Christian Bendayán: Queering the Archive from Iquitos, Peru

Sé que así fue, yo estuve allí.
(I know that’s how it was, I was there.)
—Christian Bendayán

The Amazon region has been depicted in a range of print materials, including myriad travelogues, “landscape” paintings, maps, and photographs by explorers, scientists, anthropologists, and novelists, since the sixteenth century. An imagined place as much as a physical one, it is only relatively recently that the Amazon has become a perspective on the world, not just an object of voyeuristic curiosity or an expanse of exploitative potential for the desires of outsiders. One of the first people to write about the Amazon was Gaspar de Carvajal (1500–1584), an early sixteenth-century missionary from Spain, who claims to have seen las indígenas guerreras, based on his knowledge of the ancient Greek myth of women warriors that circulated in Europe at the time.¹ Two centuries

¹ Gaspar de Carvajal, Relación del Nuevo Descubrimiento del Río Grande de Las Amazonas (1541–1542) (Quito: Gobierno del Ecuador, Comisión Nacional Permanente de Conmemoraciones Cívicas, 1992). This extensive report includes Gaspar de Carvajal’s notes and selections from stories told to him by Francisco de Orellana. It contains valuable ethnographic information as well as the names of the copious natural resources of the region, “la tierra es muy alegre y vistosa y muy abundosa de todas comidas y frutas” [the land
later, José Celestino Mutis and a team of accompanying scientists and artists drew, painted, classified, and collected countless plants during the Royal Botanical Expedition to New Granada (Expedición Botánica al Virreinato de Nueva Granada), which took place between 1783 and 1816 during the height of the European Enlightenment. At the turn of the twentieth century, Julio C. Arana, a rubber baron from Lima, established his brief empire by transforming Iquitos from a small community into a full-blown city, retold in part in Werner Herzog’s 1982 film Fitzcarraldo. All of these (male) travelers have directly impacted the construction of a national and global written and visual archive on “the Amazon,” because their stories make up the first layers of a written and visual palimpsest upon which subsequent iterations of the Amazon have been inscribed.

Today, several artists in Iquitos have begun to assemble a counter-archive to the naturalized heteronormative frame into which outside explorers have described and visualized the Amazon. These new vantage points present part of the Amazon from the inside and assert that local inhabitants were and are historical agents. The artists’ embodied experiences make them just as reliable witnesses to reality as outsiders. In what follows, I focus on one of these artists, Christian Bendayán, who presents his city — Iquitos — and region as a moving and fluid entity, not a fossilized object of study. In his visual corpus, Bendayán (b. 1973) contributes to a queering of the archive of Peru, particularly, that of the Putumayo region. He incorporates gender nonconforming figures, notably in his early paintings, confronting viewers with subversive aspects to gender and sexual identity relative to the cultural norms of Peru. In some of his more recent paintings, from 2011 on, he makes visible the symbolic violence of the archive produced during the Royal Botanical

is very beautiful and happy and very abundant with all kinds of food and fruit],” but the people “nos daba mucha guerra [gave us much war]” (38).

2. See José Celestino Mutis and Guillermo Hernández de Alba Lesmes, Diario de observaciones de José Celestino Mutis, 1760–1790 (Bogota: Instituto Colombiano de Cultura Hispánica, 1957).

3. Other artists of this generation include Brus Rubio, Elena Varela, Rember Yahuarcani, and LU.CU.MA. (Luis Cuevas Manchego).

4. See Ana Pizarro’s Amazonía: El río tiene voces (Havana: Fondo Editorial Casa de las Américas, 2011), in which she interprets the Amazon as an occupied imaginary space as much as a territorial one.
Expedition.\(^5\) In his series on the botanical expedition, *Flora Amazónica*, he reproduces scientific paintings made in the eighteenth century with figures from some of his own paintings, drawing attention to the intimate connection between human and other forms of life, to the subjective nature of science and to the potential of altering historically embedded narratives to reflect aberrant desires from those that have been documented. Bendayán directly critiques extractive industries and their associated violence in his 2014 exhibit *La buena tierra y el señorío de las Amazonas* (The good land and lordship of the Amazons), a title that he appropriates parodically from Gaspar de Carvajal’s 1542 account of the expedition in which Francisco de Orellana “discovered” the Amazon River, *Relación del nuevo descubrimiento del famosa río Grande de las Amazonas*. I draw on one painting in particular from this exhibit, titled *El Encuentro del Amazonas*, which revises an early twentieth-century mural of the same title. Bendayán’s version presents a chaotic, excessive scene, which escapes archival knowledge and fixity, contesting the West’s desire to classify species and resources in the region as part of a world-ordering project fueled by capitalist expansion.

Before presenting Bendayán’s art, I discuss queer and archive in the context of his work. I define the queer in Bendayán’s approach as having less to do with sexual orientation or gender identity, but rather with presenting a countercapitalist approach to materiality. In other words, while the rubber barons considered materials, including human bodies, as labor, Bendayán displaces an exploitative capitalist logic in favor of an Iquitos determined by sexual desire, at least in part, for the sake of sexual desire and not in the name of (re)production. Bendayán does not follow the dictates of any artistic canon, and instead challenges conventions of “good taste” or “refined sensibility,” introducing popular aesthetic values. Likewise, he neither tames nor domesticates sexual desire but draws attention to its hypercolor excesses alongside its dark recesses. The temporality that he creates in his representation of the Amazon challenges linear history by constructing an unstable archive that combines old, new, real, and imagined in surprising ways, making visible

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corporeal desires and physical spaces that are typically hidden from outsiders’ views, but which are an essential component of Iquitos’s vibrant popular culture.

