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A Complicated Portrait of the Portuguese River Paiva: A Photo-Essay

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Abstract

This photo-essay presents a complicated portrait of the Paiva River in Northern Portugal, treating it as an ethnographic subject. It is based on three weeks of fieldwork and forms part of a broader project that traces water in rural imaginaries. Here, however, I focus on underwater analogue photography to explore the material traces a river's water can leave behind on the images I produced. The photographs presented are drawn from two different batches of film: one of them unaltered, and the other boiled in water collected directly from the river. By enacting an amphibious anthropology that surrenders to the materiality of the process, this study reveals the dynamic relationships between water, camera, and person. This techno-animistic approach teases out invisibilities and shifts our perceptions of agency in image-making. Additionally, I use collage elements to synthesise information and create new meanings. Reworking these photos constitutes a powerful experimental research practice that offers new anthropological perspectives. The combination of both strategies helps us rethink the dominant approach to how visual methodologies are applied in the discipline. Underwater worlds are often implied and discussed in water anthropology, but what do they hide that we have not yet considered? What can we uncover when we invite the creative, transformative capacities that are characteristic of water-led spaces into these portraits? What can these new modes of interaction teach us? The resulting images will allow us to co-create the identities of the Paiva landscape in ecologically critical ways.

Key Words: experimental ethnography, visual methodologies, water anthropology, underwater photography, art practices

1. Introduction

'Anthropogenic landscapes are also haunted by imagined futures' (Tsing et al. 2017:G2).

- In the summer of 2023, I spent three weeks in the region surrounding the Portuguese River Paiva conducting fieldwork for my master's thesis. I wanted to intimately get to know the river itself as an ethnographic subject, drawn in by landscape theorisation connected to memory (e.g. Cruikshank 2006) and by sensory ethnographic methodologies (Pink 2015). As a visual practitioner, I saw this as an opportunity to explore underwater photography in a research context.
- Anthropology has a long history of reading and employing photographic images as evidence or proof of the world. Medeiros calls this the photo's 'documental status' (author's translation 2023: 74), and it is undeniable that it played an important part in the birth and conception of the discipline. In his book *Failed Images* (2018), van Alphen uses the term 'straight photography' to refer to this approach: one that aims to provide an objective depiction of a supposed reality, grounding itself in science by seeking truth. Straight photography, then, excludes not only anything that is 'staged' but also any stylistic decisions that might render photographs imperfect (e.g. blurriness or under/overexposure). Contemporary visual anthropologists have worked hard to denounce the many issues surrounding this interpretation of the indexicality of images. Nevertheless, when discussing how photography is utilised as a research methodology for ethnographic work, it seems fair to say that straight photography remains the dominant approach.
- However, I believe that one of the camera's greatest values to researchers is its ability to see differently from the human eye. In this project, this is perhaps made apparent on a first level by taking underwater photography as a focus. In fact, when I first started fieldwork, my use of a camera was justified by my desire to visually reveal the submerged world of the river, therefore allowing the camera to serve as a translator. Essentially, I wanted to see underwater as I saw above, by way of photographs. However, as time passed, my engagement with the river deepened and evolved. I began to question my mode of creation with a camera and the work it was really doing for/with me. Many of the photos I captured are what other anthropologists might call failed images. Yet I do not feel like they have failed me. I quickly discovered that these types of photographs could constitute helpful counter-practices in visual research. This the core of my argument.
- By 'counter-practices' I borrow van Alphen's framing (2018) once again. Generally, I apply it to mean that anything which disrupts the prevalent usage of photography in anthropology can be one. As Medeiros suggests in her book *Animism and Other Essays*, 'it is necessary to understand photography ... as a means of resistance to the discipline, mobilising new attitudes and ways of thinking' (author's translation 2023: 49). This sentiment seems to resonate with the idea of counter-practices. When I reflected on how important it was for the river to become more than 'a supporting actor' (Wagner and Jacka 2018: 7) in my research, I ended up searching for ways that these counter-practices could help me engage directly with it. Here, I must agree with Waterson that 'anthropologists still have much to accomplish in this field' (in Banks and Ruby 2011: 82). I worked with photography with the intention to harness

