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# Ignition

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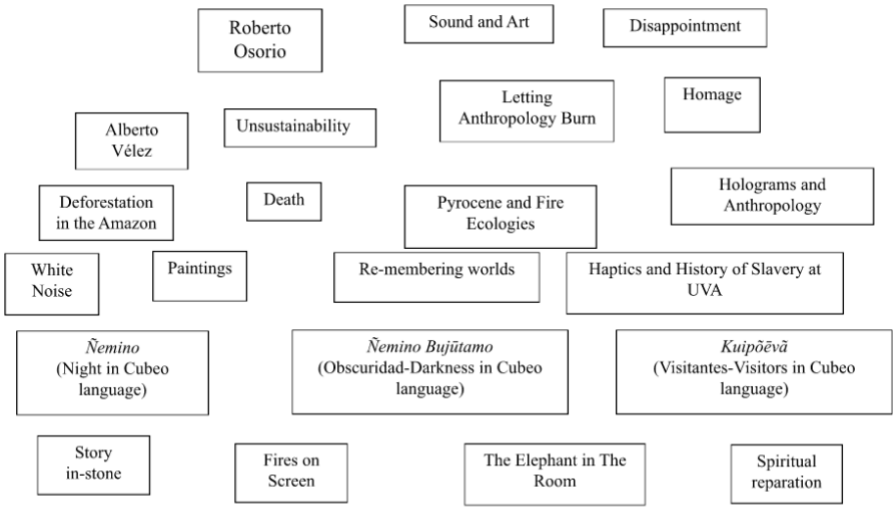
*~~Co~~Ignition* is an audiovisual installation that intervenes Brooks Hall, the first landmark building devoted to studying natural history in North America. It features the ritual action of healing and sorrow in the Amazon and the transformation of memory in contemporary environmental crises. In this audiovisual rendition of Brooks Hall, it appears a place for the containment, refraction, and excess of hopes and tensions between plural worlds. In its triptych format, it features a posthumous retrospective of two Colombian painters, Alberto Vélez and Roberto Osorio who worked extensively in Colombian Lowlands, the acknowledgement of the international genealogy of anthropologists who have studied the Amazon, and the ancestral presence of the slaved laborers who built the Brooks Hall at the University of Virginia. *~~Co~~Ignition* was directed by multimodal anthropologist Juan Castrillón in collaboration with Dr. Christopher Hewlett and produced in 2021 for the XIII Biennial Conference of the Society for Anthropology of Lowland South America (SALSA).

This project began in March 2019 after a conversation I had with George Mentore, an associate professor of anthropology at the University of Virginia. I directed the CAMRA Screening Scholarship Media Festival (SSMF) hosted annually by the University of Pennsylvania, and I invited him to participate at the keynote panel on Analytics, Poetics and Aesthetics in Multimodal Research. CAMRA (Collective for Advancing Multimodal Research Arts) is a graduate student-run collective affiliated to UPenn's Center for Experimental Ethnography and the Annenberg School for Communications that fosters the advancing of multimodal research arts and media-based pedagogies. During the media festival we were listening to the outdoor performance of Adam Vidiksis' composition called "Density Function" nearby UPenn Fisher Arts Library. Vidiksis' piece was performed by the student members of the Boyer Electroacoustic Ensemble Project using iPads and included a spatialization choreography that modified the quality of the sounds and its reverberation as people were interacting with and through the space.

After the piece ended, George immediately said, "We should have something like this happening in our SALSA (Society for the Anthropology of Lowland South America) conference". George and Laura Mentore were the organizers of the XIII SALSA Biennal Conference – University of Virginia, Charlottesville, 24-27 June 2021. Two months later, he emailed me saying, "Could I ask you (in your spare time of course) to imagine an outdoor display, event, performance (perhaps similar but not necessarily so) to that at your UPenn multimedia festival?" Subsequently, I was commissioned to design an art installation for SALSA 2021 that could get attendants together in ways they could acknowledge the sense of space of the Department of Anthropology at the University of Virginia campus in its confrontation with slavery, while also tuning into my research about Cubeo sonic worlds in the Vaupés region of the Northwest Amazon (Castrillón 2017; 2021a; 2023). The initial idea, then, was to invent a sort of event in which all these dissimilar elements were equally invited to be part of a shared conversation. The murder of George Floyd in 2020 and the unexpected outcomes of the Covid-19 pandemic precipitated the rise of BIPOC scholars in shaping this type of conversation that did not exist back in 2019.




