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**This is a pre print version of the following article:**

*Original Citation:*

*Availability:*

This version is available <http://hdl.handle.net/2318/1765030> since 2020-12-28T22:40:22Z

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(Article begins on next page)



# Dutkansearvi dieđalaš áigečála

**Volume 4, Issue 1, 2020**

**Special Issue**

Indigenous Studies and Conceptualising Coexistence

**Publisher**

Sámi language and culture association

**Editors**

Ellen Marie Jensen, Mere Kepa & Pirjo Kristiina Virtanen

**ISSN 2489-7930**

## Talanoa dialogues: Finding homes and re-enchantments

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*Noi di qua, siamo acqua e siamo terra, siamo persone in mezzo ad un limite, aspettiamo di trasformarci, cambiamo con gli ordini dell'acqua, piantiamo i piedi nella palude.<sup>1</sup>*

*(Silvia Barbon, Faló lagunare, 2014)*

### Introduction: Estrangement


This text is a narration on belonging, liminality, and mobility across spaces of identity and disciplinary boundaries. In this collection on Indigenous dialogues, I enter on tiptoes, with humility. I participated in the writing retreat at Gilbbesjávri/Kilpijärvi as I was in the process of rethinking and possibly changing homes, both physically and in disciplinary terms. I was embracing a feeling of estrangement, once more. I will then start by presenting my (often-disoriented) subjectivity in terms of origin and academic belonging.

In that communal space of reflection and writing, it was important to know more about the daily struggles of Sámi and other Indigenous peoples, and the epistemic, ontological and political reconstruction in which they are involved. This made me reflect on current struggles in my original place, Venice and its lagoon, whose environment and early settlers' traditional livelihoods are seriously endangered by economic speculative activities. Does it make sense, nowadays, to conceptualize a possible coexistence of diverse forms of living there, a non-Indigenous territory, through methodologies of research and action offered by Indigenous studies?

This question is of primary importance for me, as the flattening of livelihoods over a few global sectors, shrinking all the rest (including types, scopes and alliances in academic research), imposed a situation that pressured my family and me to leave; as a result, I have been searching for homes where ontological practices of coexistence were possible. This text will be

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<sup>1</sup> Translation: We from here, we are water, and we are earth, we are people in the middle of a limit, we are waiting to transform ourselves, we change with the orders of the water, we plant our feet in the swamp.



autobiographical and will present my different personal moves, including academic moves, across disciplines and interdisciplinary assemblages. My moves did not intended to be exclusive but based on constructive alliances: from political sciences to human geography and political ecology, to global development studies. In the end, it's not the disciplines but the academic communities that make them either exclusive or inclusive, or related to positivist science and coloniality, rather than inspired by global justice. For instance, development studies is a wide area, including methodologically and axiologically diverse aims. It contains studies promoting Eurocentric aid to develop the world based on principles of growth, civilization and modernity, but also others that, on the contrary, claim that a containment of the role of the West in the world is needed, as expressed by Chakrabarty's call in the book *Provincializing Europe* (2000).

My position is close to the struggles for social and environmental justice, and local resistance against multiple causes of eviction and cultural and biological extinction. I feel aligned with the idea that we need to go beyond development, rather than maintaining development as a universal goal (Kothari et al. 2019); and I believe that cooperation should be promoted through social movements connecting initiatives of localization of resistance and renewal. I am learning from decolonial approaches in research and education, especially from scholars of Abya Yala (the pre-Columbian name of the American continent used by the Guna people) that I have known and appreciated in the past five years. I would reject any misappropriation of political causes but feel that my pre-assigned position in a binary worldview, as a member of the "Global North" or the "West," is inaccurate and essentializing my nature. I feel the contradictions of my plural identity: as a citizen of Italy, a country that was responsible for colonialism in Africa; as a person keeping strong ancestral ties to the territory of Venice and its lagoon, whose population has been facing violent resource exploitation, erosion of land and water, degradation of livelihoods, ongoing migration, and demographic aging; and as a migrant myself, from that territory that in few years could become a mere empty space in the hands of financial speculators.

