

Dwelling in Political Landscapes

Contemporary Anthropological Perspectives

Edited by Anu Lounela, Eeva Berglund and Timo Kallinen



STUDIA FENNICA ANTHROPOLOGICA 4

The publication has undergone a peer review.



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Cover Design: Timo Numminen
EPUB: Tero Salmén

ISBN 978-951-858-087-7 (Print)
ISBN 978-951-858-114-0 (PDF)
ISBN 978-951-858-113-3 (EPUB)

ISSN 0085-6835 (Studia Fennica)
ISSN 1796-8208 (Studia Fennica Anthropologica)

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.21435/sfa.4>

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or by scanning this QR code with your mobile device.

BoD – Books on Demand, Norderstedt, Germany 2019

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The political side of the landscape: Environmental and cosmological conflicts from the Huave point of view

Making room for power in landscape theory

In recent decades landscape, reconsidered from a phenomenological perspective, has been used as a strategic and powerful ethnographic tool, one that is multifaceted and flexible, and capable of accommodating different forms of agency, materiality and sensorial perception (Feld and Basso 1996; Hirsch and O'Hanlon 1995; Ingold 2000). In this chapter, we would like to push the phenomenology of landscape to engage the issue of power and politics with two purposes in mind: firstly, to explore the theoretical implications of connecting the concept of power with that of landscape; secondly, to better understand processes that originate from the conflicting management of the landscape.

This approach, which is simultaneously empirical and theoretical, emerges directly from our fieldwork with the Huave, fishermen and peasants numbering about 27,000 scattered in four main communities: San Mateo del Mar, San Francisco del Mar, Santa Maria del Mar and San Dionisio del Mar, settled in a lagoon environment facing the Pacific Ocean, on the Isthmus of Tehuantepec (Oaxaca, Mexico).² Their rejection of a mega-scale wind

- 1 The whole chapter is the result of comparing and sharing the fieldwork experiences of the authors (Francesco Zanotelli in San Dionisio del Mar since 2009 and Cristiano Tallè in San Mateo del Mar since 1999). Introduction and Conclusions equal contribution; the second and the fourth paragraphs by Cristiano Tallè; the third and the fifth paragraphs by Francesco Zanotelli. This is part of the ongoing research project *Eco-frictions of the Anthropocene* (2017–2020), funded by the Italian Ministry of Education and Research (PRIN 2015–20155TYKCM–SH5). The writing process began with Zanotelli presenting at the session *Landscape ontologies in collision: food, politics and (non)human transformations in the neoliberal era*, convened by Tony Knight and Laura Montesi, at Helsinki's Biennial Conference of the Finnish Anthropological Society in 2015, and he would like to thank them their kind invitation to participate.
- 2 On the 7th of September, and again on the 19th September 2017, the inhabitants of the Isthmus of Tehuantepec were struck by two powerful earthquakes. We hope that they will soon recover their serenity despite the inevitable landscape and social transformation.

farm project designed to exploit the energy of the strong winds blowing over the lagoon, is exemplary of territorial conflicts being not just about land, but also about landscape. We consider that the concept of landscape, together with the classic notion of land, is a powerful analytical instrument for deepening our understanding of Mexican environmental conflicts and the huge processes of land-grabbing, typical of contemporary struggles in Latin America and beyond.

Including landscape in the analysis is particularly urgent in light of prior traditions of Latin American studies into land and territory (Escobar and Alvarez 1992). Early research conducted with indigenous groups was traditionally characterised by the idea of a strong connection between land and the peasant system of production (Redfield 1956; Stavenhagen 1969; R. Bartra 1974; A. Bartra 1979; Warman 1980); a second, politically and economically informed, stage of anthropological inquiry has focussed on the link between territorial autonomy and indigenous citizenship (De la Peña 1995; Bartolomé 1997; Pacheco de Oliveira 1998; Surralés and García Hierro 2004; Burguete Cal y Mayor 2010; Venturoli and Zanotelli 2013). This political and economic tradition in anthropology has rarely dialogued with the specifically ethnological perspective on cosmovision and indigenous knowledge, or where it has, it has lent itself to naïve interpretations of indigenous environmentalism (Conklin and Graham 1995; Albert 2004; Turner 2000). Only recently has the role of natural entities been investigated in a framework of cosmo-political anthropology (de la Cadena 2010), which brings together three interconnected dimensions of analysis: the neo-liberal specifics of natural resource exploitation; phenomenological and embodied effects on territories and people; moral economy and political resistance (Scott 1976) that includes non-human agents.

Taking a similar anthropological perspective, we propose the concept of landscape to develop a more intimate understanding of contemporary eco-political frictions (Tsing 2005). In other words, the material and sensorial dimension of the landscape is an important characteristic of the local conflicts, which must be considered in conjunction with the economic and political asymmetries concurrently at play at different scales.

The most interesting challenges of this approach include connecting local conceptions and experiences of landscape with complex macro processes (late industrialisation, the management of green energy, land grabbing, national and transnational politics) and the indelible imprints that they leave in “disturbed landscapes” (see Lounela, this book).

Thus, we devote the first section to illustrating the procedures that the Huave have put in place to conceive and describe the landscape in which they live. Through an examination of aspects of the Huave linguistic encoding of landscape forms, we find that the landscape is conceived as a never-ending process of materialisation: it is the precarious result of the constant co-agency between nonhumans (meteorological, geological and liquid elements) and humans, which interact at different timescales.

The significance of this perspective is further revealed in the next section, which considers a second dimension: the representation of the landscape in Huave mythology and rituals, where the landscape is the resulting concretion



Figure 1. The lagoon region of the Isthmus of Tehuantepec: in red, the main Huave settlements and the ritual place of Cerro Cristo; in blue, the main Zapotec and mestizo cities and settlements (Image elaborated by the authors with Google Earth).

of political negotiations between humans (especially religious and political authorities) and nonhumans (sea, lagoon, wind, lightning, clouds, animals), a kind of negotiation characterised by conflict and its resolution.

In the third section we stress how the relationship of Huave people with the water-scape and aero-scape is intimately connected with forms of their ethnic identification, for example in a contrasting opposition with the neighbouring Zapotecs, who are identified with inner-land and farms. In this framework, we will discuss the hypothesis that the local agrarian conflicts that historically characterise inter-ethnic relations here, can be explained on the basis of a historical process of ‘ethno-naturalisation’.

Finally, we take the present strenuous opposition to the huge eolian industry spreading wind farms all over the region, as a struggle for indigenous sovereignty that cannot be reduced to an exclusive right over a plot of land, but embraces the whole web of aquatic and air agents shaping the landscape.