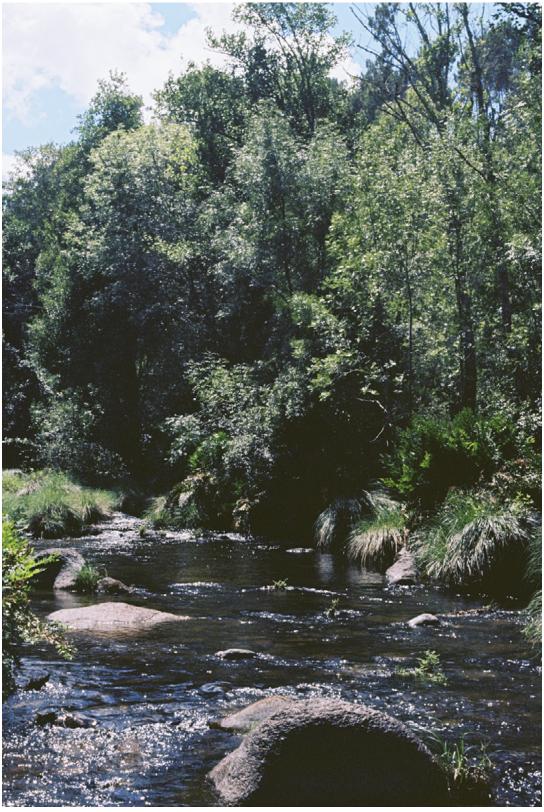
its potentials that go beyond the visual mediation it enables, in an attempt to '[provide] access to otherwise invisible knowledges' (Farnell in Banks and Ruby 2011: 15).

- The first counter-practice I employed was what the analogue photography community calls 'film soups'. Making film soups is an experimental technique that usually involves boiling/soaking film rolls in various substances: these can be anything, ranging from bleach to lemon juice. Film souping creates distortions upon the photographs, which are then developed to reveal the effects of the ingredients; these vary greatly, but can include hue and colour shifts, changes in texture or the appearance of patterns. Photographers incorporate this step into their workflow for several reasons. Katie Mollon, for example, expresses an inclination to experiment with ways to 'describe the feelings associated with place' (see Mollon website, 2024), whereas Patrice Baunov notes his 'desire to play' (see Lomography website, 2020) and Mark Tamer explains that he seeks to 'find a balance between chance and control' (see Tamer website, 2022). Of particular relevance to this essay might be photographer Polina Washington, who once experimented with soaking film in water from the Neva River in Saint Petersburg. She expresses being driven by curiosity about the effects its pollution might have on the photos, though few examples of her results were available online when I encountered her work (see Format website, 2017).
- The photos I used as source material for this essay were all taken by me, but they come from different rolls. Some were left unaltered, while one was boiled in water I collected directly from the stream of the Paiva and left to soak for five hours. By infusing river water, with all its minerals, chemicals, and discharges, into the celluloid, the river's complicated liquid reality imprints upon the photographs, leaving a trace and taking part in its own portrait.
- When I was confronted with the results of this experiment at the end of my fieldwork, my material felt scattered; I struggled to make sense of it. As researchers, we are taught to want to untangle our findings. However, Banks' point that 'visual research methodologies tend towards the exploratory rather than the confirmatory' (2007: 10) strikes me as important to consider here, and throughout the essay. Accordingly, I also decided to introduce collage as a counter-practice, working with it not only to synthesise information but also to further complicate and entangle meanings. I believe that these montages and sequences are ways of posing questions and revealing thought processes, rather than providing one concrete answer.
- It is worth noting the concerns commonly raised vis-à-vis the subjective and artistic practices that anthropology has, as of late, leaned towards. However, it is my view that reflexivity regarding such methods is important and does not take away from the anthropological learning that can come as a result. Notably, it seems to me that 'awareness of the interplay between analytical and artistic reflections might help the researcher make the interpretive processes more transparent, thereby strengthening the validity and relevance of the metasynthesis' (Kinn et al. 2013: 1291). Although my visual renderings arguably make it more apparent, creativity and intuition are fundamental to all types of qualitative research (ibid. 1286), including ethnographic texts. In truth, Banks' emphasis on the exploratory character of visual methodologies strikes me as a fundamental goal for good anthropological

work, and one that aligns with my values as a researcher. This is undoubtedly reflected in this photo-essay.