ON THE POSSIBILITIES OF QUEER

Let me begin by defining and situating the word *queer* in the context of the artist’s work. Literary and cultural scholar Brad Epps’s article, “Retos, riesgos, pautas y promesas de la teoría queer,” traces the pitfalls and possibilities of invoking the word queer, and the concept of queer theory in a Latin American context and, more broadly, in a Spanish-speaking context. Epps incisively names the intellectual and political risks involved in displacing the word queer from the sociolinguistic context from which it emerged. The crux of his argument is that linguistic legacies matter, and we cannot simply take them for granted. To do so would be to pretend that “queer” travels uniformly across languages, geopolitical loci, and histories. In his analysis, he traces the term queer, explaining its origins in English and its multiple applications. Queer is both negatively and positively coded, and oftentimes both, because it contains a spectrum of meanings, from its early use as a relatively neutral term for “out of the ordinary” or “eccentric” to its pejorative operation as an interpelation of those who “deviate” from heterosexual norms relative to mainstream perspectives and practices. It has caused real and symbolic violence to many.

In a twenty-first-century frame, “queer” has gained political traction in and beyond English and is often used as a catchall for the mobilization of progressive politics. As Epps cautions, “‘queer’ is a word that, like any term elevated to the level of a political slogan that is reiterated and even applied ritually, becomes normalized, institutionalized, and converted into an identity marker or even a brand.” The drawback to the application of queer once it becomes a brand, is that it slips into the meaningless or the banal, thereby losing its critical purchase. With Epps’s caveats in mind, in the context of Bendayán, I use the term *queer* to refer to a contemporary hermeneutic that goes against the historical

7. Ibid., 899.
8. Ibid. (author’s translation).
grain of capitalist reproduction and means more than a reference to sexual preference alone or just to a performance of a nonheteronormative identity. In some of his paintings, such as *Cuando va cayendo el sol* and *Amazonas*, Bendayán paints gender nonconforming figures that visibly disrupt normative gender or sexual roles and present subjectivity as an ongoing transformation, not a fixed location. I also focus on the work his art performs beyond the layer of literal visual representation — at the theoretical level — to think about what a queer archival practice in the Iquitos region looks like. In other words, instead of thinking about what Bendayán’s art represents, I use the queering verb that Amy Kaminsky proposes to argue that his art *encuira*, “pulls back the layer of heteronormativity,” from a given situation.9 This verb is an active tool through which we can destabilize and denaturalize archival images and our practices of interpreting them.

There is arguably an opacity to the term “queer” to those who do not identify as such; a secret unspoken and accessed only by those who embody the political exclusions that a queer orientation entails. As the editors of two recent special issues of *Radical History Review* about queer archives argue, “the queer and the archival offer conceptual illumination to each other” because of their shared evasive and their dynamic qualities.10 Despite what Bendayán’s art makes visible, there is an unknown factor and impenetrability to his art that remains intact at the end of the viewing experience for those uninitiated into the sensorial experience of being in Iquitos. For example, his enigmatic sirens — depicted in the painting “Cuando el río baja” — emerge from rivers and trees in their flashy fuchsia as half-human, half-animal gender ambiguous forms. They are otherworldly, as if flung onto the canvas from myths or dreams. In this sense, rather than make the Amazon transparently legible to the outside, Bendayán arguably turns the tables to make outsiders feel uncomfortable with their own assumptions and perceptions of difference. Looking at some of Bendayán’s images is like walking into a night

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10. Daniel Marshall, Kevin P. Murphy, and Zeb Tortorici, eds., “Queering Archives: Historical Unravelings,” in *Radical History Review* 120 (Fall 2014): 1–11. This rich introduction provides numerous inroads into the creation and practice of approaching a queer archive.
Oil on cement wall. Collection of the Museo Iquitos.
CENTER
Christian Bendayán.
_Cuando baja el río, 2007._
Oil on canvas, 180 x 180 cm.
Private collection.

SIDES
_Cuando baja el río, details._
**RIGHT**
Christian Bendayán. 
*Cuando va cayendo el sol*, 2000. 
Oil on canvas, 170 × 130 cm. 
Private collection.

**LEFT** Details.
LEFT TO RIGHT

Christian Bendayán.
*Ficus elástica (caucho) & Huitoto ahorcado*,
from the series *Flora Amazónica*, 2013.
Oil on paper, 65 × 50 cm.
Collection of the Museo de Minerales Andrés Castillo.

Christian Bendayán.
*Stereum sp. & Muchacho cutipado*,
from the series *Flora Amazónica*, 2013.
Oil on paper, 65 × 50 cm.
Collection of the Museo de Minerales Andrés Castillo.

Christian Bendayán.
*Etlingera elatior & Pachuca apasionada*,
from the series *Flora Amazónica*, 2013.
Oil on paper, 65 × 50 cm.
Collection of the Museo de Minerales Andrés Castillo.

Oil on canvas, 120 × 150 cm. Collection of Micromuseo.

Oil on canvas, 170 × 220 cm. Collection of Héctor Montori.
club at 2 a.m., turning off the music, and flipping on fluorescent lights: he presents a scene, in all of its tawdry glory, that demands to be witnessed as much as external accounts of the region. He shines equal light on gaps in the archive and other places to look for history beside institutional spaces and their associated documents.