As we stress in the conclusions, the radical and abrupt transformation of the landscape caused by the high density of turbines, together with the massive occupation of land that they entail, assumes an immediate political significance for indigenous people living on the edge of the lagoons. This process of ‘landscape grabbing’ seems to endanger indigenous self-determination in a more radical way than ever before. Moving from ethnography towards a more theoretical perspective, we consider that attending to the ‘political side’ of the landscape helps us to better understand the intimate reasons for opposition to the so-called sustainable energy industry: these go beyond the concerns of twentieth-century political economics, such as struggles founded on a quantitative conception of land.

The landscape from the Huave point of view: Co-agency and metamorphosis

The landscape that the Huave inhabit is a hydro-geographic *continuum* where forms of land and water interpenetrate in a fluctuating way (Zizumbo and Colunga 1982). The alternation of heavy rains (typically from June to September) with a dry period of strong winds (about November to February) creates a patchy lagoon landscape that can change dramatically within a year or a cycle of several years, depending on intensity of rainfall, the strength of ocean currents and waves, and the force of the northern winds that dry the stretches of water and move sand dunes. Historically lagoon fishing has been the main way of appropriating this metamorphic landscape, coexisting, wherever possible, with livestock farming (cattle and sheep) and agriculture.³ Although fishing is practiced today in a market regime it still retains some of the territorial characteristics of a foraging economy. The lagoon fishing is traditionally practiced with dragnet and trammel, and requires an extensive mobility (coextensive to the resources). It involves walking along the banks and through the fords, or moving with canoes into the lagoons. We could define this type of fishing as a ‘walking fishing’, in and out of the water, which is at the same time a technique of the body and an expert use of places: one learns to fish while learning to move in the lagoons, one learns to move in the lagoons while learning to fish.

In this economy, the agency of meteorological elements in shaping the landscape is therefore very tangible, not only on a geological timescale, but also on a human one of months, years or decades. The morphogenesis of landscape is indeed a recurrent topic of cosmological memory as constructed in mythological tales, as well of biographical memory and everyday conversations. In this context, the local way of speaking of the landscape seems to constantly reflect a kind of “interanimation” (Basso 1996: 107–108) between human and the meteorological agency.⁴ This interanimation is detectable at every level of local discourse, from the linguistic coding in single words to the construction of stories.

The Huave lexicon does not have a unitary concept that corresponds to the English landscape. Rather, there is a lexical mechanism that, by connecting body part terms to topographical terms (aquatic and terrestrial)

3 This ethnographic description of the conception of landscape refers specifically to San Mateo del Mar (notably the linguistic documents studied as part of Cristiano Tallè’s fieldwork). Its territory is very exposed to the hydro-morphology of the ocean and the lagoon, and fishing rather than agriculture predominates. By contrast, the fertile lands of the Eastern territories of San Dionisio del Mar and San Francisco del Mar give a major role to agriculture, together with fishing.

4 Basso’s notion of interanimation refers to the experience of sensing places: “As places animate the ideas and feelings of persons who attend to them, these same ideas and feelings animate the places on which attention has been bestowed” (1996: 107).



Figure 2. A lagoon close to the shore in the surroundings of San Mateo del Mar (picture by Cristiano Tallè).

(Tallè 2017), defines the metamorphic forms of the local environment and their affordance for human actions (Gibson 1979; Ingold 2000; 2007).⁵

For example, in the *ombeayiiüts* ('our mouth') of San Mateo del Mar,⁶ the landform of ford is encoded by the compound term *o-mal iüt* (his-head of land/the land's head) to indicate the land summit that is submerged where a sand dune, crossing a lagoon in its seasonal movement driven by the northern winds, forms an elevation on the lagoon bottom. Focusing on the vertical discontinuity underwater, the term echoes a very relevant sensory-

5 The term *püjchiün* indicates the specific topographic morphology of an open and level ground (from the verb *apiüüch* /to extend/). Only recently has this term acquired the visualist and general connotation of landscape, understood as an extensive view of land scenery in front of the eyes of the viewer (Flavia Cuturi, personal communication, 2016).

6 The Huave language is an isolated language that is extremely endangered in three of its four variants: the *ombeayiiüts* (literally: our mouth) of San Mateo del Mar is spoken by more than 95% of the inhabitants, the *ombeayiiüjts* of San Dionisio del Mar by around 50% of the population, the *umbeayajts* of San Francisco del Mar by around 15%, the *umbeayüts* of Santa Maria del Mar by less than 10% of people (INEGI census 2010). The pronunciation of the phonemes in *ombeayiiüts* of San Mateo del Mar is the following (according to the International Phonetic Association): *ch* = [tʃ] (as in Spanish), *ü* = [œ] (an intermediate sound between *u* and *e*), *x* = [ʃ] (like English *sh*), *j* is aspirated (as in Spanish) and *w* is a semi-consonant (as in English *water*), *g* = [ɣ] (hard *g* as in Spanish *ga, go, gu, gue, gui*). When it is useful for a better understanding of their meaning, the words are segmented into their morphological components, followed in brackets by literal and free translations, such as: *o-mbeay ndek* (his-mouth lagoon / the bank of the lagoon).

motor experience in local fishing practice, which involves wading through a stretch of water, where one can perceive (first by foot, then by eye) *niüing ajliiy awaag* (where it is dry). The lagoon bank is encoded by the compound term *o-mbeay ndek* (his-mouth of lagoon/the lagoon's mouth) or *o-mbeay yow* (his-mouth of water/the water's mouth) to indicate the perimeter of the bodies of water, such as a mouth top view. This term, marking the variable perimeter of the lagoon, resonates with a different experience of walking, one that is very common in the daily movements of every lagoon fisherman, namely walking along the coastline (*ajüy mbeaymbeay* /walking coast-to-coast/). Differentiated again from the bank of a lagoon, the ocean beach is encoded by the body-part term *o-mal* (his-head), namely *o-mal wiiüd* (his-head of the sand (dune)/the crest of the sand): the term indicates the emerging profiles of the shore as it is moulded by the perpetual undertow of ocean waves, forming a crest. Marking this prominent profile of the sand, the term records a specific experience of walking, which is to say 'walking up' (on the top) and 'out of the waves,' going to fish or looking for turtle's eggs (Tallè 2016: 97–129).

This linguistic encoding of a water-land-landscape *continuum* does not label topographic forms as a series of discrete objects existing 'out there' (on a geological scale) well separated from human experiences 'within' (on a historic scale). Instead, it seems to reflect a fleeting morphology of the landscape (the shifting sand dune forming fords, the rhythmic 'to and fro' of the undertow moulding the shore, the intermittent filling and emptying of the lagoon basins) resounding with the sensory-motor experiences of humans moving within it.

