

Bongani Khoza / Dylan Clark & Ángel Xicohtencatl Espinoza

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Organized by Zaid Arshad

“[The heart of revolutionary movements is alive, awaiting new forms and approaches]. And to do this, we need archipelagic thinking, which is one that opens, one that conforms diversity — one that is not made to obtain unity, but rather a new kind of Relation. One that trembles — physically, geologically, mentally, spiritually — because it seeks the point, that utopian point, at which all the cultures of the world, all the imaginations of the world can meet and understand each other without being dispersed or lost.”¹ — Édouard Glissant

The sounds of wind, jet engines, smog pushed through gaping steel exhaust pipes booming everywhere; gushing to and fro at a low volume from the window as one sits in the room. Space is made for an inquiry on forming a history receptive to the particularities of subjects that are strengthened by colliding with one another, thereby infinitely trembling as co-constituents of Earthly life.

Rand is short for *Witwatersrand*, a Dutch/Afrikaans term which translates to “white waters’ ridge” in English. Witwatersrand is also a 35-mile-long cliff range formed by hundreds of millions of years of erosion and fossilization. The rocks which make up these formations are collectively referred to as the Witswatersrand Supergroup; the youngest of them have been dated to nearly 3 billion years. Amongst this youthful strata exists an amount of gold rivaled by no single site on the earth today. Nearly a quarter of all of the gold mined in the world comes from this range. Naturally, Witwatersrand is also the name of a region of South Africa with large gold deposits, and the capitalists who first began to exploit these basins were known as Randlords.

In 1917, Allister Miller (military aviator and founder of South Africa’s first commercial mail & passenger airline—which later became South African Airways) landed his plane on Germiston Golf Course (established 1898 and closed March 2025) and decided that a location near the golf course would be a great place for an airport. In 1929 his dream came true; Germiston Town Council, a real estate company, and the Rand Refinery (established in South Africa after being transferred there from Britain in 1920 as “the world’s largest integrated single-site precious metals refining and smelting complex,”) collectively funded what would become the busiest airport in the southern hemisphere by 1975.

Rand Airport ceased running international flights in 1948, when it was replaced by Palmietfontein Airport as Johannesburg’s main international airport. Palmietfontein was later replaced by Jan Smuts International Airport (now O.R. Tambo International Airport) in 1952. The airport’s financial success was not due to hoards of tourists flooding in from abroad, but private and commercial aircraft usage and a litany of capital rendering ventures including hosting flight lessons and competitions. In February of 1961, as South Africa was gearing up to declare itself “a republic,” it minted a currency based on the decimal system rather than the sterling. This new money was dubbed “the South African rand,” and was promptly promoted by a cartoon businessman ambassador on television and radio: Daan Desimaal (Dan Decimal, for Anglophones, and Dezimal Dan for Germanophone South West Africans (Namibians)). In his tuxedo and R-shaped tophat, Daan encouraged consumers with catchy tunes that were “perfect for singing in the bathroom,” as suggested by a columnist for *The Spokesman-Review*, a Spokane-based newspaper which happily advertised the SA rand ahead of its official launch.

Thirty years later, in 2000, the Johannesburg City Council sold its shares to the ownership of three private investors, half of which are held by a company made up of 28 shareholders collectively known as Rand Operators. Three years ago, in 2022, the then Rand Airport General Manager departed the position he had held for six years after being accused of criminal mismanagement totaling 8 million rand (appx. 456,100USD). He would be replaced by two others in the next two years. In August of 2024, members of the Rand Airports Management Company and Rand Airport Holdings filed a lawsuit against three individuals directing the airport. The plaintiffs included Niklaas Johannes Degenaar—a director of both of the aforementioned companies—and attorney Kolisang

¹ Édouard Glissant & Hans Ulrich Obrist: *The Archipelago Conversations*, Isolarii, 2021

Mochesane Lepholisa, who survived an assassination attempt in 2015. Corruption and mystique seem to undergird every inch of the situation.

Just ahead of the airport's 2015 revamp, which it embarked on after "recognizing the potential of its resources," Bongani Khoza photographed its runway. On a gloomy day, the scene of pitter-patter against concrete—captured from an ant's viewpoint—is dramatic and theatrical, culling memories of writings made from storm-stricken travelogs of the colonists of old. The mise also contains a single flag in the foreground, hoisted, flailing in the wet wind at the very top of its pole. It is a marker—an image-maker and a sign of life, yet at once the object-form par excellence of dominant presence. A haunting occurs over the novelties, over the golf course and hobby planes.

Rand Airport is incidentally situated in an incredibly hot region of urban South Africa and has relatively short runways, leading to increased accidents. There is a sense that amidst intense sociopolitical issues of contextually varying origins—all of which find roots in the ongoing climate crisis sparked by imperial extractive capitalism—creative practitioners and cultural producers work to explicate this connective tissue by reconsidering how to archive and re/present circumstances.

