“This is not a river anymore”

Rights of nature and life in ruins along El Río Monjas

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Abstract

My main findings revolve around the impact of granting legal personhood to El Río Monjas - a polluted river - on the residents of La Esperanza in Quito, Ecuador. Existing research in the rights of nature discourse has primarily centered around marginalized groups' resistance for nature's rights, with limited exploration of the consequences and implications of realizing these rights for daily life. This study fills this gap by examining how the realization of these rights shapes the lives of La Esperanza's residents. The relationship between the residents, the river, and the municipality has undergone significant changes. Processes of truth-production and problematization (Foucault 1980; Li 2007) have turned the river into a legal political tool, shaping the perception of the river's contamination, creating misconceptions about the residents. Different stakeholders exploit the river for their own purposes, leaving those without resources voiceless. For the residents, El Río Monjas its vibrant materiality (Bennett 2010) has changed from a source of life into a monster, a ruinous vibrancy (Wilhelm-Solomon 2017). The river symbolizing ruination (Stoler 2008) caused by the government's lack of support. The art of unnoticing (Lou 2022) and salvage rhythms allow the residents to survive amidst the ruins (Tsing 2010) of La Esperanza.

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Let us continue exploring unknown paths without forgetting from which rhizome we have grown.

Vivamos otras mil vidas.

Liefs, un abrazo,
Mariska

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Glossary

Below is a list of frequently used Spanish words in this thesis, along with their translations. Translations also provided at the first mention in each chapter, in-text or in footnote.

Cuidate: Take care (of yourself)

Embaulamiento: The Spanish term used to describe a concrete tunnel through which the river passes. This tunnel was constructed to allow for land filling on top, and is currently constructed through the city, up until La Esperanza.

EPMAPS: Municipal water management company of Quito

EPMMOP: The Metropolitan Public Company for Mobility and Public Works

Hermana: Sister – In this thesis referring to the sister of Sarina.

Invasores: invaders

Quebrada: Spanish name given to a ravine, typically dry or almost dry, which experiences a sudden surge of water during rainfall.

Tía: aunt – In this thesis referring to the aunt of Sarina.

Vecinos: neighbors – In this thesis referring to the inhabitants of La Esperanza.

Introduction

El Río Monjas está enfermo. (The Monjas river is sick.) (El Río Monjas, 127).

The belief that nature should be granted rights is spreading around the world. Such rights would aim to solve anthropogenic catastrophes, which are negatively affecting all other forms of life on the planet and beyond. In September 2008, Ecuador became the first country on earth to imbed the rights of nature in its constitution (Boyd 2017). Since then, numerous countries around the earth are joining Ecuador in the acknowledgement that non-human nature has the same right to live a healthy life as humans do. Examples include: Bolivia granting rights to Mother Earth in 2009 (Boyd, 2017), the Whanganui River in New Zealand receiving legal rights (Salmond, 2014), and Bangladesh granting legal rights to all of its rivers (O'Donnell et al. 2020). These legal changes serve as a prime illustration for numerous environmental groups around the world. One of such groups in my home country of the Netherlands is Maas Cleanup. This organization primarily organizes events in which volunteers clean up the Maas River, but has recently also shifted to advocating for legal rights to be granted to the Maas River (van Kesteren 2022).

Rights of nature seem to provide a shift from an anthropocentric to an ecocentric perspective, critiquing anthropocentrism in many environmental protection legislations. Nonetheless, we are still living in the Anthropocene; humans have been, and remain, the dominant geological force driving the ecocrisis (Crutzen 2000). We should note that simply granting legal rights to nature does not necessarily result in actually safeguarding nature. Thus, these rights should not be idealized as a one-stop solution to protecting the other-than-human world from homo sapiens' destructive activities. Exemplary of this phenomenon is the river El Río Monjas, its once characteristic blue color has been replaced with dark colors from pollution.

In February 2023, the Constitutional Court of Ecuador ruled that the Municipality of Quito has violated the rights of El Río Monjas through pollution; the river is sick (El Río Monjas, 127).

In response to rapid urban expansion in Quito since the year 2000, the municipal planning and control of settlements established emergency measures to provide livable conditions for its residents, often neglecting consideration of future environmental and social consequences in the process (Romero 2022). This has affected El Río Monjas and all life around her in several ways. For decades the river has been receiving excessive inflows of rainwater and untreated domestic and industrial sewage, having caused the water level to surpass the river's natural capacity. The overflows have led to erosion of the riverbed, widening the channel in certain parts from 7 to 30 meters. Consequently, houses situated near the riverbanks have been adversely affected, with some collapsing and others sustaining damage, leaving them in constant jeopardy. As a response, the court ruling has mandated the prevention of further violations and the rehabilitation of the river and the ecosystem to which it belongs (EL Río Monjas 2022).

In light of these new legal rulings, it is essential to examine their practical implementation and whether these are of tangible impact on the affected area, the humans and other-than-humans that inhabit it. Primary focus of anthropologists (de la Cadena 2010; 2019, Escobar 2020) has been on resistance by marginalized groups for nature's rights while limited research has been conducted to examine the implications and consequences that arise once these rights have been realized, specifically in terms of how they shape the daily lives of both humans and other-than-human involved. I will fill the gap in understanding of the implications of nature's rights by raises questions about the practical implementation of the power dynamics at play when legal recognition is granted to the natural world. To contribute to this existing body of research, this paper seeks to explore and comprehend the potential shifts in relationships, governance systems, and the overall well-being of all beings involved in these rights-based

approaches. To examine what the recognition that nature has right does on-the-ground, it is crucial to explore the personal experiences of those individuals who directly engage with the river and its associated rights. Given that La Esperanza, a neighborhood along the Río Monjas, has been significantly affected by the alterations to the river and the shifts in the legal landscape, my research will center on its residents and their livelihoods. I ask:

> *Given that El Río Monjas has been granted legal personhood, how do the people of La Esperanza perceive and navigate their lives amidst the river's pollution?*

In answering this question, this thesis will demonstrate the limitations of the rights of nature framework by highlighting the persisting legal and social injustices it upholds. The predominant utilization of the river as a legal tool illustrates how the legal changes primarily serve human interests and aspirations rather than prioritizing the well-being of El Río Monjas. Implementation of these rights has neglected the livelihoods of marginalized communities residing in close proximity to the river, leading to adverse impacts. Despite the threatening circumstances, life continues to flourish in La Esperanza.

Exploring the impact of granting legal personhood to a river

Rights of nature

Should Trees Have Standing? was the pioneering academic work on the rights of nature by legal scholar Christopher Stone (1972). Stone has been influential in the academic debate on rights for other-than-human beings, by arguing for the recognition of the inherent value of the natural world beyond their instrumental use to humans, and advocating for giving nature a legal voice. He believed that by the granting of legal standing to nature, it would be able to guard its ecological health, independent of human interests. Stone contends that by granting legal

standing to Earth's ecosystems, it becomes possible to advocate for their interests and include them in decision-making processes, ultimately fostering a more sustainable and equitable relationship between humans and the natural world. If we look at the legal personhood of El Río Monjas in the manner Stone described, it should ultimately be about acknowledging her intrinsic worth and ensuring its well-being, rather than solely benefiting the existing rights-holders. This would challenge the hegemonic western concept of nature, in which humans are subordinate to their surroundings (Ingold 2000).

However, Stone's view was hardly a new idea; Indigenous knowledge practices and cosmologies have long been built on refuting a division between human and nature, emphasizing the interconnectedness and interdependence of humans and their environment; considering humans as a part of a larger web of life, emphasizing the responsibilities of mutual care. Because of what Arturo Escobar (2004) calls *imperial globality*, Indigenous worldviews have been excluded from the political domain and marginalized as subordinate to Western modernity and its dominant knowledge systems. The legal transformations witnessed in recent years are deeply intertwined with Indigenous cosmologies and would not have been possible without the guidance and leadership of specific Indigenous communities. (O'Donnell et al. 2020). It is equally important to avoid romanticizing Indigenous interests in and responsibility for environmental care (Li 2013; Whatmore 2013). In general, I will show in this research that it is crucial not to idealize the interests of any stakeholders involved in rights of nature processes.

Legal personhood to nature has particularly sparked recent research within the field of anthropology, perceived to be a means of practicing *cosmopolitics*, in which other-than-humans are included in political considerations (de la Cadena 2010). Such research has highlighted the potential for a pluriversal politics, in which multiple perspectives and worldviews can coexistence within a shared political framework (De La Cadena 2010, 2019; Blaser and de la

Cadena 2018). I will contribute to this tradition of research by living in La Esperanza with the notion that there are multiple realities to be discovered around El Río Monjas. This means I will look into the degree to which *the pluriverse* has been realized. Pluriverse being defined as "a world in which many worlds might fit*"* (Escobar 2020, 26); a world in which social and political communities can live together and in which political discourses go beyond hegemonic forms.

In Ecuador, the country of my research location, Indigenous cosmologies are part of the country's constitution. Given that the rights of nature are based on 'Sumak kawsay', an Indigenous concept, roughly translates as "good living" or, "harmonious coexistence," between people and nature (Boyd 2017), I wonder: does harmony between humans and their environment truly exists within the rights of nature framework in the case of El Río Monjas?

As rights of nature cases are based on Indigenous belief systems, anthropologists such as de La Cadena (2010; 2019), Escobar (2016; 2020), Kohn (2007) have mainly focused on the involvement of Indigenous communities within such legal changes. However, in the case of El Río Monjas, Indigenous cosmologies were invoked for the river's verdict, even though Indigenous peoples were not involved in the decision-making process. Interestingly, the plaintiffs involved in the case do not prioritize transcending the divide between nature and culture. While this paper does not directly examine cosmologies, it is important to acknowledge their influence in shaping the rights of nature discourse discussed in this research. By recognizing the role of cosmologies, we are reminded by the values and beliefs the rights of nature stem from and can gain insight into how these belief systems are appropriated and utilized by non-indigenous groups in the context of nature's rights.

The power of truth

It is crucial to critically examine the processes by which non-human entities are molded into political subjects and the resulting consequences for humans and nonhumans when assessing the efficacy of recognizing non-human entities as legal entities within political frameworks.

In his lecture on governmentality, Michel Foucault (1980) describes how governmental practices shape people towards particular behavior and thoughts, what he calls, the 'conduct of conduct.' (Foucault, 1980). These practices can be analyzed through the interplay between knowledge and power which mutually constitute each other. Power influences and molds what is perceived as fact to serve its own interests. While knowledge in turn, justifies and reinforces existing power structures through accepted beliefs and understandings. This perspective allows for examination of how truth-claims are constructed around the discourse of the legal personhood of El Río Monjas. I will use Foucault's notion of *regimes of truth* to describe the discourses and narratives that establish certain things as "truth" and determine who is included or excluded from this realm of truth, as well as the reasons behind such distinctions.

Tania Murray Li's work *The Will to Improve* (2007), built around Foucault's work, helps analyze the discourses concerning the river's contamination and the verdict's demands. Li focuses on government interventions and development practices, and the processes through which these are shaped. Building upon Li's research, the practices of problematization and rendering technical within Quito's municipality unveil the hidden political dimensions behind the identification of landscape and population deficiencies. Problematization is the process through which certain issues are constructed as problems, requiring intervention. This results in truth claims, about El Río Monjas' pollution, shaped by the municipality's available solutions. Given that the municipality is in the position to identify issue to be solved and legitimizing their expertise, they claim the residents of La Esperanza to be the problem which needs to be controlled.

I will show how plaintiffs have questioned the municipality's given facts concerning the conditions of El Río Monjas health, which allowed the river to enter the cosmopolitical arena as a legal subject. Given that the municipality continues their truth-production and problematization processes, I argue El Río Monjas has turned into as a legal and political tool.

Transforming vibrant materiality

New Materialism is an interdisciplinary field that challenges binary understandings such as life/non-life, beings/non-beings and vibrancy/passivity. This approach explores the diverse qualities, capacities and material-energy of entities (Coole and Frost 2010; Deleuze and Guattari 1987). New Materialism goes beyond natural laws, by exploring the material realms and nonhuman life in relation to their surrounding environments. This expanded perspective is particularly significant for the social sciences, as it recognizes the significant influence of matter and nonhuman agents on human existence.

To delve into the agency of nonhuman entities, I will draw upon Bennett's (2010) work on *vital materiality*. Bennet challenges the notion of nonhuman matter as inherently passive or lifeless, instead emphasizing its vitality and the liveliness of objects and non-human entities in shaping political and ecological processes. Within this conception, El Río Monjas has a capacity to act, to influences thoughts, feelings, habits, politics and relationships. I build on this debate by shedding an anthropological light on the vital materiality of El Río Monjas by taking the river as the focal point of my study and exploring the social, cultural, economic, political relations surrounding her.