On the other hand, walking seems to be a prototype of the agency that encompasses many processes, human and nonhuman. In the *ombeayiüts* of San Mateo del Mar, the verb *ajüy* (walk) defines processes and 'paths' in many different domains of experience: the motion of human bodies moving on foot but also the gliding of canoes within the lagoons (*ajüy müx* /walks the canoe/), women's weaving (*ajüy mandel* /walks the napkin/) and men's weaving of fishing nets (*ajüy ndok* /walks the fishing net/), as well the movement of lightning during summer storms (*ajüy teat monteok* /walks father lightning/), the sun's movement across the sky (*ajüy teat nüüt* /walks father Sun/), the movement of the sand dunes driven by north winds (*ajüy wiiüd* /walks the sand dune/) and more. Thus, at a timescale relevant to human and nonhuman lives, path (*tiiüd*) and footprint (*akwüüch oleaj* /tread the foot/) are better concepts for expressing the emic sense of temporality of this morphogenetic landscape.

A prototype of how this kind of meteorological and human co-agency shapes the landscape exists in local mythology. Meteorological phenomena are represented in myths as persons, with specific social, moral and emotional characteristics (Lupo 1997), but their morphogenetic agency over the landscape is not described as 'demiurgic'. That's to say, it is not described as an intentional (ego-centred) act of creation, moulding or production, but rather as the solidified imprint of the motion of meteorological bodies in resonance with parallel co-actions of one (or more) human and animal

bodies.⁷ What follows is an excerpt from a larger narrative, focused on the specific morphology of the landscape that is such a consequence of the interaction between humans and nonhuman agents. It concerns a ravine, called *nots weak* (one horn), like the gigantic one-horned snake that dug it:

[...] *kiaj ajmbaj a tiik aaga ndiik, nadaam ajmbaj a tiik [...] nadam aaga xeech tiik, nadaaaam; tamb at nej yow, nej maw chük ngana a ndiik, ndoj teat Dios ngomüüch lugar, kiaj chük mandooig onik, mandooig onik ngana, tilüy iün chük matüch miyow nej, tawün nej andüy kawak.*

[...] there the snake breaks the mountain, makes a large breach in the mountains [...] it is huge that mountain, really huge; [the snake] went like water, the snake went out – it is said – but Father God (an old man-lightning) didn't allow it, he cuts off his neck there – it is said – now he cuts off the neck, he came at once – it is said – to reject his water, he pushed him southwards.

[...] *Aaga kiaj mejaw nganüy kiaj ngitow aaga jarraw kiaj, asoik nots weak, awün aood andüy tiüt ndiik, nadam ata tiik niüng ajmbaj, nadam yow ajoy, nadam, aag naw tiül tiik kiaj, hasta tamb ngana nej, teat Dios nepal andüy kawak [...] Tandüüb andüy kawak, aag tamb ngineay awün nendondonrojpiy, jarraw netejngieyay ajntsop mal wiiüd, ijaw ngineay [...]. Tajntsop, tajntsop mal wiiüd, apmatüch kiaj... mbi kos nangaj nadam ndek, ngoj ajponch ngwa? tatüch mal wiiüd, aag lamapal ombeay niüng awün zanja.*

[...] Now you can see there how big this ravine is, it is called “One Horn”, the snake digs down a ravine as big as the breach of the mount, he carries a large flow of water, big, he comes out there from the inside of the mountain, until the moment He went, until the moment when Father God (an old man-lighting) went to block [his path] southwards [...]. He continued southwards, and dug a channel stream, a curved ravine, led to the head of the sand (the ocean bank), you can see how it is [...]. Led to the head of the sand (the ocean bank)... but because of the great sacred sea (ocean) and its waves, the mouth where comes out the channel was closed.⁸

The landscape from the Huave point of view: Cosmology and power

As mentioned, the mythology of the Huave makes numerous references to the weather and to atmospheric elements. Furthermore, in the mythology, these elements are usually engaged in conflictive situations.

It means that through the language of myth, the narrator is talking about the locally shared ideology of power. This aspect is fully reported in the analysis elaborated by Lupo (2015) of the myth of *the son of the silly*

7 In San Mateo del Mar the same term *ombas* (which means ‘body’ but also ‘form’, ‘color’ among other things) indicates the human anatomical body as well its non-human *alter ego* (animal or atmospheric), which are semantically assimilated because they are existentially and agentively coupled (compare with *nagual* in Mesoamerican ethnographic literature, e.g. Tranfo 1979).

8 Extract from a myth narrated in 2006 by the elder *teat* (Father/Mr.) Juan Zaragoza (Tallè 2016: 258–259).

town-crier (*el hijo del pregonero tonto*), collected in San Mateo del Mar. Like many other local stories, it narrates the fight between cosmic forces: on one side lightning (*monteok*) and his ally the southern maternal wind (*mümncharrek*) that bring rain and prosperity; on the other side the horned snake (*ndiük*) that is able to transform itself into a hurricane, endangering the territory. The possibility of reproducing the lagoons, the fish, the shrimps, the harvest – in one word life – depends on the balancing of these forces.⁹ In the myth, the fight ends with the recovery of unity and harmony: control over the hurricane is gained, but only temporarily. Transferred to the social realm, the same myth talks about the power of one special child, who is able to get in touch with the snake and to obtain knowledge about the flood and the stormy wind, surpassing even the village authorities in wisdom. Then he dies, his death caused by his audacity. When he dies, sacrificed to the snake, he then transforms himself into a red cloud full of rain. In Lupo's interpretation, taking a perspective intimately related to the social life of the community, the myth represents the conflict between the young and old generations over power (Lupo 2015: 111).

The same conflictual dynamic that involves power and meteorology is at the heart of another myth (Warkentin and Olivares 1947: 230–231), but on the scale of the huge territory encompassing the four Huave municipalities and some neighbouring Zapotec communities. It tells of the robbery of some bells from Juchitán (the Zapotec municipal centre) by two Huave who were also able to make clouds on which they could carry the holy bells to San Mateo, where the bells are guarded carefully to this day. Cuturi (2003a: 41–45) reports a different version of the same myth focusing on the origin of the Huave villages. It was because of the risk of a big flood announced by San Vicente (the eponym of the municipality of Juchitán) that the Huave population left the original site of Huazantlán del Río (today a hamlet near San Mateo del Mar) and went to found the villages of San Dionisio del Mar and San Francisco del Mar. Because of the contrast between the saints, San Mateo went to ask for the help of southern lightning, which cut off the head of San Dionisio, though not completely.

We conclude this discussion with an analysis of a myth that is widespread in the region (Ramírez Castañeda 1987: 50–51; Millán 2003: 62), which, like those discussed above, is about a confrontation over knowledge, wealth, power and landscape imprints. But it refers to an even higher territorial level where colonial and postcolonial relations between the Huave and the central government are played out (Zanotelli 2016: 174–188). This narrative tells the story of a child prodigy born to a virgin. The version we report, collected in San Dionisio del Mar, refers to the child as *ñutyok* (the one who does exceptional things).¹⁰ His special nature is underlined by his capacity to multiply fish and

9 See Signorini (2008: 381–388) for a general explanation of the conflictual relationship between *teat monteok* (father lightning) and its enemy *ndiük* (water snake) in the Huave mythology.

