

Transcript for Episode with Macarena Gómez-Barris

SPEAKERS

Joe Aguilar, John Galante, Macarena Gómez-Barris

John Galante

Hi, I'm John Galante, I'm a historian of Latin America who specializes in migration and relations between South America and southern Europe. I also teach history and global studies at Worcester Polytechnic Institute, otherwise known as WPI.

Joe Aguilar

And I'm Joe Aguilar, a fiction writer. I specialize in speculative fiction and Chicano literature. I also teach creative writing and literature at WPI.

John Galante

And you are listening to *Crossing Fronteras*.

+++++MUSICAL INTERLUDE+++++ **INTERDISCIPLINARY**

John Galante

So welcome to another episode of *Crossing Fronteras*. We're here at the PRX podcast studio in Allston, Massachusetts. My name is John Galante. I'm a historian of Latin America. And unfortunately, my partner Joe Aguilar is unable to be here today.

But we are welcoming, nonetheless, and we're really happy to have Macarena Gómez-Barris here with us in the studio. Macarena is an interdisciplinary scholar, thinker, writer, activist, and so on, with a focus on the environment, decolonial theory, queer epistemologies, and many other things. She's also a professor at of modern culture and media at Brown University in Providence. Macarena. Thanks for for joining us today.

Macarena Gómez-Barris

Hi, John, it's great to be here today with you, thanks for the invitation. So

John Galante

So, I wanted to start with a sort of a broad-ish question, thinking about your approach to, you know, scholarship and creative output. You know, we've had a couple other participants in this series who have called themselves interdisciplinary scholars, right?

I don't know if you have a firm definition or need to have a firm definition of what it means to be an interdisciplinary scholar. But, if you do, you know, it'd be interesting to kind of get a sense of, of how that sort of might position you? Or is it something more that, you know, you and others might be using to break free right of sort of disciplinary structures and constraints and that sort of thing, and that's, that's enough.

Macarena Gómez-Barris

You know, I think with a lot of different kinds of knowledge, productions, knowledge forms, ways of imagining the world, ways of seeing the world, ways of approximating the world, I guess, I think of myself as a creative scholar and writer, that would be primary identities, intellectual work, and thinking across lines, creating webs across different kinds of knowledge formations, is really important to me.

Interdisciplinary, is a term that I gravitate to that feels easy for me. I was trained as a cultural sociologist. But, you know, and I have taken a lot of statistics and the quantitative courses, but I think a lot of knowledge defies easy categorization. And I think sociology was comfortable as a discipline, in part because it was easy to see the pitfalls of easy categorization. And so how to trouble certain ways of categorizing social life became part of my project in decolonizing sociology in early work.

And I have always been interested in the social and social formation, thinking about how people go about doing what they do, thinking about critical modes of engaging the world and the environment, questions of race and justice. And I think these kinds of modes cut across all disciplines and all knowledge production, it's not just the disciplines in a kind of elite form as they appear within the US or international academy. I think it's also within modes of life, vernacular life, you know, as modes of being and ways of going about acquiring information and analyzing that information, and sorting through the complexities of the world in order to produce some take on the world.

So I don't know about others, but the interdisciplinary is just a way to signal very quickly that I'm trying to think, not just with, you know, literatures or media, which is already interdisciplinary formation, or sociology, or the Humanities or Environmental Studies, but across those many formations. And often, really understanding that what we have to prioritize is a critique and delinking in order to undo and remake anew those structures.

John Galante

Yeah, and you get the sense that the academy is to some degree changing in those directions. I mean, we have those conversations at my institution. And I, I know that other institutions are building departments, right, that are increasingly interdisciplinary or multidisciplinary or integrative in some way, right? And your department at Brown is maybe another manifestation of this push, you know, over decades, perhaps, to to create those webs, and then, you know, maybe to some degree, institutionalize them. Maybe it is indicative of some kind of influence, right, that scholars like yourself and others pursuing these types of efforts have had on on the academy and the way that we think, in a more institutionalized way.

Macarena Gómez-Barris

I do think that, as Rod Ferguson charts in work on the academy, I do think there's a way in which the 1960s and 1970s movements by scholars of, color thinkers of color, black and brown peoples, Asian peoples, etc., did extend to kind of Race and Ethnic Studies, Gender and Women's Studies, Gender and Sexuality, redefining, you know, women as a category, women to extend to non-binary and trans women. That's been going on for decades.