By researching El Río Monjas as a legal being, polluted by human actions, called "a monster" by my interlocutors, I will explore the dark aspects of Bennet's proposed vitality. I will shine a light on how this liveliness of matter is not always as bright as it may initially seem, and how this liveliness even has the capacity to generate negative effects on people's emotions,

thoughts and experiences. Bennett briefly touches on the vitality of debris, illustrating the thing-power of inanimate objects she encountered. She demonstrates how: a death rat, a bottle cap and a stick all possess the ability to produce effects; they "shimmer and spark" (5) to her. These things are vibratory, simultaneously embodying qualities of both life and death. However, she does not discuss the implications when the death within the debris makes it dangerously alive. Later in her work, Bennett mentions "the dark side of 'a life'" (54), in which she draws on anthropologist Veena Das (2006). She agrees with Das that at moments when the allure of a vibrant and fulfilling existence diminishes, descriptions of "eruptions of a life" (54) should rely less on metaphors of abundance and vitality. In other words, assumptions that something perceived as alive would evoke feelings of joy should be reconsidered, as it can sometimes evoke terror instead. To illustrate this perspective, Bennett quotes Friedrich Nietzsche's perspective on vitalism, from "Will to Power", *"*Do you know what Life is to me? A monster of energy ... that does not expend itself but only transforms itself ... A play of forces and waves of forces, at the same time one and many …; a sea of forces flowing and rushing together, eternally changing" (entry 1067 as quoted in Bennett 2010, 54).[1] However, Bennett does not delve into what these dark and vibrant energies and forces actually look like or the effects they have when their vibrancy turns from bright to dark. During my research on El Río Monjas, I discovered that non-human entities can shift from being sources of life and joy to becoming provokers of death and terror, all through their inherent vibrancy. This transformation occurs as their vibrancy is influenced by the dynamics with other elements with which they are related. Through my exploration, I aim to illuminate the complexities of these transformations and their implications for human experiences and relationships.

Bennett (2010) draws on the concept of *assemblage* (Deleuze and Guattari 1987) to elucidate the notion that agents - like El Río Monjas - do not operate in isolation. Rather, they

[1] Original quote from Nietzsche has been altered by Bennett, "Life" has replaced "World".

exist through their interconnectedness with other humans, non-humans and their environment. Assemblages emphasize how the world comes into being through the relationship between things. Though this relational notion holds merit for this case, indeed, El Río Monjas is not just a stream of water physically affecting its surroundings - it does appear to act in relation with other actors such as the municipality, rain, stones and its neighbors. We should still consider that not all forces have the same effect on each other. To show the relationality between the river pollution and municipal decision-making, I will draw on Wilhelm-Solomon (2017) notion of *ruinous vitality*, which shows the instability of urban infrastructures: the remnants and scars they leave behind, and the impact on social relations they invoke. Wilhelm-Solomon (2017) combines Bennett's (2010) notion of vibrancy with political implications of ruination processes (Gordillo 2014; Stoler 2008). I will show how the ruination of El Río Monjas (and thereby La Esperanza) is political, turning the river's vibrancy dark.

Life in ruins

But how does one survive in such terror? Conceptual frameworks within New Materialism are largely focused on imagining new ways of living with non-human entities but those do not reflect the challenges of reality, of ruination. For this purpose, we may instead look towards Tsing's (2015) work on *life in ruins*. Tsing follows the journey that matsutake mushroom make from Japan to other parts of the world, delving into themes of ecological destruction, the precarity of life, and the possibilities for new modes of existence in damaged landscapes. Tsing argues capitalism has created a world of ruins characterized by environmental degradation, economic instability, and social dislocation. Nevertheless, within these ruins, she shows the emergence of opportunities for unexpected collaborations, survival strategies, and alternative ways of living within and between marginalized communities and non-human actors.

I will show how the people in La Esperanza shape their lives in the ruins through employing strategies of “unnoticing", as described by anthropologist Loretta Ieng Tak Lou (2022). Focusing on southern Chinese city, she shows how a contrived form of ignorance enables residents to live with the threat of petrochemicals, illuminating the complicatedness of environmental injustice. In a similar sense, deliberately turning a blind eye to certain realities allows the residents of La Esperanza to coexist with the constant threat posed by El Río Monjas. The art of unnoticing can be seen as a coping mechanism which allows my vecinos (neighbors) to live amidst the presence of danger without succumbing to fear or despair. Rather than fixating on the imminent harm posed by El Río Monjas, they choose to overlook it, to maintain a semblance of control over their lives. This act of unnoticing empowers them to focus on other aspects of their existence, pursue their daily activities, and preserve their sense of agency. By reclaiming control over their perception and attention, they carve out a space where they can assert their own narratives and aspirations, even in the midst of unavoidable and potentially hazardous circumstances. This practice allows them to cultivate a sense of resilience, adaptability and provides determination in the face of adversity.

Through ethnographic illustrations of real-life practices carried out by residents, I examine the concept of *salvage rhythms* as defined by Tsing (2015). These rhythms encompass the survival and adaptive actions undertaken by inhabitants, with the purpose of extending their time in La Esperanza, striving to sustain a sense of stability and continuity. I will demonstrate how residents achieve this by adapting their embodied experiences (Ingold 2000; Edensor, 2008) and navigating the interconnected lives of multiple species. Their objective is to evade the impending realization that, despite their best efforts to mend the fractures in their livelihoods caused by El Río Monjas, their lives may eventually crumble nonetheless.

The Fieldwork: Washing ashore El Río Monjas in La Esperanza

In January this year, before starting my fieldwork, I had a coffee with two interlocutors Elena and Alegría from grassroots movement Luchando por las Quebradas (Fighting for the *quebradas*[2]). We met at an election debate concerning the environmental plans for Quito. Elena is actively engaged in the El Río Monjas case due to the high-risk location of her house along a side stream of the river. We discussed potential neighborhoods for my research, particularly focusing on La Esperanza, which surprisingly had been frequently mentioned in news articles related to the court case despite its small size - just one street where the river rises above the earth. Elena and Alegría explained the plaintiff of the legal case is living in a patrimonial house in La Esperanza and the neighborhood is dealing with issues concerning the municipality, damaged houses and discrimination. Soon we jumped in the car and we drove off to the neighborhood in the North of Quito. Once we arrived in the street, residents had already gathered outside. They quickly began exchanging stories and experiences about the issues they faced with the river and the municipality. The scene was fast-paced and chaotic. We climbed a ladder to the roof of a house to assess the damage, then descended to a garden to observe the distant river. I felt drawn to La Esperanza as all signs seemed to be pointing me here, so I decided to stay.

[2] Spanish name given to a ravine, typically dry or almost dry, which experiences a sudden surge of water during rainfall.

Photo 1: La Esperanza from the other side of the quebrada [Photo by author]

Elderly neighbors often eagerly shared stories of the neighborhood being their birthplace, where their fathers purchased land and built their homes. In those days, it was still *el campo*, (the countryside), a tranquil place nestled among mountains, unimaginable to envision its current state with bustling main roads, a nearby shopping mall, and perpetual traffic jams. As families expanded, additional floors were constructed, houses expanded to accommodate everyone, to ensure all could stay. Because that's what people do here—they stay close to their family and everything familiar. Less than a handful of families reside here, along with a few sub-renting friends and, for ten weeks, a *gringa*.

Dogs are in charge in La Esperanza, roaming the street, barking at known and unknown faces. Walking down the road requires an umbrella, stick, or similar item to ward them off; otherwise, they'll scare you away. The road meanders down, houses lining the right side, adjacent to the river, and alternates between houses and vacant plots of land. Left, a big wall which surrounds the gated community. There's one small shop with an iron fence in front, you have to shout for service, as the owner is often behind in her garden. I rent a small quarter in

the house of an elderly couple, sharing the hallway with the grandson and a friend of the owners. In the houses left and right live other family members, we often chat on our balconies. Further down is the house with *bacas* (cows) and countless dogs. I reach the garage, and have a short talk with *vecino* who is busy with a car. Next, the house of *vecina* who does energy cleansings with herbs from her garden. Then Sarina's house, and all the way down, a small restaurant which is closed now, the family left for Spain. Road blocks are in front of the door, the street turns left here but the corner is marked as too dangerous to pass by car.

Walking back, past the garage, before the *bacas*, is an empty piece of land. Unsure who owns it, I walk across it while sensing the curious gazes of those on the street behind me, hearing them say "What is this *gringa* doing here?" I walk as far as it feels safe and peer down. There she is, El Río Monjas - a small, dark grey stream of water - deep in the *quebrada (*Spanish name given to a ravine, typically dry or almost dry, which experiences a sudden surge of water during rainfall). While I love water in all its forms, I love to touch it, be with it, this river evokes no particular emotions in me – neither positive nor negative. Perhaps because she lies so far below, seemingly inaccessible. I am uncertain if I would even desire to reach her. That feels weird.

Photo 2: El Río Monjas from the side of La Esperanza [Photo by author]

Methods of exploration

During my fieldwork in La Esperanza, I employed various data collection methods. My main methods were walking ethnography (Ingold and Vergunst 2008), participant observation (O'Reilly 2012), writing fieldnotes, a cartography exercise (Oslender 2021), and oral accounts – interviews and conversations (Hammersley and Atkinson 2019). Besides, I analyzed online material, such as policy documents and news articles. This mixture of data gathering methods allowed for data triangulation during the analysis and writing process (DeWalt and DeWalt 2002).

I primarily conducted participant observation in La Esperanza, to understand how risks associated with El Río Monjas are embedded in the residents' daily lives, my main research population. Initially, I resided in the neighboring gated community for safety reasons but from passing by the guards every day, I felt disconnected from the lives of the residents, remaining an outsider. Therefore, I decided to move to La Esperanza while ensuring my personal safety by living in a secure area. This meant that I could not fully experience the genuine fear that the research participants faced concerning the river on a daily basis. To gain a deeper understanding of these aspects that I could not directly observe, I engaged in countless conversations on the streets or during different activities with *vecinos.* For example, by living in the house of an elderly couple, spending time with them working in their garden, sharing tea, and accompanying them to the local market.

Once I settled in the neighborhood, I initially still felt a sense of distance from the residents but soon I observed a shift in their behavior and communication towards me, they started calling me *vecina*. I realized about the importance of informal relationships within the neighborhood, shaped by their collective history and the collective experience of pollution. Throughout this thesis, I will frequently refer to the main research population as "my *vecinos"*, due to the importance they attach to being a community of neighbors.

My main gatekeeper and friend in La Esperanza was Sarina, who helped me connect with the inhabitants. Through conversations, I listened to their stories, thoughts, and emotions about life with and without the presence of El Río Monjas. Conducting semi-structured interviews allowed me to delve into sensitive topics with care.

The residents led me through their houses, gardens and along the river, as a form of walking ethnography (Ingold and Vergunst 2008). I engaged in the physicality of the river and its surroundings, together with research participants, through which deep-seated memories, current feelings and thoughts got stirred-up. I recorded this information and experiences through fieldnotes, multimedia recordings, and bodily knowledge.

As stated by Bateson (2000), a deeper understanding the natural world is best achieved through aesthetic experiences involving non-human elements. Therefore, I employed drawing as a means of translation, inviting La Esperanza residents to draw their own maps of El Río Monjas. My interlocutors became conscious of their surroundings and the conditions through an *internal* process of territorialization, and simultaneously engage in an *external* process of projecting their territory to the outside world (Oslender 2021). These drawings provided valuable insights into their perspectives and connection with the river and the pollution. Despite my attempts to compare them with official state maps, my visits to the Ecuadoran Military Geographic Institute left me empty hand.

Outside of La Esperanza, I participated in the activities of different citizen initiatives, such as Luchando por las Quebradas, Rescate del Río San Pedro, Río Machangara Group, and NGO Acción Ecológica, who are actively involved in addressing the issue of El Río Monjas and other polluted rivers in Quito. This included joining them in visits to affected families along different rivers, attending municipality meetings, participating in river clean-up events, and attending internal bi-weekly meeting.

Lastly, I conducted interviews and had conversations with various stakeholders involved in the Río Monjas case, including the plaintiffs, EPMAPS (Municipal water management company of Quito), Secretary of Risks, The Metropolitan Public Company for Mobility and Public Works (EPMMOP). Through these engagements, I identified *zones of awkward engagement*, discourses in which different meanings are attributed to the same words (Tsing 2005). I accomplished this by observing my experiences as ethnographer as these 'patchwork and haphazard' (xi), reappeared in different places, times and situations. By closely observing, listening, and reflecting on my encounters, I found areas of frictions surrounding the understandings of what El Río Monjas is and its associated rights, as well as the history of La Esperanza and the needed actions for the area.

Ethics and role of researcher

Ethical considerations and my role as a researcher hold significant importance, as I have a moral obligation to both my research participants and the field of anthropology. Therefore, reflecting on my position and its impact during fieldwork has been crucial (DeWalt and DeWalt, 2011). As a Dutch, white, twenty-five-year-old female student conducting research in Ecuador, I was being referred to as "La Gringa" (used for either white North Americans or Europeans) in the neighborhood, as no outsider had ever decided to live in La Esperanza. Rapport-building had been challenging at the beginning as residents were hesitant towards my incentives, often assuming I was working for the municipality. It was only for Sarina, my main gatekeeper, to be there with me that they would believe me when saying I do not. This however brought other expectations and presumptions, namely, that I would be able to help them and to find a solution for their circumstances. Therefore, I continuously had to clarify I was unable to do so. However, being perceived as outsider proved advantage in certain circumstances, such as, when interacting with civil servants - which I assume is due to me being a student.

Furthermore, since my research is about a sensitive topic and most of my informants are living in a high-risk situation and issues of social and political power are at play, I actively tried to observe and feel what my participants were comfortable talking about and what not. Most of the time, I let the conversations be guided by them, and where I felt it was possible, I asked more sensitive questions.