### **Displacement from Venice**

During the first common writing retreat session, we were invited to talk about ourselves. Understanding one's subjectivity, positionality, and situatedness is fundamental to all critical

research, because it clarifies why certain thematic, methodological, and ethical choices are made in personal research paths. My research is filtered through my body and my thoughts and further forged through my beliefs, experiences and elaborations. As I said, the starting point of my exploration of identity is my own cultural and territorial belonging, which I do not find in terms of nationality, but rather rooted in Venice and its lagoon. Given the long history of decline of the city, which has been heavily violated by extractive activities, such as tourism, cruises and chemical industries, I believe that I am suitably positioned to understand and intimately feel the problems of deterritorialization, estate speculation, uprooting and displacement, loss of memory, of language and traditional knowledge, and assimilation into dominant cultures.

I left Venice various times; the last time was almost fifteen years ago. I could be considered an economic migrant, having left my city for work reasons; but I also left for gender-related and environmental issues, and academic practices that made me feel uncomfortable. While my desire was to work with the civil society in the city and elsewhere, the local academic practice at that time was not conceived as a space for supporting transformative action but for self-ensuring funding, and for servicing primarily stronger political and economic actors. As a woman, I was assigned fundraising service tasks—which I accomplished with a certain success—by a group of powerful male professors, who were also covering relevant positions in the local politics. In addition, I had lecturing tasks, but could not hope for any tenure track position that was promised to others; I could only do research activities in my spare time along with the gendered burden of caring for two small children while their father was working outside the region, as Venice has scarce skilled jobs to offer (Bertocchi & Visentin 2019).

I am also an environmental migrant; unfortunately, the city government has neglected the lagoon environment and let tourist lobbies devour minor islands and the main residential area. Socio-ecological erosion is the result of territorial policies of the last century. The lagoon has for a long time been considered a non-valuable space, to be reclaimed by mainland-government rationality. The filling of wetlands of the Southern lagoon started in 1917, to form Porto Marghera, on which a large-scale industrial chemical plant was established in the 1920s (Zazzara 2019). The waterways became sea branches with the deepening of the canals for oil ships and, in more recent times, to facilitate the entrance of large tourist ships to the city, allowing tourists to enjoy a breath-taking panoramic view over the monumental centre and St

Mark's square. The changed balance of currents, sediment, and contamination have damaged the biodiversity of the lagoon, thus destroying livelihoods connected to fishing (Bevilacqua 1998). Today, a single fishermen's cooperative is operating in the entire lagoon (Fig.1).



**Figure 1.** Ivan, fisherman from the Burano cooperative, sorting moeche (molting crabs). Giudecca island, February 2017. Photograph: author.

During my lifetime, I have witnessed the disappearance of many cultural industries and handcrafts, e.g. artisans of glass, lace, beads, gilders, boats manufacturers, carpenters and others. The local administration did not control or stop the tourist gentrification and financialization of housing that ousted citizens (Minoia 2017); on the contrary, it is often accused of having accelerated the process of eliminating many social services, offices, university departments, and so on (Borelli 2019). Everything was relocated to the mainland; some workplaces were closed for good. In my research work, in the context of extractive power, I was asked to navigate through entrepreneurial opportunities offered by the neo-liberalization of the city in greenwashed growth-minded plans—thus, socially and politically legitimated—which also involved the tourism sector.



**Figure 2.** Fishermen in front of Porto Marghera. Photograph: author.

What was the future of the city and my future in it? The city was losing its territorial connections and meaning. The university job, which I had taken on my return to Venice after some years in Africa, represented a rare chance to stay and raise my children. The dialect, rowing in the canals, boat trips to the islands, swims, local food, brackish wine, social and family gatherings, children's street games, traditional songs, numerous associations of citizens, festivals and many cultural events all formed the amphibious territoriality of Venice, which was fundamental for me to pass on to my children.

After a few years, however, my workplace frustrations deepened, and I agreed to accompany my husband in his work relocation to Finland. There, I would soon find work. Still, nowadays, after so many years of physical distance, my identity remains strongly linked to the native culture of Venice. I try to follow from afar the resistance struggles of Venetian activists who fight for their residential and environmental rights against aggressive and extractive transformations; event nowadays, while Covid-19 has stopped many economic sectors, hotel construction still continues (Vitucci 2020).