To be clear, there are documents in the extant archive that point to the existence of homoerotic desires in the region, but which serve more as a contemporary register of Europe’s own perversity displaced onto the Amazon. Perhaps the most homoerotic history connected to the region is that associated with the rubber era and a famous outsider, Roger Casement (1864–1916). Casement wrote two pivotal reports; one on the physical and symbolic violence committed against the Congolese in the then-called Congo Free State and the other on the similarly abhorrent conditions inflicted on Indigenous people in Peru and Brazil during each region’s overlapping rubber booms. In 1904, the “Casement Report” was published by the British parliament, attesting to the brutal conditions in the Congo Free State under King Leopold of Belgium’s private ownership. In 1908, Casement was sent to Brazil and to the Putumayo region along the Peru/Colombia border to explore rumors that had been circulating in Europe and Peru about excessive physical labor and abuses there. He found the conditions inhumane, as described. The results of his investigations were included with those of other investigators and published in 1912 as *The Putumayo, the Devil’s Paradise; Travels in the Peruvian Amazon Region and an Account of the Atrocities Committed upon the Indians Therein*, known as the “Putumayo Report.” These reports slowly led to the end of the reign of La Casa Arana—rubber baron Julio C. Arana’s company—in the Amazon and to King Leopold ceding control of the Congo Free State to parliamentary control in 1908. However, perhaps what Casement is most notorious for are the *Black Diaries*, which were “unearthed” and circulated during his trial for treason against the British Crown years later. While the jury is still out a hundred years after Casement’s death in 1916 as to whether the diaries were fabricated in order to undermine calls for clemency during his trial, the *Black Diaries* contain what are presumed to be Casement’s account of his homosexual desires and exploits, both in the Congo and in the Putumayo region. It is an interesting complexity that this defender of Indigenous people in the Putumayo region and of African slaves in the Congo was hanged for treason and vilified for his sexuality. Likewise,
it is also interesting that these diaries, whether fabricated or real, have always occupied a precarious place in the archive, as is evinced even by their name.\textsuperscript{11} I bring up Casement to demonstrate that in some sense even “perversity” in the Putumayo region has also been told circuitously, via a European lens.

This brings us to our second term: \textit{archive}. Visual art, as opposed to written text, offers a point of view but not a linear narrative. Because of the openness to interpretation of the pictorial medium, Bendayán’s paintings present a record of embodied behaviors that have been left undocumented. Jacques Derrida famously coined the term “archive fever” to describe the condition that undermines the archive and is at the same time the condition of its possibility: the potentiality of its own undoing and of repetition. For Derrida, the archive exists in direct relationship to the future, because we can only know it, or see in it, from a time that is not yet here. As he says, “The archive: if we want to know what that will have meant, we will only know in times to come.”\textsuperscript{12} In the “time to come,” that is, in the present day relative to the past, Bendayán’s work deconstructs the archive so that viewers can see what was once invisible but always-already in there: the desires not of those who arrived, but those who were “there” and more importantly are there and will be there in the future. Bendayán confronts the archive of Iquitos from Iquitos, letting viewers peek into scenes that bring alternative queer stories and desires to the fore of regional, national, and global imaginary.

Moving beyond Derrida, Ann Cvetkovich, following her 2003 field-changing book \textit{An Archive of Feelings} that traced the relationship between trauma, the body, and affect, has recently been inquiring into what type of archive would constitute a queer one—a traditional one with paper documents or records, or one that uses “ephemera to challenge what we mean by archive.”\textsuperscript{13} Moreover, she asks, does a queer “we” want a “separate but equal” archive, or an assimilation into an archive that already exists, or something entirely different that lies “outside a

\textsuperscript{11} See Jeffrey Dudgeon, \textit{Roger Casement: The Black Diaries—With a Study of His Background, Sexuality, and Irish Political Life} (Belfast: Belfast Press, 2002).


bounded spatial enclave”? Bendayán’s art definitively unbounds the spatial confines of place by turning to streets, nightclubs, and shamanistic traditions to render Iquitos visible. While a painting can obviously be reproduced, the affective experience it has on a viewer is an intimate and irreproducible one. Paintings and pictorial images do not so much convey meaning as elicit affect in viewers. This provocation they perform connects to the idea of desire for desire’s sake. A given painting of Bendayán’s does not necessarily retell a specific history, but fundamentally questions the existence of linear narration as the privileged mode of representing history, foregrounding affective desire as the basis for his historical renderings rather than knowledge (re)production.

Cvetkovich has also made the case about the “archival turn” that it “can be understood as cultural studies’ theoretical reframing of what historians call the archive,” but she asserts, “through that process, cultural studies has also come to new archival practices.” In Bendayán’s work, we see such new archival practices made visible on the canvas as he collects stories from myth and dreams, from the streets and cantinas. In sum, the role that Bendáyan’s art performs is twofold in its relationship to the archive: it serves as a placeholder for history and memories and it stands to reinforce stories that are left out, behind the scenes.

Bendáyan reveals just enough to make us question the intentions of a scene but not enough to let us answer the same. His paintings, therefore, invoke wonderment itself as what is compellingly queer: the temptation to look, coupled with the trepidation of looking. But just as those desires might come into articulated language, Bendayán transforms them via the insertion of another image. His moving archive keeps us guessing, affecting us with the wonder of the secret that we will not—we cannot—know, because it resists representation: pure desire in its chaotic and undomesticated form. Bendayán’s work, therefore, does not just challenge an established archive, but also stimulates us to think about how to archive. Because studies on queer literature and art in the central Andean countries (Perú, Ecuador, and Bolivia) are still relatively nascent, Bendayán’s work serves as an opening to new forms of telling histories.