Lastly, conducting my research in Spanish, I was mindful of potential translation issues and sought clarification when needed. During the analysis and writing process, I have ones more cross-checked with my interlocutors if I had interpreted their words correctly. Excerpts in this thesis have been translated from Spanish to English by me. I have left some words in Spanish because of the energy and feelings attached to the words. Participant identities have been protected through pseudonyms.

Roadmap

In this thesis I will lead you along the banks of El Río Monjas and show you the political world she is part of, the ways she is reshaped by human influences, and how humans' thoughts, feelings and behavior are simultaneously shaped by the river. The structure of this journey will be as follows:

The first chapter explores how El Río Monjas became a legal subject in a cosmopolitical arena (de la Cadena 2010); a space where other-than-human entities are incorporated into political deliberations and decision-making processes. I will address different perceptions of the rights that the river has been granted by the different actors, how these rights are used and how usage of these rights has shaped my *vecinos*. For this purpose, I draw on works of Foucault's (1980) and Li (2007) on the interplay between power and knowledge in processes of truth-production and problematization. I will show different forms of truth-production that result from the legal personhood of El Río Monjas. We shall find out how these relate and affect

the populace of La Esperanza. Based on this, I argue that El Río Monjas has turned into a legal tool.

In chapter 2, I examine the meaning of El Río Monjas for my *vecinos* and how it affects them and their relationship with the municipality. For this purpose, I draw on theory of vibrant materiality by Bennett (2010). For the residents, the river has turned from a source of life -a small stream of blue water - into a mixture of dismay, distress and anguish. All of which has resulted from pollution caused by the municipality. I will look at several non-human elements such as wastewater and rocks which taken together, illuminate how the river's vitality has become ruinous (Wilhelm-Solomon 2017), reminding them of the social inequality they are facing.

In the third chapter, I will illustrate how my *vecinos* practice the art of unnoticing (Lou 2022). This refers to a deliberate form of ignorance, which allows them to live in and deal with the constant presence of potential harm originating from El Río Monjas, while also reclaiming their sense of control and agency, in the face of an unavoidable situation. Using Tsing (2005), I will show how this enables them to continue life in the ruins, an apt metaphor for the current state of the houses along the riverbanks. For this purpose, I shall use ethnographic examples of the art of unnnoticing (Lou 2022), and Tsing's (2015) *salvage rhythm*s: activities of adaptation and survival that human and other-than-human residents undertake to stretch their time in La Esperanza, without knowing for how much longer that may be.

My analysis leads to the conclusion that the rights granted to El Río Monjas primarily serve the interests of hegemonic powers. The provided rights enable these actors to pursue their own objectives without considering the well-being of the river itself or the potential consequences for marginalized groups. These findings support the notion that simply granting legal status or personhood to nature is insufficient to safeguard it against distress caused by human actors.

Chapter 1

Rights for El Río Monjas, Rights for Whom?

"12 a.m., walking down the street of La Esperanza, I spot Sarina in the distance. Suddenly, my *vecina's* dogs rushes towards me, barking aggressively. I freeze, not knowing what to do. Sarina quickly approaches, carrying an umbrella to shield herself for the sun. She carefully waves the umbrella in the air, distracting the dogs and allowing me to pass by safely. Today, Sarina wants to show me her beloved garden; her favorite place on earth. Walking past rows of corn, potatoes, beans and colorful flowers, she points out all the life that is growing around us. At the edge of her garden, at the *quebrada*[3], - "Cuidate!" (Take care!) -, we gaze down at the calmness of the river. "Look a bird!", Sarina continues pointing out all nonhuman beings surrounding us - butterflies, plants, fruits. Curious, I ask Sarina if she knows nature has been entitled to rights in Ecuador since 2008. She says she does not, and shares how "*nosotros*" (we, referring to her neighbors) feel and think about nature. "We are part of it all - the earth, the river, the birds, the plants, everything. We love *el campo* (the countryside)." She emphasizes, "*Sommos naturaleza*" (we are nature), while spreading her arms to encompass the land around us. "Nature needs to be protected but we are part of it too. The *quebradas* need to be supported but we, the people, as well". After a moment of quietly listening to the birdsongs, I mention the verdict. She dismissively says, "Of Señor Sanchez? All the municipality did was putting those rocks at his side, it makes the water bump towards our side, it makes it worse for us." She points at the large rocks across the *quebrada.* "A little paradise, a paradise at risk *amiga*." (Fieldnotes, 27 February, 2023).

[3] Spanish name given to a ravine, typically dry or almost dry, which experiences a sudden surge of water during rainfall.

This afternoon with Sarina (50), my main gatekeeper in La Esperanza, was an important moment at the start of my research period. She cared for me like she took care of her own daughter, bringing me fruits and fresh corn from her garden, checking on me when I went out at night, bringing me medicines when I fell ill. Her words of, "*Cuidate*" (take care), still echo in the back of my head. Looking after her daughter in the morning before sending her off to school, selling cheese from nearby farmers in the late afternoon and evening, she always had a few hours of time for me at 12 a.m. sharp. Sarina welcomed me into her world, showing me her home, La Esperanza, the place of her birth and, if it were up to her, the place where she would spend her final days. Sarina taught me the importance of family bonds in La Esperanza, the wariness towards outsiders and how to navigate within the neighborhood.

While Sarina, like many other *vecinos* I spoke to, may not have been familiar with the concept of the rights of nature, she clearly expressed she feels connected to the other-than-human beings in the world during our time in the garden. Surely not all *vecinos* feel such a strong bond with their surroundings, or had a similar clear-cut explanation. But through my ethnographic research, by listening, watching, observing, partaking; being present in their daily lives, allowed me to witness how they interacted with the other-than-human beings in their environment. Their care and love for other-than-human beings became evident to me from the manner in which they explained the different fruits, vegetables and medicinal plants during walks around gardens. I still see my *vecino* Victor, from whom I rented a room during my fieldwork, digging holes in the garden, asking me for my organic waste to "feed his trees". They took care of their surroundings as if that is something obvious to do, something of which we do not need to speak. They *inhabit* the place, rather than *occupy* it (Escobar 2020; Ingold 2000). Sarina's words "we are protectors of nature" and "*sommos naturaleza*" (we are nature), are aligned with the concept of 'rights of nature' and the granting of rights to El Río Monjas. Given that the residents of La Esperanza often responded to questions about the verdict with "For

Señor Sanchez?" (The plaintiff in the El Río Monjas case) it became clear that they perceive the verdict as a means to save his house rather than as a solution to support the river.

Sarina would frequently pose the question, "but what about us?" and her inquiry is justified. The verdict explicitly states that the residents living along El Río Monjas should receive assistance from the municipality as part of their "right to live in a healthy environment and safe habitat" (El Río Monjas 2022, 76). As the plaintiff's lawyer emphasized in the radio talk, "all residents can go to court, without a lawyer, and they should receive help". However, a combination of inadequate support from the municipality, a general distrust of the state, and a lack of awareness about available options for assistance has hindered their ability to seek help. Their past encounters with state governance and the exercise of power have significantly influenced *vecinos* current mindset and behavior.

In this chapter, I explore the complex dynamics surrounding the rights of El Río Monjas, and how various actors manipulate these rights to serve their own agendas. Through the interplay of power and knowledge, they shape the truth about the river, impacting its fate and of the well-being of my *vecinos*. I will firstly demonstrate how the plaintiffs have challenged the prevailing truth about the river's pollution, re-shaping El Río Monjas into a subject with inherent rights. This places the responsibility on the defendant, the municipality of Quito, to ensure the river's health and create favorable circumstances for the inhabitants along its banks. Nonetheless, through employing a regime of truth (Foucault 1980; Valladares and Boelens 2019), the municipality reshapes the discourses surrounding El Río Monjas and the verdict. Their methods of problematization and rendering technical (Li 2007) lead to manipulated perceptions of my *vecinos*, portraying them as *invasores* (invaders) who have unlawfully settled near the river and are therefore held accountable for their own living conditions. El Río Monjas has been turned into a legal tool for hegemonic aspirations, silencing the voices of marginalized groups.

Rights for My House

When I began my fieldwork in early February, I decided to visit the only restaurant in La Esperanza. When the lunch place turned quiet, the owner - *vecina* Dolores (50), a mother of three - invited me to join her family while they ate. As she prepared their plates, I glanced out of the kitchen window. No signs could be found of the garden her family used to have; the land sloped downward below the window. Dolores and her husband - who used to be the president of the neighborhood - would often attend meetings at the municipality about the *quebrada* and La Esperanza. When I asked her about the verdict, she gestured towards the other side of the river. "Yes, that's for his land, of Señor Sanchez, but all the municipality has done is put those brick blocks down at the river, at the other side, nothing else." Just as Sarina, Dolores associated the verdict of El Río Monjas with a person - the plaintiff, Señor Sanchez - and to reinforcement works done to his advantage. I became curious about this man whom everyone kept talking about.

I had come across Señor Sanchez's name in various articles and legal documents. He and his family were the plaintiffs who filed a lawsuit against the Municipality of the Metropolitan District of Quito and several of its agencies for violating the rights of nature. The verdict held the municipality accountable for breaching the rights of the river and its citizens. To prepare for meeting him, I listened to a radio program from Cabildo Cívico de Quito (Civil Council of Quito), where the radio host discusses the court case with Señor Sanchez and his lawyer. "Patrimonial rights are for everyone; I'm not only fighting for myself but for everyone" ("Gente en Accíon" 2021), Señor Sanchez refers to the patrimonial house he is living in which was once a monastery and is marked as cultural heritage. He uses these collective rights to protect his own home while advocating for the preservation of the property for all citizens of Quito. Hearing these words gave me the expectation that I would be able to freely enter his terrain, like my *vecinos* told me they used to do. His terrain can be seen from La Esperanza -

an expansive garden. I would describe it as green, just a lot of green; tall trees, abundant plants. The terrain stretches down the steep cliff, reaching the river below. Perhaps the drawing made by my *vecina* Claudia would help you visualize it better.

Photo 3: Drawing by Claudia depicting her view of El Río Monjas from La Esperanza. The lower half of the drawing captures the river, the upper half the cliff and garden located at the opposite side of the river. [Photo by author]

The bridge to the monastery garden, which my *vecinos* used to take, collapsed years ago. Now, in late February 2023, I have to take a detour along the main road, passing by walls that cover Señor Sanchez's terrain. When I arrive at the gate of a gated community, the security guard claims to be unfamiliar with La Hacienda Carcelén (the name of the monastery) or Señor Sanchez. Looking around, I spot another *gringo* approaching – it is him.

He first takes me to the office of his construction company; filled with photos and maps he has collected over the past 40 years while fighting for his house. It has been at risk ever since and he has not received and help from the municipality.

> The first few times I went to court, I worked together with people from different neighborhoods along the river. The municipality told them the water was clean, only contaminated for 1%. They gave the residents some money and that was it.

His example illustrates Foucault's (1980) ideas on how power and knowledge co-constitute each other and are produced through the power structures of society. The municipal bodies use their position of power to their advantage by deciding what is accepted as valid way of measuring the river's contamination level, and what grade is deemed as unproblematic. By accepting the bribe and staying quiet, the residents recognize the belief that the river is not polluted, keeping the municipality's regime of truth in place. Señor Sanchez continued:

> Another time, someone from the municipality came by to investigate the pollution. He stood in the garden, sniffed his nose and told me he did not smell anything so he wrote down the river is clean!

That is how he lost another court case. Señor Sanchez's experience of being subject to ambiguous expertise, the dismissal of the pollution based on a simple sniff, can be analyzed using anthropologist Tania Murray Li's work *"The Will to Improve"* (2007), rooted in Foucault's contribution on power. Li examines how development processes can lead to forms of dispossession, marginalization and exclusion for local communities. Following Li's work, the practices of problematization and rendering technical in Quito's municipality exposes the concealed nature of political choices when identifying deficiencies in landscapes and populations.

Given the status of the municipal agent as knowledgeable one, led to assessment of the river pollution by sniffing his nose being taken as unquestionable truth. As Li suggests, experts

are trained to identify problems based on available interventions to be offered (see also Ferguson 1994); the expert's claim of the river to be clean, left no room for alternative solutions. This rendering of the issue as technical and neutral effectively depoliticized (Li 2007; Joy et al. 2013) the river's pollution, removing it from political discourses. In other words, the experts presented the river's pollution as scientific matter, for which no evidence could be found, removing it from political discussions. As no problem was identified, no solution was provided, excluding Señor Sanchez from the realm of truth; his polluted reality got denied.

Señor Sanchez's persistent legal actions against the municipality challenge the "absolute truth" (Foucault 1980) about the river's cleanliness. Through his effort, he defended his rights to a healthy environment and advocated for the rights of the river. In doing so, Señor Sanchez resists the government's attempts to shape the thoughts and behaviors of citizens (Foucault, 1980) regarding the conditions of El Río Monjas. During my interactions with Señor Sanchez, he primarily discussed his house, land, and being a victim of the municipality's mistakes. He mentioned "I do not own the river; the municipality owns the river. So, I'm not responsible for the damage caused by the river but they are." To me, his words claiming the river is something that can be owned - as if it is an issue in terms of property liability - were the final affirmation that he does not perceive El Río Monjas as an equal entity to humans.