Ultimately, I argue that these counter-practices can be powerful tools for imagining new entanglements between humans and their environments by harnessing photography's potential for visualisation and imagination rather than representation. Borrowing the ghost as a motif and heuristic from *The Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet* (2017), for how it relates to both water and photographs in terms of their materiality and temporality, I am able to uncover (techno) animistic narratives. Through collage, these ideas collide in the creation of a portrait that is more concerned with '[suggesting] internal dilemmas' (Medeiros 2023: 164) than providing a clear image of what the Paiva is.

2. When we talk about a river, what do we imagine it looks like?

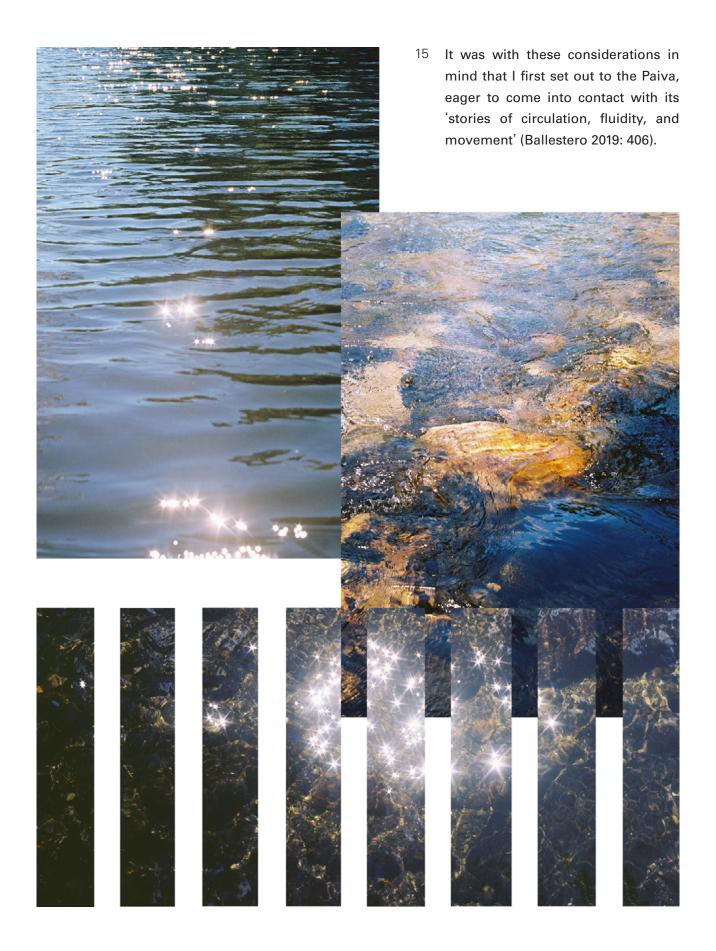


'[Ghosts] tell us about stretches of ancient time and contemporary layerings of time, collapsed together in landscapes.' (Tsing et al. 2017 : G8)

- 10 Born in Serra de Leomil, flowing through the Viseu and Aveiro districts, and eventually draining into the *Rio* Douro, the waters of the Paiva are witness to the 'cosmological and material changes' (Strang 2014: 86) of their own environment, the people who belong to it, and their interchangeable relationships.
- My connection to the region is personal: my grandparents' hometown, a small cluster of villages in Castro Daire called Souto e Alva, is not far from the river. I was first taken swimming in the Paiva by my older cousin when I was a teenager. Ever since then, I have experienced first-hand how rivers can become central actors in conceptions and/or imaginations of place, as well as how dynamic they are as spaces of encounter between humans and non-humans.
- In fact, the field of water anthropology has grown to become diverse and even chaotic in its interdisciplinarity (Wagner and Jacka 2018: 3), with rivers and other bodies of water currently occupying a more 'robust presence' than before (Ballestero 2019: 412).
- As my sustained curiosity towards water-worlds initially stemmed from all the time I spent swimming in the Paiva, it felt natural to choose it as my field site. This means that there are, of course, particularities to the results I have obtained which are specific not only to the Paiva, but to my relationship with it both as an ethnographer and as a person.
- However it may be, I believe that many of the observations made here can carry over to the study of other rivers (and even other environments). Strang in particular has observed how the 'direct sensory experience of river water engenders meanings that are surprisingly consistent, both cross-culturally and historically' (2005, paraphrased in Krause 2023: 24). She has also pointed out how scholars generally find water good to think with (2014: 134), and identified 'the concept of flow [as] central to an ever-proliferating number of theoretical approaches.' (in Wagner and Jacka 2018: 13).