Reflecting on this case of extractivism, cultural and territorial loss, while I was in Gilbbesjávri/Kilpisjärvi, I found important connections. During the *kaupapa* conversations enacted by our Maori and Tongan facilitators, and in which I was at ease, in an evening session in front of the *gohti/kota* fire, I was offered some important words. I wrote them on the

notepad of my mobile, as it was so dark! These words have helped me to articulate methods of relationality and emotional exchange. *Talanoa* is one of them: *talanoa* dialogues as a research methodology, involves talking, storying, deconstructing understanding, and reconstructing meaning. It is a common way of knowing and speaking from the heart. *Po-talanoa*: dialogues in the night. *Mafana*: the warmth in the research.



**Figure 3.** Talanoa conversations around the fire in Gilbbesjávri/Kilpisjärvi. Photograph: author.

## Home-searching

*Mafana: the warmth in the research* is something I have been seeking for a long time. Thinking about my professional career, without realizing it, I have always instinctively followed a geography of affects. Initially, after my Master studies in international politics, I went to Ecuador where I had close relatives and worked for some months. I intended to continue with a PhD, proposing research on political ecology in the Amazon rainforest; but other plans had me start a new project in Sudan to study the State politics of irrigation for which I accepted.

The year I spent working in Khartoum and the Nubian region, was a wonderful, formative year. In a precarious political and economic situation, I met people with a fabulous sense of hospitality, who have remained my friends ever since. Remaining in my memories and diaries are the experiences of living together with student girls on the Omdurman campus, learning




customs and traditions, experiencing the university services, political and religious meetings, military exercises of students and professors, family celebrations, and more; although in my official research, I could only report on interviews with public officials about organizational issues in irrigation and farming. It was out of the question that ethnographic work would be recognized as a scientific research methodology. The research had to follow certain pre-defined canons and methods. So firmly cemented was the demand for objectivity, externalities, and detachment from local ontologies and realities that, in the end, I used more of the documentary parts I collected, rather than field observations and live interviews. The objective reporting could not be intimate and complex, but remained binary and selective, with strict guidance on what was considered research, and what was not. I was made into a self-censoring self, and in my doctoral thesis, nothing of the 'living' political and feminist parts could be expressed; these subjectivities remained hidden and repressed.

As soon as my thesis was finished, I looked for other homes. I got involved in an environmental NGO for the protection of the Venice lagoon for some years, and then I went back to Africa, working for the UN in Lesotho and Egypt; and, then, again in Venice: home.

Then only a few years later, I had to leave again: Helsinki.

In Helsinki, I found hospitality at the Geography Department, as a lecturer in Geography of Development and Tourism; I collaborated in research projects with some autonomy; but, the research environment was very competitive, even between close colleagues, and development research was meant to be spatial, quantitative, and technological. Theory was less valuable than monitoring. The idea of reflecting on the researchers' subjectivities and positionalities was formally accepted, but not valued as part of the research. Ethnographic immersion, listening to traditional knowledge, ethical issues, relations and solidarity with subordinate and vulnerable parties, the search for alternative visions of transformation, involved too lengthy processes and did not sell enough; such ideas and practices were not practiced or discussed in research meetings.

In the meantime, I started exploring the geographical debate internationally. Many scholars have contested and rejected the traditional forms to study development in terms of the modernization project, thanks especially to movements in critical geography, political ecology, Indigenous studies, and also postcolonial, race and ethnicity, feminist and emotional



geographies. Through communications on mailing lists, reading, intellectual debates and connection with social movements, I have deconstructed the rigidities of the imposed canons of western science, and re-learned geography and other social sciences in closer relation to decolonial and Indigenous research methodologies, while at the same time understanding that I could free myself from the yokes of academic subordination, and I was able to restart moving toward new academic homes.

### **Re-enchantment**

The emancipatory step finally happened when I moved to Development Studies, into a unit of very inspiring scholars, who were theoretically engaged and open to collaborations with other disciplines within the social sciences and humanities; and there was a special sisterhood with Indigenous Studies. This was a very fertile environment in which I could initiate my long-awaited research project in the Ecuadorian Amazonia. I undertook fieldwork travels, I could reunite with my relatives based in Ecuador, and widen my network of friends-colleagues from universities and Indigenous organizations, including feminist activists involved in anti-extractivism struggles for the protection of their territories, forests, livelihoods, languages, and ancestral cultures. I have started re-exploring with new eyes their environment for living, researching, and practicing connections to affective links with knowledge exchanges and solidarity, which are based on their concepts of *sumak kaywsay* (good living in plenitude) and *kawsak sacha* (living forests) (Gualinga 2019). These concepts break with the ontological monoliths of western knowledge reproduction and go beyond the division of the world between humans and other earth beings. The Kawsak Sacha are territories of life, which the Kichwa Indigenous people defend from the necrotized interventions of the state and western corporate powers through struggles and judicial actions. The Kichwa have also organized the protection of the Kawsak Sacha by introducing the new instrument of the planes de vida (planning of life) defined by the community, for the control and sustainable use of natural resources on the surface, and also in the underground, where the fossilized natural resources—the target of greedy interests—are located.

