

Carbon hurt / hacking the imagination

Open Curriculum: Susannah Haslam in conversation with Araceli Camargo.

Araceli Camargo is a student of neuroscience, specialising in its relationship to health and place. Her ancestors are the first Peoples of Turtle Island, commonly known as colonised North America.

Araceli Camargo

Our work at Centric lab sits at various intersections between lived experience, place and health. We also look at the climate and the dysregulation of our planet, because the climate and the planet are closely related to us and our health: if the planet is sick, so are we, if we are sick, so is the planet. We work with policymakers, with people who run health organisations, and with communities who are involved in the historical work of health or environmental justice. For us health and environmental justice work are one and the same, but they are sometimes dichotomised. The lab provides communities who are practicing health and environmental justice with the tools and language to be able to bridge the gap between how people actually experience injustice, and the organisations that influence that lived experience (in policy, healthcare, environmental regulation, housing etc.) It is not that people are incapable of expressing themselves, it is that organisations often use jargon and their own specific lexicon that alienates those outside of the organisations, making it difficult to communicate with them. So, for example, when you are presented with terminologies like ‘PM 2.5’ and ‘emissions’, our job is to help translate that, and go, ‘hey, this is what that means.’ Equally, we provide tools such as a postcode search called Right To Know, where communities can identify registered environmental stressors (also known as pollution and deprivation); we believe that people have the *right to know* as much information about their physical environment as possible, and how it affects their health.

Susannah Haslam

The conversations that Dani Admiss and I have been having around climate literacy and climate justice in the arts resonate so much here with your work in environmental and health justice: there’s a commitment to language, communication and translation in your work ongoing, almost employed as a methodology, in as much as it is the matter of the work that you do, both at Centric Lab and prior to that in coworking. You’ve worked with people and places and organisations — communities and institutions — and by bringing them together it’s always been about finding modes of communication and translation, almost as thresholds to achieve what perhaps alone, they could not. I think the vitality of the work you do is in this thresholding or crossing-over. From my perspective in education, this meeting point is so important, it’s where stuff happens. And it’s the crossover, the threshold, where people from different contexts — organisations, institutions, communities — are being brought together under the aegis of asking what neuroscience can do in and for those different contexts, in your work.

What does it mean then to be a science communicator? How do the capacities of love, dialogue, confidence, and coherence help to locate your work? What is the relationship between science and Sacredness? What is Carbon?

Araceli Camargo

Let’s address this in three steps. I want to go back to language, then to epistemology, and then the question of Carbon.

Language has been central to my work for a very long time. First it was a question of how language affects us and how it ties to rhythm. My first thesis looked at the work of Shakespeare and considered why and how listening to any verse, or any rhythm, in the iambic pentameter affects us so much; whether it is related to the correlation between that rhythm and our heartbeat; and the cultures for which the iambic pentameter is important. This led me to look at the way the Djembe drum is used spiritually in ceremonies to connect us with our Creators. At this point my obsession with the idea that language shapes our understanding of the world started: both word construction and etymology have the capacity to change the way we think and even how we think. On a macro level, from the perspective of language structures, what we call English or Spanish etc., those languages co-evolved with the experiences of people, creating a constant feedback loop between

society and language creations. For instance, we understand that English became the language of the land that used to belong to my Peoples, and I found that very interesting: why did English prevail when it could have been Spanish or French or Dutch? It was because English already had a well-established transactional lexicon and mindset, specifically legal structures that were perfect for capital gain (land ownership, contracts, finance frameworks etc.). This created the opportunity for English to become the default language as the colonisers looked to create the infrastructure for violent land acquisition and ownership. In tandem, the coloniser culture continued to feed the evolution of the English language. Conversely as this society did not prioritise concepts such as togetherness, there are very few words and linguistic opportunities for expressing Kinship. Therefore, English doesn't do very well when you're trying to frame things in terms of Sacredness, Kinship, or in terms of spiritual epistemology.

As a language, it is also proficient at removing people from their ecologies. For example, you have *the tree*, or *a tree*. In many non-western contexts, language develops alongside experience and allocentric or ecological perspectives. So you wouldn't say *a tree*, you would articulate *tree* in relationship to the wider landscape or ecosystem. And that's where the root of the word or naming would come from. An example is the Sacred mountain Mauna Kea, whose naming reflects their role in the creations of the Peoples of Hawai'i. It is not just *the mountain* or, *a mountain*. Another example is the Inuit languages. There is such a wide variety of terms for snow and this is due to observations and encounters of snow in relation to the self or community. With this, a term is also bound up with instruction: *snow comes with this specific type of weather forecast*, or temporal evolution. *Is it closer to spring or closer to winter?* With this example, language is steeped in relationship to the environment, with our planet. This makes sense, because we need this information to pass on to other generations, and for survival.