I think it's also if we're thinking within the institution, John, I mean, I think it is also about. as you suggest, people. I think, at your institution, what I've noticed, because I had the opportunity to visit is that there's a group of visionary thinkers and makers. There is an incredibly thoughtful and powerful, innovative dean. There's support at the upper administration. That allows for really interesting intellectual life to form and for a kind of funding.

So I understand what you're saying about service. But I would like to think that, beyond service, we're working with students and their demand for a kind of relevancy to knowledge production, and the kinds of things that they're learning in the classroom that will help them navigate the world, not just as graduate students or in a professionalized sense, but also as thinkers, makers, activists, as people, artists who are reimagining that world.

They face enormous problems that our generation and previous generations have also faced, but have also created. And I think those problems are absolutely overwhelming. And I would say, I'm increasingly turning not only to the idea of clusters of knowledge formations that potentially depend on certain kinds of disciplines as underpinnings, but also to the idea of theory and praxis. So the idea that our institutions should not only prepare for, you know, interrelated kinds of academic knowledge production, but also practice on the ground, working with communities, having concrete skills, and being able to engage the world in really thoughtful and productive ways to address these major problems.

+++++MUSICAL INTERLUDE+++++ **EXTRACTIVE ECONOMIES**

John Galante

You know, your book on extraction and decolonial perspectives, you know, is a good I think starting point for some of the discussions of your work and your thinking and how it's evolved and so on and so forth. And it's situated in in a collection of work in some ways that's that's connecting and interrogating, you know, extractive economies.

But, but your take is, is, is, is also really innovative within that, right, and I'm curious as to how you chose the examples, among so many to focus on, indigenous activists, artists, intellectuals. What drew you to those particular cases, people, communities, problems.

Macarena Gómez-Barris

What led me to *The Extractive Zone: Social Ecologies and Decolonial Perspectives* was the work that I had done in *Where Memory Dwells*, which was a book that was on state violence and post-dictatorship Chile. And really studying authoritarianism and working with women groups in Chile that were continued to search for their disappeared loved ones and the missing population. And working with artists, like Guillermo Nuñez, who has an entire archive on torture paintings and taught me a lot about how to think about the nation-state in particular, and demands that were aggrieved within the nation state.

And as I was doing that archival work in human rights archives, there was an image, a sepia-toned image that's in *The Extractive Zone* that actually opens the book. And that image was of indigenous Mapuche women and children who had survived the occupation and pacification, quote/unquote, of Araucaña, in the late 1800s, the 19th century. And that image and those women and children who were on their own land, but had survived, were survivors of a genocidal settler colonial occupation, could not fit into the narrative I had constructed in *Where Memory Dwells*, which was a much shorter timeline of modernity's violence and its afterlives. And the Pinochet terror and the people who had experienced that directly in their bodies and that turned to neoliberalism. And I had tracked that very carefully, but within the nation-state format that I had constructed, there was not much more than I can do then mention that Mapuche peoples have suffered authoritarianism and authoritarian colonialism in distinct ways.

So that became the prompt for *The Extractive Zone*. And with that as a starting point, and undergoing a process of 10 years of research, and engaging and living in a number of different locations that I had already visited within South America. I knew that I had to work at a sub-national trans-regional level rather than merely a national level. You know, I had relationships with Mapuche peoples and communities and, and began a very ongoing collaborative relationship with Francisco Huichaqueo, who's a wonderful Mapuche filmmaker and documentarian. And then with Catalina Caycedo who's a Colombian artist and multimedia artist who has also happened to be my student when I was teaching the University of Southern California and we ended up teaching each other on extractivism.

And from there, field work, site work, living in communities, it all kind of unfolded. But it did take me many tries to be able to put together this book because I was really straddling and thinking about, on the one hand, how much I appreciated a decolonial generation of scholars ahead of me that had opened up space for a kind of conversation about delinking from the colonial apparatus. And then on the other hand, the kind of textured aesthetic accounts of indigenous and their allies, afro-indigenous peoples, and artistic production that I knew I wanted to include. And then, on the other hand, a grounded struggle against an intensification of extractive capitalism that was occurring in the Americas. So it was those three different kinds of modes that prompted this book.