14. Ibid.
from multiple imagined communities of Peru, Iquitos, and the Putumayo region.

**THE ARTIST, IQUITOS, AND THE WORK**

Bendayán was born in Iquitos in 1973 and is a primarily self-taught painter, writer, and art curator who has formally shown his art—particularly paintings that take as their subject matter the contemporary Amazon region—since the early 2000s. He has exhibited in Lima, Iquitos, Buenos Aires, Miami, and Paris, among other cities, and has more recently curated multiple exhibits on artists from the Iquitos region. Iquitos is the fifth-largest city in Peru, inhabited by over 400,000 people and named after the Iquitos people, an Indigenous group that lived in this region prior to the arrival of the Spanish missions of the eighteenth century. Iquitos was a small town, barely established until well into the late 1800s and early 1900s when great wealth, fueled by the rubber boom, flooded the emerging city with throngs of immigrants from North America, Europe, and Peru. Today, the center of Iquitos is populated with buildings from this more prosperous era that are in decay due to the passage of time as well as the humid climate. However, the architectural decadence of the past is still palpable in the form of intricately painted tiles and gorgeous turn-of-the-century architecture, lending the city a weary baroque feel.

Iquitos is only accessible by plane or boat, not by road, and the complicated logistics of getting to the city, coupled with the great travel distance from the capital and the dramatic climate shift from the high

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17. For example, Bendayán curated the 2012 show *Selva virgen, salvaje y sensual* at Casa Inmobiliaria in Lima.

18. Bendayán captures one of the most famous houses of Iquitos in his painting *Retrato de familia* (2014), La Casa de Fierro, which sits in one of the four corners of the central plaza. Constructed in 1889, this iron house is said to have been designed in France before being sent to Peru in pieces that were carried through the jungle by Indigenous peoples.
plains of the Andes, lends the city an otherworldly feel. Reflecting the exuberant energy of the inhabitants, Bendayán’s paintings are not subtle; they tend to demand viewers’ attention with their bright, tropical colors. He relies heavily on magenta and lime-green hues, colors associated with nightclubs or neon signs that flash by in Iquitos during a post-sunset drive. Gustavo Buntinx describes Bendayán’s paintings as “saturated with the humidity and the density of the Amazon region” and as employing colors that are *chirriantes*—that grate on one’s nerves—a great way to describe the way the colors jar a viewer’s unaccustomed eyes. When I first saw Bendayán’s paintings, they stimulated affective excitement and intrigue. The overt sexual desire that some of the faces of Bendayán’s characters convey may confront viewers with their own unacknowledged longings. Some contain a homoerotic and almost pornographic factor that may leave viewers wanting to look and even enjoying what they see, but then sinking into a self-questioning: “Should I like this?” or, “What does it mean if I like looking at this?” Buntinx observes, “Many of the images confront spectators with the ambiguity of sex and desire: they are at once provocative and off-putting, desirable and easy to reject.”

In the early 2000s, Bendayán’s art takes up the popular culture of Iquitos and focuses particularly on the youth and young adults living there. During this period, Bendayán painted *Amazonas*, in which a bacchanalian scene of gender-nonconforming figures serves as a gateway into the underworld of Iquitos’ nightlife. The numerous male figures in the painting pose in suggestive and playful ways, and their gaze outward from the canvas confronts the viewer eye-to-eye, daring them to engage. The painting is light and amusing on one level, but transforms static representations of Indigenous peoples into *mestizx* actors who laugh at the off-canvas audience around them. Because he titles the painting *Amazonas*, Bendayán dialogues specifically with place. He appropriates

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20. Ibid.
stereotypes about the Amazon, for example, the idea that it is a hyper-eroticized feminine space, and transforms it by painting an alternative local scene of queer desire.

The details of this painting are important in that they indicate the locale to viewers. For example, the figure with the crossed legs and fishnet tights is sitting on one of the cheap and ubiquitous green plastic chairs seen at popular street events, cafes, and vendors all over Iquitos and throughout the world. But this common contemporary artifact rests atop the very remarkable tile floor that Bendayán mimics from one of the gorgeous tile patterns of the nineteenth-century belle époque in Iquitos. The scene is orgiastic, with the turquoise tile floor donned with the sexualized and confident gender-bending figures. The bright tropical flowers transport viewers to an imaginary space of playfulness and fantasy. Bendayán’s version of paradise is not a sacred “Garden of Eden,” but a luscious, lascivious, and promising scene of queer desire: at once accessible and popular as well as private and unavailable. The painted images on the bodies of numerous figures also make reference to the traditional paintings of the Huitoto people; for instance, the recurring impression of the snake on three characters’ bodies. Professor emeritus Fernando Urbina of Colombia’s National University has dedicated his career of over forty years to the documentation, recording, and study of the Huitoto people’s myths. In a presentation in June 2014 in Iquitos, Urbina spoke of the sacred symbol of the snake, which, in its ability to slink along the ground as well as slither high into the trees, serves as a sacred symbol on earth and a mediator between the world above, of the gods, and the world below, of humans.21 This snake figure is a recurring icon in Bendayán’s corpus and contributes to his mixing of Amazon myths with contemporary figures that are primarily mestiza and urbanized but that still carry their cultural roots on their bodies. In Amazonas, viewers can see that Bendayán pokes fun at the “discovery” of America, as the figure lying on the ground with the turquoise-hued lips is holding a black vase that is showing the first letters of the word America on it. With this placement, Bendayán insinuates that the figure is all that there

21. Fernando Urbina, “¿En qué género literario se clasificaría el relato de Don José García ‘Cómo murió mi abuelo Boca-de-tambor-sagrado’?” presentation given at the III Encuentro Intercultural de Literaturas Amerindia, Iquitos, Peru, June 2014.
is to “discover” in America, transforming the myth of the untouched pristine landscape of the explorers into a private party. At the same time, a significant portion of “America” remains hidden from view, only potentially visible to the figures in the scene. It could also be read that this, too, is America, as much as any other inaugural scene of discovery. Bendayán’s painting makes visible dissident subjects that challenge the foundation of the nation and are queer in their playful poses and direct and outwardly directed gazes.

