

Cantos rodados (Rolling Songs): Curating as Situated Memory and Ecosystem Service by Paz Ponce

In the language of my native shores,
rivers flow down singing.
Even the stones they carry make sound —
Cantos rodados: rolled songs —
as if the earth itself were telling a story
we haven't yet fully learned to translate.
A whisper (stream, cradle-song) converging with ideas for the **future**.

Future: you've entered this river twice already,
but neither the water nor we are the same.
Still, we hold you in memory.
Because what is sung, is remembered.
And what is remembered, can be told.
And what is told, can be entrusted to care.
And *custodianship* — to care without possessing —
is a way of resisting **erosion**.

Erosion: the constant wearing-down of bodies by f(r)iction.
How do we survive the impact of our encounters?
How can we transform together without vanishing?
John Berger once said *a song is a shelter in time*.
But what if singing were also a curatorial method?
A way to hold situated memory —
a current for dissident orality to keep flowing,
even when the narratives of progress silence the stories that gave life to this **context**?

Context as method, as interlocutor:
working with the grain of a community and its histories.
Curating as a regenerative practice that listens to the layers of a place:
the visible and submerged,
the institutionalised and displaced,
the lived, the erased, the **dreamed**.

To dream a latent curatorship,
one that tends to the material and emotional conditions
that allow something (a relationship, an archive, a story)
to keep breathing —
even if it lies dormant.
Even if it's undocumented, unnamed in any budget.
(*I gift you the hollow of my embrace*, sings a poet from **where I grew up**.)

Where I grew up, some trades still announce themselves by singing.
The knife sharpener, for instance, plays a pan flute
as he rides his bicycle down the street.
That gesture — to sound in order to be heard —
stays with me in my curatorial work.
I too wish to announce myself that way:
not as a “freelancer multitasker”

but as someone who shapes shared tools.
As someone who strikes a note to sustain **life together**.

Life together in the art scene has no song yet,
but you can hear the sparks fly across Europe —
the tools of its precarious, itinerant infrastructure being sharpened.
But how much can a body erode
while it follows the current of cultural production
and its dramatic politics of **drainage**?

Drainage: Cultural drainage, wetland drainage, memory drainage.
Is care only a rumor,
or is it the body of water still flowing beneath our feet?
Can an institution hold me as I hold it?
We long for sustainability — yes —
but not as a funding slogan,
as an embodied desire,
a non-extractive rhythm.
We need radical caretakers to rewet the land.
We need queer resuscitators of vegetal memory,
of exhausted soils,
cleared and commodified by a *turbocapitalism* that parasites **goods and services**.

Goods and services: Resources — that's what ecosystems offer.
They sustain us. But what services can we offer back?
The United Nations' Millennium Ecosystem Assessment
defines ecosystem services in four broad categories:
provisioning, regulating, supporting, and cultural.
Curating, too, might be imagined this way —
as a kind of cultural ecosystem service.
What if curating were more like composting,
a practice of tending.
Not a mode of display, but of groundkeeping.
An ecology of attention.
A service that shelters time,
and holds space for unpredictable growth.
What if curating were this **kind of gesture**?

A kind gesture: hospitality —
to open a space for others,
physically, symbolically, emotionally.
To ask: Who is welcome? On what terms? At what pace?
What forms of attention are needed to sustain an encounter?
Hospitality is a threshold politics,
a bridge between the intimate and the public, the familiar and the unexpected.
A tactic to render structures of domination visible.
A way to share infrastructure through care,
reciprocity, and **responsibility**.

Response-ability: beyond programming,
the capacity to situate oneself. To entangle.

To become an intermediary, a caretaker of rhythms,
a custodian of memories that have no monument yet.
And when the monument appears —
to question it,
so the collective does not fossilise,
so there remains an infrastructure
where theory can meet action,
analysis can reconcile with hope,
and future remains organic.
Perhaps here lives the **curatorial-wilderness**.

The curatorial-wilderness operates from feminist geography
and an affective economy.

It is the silent function that holds habitat:
to filter, to fertilise, to retain moisture,
to connect invisible root systems —
relational, vital, spiritual.
It lives by an **instinct of joy**
(**And Joy is queer**)

Instinct of joy: that's what my mother calls
the dragonflies singing lullabies to the river in her poems.
(**And Mum is queer**)

She says you enter the stones through the palms of your hands.
Do you know the country where lichen blooms?

Lichen: metabolic architects.
I often dream we could be like them.
That we'd learn to enter latency.
To suspend metabolism, to not die from overproduction.
Lichens survive drought by pausing.
They come back to life with humidity.
They photosynthesise.
They share.
They **regenerate**.

Regenerate: What if art could do the same?
What if curating, instead of accelerating,
could inhabit the margins —
wait, accompany, breathe together again?
Geography is on our side,
whisper the lichens in their rebellious nap.
So does the murmur of water,
when we learn how to **listen**.

Listen: I can live without you, Capitalocene —
but not without the song of my labor.

Epilogue:

This text doesn't answer questions.
It makes them echo like stones in a river —
cantos rodados.

Some of those stones were given to me.
From the river where I was born:
my mother's tongue —
a poet who taught me to hear the landscape
as language. The soul of play.

What follows are fragments of her poems.
They taught me how to listen,
how to tend to silence,
how to enter the stone.