John Galante

And so when you're looking at these people's experiences, right, and, you know, at a sub-national level. It's interesting because it's, on the one hand, it's subnational, local even. On the other hand, it's this global phenomenon, right?, that they're contending with. I wonder what your impressions are of objectives of those people that you're engaging with, you know, studying, investigating, ultimately, you know, writing about. And I also wonder about, where success lies in relation to that. You know, the goal, a long term goal, you know, to, to topple global capitalism feels hard, it feels something that generate would generate pessimism, maybe, in one's point of view. But, you know, if you're looking at this from a sub, subnational, a local perspective, then the idea of success and what is successful in your efforts could potentially change? Because the goals is potentially different, right?, the goal is to remove yourself, maybe from that those systems.

Macarena Gómez-Barris

Well, it was important for me to not just work at the sub-national level in terms of thinking about localized communities, but understanding those within an international context of advancing extractive capitalism in this particular moment. And there's a lot more to say about that. But one thing I would mention is that I knew I couldn't focus on one industry. So I worked on hydroelectricity, oil, monocultural forest plantations, and also spiritual tourism or tourism and its massification, and also spiritual settler tourism.

So there were a lot of different ways I thought about extraction. And I thought about extraction upon indigenous and afro-indigenous bodies and also land. And there's a long conversation and fight or contentions within the literature on extractive capitalism now about whether you should just think about the extensions of extraction through like its somatic extraction and bodies and meta metaphorical and material sense or whether we should just focus on land and the infrastructures of extraction. I feel that many of our current questions around settler colonialism can be settled. The extractive weapon has always been focused on racialized peoples and their territories. So, for me, I've settled that question, maybe others have not. But I feel that question settled.

And I think what I noticed and observed alongside communities of struggle, and I consider myself still in conversation with those communities of struggle, is that success is complicated, but also easy. It's about the occupying force leaving. And it's about territory being regained, it's about people being able to live a life and a life worth living, it's about being able to think about the future beyond just the daily. And it's about really finding sources of resilience, even in the most difficult and violent circumstances.

And so, land reoccupation, thinking about clean water sources, allowing for oil which is really fossil fuel energies to stay below ground, for people's lives to be, you know, left alone by the extractive machine. These are the sources of quote/unquote success. And it's not a pretty picture, as you seem to suggest, um.

You know, in some of the fieldwork that I done, I had worked on indigenous socialist kind of organization communities of ecotourism in eastern Ecuador, in a really vital and biodiverse region called the Yasuní. That there were important urban connections that were quite pluriversal and pluralistic within Quito as well. And, you know, some of the communities I visited, where they had fended off through their own beautiful ecotourist businesses, that create a vitality for their own communities and a form of cultural preservation, are now gone. And those have been eradicated by oil corridors that have been opened up by US, Canadian, European, Ecuadorian petroleum companies.

And that is, that kind of sad legacy and sad fact is part of the work that we're doing right now in the world is very real in relationship to what it means to not win. It means sometimes that the culture of death will, will do its work in really devastating ways.

So, you know, and of course, we're speaking in a moment of great crisis on the planet, in terms of war in the Middle East, and the incredible and terrible advances of the Israeli state in Palestinian territories. And so we will have a lot of loss, there is a lot of loss, and we can't just speak from a place of naivete about how much land is required, desired, and to what lengths by particular corporate states, you know,

against indigenous people. It's a real moment in the world of anti-indigenous legislation, think about Australia and the failings of the recent legislation to advance there.

So I think we have to be extremely sober-eyed about this. I'm usually quite a critically optimistic person. I take a lot of solace from Paulo Freire. I've written about in *Beyond the Pink Tide* that there has to be a sliver of hope, but I do see that authoritarianism is reigning supreme and many ways. It doesn't mean we stop, you know, and we find each other, we find ways of learning with each other, we listen, we engage, I engage, I look to my books, I look to my colleagues, I look to my students, I look to my activist communities, and I continue as, as someone that's not at the very forefront on the edge of the extracted machine. But at the same time, you know, I know my role within it.

John Galante

Yeah, I guess that's, I'm thinking about also knowledge transfer, and how, when you are facing the, the extreme versions of that capitalist state, kind of efforts at the control of land and bodies, and that sort of thing. That you, that you learn, or you have the knowledge of its perversions, and its extreme versions. And you also have the knowledge of, of potentially how to resist, or you have a historical experience or even a present experience of how, how one could contend with those forces. Right? And so there's potentially knowledge in that.