—Initial conceptual map of the installation—

This idea about participating with an art installation at SALSA's conference benefited enormously from a roundtable on poetics and anthropology I attended at the University of Virginia campus. The roundtable was organized by the Center for Research and Collaboration in the Indigenous Americas (CRACIA) on March 24, 2018. That was the first time I visited Brooks Hall. During the roundtable, senior anthropologists Janet Chernela, Beth Conklin and William Fisher were invited to comment on the preface of George Mentore's unpublished manuscript on poetics of being in Indigenous Amazonia and modern anthropology. That day, Mentore's remarks on centering our academic and ethnographic attention to the empathetic games of mimesis and how they inspire and trigger other's felt emotions and realities in us left a big imprint on me.

I stayed the weekend in Charlottesville, and my colleagues Christopher Hewlett and Giancarlo Rolando introduced me to the anthropology department, its people, and surroundings as they lived there and studied at the University of Virginia. Before taking my train back to Philadelphia, Giancarlo mentioned to me that the only remarkable thing I did not have the chance to experience at UVA was the sounds of Roy Wagner's typewriting, a distinct soundmark of Brooks Hall. Wagner's ideas were ubiquitous although not repetitive in Mentore's discussion regarding the virtual space shared by modern anthropology and poetry as both made appear felt worlds out of their own limited textuality. The sonic presence of Roy Wagner at Brooks Hall, as I heard it through Giancarlo, oscillated between his typewriting and the echoes of a sound recording of a cicadas' choir played backwards. These sonic hints were

used to spatialize Roberto Osorio's paintings over the mammoth, arranged by the music composition titled "Twisted Hair" by Choctow and Irish descent musician Jim Wilson.

**Emergences**

~~*Co*~~*Ignition* was the after-effect of multiple situations and events. It resonated with two listserv exchanges among the SALSA membership regarding female fieldworkers in Amazonia (February 2019) and the Amazon fires (August 2019). The incident of these fires called my attention to issues of disappearance, reemergence, and other modalities of memory brought up by the varied statements presented by SALSA members and indigenous communities. Cubeo Emi-Hehenewa and Caraparã Indigenous interlocutors taught me that fire produces different outcomes, and that people use ashes and remains of fire in different ways. In some cases, they repurpose remains, ashes, names, and entire areas of gardens after being lost. But in other cases, these forms of repurposing do not happen, and instead, there is an emergence of loss, mourning, extinction, incomparable absence, and difference. An example of the former was when Elena Correa, a Caraparã woman from the Cuduyarí river, showed me a picture I took in 2012 pointing at a rounded hole as a way to say, "here was my son."

The production of ~~*Co*~~*Ignition* posed unprecedented challenges amid all these circumstances. However, the questions that helped me to start thinking through this were: How to invent an event that would allow us to remember? How to use remembrance as a point of creative and historical juncture? These questions were inseparable from Jonathan D. Hill's thoughts about re-membering as putting pieces, worlds, Xscapes, narrativity and history together (Hill 2020, 112). By then, remembrance began to accumulate so many deaths and to include in its meaning the impossibility to be together in various ways that it pushed me to rethink and revisit the paintings of two Colombian artists, as well as the sonic worlds I wanted to have at the core of the installation.

