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Arctic Weather Words

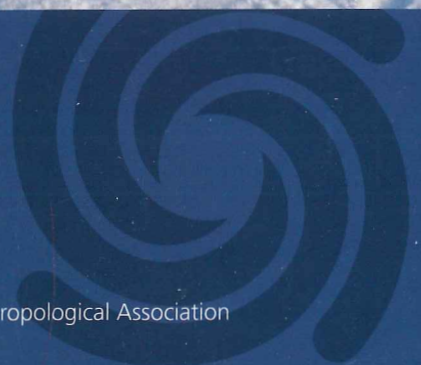
WATER

Fish, Flows, and Desire
in the Delta

Performing Water Rights
on Cochiti Dam

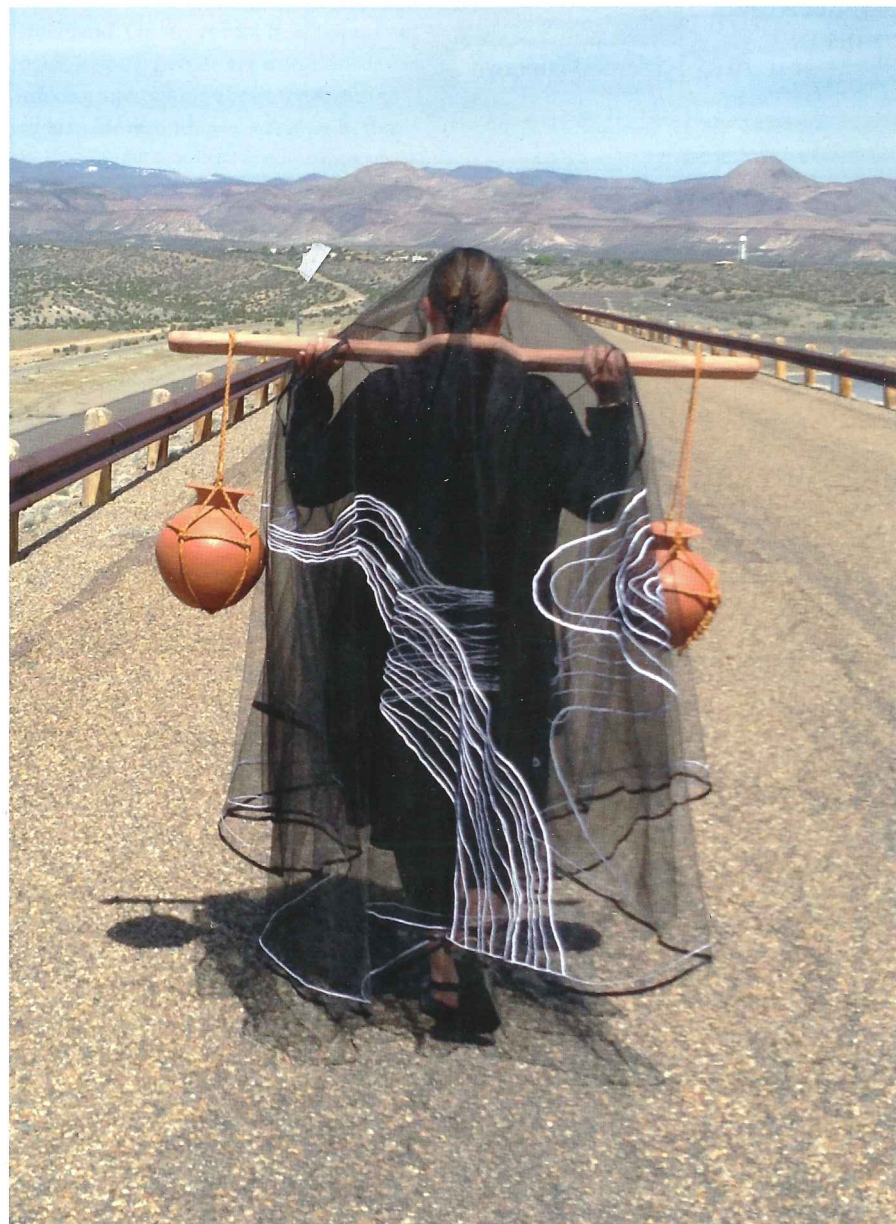
If "Water Is Life," Shouldn't
We Know How to Measure It?

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Performing Water Rights on Cochiti Dam

ARTISTIC PERFORMANCE OPENS UP QUESTIONS ABOUT WATER RIGHTS AND SOCIAL JUSTICE.



Courtney Leonard. *Walking Cochiti Dam* performance. Detail. April 10, 2017.

FIONA P. McDONALD

By Fiona P. McDonald

As part of a thematic Water Rights residency at the Santa Fe Art Institute, Shinnecock artist Courtney Leonard and Irish artist Anna Macleod performed a collaborative piece, *Walking Cochiti Dam*, on April 10, 2017.