As radical feminist scholar Federici (2019) has put it, good living provides meaning to our existence, and re-enchantment with the world. Re-enchantment is when we achieve


recuperation of our knowledge and the senses together, reconnecting our body with nature as materiality and spirituality, and in relation to community and place.

By connecting with the experiences of indigeneity of the peoples of the Ecuadorian Amazonia, and at the retreats with Sámi, Tongan, Maori, and the other researchers in Gilbbesjávri/Kilpisjärvi, I have been able to meta-visualize my journey, and to understand that Indigenous methods and re-enchantment are legitimate research practices. Through *talanoa* around the fire, the conversations while walking to the top of the spiritual mountain of Saana next to the zoological research station, and around the lake, I was able to find new energy and meaning in a life and professional journey— here summarized briefly—across countries and disciplines, searching for comfortable homes, places of *mafana*.

New phases of my journey are on the horizon, with a career move that I will try back in Italy, again in Geography (as there is no Development studies or Indigenous studies as recognised disciplines), but this time on my terms and using my strengths. Soon, for me, the time will be right for a new Indigenous methodologies' retreat, to reconnect.

### **Closing the circle**

This narration is an autobiographic reflection and reaction after years of work targeting social realities within the limits imposed by classical, western academic canons in geographical, social and environmental sciences. It is an account of an ongoing unlearning-and-relearning process (Mignolo & Walsh 2018) and meditated search for a renewed focus on what my personal contribution within the academia and the society could meaningfully be. By sharing experiences and reflections of work in different localities of the world, I hope that my account will touch the chords of younger readers or encounter those of experienced ones who, perhaps, feel the same need for methodological emancipation. New possibilities to overcome positivist methodological boundaries have finally emerged, thanks to a recent work-life change out of the subjugation imposed by authoritative environments where I felt obliged to forget my own identity, gender, status, political sensitivity, which were deemed as irrelevant. The idea of subjectivity and positionality of the researcher is accepted within the academy only formally and superficially, as a well-referenced research preamble, but not as part of the very research. This muting of subjectivity has meant years of sorrow for the limitation of greater possibilities



to acknowledge well-deserved relations with “life in its fullness” outside of the pre-imposed boundaries of my eventual mandates. I was surrounded by living accounts and daily struggles of peoples, friends and acquaintances, and by the sounds, lights and materiality of the earth, rivers, trees, seashores and changing landscapes, and the violence of mining and polluting industries; but I could not attend to any of these. Outside of work, I could better fulfil caring duties as a mother, a friend, a companion, or a volunteer; but with stress about the added restrictions for navigation, and no time for just being (Ahmed 2017).

The change was favoured by my involvement in new research projects in connection with indigenous communities and with decolonial scholars. Decoloniality has allowed me to liberate myself from imposed hierarchies of knowledge, predefined authoritative methods, and othering practices, and encouraged me to search for local and deep meanings while approaching Indigenous methods, which has meant discovering other ways of knowing, the importance of ontological connections with people, land, nature (Wilson 2008), and re-enchantment with my place and worldview. Indigenous methodologies have also helped me to comprehend my identity as a member of the diaspora from Venice, moving academically and geographically, and to worlding my own liminal identity made of water, earth and spirit, and in continuous transformation.

## **Acknowledgements**

I wish to thank Pirjo Kristiina Virtanen for her tireless and hospitable coordination of many initiatives within the Indigenous Studies community, including the organization of the writing retreat. Many thanks to Mere Kepa and Linita Manuatu for the inspiring *talanoa* conversations and their generous guidance during the retreat and beyond; and to Ellen Maria Jensen, Mere Kepa and Pirjo Kristiina Virtanen for reviewing and providing helpful comments to the paper. The participation in the retreat was possible thanks to the funding of the Academy of Finland for the project Eco-cultural pluralism in Ecuadorian Amazonia (Grant No. 318665).

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