As previously mentioned, between 1783 and 1816, the Spanish Crown sponsored the Royal Botanical Expedition to New Granada. King Charles III funded the expedition after years of persistence on the part of the European botanists. José Celestino Mutis, a disciple of Carolus Linnaeus, led the expedition. Over the course of its thirty-three years, the expedition produced “more than 5,300 meticulously detailed studies of previously unknown species of flora of the Colombian highlands, rendered on folio sheets with unprecedented economy, accuracy, and grace, for illustrations of this kind.” Among the most persistent beliefs about the Amazon is its mythological status as a pure, untouched “Garden of Eden,” or its scientific status as an infinite laboratory of pristine nature, waiting to be classified and archived by the West. As Alfredo Villar comments,

Before the exploitative capitalist delirium reigned in the Amazon, there were the botanical expeditions…. the colony opened their doors to explorers and scientists from all parts of the world. It was a new universe that opened its secrets to the world; before those secrets were converted into products for the market, they were studied with the passion and the dedication that corresponded to the scientific gaze.

In the series *Flora Amazónica*, Bendayán alters the scientific and consumptive perception of the Amazon by adding human figures onto reproductions of the original paintings produced by members of the

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botanical expedition of the regions copious plant life. Bendayán offers an alternative album of just a few of the myriad plants collected during the botanical expedition through his addition of a contemporary human layer to the plants. He populates the abstracted plants with figures taken from his own previous paintings to both corrupt and correct the sterile scientific representation of nature with a much messier and uncomfortable scene replete with desiring subjects. Scholar of the Putumayo region Carlos Valcárcel explains that the nineteenth century arrived in Putumayo “with the development of positivism and the systematic secularization of knowledge and of society in general. This trend moved into the social sciences via theories of the evolution of species and gave scientific weight to the arguments about the inferiority of the Indigenous, who were defined as the extreme opposite to the civilized society that had fabricated such a theory.”

In this sense, the botanical expedition is part of the positivist turn but, moreover, anticipates the ways in which social theories such as Charles Darwin’s will come to influence the perceived biological inferiority of the tropics.

Along the top of all the images in the botanical series the, script reads, “Flora Amazónica”; in the first image of the series, this is followed by the words, “Stereum sp. & Muchacho cutipado,” which is also the title of the image. The species name — stereum — comes from the original botanical expedition (stereum is a genus of mushroom), but muchacho cutipado is Bendayán’s fictitious classification of the eroticized male figure with a bare torso that spills out of the flora, defying the plant’s neat boundaries and clean edges. In choosing to focus on the male, Bendayán overturns the disembodied heteronormative male gaze of the scientist upon feminized nature, captured grammatically by la tierra, la flora y la fauna, and la naturaleza. The fact that this figure is eroticized parodies the notion of pristine nature, as well as the expectation that Amazon women are closest to nature. The perspective offered to viewers of the young man is decidedly current and ironic, as it insinuates that the sexualized youth is a type of flora unto himself, alongside the plant. Bendayán does not shy away from representing viewer’s potentially queer desires for same-sex eroticism and for excess, as the figure is sexualized

without a third party, so to speak. The figure has been bewitched by a shaman or someone off canvas, an entity evoked by the lower animal half of the figure’s body.

The incorporation of the figure onto nature also follows María Elena Martínez’s urging that “we must pay more attention to bodies in history.” In its entirety, Flora Amazónica shows both women and men, all somewhat sexualized, emerging from various species of fruit and flowering plants. For instance, in the image “Etlingera elatior & Pachuca apasionada,” the figure in the painting looks to be masculine, but by choosing the feminine pachuca—a popular urban term for a female—Bendayán questions and plays with the gendered identity of the masculine-looking figure. The arm that reaches around and seems to grope the figure’s chest is ambivalent; we don’t know from where it originates nor to whom it belongs, but it is angularly impossible for it to be the figure’s own arm. The arm also looks to be that of a male, representing a homoerotic impulse. In both paintings, the figures are distinctly modern with contemporary sexual desires, which they act out in spite of or on top of the scientific record. The fact that an urban, contemporary pachuca is layered onto an archival image provides a temporal clash that transforms both the past and the present and pokes fun at the classification of “character types,” as if they were able to be labeled as easily as different plants.

In another image in the Flora Amazónica series, Bendayán adds a layer of critique beyond the Royal Botanical Expedition. “Fictus elástica (caucho) & Huitoto ahorcado” jars viewers in its simple and incisive presentation of violence. Bendayán calls our attention to cycles of exploitation that have shaped the Iquitos imaginary by giving the work a title that calls attention to the rubber, the botanical expedition, and the violence of colonialism (ahorcado is “hanged”) at once. In this image, Bendayán compounds two forms of particular violence inflicted and inscribed onto the bodies of the native people who were forced to a participate in the botanical expedition and the rubber tapping, but he also draws attention to the symbolic violence associated with the misrepresentation of history as remembered by the exploiters. The reference to Huitoto ahorcado (the hanged Huitoto) makes it clear to us that Bendayán

is recuperating some of the various moments and historic episodes in a present-day image that reminds the current residents of the Putumayo region of the still-felt effects of the past. This image communicates a hope for a revised archive, for one that can be mined and remade in the imagination of people whose ancestors’ lives might have been erased in the name of resource exploitation.

