

Sharing Scarcity: Why The Ancient Ethos of Hispanic Water Democracies Matters Today

By Christine Howard Sandoval, 2017

During the fall of 2016 I was awarded an artist residency at the Santa Fe Art Institute (SFAI) for a water rights focused program. Not only is SFAI an internationally respected program, but also New Mexico is the region of my entire family heritage- for the first time I would confront a complex ecological subject through the lens of my own family history. I want to acknowledge the guidance of my mother Rita Howard who has opened up a door to our family's history through the story of my late grandmother Josepha Arellano, a mother of seven and a farmer of a large parcel of land off the El Llanito Acequia outside of Bernalillo, NM. I want to also acknowledge the support of several acclaimed acequia scholars and artists who guided me in the foundational research for this project: Stanley Crawford (Author & Farmer), Donatella Davanzo (Social Anthropologist), David Groenfeldt (Founder and Director of the Water-Culture Institute, NM), Michelle Minnis (Founder, University of New Mexico Master of Water Resources Program), Jose Rivera (professor of community and regional planning, University of New Mexico), Sharon Stewart (photographer), and Arnold Valdez (Architect & Planner).

If you think about what a head gate is, the head gate is not just a physical structure and archaeological artifact, it is also the concrete representation of an agreement to share the water that was reached by a long process of cooperation and competition.

*Dr. Sylvia Rodriguez
History of Acequias and the Future of Taos
Taos County Historical Society, 2015*

Sharing Scarcity, or *The Rapartimiento* as it is called in Spanish, is a term I learned when I began studying the formal practices of acequias in Northern New Mexico. It is the central ethos of these 500 year old agricultural communities, " that dates back over four thousand years, with its origins in Assyria." (Arellano, P.81). The fluid practices of Hispanic farmers during times of drought in the high desert of northern New Mexico and southern Colorado are based on sustaining the equanimity of everyone in the community along with neighboring communities that share a single water source. If you are down river during a drought you rely on generations old relations with those up river and the very delicate skill of negotiation and problem solving when times are hot.

Acequia, or "as-sāqiya" as it is pronounced in classic Arabic, translates to mean a "conduit of water" or "one who bears water". The term was brought to North America in the 1500's by the Spanish Conquistadores and was codified into the first water laws in the United States through the Spanish Crown decreed Laws of

The Indies. The term Acequia has a double meaning and is a direct example of how culture and landscape are inextricably intertwined in the Chicano Mestizo culture of the southwestern United States. The term is used to convey both the physical canal and the community that shares and maintains its water source. Devon Peña, Professor of Anthropology at the University of Washington, states, "By 'situated knowledge' we understand a dialectical relationship of humans to the biogeographical properties of place in which, over generations, the local culture accumulates a vast reservoir of knowledge dealing with the ecological limits of life in a specific locale." (Peña, P.11). Peña is specifically arguing for an eco-cultural understanding that de-isolates Chicana and Chicano Studies, linking the field to perspectives within Ecology as a way of understanding the full breadth of sited knowledge. Before sustainable practices became something one could study in school, acequia communities formed cultural practices that functioned in service of a deep knowledge embedded in the ecology of their home, a knowledge that continues to develop today in the face of quickly developing technologies, invasive commercial development, and the precarity of Global Warming. I have made work about land use issues in the southwest region of the U.S. for over ten years; in some sense I am starting to see the trajectory of my artistic development moving towards a clarity of my own situated knowledge within the landscape of my ancestry. Is there a sited knowledge of a specific landscape embedded in me always already? Is my sense of *querencia*, or a love of the land through an awareness of my place within it, an ontological formation that started generations before I was born? Not only are both sides of my family from the state of New Mexico, but my Grandmother was a farmer on an acequia in the small village of El Llanito just north of Bernalillo. My initial research involved difficult conversations with my mother as she struggled to convey memories of survival within a very impoverished situation that is prevalent in most, if not all, rural communities in the region. Historically the demographic of the rural poor in northern New Mexico is primarily Indigenous Americans and the rural Hispanic. A study by authors F Lee Brown and Helen M. Ingram in 1980 identified a connection between water and poverty in southern Colorado and northern New Mexico, "...the populations of particular interest are those associated with substantial existing water use or having substantial unrealized claims to water... are the Hispanics in the counties of north central New Mexico and south central Colorado and the Indians." (Brown & Ingram, P. 10-11). The study reveals a