While Señor Sanchez's maintains a view that reinforces human-nature dichotomy (Ingold 2000), conversely, the country's Constitution does perceive that nature should be treated on equal terms with humans. The plaintiffs strategically utilize the truth about what nature, El Río Monjas, is and how it should be treated to engage in cosmopolitical negotiations (de la Cadena 2010), bringing the river into the political arena by asserting that the municipality infringes on its rights. Through this accusation, the plaintiffs grant themselves the 'right to question the truth regime' (Foucault, 2007), challenging the municipal processes of problematization and rendering technical, and the boundaries of who has capacity to diagnose

deficiencies and those who are subject to expertise (Li 2007). This has led to the Constitutional court ruling the Municipality of the Metropolitan District of Quito guilty of violating the rights of both the river and its citizens. As a result, the municipality is obliged to assist the river in restoring its ecological balance, thereby creating a safe environment for its citizens. The plaintiffs used the municipality's moral obligation to support and protect nature, to save their own homes and livelihoods.

No Rights for *invasores*

> "When walking down the street with Sarina we encounter some municipal workers on the street. One man is standing on top of the restaurant at the end of the street, and three others further down, carrying technical equipment. Curious about their activities, we ask one of the workers who they are and what they are doing. He tells us they are from The Metropolitan Public Company for Mobility and Public Works (EPMMOP). They are doing measurements to assess the quebrada's danger to re-open the closed road of La Esperanza again, which has been closed a few years ago due to safety risks. He speaks about plans for a new shopping center around the corner. Sarina asks, "But what about the houses?", to which he replies, "People shouldn't live this close to the *quebrada,* it is their own fault." I see Sarina's mood change from curious and open, to a mix of annoyance, sadness, and hurt. The power words can have when knowledge is lacking. She had heard this narrative countless times before. "But are there any plans to support them?" I ask him. He seems to get annoyed with us and responded shortly. He states his department is only responsible for the city's roads, and has no further involvement with the houses, *quebrada* or river. He tells me I should ask the Secretary of Environment or the Municipal Water Management Company of Quito (EPMAPS), so that's where I went next." (Fieldnotes, 21 March 2023).

I requested a meeting with EPMAPS, the municipal body of Quito responsible for all works regarding household water. It took some time to get through the bureaucratic system but after some weeks, I received a text message from employee Luis, expressing his willingness to meet me. On the 5th of April, we met in his office where he explained the works EPMAPS undertakes in La Esperanza:

> Luis: We can only realize small works to help against the erosion, just as putting rocks. We can't do any works for the houses, that is not our area and the houses can't be saved. The people have to move.
>
> Mariska: What about continuation of the *embaulamiento*[4]?
>
> Luis: It is not allowed to cover the river, it would go against its ecosystem, that's what the verdict is about and we have to support the river since the verdict. We have to create green areas around the *quebradas* so the people have to leave.

Luis redirected the conversation to the demands of the verdict as I asked him about the prospects of the *embaulamiento*. He emphasized the importance of supporting and preserving the river as mandate of the verdict, using it as reason to explain why they were not allowed to proceed with the *embaulamiento* which would lead the river's flow underground. Luis' response exemplifies Li's (2007) analysis of improvement projects; his solution is based on experts' capabilities; he is rendering technical the situation. By stating that EPMAPS is not able to support the houses in La Esperanza, he proposes relocation of the residents as the solution.

Given that no explicit prohibition of the continuation of the *embaulamiento* could be found in the verdict, I felt the need to seek for further clarification. The following day, I spoke

[4] The Spanish term used to describe a concrete tunnel through which the river passes. This tunnel was constructed to allow for land filling on top, and is currently constructed through the city, up until La Esperanza.

to Carlos from Acción Ecológica (AE), an environmental justice NGO actively engaged in advocating for the rights of nature and the Río Monjas case. When I mentioned the explanation of Luis, Carlos clearly got annoyed "There's nothing true of that, EPMAPS does what it wants, they don't listen to anyone". These examples show how EPMAPS use their power position as experts to create truth-claims of what the verdict entails - what should be done with El Río Monjas and what can be done for the people of La Esperanza.

When I asked Luis about what the future prospect of "the apartment building", he immediately grasped the reference. This particular building is situated on the opposite side of the *quebrada* from La Esperanza, perched precariously above the *embaulamiento,* giving the impression it could slide down at any moment. One afternoon I visited *vecino* Santiago's (70) house, he is located on the other side of the *quebrada*, near Señor Sanchez. Santiago is a geologist and constructed his house himself. The apartment building is visible from his garden. As I asked him about the it, he burst into laughter.

> That's a joke, even the people living there at one point put huge paper on their windows saying 'I don't recommend this building'. It was constructed by a big construction company a few years ago. But the soil isn't good for building, it's for agricultural purposes. So they continuously have to do works to keep it from falling down.

When I asked him why he thought they had chosen this specific location, he replied, "For the money, it is close to everything - the shopping center, the highways - they can ask a lot of money." Let us keep Santiago's words in mind while returning to the conversation with Luis.

> Luis: Yes, we are supporting the apartment building because it is easier. It is next to the *embaulamiento* which is ours, so we have to take care.
>
> Mariska: But isn't it as much in danger as the houses along the river?

Luis: Yes, that's why we do works to keep it from falling down.

Mariska: But you cannot do that for the houses in La Esperanza?

Luis: We put the rocks but it's the fault of the people; they shouldn't have built their houses there. They have to move; it is an emergency area.

While Luis' earlier explanation attributed the lack of support for the houses and the discontinuation of the *embaulamiento* to technical reasons and the verdict, his words now reveal the underlying political motivations. EPMAPS chooses to prioritize the support of the new apartment building, benefiting their own interests, while the residents of la Esperanza are problematized (Li 2007). EPMAPS shifts the blame for the current situation in La Esperanza from the river's pollution to the residents themselves; not the damage from the polluted river is the issues to be solved but the residents their presence. Consequently, solutions are focused on preventing the collapse of the apartment, while the residents of La Esperanza are held responsible for building houses in a risky area and are expected to relocate. EPMAPS position of power enables them to impose their own version of reality, neglecting the needs of the people in La Esperanza whom they deem undeserving of assistance.

The remarks made by Luis remind me of something Carlos, from AE told me, "It is a form of environmental racism, a problem of social class. The poor people are called *invasores*, they are perceived as bad people who need to move. While the municipality does give permission to the richer people or corporations to build wherever they want." Carlos highlights the presence of environmental injustice and social class issues. The poor are labelled, problematized, as *invasores* and are perceived negatively, being expected to relocate. In contrast, wealthier individuals and corporations are granted permission to build in any desired location by the municipality. This situation demonstrates a disparity in treatment based on social

class; prioritization of interests of the government results in marginalization and exclusion of the residents (Li 2007).

The interplay between power and knowledge elucidates the truth production by the government over the discourse of *invasores*. The increased volume and acceleration of water has been causing erosion, El Río Monjas became the taker of land for my *vecinos*. This situation caused the residents of La Esperanza to be mistakenly perceived by the public as *invasores*, people who illegally settled near the edge of the precipice and therefore should not receive any support. Their living situation is perceived to be their own fault, as Luis clarified. However, official records reveal a decline in the land area owned by my *vecinos* over the years, while they are still required to pay taxes for the land they previously possessed. I asked Carlos to elaborate on the illegal settlement narrative and he explained:

> That is what the city is made of, is built on. Nobody had permissions, everyone just built without permission as people needed a place to live. Later on, these places were legalized. That's not the fault of the people but the bad planification of the municipality which couldn't handle the city's growth.

Residents are problematized as objects of governmental (interventions) and their identities are recreated through subjectification. The constant labelling of them as *invasores* by the general public leads to an ongoing transformation of their ethical connection with themselves as governed individuals (Foucault 1980). In other words, knowing they are spoken of as *invasores* in the general discourse, does not only problematize them as objects, as obstacles of urban progress. Also, it reshapes and makes them rethink their position within society. They are shaped as *matter out of place* (Douglas 1966), marked as being in the wrong location given the social and cultural system. Being perceived as poor, they do not fit the pattering of society, as

they do not contribute enough monetary value to the economy (Eriksen 2016), they are responsible for their own living conditions and do not deserve support.

The discourse surrounding *invasores* is much spoken of in La Esperanza which made it clear to me that the people are consciously aware of how they are portrayed and do not agree with the view. The 24th of February, I went on a map-hunt with Sarina, going around the street, asking *vecinos* if they had maps or picture of what La Esperanza looked like in the past. It was challenging as many maps have gotten lost over the years but finally *vecino* Victor, from whom I'm renting a room, could help us. He has lived in La Esperanza for about 70 years. He asked why I needed to see the maps, to which Sarina replied, "to show her the proof of the land we used to have, to show we aren't *invasores*. We are victims as well, just as the river". Victor shows us four different maps and satellite photos, pointing at the oldest one, he says "Look how the river used to zigzag. And these houses here, they have disappeared by the river". We look outside of the window; the river is a straight line right now and no houses can be seen between us and the river. By being shaped into *invasores*, they are excluded from the realm of truth. Their stories by use of maps holding memories of how life used to be in La Esperanza are not accepted as truth due to their position within society. They feel powerless against the governing forces. My intention is not to portray them solely as victims, but to highlight that their ability to take action is shaped by the historical context and the various truth-claims they are associated with (Li 2007). This demonstrates the central role of El Río Monjas within this complex situation.

Concluding remarks: A river as a legal tool

I have shown how recognition of El Río Monjas as a legal entity does not bridge the human-nature divide (Ingold 2000). Despite its personhood status, the river remains primarily subservient to human interests, with humans acting as the central agents. The word "verdict" is

a *zone of awkward engagement* (Tsing 2005) with varying interpretations among different groups: Señor Sanchez and certain neighboring areas see it as "disillusionment with housing rights," and residents of La Esperanza perceive it as "support for Señor Sanchez and further harm for us." The battle for truth production, in which power and knowledge play crucial roles (Foucault 1980), reveals a complex interplay of framing and stretching boundaries of who has the capacity to shape the truth about El Río Monjas between governmental bodies and the plaintiffs. The moral agency of the river, its right to be cared for, is appropriated by both the plaintiffs and the municipality to fulfil their own aspirations (Boelens et al. 2022; Ingold 2000; Stengers 2010). Discourses surrounding the state of the river and efforts to mitigate its pollution are influenced by problematization and rendering technical (Li 2007). Meaning, the processes through which the implications of the river's pollution are constructed have framed the residents of La Esperanza as *invasores*, presenting them as the problem which needs to be resolved. By assuming the role of shaping solutions, government agencies exert their power to govern the situation and the people with the proposed intervention being the relocation of my vecinos. Consequently, the root cause of the current situation, the pollution, is side-lined, and existing inequalities are reinforced. El Río Monjas has been wielded as a legal instrument to perpetuate social inequality against the residents who continue to grapple with fundamental issues of justice, so-called 'bread and butter issues' such as access to safe housing (Celermajer et al. 2020, 15; Fritz-Henry 2022). In the subsequent chapter, I will delve into their world to illustrate how the residents' perception of El Río Monjas has evolved in response to the consequences of the legal transformations.

Chapter 2

From a source of life to a source of danger

Photo 4: Drawing of El Río Monjas by Mónica. The river is illustrated in the middle, La Esperanza below. Above the river is her view on the other side of the quebrada and at the right side is the embaulamiento. In the river, she has indicated different types of pollution by the use of different symbols and colors. [Photo by author]

"12 a.m., rushing down the street La Esperanza. The dogs bark loudly but as I come closer, they fall silent, stand still and stare at me as I make my way past. Sarina, whom you already met in my first chapter, looks questionable at the big paper and pencils I'm carrying as she hands me a bag with some lemons and oranges. I explain her my idea to draw El Río Monjas, and she suggests we go inside *hermana* (sister) Mónica's house. Inside, I find myself sitting on the bed, peering over the shoulders of Sarina, her *hija* (daughter) Claudia, and Mónica, who are closely huddled behind a small computer desk. The sizeable sheet of paper I brought doesn't quite fit properly on the table. Soothing music from a fantasy game is playing on the computer, it is calming, it fits the atmosphere. "Now I'm still feeling *tranquilla* (calm) but wait until I start putting the colors, I need a dark pencil for the river" Sarina says. They are chitchatting about the

different kind of rats that have inhabited the *quebrada*[5] since the pollution. "Can you explain to me what you've drawn?" I ask Mónica. Pointing at the top of the river, at the *embaulamiento*[6], she says, "Here's the pollution that the municipality sends us". Her finger rests on the skeleton of a skull she drew. She explains to me the river is depicted with different colors, each representing a different kind of pollution. Purple symbolizes pollution from the hospitals, red represents the household water. "I couldn't make it all dark because the river is still there. You see the tiny blue lines? It is the crystal-clear water from the *ojos de agua* (a spring). That's what the river used to be all made of - pure water. There's still a bit of it right now but thanks to the municipality, it is contaminated; it is not healthy anymore." She looks at Sarina who is coloring her river all brown and continues, "If I made the river all black or café, I wouldn't have been able to indicate that these colors represent the pollution mixed with the crystal blue water." Her finger slides across the paper to the rocks at the other side of the *quebrada*, saying, "Those are the rocks for Señor Sanchez". Sarina sighs deeply. Mónica continues, "We used to have fishes, so many different types of fishes in the river, and we would go down to catch them. I didn't draw the fishes because they are no longer there. And here is the water well, which is of no use anymore because the water is polluted." Sarina points across the drawing, saying, "And over there used to be a beach to enjoy, and there the place to wash." The atmosphere in the room undergoes a noticeable shift. The energy becomes heavier; and a sense of emotional weight lingers in the air. Sarina's earlier observation about her *tranquilidad* disappearing holds true, as she expresses her feelings with a hint of mournfulness saying, "I'm sad Mariska, it is not fun talking about contamination." (Fieldnotes, 24 March, 2023)

[5] Spanish name given to a ravine, typically dry or almost dry, which experiences a sudden surge of water during rainfall.
[6] The Spanish term used to describe a concrete tunnel through which the river passes. This tunnel was constructed to allow for land filling on top, and is currently constructed through the city, up until La Esperanza.

