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To cite this article: Diego Astorga de Ita (2022) Musical Hydropoetics: Fluvial Inhabitations, *Son Jarocho*, and Anthroposcenes, *GeoHumanities*, 8:2, 435-456, DOI: [10.1080/2373566X.2022.2045208](https://doi.org/10.1080/2373566X.2022.2045208)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/2373566X.2022.2045208>



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Published online: 08 Jul 2022.



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Musical Hydropoetics: Fluvial Inhabitations, *Son Jarocho*, and Anthroposcenes

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This is a geopoetic exploration of riverine space through music. In this article, I build upon the nascent field of hydropoetics by approaching the space of rivers through musical ethnographic research. I draw upon post-colonial geopoetic approaches, blue humanities and oceanic studies, and the phenomenology of Gaston Bachelard and Ivan Illich, as well as on the praxis of *son Jarocho* musicians. I reflect upon three vignettes of music in two rivers of Sotavento in southeast Mexico and in one British river, exploring the ways in which *son Jarocho* music is used to produce and transform space. These surveys disembody into a consideration of the possibilities granted by musical hydropoetics in the context of the Anthropocene, thinking of landscapes as feral Anthroposcenes as per Tsing et al. and Matless's works. **Key Words:** *ecomusicology*, *geopoetics*, *hydropoetics*, *music geographies*, *Sotavento*.

IN A LAND OF BROOKS AND RIVERS

“Je suis né dans un pays de ruisseaux et de rivières ...”
— G. Bachelard, *L'eau et les rêves*.

*“Aquí
sumergido en el centro de estas aguas
sobre un río sin principio ni final
descubro
lo distante
lo lejano”*
— R. Perry Guillén

Two of the largest navigable rivers of Mexico, the Papaloapan and the Coatzacoalcas, flow through Sotavento. El Sotavento (in English “The Leeward”) is a region in southeast Mexico, in the coastal plains of the gulf. Some define it as the region constituted by the basins of the aforementioned rivers, others as the hinterland to the south of the transatlantic port of Veracruz (Delgado 2000; Domínguez Pérez 2015; García de León 2009, 2014, see map [Appendix 1 in Supplemental Materials](#)).

Veracruz has been an important port since Mexico's early colonial history and it had (and still has) considerable influence on the Leeward region (Chaunu 1960). The cities and towns of Sotavento were connected to the port and each other by rivers and streams, partly because of this, rivers became an important part of Sotaventine culture, history, and everyday life.

As The Leeward developed, so did a particular style of music, product of the encounter between American, African, and Spanish peoples, brought together in the complex and violent

colonial process. The resulting music is generally known as *son Jarocho* (García de León 2009, 2014), and it is played with an array of instruments of which the small eight-stringed chordophones known as *jaranas* are perhaps the most representative.

Besides *jaranas*, some recurrent instruments are small Sotaventine guitars with four to five orders of strings, tambourines, and equine jawbones that are percussed, large lamellophones called *marimboles*, acoustic basses dubbed *leonas* (akin to a *guitarrón*), the *tarima* upon which dancers dance, and sometimes large harps. Despite this diversity of instruments, son Jarocho practitioners are often referred to as *jaraneros*. Jaraneros gather and play their myriad instruments in encounters known as *fandangos*, which welcome all musicians, dancers, or curious onlookers wanting to join the party. Some speak of *fandangos* as rituals (indeed, the music can sometimes lead to a near-trance state with its repetitive rhythms), others see it as amusement, some as a vice; be as it may, the resulting sounds—shoes on wood and uncountable strings—are intense, wonderful, and seemingly chaotic.

Since the 1970s this music and its *fandangos* have spread beyond the regional confines of Sotavento with many city dwellers in Mexico and abroad looking toward Sotaventine rural music as a means of forging identities, building communities, or simply having fun. I myself am one of these Mexican urbanites who have been drawn to son Jarocho for some reason.¹

Despite this urban musical revival of recent decades, Sotavento and its son historically developed in and around Sotaventine rivers, and the intimate connections between music and fluvial spaces resulting from this history remain today, as we will see throughout this text.

Fluvial Geopoetics

Sotaventine rivers are places of memory and imagination, inhabited through music and poetry. In this text, I will delve into the space of rivers and consider the practice of son Jarocho in regard to this fluvial world. I will outline a musical geopoetics of water, following in Nassar's notion that "geopoetics emphasizes the elemental materiality of space" (Nassar 2021, 1), and that sees "elemental geopoetics as a narrative tool that attunes us to the entanglement of the material and the metaphoric" (Nassar 2021, 2). To do this, I draw upon the emerging field of hydropoetics and Bachelard's material imaginations (Bachelard 1999, 2014) as well as Illich's writings on the historicity of water (Illich 1985).

Although most of these theoretical sources are chiefly Western, I intend to follow Ferreti's post-colonial proposition that "different notions of geopoetics are needed, and non-Western cultures can nourish them" (2020, 2). Therefore, diverse geopoetic notions and practices inform this article and, alongside theoretical analyses there is empirical data written in somewhat experimental, "apotropaic" ways; likewise, verses and melodies are included throughout the text (Leeuw and Magrane 2019; Magrane 2015; Taussig 2010). All as an attempt at "doing geopoetics in different ways in relation to early European definitions of geopoetics" (Ferreti 2020, 12).