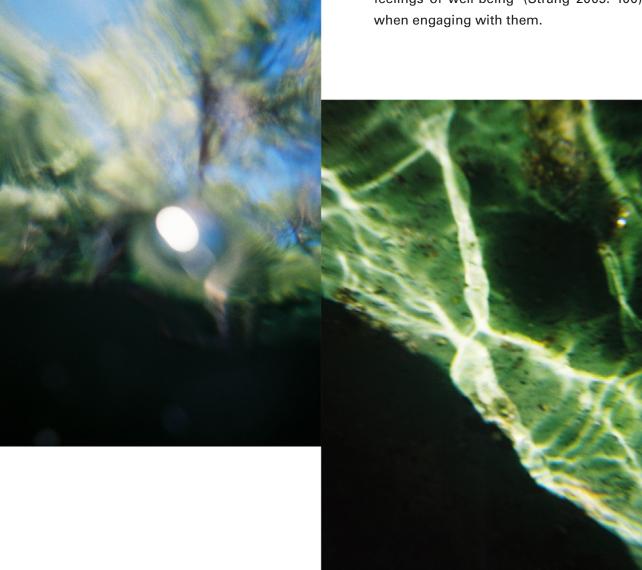




- In *The Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet* (2017), the authors theorise the ghost as the memory that haunts landscapes. The wind serves as a metaphor for this, sweeping over, present and absent, material and fleeting. Throughout the volume, different anthropologists present varied ethnographies, showcasing how searching for the ghost and learning to tell it apart in the landscape can be valuable to an anthropology that concerns itself with the environment. As a framing device, the ghost invites us to look beyond what is immediately materially visible, layering spatiality and temporality in ways more traditional approaches to ethnography may otherwise neglect.
- Though I already knew the Paiva in an embodied way as a swimmer, thinking of it through the anthropological framing of the ghost taught me to look at it differently. Water, much like the wind in *The Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet*, has been shown to animate life by flowing through it (Wagner and Jacka, 2018: 3–4). I wondered, then, can the waters of a river also haunt a landscape, the centuries of their flowing shaping it, along with the ever-changing multispecies entanglements created, made, and unmade? Can water be read as an archive of a river's memory, carrying its past in its flow? What can we learn from the traces these ghosts leave us? We are told that, 'to track [these] histories ... it is not enough to watch lively bodies. Instead, we must wander through landscapes' (Tsing et al. 2017: G5). If we are to take the Paiva's portrait, then to wander through it, we must go underwater.



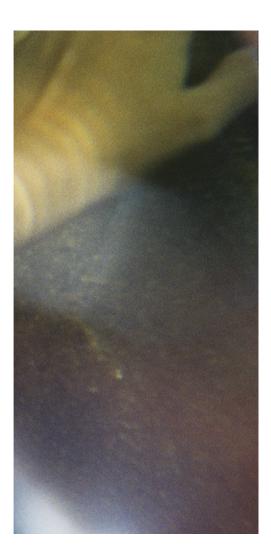
- Thinking about going underwater calls our attention to an implied 'conceptual separation made between land and water' (Strang 2005: 106). The riverscape's material reality pushes us to question this notion; there is an amphibious aspect to placemaking in this context that is made evident by the way land and water converge (Gagné and Rasmussen 2016).
- As I explored the Paiva during fieldwork, I was quickly reminded that the world of wild swimming is a textured one. Even when immersed in water, we are still engaging with the riverbed, our world framed by solid realities, just as much as liquid ones.
 - Therefore, I propose going underwater as a sensory ethnography method (Pink 2015). Waterscapes are often theorised as creative spaces, 'with subjects reporting heightened imaginative activity, relaxation and feelings of well-being' (Strang 2005: 100) when engaging with them.



