



W I N T E R / S P R I N G 2 0 2 3

LEARNING GUIDE

W E X N E R C E N T E R F O R T H E A R T S

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MEDITATION OCEAN CONSTELLATION

MEDITATION OCEAN

SA'DIA REHMAN

THE RIVER RUNS SLOW
AND DEEP AND ALL THE
BONES OF MY ANCESTORS

HAVE RISEN TO THE
SURFACE TO KNOCK AND
CLICK LIKE THE SOUNDS
OF TREES IN THE AIR

A. K. BURNS

OF SPACE WE ARE...

ANNA TSOUHLARAKIS

THE NATIVE GUIDE
PROJECT: COLUMBUS

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INTRODUCTION


Water is in constant flux. Through a cycle of evaporation, condensation, precipitation, and collection, water changes form, moving across the planet and connecting bodies of water. Water also flows through our human **bodies**, connecting us to one another and to the **more-than-human** world.[1]

In this guide, water is a subject in the artists' work, as well as a metaphor that informs the design and writing process.[2] Mirroring the water cycle, we emphasize the flow between the artists' distinct practices. The use of circles and watermarks in the design is similarly a gesture towards fluidity and nonlinearity.

Water has power. It is life-giving, and it can be destructive. We hope to utilize the potential of water for interconnection, so that we may build a world characterized by thoughtful ways of being in **relation**.


Listen to artist Hope Ginsburg describe her understanding of water.  

INTRODUCTION



It can often be a challenge for people to confront and comprehend the enormity of climate change, let alone to envision solutions. As writer Amitav Ghosh argues, “let us make no mistake: the climate crisis is also a crisis of culture, and thus of the imagination.”[3] If the climate crisis is one of the imagination, can artists help us to imagine otherwise? Artists like those featured in this learning guide help reorient perspectives, particularly the capitalist mindset of land as property, pointing us towards other ways of being in **relation** with one another and the planet. They may, we can hope, help us find “a differently perceivable world, an intangible space of emergence, where rivers converge into the flow and the muck of life otherwise.”[4]

Each of the exhibitions featured in this learning guide will also generate a series of public programs and events. Check out the [Wex calendar](#) for up-to-date information.



HOW TO

This guide is intended to support visitor engagement with Wex exhibitions and can be used in tandem with the exhibition gallery guides. The learning guide offers points of divergence, reflection, and extension on major themes and works among the exhibitions, particularly around the themes of water and **porosity**.

Throughout the guide, users will find guiding questions, prompts, and related resources surrounded by **negative space**, a gesture towards the potential in the void. This space is an invitation to you to add your own words, images, and connection points.

Each exhibition's section has an overview, images, guiding questions, and a resource list with key words. We invite you to explore these resources in the Wexner Center Store, Ohio State University Fine Arts Library, and the Columbus Public Library.

Watershed map of the Columbus area, generated using the **USGS National Map Viewer**. Click on the link or image to build your own!



HOW TO

You may notice that the “I”s in the titles are an ice blue, in contrast to the rest of the text. Like the **shimmering** transitions of the video in *Meditation Ocean*, the “I”s in this guide are meant to play a dynamic role. By fading in and out of focus, each “I” asks you to consider your changing place and perspective in the world. We also refer to the collection of important “I” words below.

Glossary terms are bolded.

Links are bolded and underlined.

Click to explore relevant sites and resources!

Books 

Articles 

Online 

Video 

Audio 


INTERBEING
INTERGENERATIONAL
INTERDEPENDENCE
IMMIGRATION
INTENTIONALITY
INSTABILITY
INTERCONNECTION
INUNDATION
INTERRUPTION
INCLUSION
INQUIRY
IMMERSION
IDENTITY

LEARNING GUIDE


RESOURCES

Chiedza Pasipanodya, “Ngozi: We Might Listen for the **Shimmerings**” (2022) 


- movement, perspective, perception, embodiment

Amitav Ghosh, *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable* (2016) 

- **climate justice**, artists, imagination

adrienne maree brown, *Emergent Strategy: Shaping Change, Changing Worlds* (2017) 

- nature, social justice, **relationality**

Roy Scranton, *Learning to Die in the **Anthropocene**: Reflections on the End of a Civilization* (2015) 

- **climate justice**, humanities, war, **Anthropocene**

Feral Atlas: The More-than-Human Anthropocene (2021) 

- **climate justice, relationality**, rhizomes, digital humanities

GLOSSARY

CLIMATE JUSTICE

Recognizing the disproportionate and catastrophic effects of climate change on marginalized communities, what are strategies for justice? What does a world where we equitably live with the consequences of capitalism, globalization, and environmental degradation look like? How can we imagine and create a more just planetary future?

BODY

By **body**, we refer to **bodies** of work, **bodies** of water, and the **bodies** we inhabit. How do these **bodies** interact in each exhibition? What forms of embodiment do you notice or experience?

CONSTELLATION

A collective, arrangement, or pattern composed of individual points or beings (see also: **ecosystem**; **relationality**).

GLOSSARY

ANTHROPOCENE

A contested term for our geological era, one in which humankind (*anthropos*) has altered the environment to such extremes that it will be readable in the fossilized layers of earth for eons to come. Exactly when the **Anthropocene** began—and who gets included in the category of *anthropos*—is a subject of debate. Some scholars place the start of the **Anthropocene** at the invention of nuclear bombs, others at the Industrial Revolution, and still others at 1492 with the colonization and conquest in the so-called “New World.”[5]

SHIMMERING

“For me, **shimmering** speaks vividly to the way someone moves in and out of time and space, constantly aware of their changing nature and the shifting perspectives of this subjecthood, constantly aware of the oppression that colonial, patriarchal cultures vigorously enforce on **bodies** and beings to stay the same—when nothing ever really stays the same, when things are always in motion, always being born and dying simultaneously. **Shimmering** offers a lens through which to imagine **bodies**, identities, and spaces constantly moving in and out of focus.”

- CHIEDZA PASIPANODYA[6]

GLOSSARY

NEGATIVE SPACE

In visual art: the compositional space around the subject matter; the “background,” unused space that might not even get noticed.

Though often considered to be empty space or absence, A.K. Burns prompts us to think of **negative space** as a space of potential and transformation. To engage **negative space** is to shift the center, to pay attention to the non-human, and to embrace a sense of possibility.

ECOSYSTEM

A necessary biological function of human life and a focal point of mindfulness practices. Using different **breathing** techniques can reduce heart rates and cultivate a sense of calm. Since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, the exchange between bodies (see also: **porosity**) has new, dangerous connotations. Like water, **breathing** is a source of vitality and destruction.

A complex network or community characterized by inter-dependence.

BREATHING

GLOSSARY

WORLD-BUILDING

The practice of realizing or envisioning a new world for oneself, the environment, and society.