Throughout this article, I will survey different ways in which music permeates space and intertwines with spatial practices. I will do this by retelling three hydropoetic stories in which music is central. In these "musical navigations" I will explore how, through son Jarocho, waters unfold showing the experiential multiplicity of space in terms of memory, poetics, and politics, and consider what this entails for an Anthropocenic (or Anthroposcenic) context (for more on sound, geopoetics and the Anthropocene see Gallagher, Kanngieser, and Prior 2017; Kanngieser 2015; Last 2015).

SOTAVENTINE HYDROPOETICS

As in Leeward landscape, in Leeward son rivers are ubiquitous. We could say that there is a Sotaventine hydropoetics, where numerous bodies of water are present. From the “Greater Caribbean,” linking the Atlantic Coasts of Spanish America with West Africa and the Iberian Peninsula, to the lagoons, wetlands, and rivers that fill the landscape.

In recent years, the notion of hydropoetics has begun to emerge in ecocritical writings (Bennet 2018; Bernal Arias and Marandola 2014, 2018; Hooper 2017; Noguera and Bernal Arias 2015; Zorić 2019). Though it is still in its infancy, and some approach the concept from a literary perspective (Hooper 2017; Miller 2018), hydropoetics seems to be flowing beyond literature, toward a more diverse decolonial approach from the Global South (Bennet 2018; Bernal Arias and Marandola 2018; Zorić 2019). Here I approach hydropoetics following in Bernal Arias and Marandola for whom “[h]ydropoetics are the narrations of the water-place-experience relation” that allow for other forms of dwelling (Bernal Arias and Marandola 2018, 100), through which emerge “poetic-political alternatives” in the midst of environmental crises (Bernal Arias and Marandola 2014, 160).

Hydropoetics emerge alongside other “hydro-logics” (to use Neimanis’ term, 2012) that flow from Oceanic Studies and the Blue Humanities (Alaimo 2019; Hofmeyr 2019; Oppermann 2019; Winkiel 2019). Authors write of hydro-criticism (Winkiel 2019), hydrocolonialism (Bystrom and Hofmeyr 2017; Hofmeyr 2019), hydroimperialism, hydrocapitalism (Pritchard 2012), hydropolitics (Noguera and Bernal Arias 2015), and hydrofeminism (Neimanis 2012), among other hydro-logics. This “turn to the sea” engages with the ontological turn, and often focuses on Anthropocenic imaginations of the ocean (Deloughrey 2017); likewise, there is a strong post-colonial element to this current of thought, as many of these neologisms suggest (Bystrom and Hofmeyr 2017; Te Punga Somerville 2017).

These diverse hydro-logics flow into each other and mix with scholarship on geo- and eco-poetics. Both Noguera de Echeverri and Bernal Arias, and Hofmeyr speak of hydropolitics (Hofmeyr 2019; Noguera and Bernal Arias 2015), while other authors develop the idea of “hydro-power” (Winkiel 2019). Similarly, the inherent post-colonial critique of hydrocolonialism reminds us of Ferreti’s geopoetics (2020).

While different waters are present in this literature, most of these hydro-logics relate to the ocean. This text, instead, focuses on the hydropoetics of rivers through ethnographic and musical work, in an attempt to build upon these existing hydric theories. Here I consider the imaginative as well as the material aspects of riverine hydropoetics in relation to Sotaventine son, after all, poetic waters are not only made up of lyrical imaginations, for “poetic images also have their matter” (Bachelard 1999, 3), and so “the oneiric landscape is not a frame that is filled up with impressions; it is a pervading substance” (Bachelard 1999, 4).

Sotaventine rivers, like any other waters, are historical; shaped by geopolitics and mercantile trade, and filled with the meanings that the *longue durée* infuses upon places. The oneiric and poetic elements are not at odds with this historicity, as Illich clearly demonstrates in his aquatic treatise (1985); rather, history and imagination are the two shores of these sounding rivers that come together in the music of The Leeward.

For Bachelard, poetic images can be phenomenologically characterized into one of the four elements—water, earth, air, or fire—and one of these elements will define the world of a poet. While the thought of classifying poetic images into elemental boxes and developing psychoanalysis of

each of these elements may seem outdated, pointless, positivistic, and somewhat Eurocentric, the idea of poetic matter is an interesting one. Poetic matter can provide a way to think through the ecopoetics of son Jarocho and its connections to the waters of Sotavento. Nevertheless, the issues and constraints of Bachelard's ideas ought to be considered. In some ways Bachelard himself recognizes his ideas are limited in his *Poetics of Space*, when he says: "I myself can only meditate upon things in my own country" (Bachelard 2014, 206). Thus, I will try to make a critique of what I consider to be limitations within Bachelard's thought, drawing upon geopoetics and diverse hydro-logics. I do not mean to dismiss Bachelard and pretend that I will set the record straight, rather I myself shall meditate upon things in my own country, and this shall take us beyond some of Bachelard's conceptions, even if that is our (theoretical) point of departure. Consequently, though I will speak of the hydropoetics of The Leeward, I do so without attempting a neat classification of the material imaginations of Sotaventine son. I'd rather leave the waters flow and entangle, for matter is entangled in poetic imagination as much as it is in real life, and severing the ties of this entanglement would impoverish our understanding of the word.

FLOWS OF ENTANGLEMENT

The Leeward is a land of rivers. Here, out of the four Bachelardian elements, water is at the center. Although to Bachelard the poetics of water are scarcer than those of other elements, since he considers that poets are "more often entertained than captivated by ... waters" and that "[w]ater, then, is an embellishment for their landscapes; it is not really the "substance" of their reveries." (1999, 5). Nevertheless, in The Leeward waters are the landscapes; or, at the very least, water is at the center of Sotaventine landscape.

