THE DESERT IS A WILD RIVER

I intended to write about wild water in the desert, and I still plan to, but as I spend time near the ocean, I keep finding myself coming back to grief and ancestral memory. I'm at the southernmost tip of the Yucatán, walking distance from the shore, and every time I set foot on the sand, I can only think about how my Yoeme ancestors were brought here as slaves. How many of them suffered, how many never made it home, how many did make it home, and how many fought back and resisted slaveholders. Specifically, I think of the ones who swam across the ocean with broken ankles for even a chance at homecoming. I wholly believe that water is an activator for memory; these memories are not mine, but they are embedded in me and my psyche, in my body. They are a part of who I am, the stories that weave me together, no matter how hard colonial violence tries to wipe them away, they always resurface. As I spend time in the salty air next to our mother the ocean, I find myself homesick and yearning. I find myself mourning, and most of all I find myself curious about how this relationship can give me clues about what I need to do, and perhaps these clues might rub off on you, too.

There is a myth whose whispers permeate throughout these lands that the desert is dry. That there is no water in the desert. That the desert is lifeless, barren, rugged: a place not suitable for living beings to thrive.

But the truth is that the desert has five seasons: winter, spring, summer, fall, and monsoon season. Every year it is gifted with massive rainfall and floods that make the whole desert dance and leaves behind the smell of rain for the full year afterward. The truth is that wild rivers in the desert have suffered the consequences of colonial genocide: dams, canals, and pipelines wreak havoc on our waterways and have made it artificially dry. The truth is that people, plants, and animals have lived in harmony with wild waters for tens of thousands of years, to the extent that water is an integral piece of many of these peoples' creation stories. The truth is that the desert is a wild river.

Have you ever gone to undisturbed desert and not been overtaken with a sense of holiness among the tangled trees and cacti? Have you never felt a shiver in your bones upon hearing a coyote's howl crawling through the cold night once the heat has settled along the sand? Has the event of the Rain Being walking over the mountains during a monsoon not made you realize how infinitely tiny and unimportant you are to this place? Has the searing warmth of the sun enveloping you like a blanket not made you feel like you were home?

The desert is only hostile towards those who don't want to listen, who want to control and change it, who spit at the sand in contempt. If you listen, the desert will hold you and whisper its secrets to you – but only if you listen.

This is not an anthropological or historical account of wild water in the desert. This is a narrative, a story of sorts, stemming from anger. I grew up in the desert where many believe there is no water.

And it's not a false assumption: many riverbeds, particularly those in metropolises like Phoenix, are dry shells of what they once were. Phoenix prides itself on its canal system, stolen from Hohokam, the ancestors of O'odham. But what they leave out of this history on their museum plaques is that O'odham tried to warn settlers about the dangers of harnessing wild water via a canal system– the reason why their ancestors' society collapsed– but the civilizing apparatus inherent to the colonial project persisted. Stealing and redirecting water is crucial to this apparatus and it's crucial to the destruction and genocide of native people and lifeways. Water becomes a weapon, a bludgeon that ensures total domination in the hands of those who can harness it.

As the settler project continued to entrench itself in the Salt River Basin, the destruction of the Salt River came alongside the dispossession of the O'odham. First came the Roosevelt Dam followed by the Granite Reef Dam, both in the opening years of the 20th century. These dams captured and diverted wild river water towards irrigation and for usage by the festering blight of Phoenix; the latter dam captured one hundred percent of the Salt River's water, leaving the entire riparian system below Granite Reef completely dry.

Near one of these stretches of empty riverbed, a small enclave called Guadalupe straddles the boundary between Phoenix and Tempe. It was founded during the early 1900's by Yaquis fleeing colonial terror in Mexico. The drying Salt River at Guadalupe was a harbinger of what was fated for their ancestral river — the Rio Yaqui.

In the heart of Sonora, Mexico, people have relied on the Rio Yaqui – or *Hiak Vatwe* – for over 10,000 years prior to colonization. Now, it has been relentlessly mutilated to the point of unrecognizability in a history that mirrors the Salt River. Three major dams divert water from the

Rio Yaqui, each redirecting water towards cities and agricultural usage, leaving the river butchered, stagnant, and polluted with agricultural runoff. In turn, the Yaqui people that have lived along the river for millennia are increasingly reliant upon industrialized water infrastructure: in a place of intense economic precarity, commodified, treated water replaces a reciprocal relationship with this ancient riparian system. In a pattern that has defined the history of civilization, indigenous people are forced off the land and into an artificial dependence upon the dominant system through the denial of self-sovereign subsistence; here in the desert, it is through the control of wild rivers that subsistence is denied. Control of natural resources is a calculated effort of slow strangulation, for people and land.

If you listen, you'll hear countless stories of people coming from the water and receding back into the water for refuge, a hundreds-year long dance.

In the face of genocide and ecocide circling each other, I am reminded amid hopelessness of the defiance that has kept us here despite several attempts at extermination by both the US and Mexican states. I am reminded of the ways the land persists and dances around human development as if to laugh in the faces of those who try to control nature. I'm reminded that sabotage and resistance are joyful, too. These structures are not unbreakable; one day they will fall whether by hand or by wind – and when they do, the sound of the rushing river will be deafening.

Ⓐ F U C K HOPE

A PROJECT OF INDIGENOUS NIHILISM