10 This has been collected by Francesco Zanotelli in San Dionisio del Mar in 2009 from the voice of *teat* Otilio Castellanos, an 87 year old man of authority. In San Mateo del Mar, the same myth is well-known as *ndejaj*, the orphan.

crops, to build a church in just one night, to invent all the machinery that corresponds to the idea of modernity among the Huave: helicopters, ships, trains and so on. However, the child prodigy's fame reaches the *gobierno's* ear,¹¹ a military force from outside of the Huave territory that wants to catch, imprison and take him out of the Huave lands, towards Mexico City.¹² The Huave ancestors are unable and unwilling to protect the *ñutyok* against those who want to take him away, so the child decides to escape and to bring his exceptional abilities and wealth to other people all over the world. Before leaving the region, he leaves to his people unmistakable signs of his passage, such as the unfinished church of San Dionisio Pueblo Viejo and the imprints of his little hands on the inside of a cave in Cerro Cristo, a desert island located in the northern part of the Laguna Superior. In a similar version collected in San Mateo del Mar (Millán 2007: 207) the child prodigy, with his imprints, creates the coastal lagoons, the mountains and salt marshes of the coast, and he also leaves his moustache from which shrimps are created.

This brief journey into Huave mythology allows us to add something to the character of the landscape as perceived from the Huave point of view: not only is it shaped in the continuous co-agency between humans and nonhuman elements, it also results from the effects of confronting forces, which can have potentially disruptive impacts. The implication is that it is worth being careful about behaving correctly.

The spillover between moral and political behaviour is evident in the realm of ritual work, as can be seen by examining the administration of public life. Like elsewhere in the region, in San Mateo del Mar this involves two hierarchical systems of authority: civil (linked to national institutions) and religious (linked to the Catholic Church).¹³ These authorities have common ritual obligations aimed at the reproduction of life in connection with aquatic manifestations (sea, rain, lagoons). The high point of this system falls before and after Holy Week, when, following special ritual techniques (Millán 2007: 139; Signorini 2008), the mayor and other civil authorities bring their offerings to the sea and the lagoons. The mayor's conduct and moral reputation in this context impact the fishing economy since he is seen here as more or less fit to rule the meteorological and ecological cycles of water exchange between the Ocean and the lagoons, and so to propitiate an abundant or poor rainy season (Tallè 2016: 235–236).

By contrast, in San Dionisio del Mar, the political and religious authorities are neatly separated. The religious field is in flux, with a high level of conversions from syncretic Catholicism to several variants of Protestantism (Montesi 2016: 125). However, among the rituals of the annual Catholic calendar, there is one that seems to be respected by everyone, and supported

11 The Spanish word was used while the narrator was speaking in *ombeayiiijts*.

12 In the version collected by Ramírez Castañeda (1987) in San Mateo del Mar, the orphan (*ndeaj*) was initially brought to Mexico City to be educated in Spanish schools.

13 This dual political system takes varied forms but is well-known in Americanist ethnology as the *cargo* system. See Pelletier, Dehouve, Hémond (2011) for a comparative review.

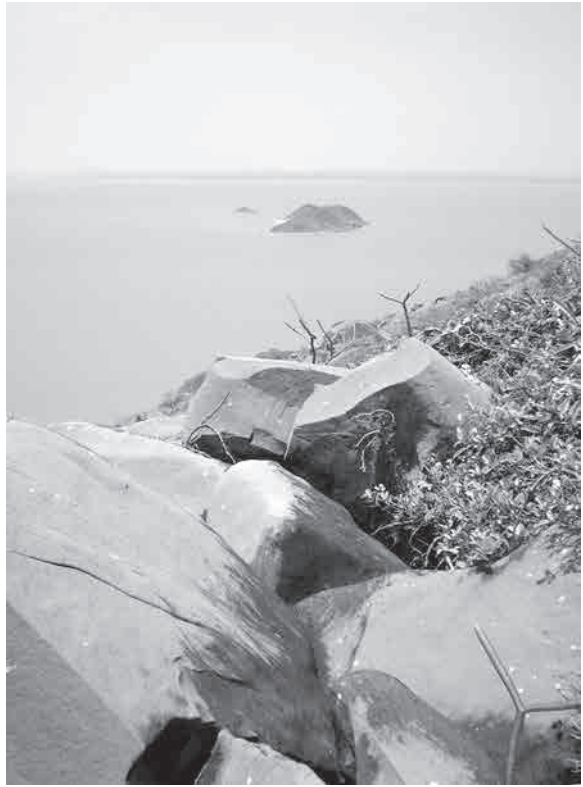


Figure 3. The island of Cerro Cristo (Christ Mountain), a ritual place in the northern part of the Laguna Superior (picture by Caterina Morbiato).

by the political authorities (whether they are Catholics or not): every Holy Week, the “Catholic Society”¹⁴ organizes a sailing trip through the lagoons with the aim of reaching *Cerro Cristo* (Christ Mountain) in order to celebrate one day and one night of rainmaking rituals. The island of *Cerro Cristo* is the setting for the myth sketched above.¹⁵

Thus, as well as in the realm of mythology, it also seems that the co-agency between humans and nonhuman entities is at work in the rituals performed by political and/or religious authorities. Echoing the ethnographers cited above, we conclude that these specific rites performed in known places, and cosmologically located in the landscape, aim to maintain a delicate balance between excessive rain, abundant rain and scarce rain, a condition that is inherently unstable, ecologically, morally and politically.

Disputing ethnic frontiers: Landscape or land?

On the basis of the ethnographic outline above, it could be said that for the Huave the political control of their ‘dwelling space’ has happened more

14 It is an unofficial association of people from the community who play ritual roles in the ceremonies and liturgies of the Catholic Church.

15 Francesco Zanotelli’s fieldwork notes, August 2010, San Dionisio del Mar.

through the careful monitoring of the landscape and its morphogenetic cycles than through the control of land. In other words, although they have always had a 'landscape politics' played out in certain places through ritually caring for the cosmo-political (de la Cadena 2010) control of its metamorphosis, they have been much less effective in territorial politics, that is, the control of a portion of land within boundaries (Tallè 2016: 77–85). Such landscape politics is principally based on a way of appropriating the environment through the careful control of circumscribed places and waypoints, which is essential for the effectiveness of the walking practice of lagoon fishing.