Against these Bachelardian logics emerge hydropoetics, "[t]heir understanding expresses the essence of inhabiting linked to water; since the ways of being of water are infinite, so are the hydropoetics that may emerge" (Bernal Arias and Marandola 2018, 100). The hydropoetics of son dwell upon rivers, streams, lagoons, and seas since everyday life in Leeward cities and villages transpires in a space marked by waters. Here, Illich's words ring true: "water [is] needed for dreaming ... a dwelling place" (1985, 11).

Sotavento was built in and around the rivers Papaloapan and Coatzacoalcos, and so, water has been a central element of Sotaventine life since pre-Hispanic times. Although the sea is also an important part of Sotaventine history and culture, and mariner endeavors are recorded in verse and sound (García de León 2009, 2002), here we shall focus on fluvial hydropoetics instead.

Three musical navigations that speak of Sotaventine hydropoetics follow; they take place in three different rivers and in three different cities. Thus, we shall embark considering Illich's idea that "[w]ater remains a chaos until a creative story interprets its seeming equivocation as being the quivering ambiguity of life" (1985, 25). With this in mind we will look firstly at Tlacotalpan; the city where the Virgin of Candles is taken into the river to bless its waters every 2 February while musicians play in a procession of boats. In the Candlemas processions, we will explore the contestation of space through sound and how music and fluvial navigation come together. Secondly, we will look at everyday life in the town of Tres Zapotes through which the River Hueyapan (a tributary of the Papaloapan) flows; here we will discover a story of musical rivalries in which the river is central. Lastly, we will look at Durham upon Wear, where a brief

autoethnographic episode will show how son continues to transform space, and how it is a means of navigation and contestation, even beyond Sotavento.

Preamble: In the River of Butterflies

The Papaloapan is the second largest river in Mexico, and one of the defining geophysical features of Sotavento. Its name is Nahuatl and translates as “River of Butterflies.” It flows from the mountains of Puebla and Oaxaca to the Lagoon port of Alvarado in the Gulf of Mexico. Several Sotaventine cities have been built on its banks, Tlacotalpan being perhaps the most renowned of these.

Tlacotalpan was founded in pre-Columbian times on an island in the Papaloapan that has since joined the mainland, and lies at the point where the San Juan River meets the Papaloapan. This location made of Tlacotalpan a site of geopolitical and economic importance from pre-Hispanic times up until the 19th century (Thiébaud 2013; Velasco Toro 2003). The river was not only a means of subsistence but also a means of contact between settlements, making Tlacotalpan a central site in the region. Because of the importance of the river, the patron deity of Tlacotalpan before the Spanish conquest was Chalchiuhtlicue—She With the Jade Skirt—goddess of freshwater bodies (Velasco Toro 2003, 57). With the arrival of Spanish colonists and the advent of Catholicism, the characteristics of Chalchiuhtlicue were transferred to La Virgen de La Candelaria—The Virgin of Candles (Figure 1). This Catholic figure is celebrated during Candlemas (The Feast of The Presentation), the Catholic celebration that takes place every year on the 2nd of February—the same date on which the celebrations of Chalchiuhtlicue took place (Thiébaud 2013, 85).



FIGURE 1 Altar of La Candelaria. Tlacotalpan, August 2018.

Nowadays, the Candlemas celebrations set the stage for one of the most important events for traditional Leeward musicians. The festival of La Candelaria is seen by many as a Sotaventine New Year when musicians will meet after long absences to celebrate and recount the happenings of the past year.

At Candlemas, for three days—from 31 January until 3 February—the center of Tlacotalpan turns into an enormous tavern with numerous small stands selling food and (mostly alcoholic) drinks. Stages sprout over the city with giant speakers pumping music of diverse genres and styles. During those days in Tlacotalpan one can hear son Jarocho, alongside *cumbia*, *salsa*, or northern *banda* sounding among the impromptu bars and street stands (hear [Track 1](#)).²

At night, after most activities have finished, fandangos (the communal gatherings that revolve around son Jarocho) will begin ([Figure 2](#)). While there are several fandangos in the city, they are not ubiquitous—still, finding a fandango during these days is not complicated.

The fandangos at Luz de Noche (a hostel/cultural center) have become particularly famous (or infamous), and are now some of the principal Candlemas events for son Jarocho musicians, particularly on 2 February. This Candlemas fandango is the largest, the longest, and the one where most of the son masters gather. It is not uncommon to see members of renowned groups—like Son de Madera or Mono Blanco—and players from near-legendary son dynasties gathered in the café at Luz de Noche or playing at the nightly fandangos. These fandangos will usually start around 10pm and last through the night and the following morning, ending well into the next day. Not all musicians stay for the whole fandango, but there are musicians and dancers playing throughout the night, sounding *sones* under a marquee on the street outside Luz de Noche, while two blocks away the River Papaloapan runs into the night.

Navigation 1: A Hydropoetic Procession

On 2 February, before daybreak—in the wee hours of the morning—a fleet of musicians will leave the fandango and go to the Sanctuary of La Candelaria to sing to the Virgin of Candles. They will play *sones* and say verses to the image of the Virgin, celebrating the day of Candlemas.

