

COLLOQUIUM AMAZON'S RISING VIOLENCE AND DISTURBING TRENDS

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<https://www.agrocultures.org/results-of-the-5th-workshop-in-oxford-31-jan-02-feb-2020/>

Roundtable 2: Reactions and Perspectives (moderator: Paul Little)

DEAD WATER – DEVELOPMENT, LOSSES AND SENSIBILITIES

Presentation by Dr Marilene Ribeiro

Good morning everyone and thank the Agrocultures team for the opportunity of learning from these strong and inspiring people and also for this outstanding event – which I consider that represents a landmark in the struggle in and for the Amazon.

Today I will be talking about the immateriality of the losses that are consequences of the widely debated megaprojects for “development”. I will be talking about things that cannot be easily measured or presented in charts and tables, I will be talking about ways in which these things could be noted and, foremost, considered. I will be talking about Development, Losses and Sensibilities and how the work Dead Water has delved into these subjects.

I will first contextualise the work I will present today so that we can all absorb and reflect on the points it tackles in a better way.

As a consequence of the pressure of the international market, aligned with historical alliances between political parties and infrastructure companies, Brazil, like many other countries, has been facing an aggressive policy for expansion in hydropower plants despite the arguments of social movements, anthropologists and biologists concerning the loss of wild species habitats, impoverishment of local dwellers, and dismantlement of traditional cultures these dam projects have caused. Importantly, regardless of the country, decision makers and the dam industry have imposed hydropower plants upon traditional communities that have lived by the riverside for generations. This has been a silenced conflict that takes place everyday and it is veiled by the widely spread propaganda of hydroelectricity as the ‘green’ and ‘sustainable’ energy source that may save us from global warming. It is important to note that, up until now, the building of dams has impoverished over 400 million

people, destroyed much freshwater living systems, and fragmented virtually all river basins in the world.

Back in 2011, when the Belo Monte hydro project was officially announced to take place on the Xingu River, in Eastern Amazonia, I decided that I should take action and *Dead Water* is my response to this scenario. I wanted others to know what is involved in the process of damming a river. I wanted to disclose, to unravel, to surface the negative consequences of these interventions on watercourses, or to make these consequences more "visible" to the eyes of the others, as these costs seemed to me to be undermined when confronted to the big discourses of progress, development, and the financial benefits of hydropower.

It made sense to me to explore the act of damming a river through the experiences of those who I consider the most appropriate ones to speak about this subject: riverside dwellers. Supported by the Movement of People Affected by Dams (MAB), I invited individuals who were affected by the construction of the Belo Monte dam (and also dwellers who had been or would be displaced by other hydro projects in other regions of Brazil) to tell me about their lives by the river and their experiences concerning the hydropower scheme so that we could work together in a visual work that would chronicle these stories. So, *Dead Water* is a visual narrative that aims to tell the story of dams and hydropower from the perspectives of the people who have been affected by these ventures in Brazil stitched together with my own background as a trained photographer, ecologist, and individual.

One of the participants of this project was Maria Rosa, who was born and bred by the Xingu River, in an area known as Palhau – area that lately became the main reservoir of the Belo Monte hydropower complex. During my stay with Maria Rosa, she and her husband, Jaime, detailed their memories and thoughts concerning what they had witnessed since the Belo Monte dam project was announced. As the interview was done, I asked Maria Rosa if she happened to have any image to show me which depicted the Xingu River and her former place of living or the everyday life there before the dam. She said she had some images she recorded with her mobile. As I opened Maria Rosa's files, I realized she had actually used image making as a channel to pour her anguishes and thoughts. The images made by Maria Rosa are altogether records, memories, catharsis, protest, indignation, and love letters addressed to her homeland – in other words, they embody what constitutes her self. Maria Rosa systematically documents not only the losses involved in the process of damming a river but also the inherent value of everything that hydropower projects usurp. The tensions revealed by Maria Rosa resonate the feelings of oppression, anguish and violation exposed by every individual that has worked together with me in the *Dead Water* project. I shall describe Maria Rosa's visceral labour as a sensitive

record of the immateriality of the losses and of the magnitude of the impacts dams cause.

I shall leave you Maria Rosa and her visual testimony for a while before I finish my talk responding to the question this colloquium has invited us to engage with: "what could be done to promote social and environmental justice?". It consists of a 10-minute video which is part of the work *Dead Water*. It is a chronological assemblage I made of her footage along with some highlights of our encounter, what I believe will contribute to the understanding of the breadth of the damage dams have caused on ecosystems, people and other living beings.