Ingold has shown how this way of appropriation of the environment contrasts the great family of foraging economies with those practicing the exclusive ownership of a plot of land (such as a ranch), and shows how it has been the historic reason for countless disputes between hunting and gathering societies on the one hand and agricultural societies on the other (Ingold 1987: 130–164; 2000: 40–60). Such a dispute was the reason for the progressive taking of the Huave lands by the neighbouring Zapotecs and *mestizo* farmers, and for the long-standing agrarian conflicts that have plagued the region from the time of the Colony until today.¹⁶ As the historical anthropologist Zárata Toledo has shown, it was precisely through the settlement mode of the *ranchos* operating in the pre- and post-revolutionary era, that agricultural penetration into Huave territory was made by some Zapotec villagers, and consolidated through land tenure rights (Zárata Toledo 2010: 262–269).

Within the colonial economic-political order and later with the formation of the Mexican Nation state, the conflictual land-tenure process went together with a process of naturalisation and ethnicisation that pitted the Huave people – 'underdeveloped' lagoon fishermen – on the one hand, against the Zapotec people – 'evolved' ranchers from inland – on the other. The *de facto* identification of the Huave with waterscapes – fluid, empty, open and fordable – and with lagoon fishing techniques requiring a high level of mobility through water, has gone together with a structural weakness of the Huave municipal boundaries. These have always been vulnerable to infiltration by Zapotec settlers (Castaneira 2008; Zárata Toledo 2010). It is important to stress how far the negative identification of the Huave with the waterscape has moulded their image in regional and national contexts. In fact, the term Huave seems to have been imposed by neighboring Zapotecs with the eloquent but derogatory meaning of 'people rotted by the water' (León 1904; Signorini 1979: 17–18). The exo-ethnonym is a reflection of what was perceived ethnocentrically as a misguided fishing practice, one

16 In the early Colony, the entire Isthmus of Tehuantepec was the private property of Hernán Cortés, who was gifted the *Hacienda del Marqués del Valle* by the Crown (Cuturi 2009, Machuca Gallegos 2001). Throughout Mexico, landlordism continued after independence (1821) and it was only with the Revolutionary process (1910–1917) that economic restructuring became thinkable. Agrarian reform from the 1930s onwards has served as a powerful means of national identity construction.

that did not require the art of navigation in open water, but that of walking in shallow waters like fords, shores and estuaries.¹⁷

Since the Huave municipalities' boundaries were defined after national independence at the end of the 19th century, this process of 'ethno-naturalisation' has continued and been accompanied by chronic agrarian conflicts. In the western part of the lagoon system, the municipal territory of San Mateo del Mar has suffered a steady erosion of its borders, a process legalised through various official decisions.¹⁸ The beneficiary was the nearby pueblo of Santa Maria del Mar (*agencia municipal* of the Zapotec town of Juchitán de Zaragoza) to the east,¹⁹ and to the west, the Zapotec municipality of San Pedro Huilotepec and the *ejido* of Boca del Río. In the eastern part of the lagoon area, the municipalities of San Dionisio del Mar and San Francisco del Mar also have a long history of conflict with the neighbouring Zapotec *rancherías* that caused an almost forced relocation of both villages. Between the 19th and 20th centuries they were relocated inland from their original isolated locations on the lagoon in order to maintain better control over disputed lands and are today known as San Dionisio Pueblo Nuevo and San Francisco Pueblo Nuevo (Zárate Toledo 2010).

By making a distinction between a landscape-based appropriation and a land-based one, between a 'landscape politics' and a land politics, we can better analyse this history of agrarian conflicts. Here, the degrees of trust and familiarity with the technologies of representing the earth (maps, cartography, etc.) as well as with each national bureaucratic regulation designed to objectify a customary law (Cuturi 1996), have played a fundamental role, from the Colonial period to well after national independence. In the case of San Francisco del Mar (the Huave municipality most known for its fertile lands), the rediscovery of the *título primordial* (primordial title) in the nineteen-seventies meant the legal recognition of their homelands, which halted the land dispossession they had suffered 50 years earlier, caused by the neighbouring Zapotec municipality of San Francisco Ixhuatán. In the case of San Mateo del Mar (the Huave municipality where lagoon fishing is by far the most dominant economic activity), the occupation of lands unfolded in a process of complete disregard for maps and documents: these were lost, counterfeited or never even submitted to the agrarian courts.

17 The terms *Ikoots* (in San Mateo del Mar and Santa Maria del Mar), *Ikojts* (in San Dionisio del Mar), *Konajts* (in San Francisco del Mar) (which means 'us', as inclusive form) are used as endo-ethnonyms starting from the nineties of the last century, as the result of a self-representation tending to free itself from a negative image (Tallè 2015: 393–403).

18 San Mateo del Mar was recognised as municipality by a decree of 1825. Due to recurrent agrarian disputes the Agrarian Court issued during the 20th century different *Resoluciones Precidenciales* (in 1904, in 1945 and in 1984), that is official acts of recognition and titling of communal property, that changed the land endowment of the community of San Mateo del Mar.

19 The settlement of Santa Maria del Mar has an agrarian history that binds it jurisdictionally to the town of Juchitán since the end of 19th century (Zárate Toledo 2010).

Today, in San Mateo del Mar it is commonly held that the incapacity to defend ancestral lands in the past went hand in hand with the widespread ignorance of Spanish and illiteracy among the authorities of that time. Added to this, there is a perceived decline in the public morals of present-day authorities, viewed as ever ready to transform their turn at community service into robbery. All this is felt as a heavy historical loss that weighs more and more on the community, eroding conditions for continuing with their own form of life. In fact, land disputes with neighbouring communities are shrinking the fishing area more and more, resulting in a severe scarcity of land and undermining mobility through the lagoons. It is becoming increasingly clear to the new generation of agrarian authorities that defending and claiming rights to ancestral land is the inescapable condition for safeguarding the free movement of fishermen across the lagoons that is the very footing of 'landscape tenure'.

For this reason, indigenous place names turn out to be an unexpected political tool in territorial claims. In 2010 Cristiano Tallè was involved in writing an anthropological expert's report, based on a glossary of native place names, to be submitted to the local agrarian courts in order to resolve a dispute relating to a portion of border territory. Mexican legislation requires that native right to land be proven by exhibiting judicial evidence (artefacts, maps or traditional knowledge supported by anthropological expertise), and so the place names in *ombeayüts* were recognised as the best evidence of the ancestral ties of the community with the disputed land. They were in the indigenous language and still in everyday use. Reflecting in such a transparent way the forms of landscape and waterscape and the movement of humans within them, they reveal in an immediate way that the appropriation of the environment is founded on the control of landscape. In fact, the place names mark crossing lines and waypoints, anchoring the right to mobility in the local landscape, however unstable. In the courts, however, where national and international laws oriented towards a productivist conception of land and work align indigenous land tenure with the legal and policy standards of Western law (Povinelli 1995), these waypoints can easily turn into border-points.