*Patroncita milenaria
que llegaste de la nahua,
santa señora del agua,
Virgen de La Candelaria;
defensora legendaria
bendícenos con tu luz
y quítanos ya esta cruz,
oye este grito a conciencia
y que la paz sea tu ciencia
para nuestro Veracruz.*

[Oh millennial patroness!
You came to us from our past,
Holy Lady of the waters,
oh Virgin of Candlemas;
our legendary defender
bless us today with your light,
and take this cross from our backs,
oh hear this conscientious shout
and let your wise peace abound
in our Veracruz, our land.]

Fernando Guadarrama, a Sotaventine poet, sings this impromptu *décima* (a ten-line poem) before the image of the virgin during Candlemas 2019;³ in the background, *jaranas* treble in minor tones. After the last line, there is a brief silence—and then—the surrounding musicians start playing “*La Morena*”: the dark-skinned woman. With this, the celebrations of the feast day begin. After singing to the Virgin, musicians return to the fandango and keep playing into the early afternoon when the fandango usually ends.



FIGURE 2 Fandango at Luz de Noche. February 2018.

Later that same day, the jaraneros will gather outside the sanctuary of La Candelaria to lead the procession of the Virgin up to a pier on the Papaloapan.⁴

§

We wait at the door of the light-pink church; little by little a great mass of jaraneros assembles. On either side of the street observers gather, eager for the procession to begin. The company of jaraneros starts to organize and form a more-or-less shapely column. Spearheading the group are Gilberto Gutiérrez and Juan Pascoe—two of the founding members of Mono Blanco, a celebrated son Jarocho group. They arrive later rather than sooner and take the lead. I am toward the rear.

After some time of waiting, tuning, and practicing the chorus of “*La Bamba*”⁵ (the group is large enough that we need to do this in order to ensure we play in unison), the Virgin of Candles comes out of the church (Figures 3–5).

Prompted by the push of the priests we start marching, as we do so we play *La Bamba*. We sing the refrain, trying to follow the same rhythm while the priests push us forward and the multitude of people holds us back. It’s hard to hear what the jaraneros at the front are playing and when they sing, it only becomes slightly clearer when all start chanting the refrain.

*¡Ay arriba y arriba
y arriba iré!
¡Yo no soy marinero!
¡Yo no soy marinero*

*por ti seré
por ti seré
por ti seré!*⁶

As we continue walking it becomes harder to hear each other. We walk past stands with loud-speakers blasting “*Las Mañanitas*”⁷ where MCs dedicate the song to the Virgin and ask the attendants to sing along. At the same time, we try to sing La Bamba but are drowned by the electric horns (hear [Track 2](#)).

*¡QUÉ LINDA ESTÁ LA MAÑANA
EN QUE VENGO A SALUDARTE,
VENIMOS TODOS CON GUSTO
Y PLACER A FELICITARTE!*

*¡EL DÍA EN QUE TÚ NACISTE
NACIERON TODAS LAS FLORES,
Y EN LA PILA DEL BAUTISMO
CANTARON LOS RUISEÑORES!*

*YA VIENE AMANECIENDO,
YA LA LUZ DEL DÍA NOS DIOOOOO ...*

Fireworks and the priest’s bells are still heard among the raucousness. We continue walking and the strumming of jaranas comes back, and the refrain ...

*¡Ay arriba y arriba
y arriba iré!
¡Yo no soy marinero!
¡Yo no soy marinero
por ti seré
por ti seré
por ti seré!*

The procession continues, now with the music of jaranas and the sound of the tambourine in unison, except

*i
Ay arriba y arriba
y arriba*

we are not in unison

iré

*i
¡Yo no*

soy marinero!

i



FIGURE 3 Priests lead the procession of La Candelaria, jaraneros march ahead. Tlacotalpan, February 2018.



FIGURE 4 Bystanders and jaraneros look at the Virgin of Candles. Tlacotalpan, February 2018.

Yo no

soy marinero

por ti

the crowd is so large and the surrounding noise so immensely pervasive that we can't hear each other. This becomes obvious as the front of the procession starts chanting the refrain at a different tempo than our *jaranas*. We are out of

seré

por ti seré

por ti seré !

sync. The space of the procession—the moving space of walking and playing and singing—is disturbed by the stages and their loudspeakers. Microphones seem to beat musicians. I give up trying to play. We're near the pier anyway. We move aside and the Virgin goes into the river, where some join the procession in boats (Figure 6). Some of those in the River of Butterflies will be musicians playing sones, flowing with the river's currents as the "Holy Lady of the waters" blesses the Papaloapan.

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Flowing Rhythms

In the procession, space is produced through music. The procession happens in space and time: it is a chronotope. It moves from the church, to the pier, to the river. Different rhythms come together—they clash—in the procession. The rhythm of the procession is different for those standing—in the street or in stages, with microphones and speakers—than for those of us moving with it. They see us moving, we leave them behind. Rhythm is deployed differently: our rhythms have to do with our bodies; we walk, play, and sing (or try to)—our rhythms are part of the flow of the procession. The body electric of sound systems remains static and envelops almost everything; it throws the chronotope into disarray, causing arrhythmia and forcing our music to stop. It is all part of the flowing chronotope, even if the speakers and bystanders are in the margins. The procession is a polyphonic and polyrhythmic chronotope. But the polyphonies and polyrhythms of the procession have to do with more than its sounds. It is not only about a waltzy 3/4 vs. a syncopated binary beat; it has to do with what lies behind the sounds, with the different forms of producing space and of inhabiting that emerge from these different kinds of music and that come at odds in the moving chronotope.