- We should take the ethnographer into account here, not in terms of positionality as we have before, but by seeing them as a human agent. Contextualising the act of photographing within this textured immersion experience means acknowledging the corporeal sensibility of the researcher's body, which also extends itself into the camera. If we can learn by wandering, can we also learn by photographing?
 - I found that having a camera in my hand directed my gaze and focused my attention, but it also helped me emplace myself:

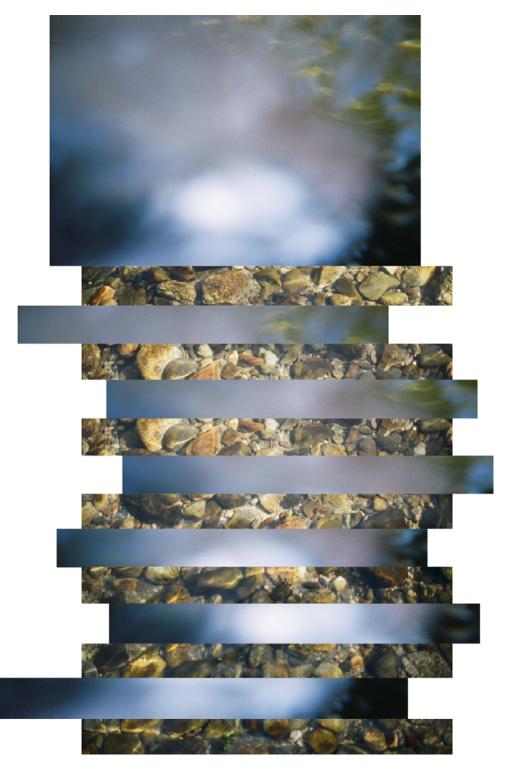






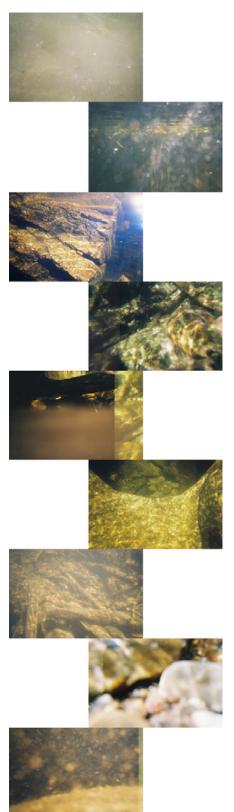
taking a photo of a space gave me a sense of being interwoven with its history.

Nevertheless, navigating the act of photographing underwater was also destabilising. I was used to searching for what to photograph with my eyes, but the river demanded I use other senses to navigate and interact.



This means that this new mode of image-making also required new ways of being and knowing, shaping not only my experience but also the photographs I took as a result.

Visually, this tension is first made clear in the blur, which van Alphen (2018) also lists as one of photography's counter-practices: 'the blur indicates a condition of the image, not of the referent. Even if the blur is the result of motion, ... [it] implies the failure of the image to capture that movement' (119).