INDIGENEITY

Refers to the identities and experiences of Indigenous peoples; while localized, also suggests global links between diverse Indigenous cultures.

DISPLACEMENT

Often a sanctioned consequence of unchecked urban or technological development; a form of forced removal; a loss of community and way of life.

MORE-THAN-HUMAN

A term that expands the idea of what constitutes life—including plants, rocks, water, and more. “More than” shifts the focus from human beings to planetary interbeing, rejecting the mindset that people are the most important creatures.

GLOSSARY

POROSITY

The quality of permeability and exchange, an example of which might be the **porosity** among the artistic projects of A.K. Burns, Hope Ginsburg, and Sa'dia Rehman. What do we learn from these connection points, where one artist's work seeps into another's?

RELATIONALITY

The state of interbeing, interconnectedness, kinship. **Relationality** asks us to recognize and respect the ways in which we are beholden to one another and to the many worlds we inhabit (see also: **ecosystem, constellation**).

HEALING

What of scars, both internal and external? What does a dictionary definition of **healing** erase, overlook, move too quickly past? What is the role of community, generational/biological/geological time, of forgiveness, stitching, intention, sleep? What might the Earth need to **heal**?

MEDITATION OCEAN

OVERVIEW

Meditation Ocean is an ongoing project created by the Meditation Ocean **Constellation**, which includes artists, writers, educators, meditators, musicians, curators, divers, and scientists. It is conceived and directed by the interdisciplinary artist **Hope Ginsburg**. The project's first iteration, **M.O. Turtlegrass Meadow** (2023), grows out of Ginsburg's longstanding relationship with, and her 2022 **residency** at, the Wex.

M.O. Turtlegrass Meadow builds an immersive, underwater experience that invites visitors to meditate on what **healing** can look like at individual, community, and planetary scales. The installation situates viewers on the ocean floor, where the swaying of surges (underwater waves) and sea life echoes the rhythm of **breathing**, a **bodily** necessity taken for granted in our daily lives but one that becomes acutely present with scuba gear on the seabed. In keeping with the project's emphasis on **climate justice** and accountability, the artist will produce a climate impact report for the exhibition at the end of its run to document and acknowledge the ways in which artistic production has material consequences on our world.



Meditation Ocean **Constellation**, M.O. Turtlegrass Meadow, 2023 (still). Six-channel video installation, 67 mins., looped. Image courtesy of Hope Ginsburg. Two people in scuba gear float above the ocean floor.

How can we practice buoyancy as we also seek to be grounded?

What lessons does a sea sponge hold for how we interact with and learn from the world?

MEDITATION ON OCEAN CONSTELLATION

In a December 2022 conversation, a group of M.O. **Constellation** members respond to questions about the project and their practice. Listen to the **recording** for the full conversation. 🎧 🔗

Hope Ginsburg: Artist/Director

Jennifer Lange: Curator/Producer

Matt Flowers: Director of Photography

Alexis McCrimmon: Editor and Colorist

Joshua Quarles: Composer and Sound Recordist

“We keep blossoming out with the complexity and ambition of each project.”

- MATT FLOWERS

“Throughout this project there has been a theme of challenges turning into incredible opportunities.”

- JENNIFER LANGE

What brought you into this constellation and what is your role?

“I’m building a fictitious but also incredibly real ocean and creating a landscape... I feel like it’s this creation of opportunities.”

- ALEXIS
MCCRIMMON

How do you think about water in relation to your work?

“In your scuba gear, you don’t hear a lot other than your air bubbles and the ocean current, but when you hear an actual recording, there’s a lot more crackling and high frequency information.” - JOSHUA QUARLES

“That crackling is the microscopic animals in the reef...I saw a headline the other day about fish speaking to each other...there’s a lot of actual noise happening underwater...When you’re down there, it is an insular experience, and you feel so connected to your **breath** that it is the dominant sound...just your **breathing**.”
- MATT FLOWERS

“I was very happy to be forced to embrace the unpredictability of water.”
- MATT FLOWERS

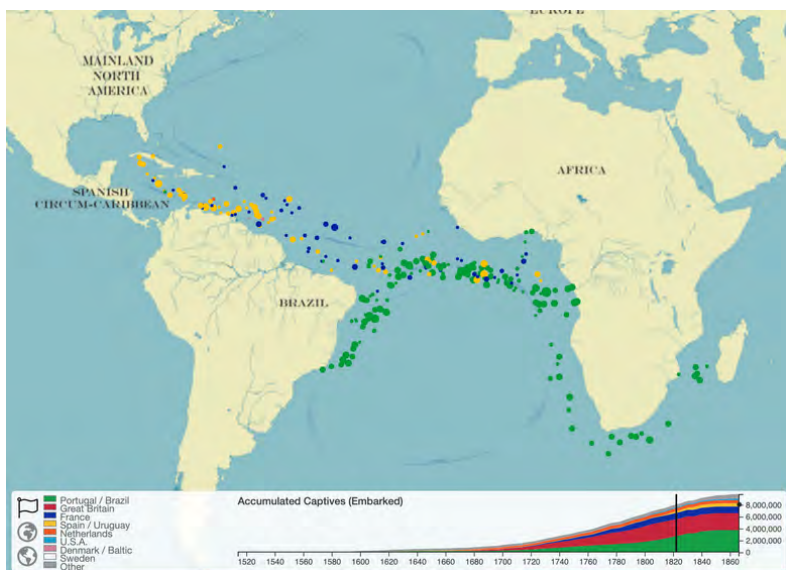
“Like music, water is complex and ever-evolving. It can be very slow but also there’s no tempo. It's very fluid.”
- JOSHUA QUARLES

“I’m embracing the properties of water and thinking about fluidity and **porosity**...I need to be fluid. I need to be agile. I need to be willing to float.”
- ALEXIS MCCRIMMON

DIVING WITH A PURPOSE

Diving With a Purpose (DWP) provides training and support for underwater archaeological projects. *M.O. Turtlegrass Meadow* divers Rachel Stewart and Riane Tyler are a DWP Instructor and DWP CARES Lead Instructor, respectively. DWP specializes in shipwrecks related to the African slave trade, with the goal of providing more complete documentation and interpretation of histories of slavery. Many of the divers are African American, and the organization provides an opportunity to “find their own history and tell their own stories,” in the words of Tara Roberts.[7] Roberts shares more about her experiences on the team in a National Geographic **article** and a **podcast**. The **National Museum of African American History and Culture** collaborates with DWP in the **Slave Wrecks Project**.

As we consider the science of climate change, what entangled social histories can also be found in the ocean?



To learn more about the transatlantic slave trade, explore records from the digital initiative **SlaveVoyages**, including **interactive maps** and a **timelapse** of the forced **displacement** of enslaved Africans.