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Selected poems by Ana Sofía Pérez-Bustamante
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1
En el reverso de tus ojos
memorias vegetales de la tierra.
Sombra. Puntos negros
—semillas de la luz—
por dentro de los párpados.
Se mueven. Juegan.

2
Qué difícil leer por dentro, inteligencia.
Volver al bosque
donde una vez quisimos
ser por siempre niños.
O vágulas o blándulas ánimas
o nanas —o lullaby— o libélulas.
Pura vida sin apenas redes
de símbolos. Instinto de alegría.

Qué difícil, conciencia,
ir más allá de ti. Pero contigo.

(Y pasa por detrás, en sombra,
la sombra. Una palabra. Una pantera.)

1
On the reverse side of your eyes
vegetal memories of the earth.
Shadow. Black dots
—seeds of light—
inside the eyelids.
They move. They play.

2
How hard it is to read from within, intelligence.
To return to the forest
where once we wished
to be children forever.
Oh vague souls or soft spirits
Oh lullabies—oh *nanas*—oh dragonflies.
Pure life with barely
any net of symbols. Instinct of joy.

How difficult, consciousness,
to go beyond you. But with you.

(And behind, in shadow,
passes the shadow. A word. A panther.)

3

Voy entrando en mi edad
 como en un abandono o un sendero
 menguante.
 Qué difícil ahora tan solo incorporarse
 es, cuando eres solo un animal cansado que lame
 sus heridas.
 Quién podría decir
 de dónde viene el miedo.
 Por qué es tan ominosa
 la soledad que acecha entre los árboles.
 Con qué mundo o lenguaje
 —u olvido de lenguaje—
 limita mi silencio.

7

Entro en la piedra
 a través de las palmas de las manos.
 ¿Conoces el país
 donde florece el liquen?
 Sus ríos como el óxido de cobre.
 En el silencio, con el aire puro,
 por los montes de venus vienen verdes.

12

Un misterioso sol
 se filtra entre las ramas.
 Va eligiendo las cosas.
 Las cuevas de la luz:
 un remolino de agua, las flores de una adelfa,
 un destello
 que ha dejado la lluvia en las rodadas.
 El humilde sendero
 deslumbra apariciones. Imposible
 andar con esta niña tan pequeña
 que va coleccionando
 hojas de otoño, cantos
 rodados, cuarzos, piedras,
 piedras y piedras y más piedras
 (no le bastan las manos, no le sobran bolsillos).
 Cuando se tienen los ojos tan cerca de los pies
 cada punto del suelo es infinito.
 (Los niños no saben pasear.)

3

I enter my age
 like entering an abandonment or a
 waning path.
 How hard it is now just to rise
 when you're nothing but a tired animal
 licking its wounds.
 Who could say
 where fear comes from.
 Why the loneliness lurking among the trees
 feels so ominous.
 With what world or language
 —or forgetting of language—
 does my silence border.

7

I enter the stone
 through the palms of my hands.
 Do you know the country
 where lichen blooms?
 Its rivers like copper oxide.
 In silence, with the pure air,
 they come green over the mounts of Venus.

12

A mysterious sun
 filters through the branches.
 It chooses things.
 The caves of light:
 a whirl of water, the blossoms of an oleander,
 a gleam
 left by the rain on the ruts.
 The humble path
 dazzles with apparitions. Impossible
 to walk with this small child
 who collects
 autumn leaves, smooth stones,
 quartz, pebbles, stones,
 stones and stones and more stones
 (not enough hands, not enough pockets).
 When your eyes are so close to your feet
 every patch of ground is infinite.
 (Children don't know how to take a walk.)

15

Parece que vienen risas de allá abajo.
 Madeja impenetrable de zarzas y lentiscos.
 Sonando baja el río
 pulsándole a las piedras
 sus notas de cascada. Sí, son risas.
 (Pasa lo mismo con náyades y nutrias:
 que no se ven.)

18

*Allí donde no pienso [en mí]
 es donde existo.*
 En la acción de fluir.
 Fluir así, sin más,
 es el alma del juego.
 El río,
 el río de la vida,
 es el que fluye así, sin más.

19

Cruza el puente el niño
 con su bastón de caña
 que va sonando contra la pasarela.
 Rítmico traqueteo, música de estacas.
 Canta el cuco. Y va sonando el niño
 con junglas, con manglares, con aullidos de
 monos.
 Late su corazón con furia
 como un batán se bate con el agua.

 (Por debajo del agua, en las lagunas
 del tiempo,
 siguen en otro idioma las palabras.)

15

Laughter seems to come from down below.
 An impenetrable tangle of brambles and mastic
 trees.
 The river flows below,
 plucking from the stones
 its cascade notes. Yes, it's laughter.
 (It's the same with naiads and otters:
 you don't see them.)

18

*There, where I don't think [of myself],
 is where I exist.*
 In the act of flowing.
 To flow like that, no more,
 is the soul of play.
 The river,
 the river of life,
 is what flows like that, no more.

19

The child crosses the bridge
 with his cane stick
 tapping against the walkway.
 Rhythmic clatter, music of stakes.
 The cuckoo sings. And the child resounds
 with jungles, with mangroves, with monkey
 howls.
 Her heart beats wildly
 like a fulling mill strikes water.

 (Beneath the water, in the lagoons
 of time,
 the words continue in another language.)