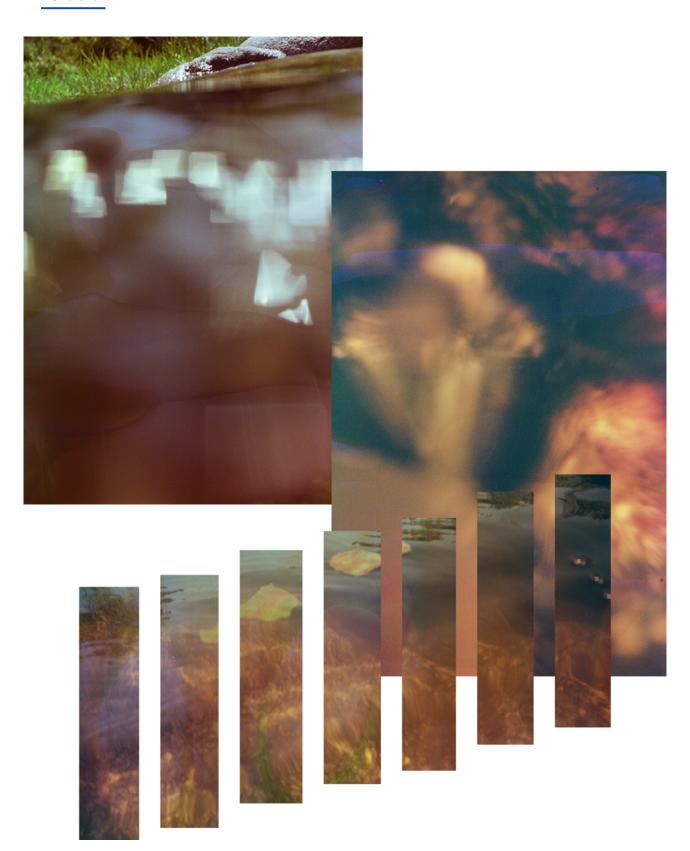


In fact, to the ethnographic instinct, a blurry photo may feel unusable. However, Medeiros urges us to 'urgently [abandon]' (2023: 39) these attitudes, proposing we deconstruct them by '[abolishing] sensorial frontiers' (ibid. 42). And it is true that, when I look back at the underwater images I took of the Paiva, the blur does not feel like a failure. Instead, it constitutes a powerful translation of the constant flow of the river, highlighting both my body's and the camera's interactions with it. In this instance, 'the effect of realism provoked by a photograph' (Medeiros 2023: 76) feels necessary only in so far as it allows me to redirect away from it.

Julia Margaret Cameron was a Victorian photographer known for pioneering the intentional use of the blur in her portraits for similar reasons (van Alphen 2018). She valued its affective qualities, seeking it to capture the essence of her subjects, while also transmitting said essence to those who viewed her photos. Van Alphen praises 'the mode of looking that her images enable' (2018: 127), arguing that through them the 'ghostlike nature of photography is not only ontologically explained, but also materially and visually' made evident (ibid. 133). My portraits of the Paiva aim to do the same, showcasing how going underwater is both an act and a transposable strategy of opening up to ways of knowing that are currently under the surface.

As contemporary anthropologists, our work actively shapes the direction towards which the discipline moves. It is only by reworking the sensibilities we employ practically in our research that we may be able to contribute to a future where human relationships with our environments become more critical. This is important because, just as Jensen and Blok say, 'dwelling is not simply about repeating the past; rather, it concerns the imaginative renewal of a more-than-human "home". Such imaginative renewal ... may require a certain "channelling" through emotional and aesthetic conditions' (2013: 105). Photography can then come in as a 'communication strategy' (Medeiros 2023: 76) capable of not only teaching us to see differently but also allowing us to transmit that experience to others by generating an affective response to the images we make.

3. So, What Happens When We Use This Potential of Photographs to Complicate the Portrait?



- The images we are beginning to see are from the batch of film soaked in river water. Much like the blur did before (and continues to do throughout), the warmer yellow and pink undertones, alongside the new wave-shaped and scratchy textures we are now confronted with, also hint at the presence of a ghost; of the river's voice as a counter-practice.
- Through these photographs, 'the very substance of water is being reexamined' (Ballestero 2019: 406). Strang rightfully points out how 'Cartesian [visions] of water as H2O' (Strang 2005: 106) can constrict our understanding of it. By looking at these images alongside those that were not soaked, we are able to not only visualise but also imagine the previously unseen memories that constitute the flow of the Paiva. Indeed, there is something powerful about making a ghost visible.
- Medeiros (2023) seems to think so as well: if Tsing, Swanson, Gan, and Bubandt (2017) use the ghost to theorise landscape, she uses it to theorise photography. In her book *Animism and Other Essays* (2023), Medeiros speaks of the portrait as 'a space for the assembly of ghosts' (author's translation: 160). It is
 - worth pointing out that she is not the first to speak of the spectral dimension of photographs: Sontag, notably, has done so too (2008 [1977]) and, of particular relevance, Sconce has described celluloid as a 'haunted space' (2000: 295).
- 31 Thus far, the photos that permeated this essay told us familiar stories, not only about the river, but about photography itself. However, the ghosts in these river-soaked images help us dismantle and challenge the material realities at the porous frontier of encounters between humans and non-humans.
- It is exactly because of the fluid specificities of water that I was able to undertake this experiment in the first place: it infiltrates and mixes with other materials—in this case, the celluloid—transforming and mutating them in the process. But it is also by taking creative advantage of the material intricacies of analogue photography that we get here in the first place.
- It would be a mistake, then, to describe this photoessay as the result of an encounter simply between a human and a landscape. As I have been arguing, the presence of the camera and the celluloid means that this encounter is also technological.