A lot of thoughts and emotions got stirred up this afternoon. Mónica and Sarina vividly described how they visualize the pollution affecting El Río Monjas. revealing their feelings and experiences regarding the river's transformation. Once a life-giving source —a place to wash, fish, and play—now a source of danger, a place of death. In contrast to Sarina's drawing which is all dark, Mónica's drawing captures the transformation of El Río Monjas by illustrating the various streams that compromise the river. While natural spring water is still part of the river, it is now tainted by discarded water from households and hospitals. Both explanations vividly depict how the river and its surroundings have fundamentally changed for the people of La Esperanza, just as their manner of living with the river.

The changed livelihoods of La Esperanza's inhabitants can be examined through the lens of *hydrosocial lifeworlds*, as explained by Franz Krause's (2018) in his work on anthropological research methods for studying human-water relations. Krause proposes a strong interconnection between hydrological and social relationships. El Río Monjas its flow, volume, timing, and quality all reflects the underlying political and economic power dynamics that shape the lives of my *vecinos* (neighbors). As Mónica's river turned from blue to a mixture with purple and red, symbolizing the impact of the changes on the residents; they stopped using the water well, the fishes disappeared from the river.

Mónica holds the municipality responsible for the pollution, and the rocks in her drawing seem to evoke negative associations with the neighbor at the other side. In understanding these relationships, we can *think relationships through water* (Krause & Strang 2016), the hydrosocial relationships that emerge through the interconnectedness between actors with water acting as the mending agent. The pollution of El Río Monjas results from interconnected social, political, and ecological streams, shaping and re-shapes the relationships

among the different hydrological agents surrounding the river; the municipality, the residents of La Esperanza and Señor Sanchez, in a continuously evolving flow of relationality.

To examine the shifting perceptions and interaction between the residents and the river, it first has to be understood that El Río Monjas is not merely a flowing body of water. The river is experienced and embodied both physically and culturally (Strang 2020), it is a *vibrant matter* (Bennett 2010). In this chapter I will demonstrate the transformation of the river's vitality shifting from a source of liveliness to being ruinous (Wilhelm-Solomon 2017). By showing the relationality between municipal decision-making and the river's pollution, I will illustrate how the vitality's transformation reflects a form of ruination (Stoler 2018). The river now serves as tangible symbol of the environmental injustice experienced by the people of La Esperanza. To provide more context, let me first give a short sense of what life was like before these changes occurred.

"The river was our life"

A few days after the drawing session, I visited *hermana* Mónica for a cup of tea. As we looked out of the kitchen window, overlooking the *quebrada*, she recalls how life used to be intertwined with El Río Monjas before the contamination.

> About seventy years ago, we build our houses here, it was rural, all around us was *el campo* (the countryside). The big streets, the mall and the houses around were not here, it was just us". The water was crystal clear. We used to go down to a small beach, to take water for cooking. And we had our gardens, we ate from our land, cultivated all our fruits and our vegetables with the water of the river.

After a brief pause, she said, “The river was our life.” Mónica recognized the *vibrant materiality* (Bennett 2010) of the river. For the residents, the river served as vital source of water and sustenance for the residents, literally giving them life. This direct reliance on the river can be understood as a profound connection between humans and their surroundings. Anthropologist Tim Ingold (2011), famous for his contributions on human-environment relationships, would describe Mónica’s experience as a form of dwelling (see also Heidegger 1971), where the self and the world meld together; boundaries between the residents’ bodies, La Esperanza and El Río Monjas blur and landscapes become ever-evolving narratives. While *vecinos* often shared vivid stories of what life looked like in La Esperanza, as interactions with the river diminished, so did the creation of recollections; very few had word for the current role of the river in their lives. After Mónica referred to the river as *life*, I asked her “And now?” Her voice trembled with a mixture of sorrow and longing as she uttered, “Now nothing of that.”, referring to the life she once shared with and around the river. Given that the embodied practices and experiences with El Río Monjas shaped Mónica’s stories and perceptions of what El Río Monjas used to be (Ingold 2000), the loss of interaction with the river, halted the storing of stories in the landscape. She told me she did not have anything else to say. What in El Río Monjas has caused her to fall silent regarding her current situation?

“It became a monster, it eats up the earth”

For those not living along El Río Monjas, the river is perceived as just one of the four contaminated rivers in Quito, as all rivers receive untreated sewage water. On the contrary, for the people in La Esperanza, the pollution has become a daily psychological trigger of fear. To understand how this situation has unfolded, let us begin at the top of Mónica’s river drawing, where she points out that “the municipality sends us pollution”, at the *embaulamiento*. From the balcony of my home during my fieldwork, I have a clear view on the now a human-made

construction which compels the water to cascade forcefully onto the concrete platform below. I have often tried to imagine how the river used to flow freely, where I now see a "*cascada de sucio*" (a waterfall of dirt). Right above the construction is a volleyball field and further up a park, nothing reminds you of the waterway that once existed alongside still-standing houses.

Beneath the *embaulamiento*, clean river water is joined by wastewater from hospitals, households, and factories, as Mónica described with her drawing. *Vecinos* would often mention the *embaulamiento*, as it is the place where the river turns from its natural blue to a disheartening black. *Vecina* Cristina, who lives in the neighborhood with her husband (a native of La Esperanza) and children, explained the following to me:

> First the river was tiny, shortly after the municipality created the sewage system, water increased little by little and the river became bigger and bigger. It took until the rain season was over and the quantity of water lowered, that we were able to see that it had done so much damage.

The river now serves as both drainage and sewage system for the city. As the city expanded, the municipality failed to establish an adequate treatment plan, resulting in the pollution of El Río Monjas. The increased flow of contaminated water overwhelmed the riverbed, causing it to deepen and widen. This disruption has dominated the ecosystem, disturbing its equilibrium (Bateson 2000). Anthropologist Gregory Bateson, in his work *conscious purpose vs nature*, describes that dynamic balance in ecological systems is kept through competition and interdependence among species. Unchecked activities like the pollution of El Río Monjas lead to disruptions, prompting humans to recognize that the river has its own life force and does not solely exist for human needs (Bennett 2010). In her work *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (2010), Bennett invites us to explore the agency and vitality of non-human entities

and objects in shaping political and ecological processes. This perspective shifts the focus from human experiences towards what non-humans do to us; how material space-taking of El Río Monjas, capturing parts of land and houses, affects the thoughts and actions of human beings. Humans might not be in charge of the things around us, interdependency makes that we do have the ability to affect our surroundings, just as it affects us (Bateson 2010). Discarding wastewater in the river may have been an attempt to absolve humans of responsibility for the pollution, it resulted in the water becoming too highly contaminated and dangerous to be touched. Showing us that *vital materiality* cannot be discarded; the shining vibrancy of debris which Bennett (2010, 5) describes, has turned dark.

One early afternoon in March, I found myself seated in the garden as Victor called out to me from the upper-window of the house. He beckoned me to join him to see a piece of land further down the street that had collapsed overnight. As we stood there, peering down at the river, Victor said:

> It became a monster, it eats up the earth from side to side, from side to side the ground has been gone. And it is going deeper, it keeps going down, eating away the earth from us.

Victor perceives El Río Monjas to have *vitality,* the river changes the landscape, decreasing the size of Victor's garden. He used to have a substantial plot of land for cultivation; allowing his family to live self-sufficiently. His wife would make humitas (corn cakes) from the corn grown in their garden and sell them to the neighbors. With the river's expansion, the land gradually diminished; as the gardens became smaller, food became scarcer. "We used to grow enough avocados for the whole neighborhood, now we cannot even grow enough food to fill our own mouths." He told me while picking one of the few avocados hanging from a tree. El Río Monjas

is co-creator of the world beyond its material forms, it shapes cultural practices (Bennett 2010; Strang 2020). Before the pollution, it facilitated activities of *vecinos:* fishing refreshing in the water, the river allowed them to live autonomously. Given its current state, the dark vitality forces Vincent to work as a silversmith and to buy food in the stores. The river's vibrancy evokes strong emotions within Vincent; he views the river as a monstrous presence, a dark and living force, that engenders a deep aversion towards its very existence within Victor. Where Bennett's (2010) describes vibrancy as evoking "joyful attachments"; being in joyful resonance with our environment, Vincent's experience aligns more with anthropologist Yael Navaro-Yashin's (2012) explanation of "irritability", a dis-resonating feeling towards El Río Monjas, as he witnesses the gradual disappearance of land week by week. A feeling of disturbance, of eeriness, is evoked by the relation between the polluted state of the river and Vincent his knowledge of his negatively changed living situation.

Perceiving the river as a co-creator of the world and experiences, we align with Bennett's (2010) purpose to challenge the illusion of humans control over shaping the world. Humans are not in charge of El Río Monjas; they cannot stop its expansion, consuming land and houses in its path. The river's pollution is a direct consequence of human actions, and it responds accordingly. As long as contaminated water continues to be discarded into the river, its dark vibrancy persists, intertwining with memories of a different life.

Between knowing and unknowing landscapes

Photo 5: El Río Monjas from the window of Mónica's house in La Esperanza. [Photo by author]

> You see how high the wall is at the other side? It shows how deep the *quebrada* is. Grandma always told me how easily they used to walk to the river, jump over it and hike up the mountains at the other side, where it is filled with houses right now. Now it is dangerous, it is steep, I don't think I've ever been down.

During the drawing afternoon, *hija* Claudia led me to the window to show me the *quebrada*. As she explained her drawing, which you have seen in chapter 1 "Looked more beautiful than reality". The high slope now makes it hard to reach the river. When I asked Sarina when she had last visited the river, she replied, "Many years ago, maybe more than ten years. Nobody goes down anymore because it is too dangerous, too far, and nothing is there anymore." I asked her how she would feel about going down together. She was hesitant at first but somehow read my mind that I would find an alternative if she declined. So, the next morning we embarked on our journey, accompanied by her brother Juan. To avoid the afternoon rain showers that could increase the river's flow and create a hazardous situation, we set out early.

Walking is a way of noticing, to engage with our surroundings (Ingold and Vergunst 2008). But walking in landscapes we have visited before does not always stir-up good memories (Lorimer and Lund 2008). As signs of the past have been faded away, walking in ruinous landscapes, holding unfamiliar affordances, does not always create enjoyable adventures as Edensor (2008) suggests, but rather alienated experiences. Making our way down, we are forced to move with our surroundings (Ingold 2011), climbing down a steep ladder, Juan clears a path with a machete through the overgrown vegetation, and we zig-zag down, being carefully not to slide on the slippery slope. The smell became worse the closer we came to the river; dark vibrancy comes in different forms. The place became more and more unrecognizable, Sarina and Juan had unknown El Río Monjas. Not forgotten, as they have told me countless stories of what it used to be like; the *quebrada* of El Río Monjas still embodies the past stories, the living memories of the residents of La Esperanza (Ingold 2000). But from their way of walking, it became clear Sarina and her brother did not know the river, the riverbed and the walk towards it anymore. Walking in past traces had become impossible as they had disappeared, the routes have unrecognizably been reshaped by erosion. "*Cuidate*!" (Take care!) Sarina shouts to her brother, while he is standing on a stone in the middle of a puddle at the side of the river, trying to make a path of rocks across the water. "*Cuidate, cuidate*! Watch out not to touch it!" Their manner of walking has changed. The riverbed had become a defamiliarized space in which they coax their bodies into unfamiliar bodily movements (Edensor 2008) such as jumping and balancing, different from their now usual manner of navigating. Perhaps not completely different from how they used to navigate - they used to carelessly jump in the river, they now anxiously jump over it, afraid to touch the water - but the sensations and emotions associated with the experience have changed. Walking this day became a confrontation of what the place is not anymore, of the dark vibrancy it holds. Walking back up Sarina suddenly shouts anxiously, "Look!". As I turn around, I see dust all around the *quebrada*. "Did you hear that?!"

I had not. We were just in time, where we had just been standing, a big lump of earth had fallen down. I must have heard the sounds of the earth coming down but I had not been listening attentively. In this environment, my body is not accustomed to being in a constant vigilance, like Sarina's. The landscape resonates through her body (Ingold 2011), as the earth shakes, her fears are awakened. The dark vitality of the river vibrates through her body. Sarina points out, "*Mucho, mucho peligro, de parte del municipio*" (a lot of danger from the municipality), emphasizing that the municipality bears responsibility for the resulting damages caused by pollution. Let us examine this aspect more closely.