Screenshot from SlaveVoyages interactive timelapse. A map of the world, centered on the Atlantic Ocean. Color dots denote ships crossing from Africa to the Americas during the slave trade.

How can practice of mindfulness help us cultivate a sense of non-separateness and interdependence?

How does artwork help us see the connections between far-flung environments like the coral reefs of the Florida Keys and our own, landlocked experiences in Columbus?



Meditation Ocean **Constellation**, M.O. Turtlegrass Meadow, 2023 (still). Six-channel video installation, 67 mins., looped. Image courtesy of Hope Ginsburg. Six people in scuba gear hold hands and float in a circle above the ocean floor.

EXCERPTS FROM M.O. MEDITATIONS

“Water: Become aware of the water available to you at this moment. Perhaps your hand can touch the condensation on the outside of a glass; your fingers can dip into a river; you are floating on or submerged in a large **body** of it. The water available to you might be that in your body, the moisture in your mouth. The sweat rolling down your back.”

- LILY COX-RICHARD and
MICHAEL JEVON DEMPS,
LIBRARY OF RADICAL RETURNS

“Marine mammals, evolutionarily, are those that have chosen the water. They are our **relatives** who came with us from ocean to land, then returned to ocean. No thank you, they said. We will swim. Are humans marine mammals, when in the sea?”

- SARA SMITH

“Gradually opening our eyes and moving in space like elegant octopuses displaying their tentacles, or flexible jellyfishes basking in their transparency. Bringing Water with us wherever we go. ‘I am Water and Water is in me.’”

- NICOLÁS DUMIT ESTÉVEZ
RAFUL ESPEJO OVALLES

“As this experience closes, you’ll begin to float again, along a different current, feel yourself, from time to time, a jelly-bodied sea creature. A **body** held by the environment, taking shape in thick fluid.”

- GM KEATON

“For this meditation, if possible, place yourself in a peaceful and comfortable environment where you are able to hear sounds clearly. Note the higher humidity, the clearer sound, such as in a greenhouse, in the bathtub, or underwater. In fact, we can hear sound at four times greater speed, and ten times higher pitch in water than on land.”

- NAOKO WOWSUGI

“Allow your thoughts to come and go
Like waves kissing a sandy shore
Some thoughts may linger
Others may easily float away
Let them be and keep **breathing.**”

- TIFANI KENDRICK

“What do we want to **breathe?**

Clean air and clean water.
How do we know we belong here?

We are **breath** and **body.**

Inhale, take less.

Exhale, give more.”

- RACHEL HILTON


“As you ground yourself, imagine the gentle pull of gravity as you emerge from the waters until you are back on shore. Feel the energy of the sand and ocean beneath your feet, and carry that energy through your **body** during this final scan.”

- RIANE TYLER

OCEAN SCIENCE 101

The divers' bubbling **breath** reminds us that our well-being and the ocean's **health** are interdependent. At least half of the **oxygen** we **breathe** comes from the ocean. Yet human-induced climate change through the burning of fossil fuels threatens the ocean with excess **heat** and **carbon**. The effects, which include ocean **acidification**, changes in storm and precipitation patterns, altered currents, and a rise in sea level impact life on land and underwater, including coral **reef ecosystems**. We share a reliance on the ocean's **health** with the countless species that live there.

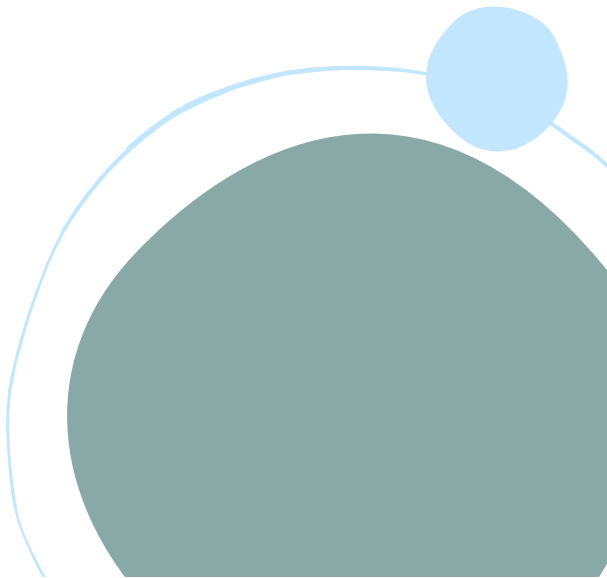
"I am a multiverse
You are a multiverse
We are inhaling we are
exhaling
We are a multiverse"
- DEJA REDMAN and
MONIQUE MCCRYSTAL

Learn more about
the impact of
climate change on
the ocean from the
**National Oceanic
and Atmospheric
Administration**
 **(NOAA)**.

Meditation Ocean
Constellation, M.O.
Turtlegrass Meadow,
2023 (still). Six-channel
video installation, 67
mins., looped. Image
courtesy of Hope
Ginsburg. One person in
scuba gear kneels on
the ocean floor.



How can we conceive of wellness in human and more-than-human terms?



MEDITATION OCEAN



RESOURCES

Alexis McCrimmon, *Ocean of Interiors* (2020)  

- environment, memory, poetry

Alexis Pauline Gumbs, *Undrowned: Black Feminist Lessons from Marine Mammals* (2020) 


- **relationality**, **climate justice**, anti-racism

Ayana Elizabeth Johnson, “*What I Know About the Ocean*” (2020)  

- **climate justice**, anti-racism, futurity

Astrida Neimanis, “Hydrofeminism: Or, Becoming a Body of Water” (2012) 

- becoming, **climate justice**, phenomenology, **relationality**

John Dunne and Daniel Goleman, *Ecology, Ethics, and Interdependence: The Dalai Lama in Conversation with Leading Thinkers on Climate Change* (2018) 

- **healing**, **climate justice**, **relationality**

D I V I N G I N T O T H E W R E C K

First the air is blue and then
it is bluer and then green and then
black I am blacking out and yet
my mask is powerful
it pumps my blood with power
the sea is another story
the sea is not a question of power
I have to learn alone
to turn my **body** without force
in the deep element.

And now: it is easy to forget
what I came for
among so many who have always
lived here
swaying their crenellated fans
between the reefs
and besides
you **breathe** differently down here.

I came to explore the wreck.
The words are purposes.
The words are maps.
I came to see the damage that was done
and the treasures that prevail.
I stroke the beam of my lamp
slowly along the flank
of something more permanent
than fish or weed

- ADRIENNE RICH (1973)[8]

SADIA REHMAN

OVERVIEW

The title of Rehman's exhibition -

the river runs slow and deep and all the bones of my ancestors

have risen to the surface to knock and click like the sounds of trees in the air

- is an excerpt from a poem by the artist's sister, Bushra.