This brings us onto epistemology and imagination: language can liberate or incarcerate and this is exemplified by, what I would say is a very unintelligent, current debate about sex and gender, where we are incarcerated by language that cannot express itself. English only gives us a binary vocabulary to describe a complex interconnected ecosystem in activity — the body. This binary vocabulary excludes the opportunity to see and know the body in its full biological splendour, socially, or in terms of spirituality. In other non-western languages this is not the case as there exists a lot of flexibility in the expression of the body or the selves beyond the binary of female and male. I find this phenomena very interesting, and wonder how it applies to how we conceptualise freedom, abolition is steeped in the limitations of the language we are using, and the ways that we define this language.

Moving to how these language roots were created, we have to look at feudalism, which was established around 4 AD (this is a long time to be living within this imagination). *The other* had to be assigned because if you say, 'well i'm going to own land, and you're going to work the land in exchange for money', you have to give an explanation as to why you get to own the land and not work it. But surely everybody gets to own it? Well no, because there's a limited amount of land.

And here we have that first disconnect: the first root of knowledge in the way that we understand the planet's material limitation. Yes, it's limited if you want to own it, but it's not limited if you are in relationship with Nature. There is only a certain amount of acreage, so this is why some of us will own, some of us will do, or be, the labour. As this inequity grows, society has to provide meaning, it has to keep people on side, and a great way to do this is layering in religion, so we start to hear, 'well, actually, I'm anointed by God, I'm closer to God, and we're going to have to make God look very much like those who are allowed to own land', which in the case of the west, it is a white male. And so you see how these things begin to evolve.

There have been centuries-long practice, rooting us, in creating these epistemologies that refuse to recognise who is at the root of inequity. So, in the case of feudalism, it's not us, the ruling class who is to blame for your lack of food, proper shelter, or lack of dignity, blame God, and yourself. 'You're the sinner, that's why you don't have anything. Go pray, be pious. It has nothing to do with me, the oppressor, as to why you are experiencing this oppression.' Supremacy structures began to create fictional *enemies* for the problems we were experiencing, it created *the other*; we hear it today, it is *migrants* who take your jobs, it is *Indigenous Peoples* stopping progress, or it is *Transgender Peoples* who are destroying a way of life.

And now the same is being done to Carbon. Carbon on their own are being blamed for climate change, rather than capitalism, which is the actual root cause. Carbon is actually an essential element to planetary life, and western epistemology has turned it into *the other* and into *the enemy*. And we have to be so careful with that, because they are not the enemy. More importantly, by only focussing on Carbon in terms of measurement, we take away the autonomy of Carbon; we take away its life-givingness. And I find the stigmatisation of Carbon very interesting. We are here because of Carbon. They are essential.

The idea of *enemy* or *othering* causes a distraction. Analogous to the proxy of a god in relation to the oppressor/oppressed and land/labour, we are actively covering up the realities of Carbon. So by recognising Carbon in terms of measurement we are misunderstanding their utility, and role within our planetary ecosystems, and it is therefore easy to demonise them and say, 'we have got to stop Carbon emissions, that's it', as this is a reductionist perspective. It ignores the direct relationship that capitalism and industry has to the contamination of air from emissions, and the consequential deregulated function of Carbon. Carbon can no longer exist in their full beingness because industrial emissions have changed the role of Carbon and how they can function.

And that is what we need to focus on instead, and not get distracted by measurement. We need to ask, what is changing the essence of Carbon? How is Carbon's beingness being changed? And how is our relationship to Carbon being changed or, more importantly, disconnected? I don't think that people shouting *Carbon, Carbon, Carbon* understand that Carbon is an essential element to life on this planet. Again I find this very interesting. I'm like, 'oh, right, you're up to your usual tricks.' And this is why language is so important, and that we understand these epistemologies, and these imaginations, where they come from and why we continue to iterate within them.

Susannah Haslam

What you have done is demonstrated this long history of individualising or dis-locating the fault line, almost making-crisis-of, as a way to distract from the mattering, the beingness, the life of Carbon, and that is huge. There's a huge amount that you've drawn together from language and epistemology, to the mattering of Carbon. I think that *matter* is a really interesting way to talk about something like Carbon, which for me is a very abstract thing. And so *mattering* is this dual articulation of something that materially exists and takes shape, but also accounts for the idea and the reason for the thing. I think it also designates the politics of it too.

In the light of this, what is solidarity?

