

Wetland Politics: Social Belonging, Racialized Politics, and Urban Environmental Futures along the Colombian Caribbean

Silke Oldenburg

The proposed project coalesces around ethnographic research on socio-environmental justice and climate coloniality in Cartagena, a Colombian port and world heritage city. It explores the nexus between social belonging, racialized politics, and urban environmental futures in the neighborhood of Olaya Herrera which is largely inhabited by Afrodescendent population trying to make a living in between mangroves and marginalization.

“Wetland Politics” draws on approaches from political ecology and critical urban theory and is guided by decoloniality, critical race, and feminist theories. It strives to weave together, based on dense ethnography, the cultural, political, and material dimensions of how urban wetlands are perceived, conceived, and lived (Lefebvre 1974).

Wetland, in my project, refers to the Ciénaga de la Virgen, Cartagena’s biggest urban waterbody in which the mangrove ecosystem predominates, constituting a valuable refuge of fauna and flora while being an important source for the communities’ livelihoods. Hence, I argue that by introducing Wetland Politics as an analytical lens, I am able to a) carefully delineate the socio-spatial segregation of Cartagena in the long *durée*, to b) highlight the contested appropriation of the urban wetland by different actors and on different scales, and c) to demonstrate how new forms of interaction and political mobilization emerge in order to contest elitist economic projects and formulate emancipating aspirations for just urban futures.

My writing project strives to demonstrate the plural ways of knowledge creation surrounding the *manglar*. “Wetland Politics” allow to understand how urban residents deal with climate uncertainties in a rapidly changing social setting and how negotiation processes between urban planners, environmental NGOs, activists, and community members evolve. While on the one hand waterfront settlements are declared as high risk by city officials, local residents fear that big infrastructural projects for ecotourism and a highway will be initiated soon, endangering their livelihoods.

Introducing and thinking through “Wetland Politics” in Olaya Herrera aims to further the discussion of the emergence of new urban political subjectivities and social belonging in the Caribbean addressing questions of colonial continuities. The case study on Cartagena might also resonate with efforts to paying more attention to racialized politics, particularly in coastal cities, and acknowledging their structural and historical roots.

Generating both academic and artistic output, finally, this project approaches the highly complex question of “Are we protecting people or are we protecting mangroves?” I argue that the lens of “Wetland Politics” will offer nuanced understandings to this conundrum that is being discussed in Cartagena on policy-, activist, and community-levels alike.