A new frontier of dispute: Eolian energy and the aero-scape

In the following, we try to demonstrate that a similar reduction of the idea of landscape to one of land and territory is also at work in current disputes over the aero-scape. This perspective will serve to better understand the strong local resistance to the installation of wind farms. In the Isthmus of Tehuantepec, opposition to wind power projects has grown in the last decade. Those in favour have been a network of transnational and national actors like the Inter-American Fund for Development (a regional commission of the World Bank), the Mexican government, the Oaxaca state governor and, at the local level, a variable number of administrative authorities and inhabitants affiliated to them, attracted by the potential for financial compensation – or,

to go with local gossip, by bribes.²⁰ On the other side, against the proposals are many different actors united by discontent with how the sustainable energy industry has been brought to the region: individual farmers who want to annul the rental contracts previously signed by intermediaries for the power companies; whole communities opposed to the exploratory surveys carried out by technicians (the municipalities of Álvaro Obregón and San Mateo del Mar), or who have cancelled previously granted permits (San Dionisio del Mar); organised movements with anti-capitalist and neo-zapatista leanings such as the *Asamblea de los pueblos indígenas del Istmo en defensa de la tierra y el territorio* (APIIDTT), based in Juchitán.

There are two related explanations for the intense development of wind parks here, amongst the highest in the world as reported by the NREL.²¹ The first is technical: the wind on the Pacific side of the Isthmus is constant all year round, and from November to February has a power rating equivalent to the force of off-shore wind. The second is linked to the shift in Mexico towards the use of renewable energy. On a legal level, we are also seeing public energy production being transformed into a system contracted out by the state to private multinational companies (Boyer 2014; Howe et al. 2015: 99). Both public and private institutional actors view the wind, and the territories that it passes through, as a quantifiable resource that can be converted into money. This point of view reveals the intimately neoliberal matrix they embody, which according to Pellizzoni (2015: 19), is based on the ability to stimulate competition and to create new goods for new markets. The peculiarity of new goods in a neoliberal economy is that they concurrently take on the function of new exchange values. This also applies in this case: the wind is a material good which, thanks to the industrial process, is converted into a kind of commodity (energy) to buy and sell, but it is also a medium of financial exchange through an emerging international system of free carbon market emissions. The final effect is the ‘financialisation of landscape’.

Importantly, this neoliberal system can transform the landscape, the shared experience of living beings as we have defined it, into a commodity to be exploited by the few. Furthermore, the renewability of these kinds of meteorological resources is compromised by the fact that the industry needs to preserve some of the land and some parts of the landscape by occupying them. In the Isthmus, the wind resource is abundant and technically cheap to extract. This makes the level of occupation so aggressive that instead of

20 The case is reported extensively in national press, especially during 2012, when the conflict arose explicitly. See for instance *La Jornada*, 8/9/2012, *Denuncian comuneros ikoots amenazas del gobernador de Oaxaca, Gabino Cue*; *La Jornada*, 12/15/2012, *Empresas eólicas y derechos de los pueblos en el Istmo de Tehuantepec*; *La Jornada*, 1/9/2014, *Muerto proyecto eólico en San Dionisio, Oaxaca*.

21 This report, authored by the National Renewable Energy Laboratory, was originally promoted by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) on the request of the Mexican government, and distributed by the U.S. Department of Energy, Office of Scientific and Technical Information. See National Renewable Energy Laboratory (NREL), 2003, *Wind energy resource atlas of Oaxaca*, report accessed on-line the 28 of May 2017 from: www.nrel.gov/docs/fy04-osti/35575.pdf

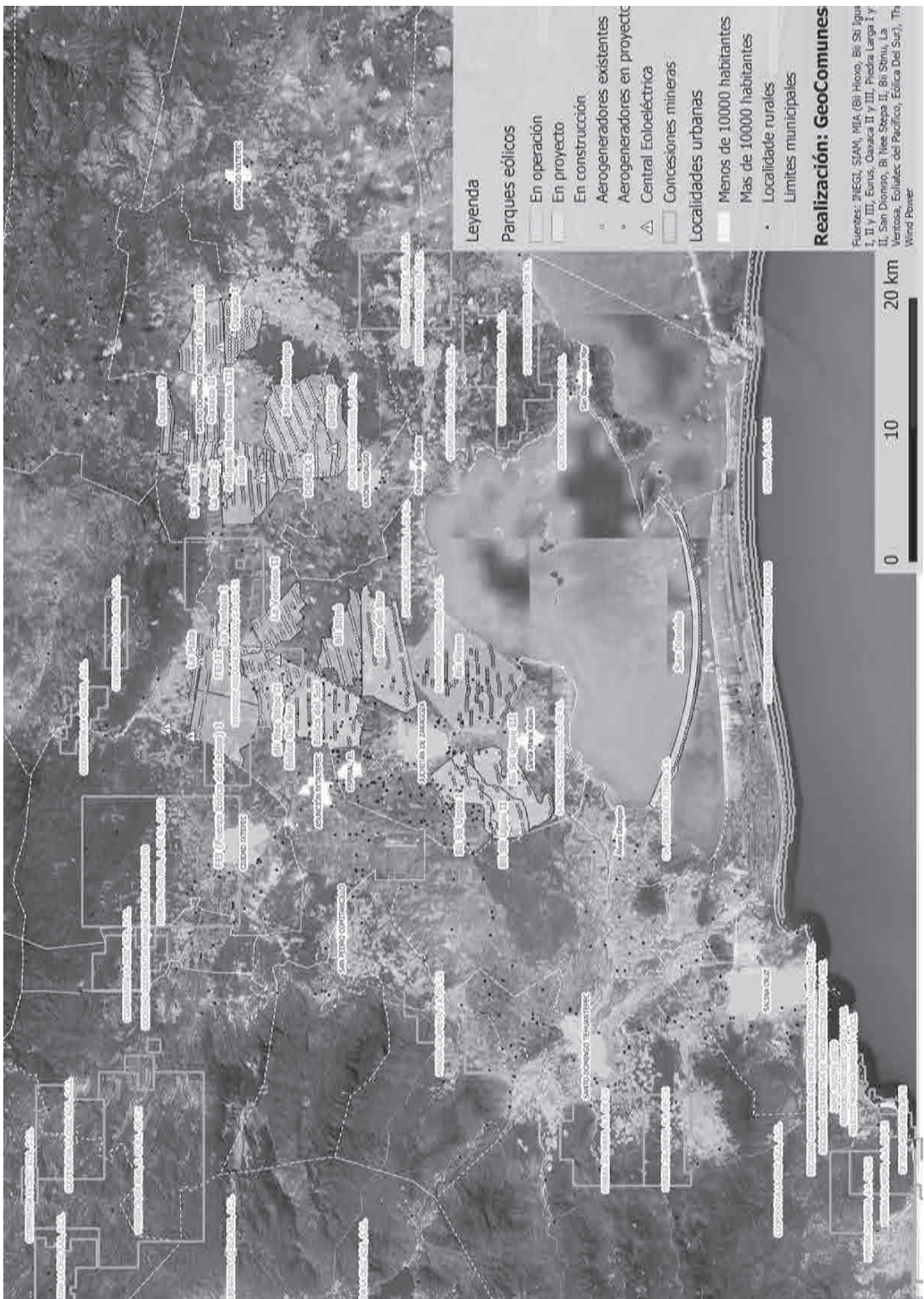


Figure 4. Map of the location of wind farms and mining concessions in the Isthmus of Tehuantepec (picture by www.geocomunes.org).