And so and so that, that seems to me at least to be an important element of your work. So that if we aren't at the margins, we can understand, not just understand the problems, but how we can contend with it in our own way. Because we also have to, in different ways, engage with this, these larger structures. And so there is a lot of value, right, in those intellectual and creative processes, not just for those local communities, but for, for anybody who's being thoughtful about their relationship, right, with those same forces.

Macarena Gómez-Barris

I agree. I agree. And I guess I would just think a little bit with you about who the "we" is there, because the "we," I think, presumes that the academy is separate from the extractive capitalist racial capitalist forces. And as we know, it's absolutely both about reproducing white supremacy and a particular version of a hegemonic model of economic and political model. And at the same time maybe those of us who have tenure in this colonial university, also are more privileged.

So the "we" there is, I think, a tenuous "we." And I've switched from using the kind of pronoun we although, you know, sometimes it can be a galvanizing force to the I. And I in both senses, you know. I see, I witness, you know, I am in solidarity with, and I continue to learn, just as you know, I know you are an incredibly thoughtful critical scholar, teacher, activist in your own work as well, and are thinking from these similar locations of trying to create community in spaces where what is valued is the individual effort, individual assessment, individual success up a particular kind of ladder.

You know, and some of our students in the ideology of neoliberal capitalism face this. But I think we are in a moment of real need for figuring out those communal structures. And definitely the communities that I've worked with and witnessed understand that without each other, and the more-than-human, the rivers, the planet, the trees, the Earth, the soil, we are nothing.

+++++MUSICAL INTERLUDE+++++

KNOWLEDGE SYSTEMS; THE GLOBAL SOUTH; TRANSVERSAL PERSPECTIVES

John Galante

I am curious also about how you are layering other things on to some of the things that you you dealt with when thinking about, you know, extractive economies, kind of thinking about queerness and, and feminism and youth activism, indigenous groups still, anti-capitalist organizing. How do you view those things together? Of course there's so much diversity in in those experiences, which is the value, right, on the one hand. But then that does make synthesis a challenge, no?, to some degree, among those different perspectives, points of view, types of activism, types of creativity? It's global in scope, also, right.

Macarena Gómez-Barris

I mean, John, I think it's a complicated question, in some ways, and it's an easy answer in another way. I've worked very organically, I've never kind of seen an arc from beginning to end, as I think few people do when they're doing this kind of work. By delving into the materials of my interests and my passions, my commitments, be they ethical, political, intellectual, cultural, my subject position as a child of empire myself, coming here to the United States very young. My first narratives were about all of the things we left behind and the sadness of having to live in the belly of the beast.

And I think that is how I've entered forcefully into the work. And so that allowed me to always have a kind of alliance with people from a submerged position in society, and to see that the ideologies that were on offer by the United States for a good life were false in many ways and had an underbelly themselves. And so I think that's how I've moved always in a kind of form of solidarity with the topics at hand, and through a position of also allowing for creative flow. But I do think that there is training and then there is following one's own process and one's own contribution, and we can't do everyone's part, but we must do our own, you know. And that kind of approach is really guided my work to this point.

And it's also raising the, you know, question, What counts as theory? What counts as theory? What counts as knowledge? And a lot of the subjects and conversations I've had with other artists, with other activists, they're certainly theorists. And so I don't necessarily have to track through a particular European centered continental philosophical canon in order to be able to say the things that matter in the world, although I think it is important to understand one's place in the history of ideas. Yeah.

John Galante

Going through your work, I thought about Antonio Gramsci, quite a bit. And I'm also a scholar of Italy, and Italian history, and Gramscian influence in Latin America. But that notion of the kind of working class intellectual, right? And, you know, he was an avowed communist, and so he's, you know, looking through a class lens, primarily. He's important in terms of understanding hegemony, I think, right, and his kind of comments on hegemony are quite important and influential. But also the element, which maybe isn't talked about as often in his writing, which is opposition to hegemony, which is in that kind of his idea that working class intellectuals, and that people who are unstudied, are still creative, they're

still intellectual, they're still leaders. And that is, in his view, an important source of resistance, again, from a class perspective as he's viewing it, right?