Family is also a thread that connects the artworks; using paper, charcoal, plaster, water, denim, and rebar,

Rehman tells the story of their family's **displacement** by

the construction of the Tarbela Dam. Videos from the

artist's March 2022 trip to Pakistan show the family's visit

to the flooded site of their past home, Khar Kot. Through

material processes of cutting, stitching, etching, and

disintegration, Rehman conveys the fragmentation and

erasure of **displacement**. At the same time, they

construct a narrative and an ephemeral landscape that

speak to connection and emergence.

In earlier artworks, Rehman has referenced family

connections and addressed the cultural experiences of

Muslims in the United States. For instance, in the 2005

installation **Lotah Stories**, Rehman used audio recordings

to share narratives that communicated the pressures of

cultural assimilation.[9] Likewise, in their 2017 MFA thesis,

This is My Family: An Erasure, Rehman investigated

identity and incorporated storytelling through the use of

family photographs and relics.[10]

How are land, water, and grief entangled in Rehman's work?

Sa'dia Rehman, Still from *There isn't a stone I don't remember*, 2022. Two channel video. Courtesy of the artist and their family. This photograph depicts an emerged stack of Quran text, bound together and to a large rock at the bottom. Submerging Qurans in running water is considered one of the most respectful ways to dispose of damaged Qurans, as it is said to allow the ink to run—erasing the holy text, and rendering the once sacred page into a blank canvas.

How do family narratives, archives, and relics emerge in the river runs slow? What are the connections between **displacement**, immigration, and assimilation?



TARBELA DAM

Built on the Indus River, the **Tarbela Dam** is the world's largest earth-filled dam.[11] The construction of the dam, financed by the World Bank, caused the **displacement** of an estimated 96,000 people from 184 villages in the 1970s. Intended to regulate the river, support irrigation, and generate hydroelectric power, the dam project also included the creation of a 260 square kilometer reservoir, which flooded the valley and submerged entire villages. [12] Today, this lake features tourist attractions, including a boating point and picnic spot. In the winter, when the water is low, the evidence of what once was—homes, shrines, graveyards—becomes visible again.[13]



Sa'dia Rehman, *Tarbela Dam Spillway*, 2022, digital photograph.

Courtesy of Artist.

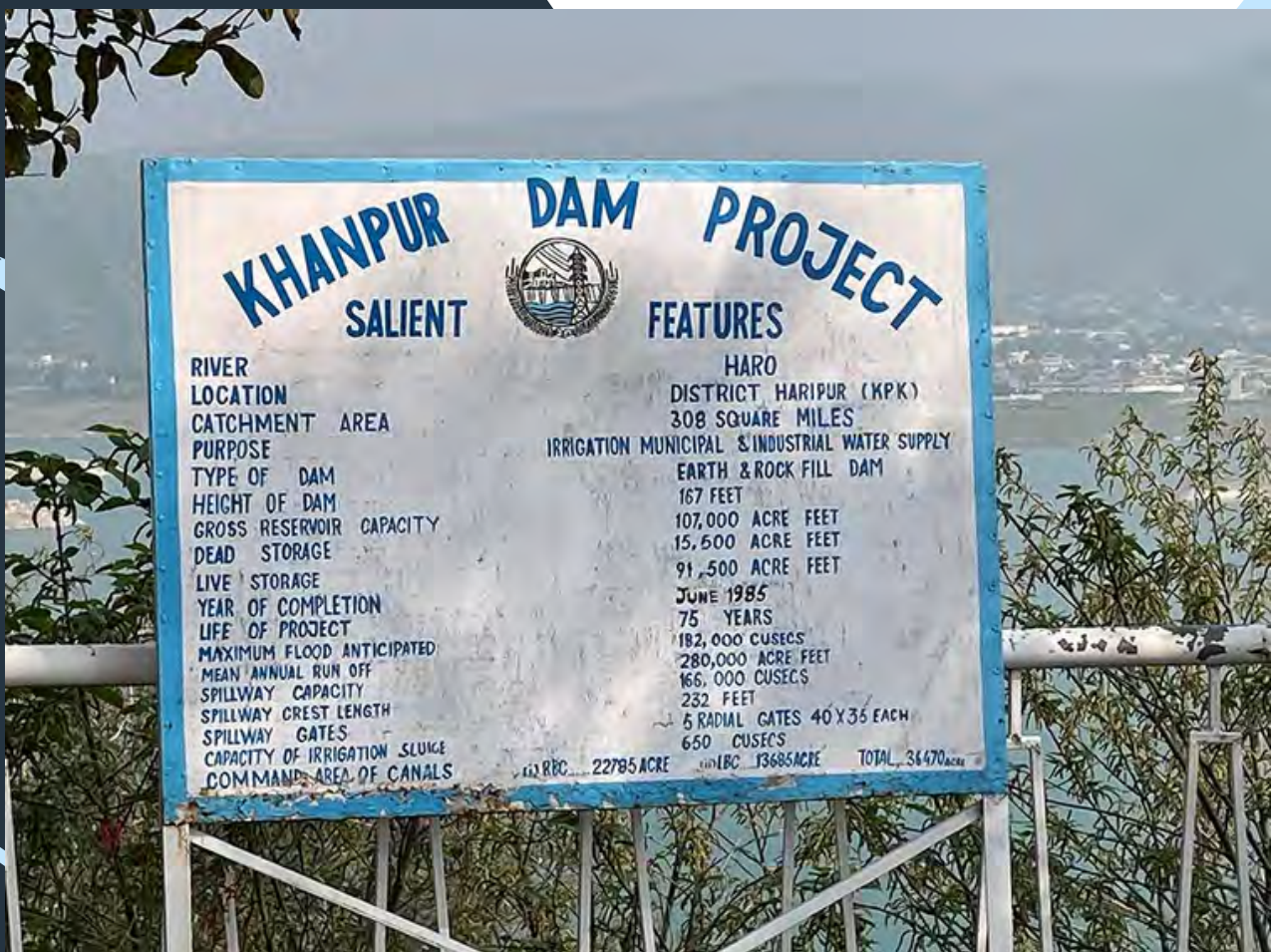
A landscape image of a dam with a water reservoir in front.

How might we reflect on histories of imperialism
without reproducing imperial ways of thinking?

Sa'dia Rehman, *Khanpur Dam Sign*, 2022, found object, public sign, wood, paint, stencil. Courtesy of the artist. Image of a rectangular wooden sign, with blue text on a white background, reading 'Khanpur Dam Project', then listing the 'salient features' in writing.