land grabbing it is possible to talk of massive scale ‘landscape grabbing’. This is visible in how wind power companies on the Mexican isthmus have divided the space not only into plots of land but also into areas of air space corresponding to groups of turbines owned by multiple transnationals. In this context, the concept of ethnography of the atmosphere is useful or, to use Cymene Howe’s (2015) language, we can talk about an anthropology of life above earth:

Life Above Earth cannot simply suggest air, sky, and space as new ethnographic opportunities; it must instead indicate how lives and materialities in these suspensions represent specific forms of human and non-human being. It is to see these spaces [...] as constitutive, not simply as contextual (ibid.: 206).

This helps understand why opposition has grown in the last two decades as wind farms have been installed, especially in the inland territories inhabited by the Zapotecs. Stated reasons for the protests have included, firstly, fear of damage by the wind turbines to animals (cattle who no longer produce milk, interference in the migratory routes of birds) and to the land (pollution caused by the leakage of lubricants from the turbine motors, contamination of mangroves); secondly, farmers’ difficulties in accessing their land, and an increasing sense of encirclement by wind-turbines in close proximity to settlements (Dunlap 2017); thirdly, lack of adequate information about, and dissatisfaction with, the agreed economic terms, which give land owners only paltry compensation for the sale of their land (Manzo 2011, Nahmad et al. 2014). Last but not least, some inhabitants have criticised the loud and persistent noise pollution produced by the turbines, and the visual obstruction, perceptible dozens of miles away, in the flat land-sea-scape.

One project in particular, the *San Dionisio* Wind farm, prompted great opposition. We will look at this briefly here as it highlights the struggle over the political dimension of the landscape.

The project was initially put forward by another company with mostly Spanish capital, but subsequently passed to a multinational company with Australian and Dutch capital, thanks to Mexican intermediaries. The project was supposed to become operative in 2011, with 102 wind turbines situated along the *barra de Santa Teresa*, a narrow sandy peninsula located in the centre of *Laguna Superior*, in the municipal territory of San Dionisio del Mar; another 30 wind turbines were to be located along the *Barra Tileme*, in a territory disputed by the communal land owners of Santa Maria del Mar and by their neighbours of San Mateo del Mar.

We believe that the key to understanding the opposition has to do with territorial sovereignty, or rather the legitimacy of those who should be responsible for the decisions regarding it. However, from the local point of view that anthropology is interested in, the concept of sovereignty cannot be reduced to an exclusive right over land. In fact, as we have argued above, lagoons and borders between communities are constantly disputed, and when we consider the tenuous link between sovereignty and atmosphere, the case is even stronger.

Until 2012, the people of San Dionisio del Mar were quite unaware and rather unconcerned about the wind farm project (Zanotelli 2016: 168–169). They were doubtful about the intention of the multinational to create it, and some of them considered wind energy to be a resource ‘high up’ enough not to disturb their ordinary life.²² In that sense, it could be shared, but only under some conditions.

By the beginning of 2012, the situation had completely changed and tension was very high. In January the mayor, a member of the PRI (*Partido de la Revolución Institucional*), signed a new contract with the wind power company, giving them a thirty year permit to use the land for the installation of wind turbines. This agreement was communicated to locals at a meeting, where people expressed strong dissatisfaction with the decision, considered an affront to the community. There was fear about the possible consequences for the delicate lagoon ecosystem because, in the period from 2010 to 2012, local inhabitants had been informed about it at meetings organised by the neo-zapatista APIIDTT. Here people learned that, in addition to the wind turbines, there was a plan to build several pier moorings in proximity to some shrimp farms, as well as to install a large underwater cable. The construction work would certainly disturb the lagoon currents, and the lighting on the wind turbines could potentially frighten away the fish. The heavy cement foundations on which the wind turbines were to stand could impede the interflow of waters between the lagoons separated by the peninsula. Following an announcement by the civil authority, a resistance group occupied the town hall and the mayor was forced to flee, making him unable to continue with the agreement made with the company. In the months that followed, the members of the Assembly and the APIIDTT activists had to face the organised violence of groups ready to destroy any resistance to the project.

The events that followed were favorable to the Assembly resistance group. In 2013, a legal action filed by some dwellers was upheld by the judge in Salina Cruz who called for the immediate suspension of any activities related to the wind farm project until wider investigations had taken place.²³ Those who brought the case had appealed to treaty 169 of the International Labour Organization (ILO) regarding the rights of indigenous peoples to give their prior and informed consent to any actions implemented in their territory. In the ruling, the judge recommended that a popular consultation should take place at the end of this process. In the face of legal opposition, the company decided to abandon the project and move its investments to the nearby municipality of Juchitán de Zaragoza.

To understand the level of opposition, it is necessary to raise the socio-political analysis from the level of specific complaints to a much wider concern, namely that the wind farm might completely compromise the ecosystem and the local economy, based as it is on the commercial sale of fish and on subsistence fishing (Castaneira 2008: 67–86): “[...] la laguna nos da de comer” (the lagoon feeds us), claimed a woman from San Dionisio.

22 Francesco Zanotelli’s fieldnotes collected in San Dionisio del Mar in 2009, 2010.

23 Source: <http://www.noticiasaliadas.org/articles.asp?art=6907>, accessed on the internet the 11/16/2013.

In conclusion, there are at least two aspects which define the sovereignty of the Huave and the Zapotecs who live in the lagoon context: on the political side, these peoples do not agree to give up the rights to their land and their territory to others who want to take possession of it (Howe et al. 2015: 108). On the economic side, sovereignty includes the whole lagoon system, which for them represents an environmental continuum and guarantees the existence and survival of future generations.