disenfranchisement within these communities where, "water is widely and strongly perceived to be an essential element in the preservation of Hispanic [and Native] culture in the region...", due to a lack of organization towards an agricultural strategy and the historical colonial bitterness that impairs mutual support between Native and Hispanic communities. (Brown & Ingram, P. 95). Today the organizational strategy is supported by local non- profits such as the New Mexico Acequia Association and more scholarship documenting the cooperation between Native and Hispanic communities that share single water sources.

I do not have a memory of Llanito, I had never even heard the name before, so I convinced my mother to fly in and visit the site of the old farm. She had not been back since she was a kid and when we finally found a visual marker, Dead Man's Curve where pedestrian accidents were notorious enough to mythologize this particular point in the dirt road, we were able to trace our way back to the original farmland and the place the kids swam in the acequia. The photographer Danny Lyon made this community visible in his photos of children swimming in the ditch and a 54-minute film titled "Llanito" made in 1971. Although made about a decade after my mother moved away from Llanito, Lyon's documentation of Hispanic families and stories told by local children provide a window into what it might have been like growing up in the community at that time. When we arrived to the dirt bridge that goes over the acequia to a back section of what was once a large orchard, another enduring visual marker in the landscape, she was hesitant to get out of the truck. When she finally did after some encouragement, there was not much discussion or storytelling, the way I had hoped. She wore thin gold colored sandals with newly manicured toes, a disturbing contrast to the ruggedness of the dusty road. I asked her to walk along the edge of the canal as I stood behind. The shutter of my camera opened and the silence of a past untold crept in. The details of the narrative were everywhere, from the mouth of the desgüe buried in black and pink clay silt to the deep dark culverts where my mom remembers kids getting sucked in during heavy rainfalls. I was a long way from my original thoughts about the effects of climate change, I had entered a space of personal historical trauma that could be seen physically in a landscape I had never experienced before, maybe the ground zero for all my work thus far.

After the brief but revelatory trip with my Mother back to our home in Llanito, I continued to follow the thread of shared scarcity. Much has changed for agricultural communities since the 1970's. In fact most acequia communities do not rely solely on an agrarian existence, most of the individual family farms have dwindled to become exceptional gardens or singular crops of corn, garlic, squash, or beans. So why do acequia communities continue to become more organized around protecting their water rights when in many cases the water is not being used? New Mexico State has a unique "use it or lose it" law that requires one to uphold their water rights by proving proof of consistent use for "beneficial" purposes- here the law does not explicitly define "beneficial use" and regards it as an evolving concept. The law presents several obvious challenges to the mandate of water conservation, especially during the current mega-drought that is depleting the seasonal watershed supply in the region. I traveled north to Dixon Valley, not far from the town of Embudo where the state conducted a pilot-planning project for the Embudo watershed in the 1960's. The Acequia de la Jara is immortalized in a book titled "Mayordomo," by Stanley Crawford. The story details Crawford's experience being the Mayordomo, or ditch boss, over the course of one year. The Mayordomo is an elected position within the acequia community. Crawford was, at first, surprised that he was elected to the position not long after arriving with his Anglo family to the valley. "What was once a position given to a respected elder in the old days- if there were old days, and perhaps there are still the old days here- is now foisted onto the old, the stay-at-homes, sometimes even the derelicts, or is occasionally coveted only by desperate young men in their early twenties who see in the modest salary the illusion, a road-somehow- to freedom and self-respect, an escape from the confines of this narrow valley." (Crawford, P.23). Crawford wrote the book almost thirty years ago when he was in his fifties; he is no longer the Mayordomo of his acequia but continues to maintain a thriving garlic farm which he harvests and sells at the farmer's market in Santa Fe. Turning off of Highway 68 and entering the town off Dixon, we were immediately greeted by a public acequia that runs along the road and almost just as quickly meanders back into the thicket of Chamisa, Sage, and Piñon trees- "The arteries of ditches and bloodlines cut across each other in patterns of astounding complexity." (Crawford, P.23-24). At the root of all the entangled complexities of water is the ethos of Sharing Scarcity, what does sharing scarcity look like today in comparison to thirty years ago? Is the ethos still alive? My interview with Stanley took place in

his living room surrounded by a collection of dusty camera lenses, books, loosely stacked papers in a hand built adobe home that he and his wife constructed when they first came to the village in the 1960's.

