “word” (*palabra*), “till” (*labrar*), “weapon” (*arma*), and “more” (*más*).³ Vicuña’s PALABRARmas pieces are monochromatic drawings on paper that include anagrams, as well as colorful appliqué banners and wearable paper collages. She has also made a series of performances and a film involving dancing that reflects the wordplay of “PALABRARmas.” Vicuña coined this portmanteau to conjure the power of words through their poetic and subversive potential. In this series, words operate as concrete poems, images in and of themselves, political slogans, or calls to action. According to the PALABRARmas (1984) entry in the Chilean Memory section of the National Library of Chile, “Vicuña explains that working with words is like working the land, a ‘working’ plus a ‘thinking.’ The work arms the speaker with the vision of the words and the words become weapons, perhaps the only acceptable ones.”

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Cecilia Vicuña, *Siembra: decirle sí a la hembra* (Sowing Is Yes To Female), from the series “AMAZone Palabrarmas,” 1978. Courtesy of Cecilia Vicuña.

Framing sowing as resistance reflects the importance of the knowledge and the work of tilling and harvesting the land to produce one’s own food. It also suggests that the caring practices required for providing healthy nutrition are correlated with those of seed ownership, the conservation of common goods, and collective work. Common goods not only take the form of rivers, forests, animals, minerals, and crops, but also the knowledge and agriculture tools that have been inherited and accumulated across generations and which serve as underpinnings

for political autonomy, food sovereignty, and environmental balance. The cycles of growing and knowledge transmission are known as agroecology.

According to the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), agroecology is a scientific discipline that studies how the different components of an agricultural ecosystem interact. Furthermore, agroecology includes a set of practices aiming to create viable agricultural systems that can optimize and stabilize production without harming the environment. It is also a social movement that proposes multifunctional roles for agriculture, promotes social justice, nurtures identity and culture, and strengthens the economic viability of rural areas.⁴ When it comes to the sowing, the act of appropriating the death (violent or otherwise) of a community member in this way could be called part of an agroecological practice on both a political and literal level, because the final resting place of this person is under the earth. This drives home the concept of death as a space for cultivation which provides the grounds for regeneration. It is also an exercise in historical memory where renaming death becomes a first step towards breaking the cycle of violence.

Unfortunately, and despite the resilience and political imagination of the communities that care for the common good, the number of murders of those defending nature increases every year, and Latin America is the most dangerous place in the world for environmentalists. It is no coincidence that Latin America holds 20 percent of global oil and gas reserves, as well as much of the world’s mining wealth, including minerals used in energy transmission like lithium and cobalt. It also has large bodies of water in the form of mighty rivers, swamps, wetlands, and aquifers. According to Global Witness, more than half of the 227 murders committed against environmental leaders in 2020 took place in just three countries: Colombia, Mexico, and the Philippines. A third of the total global crimes were committed against Indigenous people and those of African descent, and nearly half were against people dedicated to working the land. As if that were not enough, Global Witness affirms that “these lethal attacks are taking place in the context of a wider range of threats against defenders including intimidation, surveillance, sexual violence, and criminalization. Our figures are almost certainly an underestimate, with many attacks against defenders going unreported.”⁵

Through my art practice, I have been fortunate to connect with and learn from rural and Indigenous communities in different regions

of the Americas, primarily those resisting the damming, privatization, and poisoning of their waters. I have witnessed harassment and dispossession as well as resistance, and I have come to realize how the extractive economy operates violently against both nature and the bodies of community members. Damming, channeling, diverting, or otherwise transferring a river not only interrupts the flow of water and the reproductive cycles that depend on it, but also mutilates the connection that the river has with other bodies of water as well as the relationship the community has with that river and the other communities it connects with through those same currents. This is essentially a privatization of a common good that threatens the sovereign and dignified life of peoples as well as the right to clean water, which is indispensable for health – for life itself.

03/05



View of Acueducto Independencia in Sonora, Mexico.
Image: <https://ecoosfera.com/evolucion/mas-de-70-organizaciones-reiteran-porque-es-ilegal-el-acueducto-independencia-en-mexico/>.

This is why it is so important to understand that violence against nature goes hand in hand with violence against environmentalist communities. In its report titled “The Last Line of Defense” (2021), Global Witness provides the statistics on murders of environmentalists as one more climate metric to go along with more commonly recognized data like the extinction of species, the melting of polar ice caps, forest fires, and rising ocean temperatures, because the truths about violence against environmental activists mirror what we know about the climate crisis: the impact it has is unequal, big business is responsible, and governments do nothing to prevent it.⁶ Governments and corporations need to change their colonial and extractive practices, as the Indigenous activist Vanda Witoto invites us to do in a post on her Instagram feed:

The world looks at the Amazon via satellite, it looks at the Amazon from above, and it only sees the greenery, the beauty of the rivers. It doesn’t see the people who live here. To protect trees and rivers, you need to take care of the people who protect trees and rivers. Nobody is taking care of them. We need to reverse our focus, because the lives of these people are more important; they are the ones who keep the forest standing and they are the ones who protect the rivers, beginning with this way of life, with this respect for nature ... We understand that we are a part, we are her.⁷

I have been fortunate enough to cultivate and spread the word together with defenders and caretakers of water in many special places in the Americas, from the peat bogs in the Selk’nam lands of Karukinka in Tierra del Fuego, to the Somi Sek village in Texas, to the mouth of the Elwha River in Klallam tribal territory on the Olympic Peninsula of the Pacific Northwest. During this process, I have learned one particular lesson – *namakasia* – which stirs in me an immense amount of courage, in both senses of the word: “*cour*,” from the Latin word for heart, as well as the second part of the word, “*rage*.” “*Namakasia*” means both “ever strong” as well as “ever forward” in the Yaqui language. It is a tribal cry of encouragement, a collective call to never give up. *Namakasia* is both firm and tender, a call to transform pain into the dignified rage that mobilizes us.