POST- AND DECOLONIAL ENCOUNTERS
As Peruvian anthropologist and historian Alberto Chirif has suggested, no one could have predicted that the early discovery of rubber by Charles de la Condámine during the mid-eighteenth century would have resulted in the rampant destruction of the natural resource wealth and the exploitation of human labor in the Putumayo region. La Condámine offers the first notice of the existence of caucho (rubber) in his *Relación Abreviada*, published in 1745, when he describes “an elastic resin” that is moldable and used by Indigenous people in the Marañón region to “make boots, balls, and unbreakable bottles.” However, it was not until industrialization began to take off in Europe and the United States that demand for rubber rose exponentially. 1839 was a turning point, when Charles Goodyear invented the vulcanization process that enabled rubber to maintain its elasticity even with changes of temperature, leading to the rubber boom. The rubber industry fully took off at the beginning of the twentieth century when the automobile industry in Europe and in the United States needed massive quantities of caucho for the fabrication of tires.

The rubber era inaugurated an imaginary of images that still haunt the region. Many of these images promoted stereotypes of Indigenous people as primitive beings, on the margin of Western history and emblematic of the opposite of a progress that was understood only in terms of the accumulation and concentration of wealth. Concepts of “savage” and “civilized” were created by a society that needed antinomy to justify the

excesses of their actions with respect to the Indigenous world. The history of rubber is emblematic of a process of exploitation that has repeated itself frequently all over the planet. In the case of Peru, similar extractive and exploitative industries have included guano (for fertilizer), salitre (sodium nitrate, known as Peruvian saltpeter), and, to a lesser degree, zarzaparrilla, a plant whose roots are desirable for the treatment of various ailments from arthritis to skin conditions. A common characteristic of each of these industries is that the demand for the product, and hence, its economic value, originates from trade in international commodity markets, a factor that at once creates the crisis of exploitation and its disappearance when the product is replaced by a similar one or produced more cheaply synthetically.29

The principal areas of rubber extraction in Peru during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were in Putumayo and Caquetá in the north, and one of the primary figures in the Peruvian rubber industry was Julio C. Arana, whose company, the Peruvian Amazon Company, was based in Iquitos with offices in New York and London. As Chirif clarifies, it is not egotism but altruism, the rubber tappers and their defenders declared, that moved them to act.30 Darwin, in his visit to Tierra del Fuego, referring to the Indigenous peoples, wrote, “Their own postures are abject and the expression of their faces, suspicious, surprised and worried.” He also observed, “Upon seeing such poor appearances it challenges me to believe that they are humans and inhabitants of this same world. There is he or she who asks what pleasures life might offer to those inferior animals; but how much more reasonable would be the same question with respect to these barbaric beings!” 31 Because Indigenous peoples had been described in this way throughout history, it is easy to understand why they would be such easy targets for civilizing missions.

The Peruvian Amazon Company is estimated to be responsible for the mistreatment, torture, and assassination of more than 30,000 Indigenous people in the region between 1902 and 1910. It was around

29. Alberto Chirif and Manuel Cornejo Chaparro, introduction to their Imaginario e imágenes de la época del caucho: los sucesos del Putumayo (Lima: Centro Amazónico de Antropología y Aplicación Práctica, 2009), 15.
1907 that the public began to denounce the abuses committed by Arana’s enterprise, and photographs that served the function of both verifying and refuting the accusations began to circulate in the public sphere. According to the summaries of Chirif, in the images that were used to propose a counternarrative to the allegations of abject conditions on Arana’s plantations, “the indigenous appear as dangerous and cannibalistic subjects whom the civilized caucheros try to help bring out from a world of ignorance.” The notion that the Huitoto were similar to animals and needed to be “saved” was a common trope employed throughout the rubber boom. One of the most famous photographs of the era, taken by Silvina Santos, is titled “The Huitoto indian, Julia, sewing with a machine” and was published, as Jean-Pierre Chaumeil explains, with the following description: “Huitoto indigenous woman that ten or fifteen years ago went around naked and painted, and that today makes clothes sewn by herself with the Singer hand sewing machine, latest model.”

In 1963, a well-known painter from Iquitos, César Calvo de Araujo, painted a mural titled El Encuentro del Amazonas on a cement wall in what was then the Municipal Palace of Maynas in Iquitos. However, as Villar relates the story, in 2009, the mayor of Iquitos, Salomón Abensur, planned to rebuild the palace and in the process to destroy the original Calvo de Araujo painting. The following year, Bendayán became the director of the National Institute of Culture and, although the original wall fresco had already been damaged, Bendayán and other Iquitos artists united to protest its destruction and save the mural, which otherwise would have quickly become unsalvageable. Bendayán reinterpreted the old image, also naming his version El Encuentro del Amazonas. Bendayán transforms the older image to represent a dense and enigmatic scene, full of characters that all appear contemporary. However, in his version of the encounter, Bendayán draws in an imagined outsider to an internal view of the Amazon. Viewers must encounter the gaze of the Amazon head on, not the reverse. And the gaze of the Amazon, looking outside the scene, stops the flow of external desire — from outside to

32. Chirif and Chaparro, Imaginario e imágenes, 10 (author’s translation).
inside — in its tracks, queering the usual dynamic in new, unpredictable, and potentially liberating ways. It celebrates Iquitos on its own terms, not on those of the onlooker.