Araceli Camargo

Solidarity is a good word to use in terms of our understanding of and relationship with Carbon. We have to be in solidarity with them, because they're also in pain. Like I said, their beingness, their essence has been changed. We need to find languages for solidarity, lexicons in commonality, and take the time to learn how we each decipher and code phenomena differently. While we may have language in common, there exists codes within language that give different meanings and create different linguistic cultures. An example here is in my use of the word abolition previously; abolition may seem so far removed from Carbon, climate crisis, or health etc., but it is not. It is something that we are all working towards. Here we are talking about working towards abolishing these systems that have oppressed us for so long, in solidarity.

Another example is how the prison population is disproportionately acutely affected by the climate crisis. There were protests at a jail on Rikers Island where, in the summertime, the energy grid is ineffective and can not meet the demand for air conditioning. So, there are sacrifice zones, and prisons are very much one of those zones. If the whole city can not be powered sufficiently, there are certain places — in New York, though I'm sure it happens elsewhere — where the grid does not function. And there were protests from prisoners because they were sweltering inside of their cells.

To an ecologist, or an environmentalist, this matter may seem disconnected; a protest because prisoners can not sleep, eat, or digest owing to the heat being so oppressive inside their cells feels like a social, economic, or political issue. But if we consider what those commonalities might be, between the concerns

of environmentalists and those incarcerated, then we might arrive at a form of solidarity. To understand one another, we have to recognise how people are expressing themselves, ask what their lived experience is.

A root cause here seems to be this mythological centering of expertise around certain things like the climate. At Centric Lab we have recorded short vignettes about the climate, talking to people who experience disabilities, talking to the Trans community, and talking to the multi-ethnic working class, asking what the climate crisis means and looks like on a daily basis. One of the stories that really stuck with me was from a Trans person who works as a bartender: they were talking about how longer winters, from the perspective of the temperature, are really affecting their safety travelling home from work at night, in considering whether they should take a cab home or wait in the cold longer for public transport. I found this so incredibly important. They just expressed themselves in such a scientific and spiritual way. If someone were to ask you just how the climate crisis affects you, and you respond by saying that you don't experience floods or hurricanes, you're missing out on the details, or layers, that actually do affect you everyday.

Our job at Centric is to take lived experience about personal safety at night, public transport, and climate change and translate it into urban policy that supports health — this is how we show solidarity. Solidarity is surely about knowing acutely what your role is in the supply chain of justice. We often become overwhelmed by the information we are given about the climate; we see all these fires across the media and our ego wants to kick in asking, 'how am I going to help fight these fires?' But you don't, and can't. The bee doesn't ask 'how am I going to help the salmon move upstream?', the bee just does their job to their full capacity, which eventually creates a ripple effect that helps the salmon, but they are not worried specifically about how they will move from the beehive onto the waters of the Atlantic Ocean.

And in terms of true solidarity, I think it is about doing what we can when the baton is passed to us. For me, that's also the difference between solidarity and allyship; that there's an understanding of being part of a supply chain in the practice of justice, versus a *kind* gesture. When I think about this personally, whether I am an ally to, or in solidarity with, the Trans community when I'm not Trans, but a cisgendered woman, I think we can return to imagination. As a child I was told I wasn't going through puberty fast enough, that my body was too muscular and I didn't have any curves. This language, this epistemology, this framing and policing of my body is the same limited language use, same epistemology, same framing and policing — imagination — of some Trans bodies. I question my allyship or solidarity and it goes back to understanding the way that oppression and marginalisation, specifically racism and transphobia, moves in all of us. If we can recognise how they each move in us, then we can recognise how it moves in another person and then we're moving into solidarity, responsibility, and roles in the supply chain.

Susannah Haslam

Is this about placing emphasis on the different layers of action, as forms of understanding and forms of knowing? You press on this idea of acuteness and *knowing acutely*. I wonder what knowing acutely is, when we think about being Carbon literate, and, as we keep coming back to language as a crux point as it takes the shape of a systemic oppressor, I'd be curious to think about how, and if, it can be disentangled from the way that we talk about institutions, for example, so I wanted to ask you: what is language?

Araceli Camargo

There are so many layers to it: rhythmic, cellular, verbal, bodily. And these modes don't just occur between people, but trees, and non-human animals too. I think that one way to describe it is that it's a way to pass on information, to communicate. But then, what is information? If it is still a question of liberation and incarceration, then how do we liberate? One of the things that Indigenous peoples do is we try to find ways to hack into the English language. So, for example, pluralising knowledge allows us to understand actively that it's not just human knowledges that are important, but also the knowledges of Trees, and the knowledges of Water, and the knowledges of Air. And that already starts to break things apart from the institutions of language that we are immediately familiar with. One of the first things that colonisers did was take language away through the enforcement of another language. Taking away one of the throughlines of community, the modality of relationships to Nature, and to one another makes it difficult for a community to continue to forge liberation.