Rhythm implies movement, it comes from the Greek ῥυθμός (rhythmos), which in turn comes from ῥέω (rhéo)—“to flow” (Miranda Nieto 2018, xxi). Some say these terms referred not to the flows of the ocean, but rather to having a quality of fluidity and mobility (Hasty 1997, 11); and yet “the truth of the myth is stronger than that of the (philosophic) history of the notion of rhythm” (Meschonnic 1999, 63). We see this in Michel Deguy, who considers rhythm to be “like the movement of the waves, the wave returning to break upon the shore” (Deguy 1998, cited in Meschonnic 1999). If we take this mythic-poetic definition of rhythm, we can think of the



FIGURE 5 The Candlemas procession. Tlacotalpan, February 2018.



FIGURE 6 The procession disembogues in the River Papaloapan. Tlacotalpan, 2018.

procession as a river of sorts flowing with the “Lady of the Waters” toward the River of Butterflies. More so when we consider the large numbers of people in the procession; *un río de gente*—a river of people—we would say in Spanish to denote a populous contingent, such as this. But even with its considerable size, this river is overtaken by the sounds in its banks. The loudness of sound systems speaks of a different sort of space, and a different understanding of Candlemas; one which is closer to the nightclub than to the moving collective chronotope.

§

On Candlemas day, in the late afternoon, while having a coffee and writing my field notes, a friend approaches me, and we start talking about the procession and the difficulty of playing within it.

“That’s the thing, you’ve got to know the drill, we went down to the pier and we rented a boat instead.”

§

Boats are part of the procession; people follow La Candelaria into the Papaloapan—some with, some without jaranas—continuing the ritual with the river’s rhythms. In recent years it has become easier to enact the musical procession in the water than in the streets of Tlacotalpan; within the Papaloapan the noises from the stalls are less pervasive and musicians can play son from their rented motorboats. With son Jarocho being pushed to the margins of the celebration by other styles of music and other musical practices, the river remains a space for son. Navigating in the Papaloapan the rhythm of the procession and the flow of the river become one, a flowing body navigated with small ships and small guitars.

Navigation 2: A Musical Rivalry

Rivers and rivalries go hand in hand. The word “rival” comes from the Latin *rivalis*: a person using the same stream as another, which in turn comes from *rivus*—stream.⁸ As rivers, rivalries are part of everyday life in Sotavento, at least when it comes to music. Rivalries often flourished in fandangos, leading to violent confrontations. These rivalries ranged from political differences to personal vendettas, to musical turf wars. One particular story that explores the topic of rivalry and that embodies the word’s etymology has to do with the melody of “*El Siquisiri*”—a prominent son, also known in some parts of Veracruz as “*Laguna Prieta*” (Dark Lagoon). I heard this story and its melodies in two occasions told by the guitarist of Son de Madera from Tres Zapotes, Veracruz: Ramón Gutiérrez Hernández. The story is also written down on Ramón’s web page (Gutiérrez Hernández 2019). What follows is my own retelling of the story, which draws from these three sources.

§

There was an old musician called Fidel Morteo, he was the best guitarist in Tres Zapotes. He knew more songs than anyone else and played them masterfully. A young musician called Antonio Mulato wanted to learn from him, but Fidel wouldn’t teach him, or anyone else for that matter.

Despite Morteo’s reluctance, Antonio was bent on learning the musical forms of the old guitarist, and so, when Fidel played to himself by the river, Antonio would sit downstream where he couldn’t be seen. From his hiding place, he could hear the music of his elder and quietly learn the melodic figures, because—as Leeward musicians know—music travels in water.

Regarding this, Joel Cruz, a Grammy-nominated Sotaventine musician who lived next to the river Tepango (another affluent of the Papaloapan), says that when he played his violin next to the river people “down there” (he gestures downstream and across the river) would tell him they had heard him playing. The violin’s sound is strong “because the river takes it,” says Joel, “that’s why this is a music of rivers.” But let us go back to the times when Mulato was young and son was still played all over Tres Zapotes.

A fiddle player in the village, Alfonso Tegoma encouraged Mulato to keep learning:

“Sometimes water will almost stand still for you to learn these sounds.
That’s how I learned to play the violin.”

And so, the river carried the sounds of son: the tunes would reach Mulato a few seconds after they were played, and Mulato would fish them out of the river, so to speak.

After some time passed, both musicians came to be face to face in a fandango. When old-man Fidel played a figure, Antonio would repeat it. They played until they were exhausted and drenched in sweat. It was clear that Antonio had surpassed his unwilling and unwitting teacher. Fidel accepted his defeat gracefully and shook his rival’s hand. It is worth noting that in this story of rivalry Morteo accepts his defeat, unlike in many other tales where the loser draws his machete or his revolver, ready to make his rival pay for the humiliation he has been subjected to.

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Memory and Meandering Arpeggios

The second time I heard this story was after I asked Ramón about it in a workshop in Tacamichapan—an island in the Coatzacoalcos River. On that occasion, he played through several figures of “The Dark Lagoon” (see [Appendix 2 in Supplemental Material](#); hear [Track 3](#)).

The place of the river—always present in The Leeward—jumps out in this story; it is a quasi-mythological space in Ramón’s remembrance. This version of the River Hueyapan reminds me of Ivan Illich’s aquatic image of memory, which he ties to Mnemosyne: “water ... the source of remembrance ... imagined as a stream full of treasures. Each utterance ... a piece of driftwood the speaker fished from a river, something cast-off in the beyond that had just then washed up onto the beaches of his mind” (Illich 1985, 32–33).