The person who transmitted this knowledge to me, Tomás Rojo Valencia, was sown in Sonora, Mexico, in June of 2021. His sowing caused a brutal pain in the community. I met Tomás in 2014 when I invited him to lead a workshop in Mexico City that would make connections between the struggles over water in Mexico and Colombia. As a spokesman and leader of the Yaqui tribe, Tomás was opposed to the Independencia Aqueduct, a public infrastructure project endorsed by the regional government of Sonora and by the Mexican state and which – without the prior consent of the affected communities – transfers water from the Yaqui River to the city of Hermosillo to meet the demands of private industries including bottlers, brewers, and aluminum foundries, among many others.⁸ The aqueduct reduces the flow of water to such a degree that, in passing through the eight traditional Yaqui towns, the river runs dry at the mouth, resulting in a shortage of water for both domestic consumption and irrigating crops. Tomás worked hand in hand with the Citizen Movement for the Defense of Water, made up of Yaqui farmers from the town of Vícam, to demand that the government respect the rights

stipulated in a 1940 resolution allowing the Yaqui “to have, each agricultural year, up to half of the flow retained by the La Angostura dam, for the purposes of irrigating their own lands.”⁹

Carolina Caycedo is a visual artist who contributes to the construction of environmental historical memory as a fundamental element in the non-repetition of violence. She is currently a nominee for the Artes Mundi 10 prize.



Carolina Caycedo, *La Siembra* (The Sowing), view of tree planting, Union Settlement, New York, 2022.

Tomás understood that the transfer of water violated the rights of the Yaqui tribe, while also endangering the biocultural diversity of the river basin. He fought for the sovereignty of his people, for his river, for his ancestral plants and animals, for his sacred mountains, for the Sonoran Desert. His pacifist tactics, such as placing blockades and tolls on Mexican Federal Highway 15, which cuts through native Yaqui territory, resulted in an endless litany of threats. Tomás conveyed *namakasia* through his gaze and his steadfast, embodied determination to work alongside the tribal people. He contributed to the entire tribe’s sense of resilience by calling for collective action in the face of adversity, assembling it into a legitimate, legal, and nonviolent defense of their common interests and fundamental rights. Like the sowing, *namakasia* is an expression of linguistic and cultural resistance, of a self-affirmative, alternative, and peaceful nature, one in which conflict resolution is carried out according to a communal, tribal practice and worldview.¹⁰

If people control their own food, they can control their future. And in order to control food, communities need guaranteed access to clean and living waters. So my invitation is this: to accompany this verbal resistance, to walk and cultivate the word, to work as a collective, interweaving words and roots to imagine and build a world where many worlds are possible, a pluriverse, together with the people who have been sown and those currently in the fight. Ever strong and ever forward, *namakasia*!

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Translated from the Spanish by Ezra E. Fitz.

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1

"Minga" comes from the Quechua word "*minka*," which alludes, in this language native to the Peruvian Andes, to an old tradition of collective work for the benefit of society as a whole and the quality of life within it. In the Colombian context, marches, protests, and mobilizations seeking the vindication of rights are known as "*mingas*."

2

See
https://bienal.unam.mx/caminar_la_palabra/#:~:text=Caminar%20la%20palabra%20es%20entre,%20de%20lo%20no%20dicho.

3

Vicuña spells the Spanish word "*siembra*" as "*Si(h)embra*." The reason, as she herself explains, is that "'*siembra*' means 'please plant.' But if you open it up, it means '*sí, hembra*.' It is saying, 'yes, woman.' So to plant is to say yes to the feminine, to the life force of this earth."

4

See
<https://www.fao.org/agroecology/overview/en/>.

5

See
<https://www.globalwitness.org/en/campaigns/environmental-activists/last-line-defence/>.

6

See
<https://www.globalwitness.org/en/campaigns/environmental-activists/last-line-defence/>.

7

See
https://www.instagram.com/reel/CcoFj0J12V/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link.

8

These alliances between public and private powers that openly flout law, science, and ethics in order to make water into a commodity are known as "hygrocracies."

9

"22 October. Resolution definitively and specifically titling the location of the land restored to the Yaqui tribe in the state of Sonora, Mexico," *Official Journal of the Federation* (Mexico), 1940.

10

Enrique Francisco Pasillas Pineda, "Námakasia o firmeza: Hacer las paces desde la experiencia de la tribu Yaqui" (Namakasia or firmness: Making peace from the experience of the Yaqui tribe) (PhD diss., University of Granada, 2018)
https://www.researchgate.net/publication/329727213_Namakasia_o_firmeza_Hacer_las_paces_desde_la_experiencia_de_la_tribu_Yaqui.