In Calvo de Araujo’s original painting, the arrival of foreigners to Iquitos is portrayed in a way that reaffirms the dominant history, even though the artist was an Iquitos resident. Europe created its own lens, an optic that captured otherness. In Calvo de Araujo’s mural, there are native people in the painting, but they are barely discernible in the corners, blending in with the trees and more shadowed than the illuminated figures in the center. In the original painting, Francisco Orellana, conqueror of the Amazon, is shown flanked on either side by fellow explorers in European-style clothing. They also plant a flag in the ground, marking their territorial discovery. The trees to the side resemble theater curtains, pulled back to reveal another of what Michel de Certeau terms an “inaugural scene” of discovery. In this way, the central performers are the missionaries, and the spectators are the natives and the off-canvas viewers, who, from the vantage of the present, know all too well how the scene unfolds.

In contrast to Calvo de Araujo’s version, Bendayán’s painting of the same name presents characters who all appear to be from and of the Amazon, or at least, Peru. There is no way to distinguish the outsiders from the insiders, because everyone seems potentially in the scene. The figures in the painting gaze in all different directions, unlike the original painting, where the four central figures generally look in the same direction, out into the imagined place before them. In Bendayán’s version, each and every character seems either oblivious or indifferent to the other’s existence, with a few exceptions. The shirtless figure in the center, wearing suspenders and a pink dolphin on his head, has his hand on the stomach of the man holding the Bible, and his pinky finger deviates slightly down the waist of this evangelical figure’s belt. El bufeo colorado, the pink dolphin, is part of a heteronormative Amazon mythology, born out of the rubber era. According to the myth, Indigenous women could be impregnated by the pink dolphins that populated, and still populate, the rivers of the region. Because the women did not want to

risk admitting how they got pregnant, they would say instead that they bumped into the pink dolphin. Rubber barons were not held responsible, therefore, for the native women they violated and impregnated, nor for their offspring. However, Bendayán transforms *el bufeo colorado* onto the head of a male who reaches toward the Christian evangelical figure. In this way, Bendayán undermines the heteronormative underpinnings of evangelical doctrine. He also reconfigures the myth of the pink dolphin, as the dolphin is no longer just a predator of females. And moreover, the obvious mask can easily be taken off, implying that this particular myth was an artifice that hid an alternate narrative.

Continuing the analysis of *El Encuentro del Amazonas*, the look on the central figure’s face is the most directed toward and engaging to the audience, and it is both sexually suggestive and enigmatic. The figure has a slight smile across his face, but also a provocative look of mischievous deviance that does not give anything completely away. His pants and boots are anachronous, indicating a connection to the turn-of-the-century rubber era, but the haircut, the tattoo, and the bracelet transport him to a modern register. There is a triad of young, shirtless, sexually suggestive men in the image, each of them holding something phallic, whether that is a black flag, a pink dolphin head, or a machete.

There are still “natives” in the picture, but they take the form of three stylized and tattooed figures. The first such figure is to the far left and looks either upon the scene or at the other two figures across the way with an ambiguous mix of excitement, curiosity, and fear. The other two figures off to the right are similarly depicted. The first, more fully visual, appears to be a male stylized as a female, a reading with which Villar concurs. This figure looks not at the scene unfolding in front of him, but instead back at the other native figure on the left. The third figure is a woman peeking up from the corner, and her hand rests suggestively on the backside of the male in front of her, exuding a sexual energy invisible in the 1963 mural. There are also fantastical elements in the painting, like the fire-breathing woman on the horse, who seems to have been transported in from a circus, as she is on a wood platform, and the cartoon-like snake that slithers up the tree. Bendayán creates a carnival for us, even offering the likeness of his own head up for the taking, held in the hand of a sun-glassed man holding a black flag. The bacchanalian scene is ominous and hopeful at once, as the black flag portends death while the cast of characters includes a rebel figure that bears a
resemblance to Che Guevara. The scene is not resolved, but rather provides a frenetic look at the way history and myth, fantasy and reality, the past and the present come into a queer scene before us — one of limitless narrative threads and the vital continuance of life despite the waves of colonization and exploitation that have shaped Iquitos.

Bendayán’s trophy-head, in the hands of the shirtless, sunglass-wearing tree-feller, has a small banner below it that reads, Sé que así fue, yo estuve allí (I know that’s how it was, I was there). In the context of this painting, Bendayán’s declaration of truth and knowledge that is tied to physical presence in a place operates in tension with the reality of the scene that we see. And yet he is sacrificed in this painting, indicating that even his vision, that of the truest “witness” to this painting, is a world of fantasy and fiction. The statement is ironic, in that Bendayán’s libertine version of the encounter is about invention, imagination, and fantasy just like those of the original explorers. He encuira—queers—the archive by opening it up to previously unimagined ways of visualizing and sensing the world, reframing a tired scene from a vantage point that mocks the construction of history. The brilliance of the painting is that it simultaneously serves to both negate and affirm the artistic archive of Iquitos. Bendayán fought to save Calvo de Araujo’s mural because of his commitment to the Iquitos arts community, past and present. Hence, this painting serves as a re-visioning of Calvo de Araujo’s scene in a completely different artistic key. Such a refashioning emphasizes continuity and rupture at once, as the painting contains myriad histories and occludes the meaning of any one of them.