And so, I did see some really interesting connections to that, right, in some of the ways that you're looking at, and even talking just now about people and spaces that are and should be, right, outside of any institution that we might think of as being influential. That's an important locus, right for that resistance.

Macarena Gómez-Barris

I think Gramsci is a Global South thinker. Gramsci, in fact, thinking about the Southern Question in that beautiful essay, which is how I began founding the Global South Center, when we were doing that work in New York City. And, you know, it was, I think, the right essay for us as a group of critical thinkers, scholars, makers, practitioners, artists to think together. And I do think there's something about Gramsci that we need to continue to enliven because it allows a way of thinking about not only the working class but geographies and sub-geographies and certain spaces on the planet that are considered less than.

And this kind of subhuman racialized geographies, I think is at the core of what's happening right now in terms of the forces that are at work to accumulate more and more capital for an even tinier group of people, and to have massive control over hegemonic control over the masses. So Gramsci is important critical theorist for us. And I do think that we have to layer, to go back to your earlier question, many different perspectives together. And it's not about abandoning certain groups, you know, the kind of thoughts and thinking and ideas and writings and conceptualizations that have been handed to us from prior generations. I think there's a sorting process, certainly, as you're doing, you focused in, you allowed us to focus in on Gramsci.

But I think, it's about, again, our kind of intellectual solidarities with those who preceded us, and how to be mediators for the generations to come and accumulate thought, in critical ways, but also really comment. And I think I appreciate this podcast as one instance of an important turn that we need to make, and continue to make in the academy to open up the walls of the academy. So like Gramsci, we are speaking beyond the the narrow halls of our universities, or of institutional knowledge.

John Galante

Yeah, I mean, to me, the value of class was that it could be anybody. Right? Solidarity could be global, if you're obviously from that social class, right?

Macarena Gómez-Barris

But the proletariat has always been racialized.

John Galante

But but the I agree in practice, right? But the vision, to some degree, by some, of this effort to focus on class was an effort to universalize. And when we're thinking now about marginalized communities, or groups or individuals across different solidarities, right, different types of solidarity, say? Based on gender, sexuality; based on, you know, being indigenous, right; based on youth, right, activism; based

on ideological point of view, and that sort of thing, like. It must be a challenge, maybe it's a challenge for you, not necessarily as a thinker, but as an activist to make those connections across those different communities. Or is that does that happen naturally?

Macarena Gómez-Barris

I have to go back to the term transversal that I use a lot in *Beyond the Pink Tide*, which is an effort to, it's like notes and excess from the 10 years of working and writing on *The Extractive Zone*. So it's like part two. And what *Beyond the Pink Tide* really does is try to ask the question, well, so we see a kind of political left turn in Latin America, in the Americas. And then we see extraordinary backlash. But we even see within that left turn that some of the governments that say they're quote, unquote, Socialist Democrats or Socialists and formed by the people and formed by the Earth, there's still a right wing agenda in particular ways and that the natural resources are put at the disposal of, you know, the owning class.

And so, that, to me, was a big question. So how do we, again, start to think about how we might reorganize societies to better serve a broader range of peoples. And one question was a feminist question that was posed in Bolivia under Evo Morales, who was an extraordinary leader yet there was a lot of critique about, well, you're, there's an earth constitution, but still the natural resources are being sold to local and foreign governments and entities.

So, you know, the question put on the table by feminist and autonomous feminist, anarchist feminist, indigenous anarchist feminists there was, you know, where are the sex workers? Where are the women? Where are the children in your platforms? Where are the mothers? Where are the motherless? Where are the where are the queers? Where are the trans peoples, in your version of the future society? And there was a big hole there. And I'm not just pointing out Evo Morales, because I think how important to have the first indigenous president of the world? I mean, this is an extraordinary advance. But it's to say that just because we've resolved one question doesn't mean we've resolved several others.

And I think that transversal, or that idea that we need to transverse across and mediate across many forms of power, and many kinds of subject positions, be they, again, human or more-than-human, that becomes very central to how we can reimagine the world we're living in.

+++++MUSICAL INTERLUDE+++++

NON-HUMAN SUBJECTS; ENVIRONMENTAL CRISIS

John Galante

So in a couple instances, you've you've mentioned this sort of idea or element, another layer if you will, right, of kind of the non-human, and I'm interested in your approach to that. I'm also interested in how it became more important in your work.