Both musicians navigate the river in their music. From the river—hiding in its meanders—the young musician can learn the sounds of the “Dark Lagoon,” as if from Illich’s Mnemosyne. The figures of the tune themselves are river-like, they meander from the tonic to the subdominant to the dominant. The melody goes up and down in its arpeggios, in constant flow until it takes a turn into another figure. Sounds flow through the river of remembrance. From the memory of old-man Fidel to the Hueyapan’s waters to the hands of young Antonio; from the guitarists’ duel to the memory of Mr. Tegoma who told the story and sang the figures on tape for Gilberto Gutiérrez—Ramón’s brother. From Tegoma’s recorded voice Ramón learned the Dark Lagoon and later taught it to many in his workshops in Mexico City and the Luna Negra Ranch at Tacamichapan, where I recorded the melody with the figures of Morteo and Mulato, which are included here, with this text.

The melody flows through memory and disembogues in these pages (are they a pool or a dam in the flow of memory?). To Illich’s Greeks, “reliance on silent, passive texts could not but narrow the stream of their remembrance, make it shallow and dull” (Illich 1985, 34). Is this what

happens with the flows of The Dark Lagoon? Illich's writing makes me think of the transcribed melodies in the sheet music attached (see [Supplemental Materials—Appendix 2](#)): “now imagined as a page; the stuff of memory turns from water into a shard ... fixing sounds, ... so that they might be voiced again precisely in the same way but at a later time and by someone else” (Illich 1985, 32–33).

Writing this music down would seem to go countercurrent to the course of remembrance. Like the druids of Caesar's *De Bello Gaelico* (cited in Illich 1985, 33–34) it is perhaps not proper to commit these things to writing, for Sotaventine music requires the cultivation of memory. Alas, they are written now.

Be as it may, the sounds of Leeward son are a part of the material imaginations of the landscapes of the region. Music is infused with memory. The sounds of The Dark Lagoon keep memories in them: memories of daily life in Sotavento, of playing next to the river and going to fandangos; of the landscape, particularly the river Hueyapan; and of the people who inhabited these places—Morteo, Mulato, Tegoma, the Gutiérrez brothers. When these melodic figures sound in Mexico City or in County Durham they bring to Río Churubusco or the Wear the rushing echoes of Leeward waters.

The space of the river is filled—occupied—by the sounds of the guitar, as it would be by a boat. However, now it's not only a material occupation of the space that speaks of music's navigational features; it is the sound itself. Fluvial space is inhabited through music because of this musical rivalry.

Navigation 3: Musical Rivalry Revisited

On one of the few sunny days of British spring, I met with four Mexican friends to rehearse some Leeward sones on the riverside of the Wear in Durham.⁹ We sat on the grass and, thinking of Morteo and Mulato's rivalry, I started playing *El Siquisirí* on my Sotaventine *punteador*. A man in a yellow kayak paddled toward us and enquired what sort of instrument it was. A brief conversation ensued with voices traveling between the riverbank and the river. I tried to explain that my *punteador* is not a ukulele, but more like a guitar.

“Look! ...”

He shouted to another man in a red kayak.

“... they're playing the ukulele.”

“Fair enough.” I mumbled to myself.

After playing for a while, during our second or third tune, I saw the man in the yellow kayak out of the corner of my eye. He said something I couldn't quite catch but I threw a quick glance at him and smiled. Then we finished playing; I turned and asked:

“Sorry, what?”

“SHUT UP!”

His answer was rather unexpected (hear [Track 4](#)).

“SPEAK IN ENGLISH!” He added.

After this brief exchange, we ignored him. He paddled away to the other side of the river. We started playing another son: “*El Buscapiés*.” I played and sung louder, into the river:

*¡Canta, canta compañero,
no tengas temor de nadie
que en la copa'e mi sombrero
traigo a la Virgen del Carmen!*

[Sing and have no fear my friend,
have no fear of anyone
for in the crown of my hat
I carry a little charm!]

The man in the yellow kayak paddled back and screamed at us. His mate dropped his pants, mooning at us from the other side of the river, much to the amusement of their posse.

We kept singing.

The man in the yellow kayak threw a stick,

then a shoe,

then the other shoe.

They both landed several feet away from us, near my guitar case (see [Figure 7](#)).

We kept singing.

At some point, a couple walking along the river approached, drawn by the music, half smiling. When they heard the man in the kayak, they seemed upset and walked to the edge of the river. He shut up and paddled away.

“You sound great, keep singing.” They said.

We kept singing.

The man in the yellow kayak kept coming back every now and then, shouting at us to “shut the fuck up.” Eventually, he disembarked across the river. After a while, when the sun started to go down, we packed up our things and headed back home. When he saw us leaving, he yelled:

“MY FUCKING SHOES, DICKEAD!”

We arranged them neatly on the riverbank and left them there, on our side of the river.

§

In the River Wear, the different implications of sound illustrated in the previous navigations come together. As in the Tlacotalpan procession, here space is contested through music; again, there are clashing rhythms when the paddler’s movements in the river encounter our pervading sounds—different rhythms that emerge from different ways of inhabiting that lead to different rivers being enacted. Again, we navigate the river with our music and our small chordophones. Again, as in Tres Zapotes, the river is lived and experienced through melody and verse and it becomes a space of rivalry, adding to Sotaventine memories the memories of this xenophobic encounter.