PROTEST SIGNS

Rehman's hand-painted artworks/signs/poems reference historical signage posted near dams in Pakistan. Rather than providing information for tourists (like the Khanpur Dam sign below), the text on Rehman's signs stems from their conversations with family and community members. Rooted in the experience of land as a site of familial memory, these poetic meditations spark multiple interpretations, including a protest of forced **displacement**.



a village my father walked to
shepherding his own buffaloes
hanging out on the River
gossiping with friends

a village my father walked to/shepherding his own buffaloes/hanging out on the River/gossiping with friends, 2022, ink and wall paint on wood board, 30 x 40 x 1 ½ inches. Courtesy of the artist. Black text on white background reads “a village my father walked to shepherding his own buffaloes hanging out on the River gossiping with friends.”

The Land
wrinkled dried broken swelling
The Veins

The Land/wrinkled/dried/broken/swelling/ The Veins, 2022, ink and wall paint on wood board, 30 x 40 x 1 ½ inches. Courtesy of the artist. Black text on white background reads “The Land wrinkled dried broken swelling The Veins.”

We handed over 200 rupees
hot pakoras
the stand owner allowed me to take photos
as long as I posted them on Instagram

We handed over 200 rupees /hot pakoras/the stand owner allowed me to take photos/as long as I posted them on Instagram, 2022, ink and wall paint on wood board, 48 x 36 x 1 ½ inches. Courtesy of the artist. Black text on white background reads “We handed over 200 rupees hot pakoras the stand owner allowed me to take photos as long as I posted on Instagram.”



Sa'dia Rehman, *Hemorrhage* (detail), 2022, artist's, sister's, and partner's jeans. Courtesy of artist.

“Denim is made using excessive amounts of water in industrial factories along rivers. So I collected discarded denim—my own, my sister's, and my partner's. I sliced the denim into strips and sewed them together, layering one atop another, side by side, on the way, until it became a long river-like banner.”

Cutting and stitching together jeans from family members, Rehman constructs a river of denim.

Informed by José Esteban Muñoz's concept of “disidentification,” Rehman uses collage as a method of dismantling normative ideas, then building new meaning through the reassembly of fragments.[14]

What do shared genes (jeans) mean?

REHMAN | IN WRITING

The following quotes are Rehman's written responses to learning guide research questions, as well as excerpts from their **MFA thesis**.

"In working with imagery that is often marked foreign, my work challenges the position of the universal." [15]

How does this project connect to your larger body of work?

"I've always been interested in the structures around us, not simply dams, but family, nation, borders. And how those infrastructures impact who we are and the desire to rearrange and take them apart as we live within them. Even though the environment is a new focus in the work, harm and survival are themes that go back to the beginning."

"I critique socially constructed barriers on different scales: the globe, the nation, the family and the **body.**" [16]

How does site influence your practice? (e.g. Columbus and the Tarbela Dam) in conversation? How do you see different sites

“For me, site, like **body**, is not static but constantly changing. A site—or a sub-site, meaning, a space within—can be replicated, destroyed, remade. It is different depending on where you stand or who you are. There is a dynamic and endless cycle that happens when the physical **body** moves through place.

I documented my family revisiting the site of **displacement**. Their visitation is a remembrance and a letting go. My documentation is a commitment and a dispersal.”

“While I am working with my family’s **displacement**, I am aware that **displacement** is happening on many scales and in many ways and by various processes of so-called development. These are long historical and contemporary phenomena in the United States and around the world.”

“Such timelines are evident everywhere you look: push out, destroy, build, influx.”

“Think of the area in Franklinton called The Bottoms, partly named after its low-lying land and flood-risk from the Olentangy and Scioto rivers. A 2004 floodwall was built to protect the neighborhood, but at the same time **displaced** residents from three public housing projects. This contributed to gentrification: policing and glass buildings.”

BEYOND THE ASH RAINS

*What have you known of loss
That makes you different from other men?*
- Gilgamesh

When the desert refused my history,
Refused to acknowledge that I had lived
there, with you, among a vanished tribe,
two, three thousand years ago, you parted
the dawn rain, its thickest monsoon curtains,
and beckoned me to the northern canyons.
There, among the red rocks, you lived alone.
I had still not learned the style of nomads:
to walk between the rain drops to keep dry.
Wet and cold, I spoke like a poor man,
without irony. You showed me the relics
of our former life, proof that we'd at last
found each other, but in your arms I felt
singled out for loss. When you lit the fire
and poured the wine, "I am going," I murmured,
repeatedly, "going where no one has been
and no one will be... Will you come with me?"
You took my hand, and we walked through the streets
of an emptied world, vulnerable
to our suddenly bare history in which I was,
but you said won't again be, singled
out for loss in your arms, won't ever again
be exiled, never again, from your arms."

- AGHA SHAHID ALI[17]

THE RIVER RUNS SLOW


RESOURCES

Ariella Aïsha Azoulay, *Potential History: Unlearning Imperialism* (2019) 


- memories, imperialism, photography, museums

Arundhati Roy, *The Cost of Living* (1999) 


- technology, **displacement**, progress



Katya Garcia-Anton, Harald Gaski, Gunvor Guttorm (eds.) *Let the River Flow: An Indigenous Uprising and its Legacy in Art, Ecology & Politics* (2021) 

- **Indigeneity, climate justice**, activism

Jose Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (1999) 

- identity, queerness

Nina Lakhani, *Who killed Berta Cáceres?: Dams, Death Squads, and an Indigenous Defender's Battle for the Planet* (2020) 

- Lakhani **book talk** at UC Berkeley in 2020  
- technology, **Indigeneity, climate justice**

A. K. BURNS

OVERVIEW

Multimedia artist **A.K. Burns** works within the realm of the “speculative present” and argues that we can’t build a future without first building the conditions in the present out of which that future can be born; in other words, we must create the conditions for change now. A.K.’s speculative present is a **world-building** endeavor, an act of science fiction realized in part through a four-part saga called ***Negative Space***. The four videos in the series, accompanied by a series of collages on mirrors that act as archives for each installment, feature human and **more-than-human** “acting agents” whose actions and settings offer an opportunity for reorientation, and that aim to pull us out of the existing present into a possible present. Central to this reorientation is an insistence on the instability of boundaries, such as those between the human and the **more-than-human**, along the gender binary, and those separating **bodies**.

Of Space We Are... is Burns’s largest exhibition to date, featuring sculptural work alongside a selection of *Negative Space* videos and related collages. The project emerges from a durational and relational engagement with people, places, and histories. *What is Perverse is Liquid*, the final installment of *Negative Space*, premieres in *Of Space We Are...* and considers water’s properties of leakiness, fluidity, and flow.