"They're waiting for our houses to collapse"

It became evident that, for my *vecinos*, the municipality is responsible for the pollution of the river and the damage of the land. When I asked Cristina if she could elaborate on her thoughts about the pollution, she told me:

> The municipality is guilty; they do not know what they started when they used the river as a drainage system and the amount that the municipality discards continue to increase. The population continues to grow, more waste, more water, and the municipality continues to send more. Here the damage continues to increase.

Urbanization and increased consumption contribute to greater pollution, leading to a higher volume of waste being discarded into the river. As a result, the residents are excluded from secure sociality (Eriksen 2016). Cristina's thoughts make evident the sense of ruination experienced by my *vecinos*.

Ruination is an ongoing process, as the contamination of El Río Monjas persist day by day due to the continuous release of polluted water by the municipality. Following Stoler's

(2018), argument, ruination is not merely a process of destruction but also a political activity that erases specific places, things, human and non-human beings. Cristina's words exemplify how she senses this aim of erasure, "They're waiting for our houses to collapse; they're waiting until we have to leave because we don't have houses anymore!" As demonstrated in this chapter, the harmful effects of pollution extend beyond material entities, affecting the land, resulting in the death of fishes, and erasing the habits of sharing avocados, and swimming in the river. The contaminated water has made it impossible to sustain these once cherished activities and makes the inhabitants feel as if they have to disappear as well.

Anthropologist Matthew Wilhelm-Solomon (2017) introduces the concept of ruinous vitalism, by combining Bennett's (2010) material vitalism with the notion of ruination. Ruinous vitalism' acknowledges the inherent instability and adaptability of urban infrastructures, along with the visible marks and lasting effects they leave behind. It recognizes their capacity to shape social relationships and stimulate processes of re-orientation. Ruinous vitalism illustrates that El Río Monjas is not a sole agent which has caused the destruction and eroding of land around her. Instead, the concept emphasizes the political dimension that deeply resonates with my *vecinos*. The "eating of land', as described earlier by *vecino* Victor, can be perceived punishment inflicted upon those species (humans) engaged in a battle with their ecology (Bateson 2010). Given that not those humans whom have started the battle, the municipality, are punished, but the people living along the river, shows how dark forces of vital materiality are political (Wilhelm-Solomon 2017).

Before the urban expansion of Quito, the people of La Esperanza lived peacefully and self-sufficient, with minimal interaction with governmental bodies. The shift from crystal blue water to black and red marked a turning point in the relationship between the residents of La Esperanza and the government. Monica's earlier explanation of the *embaulamiento* where various types of wastewaters converge into the river, and the words by Cristina and Sarina,

holding the municipality accountable, reveal that the residents do not perceive the wastewater, or the river itself as destructive forces. They are actively aware that it is the municipality that bears responsibility for the contamination. The transformation of the river into a monstrous entity symbolizes the municipality's actions, staining the river's inherent vitality with darkness.

ROCKS ROCKS ROCKS

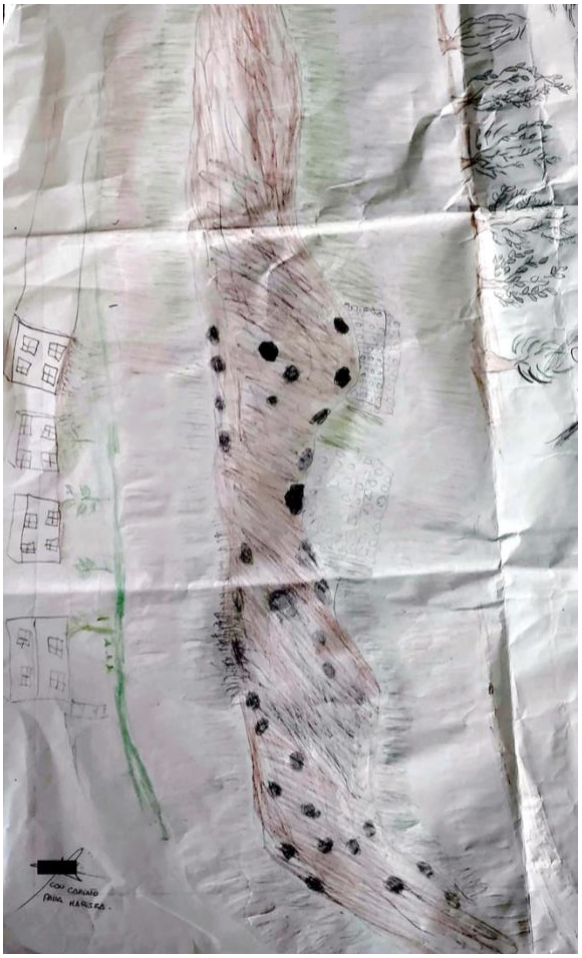

Photo 6: Drawing of El Río Monjas by Sarina. The brown line in the middle illustrates the river, the black dots rocks. The houses on the left side represent La Esperanza [Photo by author]

> "Rocks, rocks, rocks. For me the river is just black with rocks, the only work the municipality has done, making the water bump to our side!" Sarina said those words while she was coloring her river drawing with black and grey stones, I sense her sorrow as the dark colors remind her of the polluted river.

Throughout my fieldwork, I noticed a recurring mention of rocks, perhaps you've done so as well. In the previous chapter, Sarina and Dolores brought up rocks in connection to the verdict's outcomes. Luis from EPMAPS (Municipal water management company of Quito) discussed the rocks in relation to the municipal works on the river, and Sarina, Mónica and Claudia incorporated them as important element in their drawings. I came to realize that these rocks hold different meanings beyond their natural composition, another zone of awkward engagement to be explored (Tsing 2005).

As Sarina's continued speaking, her sadness got tangled up with a tip of anger from the defenselessness she explains to be feeling. "We are victims of this all, the municipality says this is an emergency zone but they don't do anything to help us, only putting these rocks." Sarina experiences a sense of powerlessness as she finds herself trapped in a situation where neither confrontation nor escape is possible (Willow 2014), she has no power to fight the government, and she is unable to leave the place she calls home.

Luis from EPMAPS explained to me that these rocks placed at the bottom of the river are a result of the verdict, intended to prevent further sinking of the riverbed. As he admitted these rocks have minimal impact and only provide a short-term solution, he confessed they do not address the issues faced by the houses in any significant way. The process of ruination in this context aligns with Stoler's (2018) idea of resentment, which "demands that the conditions of constraint and injury be reckoned with and acknowledged" (210). Given that these rocks have little positive effect, the efforts of the municipality do not reflect with the expected support for the "emergency zone" designation assigned to the neighborhood. This form of ruination maintains states of resentment, determining what places will be left in ruins and who will be forced to inhabit them (Stoler 2018). As a result, my *vecinos* feel mistreated and unsupported by the municipality; they have internalized the dark vibrancy of their surroundings.

Remember Dolores, the restaurant owner who I visited in chapter 1? She expressed the following in her kitchen:

> All the municipality does is put the rocks over there, which help Señor Sanchez, they take the rocks from here and put them there, they make the water bounce back like a ping-pong ball to our side. While over there is only his garden, here are human lives.

Given that the residents perceive the works done at the *quebrada* only to benefit Señor Sanchez, worsens their feelings of resentments, perceiving his life to be more valuable than theirs for the municipality. To the residents of La Esperanza, the presence of rocks down the river symbolizes the municipality's lack of support, failing to improve their living conditions as the *quebrada* continues to expand toward their homes. While the presence of rocks contributes to feelings of resentment, irritability, and a sense of being led down, it is not the rocks themselves that cause these emotions. They result from the relationship between the residents and the municipality, along with associations and experiences tied to them.

Rocks cannot cover the ruinous vitality of El Río Monjas but *vecinos* would often mention that continuation of the *embaulamiento* could. Countless times they have told me that the municipality had a plan, to continue the *embaulamiento* but when the mayor changed, the money went to another project. The plan had been to cover the river, so it would flow through a tunnel and the polluted water would not be able to do more damage to the land surrounding it. But the money for the project went somewhere else, the residents were left with scars of mistrust and rocks. Rocks are put down in the river as short-term fix against erosion but the houses surrounding the river, on which La Esperanza is built, does not receive reinforcements. Ruinous vitality is not only the 'destruction of space' but also the 'process of abandonment'

(Biehl 2013; Wilhelm-Solomon 2017), not being looked after by the municipality, which forces the residents to rethink their relationship in society.

When I met Sarina an afternoon mid-March, I told her about a public meeting I went to the day before at the Secretary of Risks concerning the plans for El Río Monjas. I told Sarina the meeting concluded with not having a solution for La Esperanza, the residents have to leave. "But there is, the *embaulamiento*, they build it further up, so why not here?" Resentment is also evoked by the question why one receives help and others not. "They need to help us", Sarina continued. She, and many other *vecinos*, remain speaking about the *embaulamiento* which must be continued. It is the envisioned future of unrealized governmental promises (Yarrow 2017) which makes them stay. I asked Sarina, "But then the river won't be here anymore?" To which she replied, "It is already not a river anymore. And then we will have all other parts of nature, they can put grass, trees, a parc, the birds will be here." Sarina rather sees the river disappear, as to her, its vibrancy has already been killed, its bright liveliness has vanished.

Concluding remarks: "To go to nature, you have to go far"

El Río Monjas is no longer perceived as the tranquil life force it once was. Instead, it has transformed into a mixture of rocks, contaminated water, fears, a sense powerlessness. This change resulted in the disappearance of life - of fishes, of people, and of habits. The words of *vecina* Dolores can best describe what the river has become within the hydrosocial lifeworlds (Krause 2018) of my vecinos:

> To go to nature, you have to go far, up the mountains outside of the city. El Río Monjas is not nature anymore. Before yes, but now it is so contaminated, it is not nature anymore.

For the residents of La Esperanza, El Río Monjas is not a river anymore as Sarina told me, it is a source of danger, as consequence of ruination (Stoler 2008); the river is a symbol of the

environmental injustice they face on a daily basis. While Bennett (2010) explores the potential for embracing the vibrancy of debris, to be amaze by it; for my *vecinos*, the river has transformed into a ruinous force that vibrates through them involuntarily. Despite the polluted state of the river, the residents continue to dwell (Ingold 2000) in the landscape of La Esperanza. As the river's vibrancy turned dark, so did the wellbeing of the residents' feelings of *tranquilidad* turned into "irritability" (Navaro-Yasin 2012) and resentment (Stoler 2008). This change in emotional state reflects the strained relationships between the residents and the municipality; relationships that are intricately connected through the water (Krause & Strang 2016). To my *vecinos*, the municipality is responsible for the transformation of the river into "a monster which is eating up the earth". These relationships which exist through water (Krause & Strang 2016), between the residents, the municipality and Señor Sanchez, have side-streams of political, social, economic aspects. The river has not been eating land because it was hungry, it is due to its dark, ruinous vitality (Wilhelm-Solomon 2017), which is a political form of vitality, as a result of ruination (Stoler 2008). The rocks down the river remind the residents of the lack of support they have received up until now. As the river has already been completely changed for the residents, they rather see it physically disappear, to make space for other parts of nature to flourish. But life in La Esperanza is not only bitter and sorry. I will now turn into what is left beyond destruction and pain, and look into what is alive and ways of survival in La Esperanza.

Chapter 3

Life in the Ruins: Bienvenida a Narnia

"12 o'clock in the afternoon, meeting Sarina at our usual spot. The dogs allow me to pass by without making a sound. They only stand still and stare at me for some seconds before turning around, I assume they had become familiar with my presence. Sarina and I walk further down the street to a family's house that we have not visited yet. Before being able to knock on the door, the dogs stick their head underneath it and start barking loudly. Inside a man is working with his son, crafting chairs. "Dogs! Won't they bite?" Sarina shouts. "Well, sometimes they do". Replied our *vecino* Andrés as he welcomes us inside, leading us towards the back of their house. We look down the *quebrada*[7] as we stand on a wooden platform he constructed to park his car. I had seen the construction from the other side of the river and it had sent shivers down my spine. It looked as if it could crumble down the steep slope at any moment, along with the earth beneath it. "It is safe" he tells us when he sees our scared faces. We laugh while jumping on the platform, ignoring the nagging fears in the back of my mind about its stability. Andrés has been living in this area for twenty-five years with his wife and two sons. He had purchased the land from a family member who had been living here for about forty years. Andrés had built his house and the garage himself. Stretching his arms out he says, "The land used to be all the way there. Over there used to be high trees, enormous eucalyptus trees". Now, all I see is a big hole, open air and steep slopes, as if a chunk had been ribbed of the landscape. On the other side, I could see the garden and heritage house of Señor Sanchez. "We used to grow food all the way up to the river." But now they only had some crops growing on the slope further down, with the river

[7] Spanish name given to a ravine, typically dry or almost dry, which experiences a sudden surge of water during rainfall.

> approximately 30 meters away. El Río Monjas is far down and hard to notice. She seemed distant and my attention was captured by the steep walls on the opposite side. Through a window in the house, I see Andrés' wife, Cristina, waving at us. Below the window, the earth drops sharply, Andrés' had built a concrete wall to support it. He recalls the nights when the river was wild, and big chunks of earth would come tumbling down. "We are sleeping up there" pointing his head towards the upper window of the house. "At night it's scary" he tells me. "Because you don't know where or at which side the earth is falling. Often, we are unable to sleep, so we close the window to avoid hearing the sound". Sarina adds, "And for the smell!" (Fieldnotes, 2 March 2023).