Through these musical navigations, we see sound as a means of inhabiting fluvial space. These fluvial stories illustrate how hydro-poetics work upon the world, as well as the politics that emerge from them. Social arrhythmia entangles with the rivers’ currents, particularly when we remember the philosophical imaginations of Greek rhythmic etymologies. Sound is used to claim the rivers’ rhythms—the rivers themselves are one with sound. Through music, fluvial space—always flowing—is inhabited. This is tied in with memory and with ideas of space (or of what space ought to be), which lead to aural clashes and bring out the political nature of sound.



FIGURE 7 Kayakers, shoes, and guitar case at the River Wear.
Durham, April 2019.

With the last riverine story, Matless's words on the Norfolk Broads come to mind: "Sound helps legitimize forms of cultural authority which deem it problematic. Shouts on the riverbank or songs from a boat can hardly be prevented, but their all too unpredictable occurrence sustains responses seeking a quiet order of things." (Matless 2005, 753).

The case Matless writes about feels familiar, though in our case the music was on the riverbank, and the shouts came from a boat. Were our sounds—our Sotaventine songs—furthering the xenophobic notion that deems the foreigner problematic? Did their shouts legitimize our riverine melodies? These sounding occurrences certainly sustained responses, though not quiet ones. They shouted and threw a fit (and their shoes); we sang and played louder into the meandering Wear. It did not seem at all like the kayakers were "seeking a quiet order of things," but they may have felt the same way people in the Norfolk Broads did regarding holidaymakers in the 1920s (or the way jaraneros may feel about other revelers in the Tlacotalpan fete): "a new and noisy type of visitor is invading our rivers" (Matless 2005, 754). In any case, sound elicits a response and aural politics emerge. Sound fills space and transforms it, leading to new musical rivalries.

Here the political implications of music become clearer as well as the possibilities granted by hydro-poetics in this regard. Here, sound is deployed by those involved to make a place for themselves: they screamed at us; we sang at them. Different forms of sound, different rhythms,

and cadences—different flows—are used to produce space for being, and to reaffirm our right of being in space. Rhythm and sound, and the rhythms and sounds of son Jarocho in particular, become means of transformation and resistance in this conflict over riverine space.

ANTHROPOSCENIC HYDROPOETICS

Rivers and music intertwine. Fluvial space is produced, remembered, and contested through sound, as we have seen in these navigations. Memories of place become embedded in music; in melody and verse and cadence and rhythm. Making sound is making space, and sound is a means for inhabiting space. In this case, the space of rivers is (re)created through riverine melodies.

Music produces and transforms space, and yet, musical spaces come at odds with reality. The oft-idyllic images of rivers don't seem to match other experiences of being in the world. Be it noisy processions, intolerant kayakers, or the increasingly polluted state of these bodies of water.

The river used to be a blessing ...

says dancer Martha Vega, speaking of the Papaloapan's tributary at Boca de San Miguel, in-between Tres Zapotes and Tlacotalpan, where she grew up. Used to. And yet people continue to fish in the river.

Likewise, Gilberto Gutiérrez, of the Mono Blanco group speaks of the idyllic riverscape of Tres Zapotes, one that belongs to times long past:

I grew up in a town that had a crystal-clear river ... full of life, full of fish and shrimp and local fauna. Otters — river dogs, we'd call them — snakes, eels, everything. We'd stretch our hands under the roots of the trees and find shrimp, and we'd have them for lunch on the spot.

Now the river is like a sewer.

What once was my town has turned its back on the stream. The stream is no longer a place you go to, it's a place to dump your rubbish in. And nobody is even thinking about fixing [it].

The idyllic vanishes into polluted reality. It is not entirely grim, but change seems distant and unlikely:

The stream cleans itself whenever the rains come and the water level rises; it's cleansed.

People would have to stop dumping their rubbish there. There has to be a strict state project, alongside reforestation. There's a lot to be done.

Gilberto's account of the state of the Hueyapan River makes me think of my own observations of the river Tepango in Santiago Tuxtla, where Joel's violin's sounds navigated at night.

§

White herons and black buzzards perch around the river; the dark birds waiting near the local slaughterhouse. The buzzards know the schedule and start to gather around, expectant of the butcher. The man comes out of a little building next to the river, throws a bucketful of something dead and the birds swoop down to eat the blood or bones or guts or whatever it is that has been thrown away. Rubbish piles up on the riviera and floats around the whirlpools that form here and there. It is all very far from the idyl of stories and verses, yet there is still beauty. It's not all as black and white as the birds.

§

Sotaventine rivers—their tributaries and streams—while still imposing and stunningly beautiful, are less an image of Arcadia and more in line with Tsing’s idea of life in the ruins (or in this case, the outskirts) of capitalism: “[c]ontaminated diversity implicates survivors in histories of greed, violence, and environmental destruction ... We don’t know whether to love or hate these survivors.” (Tsing 2017, 33). The contaminated Leeward rivers are Anthroposcenic; they are “landscape[s] emblematic of processes marking the Anthropocene” (Matless 2017, 363); they flow teeming with life, music, and various contaminants.