Macarena Gómez-Barris

No that's great. And we happen to be in a wonderful studio with very incredible bathroom quotes by wonderful intellectuals and activists. And so, you know, I use what's around me, and what's around me

right now is a quote by Cesar Chavez that says, “The fight is never about grapes or lettuce. It is always about people.” And of course, I would not contend with Cesar Chavez, who I once heard speak at UC San Diego as an undergraduate, with the Dolores Huerta. And what an incredible history of fighting pesticides and creating union projects for Chicanx, Mexicanx, Latinx peoples.

But I will say the fight is not only about people, it's also about the land and the resources. And it's always been about that, you know, in a settler colonial framework, as Patrick Wolfe discusses, is about elimination of the indigenous peoples that live there. That is, thinking with Cesar Chavez, about the original colonization of Mexico.

And so the land, you know, how to think about the land alongside its racialized people. And one way I've done that is by thinking about the concept of the colonial Anthropocene. Now, I have not written extensively on this yet. I've written on this in a review of other people's work. But I'm not here trying to proliferate all of the concepts on the Anthropocene – and by the Anthropocene, I'm referring to the human impact and destruction upon the planet Earth that is quantifiable and measurable in terms of our carbon footprint, and lasting environmental terra formation and impact. That's been thoroughly kind of described and critiqued at the same time.

Let's not start the Anthropocene in the 1950s, as some would do, with the rise of car culture and the interstate system in the United States, highway system. Or the turn from the 19th to the 20th century, when you see a kind of mass production of industrial waste and industrial production. Or even the 1650s. But let's mark back to the 14th century, and the colonization of the Americas, and that it is a colonial project.

And that does really reshape knowledge, as it were, because, you know, when we think about power, and subjugated peoples, we also have to think about subjugated land and resources, or the plants and the trees and the nonhuman animals. So, for me, that's how I arrived at the question. It was really through a question about tracking power and its imprint, and then tracking modern disciplinary power, and then tracking it back to colonial systems of power that include this transatlantic slave trade and the indigenous, you know, genocide in the Americas. But I think that there's a way I've also learned to be more attuned to my own experience in relationship with the web of relations around me. And not just as a thinker, but as a person in the world that relies on the lettuce and the grapes, as Cesar Chavez would put it.

John Galante

Even further back. I mean, this actually complicates things a little bit. You know, the, the Warren Dean's *With by Broad Axe and Firebrand*, where he's, it's a history of the Atlantic Forest in Brazil from the forest's perspective. And he has his first chapter or two, I don't recall, is about pre-Columbian slash-and-burn-agriculture, and how indigenous groups were also, from the Atlantic forests perspective, right?, damaging to, you know, those environments But I think it does, it connects to that sort of non human element for sure. There's this longstanding relationship between humans and nonhumans that is extractive.

Macarena Gómez-Barris

Right. And I think indigenous populations have always terra formed, but not at the scale or with intensity or with machinery or with the same outcome as the kind of during the rise of global capitalism. I have not read that work. So I don't know exactly. But if we look at fire as an element, and I've been teaching a course, with Bathsheba Demuth who works on the Arctic, this semester, and we're teaching on the elemental thinking, theory and praxis. And if we think with fire there and track a history of fire, and, you know, the work that's done by indigenous peoples to selectively burn land, so that it cultivates for, you know, settled forms of early agriculture. I think it's, you know, it also has its use and that was a specific technology that was learned as a management of forestry, by indigenous populations in relationship with the land so that acorns or seeds and other things that are very specifically have evolved to be burned and then therefore, birth in you know, so that growth is always interrelated with a form of kind of fire practice.

And I, I just think that there are ways that I've often been asked, am I romanticizing the history of indigeneity and indigenous practices? No, I am thinking alongside indigenous technologies and techniques, that are always in relationship to kin relation and reciprocity globally. And, again, the struggles that are going on about territories that have intensified over the last five years since I've written that book, it's been a kind of mega form of extraction at this mode. The idea that winner takes all, we can take as much nonrenewable resources as we can, that will go to the more kind of advanced and consuming societies, they will continue to feed a kind of capitalist expansion that allows wealth for some and impoverishment of resources for others. And that whole kind of cycle that we're living in is only accelerated in this moment.