We typically perceive ruins as significant historical sites, full of memories and stories of the past. We deem them crucial to preserve, as spaces where humans can revisit and recount the stories of past lives that unfolded within them. But at what point does a place transition into a state of ruin? And how do we determine that the damage inflicted upon it is beyond repair and we must abandon the place? "The municipality calls this an emergency zone, but they won't help us, it is easier for them if we leave. But we won't, we are staying till the end." Andrés told me, clarifying the differing ideas held by the municipality regarding which places and people can be saved. Being subjected to ruinous vitalism, the residents in La Esperanza must find ways to reorient as ruination elicits survival strategies within the psychological and physical hurting (Wilhelm-Solomon 2017). To explore the ways my *vecinos* (neighbors) navigate within the ruins they call home, I draw inspiration from anthropologist Anna Tsing (2015) who in her renowned work, *The Mushroom at the End of the World.* In this book, Tsing explores the resilience of multispecies communities and their ability to survive within the destructive forces of capitalism. By following the journey of the matsutake mushroom, Tsing uncovers various

examples of how living beings thrive and coexist in environments that have been reduced to ruins. I follow her example.

While I was still slightly shocked by the state of the houses in La Esperanza, visiting Andrés made me understand he had normalized his precarious living situation where stability and security were absent (Tsing 2015). Given that Andrés took measures such as reinforcing his house to prevent it from collapsing and closing his window to shield himself from the reminders of his precarious situation, it becomes evident that he had adapted and developed strategies to navigate within the risks and challenges of his environment. But not only that, he also creates spaces to expand life, for cars, and for other-than-human beings to flourish in his garden, showing how life in ruins is possible.

This chapter devotes specific attention to motivations and strategies employed by the residents of La Esperanza to remain in precarious living conditions. I will begin by providing insights into their connection to the ruins they call home, which will help elucidate their reasons for choosing to staying. Thereafter, I will lead you through different ethnographic examples that demonstrate how the residents employ the arts of unnoticing (Lou 2022) to develop and maintain practices, salvage rhythms (Tsing 2015) that enable their continued existence in these spaces, often involving other-than-human beings. While outsiders may view these houses as ruins, for which hope has long been given up, for my *vecinos* these are their homes, where life persists by embracing the knowledge of how to navigate and thrive.

No place like home

A few days after my visit to Andrés, I returned to the house for a coffee with his wife Cristina, whom I introduced in the previous chapter and shared her perspective on the municipality's role in the contamination of the river. She expressed the following about the role of the municipality in their future prospects:

Cristina: The municipality wants us to leave, to evict us.

Mariska: Have you thought about leaving?

Cristina: Where could we go? The municipality only want to give us 5000 dollars, where do we go with that money? A house costs more than that.

Mariska: All they want to offer is 5000 dollars?

Cristina: And an apartment for which we have to pay a mortgage. From which money do we have to pay all that? Our debts will only get higher and higher. Now we live for free because we build these places ourselves. We would have to work more, we don't want that when we've made so many sacrifices for this place. Should we give up everything we have here? We stay until the last one here, until the end.

The proposed solution by the municipality to the residents of La Esperanza, offering 5000 dollars per house and a new apartment with mortgage, does not resonate as a viable option for the residents. They do not want their lives to be further entangled within the capitalistic system, which would entail more work and mortgages. Sarina, echoing the sentiments of Cristina, told me one afternoon, "If you come back in 10 years, we'll still be here, maybe with the same problem but we'll be here." The residents choose to embrace precarious living in ruins rather than precarious living under capitalist governance (Tsing 2015). In La Esperanza, the threat is not physical displacement but rather the harsh reality of being displaced without physically moving; as inhabitable possibilities are decreasing, they have become "goners with nowhere to go" (Nixon 2011, 19).

When I asked neighbors about their communication with the municipality, I received varied responses. Some indicate they do not engage in direct communication, while others mentioned that the neighborhood is always well-represented during organized meetings. I

attended several meetings of these meetings, ones with Sarina, ones with Dolores, and ones I found myself as the sole representative of La Esperanza. Sarina explained me the following:

> Before we kept on going to the meetings with the municipality, time after time. But all they did was making promises, they didn't do anything, while they say it's a place of emergency here. We are tired of not being listened to, of them acting as if we are fools. So our response is staying.

The residents have lost their trust in the government. By staying, they are resisting against the social inequality they are facing. Their silence is their answer to a government which leaves them feeling abandoned. In this act of defiance, they assert their agency and autonomy, refusing to comply with the municipality's expectations and demands.

However, their motivations for staying go beyond practical considerations; it is deeply tied to the significance they attach to the land. The following day, I asked Sarina about her perspective on the possibility of leaving. She responded, "We cannot leave this place. It is our land, our territory. I was born here; our history is here. They cannot make us leave." Her words align with Escobar's perspective (2020) on the significance of territory as, "the vital space that ensures survival as a people, as a culture in peaceful coexistence with nature and the spirits" (42). While Escobar primarily focuses on indigenous communities, the experiences of Sarina illustrate that this sentiment can extend to any group or community. One afternoon at the beginning of April, Hermana (sister) Mónica told me something in a similar line as we walked to the nearby market. She initially spoke about the futility of the 5000 dollar offer, to which I asked if she would consider leaving if an alternative option became available to which she replied:

> For the risks, yes. But no, we won't go. We have nature and peace here; you don't have that in other places in the city. We know the neighbors; we've always lived here together. It's safe here; we have no fears to get robbed. You cannot find this anywhere else. And the sound of the birds! Let's listen to the birds.

Monica's words highlight the profound importance of this place where history and land are intertwined. The residents not only inhabit but also shape and are shaped by La Esperanza, with history congealed within it (Ingold 2000). "Can you imagine us and *tía* living in a high-rise apartment in the city? All the noise, the unfamiliar people—it would be unsafe." Monica's words reveal a sense of belonging, and security—a connection to the land, the human and non-human beings of La Esperanza; it is the close relationship between the actual place and their collective memory (Lovell 1998). Despite changes in the way they interact with the landscape, feelings of nostalgia and familiarity linger, making the idea of life elsewhere unimaginable.

La Esperanza may not appear remote topographically given its proximity to bustling roads, restaurants, and malls. However, the silence, the sounds of birds, and the limited unfamiliar faces and activity in the dead-end street create a sense of seclusion and remoteness. Remoteness is not solely determined by physical distance but in a *topological space*, it is shaped by cultural perspectives and conveyed through cultural vocabulary (Ardener 2012). I asked When discussing the city's rapid growth with Victor, he said, "Oh here's it is much calmer. I cannot go to the city with all the noise and traffic. No here, in *el campo* (the countryside), it's much calmer". I sought clarification, asking if this place could be considered *'el campo*.' He confirmed, "Yes, here it is more like *el campo* than in the city; here we have nature." The neighbors often refer to this place as '*el campo*,' emphasizing the presence of 'nature' here. This distinction reflects the residents' sentiment that La Esperanza is different from the rest of Quito, reinforcing their reluctance to relocate due to their unfamiliarity with urban environments.

Unnoticing through salvage rhythms

Ingold's (2011) dwelling perspective highlights how embodied practices and practical activities shape our awareness and attention towards our surroundings. In La Esperanza, the sounds of birds, familiar faces on the empty street, and tending to gardens allow the residents to notice the quietness and calmness of the neighborhood. Perhaps you are wondering: What about the pollution and the ruins? Given that our attention is influenced by social and environmental factors (Larkin 2014; Zerubavel 2008; Lou 2022), so too are our tendencies to ignore certain things. When the residents do not notice the busyness of the city surrounding them or the risks that the river bring, it is not inevitably due to absentmindedness, distraction or lack of interest (Lou 2022), sometimes it is a way of survival. In the case of living in hazardous places like La Esperanza, the residents engage in the "art of unnoticing," a deliberate form of ignorance that allows them to coexist with the reality of pollution and reclaim their agency (Lou 2022). I draw on anthropologist Loretta Ieng Tak Lou's concept of the "art of unnoticing," which complements Anna Tsing's (2015) exploration of the "arts of noticing," emphasizing the importance of paying attention to both human and nonhuman lives in the environment. In Lou's research on life with petrochemical plants in China, she shows us that people often adopt a selective understanding of their circumstances as a means of self-survival. Drawing inspiration from Lou's work, I explored the day-to-day practices of my *vecinos* with a similar lens, to uncover what they were trying to unsee and their practices of blinding themselves. Let me return to *vecino* Andrés, whom I visited at the beginning of this chapter.

> Now the river is calmer. But you are never sure what will happen next. Because let's say that for the next few months it will rain harder. What then? Follow me, it is the river, that's where the fear comes from. But well, as I said, right now we are calm. We are

> accommodating ourselves by making that wall, we are doing this to protect ourselves as it is collapsing in this part.

Given that Andrés is well aware of the damage to his house and the uncertain future it holds, his actions of reinforcing the structure and creating stability through a small concrete wall and an elevated platform for his car exemplify *salvage rhythms* (Tsing 2015). These efforts undertaken by Andrés reflect his determination to prolong his stay in La Esperanza, even though he is unsure of how much longer he can sustain these temporary fixes before his house ultimately succumbs to irreversible collapse. His wife Cristina told me. “One day it is over, one day we’ll have to leave”. Knowing the rains might get heavier in the coming months, which could further widen the *quebrada* and make their living situation more dangerous, forces them to engage in “…forms of temporal coordination. Without the singular, forward pulse of progress, the unregularized coordination of salvage is what we have” (Tsing, 131). Andrés and Cristina engage in salvage rhythms, not to improve their house for their future but to extend their time in the ruins and to make the most of it. Despite being fully aware of the precariousness of his living situation, he continues to maintain his house through temporary fixes. He unnotices (Lou 2022) the risks until more earth crumbles away from beneath their house. When I asked Cristina if she discusses the situation with her family or friends, she replied, "No, why would we? It won't change a thing." Similar responses were common among my neighbors. They do not deny the situation, but through willful ignorance (Lou 2022), they manage to carry on with their daily lives amidst the ruins.

Salvage rhythms look different for everyone, such as for Sarina's *tía* (aunt).

> In early April, Sarina took me to visit her tía who invited us to enjoy fresh corncobs from the garden. *Tía* proposed to show us around her house. As we made our way through the well-organized and gleaming kitchen, we reached a room at the back of the house. "I don't come here often anymore." She says while opening the door. It became clear why as we stepped into a dilapidated room. Her aunt quietly moved towards the back, placing her hand on the opening in the wall where a window once existed. She gazes outside, overlooking the quebrada. *Tía* explained that this used to be the children's bedroom, now filled with unused objects such as broken bikes and egg cartons. "We were just standing there," Sarina remarked, pointing outside. It was then that I realized there was nothing beneath my feet except for the concrete floor I stood upon; this part of the house is hanging in the air. I felt a slight shock and concern, unsure if the floor would support the weight of the three of us, and sensing the palpable sadness in the room. We all remained silent for some time, even Sarina, who usually had something to say, uttered only a brief "*cuidate*" (take care) as I leaned my head out the window.

Tía's actions exemplify how precarity necessitates adapting to changing circumstances for survival (Tsing 2015). By altering her embodied experience with the environment, she seeks to transform her perception of the situation. *Tía* empties rooms and closes doors, engaging in salvage rhythms, to avoid being constantly reminded of the damage inflicted upon her house. In doing so, she can disregard the adversities she faces and instead focus on what remains. Before implementing these strategies, *tía* first recognized the inherent dangers of these rooms and evaluated her own capacity to effect change, calculating and bargaining with the associated risks (Jovanović 2018). Ultimately, she made the decision to shield herself from the reminders

of risks and signs of the past (Edensor 2008) to sustain her existence within the ruins, effectively employing the art of unnoticing.

Photo 7: View on the house of tía from her garden. [Photo by author]

Ruined spaces present a multisensory challenge to the body, encompassing sounds, smells, and sights (Edensor 2008). While Lou (2022) highlights how bodies can get attuned to living in pollution by for example, getting use to the smell of a petrochemical plant or the sight of petro-infrastructures, in La Esperanza, the people actively eliminate these encounters. *Vecinos* Andrés, Sarina, and *Tía* do so by closing windows to block out the river's smells and sounds, as well as emptying rooms and closing doors to avoid being constantly confronted by the visual reminders of the ruins they inhabit. These actions serve as a means for them to limit their exposure to the sensory effects of their living environment.

A Narnia of multispecies entanglements

Not everyone tries to avoid signs of the ruins, which opens up opportunities for other-than-human lives in spaces humans cannot use anymore. One afternoon in March, I visited *vecino* Santiago, whose old house is at the other side of the *quebrada*. I shortly introduced him in chapter one where he spoke about 'the apartment building' next to his house. Santiago keeps his house "for my son and his family, so they can one day enjoy it in the weekends". He walked slowly with his walking stick as he showed me around the various rooms. Only a few pieces of furniture are left. "I have to fix that sink; I need to put a new lightbulb here. You know, all electricity is from solar energy here, I need to fix the panels!" After Santiago and his family moved to another house because of Santiago's physical conditions, a cousin of him had been living in the house whom left some years ago because it had become too dangerous. Santiago had noticed the place was too dangerous for him to live but this did not take away his hopes for future usage of the house. He is unnoticing the dangerous conditions in which his house is located, allowing him to have future aspirations for the place. His ideas for future reconstruction work point towards belonging as an on-going process encompassing a sense of hope for the future (Gilroy 2006), dreaming about life to return to his place enables him to reclaim his agency.