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Another way to think about language then is to think about it in terms of liberation. At Centric Lab, we did a workshop on the difference between cleaner air and clean air: we must stop asking for cleaner air, instead we must ask for clean air. They are two very different things, legally and conceptually. Clean air includes in it the demand to stop and prevent air contamination, but cleaner air demands that air is less contaminated, which doesn't solve the problem. Demanding cleaner air is too broad. Is it asking for three less cars on the road? This would technically lead to cleaner air, but would make no difference to my health. When you say clean air, you demand accuracy and specificity. And this is how we are thinking about language as a tool for liberation.

We are so used to the idea of knowledge supremacy and subsequent universality as modes of organising the world, but this is not a reality, we each have very different realities. Often we are given realities to live by, to follow: *poverty is your fault, you're a sinner, you're not very smart, or you're lazy* — myriad reasons other than the systemic and insidious oppression of people. If you look at Nature, poverty doesn't exist, it is created, it must be worked at, through language, through getting people to understand poverty. Poverty is often conceptualised as an inevitability, 'it's just the way life is organised.' I find it really interesting how language is also used to unlock our imaginations, to neurologically create different connections in our brains, we can also conceptualise these things in many different ways!

Susannah Haslam

It's really helpful to think of language as both communication, as function, and liberation, as commonality, i.e., a common language; there are elements of representation in both of those definitions. And to refer back to what you have just mentioned in language, this isn't just about being able to claim allyship to an encounter, but it is also about seeking out other ways and forms of understanding and acute knowing. For example, putting something highly functional to work back on itself, for example, love in arts work, how radical can love be? Or how radical can curricula be outside of schools and universities, what can they do? You used the word hacking back into the English language, but there's also the need to disregard its function as we know it, to almost reclaim the idea of the function of language, to reimagine it.

This reminds me of how Jack Halberstam talks about the work of Gordon Matta-Clark; in Halberstam's work on unbuilding gender, he uses Matta-Clark's site-specific cuts into buildings, to imagine this unbuilding, he also refers to Karen Barad's cutting together-apart, as a means of differentiating entangled forms, or in our case, systems without fully separating them. By demolishing-into buildings or hacking into language, the demolition or hack must always already preserve, in some form, the thing that is being demolished or hacked, because it can not be totally separated; so in the same way that capital has already transformed Carbon, language transforms how and what we know. Language changes the shape of how we know.

Araceli Camargo

An interesting observation is that the English language is the only language that capitalises *I* through a sentence, which clearly marks the importance of the self within the culture. In turn, this should not surprise us that culturally we individualise crisis without looking at the systemic. So much of the western psychology tells us that most people find it very difficult to think systemically, and this is not true, it is a western view. When you are working with land, with Nature, you are already thinking and living systemically. Another aspect is the evolution of the subject/object pronoun 'it'; 'it' is throwaway, 'it' is inanimate, 'it' doesn't have life, but can be owned. This is something that is often addressed in the work of Robin W. Kimmerer who is a member of the Citizen Potawatomi Nation. That we allow elements of Nature, a tree, to be called 'it', a bear to be called 'it', is by design and designates another priority, power through degrading and oppression. Following Kimmerer, at the lab we no longer refer to Nature, or any element of Nature, as 'it', we say tree, or they, to designate the plurality of an ecosystem. Tree is plurality. Our bodies are plurality. Nature is also always capitalised. This is one way we hack.

It is so important to learn about the imaginations, lexicons, languages, and thinking different from your own. It's important to zap the simulation; move beyond western epistemology, beyond diversity. To refer again to gender, to non-binary and Trans identities that contest the very rooted and well-organised system of female and male gender binaries that are so important to capitalism, where, according to the work of Katerina Deliovsky, the female is the seed carrier of capitalism, or you're a labourer sustaining capital, or

an heir to capital. When you state that you are neither female nor male, not biologically, spiritually, or culturally, you zap the system, creating a hole, which angers capitalism. To return to language, we can also look to Patois or Hip Hop, as elements of Black culture that actively subvert the system of English language. They give people another set of tools for another imagination, another way to imagine the world, which is dangerous to the system of western epistemology. How do you break out of the matrix, what else is there, and how do we honour that?