Alberto Vélez was my art teacher from whom I learned watercolor and charcoal painting. His work focused on fires, mining, and land grabbing in the Amazon. We were friends, and he was a close friend of my parents. Vélez traveled to Leticia and the Peruvian Amazon during the last 20 years of his life, trying to understand and present the vitality and destruction of the rainforest throughout his pictorial work. Roberto Osorio lived in Leticia, Amazonas, for many years, and was in collaboration with other Amazonianists

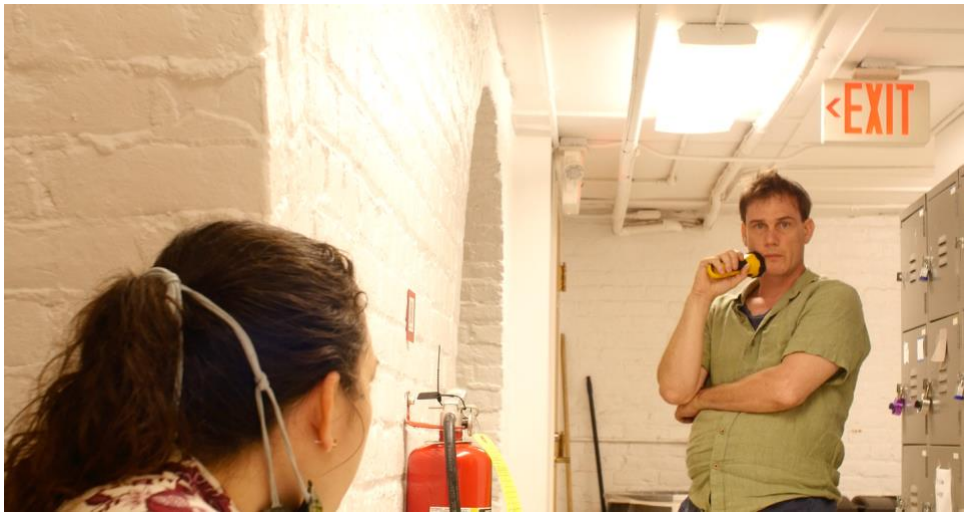
affiliated at the Universidad Nacional de Colombia producing knowledge and fostering new conversations about the Colombian Amazon. Both painters passed away when I began fieldwork for my doctoral dissertation. Both returned to their kin house to die. Osorio jumped from the window of his parents' apartment to reach the other world he was documenting in his series about shamanic healing and world shifting. Vélez went to the house of his sister to open a window in his veins and his blood was flooding until he disappeared. These two deaths and all they have revealed and taught to me in these years became the materials for the video installation and the way to think how this remembrance —and these works of art— involved these other processes of death, remembrance, and transformation of the indigenous communities with whom all members of the Society for Anthropology of Lowland South America (SALSA) have been working.

**Sound and Painting**

*Juanca, a vos que te gusta tanto eso de los sonidos, asómate a la sala a ver cómo te suenan esos cuadros*. (Juanca, you who enjoy sound so much, go into the living room, and see how those paintings sound to your ears). Alberto Vélez welcomed me with this sentence in 2017 when I visited his studio in Sabaneta, Colombia. His prompt to attend to the sounds of burning forest introduced me to a sense of limit and urgency that characterized his last pictorial work. Varied titles have been used for presenting Vélez's paintings internationally: "Water and Oxygen for the Planet," "Global Warming." However, "Tropical Forest or Thought Shaken" fits well the way he introduced me to his work better than the others. Vélez wanted me to include in my sense of appreciation other elements that exceeded his paintings although deeply embedded in each of them. He doesn't show us the mining, instead we see the fish dead floating on an iridescent river. He doesn't show us oil refineries, but we don't miss a solitary fire burning on top of a chimney in the middle of the dense forest. As I stood in front of his paintings, I wondered: in which register are these creaking sounds and calcinated branches from which we only see bits of grey, red, or a widespread smoke covering a dense creek? Limits are exceeded in these paintings, and the urgency to think these limits includes the proximity of landgrabbers, the internal contradictions of indigenous associations signing up for mining exploration projects, and the massive displacement and extinction of people and species and their resettlement in inhospitable sites.