And I would just say that, without attention to territory, it's not just about racializing Palestinians as subhuman, it's also about histories of land and cultivation of the land and a land that gives a lot and is extremely biodiverse in terms of its capacity to, to grow and cultivate. So this is the heart of the commodification of land and the more-than-human so I want to just bring attention to that space. And that close attention to the elemental, I think, is a really important turn in this moment.

John Galante

Yeah, that question of scale seems to be quite critical. Because the scale of these problems are so massive, truly global, seems like more intense, you know, every summer in the Northern Hemisphere, it's the the events are more extreme. And I don't think that's just the media, you know, playing up those those fears. It does seem like the pace is accelerating and the scale is increasing. And so shouldn't we then, let's try and learn from those peoples who have been negatively affected by this in the most severe ways for the longest period of time to understand their how, how they are relating to this? And then I'm kind of going back to the "we," but like, how can others who maybe have had been less impacted, up until more recently, learn from those peoples that have been affected by it for five centuries?

Macarena Gómez-Barris

I mean, I think there's a lot of learning and it happens on all sides. I'm continually learning. I think you'd asked earlier, off of our conversation, when we were speaking more informally, what about students? What about the classroom? What about pedagogies is in relationship to this question. And I think this question that you're raising, makes me think about the urgent work of creating space for these

conversations. Because I do think it has to be indigenous, Black, Asian, you know, led in terms of a lot of the kind of bottom up, if you will, solutions to climate change, climate crisis, and transformation in this moment. And they are anti-capitalist solutions, and they are often in relationship again to the reciprocal understanding of the fact that we are completely we, everyone on planet Earth right now, has been tipped by this unsustainable, unbalanced way of living.

At the same time, there is a role, a massive role for science here. There's a massive role for technology. There's a massive role for non-indigenous peoples. There's a massive role for us as students and thinkers and makers and artists, there's a role for everyone. And that is the kind of planetary table I want to invite us to. Because I think too often, I've noticed with my students, first at USC and then at Pratt and now at Brown, and also San Francisco State, though there was a slightly different ethos there because there was an activist history that students were very tapped into. But since then, I've noticed a sense of like, well I just don't know my role. I'm not sure I have a role and a kind of erasure of self, and that the pandemic both exposed, and has also emphasized for these students. And of course the anomie or sense of isolation that we feel in general in relationship to capitalism and a fast society as you're putting it with your emphasis on the acceleration.

I think there is a role and we, that's what we can do as teachers, but also be move into the student role. It's incredible in my classrooms, when I allow students to open up a space for students to shape the syllabus. I have learned way more, you know, in a curated syllabus by students who are interfacing with millions of pieces of information a day, and their consciousnesses are completely open, yet they may not have yet the space to try out their ideas to voice their ideas and think.

I mean, this is true of communities, students, young people, you know, and so how do we work in that transgenerational space of possibility together, so that it's not like this is just going to end and a dystopia. But let's acknowledge the dystopian elements that are ongoing and increasing, and let's find each other and reach across. And that includes with the more-than-human world.

The best class I've taught this year so far has been with no agenda, other than to walk to the water together, and have conversations about what we saw. And that was very hard for me to let go of a sense of, we are going to do something here. And there's reading that needs to be discussed and there. But, you know, the students began to talk to the people were fishing alongside the edge of Providence upon Narragansett territory. They told me for about the salt marshes and salt pods that they saw. They talked about the fact that they could see post industrial waste there. They knew about slave ships that have come and that worked up that waterway. They asked questions, we then went back to the classroom and researched together answers. And I learned so much and they felt like doing the research. So the kind of process of trust and un mastery there is really the kind of move that I think the non-human world teaches us, you know, that kind of humility?

+++++MUSICAL INTERLUDE+++++
THE SEA'S EDGE; FORWARD LOOKING WORK

John Galante

Thinking to your kind of projects going forward? What is it about the sea's edge or about fluidity. I've seen you speak online about, you know, rivers and, and your observations of rivers, and so forth. And what, what drew you to that subject matter, right, in terms of taking your your thinking and your research and your own creativity to the next level? Next place.