THE VOID

“The void is a lively tension, a desiring orientation toward being/becoming. The vacuum is flush with yearning, bursting with innumerable imaginings of what could be. The quiet cacophony of different frequencies, pitches, tempos, melodies, noises, pentatonic scales, cries, blasts, sirens, sighs, syncopations, quarter tones, allegros, ragas, bebops, hiphops, whimpers, whines, screams, are threaded through the silence, ready to erupt, but simultaneously crosscut by a disruption, dissipating, dispersing the would-be sound into non/being, an indeterminate symphony of voices. The blank page teeming with the desires of wouldbe traces of every symbol, equation, word, book, library, punctuation mark, vowel, diagram, scribble, inscription, graphic, letter, inkblot, as they yearn toward expression. A jubilation of emptiness.”

- PHYSICIST AND THEORIST
KAREN BARAD[18]

What becomes possible when we shift our attention
from the subject to the void?




How does **Negative Space** leak beyond the gallery walls into our own environments?

A.K. Burns, *What is Perverse is Liquid*, 2022 (still). Video, 35 mins, looped. Commissioned by the Wexner Center for the Arts. Two people, one with a stick over their shoulder, wade through a swamp.

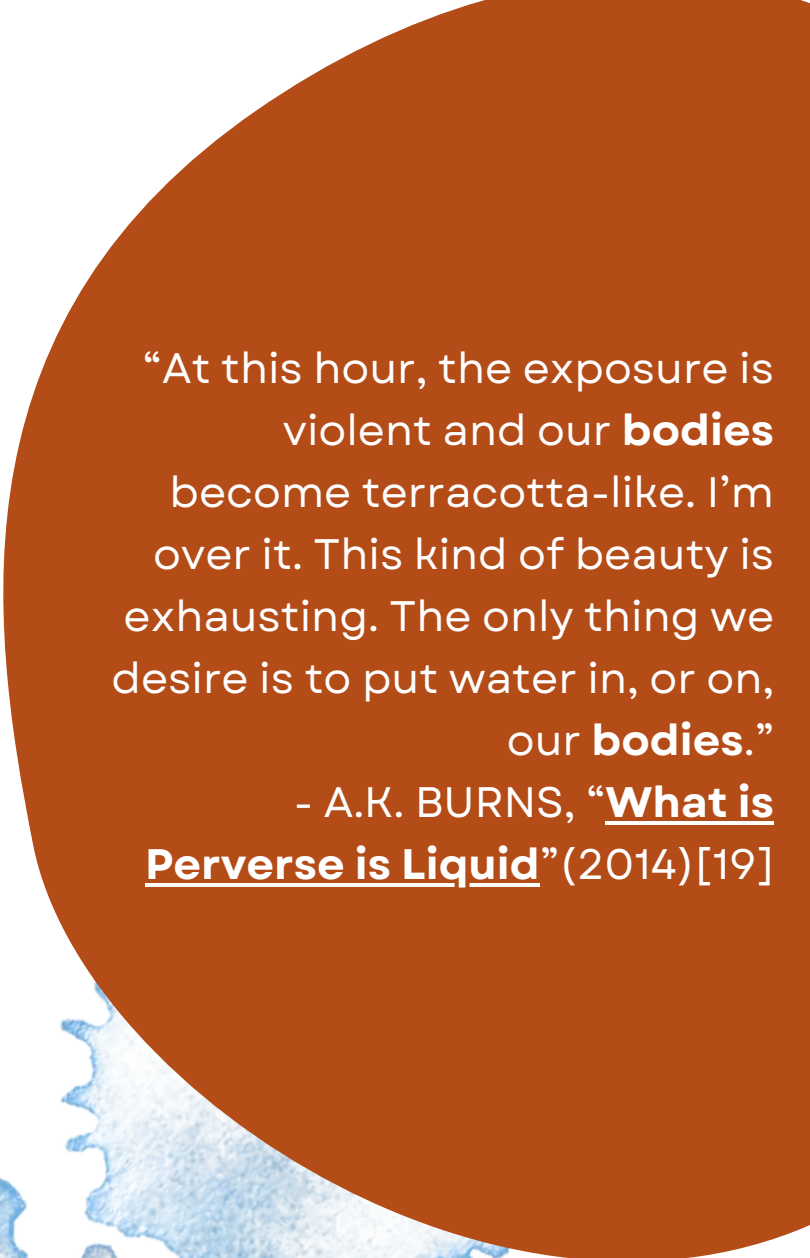
More from **Geo Wyex**, composer who scored the soundtracks for *Negative Space*





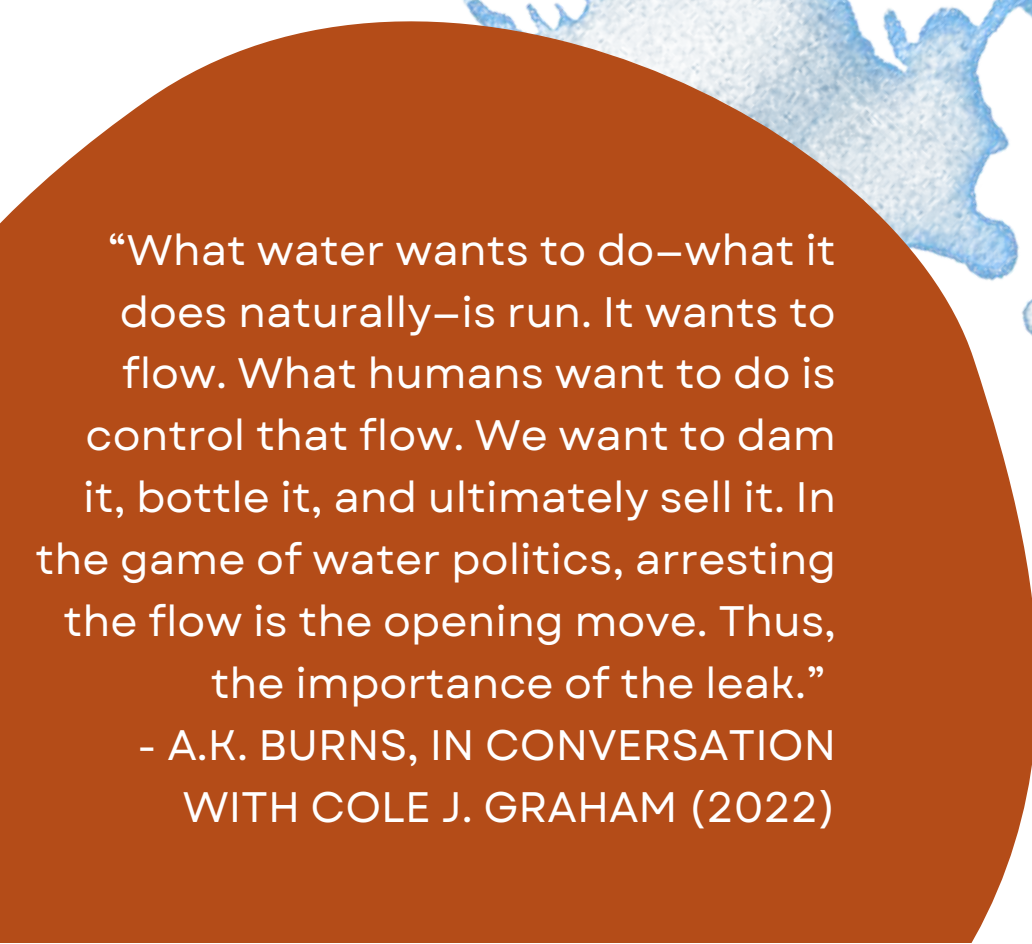
“She never cared which name you used or gender. Honestly when you look that fabulous, who really gives a damn? This is a position I personally feel deeply aligned with. I have no real interest in policing how people name me or gender me. Flamboyancy has long been the tool of choice for queer and marginalized **bodies**. I deflect and enchant your determining gaze by ‘workin it’—with a swish and a snap!”