**Back to Charlottesville**

The installation was a product of a collaborative gesture, and it was informed not only by my own idea of how to shoot and set a camera or how to edit audio with the images. Producing the video installation allowed me to learn about Brooks Hall and to acquire appreciation of its history and the multiple histories acknowledged and denied by the building, and of the people who have lived and worked there. Furthermore, the installation responded to Ryan Cecil Jobson's article "The Case for Letting Anthropology Burn" at least allegorically through its title, and some scenes in which you see Brooks Hall on fire and fumes of smoke coming from green grass. I read this letting burn as an invitation to reckon with multiple epistemic contradictions through acts of refusal with the potential to undermine any ritualized return to "academic normalcy" (Jobson 2020, 260). The English and Spanish versions of the title rendered this letting burn by offering altered forms of the words cognition and conciencia (consciousness): ~~Co~~ignition and ~~Conci~~encandescencia. These altered words were offered to conjure a mode of existence that confronts how we think and how we stand in the world as it is overwhelmed by massive fires, floods, mining, the inadequacy of monuments, the need for memorialization, and the gun violence that surrounded the production site of the installation in Charlottesville, VA. June 2021 was a month with excessive shooting reports.




*Picture 1. Christopher Hewlett and Maria Giraldo Gallo after suddenly hearing heavy gun fire at UVA campus the night we were projecting and videorecording Alberto Velez's paintings on the north side of Brooks Hall.*

**Say their names!**

Brooks Hall is a Victorian building built by enslaved laborers in Charlottesville, Virginia, in 1877. It was erected and dedicated to the study and dissemination of ideas about natural history and evolution that emphasized notions such as race superiority, and the human domestication of the environment and everything it contains. These ideas have played a major role in presenting scientific justification for slavery and colonization, and promoting a worldwide exploitation of natural resources, just to name a few. In *Unraveling the Mystery*, Dr. Jeffery L. Hantman analyzed the names that are present in each of the four walls of the building suggesting that they tell two stories. One that anchors the study of natural history developed by George Cuvier and Alexander Von Humboldt within the classical philosophical tradition; and another that ties together the tension between European and American scientists who were establishing museums and discussions around evolutionist and anti-evolutionist debates (Hantman 1989). As part of the installation, I wanted to bring other names to each wall that could resonate with SALSA's international membership in my attempt to re-imagine different genealogies surrounding current anthropological research in Lowland South America. I created these lists based on the SALSA's listserv exchange, an internal dialogue with senior members from different countries, and based on my own familiarity with the scholarship about the region.

**EAST WALL**

Terence Turner
Paul Rivet
Irving Goldman
Robert Carneiro
Kenneth Iain Taylor
Dominique Buchillet
Roy Wagner
Steve Rubenstein
Kenneth Kensinger
William Vickers

**SOUTH WALL**

Berta Ribeiro
Peter Gow
Pierre Clastres
Neil Whitehead
Denise Schaan
Johannes Wilbert
Jon Christopher Crocker
Lizzie Hessel
Stephen Nugent
Theodore Koch-Grünberg
Claude Levi-Strauss
Patrick Menget
Iris Myers
Snethlage, Emilie
Omar González-Ñáñes
David Maybury-Lewis

**WEST WALL**

Heloisa Alberto Torres
Roberto Lizarraldi
Yolanda Murphy
Eduardo Galvao
Heloisa Fenelon Costa
Herbert Baldus
Gerardo Reichel-Dolmatoff
Gertrude Dole
Gerald Weiss
Curt Nimuendajú
Simone Dreyfus Gamelon
John Elick
Egon Schaden

**NORTH WALL**

Wanda Hanke
Roberto Franco
Marie Octavie Coudreau
Etta Becker-Donner
Dieter Heinen
Jules Henry
James Peterson
Susnik, Branislava
Jane Bennett Ross
Waud Kracke
Teckla Hartmann
Paul Valentine
Warren DeBoer
Orlando Villas-Boas
Betty Meggers