Water lies at the center of many contestations regarding its ownership, consumption, and access rights. These issues range from violated treaties between Indigenous peoples and colonial powers, to unethical extraction practices for energy and petrochemical uses. Today, water rights are debated and access rewritten through Western policy systems. This global reality comprises an aggregate of lived realities that are experienced daily at the local level, where communities such as those in desert landscapes often face injustice. What role might performance art play in addressing the complex issues around water rights and social justice from the local to the global scale? In particular, how can performance art in and of a place participate in communicating an ethical dialogue about decaying infrastructure and the agency of rivers? What follows is a synthesis from my ethnographic participation in a piece of performance art and conversations with two artists about how their collaborative performance addresses the lived realities of water injustices in the

Anthropocene—our current geological epoch characterized by human impact on the Earth's bio-geophysical systems.

Located in Sandoval County, New Mexico, the Cochiti Dam rises about 250 feet above the Rio Grande river and stretches more than five miles across. It is one of the 10 largest earthen dams in the United States, and it impounds the already exhausted Rio Grande at its middle region. The resulting body of water created by the dam is Cochiti Lake, a recreational lake situated less than one hour's drive southwest of Santa Fe; a lake that unceremoniously engulfed much of the tribal and sacred land of the Cochiti Pueblo people.

The dam's construction and imposition on the landscape is fraught with the negotiation of local Pueblo rights and histories. The US Army Corp of Engineers (USACE) first began building an earthen dam in 1965 in the face of local opposition from Indigenous communities who have strong ties to the Middle Rio Grande. Construction was completed in 1973. As reporter Staci Matlock shows in her research (2009), this dam has dramatically restricted access to water and the farming lands of Cochiti Pueblo. A predicament that is corroborated by Cochiti Pueblo people's firsthand recollections of the dam's construction and the lake's creation (Pecos 2007). In the mid-1990s, the Cochiti Pueblo pursued legal action against USACE for the unjust inundation of their agricultural lands caused by a fault in the dam, and the subsequent loss of farming and subsistence. They won the lawsuit in 2001 and received a public apology, but they were still left with an earthen dam structure that bisects their homelands and signifies sustained dispossession from much of their traditional lands.

Relations and confrontations over water access, water shortage, and water policies in this desert landscape have played out for hundreds of years between Indigenous Pueblo communities and violent Spanish and American colonial efforts. Resource extraction in the form of gas fracking and mining for resources associated with nuclear efforts has also left this region that follows the banks of the Rio Grande a



Image of Cochiti Dam from impound side, 2017.

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They were still left with an earthen dam structure that bisects their homelands and signifies sustained dispossession from much of their traditional lands.

space in which water scarcity is a reality for both urban and rural communities.

While *Walking Cochiti Dam* speaks to the specificity of Cochiti Dam, the topics these artists address through their performance are not unique to New Mexico. For example, in the suite of cases that comprise *The Social Life of Water* (2013), John Wagner and others draw attention to the intricate socioeconomic-cultural-ecological-political realities of our engagements with and influences on water around the world. In *Water Ethics* (2013), New Mexico-based anthropologist David Groenfeldt uses a case-study approach to argue that "a new ethic of coexistence and synergies with nature is possible, but ultimately depends not on science, law, or finances but on the values we choose to adopt." How then, might research-driven performance art participate in consciousness-raising around water rights and address an ethics of engagement?

Courtney Leonard (Shinnecock Nation of Long Island) is an indigenous artist and filmmaker based in Santa Fe. Her main body of work focuses on the exploration and documentation of historical ties to water, whales, and material sustainability from her coastal cultural perspective. As she notes, her practice "investigates narratives of cultural viability as a reflection of environmental record." Anna Macleod is based in Leitrim, Ireland, and is a visual artist whose work "mediates complex ideas associated with contemporary, historical, and cultural readings of place." In particular, her ongoing project *Water Conversations* sets the stage for this collaborative performance with Leonard. According to Macleod, these projects and performances "address issues of water through political, social, and cultural lenses and aims to build an alternative global commons map through water."

The *Walking Cochiti Dam* performance extended to include community collaboration by building critical social and political relations. The artists relayed to me their work with Kenny Pin, Kai-t Blue-Sky, and Emiliano Yepa from Pueblo of Cochiti Department of Natural Resources and Conservation. In this process, Leonard and Macleod acquired local permissions from traditional custodians of the land and government officials to walk on the dam, and gathered together people to bear wit-

ness to their recognition of this space, its local histories, and larger injustices around water rights.

In preparation for the performance, Macleod created two unique black veils that feature white hand-stitched iconography associated with water—clouds, raindrops, and rivers. Leonard cast four clay urns to carry water, handcrafted the wooden yoke-like carrying structures that both artists balanced on their shoulders, and braided lashing from deer hide to connect the urns to the yoke. In creating these labor-intensive, mixed media elements in their studios at the Santa Fe Art Institute over a three-month period, the two artists worked out together the ethics of performance by considering its relevance to the local community and their responsibility as artists. Ultimately, their collaboration allowed them to probe at how performance can contribute new knowledge to the growing body of research on water rights.