Macarena Gómez-Barris

I grew up in Gold Country. I was born in Chile. I spent some time there as a young person, moved to LA Gabrielino territory, and then spent a considerable time on upon Maidu territory in Gold Country. And it was a profound experience to be in the foothills of the Sierra Nevada Mountains and have as my Girl Scouts troop leader, Miss Ashley, who was Maidu. And from her from a very young age, I just thought a lot about cloud formations, what the land might have looked like. She taught me what the land might have looked like prior to, you know, settler colonial impact that happened there in the late 19th century, but also, you know, 1848 and 49, and the Gold Rush, etc., that happened in that area, where many mighty peoples were killed, and there was huge genocides that happened there.

But what it means to be attuned to the land in that way, is something that I think we all have somehow within us. It's not just indigenous peoples, but of course, with indigenous histories, there's a longer and embodied archive of knowledge around how to have that attunement and perception. And so, you know, it's not just attunement to people, again, but that rivers may have their own beingness. The land, grass, microbe world, you know, the invisible, the things we've been taught to see as things rather than beings that are deserving of respect. So that has become more important to my own worldview, and not to separate that out from the topics that I write about.

John Galante

Yeah, so is there a confrontation that's happening at the sea's edge or at the ocean's edge that you're interested in? Or is it some kind of synthesis that's going on? I mean, is there is it a space for innovation and creativity, which you've often, you know, written a lot about in your work and that sort of thing? Like, what, what's bringing you to that margin?

Macarena Gómez-Barris

I mean, it's a point of the first colonial contact, it's a shoal, as Tiffany Lethabo King would describe it, it's a of African enslavement. It's, for me, a non-binarized space between supposed liquidity and supposed solidity in that transition zone, where the Earth's own ecotones, or the Earth's own boundaries dissolve. And so it allows for a kind of decompositional force. And I think we are in a moment where we need more decompositional forces. And we have produced materials like plastics that don't allow the earth to metabolize those substances.

And the sea's edge seems to be a place of what Brathwaite had called tidalectics and Caribbean philosophy really thinks with the shoreline. And originally, the impetus for this work came out of Rachel Carson's trilogy on the oceans and then her clarion cry, Silent Spring, a book that sparked a kind of anti-chemical, anti-pollution, environmental impact kind of work. But in her earlier work on the sea's, on the sea, I just noticed that there was a different voice at work, and less a kind of denunciation and attention to kind of the oceanic has its own powerful voice that needs to be listened to, that archives incredible histories that are both human and more-than-human.

John Galante

It's a place of interaction of all kinds of different things. And therefore a place of innovation potentially.

Macarena Gómez-Barris

Mutation transformation, not just sea, not just land, but a third space, a kind of opening. But again, a space that's seen an enormous colonial violence and enormous real estate gentrification, privatization, regulation, to, you know, avoid allowing access to particular populations, right. So all of those things are enlivened in my new book.

I would love to finish the that work soon. But we are in a moment in the world, we're also facing a real crisis in leadership.

And, you know, use these means that we have to be able to really engage in this moment. It is a moment of great transition. I think, not unlike other moments, but maybe more *agudo* or sharpened than in other moments. And so I do feel the important aspect of being present and witnessing and supporting and guiding as much as I can. So that takes me away from a writing practice, to be honest. And that's hard. But I think, how to inhabit these different roles that we do, and still actually feel that we are doing the work that we need to be doing together. Right?

John Galante

Thank you so much for for for being a leader, in fact, and for being present here today. And for all of your work and also for your participation in this podcast series. It's really been a pleasure to speak with you today.

Macarena Gómez-Barris

Thank you for having me. It's been a joy. Thank you.

+++++MUSICAL INTERLUDE+++++
CREDITS

John Galante

You've been listening to *Crossing Fronteras*. I'm your co-host John Galante, a historian of Latin American and an Associate Professor at Worcester Polytechnic Institute as well as the creator and executive producer of the podcast series.

Joe Aguilar

And I'm your co-host Joe Aguilar, a fiction writer and an Assistant Professor at WPI, and an executive producer of the podcast series.

John Galante

This show surveys the unique ecosystem of contemporary scholarship and art being generated by scholars and creatives in New England who are working in Latin American and Caribbean Studies.

Joe Aguilar

Our series producer is Jill Ruby. Original music for our series was written, performed, and recorded by Carlos Odria. This podcast was recorded at PRX Podcast Garage in Boston, Massachusetts, with the help of Magdiela Matta. Additional support came from a fellowship provided by the Global Labs at WPI, with special assistance from Steve McCauley, Varun Bhat, and Sam Ollari.

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