

BEING WITH WATER



DANA FICKEL AND SASHA PARK

Being With Water was created on the unceded and ancestral territories of the Akimel O'odham and Piiipash peoples and recognizes their sovereignty, as caretakers of these lands.

Being With Water explores our utilitarian relationship to water as settlers/ non-natives. The capitalist perspective that water is an economic resource for consumption & production worsens the effects of climate change and denies bodies of water their personhood.

Personhood: The rights of human and "more than human" beings to exist and thrive without exploitation or manipulation.

Such as with the Saguaro and the Tohono O'Odham, the Whanganui River and the Māori, the Mutuhekau Shipu and the Innu First Nation - legal personhood protects the sacred and recognizes the rights of being within the natural world.

Water is the ultimate indicator of life and is the lifeblood of all living beings on Earth. Yet, water is not granted the same rights and respect as humans in our limited understanding of what is alive and what is valuable.

Is water not a living being?

Does water not move and flow as we do?

What would any of us be without water?

It is unbelievably urgent that we redefine our relationship to water, otherwise our land, ecosystems, food systems and bodies will collapse without the proper protection of water.

Indigenous people are the true guardians and caretakers of water in the Salt River watershed.

We followed the flow of the Salt River in Arizona, a drought stricken state, where water is precious to all living beings but most sacred to those that have inhabited this land for thousands of years. The Hohokam, ancestors of the Akimel O'odham, transformed the desert into a garden by understanding the unpredictable vitality of water and crafting an elaborate canal system to sustain their farming practices. Today, the Akimel O'odham (the River People) and the Xalychidom Piipaash (the Upriver People) that have built their livelihood around the Salt River, are trying to revitalize their traditional farming methods in order to assert their sovereignty.

We visited three different forms of the Salt River - the Granite Reef Dam, Tempe Town Lake and the canals flowing into a local orchard - to witness the life (or lack thereof) at each destination.



GRANITE REEF

This body of water is surrounded by so much life.

There was a stark contrast between the orange and brown hues of the desert landscape and the bright greens and yellows crowding the river. Walking through this area, we saw an endless amount of food available - duck, rabbit, mustard, fish, crawfish, mesquite beans, wild onion - yet there is still this narrative of the "barren desert."

Who made this narrative?

The Indigenous peoples of the desert have been able to produce an abundance of food and support their communities for thousands of years. They recognized the plentiful presence of life here. Why can't we? Does the desert really have nothing of value to offer beyond monetary interests?

We pave over the desert and exploit our rivers in fear of scarcity but we turn a blind eye to the overwhelming abundance of life that is right in front of us.

Does the desert really have no value, or does popularizing the notion that the desert has no life make it easier to kill?



Containment & Stability

Water in the Sonoran desert gives life to all who inhabit it. For those who have learned

how to see, it is clear the role water plays: the desert springs to life after a rain. When it rains, life in the desert dances in a celebration of what it means to be alive. The rivers through this land are life-giving like the rain. Sometimes the river floods, inundating the floodplain with water and giving thirsty cottonwoods, mesquite, and willows a needed drink.

The presence of the Salt River in this valley is what makes life possible for the ancestors of the Onk Akimel O'odham, later the Piipaash and much much later Spanish and English colonists. The Salt River Valley has been inhabited since time immemorial by the ancestral Onk Akimel O'odham who developed technologies to build desert gardens that brought the Piipaash and so many other peoples to this valley. Now, through Phoenix, The Salt River is a ghost of what it used to be. Most settlers in the Phoenix valley only know of the Salt River as a dry deep-cut channel inhabited by the people our society leaves behind.

The Salt River did not dry up on its own: the colonial mindset that characterizes

our society and government has led to the end of permanent flow of the river and the interruption of many of the natural processes for the purposes of agriculture, industry, and consumption. In order to do so, the government has violated treaty rights and dispossessed native peoples of their water. The pulses of flooding that spread across the floodplain deposits sediments from upriver that make extremely fertile soils for agriculture, which is what has enabled the growth of Phoenix into the city it is today. However, those who manage the Salt River



have a fundamental misunderstanding of what a river does and how it behaves: the river dances. It stretches its curves across the floodplain through time in the complex process of meandering via flooding, erosion, and sedimentation, which increases the fertility of the soil.

Yet, our society has decided that we should build homes and buildings over these fertile soils and are then surprised when floods destroy them. This thinking leads to channelization (the process of cutting the banks of the river into steep channels and reinforcing them with concrete or other materials) and the construction of dams. Channelization depletes our soils and wears away at the

**If I were the river, I would say,
"You talk about dignity,
But where is mine?
Where are my rights,
My freedom to roam?
I have been here, and will be here
The things you have done
Will only hasten your departure."**

At Granite Reef there was so much naturally occurring interaction with the water.
Bugs crawling underneath wet logs
ducks paddling below the surface
trees inhaling with the wind
people passing around plates of food
to their families on the shore.
There was something so genuine about seeing the innate desire we all have to be
with the water.

Tempe Town Lake, in an attempt to replicate that authentic interaction,
is a commercialized imitation of the river
in the hopes of generating an economic profit
the illusion of abundance.
This concrete body of water fits an idea of beauty that actively destroys natural
interactions through herbicides, damming and extraction.

Tempe Town Lake, despite its 'billions of dollars in economic contribution' and perfectly
manicured appearance, felt empty.
It felt like a ghost.
It didn't feel rich like Granite Reef did.

When did we become so disconnected from ourselves that monetary riches hold more
value than seeds - than water - than life?
What value does money have when there is no water?

Tempe Town Lake feels like something that was created with the purpose to be owned
to be controlled.
This enforced containment manufactures a false sense of stability and safety
that has been and will continue to be proven wrong:
as the unpredictable vitality of water.
Cannot be restrained.

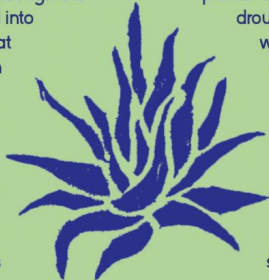


Tempe Town Lake

Food & The Orchard



We followed the waters of the Salt River to a canal that feeds a local orchard by South Mountain in Phoenix. Even as the Salt River runs dry through metro Phoenix, her being is imbued in her waters that flow through the canals in the valley and into the plants and foods that we rely on. Yet, so much of this water is used to grow monoculture cash crops like cotton and alfalfa for export into the global supply chain. These monocultures require inputs like fossil fertilizers and pesticides



that runoff into the watershed damaging the local ecosystem. The commodity price for the water sold to these farms is criminally cheap with little to no incentives for limiting water and growing native drought tolerant plants. In the context of a drought-stricken state where native peoples are deprived of water downstream, growing cash crops seems unconscionable. The waters of the Salt River provide abundance, yet we scorn her by mixing in



THANK YOU!



Special Thanks: Melissa Nelson, Myla Vicenti-Carpio, Taina Diaz-Reyes, Alex Soto, Shannon Rivers, Camila de Andrade Bianchi, Liza Stout, Zac Whaley, Ciera Parkhurst, Elora Bevacqua, John Wann-Ángeles, Bri Noonan, Maureen Kobierowski, and everybody else who made this zine possible.

Made for AIS 494: Indigenizing Food Systems with funding from Humanities Lab Amplifier Mini Grant