For now, as Santiago's future-building practices cannot be realized (yet), humans cannot resume life in this place but he sees opportunities for multispecies survival. Standing in his garden, he points towards an area halfway down the cliff "The path to the river used to be flat, just a slight decline. Look at this now, I can't go down this ladder but we are using what is left as much as possible, look!", showing me a number of beehives far down, a friend is taking care of them. Precarity might restrain Santiago from planning for house reconstructions, it opens his eyes for new possibilities from utilizing what is left amidst adversity (Tsing 2015). The intertwinement of hope and risk provided Santiago with an opportunity to turn uncertainty into

potential gains (Jovanović, 2018). He calculated his risks to negotiate compromises and secure 'the most out of it', shaping both his own life and his surrounding space (Zaloom 2004).

Photo 8: Ladder in the garden of Santiago towards the beehives below. [Photo by author]

For Santiago, the presence of bees offers a temporary alternative for sustaining life, emphasizing his present-focused approach. But sometimes salvage rhythms do touch upon the idea of future making practices. Unlike Tsing's (2015) suggestion that such activities solely revolve around immediate survival, my next example will demonstrate how these practices, while not driven by a desire for progress, serve as a mean to continue life and to benefit from in the future, if circumstances allow so.

One afternoon, I entered the garden of Sarina's *tía*, where she was busy picking herbs. Last night, a part of the *embaulamiento*[8] had collapsed. Sarina shared the news with her tía, showing her a video she had taken. "The people living up there aren't safe, nobody's safe". Sarina expressed, pointing towards the houses at the end of the street where I was residing at the time. Curious about her thoughts on the future, I asked Sarina about her hopes. "There's no esperanza (hope) here," she responded, gesturing towards the river. "That's our biggest danger. Humanity will only worsen; the situation won't improve. It would be wonderful, but it's not possible. There's no *esperanza* en Esperanza. That's it, Mariska, this is our life." Sarina made it clear that she has lost hope for an improvement in their living conditions but this did not hold her from future-planning activities, such as planting avocado trees:

Sarina: Mira! Our first avocado! After 15 years!

Mariska: 15 years?!

Sarina: Yes look, next to it, we just planted a new tree!

Mariska: To have another one in 15 years?

Sarina: Yes, it is for the next generation, we have to think about them, they'll be happy with avocados from the garden, these are so much fresher, purer, healthier than those from the stores.

Where precarity restrains Santiago from planning long-term but sticking to short-term solutions, unnoticing creates *nonreflexive* contradictions within Sarina's reality, allowing two

[8] The Spanish term used to describe a concrete tunnel through which the river passes. This tunnel was constructed to allow for land filling on top, and is currently constructed through the city, up until La Esperanza.

opposed forces to be present (Berliner et al. 2016). She says she does not have hope for the situation to improve but at the same time is unnoticing what the dangers of the river erosion could mean for her future: the collapsing of their houses forcing them to move out of the neighborhood. The planting of the avocado tree, knowing it takes many years to grow, shows one form of *salvage rhythms.* She does so without being sure they will be able to enjoy the fruits. The art of unnoticing allows for planning, even in precarious times.

Multispecies worlds continue to exist in ruins without human assistance as well (Tsing 2015; Edensor 2015). One afternoon, Sarina and I passed by the remains of a collapsed house, she surprisingly shouted, "Look, a tomato plant! *Vida en las ruinas*!" Yes, she said that, "Life in the ruins!". The four almost ripe tomatoes hanging on the stem amidst the remnants of what was ones a family's home exemplifies what Ingold (2000) meant when he spoke of landscapes holding traces of all the human and other-than-human lives that have inhabited them. Tsing et al. (2017) would call these *weedy hopes*, the more-than-human attempts to stay alive in a place where worlds have ended. While families were forced to leave, tomatoes popped-up, not in duty to fill human beings' mouths but to bloom for themselves. The afternoon I went down the river with Sarina and her brother, we encountered numerous pumpkins growing along the riverbed. "*Bienvenida en* (welcome to) Narnia, Presents from Mama Naturaleza (Mother Nature)!" Sarina shouted. We took some with us to make soup: a soup in which past and present meet. Perhaps the pumpkin seeds were ones scattered by the hands of a neighbor whose house has since collapsed, on land which has sunken down. For years, no one may have passed by to notice and collect the pumpkins, yet they continued to grow and occupy space. They do not seem to be bothered by the changes in the landscape, they change with them. Just as my *vecinos,* to the dismay of the municipality.

Concluding remarks: Life continues

I have demonstrated how residents of La Esperanza reclaim their agency and resist the municipality's demands to leave the neighborhood - despite social and economic concerns - through a form of contrived ignorance (Lou 2022). Their choice to continue living in the ruins - where their histories and lives are intertwined with the landscape - challenges outsider perceptions of danger or emergency. Illustrating how the residents, living within precarious circumstances, can come to perceive and accept their situation as a normal part of life. By collectively embracing their choice for precarious livelihoods, in the face of the river's dangers, would offer an opportunity for the pluriverse, "to imagine possibility differently" (Escobar 2020, x), to imagine the possibility to choose life in ruins over the conventional notions of what constitutes a desirable way of life. While the municipality bears responsibility for creating the current circumstances and failing to provide alternatives, it also rejects the residents' chosen way of living in ruins. From this refusal, the realization of the pluriverse remains elusive.

The residents navigate their lives by switching between noticing and unnoticing (Lou 2022), employing salvage rhythms *(*Tsing 2015) to protect themselves from the risks of erosion and to stretch their time in La Esperanza for as long as possible. Human residents employ short-term fixes to alter their embodied experience with the precarious landscape, adapting to areas deemed too dangerous to continue inhabiting for humans. In doing so, they are bargaining with risk (Jovanović 2018) given the absence of hope.

This chapter showed the limited presence of El Río Monjas and her rights in the lives of my *vecinos*, as reflected in their daily experiences. The river remains a part of the residents but the relationship has shaped simultaneously with the physical changing of the landscape; as the river sunk deeper down the quebrada through erosion, the residents and river grew apart. Hereby we overcome the division between inner and outer worlds, recognizing the interdependency and interrelatedness of humans and their environment; our surroundings affect us as much as

we affect it (Ingold 2000). As daily interactions between the residents and the river started to disappear, it made space for different interactions, different forms of human and other-than-human lives in the ruins, sometimes made possible through the intervention of humans, sometimes without. Life will continue in the ruins, with or without the legal rights to do so.

Conclusion

In this thesis, I explored how granting legal personhood to the polluted El Río Monjas affects the residents of La Esperanza, a small neighborhood in Quito, Ecuador. Let us flow down my research findings once more.

The story of El Río Monjas changed when the plaintiffs' challenged the dominant narratives (Foucault 1980) concerning its health, which allowed the river to enter the cosmopolitical arena (de la Cadena 2010). What may have seemed to be a revolutionary change - a newly recognized legal being! -, given that the plaintiffs motivations stemmed from their own self-interest in preserving their houses makes evident that El Río Monjas was utilized as a legal instrument to achieve human goals. The municipality, in turn, uses the narrative of how El Río Monjas has changed and what it needs according to the verdict, to support their ongoing truth claims about the residents of La Esperanza. By problematizing (Li 2007) the residents as *invasores* (invaders), blame was shifted towards the inhabitants, holding them accountable for their dire living conditions, and justifying the lack of provided municipal support. By using the river's legal personhood, the municipal agencies decide whom is worthy of help and whom not; whom is included and excluded from the "right to live in a healthy environment and safe habitat" (El Río Monjas 2022, 76). I have shown how both the plaintiffs and the municipality appropriate the moral agency of the river for their own objectives (Boelens et al. 2022; Ingold 2000; Stengers 2010). The results do not fulfil Stone's (1972) criteria for El Río Monjas to truly be acknowledged for its inherent value; the rights predominantly contribute to the aspirations of dominant human groups. While the idea behinds rights of nature are for all beings to live in harmony, marginalized groups still fall victim to social inequality (Fritz-Henry 2022). This brings me back to where I started from with this research, exploring if rights of nature, as form of cosmopolitics, can bring alive the *pluriverse* (Escobar 2020), a world in which different ways

of living, perceiving, thinking can coexist. In this case, is has not done so, the residents of La Esperanza are perceived as "matter out of place" (Douglas 1966), abandoned to their own fate.

El Río Monjas illustrates that Bennett's (2010) vibrant materiality should not be solely understood as a bright, positive, lively force. It also has its dark, ruinous side (Wilhelm-Solomon 2017), which has profoundly transformed life in La Esperanza. Although the river has been granted legal entity status, signifying that it should be cared for, it is experiencing increasing levels of contamination, resulting in its deteriorating condition for my *vecinos* — a form of ruination (Stoler 2008). Without direct physical interaction, the dark vitality of the river continues to vibrate through the bodies and minds of the residents, evoking sensations of irritability (Yael Navaro-Yasin 2012) and resentment (Stoler 2008) directed towards the municipality for its role in shaping the current condition of the river. Given that the municipal agencies are aware of the little positive impact of their actions – placing rocks on the riverbed against the erosion – these rocks symbolize for my *vecinos* the municipality's lack of support and abandonment. Ruination has vanished the bond between the residents and El Río Monjas, it is not a river anymore, it is a reminder of the social inequality they are subjected to. Unrealized governmental promises (Yarrow 2017) of supporting works continue to linger in the minds of the residents, fueling their desire for the river to disappear.

What has become clear from the first two chapters is what the residents of La Esperanza are noticing besides the contamination. Firstly, the truth-productions at play about what they are claimed to be, *invasores*. Secondly, the environmental injustice they are facing by the municipality. Even though feeling abandoned from society, they will not abandon the ruins they call home. The ruinous vibrancy makes that people avoid interaction with the river, as they wish not to be confronted with the place which holds their past. But their houses are places they are not able to leave. Due to the and lack of support from the municipality, staying became a way to reclaim their agency, as response to the discourse which marks them as *invasores*. As they

are not listened to, by keeping quiet and staying, they do not concede to these truth claims. But that is not all, their connection to the place makes them want to continue life in ruins (Tsing 2015). Combining Tsing's work with the arts of unnoticing (Lou 2022), we get *salvage rhythms*, which are not solely temporal forms of coordination but sometimes carry a sense of orientation towards the future. This extends to other elements as well—rats finding their home in the riverbed, cats darting down the slope, tomatoes, pumpkins, flowers, trees, birds, and countless other forms of life that I could not include in this chapter. Future research could focus on exploring the multispecies entanglements within the context of ruinous vitality and legal personhood of natural elements, offering opportunities to envision alternative modes of existence.

My work is built around the perspectives of my interlocutors, and I have strived to faithfully represent their viewpoints. While I have been mindful of avoiding unintended harm to my vecinos, I recognize that my presence served as a reminder of the things they were trying to ignore. Being there sparked discussions, thoughts and emotions regarding their living conditions and their daily practices, which they had become accustomed to not fixating on. Despite anthropologists aims of adapting completely to the life of our interlocutors, our actions always create effects. By staying true to our ethical values, we can at least make sure our influence on the results as little as possible, and our impact on the community as positive as possible.

My purpose was to demonstrate the relevance of anthropological research in the realm of rights of nature, by bringing the lived experiences of the residents of La Esperanza into the debate. Instead of focusing of ways of resistance for nature's rights, I explored what happens after such legal changes have taken place. The case of La Esperanza highlights that the granting of rights of nature does not automatically translate into improved conditions for humans and nonhumans. From the outset, I approached my research with a critical perspective, questioning

the actual impact and changes resulting from these rights. What I discovered was that these rights were not primarily designed to benefit the river itself, and in fact, they exacerbated the challenges faced by certain groups, specifically the people of La Esperanza in the context of this study. The legal personhood bestowed upon nonhuman beings does not eliminate the dichotomy between humans and nonhumans, and it can be employed to selectively benefit certain groups while excluding others, thus revealing the intersectionality of environmental injustice.

Besides, what should be taken away from this thesis is the call for academics in New Materialism to engage more with the dark side of cosmopolitics and vibrancy and the agency of other-than-human actors, and to be critical of what in the relationality between entities, creates such forces dark. Let us continue to be astonished by the liveliness around us but let us not forget the position which allows us to do so, forgetting that life is not shiny for all.

I aimed to illustrate the consequences of granting legal rights to nature, despite being an advocate for such rights. It is crucial to critically assess the practical implications of these legal changes. By exploring the everyday experiences of individuals, my intention was to make these rights more tangible and relatable, going beyond mere words on paper. To breathe life into these rights, which is ultimately what they are meant to do - preserving and protecting life.

Epilogue

> When climbing up the steep ladder with the pumpkin underneath my arm, I hear Sarina's familiar words behind me, "*Cuidate*! It's dangerous!" This time she is not talking to me but she is shouting to a cat running down the slope. "These cats here have no fear, they just live their lives." We looked at each other and smiled.

We smiled as her words - meant for, and about the cat - echoed back at her. "*Cuidate*", take care, she had often told me, yet she herself continues to live her life in the precarious situation of La Esperanza.

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