Anthroposcenes are feral landscapes, as per Tsing, Deger, Saxena, and Zhou’s *Feral Atlas*. In the feral, humans and non-humans become entangled; here are entities “that emerge within human-sponsored projects but are not in human control” (Tsing et al. 2020, 5), the feral becomes, rather than a mark of danger or wildness, “a descriptive characteristic of a more-than-human Anthropocene” (Tsing et al. 2020, 23). Our riverine Anthroposcenes are no exception, they too are feral, wonderful, and gruesome.

§

While some of us swam in the river during the son Jarocho seminar at Tacamichapan, enjoying the cool-yet-murky water, others said things like

“Bathe?! In that tick-infested river?! I ain’t crazy!”

and mockingly called it “The River of Ticks.”

Come to think of it, I did end up with a tick sucking blood from my leg after swimming in that affluent of the Coatzacoalcos.

§

The feral is a result of human handiwork, it comes from us and preys upon us. The Sotaventine rivers where the melody of The Dark Lagoon once ran are now some of the worst polluted in the country (“... the river is like a sewer ... it’s a place to dump your rubbish in ...”). Agricultural runoff and petrochemical industries in Sotaventine coastal cities, like Minatitlán or Coatzacoalcos, have made the mouth of the Coatzacoalcos River a place where life exists despite, rather than because of its waters.

Since the 1970s the cities and industries of the lower Coatzacoalcos have grown considerably, increasing the pollutants poured into the river. There is “a severe impact on aquatic ecosystems of the region” (González-Mille et al. 2010, 1238). The waters of the Coatzacoalcos run rife with contaminants of all sorts, some of these accumulate in the flesh of fish and toads and alter the very DNA of aquatic life (Farrán et al. 1987; González-Mille et al. 2010; Gonzalez-Mille et al. 2013; Rosales-Hoz and Carranza-Edwards 1998; Ruelas-Inzunza et al. 2009). Perhaps this liquid is not water anymore but something else entirely: “the H₂O which gurgles through ... is not water, but a stuff which industrial society creates ... the twentieth century has transmogrified water into a fluid with which archetypal waters cannot be mixed.” (Illich 1985, 7).

Under Illich’s optics, H₂O and water have become opposites, the former being “an observed fluid that has lost the ability to mirror the water of dreams” (1985, 76). The hydropoetics of these feral Anthroposcenes seem to point toward a dominance of Illich’s H₂O and a drought of archetypal, phenomenological water (“the river *used to be*”). Nevertheless, we can find in hydropoetic narratives and practices alternatives for dwelling amidst ecological disasters.

DISEMBOGUEMENT

Hydropoetics provide us not only with a way of thinking but with a way of acting in which fluvial rhythms provide a foundation for inhabiting. Sound and poetry carry fluvial memories, informing our relationship with the bodies of water that surround us. Through music, the space of rivers is contested and reconstructed, and opposing forms of dwelling clash or coexist.

Leeward hydropoetics in particular, seemingly living up to their name, appear to be adept at equipping us with the tools necessary to go against the dominant winds, so to speak. This musical praxis offers alternatives that may be politically mobilized in a context where Illich's H2O takes the place of poetic waters. Through these hydropoetics, knowledge becomes available, ways of being are reaffirmed, and ecological crises and anxieties may be faced. Amid the Anthropocene, within images and experiences of environmental devastation, hydropoetics open a way to imagine and enact new possibilities of living. In this world where, as Martha Vega puts it "the river *used to be* ...," hydropoetics provide a means for the river to be once again. Through memory, sound, and verse we may yet be able to turn the Anthropocenic H2O back into water fit for navigations. Perhaps as long as memory gushes in Sotaventine sones there will be water for dreams.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank professors Mike Crang and Gavin Bridge, and doctors Lourdes de Ita and Francisco Astorga for reading earlier versions of this article. I'm also grateful to Dr. Eva McGrath for organizing the *Flows of Entanglement* panel within the ASLE-UKI 2019 Biennial Conference at the University of Plymouth, where an early version of this article was presented. I am thankful to both anonymous reviewers who read this piece for their engaging and helpful comments. Finally, I am indebted to Ramón Gutiérrez for teaching me the figures of the Dark Lagoon and to Los Jaraneros de Dunelmtepec for the tunes by the Wear.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The soundtrack that accompanies this article is available in Soundcloud at <https://soundcloud.com/user-911547471/sets/musical-hydropoetics>. Supplemental Materials are openly available in figshare at <http://doi.org/10.6084/m9.figshare.14998392>.

FUNDING

This work was supported by a doctoral scholarship from the Mexican Council of Science and Technology (CONACYT), and an IJURR writing up grant.

NOTES

1. For more on my positionality in regards to Sotavento and Sotaventine musicians, see Astorga de Ita 2021.
2. The soundtrack to this article is available at <https://soundcloud.com/user-911547471/sets/musical-hydropoetics>. For notes on these four tracks, see Appendix 3 in Supplemental Materials.
3. I was unable to attend this part of the celebration in 2018, when I was doing fieldwork in Tlacotalpan during Candlemas. This particular moment of the 2019 festivities can be seen in a video, which circulated in some son Jarocho Facebook groups shortly after the days of Candelaria 2019.
4. I was in this procession in 2018.
5. While internationally known in its rock'n'roll version, *La Bamba* is originally a Sotaventine tune.
6. "Oh upward and upward/upward I'll go/I am no mariner/I'll be for you."
7. A song choired at birthdays and other such celebrations in Mexico.
8. These Latin words share the same etymology as the Greek *ῥέω* (*rhéo*) mentioned before.
9. England, not North Carolina.

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