- A.K. BURNS, “Scripting a Smearly Spot” (2017)[20]



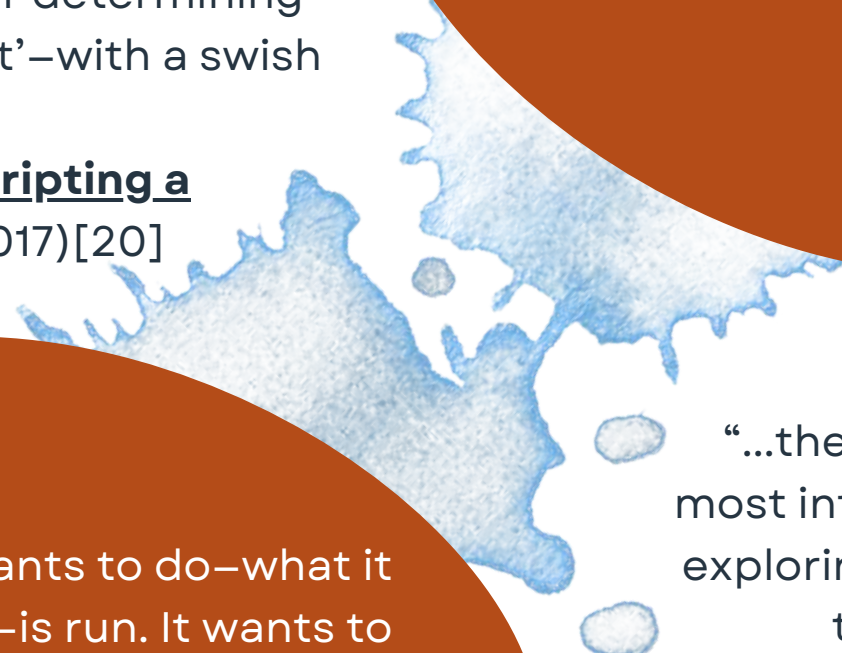
“At this hour, the exposure is violent and our **bodies** become terracotta-like. I’m over it. This kind of beauty is exhausting. The only thing we desire is to put water in, or on, our **bodies**.”

- A.K. BURNS, “What is Perverse is Liquid” (2014)[19]



“What water wants to do—what it does naturally—is run. It wants to flow. What humans want to do is control that flow. We want to dam it, bottle it, and ultimately sell it. In the game of water politics, arresting the flow is the opening move. Thus, the importance of the leak.”

- A.K. BURNS, IN CONVERSATION WITH COLE J. GRAHAM (2022)



“...the thing I am most interested in exploring through this work is difference: a belief in the liveliness, temporality, and inevitable difference of all matter.”

- A.K. BURNS, “Scripting a Smearly Spot” (2017)[21]



A.K. Burns, *Living Room*, 2017 (still). Video, 36 min., looped. Courtesy of the artist. One person sits in a bathtub with a plate of food on the tub ledge, and another sits next to the bathtub reading a newspaper.



Jacques-Louis David, *The Death of Marat*, 1793. Oil on canvas. Royal Museums of Fine Arts of Belgium. A bleeding man in a tub holds a quill and a letter.

Burns questions value systems, including the canon of Western art history. In *Living Room*, the second installment of *Negative Space*, Burns references **The Death of Marat**, a political painting from 18th-century France, to help us consider the **body's** threshold for survival.

What are the toxins in our (political) environment today?

What other art historical references can you spot as you watch *Negative Space*?

How can an artistic project be an act of world-building, akin to science fiction?

Ursula K. Le Guin argues,  
“Science fiction is not predictive; it is descriptive.”

What is the role of pleasure in changing the world?

THE LEAK

A.K. Burns, *Mx. Manning (leaks)*, 2019. Mirror, xerox, Mylar tape, India ink, pencil, and pages from *Zero* (a book by A.K. Burns). Courtesy of the artist and Michel Rein Gallery, Paris/Brussels. Various paper cutouts, including tires, a grassy landscape, text, and a military jacket, on a gray background.



A recurring motif in *Negative Space* is the Chelsea Manning jacket, which represents the idea of “transitioning” and of the data leak. Together, these ideas combine in the figure of the “leaky body.” The “leaky body” is one that is indefinitely and actively in transition, not one that has transitioned.

Just as there are leaky **bodies**, Burns introduces “leaky thought,” through which we can question power imbalances and how we define the world. “Leaky thought” flows; one question leaks and slowly unravels into the next. “Leaky thought,” like the “leaky body,” is **porous** and remains in transition.

- A.K. BURNS’S description of “the leak” as told to Wex Exhibitions Intern COLE J. GRAHAM

M I R R O R C O L L A G E S



A.K. Burns, *Makemake: The Fish*, 2019. Mirror, xerox, spray paint, and oil paint. Courtesy of the artist and Michel Rein Gallery, Paris/Brussels. Paper cutouts, including a fish, tank, and shells, on a gray background.

A.K. Burns, *Living Room*, 2017 (still). Video, 36 min., looped. Courtesy of the artist. Photo by Eden Batki. A child in a brightly lit room reaches inside a fish tank, with a couch in the background.



A critical component of the *Negative Space* project is the visual archive that Burns creates in a series of Mirror Collages. At the end of each iteration of *Negative Space*, Burns reflects, synthesizes, translates, and expands on the theoretical questions at the core of each video, layering and transposing digital sources, images, newspaper cutouts, and more.

What elements from the video still are recognizable in the accompanying collage? What is the effect of using mirrors as the backdrop?

OF SPACE WE ARE...