- I said before that 'there are still ways in which we, as anthropologists, are neglecting the potentials of visual media to enhance our studies' (Waterson in Banks and Ruby 2011: 98). I believe Medeiros offers a way to counter this when she describes photographs as 'wild machines dominated by a powerful animistic ontology' (author's translation 2023: 38).
- To Medeiros, animism serves her 'as a resource for contemporary thought' (author's translation, 2023: 17); it is a "way of thinking and presenting the world" (author's translation, 2023: 19). She also expertly ties the lack of human sensibility towards the animal and vegetal world to the work that 'the visual arts are nowadays responsible for and bastions of' (author's translation 2023: 40), deeming that perspective as part of a neo-animistic movement (ibid.).



- Her suggestion of the camera's animistic potential as a tool for reworlding is not dissimilar to Jensen and Blok's view of techno-animism (2013). In their article on 'the enabling powers of non-human agencies' (ibid. 88), the authors offer techno-animism as an alternative framing to the actor-network theory, criticising the latter for 'its implicit Eurocentric biases' (ibid. 86). While a proper dive into their argument would require a discussion of the nature-culture debate, something that unfortunately escapes the scope of this photo-essay, it remains important to point out insofar as their techno-animism offers a theoretical basis for what Medeiros argues that cameras and photographs can do. When I employ (techno)animism as a concept here, I borrow not, then, from the traditional anthropological definition of it, which has a 'winding and troubled history' (ibid. 88), but from Medeiros' as well as Jensen and Blok's own usage.
- 37 My contrasting images of the Paiva reveal 'how an animist sensibility is consequential for a variety of practices ... [when it interacts with] technological imaginations' (ibid. 96), highlighting how 'too much is lost from analytical sight if, in John Tresch's evocative phrase, we "deny technological things their own demented ontopoetics" (ibid.).

'As artists, we conjure magical figures, weave speculative fictions, animate feral and partial connections' (Tsing et al. 2017:G12).



For Medeiros, visualising and imagining the trace, the ghost, in photographs is key to seeing them as animistic entities. While she might not directly call it that, she adopts a techno-animistic ontology nonetheless: it is the trace that denounces the 'qualities of aliveness' (ibid. 102). This is what I argue materialises in these riverscape photographs.

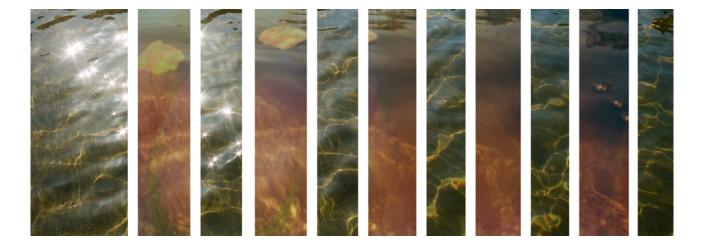
Which leads into an important question:



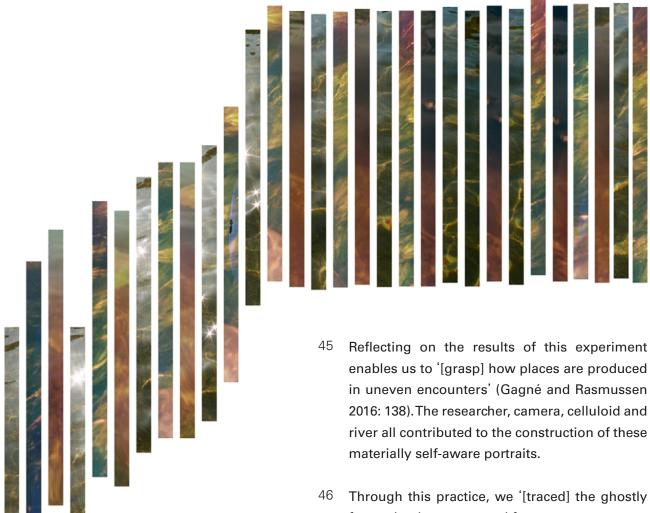
'In what ways can the animism that is intrinsic to [photographs] serve us nowadays (as it once did before)... to feed other forms of rationality, ... that will allow us to open ourselves to the world in politically decentralised, relational manners?' (author's translation 2023: 38).

