

The following is an alternative smaller version of a text that presented in the form of a lecture performance at Depo and in the context of the exhibition “My Dear Friends”, curated by Deniz Kırkalı.

My response to “My Dear Friends”

Taking on the connecting function of a canal yet being critical of how it has come to define and shape relations, “My Dear Friends” speculates on how different creative practices can contribute to more ethical approaches to connectivity.

This exhibition approaches the 150th anniversary of the Suez Canal by asking itself how the colonial past of the canal continues to affect a myriad of contemporary relations. However, as Papadopoulos suggests in the small publication that accompanied the exhibition, the relations that it presents are not obvious ones, but the pieces shown work on different scales and mediums that, most commonly than not, would be presented in separate settings. This motivates us to question the distance we place between the subjects, places, and ways of seeing presented in here.

An intriguing decision in this exhibition is that it creates a common ground for photojournalistic work with work that layers, without making distinction, photographs of different kinds with archival imagery. This decision distances both methods’ relation to any notion of ‘truth’ and rather highlights how both artists chose such techniques based on a common drive to communicate and intimately approach the zoo. And it is on this basis of intimacy that this exhibition suggests us, we might be able to retrace a different geography of connectivity from the colonial one.

The title of this exhibition makes this proposal even more compelling to me. The title, “My Dear Friends”, addresses its participants as dear friends. And to think of participation in this exhibition as a friendship, a particular level of vulnerability is asked from us; this is an acknowledgement of an already existing proximity between us and a willingness to care for that closeness.

Welcome to the Darien Isthmus!

My research regarding the Darien Isthmus started in response to a curiosity and responsibility to get closer to this place; a place that although geographically near the country where I grew up in (Costa Rica) and of tremendous regional and global historical weight, I did not know anything of until recently.

Not interested in claims about an “authentic expression” of this place, I have rather foregrounded my experiences of and with this place as ones that are inextricably linked to the languages, ways of knowing and seeing that different agents have historically used to narrate the Darien Isthmus. Through a poetic rearticulation of this multiple, contrasting epistemes with which ‘a’ Darien Isthmus has been imagined, my overall goal has been to compose a decolonial critique of global imaginaries and hegemonic historical narratives of the globe.

Before starting my research, I first thought of doing a kind of ethnography. However, soon enough, the possibility to go to this place was not available at the moment and that pushed me to rethink the whole project. Still today, I have never been there. And this fact, has very much shaped some of the

most important questions to me: What processes have shaped the multiple types of distances I feel to this place? What is to try to approach this place by using those distances as kinds of materials?

In exploring these questions, I decided to approach this place through the internet: through online archives, FB pages, blogs, online news, YouTube videos and their comments sections, amongst others. What I presented in the lecture at Depo was a compilation of some of the material I decided to focus on.

While researching, a considerable variety of sources came up, sources that felt incredibly disparate when placed next to one another. It seemed to me that the place was such a point of entanglement between many different spaces, times, and ways of knowing and that the real challenge was to understand a system of linkage and organization. In trying to subtract this system from my very own feeling of this varied information, I was motivated to think of the epistemological gaps between the material as opportunities for poetic interventions rather than as holes to be filled.

On the one hand, I wondered in which grounds could these materials exist together in dialogue? On the other, I wondered how could this process of putting these disparate materials together be itself a way of critically speaking about different academic understandings of historical research?

This said, guiding my own experimentations were writers who have pushed for notions of history that distance themselves from exactitude or authenticity, such as the performative work of anthropologist Michael Taussig and the poet Ernesto Cardenal. Their works have given way for me to propose what I call a 'historic-poetical methodology'.

In elaborating upon this, images often coming into mind are those cartoon scenes where the reparation of one wooden board in a fence results in the fall of another board, evolving into an endless cycle of reparations and disrepairs. So, I asked myself how historical gaps could be thought not as calls for amendment but as opportunities to further take apart the remaining surface of hegemonic narratives?

The play with the language of 'historical gaps' is very much inspired by how a relevant section of the Darien Isthmus, a stretch of jungle within its main road – and furthermore, the main connecting road in the Americas (the Pan-American Highway) –, is known in the Spanish language as the "Darien Plug" and in the English language as the "Darien Gap". This suggestive although contradicting language gave me a set of metaphors with which I have been developing this 'historic-poetical methodology'.

In his essay "What is the Contemporary?", Agamben uses a poem by Osip Mandelstam to give an image, a kind of body, to that which we call the contemporary. To put it simply, he imagines the vertebrae of a monster as a kind of shared history, what shapes a pattern of understanding, and the broken bone in the monster's spine, as the contemporary, that place from which we can critically distance ourselves from dominant ways of reasoning.

Therefore, I made a correlation between the image of the broken back bone (the contemporary) of the monster's spine (History) and that gap, (the stretch of jungle, the "Darien Gap") which to this day, it continues to be the only break in the modernizing project of connecting the whole Americas through one main system of roads. This use of geography to visualize history is not trivial in any way. Here, we can recall the words of Jose Coronel Utrero who says, "History and geography, having always been together, come to identify in the Central American Isthmus. Here, they morph into one, like soul

and body.” Therefore, this intimacy between history and geography is purposely exacerbated in my essay, expressing them as almost indistinguishable.

In bringing this concise version of my presentation to an end, I want to highlight a last aspect. In her textual work *The Pan-American Highway: An Ethnography of Latin American Integration*, Researcher Rosa Elena Ficek expresses how the Darién historically has been used to think of what can “lay beyond the edges of the map,” and here I would add, beyond the spectrum of visibility, knowledge, and imagination of an imperialist expansion. Drawing from this, first and foremost for me, is the understanding of my research as an attempt to claim back this imaginative potential of the Darién, its evocative presence, for a decolonial imagination of the globe and a poetic critique of hegemonic historical narratives.