To the question of love: love is about showing solidarity and listening, it's about showing up, giving without expecting anything in return. You can not have solidarity without love. While we don't have a big banner that says 'love' on it, it is definitely one of our roots at Centric, it anchors us. We have got to love to be curious to extend ourselves. To summarise: it is important to hack into the English language, to understand and question why this language is ordered the way it is, grammatically, in terms of syntax and words, and how these frame the way that we see.

Susannah Haslam

The last question is broadly around what art does or does not do, or what it can or can not do; the SDNP project considers what just transition for arts work and arts workers might look like, especially considering the relationship between climate justice and labour. Through your address of Carbon and solidarity, you have articulated some really insightful propositions about your work focused on, and through, language, and speaking from a position of neuroscience, environmental and health justice there are many crossovers with concerns from the perspective of art and education. But how useful is this frame of art for a project on climate justice? What if the ground is not art? What if the endpoint is not art? In your capacity as a science communicator, what can art do for these questions on climate justice?

Araceli Camargo

I got to beat that same drum, what do we mean by art? If we're talking about the art that is organised in a gallery for the purposes of some sort of exchange, whether it's capital, economic, social or cultural, then it's likely incredibly intensive and destructive to our planet, because we're talking about materiality, transport, it's very costly.

But if we look at art in other ways, art is another type of language. It is also an incredible tool for hacking the imagination. An example of that is, Gospel music: Indigenous Peoples that were kidnapped from Africa and brought over to the Americas, created art forms such as Gospel, where ways to survive were encoded into the music, to spiritually and psychologically deal with the traumas of slavery. Another example is Capoeira. Capoeira also gave cultural instruction. It cultivated ritual and language and roots of Indigeneity, almost like a genetic code. Song and dance are also not resource-intensive and can be done without harming planetary habitats; these two art forms have the capacity to create mental hacks, move justice forward, liberate and heal. We can also look to food; our family members live through food which is also part of my own liberation, because I connect to my roots directly, cellularly, in knowing how to eat, and how to heal from food. In my culture, as with many, food is medicine, it is also an art form that can heal. It is a language, it transports knowledge.

So the answer to this question is a lot to do with where and what; Damien Hirst, or liberation through art. Art gives us permission to think metaphorically, and it is such an important cognitive tool. Thinking metaphorically is another form of hacking. We just have to consider which art forms are in mutualistic symbiosis with mother Nature, with our planet. And which continue to be a form of liberation or healing? Finally, how do we find non-western examples of art that conserve our spiritual genetics? I think this is incredibly important.

Dani Admiss

You touched on this tension of the universality of language, which resonates with a call for planetary action or cohesion against climate breakdown. There is also something undermining about the idea of universality in climate concerns. Throughout your discussion you spoke a lot about plurally-vocal knowledges and the need for them. I wondered if and how you encounter this in your work? I think at the heart of a lot of what we're talking about is forms of reckoning with power. So, how does your work fit towards that larger systems change?

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Araceli Camargo

At Centric we are addressing this by platforming knowledges and bringing forward policy through these platforms. We also address this through education, for example we recently workshopped ideas on how to read emissions data and how emissions relate to planetary dysregulation. You can't have democracy, or informed consent, without having democratic or equitable access to information — which is seldom talked about. This is what I mean when I say knowledge supremacy; everything moves from the top downwards, this is particularly prevalent in relation to science.

Non-scientific communities are very capable of thinking scientifically. For example, you have a community telling you that children are experiencing nosebleeds that they weren't experiencing two months ago. Coincidentally two months ago a landfill site opened behind their homes. They now have headaches, trouble sleeping, the smell from landfill is causing psychological distress and impacting the mental health of the community. Public health authorities might then come along and conclude that their data metrics are below the PM 2.5 reading, which is below the World Health Organisation (WHO) cap. So nosebleeds and overall poor health have nothing to do with the landfill site.

As these symptoms are at pre-diagnosis stage, because you can't diagnose a nosebleed, these symptoms can not be tied to a condition until much later on, so you are not technically sick: 'we have checked, you don't have diabetes, you don't have a cardiovascular condition, you have not had a heart or asthma attack, you are not technically sick.'

If the public health authority is telling you that you are not sick, we want to work to redefine what health means at Centric. Health is not the absence of disease. Let's also define what is meant by poor health: if the authority is providing a metric for air pollution, that same metric is not a reading for health. This is why language and interdisciplinary epistemologies are important. In broadening our own lexicon we are able to better communicate between communities and authorities; *this* is how communities are expressing what air pollution is, and experiencing its effects directly. And this is not always of interest in scientific communities, as the phenomenological experience can not be studied, so we have the responsibility to understand this, turn it into science, and into policy.

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