Aviators Frank and Cally Eckard are a couple who have been organizing the South African Power Flying Association (SAPFA) Rand Airport Challenge Navigation Rally for 20 years. As I scroll through their online blog, I watch the updates change year by year, as if I'm watching a scene from an absurd sci-fi film in which everyone is a pilot. In 2023, "The Rand Airport Challenge kicked off the SAPFA Rally calendar for this year in unprecedented fashion for this particular event – with a perfect weather day from start to finish." Last year, "...it became clear that the weather had become untenable for continued safety. A few of the teams completed the course, but others returned to their home bases or to Rand. Wise decisions in the prevailing weather! ...Live tracking was not possible due to the weather conditions." This year, "It has been a difficult start to the year for rally flying. Poor weather first caused the Rand Rally Challenge to be postponed and then cancelled."

Khoza positions his work in the tradition of a lineage of artists who constantly challenged the constraints and associations of the photographic medium, namely, Santu Mofokeng (1956-2020), well-known for his ethereal and spirit-laden black-and-white documentary accounts of day-to-day South African life. "For Mofokeng, photography of the past was largely associated with representations exposing the horrors experienced by black South Africans under the apartheid regime... The medium was dominated by groups of photographers who chose to use the medium of photography as artists in opposition to the policies of the apartheid regime while exposing its brutality."²

What Mofokeng was invested in as part of his project—as expansively and dutifully as he pursued it—is quite simple. He opaquely acknowledges that very human feeling we recognize as fearful uncertainty, but couches it in a long history of European exploitation of lands in the Global South, reconnecting the corruption of modern leaders therein to near-ancient violences. In order to make space for 'projectable imaginings' in these lands, we must employ their ghosts to conjure images which reflect on history towards new futures, across borders.

A-toya-c

A - water

toya - verb root "to extend"

c - locative (locates an entity in space and/or time)

Atoyatl - river

Atoyac - "at the river"

Río Atoyac - River by the river

² Bongani Khoza, "The Lamppost: A Metaphorical Reflection on Archival Absences and Presences," 2014. Johannesburg: University of the Witwatersrand. <https://wiredspace.wits.ac.za/server/api/core/bitstreams/e323f9f8-afd7-4160-afd6-cdbbe94b2fd8/content>

At the feet of Popocatepetl and Iztaccihuatl, a flowing river climbs down and twists through the ranges, flanked by greenery on either side. The Río Atoyac's tired body is overgrown with machine leftovers and industrial discharge. Complexes raised by industries the likes of Volkswagen, German engineering multinational conglomerate Thyssenkrupp, and Pemex, an oil company managed by the Mexican state, leak toxic waste from factories and processing plants of international origin. In exchange for cars, electrical materials, chemicals, and fabric, the health and environment of the common people are compromised. Activists in México breathe in the thick air being wafted over and about. "Toxic, sweet, spicy at night—a cause for dizziness and vomiting," one such environmentalist described the experience. The regulation and oversight of the Atoyac are undertaken by sub-groups divided by municipality, much like a set of bureaucratic nuclei. These groups offer extensive amounts of assistance and dedicated problem-solving to the people of Tlaxcala, but they are nevertheless up against a range of issues that exceed their power as such relatively small communities.

As it pertains to the state of the Atoyac today, section 53 of the Code of Hammurabi contains an anecdote: "If a man has neglected to strengthen his dike and a breach has broken out in it, and the waters have flooded the meadow, the man in whose dike the breach has broken out shall restore the corn he has caused to be lost." This commandment requires a level of individual responsibility for the benefit of the whole, but it must be considered that the regulatory apparatus, in this case represented by the construction of a dike, was instituted by an authority that created and upholds the "problems of collective liability and negligence." Elements of all the social and political aspects of the Atoyac's management converge and become interrelated in *Ahuejote cut (Corte ahuejote)*, where we see a mutually beneficial partnership between ejidatarios³ through one action of the many involved in the upkeep of the land.

The video was recorded in Santo Tomás la Concordia in the municipality of Nativitas, Tlaxcala, México, during June and July 2024. It follows the felling of an ahuejote tree on ejido land at the edge of the Atoyac, a river within the states of Tlaxcala and Puebla. A group of ejidatarios cut down this tree to prevent it from damaging a neighboring plot or blocking the adjacent road. Rendered in real-time, live and historical data control the order and playback of video units in sequences that are continually self-reorganizing. Following patterns of difference and disruption in climatic variables, the sequence of tree removal is displaced to the site of exhibition. The audiovisual processing architecture is responsible for managing the pre-recorded video files, like a brain hardwired to react and move through time as if correlated to the earth.