A further and deeper implication is the cosmo-political dimension of the conflict which cannot be ignored. As we have shown, meteorology and the productivity of fishing and crops are materially connected, but locally they are further related to a moral dimension. The common sense of the locals is full of moral judgements that connect human behaviour with the non-human agency of lightning, southern and northern winds, and clouds. It is precisely in this elaborate moral economy that an external element, the turbines, is a threat that could affect the most intimate elements lives of the indigenous people: the aero-scape and the water-scape. The concept of sacred places sometimes used by the companies in order to show respect for the indigenous culture (for example avoiding to install the turbines in *Cerro Cristo*),²⁴ is very revealing in this sense: it shows that they have misconceived the local sense of place, which is the idea that places are not unrelated, stable and unique locations, but the variable materialisation of the co-animation between humans and not-humans. If some specific places are in some sense 'sacred', or rather, are part of local ritual practices and mythological narratives, it is because they are inserted into a wider conception of relatedness among meteorological, aquatic and terrestrial activity, as we have shown.

Concluding remarks

We started by considering how, given the rapid and radical metamorphosis of local landscapes caused by inclusion in the technological framework of late neoliberal industrialization, the almost apolitical phenomenological concept of landscape, as outlined by Ingold, needs to be more politically oriented. From our point of view, the phenomenological approach needs to be integrated with a multilevel analysis covering both native cosmologies and a historical analysis of territorial conflicts, within a political-economic frame in which the various participants (local communities, movements, institutions, transnational corporations) move along different scales. Expanded so far, the phenomenological approach can be a powerful heuristic device to explore the political, economic and existential dimensions that landscape embodies.

24 It is one of the responses that the multinational used to contrast the accusation of being disrespectful of the local knowledge carried by the social movement against the wind farms. The other was to contract an anthropologist to recollect huave legends published in an instant book that was circulating in the locality at the time of our investigation. Zanutelli's fieldnotes, San Dionisio del Mar, 2010.

Starting from the analysis of the Huave conception of the landscape combined with the forms of resistance taking place around the area, we make some concluding remarks. The political dimension of the Huave landscape is deeply rooted in body techniques and practices, as well as in linguistic code, in mythology and ritual, as well as in the historic memory of interethnic territorial conflicts. This dimension remains largely implicit in the public sphere of the eolian conflict, perhaps a plane of “cultural intimacy” (Herzfeld 1997). Nevertheless, in order to understand the resistance of the indigenous population towards the reduction of the landscape to a space of massive extraction, it is a core dimension. The conflict around the wind farms cannot be reduced to a process of negotiation or appropriation of resources, rather, it involves an entire form of life.

Our analysis reveals the appearance of two new frontiers of neoliberal exploitation in the long history of agrarian conflicts in the region. The first is sustainable energy, which reduces the wind to an energy resource that can be extracted and marketed for private purposes (Boyer 2014); the second is the massive technological occupation of the landscape by particularly invasive alien objects. In this framework, the grand-scale exploitation of renewable energy resources takes on the characteristic of ‘landscape grabbing’, which proves to be unsustainable in an unexpected way. Within the indigenous cosmology, the radical and irreversible transformation of the local landscape that the installation of more than one-hundred wind turbines could provoke, seems to make concrete all their unsustainability.

According to many testimonies collected in San Mateo del Mar, the wind turbines are described as *nendalaliüy* (twirling objects), which is the same word that defines the domestic fan, from which it differs only by its giant size. Another word that is used to describe them is *najal tarrap owix manchiük nendalaliüy* (high and wide twirling iron arms/high iron fan). Another fairly common term defines them as *nepal iünd* (that which stops the north wind), and other similar variations on the theme (e.g. *najal oleaj manchiük nepal iünd* /very high iron wind barrier/). All these terms attempt to describe technological objects that are quite mysterious from the local point of view. They are emphasising the turbines’ agency over the wind and not vice versa: they are colossal objects that move the wind, like a fan does, or they block its flow. Interfering with the biggest metamorphic agents of local landscape – the blowing of *teat iünd* (father northern wind) or the currents of the *nadam nangaj ndek* (great sacred sea-lagoon/ocean) – these machines seem to be able to subvert the ‘hierarchy of agency’ between elements, cosmologically rooted at the core of indigenous political practice and ideology.²⁵

On the other hand, their gigantic presence, while transfiguring the local landscape, goes with a massive occupation of land, and could impede the free mobility, so constitutive of the Huave experience of the environment.²⁶

25 Cristiano Tallè’s fieldwork notes, San Mateo del Mar, 2013, 2016. This analysis was presented for the first time by Tallè at the *Living Environments and Imagined Environments. New Challenges for Anthropology IV* Biennial Conference of ANUAC (November 5–8, 2015, Free University of Bolzano, Italy).

26 The research of Dunlap (2017), conducted in the Zapotec municipality of La Ventosa where a huge windpark have been already installed, shows some outcomes



Figure 5. Wind turbines on the horizon from the Laguna Inferior (Picture by Cristiano Tallè).

A further upshot of our analysis is the redefinition of the concept of sovereignty and self-determination. The case examined here suggests that these concepts, usually restricted to land and territory, should be applied at an enlarged scale, including the landscape and the web of relations among humans and nonhumans that it implies. Without doubt, paying attention to the atmospheric level, as well as to the terrestrial and aquatic levels, allows us to highlight this dimension of sovereignty that has been so little explored up to now.

Considering that the waterscape is where fish and shrimps breed, and where humans earn a livelihood, and considering that reproducing the waterscape depends fundamentally on the aero-agents, from the Huave point of view, reproducing this entanglement between waterscape, aeroscape and fishing practice, corresponds to what more abstractly is thought of as sustainability.²⁷

that are predictive for the Huave case, even if in the lagoon environment the consequences could be even more disruptive.

27 The *ombeayüüts* of San Mateo del Mar can well capture the concept of ‘sustainability’ through the concept of *monapaküü*, which can be translated as ‘life and health’ or ‘healthy life’. *Monapaküü* is the condition of a delicate balance between meteorological and water agents that must be preserved at all costs, and it can refer to any living being, human and non-human. In fact, during the procession held on the shore after Holy Week, the mayor begs the meteorological agents for *monapaküü*.

We can say, therefore, that the landscape continues to be at the core of the political concerns of the Huave people. In fact, increasingly landscape is a major reason for conflict in the region, since even its most immaterial dimension (as wind) it enters into the sphere of interest of a neoliberal political economy. In our view, it is precisely on this latter point that the sustainability of the industrial conversion to 'green energy' implemented in the region reveals a clear limit (Zanotelli 2014).

In fact, the case-study that we have summarised here shows the unsustainability of such a grand-scale exploitation of wind energy, since it reduces the landscape to a space of massive extraction, treating wind (an indivisible and intangible subject) as a quantitative and divisible resource. For those people for whom the wind, like other landscape agents, is a social actor in the continuation of their way of life, all this is a threat to their sovereignty and even more to their existence.

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