RESOURCES

Ursula K. LeGuin, *The Dispossessed* (1974) 


- science fiction, anarchy, **world-building**

Jill Casid, “Necrolandscaping” (2018) 

- **anthropocene**, death, environment, gender, queering

Karen Barad “What is the Measure of Nothingness?” (2020)  

- indeterminacy, void, vacuum, (non)being, intra-action

Silvia Federici, *Revolution at Point Zero: Housework, Reproduction, and Feminist Struggle* (2012) 

- labor, feminism, gender

A.K. Burns, *A response to post-identity* (2016)  

- identity, transformation, continuum, gender

ANNA

TSOUHLARAKIS

THE NATIVE GUIDE PROJECT: COLUMBUS

In *The Native Guide Project: Columbus*, **Anna Tsouhlarakis**— an artist of Navajo, Creek, and Greek descent—draws on an existing series of work and expands the boundaries of the Wex. Her text-based installation covers interior walls of the building, spilling out to the exterior and to locations around Columbus. Throughout, readers are confronted with humorous and unsettling declarations that challenge conventional discourse around **Indigeneity**. Each iteration of the project stems from an engagement with place, including local communities and histories of **displacement**. *Breath of Wind*, a video work on view in The Box in early 2023, draws attention to interconnected histories of climate catastrophe and settler colonialism.

Gnu Stories Podcast,
“**Meet Anna
Tsouhlarakis, SSFS
Nov. Artist in
Residence**” (2021)



How might attending to place in new ways
challenge colonial habits?

COLLECTED PROMPTS

FOR DISCUSSION AND WRITING

M.O. CONSTELLATION

- How can we practice buoyancy as we also seek to be grounded?
- What lessons does a sea sponge hold for how we interact with and learn from the world?
- As we consider the science of climate change, what entangled social histories can also be found in the ocean?
- How can practice of mindfulness help us cultivate a sense of non-separateness and interdependence?
- How does artwork help us see the connections between far-flung environments like the coral reefs of the Florida Keys and our own, landlocked experiences in Columbus?
- How can we conceive of wellness in human and **more-than-human** terms?

REHMAN

- How are land, water, and grief entangled in Rehman's work?
- How do family narratives, archives, and relics emerge in *the river runs slow*?
- What are the connections between **displacement**, immigration, and assimilation?
- How might we reflect on histories of imperialism without reproducing imperial ways of thinking?
- What do shared genes (jeans) mean?

T SOUHLARAKIS

- What becomes possible when we shift our attention from the subject to the void?
- How does *Negative Space* leak beyond the gallery walls into our own environments?
- How can an artistic project be an act of **world-building**, akin to science fiction?
- What is the role of pleasure in changing the world?
- How might attending to place in new ways challenge colonial habits?

BURNS

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[3] Amitav Ghosh, *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016), 9.

[4] Macarena Gómez-Barris, *The Extractive Zone: Social Ecologies and Decolonial Perspectives* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2017), xx.

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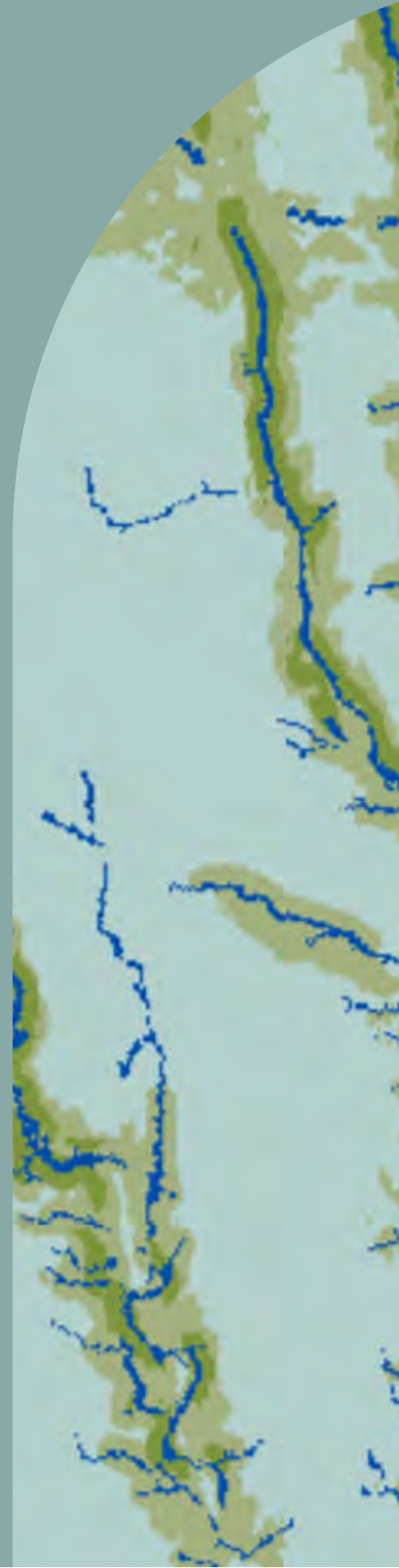
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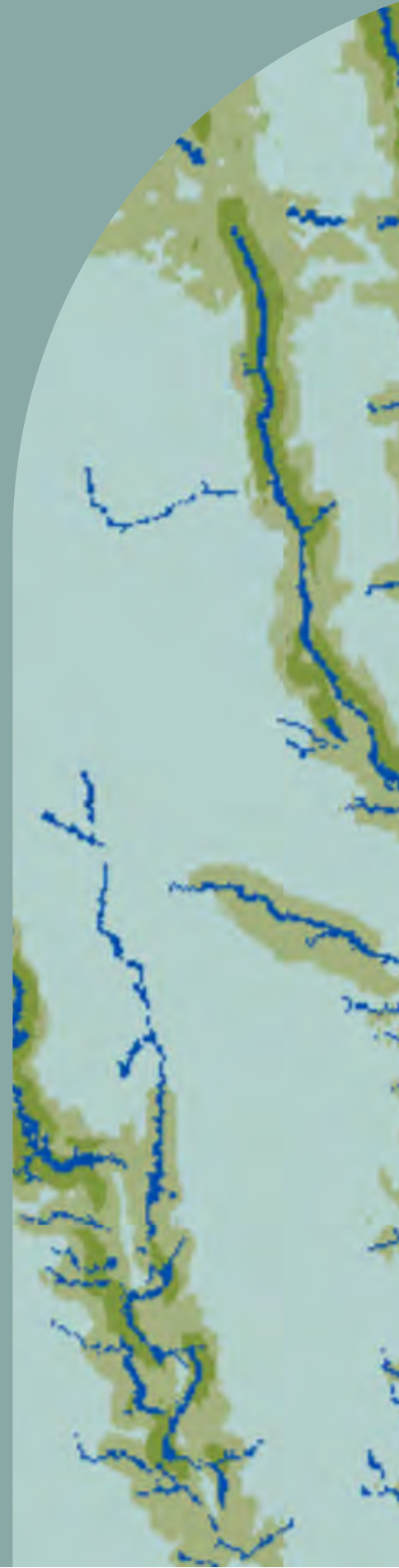
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