It is a structural approach that recalls images of actuality films of the early 20th century, insofar as it does not attempt to function as a vehicle for a constructed narrative, but rather as a display of a lived event—a *demonstration of machines*. Actuality pictures (and actuality picture-makers), much like newsreels, as an international phenomenon, pioneered and conscripted documentary film as a cinematic genre. Salvador Toscano's *Inauguración del tráfico internacional de Tehuantepec (Inauguration of international traffic in Tehuantepec)* (1907), conveys a series of sequences which present title cards and events (a boat moving across the ocean; a train coming in as a gate is opened to allow it entry) as opposed to narrations. Instead of denouement, the boat in Toscano's film moves across the ocean again at the closing scene.

Ahuejote cut (Corte ahuejote) performs like one act of a theater work, recalling the provisional nature of the 'wave scene' in *Panorama of Rio de Janeiro* (French Gaumont Company, 1909), in which the anticipation of watching water rushing into a rock-lined wall is replaced with only the grandeur of the crashing suds—we never see the tide fully recede. And consider the infamous actuality scene: the smoking locomotive thuds across the frame along the tracks, increasing in size before vanishing as it fills the screen, as if you watched it happen. By honing in on a single happening within a set, it becomes an explicated moment in the acts of archiving and remembering it—it is the literal invention of the past in what has been called a prototypical cinema vérité.

The attention to classification towards the end goal of making a documentary record is also a present theme in the history of the ahuejote. 221 years ago, French botanist Aimé Bonpland also made a voyage to Southern México. Arriving shortly prior to the Independence period (1810-1821), Humboldt and Bonpland moved extensively throughout Central México during their year-long period in the country. They conducted wide-ranging research that integrated natural sciences with economic, historical, and anthropological investigations, while at the same time connecting with Spanish and Mexican intellectuals and public figures in

³ In Mexico, an ejido is an area of land communally tended to by inhabitants with oversight from the government. The system was loosely based on calpulli commoner housing of the precolonial Aztec tradition. The NAFTA trade agreement signed by President Carlos Salinas de Gortari made significant changes to the ejidal system and was a major factor in the Zapatista uprisings and larger Chiapas conflicts.

order to expand their access to protected information and remote sites. The naturalists worked extensively throughout central México, often using México City as a point of departure for numerous other locations within the country, before departing from Veracruz to Cuba in March 1804.

During his stay, Bonpland came across the ahuejote, native to Southern México, and classified it *Salix bonplandiana*. As its Nahuatl name suggests, the ahuejote sustains a natural relationship with the water; like other trees in the willow family, it prefers wet soil and commonly grows near lakes and rivers and is central to the centuries-old agricultural tradition of constructing chinampas (a method of planting crops in water). By September 28, 1827, Bonpland had been made an honorary citizen of México under the name “Amado Bomplant,” with a certificate of citizenship sent by Joel Roberts Poinsett (then serving as the U.S. minister to Mexico); this honor was in recognition of the contributions he had made to advancing scientific and cultural knowledge of the country.

When Glissant pushed back on Rem Koolhaas’ assertion that the countryside is the stomping ground of the right-wing, he too culled the example of a tree to revolutionary tradition.

“[The Latin American] countryside is the culture of Emiliano Zapata, Pancho Villa, the revolutionaries. When revolutions take place in the Americas, they go to the countryside...I think the countryside is the place where, certainly there have been regressions and ideologies, but the countryside is also the place where there are revolutions. It’s like the acoma. The acoma is a tree in the forests of the West Indies, one of the largest and most beautiful trees in the country. Long after it’s been cut, the heart of the tree is still just as moist and full of sap, as though it’s been chopped down only moments before.”⁴

A-huexo-tl

A - water

huexo - root of “willow”

tl - termination designating nounword

Ahuexotl - water willow

Ahuejote

— Zaid Arshad

⁴ Édouard Glissant & Hans Ulrich Obrist: *The Archipelago Conversations*, Isolarii, 2021

Bongani Khoza is an experimental video artist, animator, photographer, and curator with a demonstrated history of working in the eLearning industry, helping course teams develop and produce Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) for the University of the Witwatersrand, where he received both his BFA and MFA and works as a lecturer.

Khoza uses a wide range of photographic and art practices, including stop-frame animation and experimental video installations. His current focus is on using photography and video installations to re-contextualize public and private structures within the public space, capturing the occupation, usage, contestation, and physical detail of these structures. His work evokes the supplementary nature of photographic still images and text while engaging with interdependencies and segregations evolved in modern-day South African life.

Currently, he is focusing on a water project, creating a documentary in partnership with the zoology department of the University of the Witwatersrand for the completion of his PhD studies.

Dylan Clark is a filmmaker, designer, and writer. He was born in Ventura, California, and lives in New York, New York.

Ángel Xicohtencatl Espinoza is a filmmaker and writer. He lives and works in Lee, Massachusetts, and Nativitas, Tlaxcala.