4. Reaching a Complicated Portrait

- In response to the dominant photographic approach in the field, I offer the idea of the portrait; not as a goal, but as an exploratory exercise towards connectivity. Borrowing the workflow and mindset of an artist, I subvert traditional framings in favour of new ways of thinking with a camera. I achieve this by focusing on experimentation and leveraging analogue photography's material processes as we've seen thus far. However, I take it a step further through collage. The result is an intentionally layered, fragmented, and even damaged portrait.
- The conclusions I reach here are not merely the product of my time doing fieldwork; they also arise from my time spent with these photographs on the page, questioning them as images by using them with and against one another. While this was done alongside theory, I would not have connected the same dots, seen the same entanglements, or raised the same dilemmas without the visuals. I would not have been able to envision, to imagine, what these same traces and ghosts could look like. The images have shaped my thought process because I've approached them with a different sensibility, but also because collage allows for a different mode of engagement, '[highlighting] that the choice of image and means of display [is] as critical as the production of the photographs' (Ravetz 2007: 257).
- Among everything we learn from these counter-practices, then, the most significant takeaway for me is '[entering] into an imaginative dialogue with photography that takes into account not only its indexical properties ... but how images "want", and the potential dialogue this opens up between photography, reality, representation and audience' (Ravetz 2007: 262).



- The way Ravetz brings the audience into the conversation is something we touched upon briefly earlier when discussing the affective capabilities of the blur. This can be reapplied to collages, which I believe is crucial in answering Medeiros's question of how the animistic capabilities of photographs can serve us as 'agents of new visions' (author's translation 2023: 45).
- I ask whether, in a world saturated with images, we should be looking into this potential to more effectively converse with our audiences. The notion that 'images do "work" (Banks 2007: 12) is not new. So, if we believe these photographs have unlocked some animistic potential, therefore inviting the ghost into the visual, can cameras, can images, be a means to relate to our environments? If anthropology aims to be oriented towards the future amidst a "new" animism debate (Jensen and Blok 2013: 84), creating visually impactful work that fosters imagination seems necessary to forge transformative and critical connections with both technology and the environment. Medeiros says it herself: 'the animistic potential of images ... makes using them to think critically about the world possible (author's translation 2023: 46).
- This photo-essay's '[enthusiastic embrace of] the image's propensity to suggest untruths' (Ravetz 2007: 256) goes against the grain by challenging the dominant approach to photography in traditional anthropology. Nevertheless, the use of art practices results in an innovative piece of work, contributing to an unusual yet insightful ethnographic record of the Paiva. By embracing these 'failed' traces and collating them, therefore reconstructing the landscape on the page to be (re)experienced, we gain new, more sensorial perspectives on the life of a river. This demonstrates how images that work in ways that the eye cannot are necessary to generate powerful connections to the world.
- By engaging directly with the Paiva as an ethnographic subject, I gave it 'free reign ... to inspire our imaginations' (Wagner and Jacka 2018: 9), framing its responses through the lens of a photographic portrait due to the 'animistic force [this notion] incorporates' (author's translation Medeiros 2023: 154).



forms that have emerged from past encounters between people, plants, animals, and soils' (Tsing et al. 2017: G2) in the underwater life of the river, '[avoiding] taking for granted what water is in the first place' (Ballestero 2019: 406). Furthermore, however, we have also sought to demonstrate the ways in which both Medeiros' and Jensen and Blok's theories regarding the animism present in technology enables humans to (re)learn how to understand and care for their relations with the non-human world.



Ultimately, it was by thinking with water and photographs and channelling visual meaning-making strategies that I was able to create relational links between the river's past and its imagined future. Allowing the riverscape to participate by layering its ghostly self over the portraits sediments the camera as an animistic mediator and the photograph as the ultimate ghost. Photography, then, when it embraces its visualisation potentials through a mindful employment of counter-practices, can serve as a transformative ethnographic method, not only translating life but also animating it anew.

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