SCREENING OF THE VIDEO

So, "what could be done to promote social and environmental justice?". This is my humble contribution to this quite complex question: from what I have learnt from my previous studies in Ecology and Brazilian Environmental Law, from my observations and reflections when in my fieldworks, and, foremost, from the experiences I have exchanged with riverine people (and I understand that this denomination I use here, "riverine people", applies to everyone who lives in the Amazon, as the Amazon's foundation is the watercourse), I have thought about some "fronts" that should work concomitantly and in synergy in our efforts to promote social and environmental justice. For this occasion, I will concentrate on citing three of them:

1) We need to engage in making those who are far from (either spatially/geographically, socially, or temporally far from) natural phenomena, ecological processes, and far from the consequences of human pernicious activities perceive the uniqueness and relevance of these things. We also need to engage in making these individuals acknowledge the rights of the other person and the rights of Nature to thrive. Being aware of (and being empathetic to) is always the very first step that leads to change - in a small and also in a bigger scale. I understand that this is one of the aims of Davi Kopenawa, Raoni, Megaron, Joênia and Dário here in this Colloquium. And this is what environmental education programmes have been engaged in doing and what gatherings of indigenous peoples, social movements and charities/NGOs (like MAB, ISA, CIMI, and Xingu Vivo) have been doing in local communities with regard to the dismantlement caused by hydropower projects. And this is also what the caravan "Mensajeras por un Ecuador Libre de Minería" was doing until last week throughout Ecuador: visiting local communities from North to South to tell them what these women have personally experienced with regard to mining activities in their homes, to also welcome these communities to talk about their

stories, their concerns and wishes for their future too, and to gather this people so that, united and aware of the threats, they become stronger to be able to fight the groups that are advancing towards their territories, looking for gold and copper (apart from oil). I think we need to move this first "front" forward.

2) We need to get involved in politics. And I take the word politics here in its two more, let's say, primitive meanings: the negotiation between people and the negotiation of power. We need to demand a system in which we, ordinary citizens, have the power to interfere more in the laws, a system in which we, ordinary citizens, are also entitled to change laws as they become out-dated, as they fail in protecting what needs to be protected and cherished or as they fail in safeguarding those who are more vulnerable or those that cannot speak for themselves, like rivers and animals, or as these laws start favouring too little at the cost of too many. I take as example the gathering that happened in Piraçu¹ this January, the Letter of Oxford we are putting together and countersigning here, the collective mandate Joênia has showed us on Friday (way of working that I consider that should be imperative in every MP mandate) and as another example districts in Ecuador that run *comunas*, which consist of gatherings of individuals from local communities to debate issues and work on agreements; in these gatherings laws can be discussed, proposed and even come into force, if agreed – I will let those in the audience who have a better experience in regard to this subject to contribute to the debate, if appropriate. It also involves advocating for public consultations to happen for real and, in the cases they come to happen, that they stop being treated by entrepreneurs and decision-makers as just a protocol to be ticked within the process of getting a license for operation.

3) And lastly, I consider we are now living in an era in which scientists, researchers, people who have been honestly and seriously committed in producing knowledge above (and regardless of) the interests of political parties and the greed of the market, must adventure ourselves in a bigger landscape, closer to the general public (and I am glad we are all working towards this here in a daily basis and especially on these four days of the Colloquium). We can no longer accept this imposition of the system and enclose ourselves within the borders of our offices, of high impact peer-reviewed publications, of academia. We need to populate the public space, we need to make our findings, data, rationale, thoughts and reflections accessible to the

¹ In Capoto Jarina Indigenous Land and gathered 600 individuals from 45 different ethnic groups: culminating with the Piraçu Manifesto. [https://www.socioambiental.org/sites/blog.socioambiental.org/files/nsa/arquivos/manifesto_do_piracu_jan_2020.pdf]

public and make the ordinary citizen comfortable enough to absorb, learn from and "apply" our researches, and work along with us in our journeys for a better world – and I need to acknowledge here the initiative of Brazilian scientists *Coalizão Ciência e Sociedade*². This time we are living now also demands us to not only be empathetic to the other, to social movements and NGOs but to also embrace these initiatives and get them to embrace us as allies in this struggle as well. We need to work together (regarding this, I acknowledge again as extremely important this gathering we are having here and the Letter of Oxford, which is one of its outcomes). We need to contribute as much as we can to each other. Because the system that operates throughout this planet - so far understood as capitalism, it gathers forces from different fronts, it knows how to gather players to strengthen and contribute to its engine; therefore, to contribute to its own perpetuation.

I will finish with the reflections of Juma Xipaia (leader of the Tukamã indigenous community, which is within the Xipaya Indigenous Land, in the Xingu River basin), back in 2016:

"[...] when I began to understand, to participate in all this, I saw: the Amazon, it was 'forgotten' purposely: it is being stored for future uses! And it is not going to be used for our interest but for the interest of a small group, the interest of a government that does not respect and that has never respected the true owners and inhabitants of this land, us, the indigenous peoples. And today, we are not just on the front line, we want to participate, we are participating in the discussions, we want to make proposals as well, because we, as many think, like some of the ministers, like the government, think that we hamper the government, that we hinder development, on the contrary, we do not have to destroy our nature to consume, we do not have to kill our mother to continue living, we live in harmony with her, we live according to what she gives us and we lived so well that we are alive to this day. So, we work in harmony and respecting each other's space. There is no need to deforest or kill or relocate or end people's identity, people's life, the history of a whole people to develop, and we understand this very well. We do not accept this inhuman process that the government has conducted until now, we believe, and do, and work in a way that respects each other's space and, especially, nature."

² *Coalizão Ciência e Sociedade*, of which 72 scientists from different fields and also from different regions of Brazil, from North to South, are members. This platform aims to provide the general public with free access information that is based on high-standard scientific methods. [<http://cienciasociedade.org>]