The example of those two years where everybody suffered, nobody got all the water, everybody got a trickle. There wasn't enough to do much if anything. We couldn't have farmed with it. It was considered so important that thirty people would meet every Sunday to make that decision from which they obtained no personal benefit. The underlining value is a sense of fairness... There must be a sense of fairness, the American water law does not talk about fairness."

My mind struggled to imagine the reality of such intense austerity that stretched over the course of two years, where the most essential aspect of survival was maintaining a sense of equanimity among the members of the community. The process is an example of the community's commitment to gathering and hashing out in heated debates the collective decisions regarding the most precious aspect of their community- water. The collective decision during times of extreme drought, is then re-evaluated over and over again in continued weekly meetings, re-iterating the importance of participation among everyone in the group even in the most frustrating and precarious of times- acequias are water democracies. The historic practices of sharing can be traced back to Moorish traditions through written Spanish water law- "According to I[ra] Clark (1987), the Islamic law of thirst granted free access of water for all living things to satisfy their needs in the aridity of the north African home-land. 'Islam not only subscribed to a belief in the purifying character of water ... but also the moral obligation of each to help all others of the community in the time of need.'" (Rivera, P.25). The relevance of this democratic practice that is kept alive by a vigilant commitment to participation reverberates deeply with social practices that are becoming more and more critical to the preservation of our larger body of democracy. The example of these 500 year old rural agricultural communities, whom equate the proliferation of their cultural heritage with equal access to the very water they drink, provide a more than compelling social structure for contemporary urban culture. As a long time resident of New York City, my attention is also directed towards aspects within this culture that could also be considered an example of sharing scarcity.

Today the Acequia de la Jara member meetings happen annually, but according to Crawford they are very well attended. Overall farming is not what it used to be for the community:

People are not as dependent on the acequias for agriculture, but they are emotionally. The water discussions are still approached as a life or death matter. This was instilled in the culture from the time when water was literally a life and death matter.

Acequia communities continue to maintain traditional seasonal practices that bring the community together and ritualize their relationship to the ecosystems they depend on. One of the oldest practices that originally migrated from the Iberian Peninsula, and in more ancient times from the Middle East, that is still widely enacted is the spring *limpia*. The *limpia*, also called *saca*, is the communal cleaning of the ditch before the water is permitted to flow back into the canal. The ceremonial cleaning invokes a delicate awareness of the stretch of hand dug earthen canal on the part of the Mayordomo, and a strict adherence to his or her instruction from the *piones*, the workers who are responsible for the digging. The *piones* are often local youth, wayward members of the community who are looking for odd jobs, and the *parciantes*, or acequia member shareholders. The annual cleaning not only functions to clean out a season's worth of silt, debris and broken infrastructure, but emotionally connects the community to their water source and instills a sense of stewardship for the land itself. As an artist who documents herself performing in landscapes that have been compromised by overdevelopment and global warming, I became interested in the communal gestures of labor that emerge out of the experience of participating in an acequia *limpia*. While in residence at SFAI I was able to meet with a social anthropologist based at the University of New Mexico, Donatella Davanzo, who spent several years documenting acequia *limpias* in the area. The narrative of her experience told through an expansive archive of photographs provided a potent introduction to the process. I used my time at the residency to meet with anyone who was studying water, acequia communities, or *parciantes*. Although my familial heritage is from this region, I am not embedded as a local with ties to acequias. It takes time to build these inroads, and this spring I am planning a second trip to two specific acequia communities to participate in their spring *limpia*.

References

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