On the sunny morning of April 10, 2017, Leonard and Macleod appeared as kinetic statues wearing the black sculptural veils. While they prepared for the five-mile return walk ahead (symbolically the length of the dam), a performance assistant filled the urns with water from Cochiti Lake and balanced them on the yoke the artists wore. A group of onlookers (myself included) watched this scene unfold and transformed from being an equable audience of spectators to being active participants in the performance by walking the distance of the dam with the artists under the heat of the desert sun.

Leonard and Macleod walked in tandem with the water-filled urns balanced across the wooden yoke on their shoulders, their bodies the fulcrum of balance. As they walked, their breathing quickened and their pace slowed; the labor of their carrying efforts becoming audible and visible on the incline up to the top of the dam from the lake below. The rhythmic movement of their bodies under the veils created a more encompassing sculptural space that included them, the witnesses, the dam, and the broader landscape. With each labored step under



Courtney Leonard (Left) and Anna Macleod. Walking Cochiti Dam performance, April 10, 2017.

the weight of the yoke and water-filled urns, these objects gained momentum and like a metronome kept time with the motion of their bodies as they walked the 2.5 miles to the midpoint of the dam. At this midpoint, one could glimpse where the Rio Grande re-emerges below. Here, the artists and their assistant released the lake water from the urns to let it fall the 250 feet into the river that trickled out below the earthen dam.

The pouring of the water was framed by the landscape spreading out in our peripheral vision—to the left an artificial lake, to the right a small track of the Rio Grande winding through the landscape. Intersecting this, acequia tracks (a commu-

nity-operated aqueducts system built by former Spanish colonies) crept along the roadways. Everywhere the broad horizon was filled with a desert thirsty for water.

This processual action of retracing the path of water is what Macleod calls a redemptive walk. It is redemptive in the sense that they are liberating the water from the enforced structural flow as a way to open up public discussions about trapped lands, waters, and peoples. Macleod noted that “there was a real sense of one foot in front of the other” over this dam that is a “physical interruption” to the landscape and that this activity of walking participates in the social injustices of water rights in New Mexico.

Leonard added that

when you acknowledge an interrupted space, there is something powerful to acknowledging that I am here and I know what you have been through. I had a little prayer for the lake when we started. Especially with Cochiti Lake, it is a recreational area and people are there enjoying themselves and they have no understanding about what’s under the water.

In this instance, performance art makes visible not only the histories that led to the development of a recreational facility on sacred Pueblo lands and possibly even the chemical toxicity of this lake, but is the

Leonard and Macleod walked in tandem with the water-filled urns balanced across the wooden yoke on their shoulders, their bodies the fulcrum of balance.

catalyst for individuals who witness such acts to think about the lack of human and non-human agency along the Rio Grande. Recent legislation in Aotearoa New Zealand and India has recognized rivers as beings, conferring a host of new rights on the Whanganui and the Ganges rivers. As Laura Paskus, writer and resident of New Mexico notes, “those [...] downstream should know something of the history held behind that earthen wall” (2013). Leonard echoes this saying that “nobody really thinks about the narratives upstream and downstream and the responsibility to the next community and the next community and the next community.” By creating a public performance art event, these artists and the communities they work with allow those living both upstream and downstream to informally assert their own agency (even if the river lacks it in a legislative sense in the US), and to acknowledge the social and environmental networks that demand equitable attention beyond the formal textual documents issued by governments and nonprofits.

Walking Cochiti Dam activates this particular place and its histories through multiple layers of action—walking and witnessing. Here, we can draw on Tim Ingold and Jo Lee Vergunst (2008) and others to see the value of walking methodologies in efforts to raise collective consciousness, as it can be a deeply social activity. To walk the dam is to “express thoughts and feelings that have already been imparted through an education in culture precepts and proprieties” (Ingold and Vergunst 2008). Taking this further, as Raymond Lucas has done with his work in Tokyo, *Walking Cochiti Dam* is reminiscent of the work and methodology of the Situationist International alliance of

artists who partook in *dérives*—peregrinations through a landscape. “The *dérive* entails a playful-constructive behavior and an awareness of psychogeographical effects, which distinguishes it from classical notions of the journey or the stroll” (Lucas, 2008). In the act of witnessing the redemptive walk or *dérive* on Cochiti Dam, a liminal transformation takes place in one’s behavior, shifting from passive observation to participation and tangible embodied responsibility. In the act of witnessing, those viewing the redemptive walk, the gestural pouring of the water, and the labor of this performance, take on the responsibility of knowledge of the social injustice imposed on this landscape, the Cochiti people, and on water access in this region and around the world. As Leonard noted, “the more people bear witness, the more power the people have [to share this knowledge for political change].” To undertake a performance on a human-created structure derived from earthen materials that so profoundly reshapes the landscape is a powerful action within the Anthropocene. As Christophe Bonneuil and Jean-Baptiste Fressoz note in *The Shock of the Anthropocene* (2016), “the Anthropocene is thus a political issue as well as a category in Earth sciences.”

Walking Cochiti Dam is a profoundly political gesture. It is an action that makes history visible through the poetics of movement, through walking, and through collaboration, not only between the materials of the vessels, the bodies of the artists, and the 65 million cubic feet of earth and rock that make up the earthen dam, but within the larger global conversations on water injustices that reach deep into our everyday lives. 🌀

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