—Distribution of names across the walls of Brooks Hall—

***How are we going to be remembered after we die?***

W.E.B Dubois's poem, recited in a Cubeo Emi-Hehenewa indigenous village at the Northwest Amazon at the middle of the night, explores generative tensions between visual and aural forms of knowledge among Amazonians presented to a non-indigenous audience, as much as the ritual forms of communication that make death and absence vibrant and readable to those of us who are still connected by sight and breath. In 2022, the Journal of Audiovisual Ethnomusicology (JAVEM) published a concise rendering of this poem in which I show how the Cubeo Emi-Hehenewa manage their relations of alterity through the unintelligible and opaque musicalized discourse of their ancestors (Castrillón 2022).

The fragment of *Darkwater: Voices from within the Veil* (Du Bois 1920) featured in the installation and performed by Ali Richardson works as a creative transcription that informs and exceeds the associated meanings Cubeo Emi-Hehenewa people have about their ancestors' voices; the radical disclosure of a world brought by the ancestors; the fluid transit between life and afterlife; and the indelible violence in the flesh of a man as trace of an exposed secret. In its po-etic intent, this fragment points at references that might obscure what it tries to communicate. It does so not because the translation of these associated meanings is incorrect. But because the resonance opened by the scene featuring an Afro-American character performing a poem invites a heterogeneous network of registers and viewers to participate in this peculiar encounter intended to happen inside Brooks Hall at the University of Virginia in 2021. Jonathan Hill described this peculiar encounter as a progression of aesthetics:

> There is a progression of aesthetics here, and your piece goes across semiotic codes. It starts with the image of the building and the names. Then it goes to Dubois' poem, to verbal art, which connects us directly to the history of this particular building. Later you go into this darkness through transformation and come out of it in the haunting sounds of Yuruparí instruments. Then, from there you end up going into the building where you see the swirling of the manioc beer in the gourd at the main hall before you go upstairs and start looking at all these paintings. The piece moves from verbal art to musical sounds, and from there to visual art. This latter level also connects us with the names that are put on to the building, which is also our connection with the Amazonianists. (Jonathan Hill, personal communication 2021).

**Recording at night in an Emi-Hehenewa village**

It is 3AM. There are no other sounds except the expected buzz of the night, beings, animals, and quiet thoughts of people going to *carnaliar* and fishing into small water streams, and to check the traps left in their gardens. Others like me are just thirsty and hungry, hanging in our hammocks. Suddenly, sounds emerge from around my home. The audio recorder is ready, and I turn it on. I point the mic towards where I feel the sound is coming from. I don't hear anything, but I remain in the same direction because yesterday I heard that a community near us is preparing a *dabukurí* festival with instruments. I place the mic pointing at thereish.

The pattern and rhythmical alteration populates what is being heard. When this is heard, people know that adult men are bathing together, drinking, or vomiting *chicha* manioc beer, smoking or inhaling any type of snuff. The ancestors' voices and calls talk and explain what's going on now in the middle of the night, or what happened also here in a recent or distant past. A single attention to what is heard quickly merges with other memories of the day before, and with memories of what happened other times I heard similar sounds. Perhaps memories of blood, violence, or any other unpleasant situations happening after a *dabukurí* festival. Or just other crickets, ants, sleeping butterflies, a dream.

A new dance sequence begins. Deep low sounds become less perceptible than these other mid-range sounds creating a new rhythmic pattern. I hear no words. At this time some women are grinding cassava, *rash rash rash rash*, but I heard no speech. There are no more sounds, not even a barking dog as you can notice. Because I am recording, I don't want to move. I am feeding the two mics their maximum capacity to record something that may be happening half an hour by motorboat far from my place. It seems to me that there is no other sound at night, everything else seems quiet around the *Yurupari* sounds. My ears and mics are attending only to these sounds. All Cubeo people know that these sounds unmask the unseen voices of the ancestors (Castrillón 2021b). They also know that only some people can understand them. Others fear these sounds. And others are so sleepy that they cannot remember if they heard them before the sunset, the same sounds you are listening to right now.

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