In his article, “Guerra de Imágenes en el Putumayo,” which looks at the way that photographs were used to both justify and decry the exploitation of Indigenous peoples during the rubber era, Chaumeil observes, “It is supposed that images trace an authentic testimony, but we know that this is not the case: the informative content of an image—and especially that of photography—is actually constructed, and the reality recreated and even reinvented (techniques are multiple).” Even photography, the most mimetic of artistic mediums, can lie. Instead of constructing facts, Bendayán’s emphasis on libertarian freedom undermines and challenges a fixed idea of truth upon which an archive is

constructed. As a symbol of the archive itself, the mural that Calvo de Araujo produced repeats itself via Bendayán in a space of destruction; the original signification is ruptured and revenged. As Michael Taussig has argued, also in the context of the rubber boom and the trauma in induced, “It is in the terror of the space of death that we often find an elaborated exploration of what Artaud and Marx, in their different ways, see as the rupture and revenge of signification.”36 Signification is replaced with slippage and a queered space of potential gender, sexual, and species intermingling emerges. While Taussig's study largely relies on a reading of shamans and their practices as antidotes to terror, Bendayán’s shamanic-inspired art creates a visual archive that unleashes a new affective archive: open, nomadic, and queer, taking shamanic visions and combining them with alternative embodied experiences. His images present the excess to capital: the bodies that resisted becoming part of the history of the heteronormative foundation upon which the nation had been formed.

While Bendayán’s work has made an aesthetic impact in Iquitos, Lima, and in international cities where it has been shown, such as Madrid, Sevilla, and Miami, aesthetic representation and revisionist archival work do not negate the political violence that continues to plague lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, and nonnormative-identifying persons in Peru. An article in the International Business Review in June 2014 mentions the number of hate crimes that are still perpetrated in the country:

17 murders of LGBTQ people [occurred] between January 2013 and March 2014, according to the annual report on gay rights by the Promsex NGO. That figure is a significant number in a country where the murder rate for 2012 was 10.5 per 100,000 inhabitants, according to the United Nations. The report also showcases episodes of discrimination, such as two transgender Peruvians who were not allowed to vote in the presidential elections of 2013 because their appearance did not match the photos on their identification forms.37

While these statistics speak to the continued persecution of the LGBTQ community, there is reason to believe that openness to gender and sexual nonconformity is slowly emerging in Peru and, to a large extent, is accepted in limited circles. In the past couple of years, Lima-based art critic Miguel A. López has written about the subversive performance artists Grupo Chaclacayo, three artists who, during the 1980s, at the height of the militant Maoist party Sendero Luminoso’s insurgency, began to draw attention to homoeroticism in their confrontational and transgressive art. After years of living in hiding in Lima, the group, consisting of two Peruvian artists and their German mentor who had been their professor at Pontifical Catholic University of Peru (pUCP), left for Germany, where they were able to exhibit their work. López has also written about performance artist and drag queen Giuseppe Campuzano (1969–2013), known for appearing as the “Virgin Mary” in and around Lima. Campuzano’s last project Museo Travesti de Peru—the Transvestite Museum of Peru—draws attention to the way that aberrant desires and bodies have been historically colonized by the state. A queer aesthetic is increasingly visible in Peru and has the potential to serve as a critical intervention into the politics of exclusion as practiced in the public and private spaces of the state.

The current election cycle in Peru has also drawn some attention to LGBTQ issues. Veronika Mendoza, congresswoman from Cuzco and general election candidate for the Frente Amplio party, won 18 percent of the first round vote, running openly in favor of gay civil unions and


marriage.\textsuperscript{40} That said, currently neither same-sex civil unions nor gay marriage are legal, nor is adoption by same-sex couples. Mendoza did not win enough of the vote to be nominated, and although current candidate Pedro Pablo Kuczynski has argued publicly that gay civil unions are part of democracy, he is careful to differentiate them from gay marriage.\textsuperscript{41} Due to the 2016 elections the questions of gay civil unions and marriage have been receiving some, if limited, coverage in the media.

Anthropology professor at PUCP, Alexander Huerta-Mercado, recently urged in an editorial in \textit{El Comercio}, “It is time that our criteria for what is ‘normal’ expands beyond the exclusionary concepts that colonial society left us; that we open up the possibilities of belonging to people who shouldn’t have to fight to be accepted based on their identity; we ought to question the molds that make us feel comfortable and within which we define ourselves.”\textsuperscript{42} While the political realm moves slowly, especially in a still-predominantly Catholic country, the aesthetic realm can and must continue to provoke discomfort and break representational molds to set an example for political futures.

In conclusion, Christian Bendayán asks viewers to reframe “historical truth” as an imaginary construction and to sense queer desires that work against the heteronormative reproduction of nation.\textsuperscript{43} He envisions history from the mythological rivers, nightclubs, cantinas, and streets of Iquitos, as well as from his own imagination, in order to present Iquitos’s popular culture as queer, excessive, and undisciplined. He reveals and obfuscates, critiquing the sensory regimes of the extant archive that have shaped the conditions of visibility of dissident desires while still keeping an Iquitos perspective for Iquitos. His work is a transformation of the extant archive and an inventive challenge to the heteronormative impulse on which the reproduction of national archives


\textsuperscript{43} López, “Queer Corpses.”
rests. Bendayán’s unique viewpoint validates desiring bodies that thrive beneath the surface of rivers, in the dark corners of the club, and in the shadows of scientific drawings to provide a compelling counterpoint to the way Iquitos has been historically produced. His nontraditional sites of cultural inquiry provide new models for accessing queer desires and for fashioning queer archives.

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