
From “solastalgia” to “alegremia”

In 2003, Australian philosopher Glen Albrecht (1) coined the term “solastalgia” to define the combination of psychological disorders that afflicted native populations as a consequence of the destructive changes in their territory as a result of mining activities, desertification or climate change. The term, which means pain of the land that is inhabited (“solas” means land in Greek, and “algia” means pain), can manifest itself as an intense visceral pain and mental anguish that can result in health problems, substance abuse, physical illness and suicidal tendencies.

This term or concept is related to the one developed by Laura Trujillo (2) of the word “place”, which is “a space endowed with meaning”. A place is no ordinary space. For those who live in it, it is full of stories and feelings, which is why she says that “landscape”, as opposed to “place”, is that “space that is seen but not lived”. A place, on the contrary, when given a name, is appropriated and leads to a sense of belonging. Trujillo concludes that “where the colonizers [and by extension mining, agribusinesses, oil and lumber interests...] saw a space-landscape, natives saw a place”.

It is then as a consequence, that that place endowed with feelings since infancy, of beautiful experiences, of climbing trees or mountain field trips, which has received a name, when its desolation begins, causes soul pains and psychological disorders which end up leading to sadness for the loss of the place of nesting, a place which will not return. These disorders are similar to those suffered by those who have to migrate; but now they appear in those who, without moving from their territory, see their horizon disappear and with it their past and their ecological history that their descendants will not see.

Solastalgia is the first step towards a constructed sadness that leads to despair and suicide and that maybe is in the origin of the waves of suicides that afflict many indigenous communities in different parts of the world. In Ecuador in recent years there has been a spike in suicides among the Cofan and Huaorani indigenous nationalities, which endure the aggression of oil companies, and the Kichwa nationality, which suffers the pressure of agribusiness. This tendency toward suicide is documented among all the aboriginal peoples of the world where the pressure for their lands is extraordinary. In Canada, the Cross Lake Cree community suffered in a period of two weeks six suicides and 140 suicide attempts (3). Among the native peoples of the United States, suicides in 2015 made up for 34% of deaths among males between 18 and 24 years of age (one in three) (4), which happens in 566 tribes; but the suicide figures for those under 18 are between three and ten times higher than the national average (5). This trend also seen in Australia, where aboriginal girls aged ten have dramatically increased their tendency toward suicide (6). The causes for this seem to include the reservations where they are confined to live so that the companies can act on their territories.

The path from solastalgia to suicide feeds off a sadness that finds no exit in the defense of nature. Defenders of the territories of indigenous peoples, invaded by transnational corporations and megaprojects, are murdered with impunity and with the complicity of the state (7). More than two murders a week in 2014 turn the defense of nature into one of the riskiest vocations, with Central and

South America being the regions with the most murders of nature defenders reported in the world; some 40% were indigenous women and men who protested against mining, extractive, hydroelectric and agribusiness activities. 90% of the murders remain unpunished and sink those who rely on the rights of humans and nature into despair.

It should be no surprise that among the strategies of political repression described by philosopher and social psychologist Edgar Barrero (8), the construction of fear goes first through altering the horizon, through making the presence of the state repression apparatus visible, with the clear intent of having its presence act upon the consciousness of those who resist their intervention as “persuasive action”. The next stage, if the defenders of nature do not desist of their protest, is entering their homes, make them see their helplessness and thus make it a “suggestive action” on the subconscious, on the emotions and risks suffered by the family, which will be compelled to get them out of the struggle. This second stage passes through removing the population from its place, through constructing the nostalgia (the pain caused by the distance from the place), through getting the people who struggle to leave or quit. Finally, if none of the preceding options accomplishes this, the construction of fear goes through “compulsive action”, through entering the bodies of those who resist, through hurting them so that instinct takes action and calls out “run for your life”; through disappearing them from the place, by taking their lives or jailing them. The destruction of the landscape goes accompanied by the destruction of people’s health, the community fabric and their wellbeing.

The concept of health of the indigenous peoples of Chiapas (Mexico) was defined in their 1997 Moisés Gandhi declaration as “health is dignity and behind each illness there is always a cause of humiliation”. The destruction of the environment, leaving complete desolation in its wake, not only is an aberration per se, but also a humiliation for those who inhabit those places endowed with feelings; because the memories are in the texture of the trees, in a horizon whose vision welcomes and integrates them, in the nightly music of the forests, in the smells of its seasons, in the flavors of its seasonal fruit, in its harvests, in the tasks of care of nature from which they obtain not only food but also dreams and aspirations for the future.

The recording of forest sounds by Bernie Krause in the Sugarloaf Ridge park in the United States, from 2004 to 2015, shows the accelerated loss of sounds in barely eleven years, offering a sample of the accelerated deterioration of our jungles and forests and the dire situation of species loss.

How to recover from this constructed solastalgia, from the nostalgia of home, from the destruction that leads to sadness and from there to a fear that leads even to despair and mourning?

There are no formulas, but there is a need to do it. For some years now Julio Montalvo advocates in Argentina what he has called *alegremia* (10), the “joy in the blood” or the quest to infuse joy into the veins, a proposal that seeks to reconstruct and recover better health.

In Ecuador, where this current arrived thanks to the celebration of the 2nd World Assembly for Peoples’ Health, we have initiated processes of *alegremia* in the communities affected by the aerial sprayings of Plan Colombia - fumigations carried out by Colombia supposedly to eradicate illicit crops and that penetrate into Ecuador because of their closeness to the border and the wind. For five years we have also been holding festivals that encourage the encounter between the affected communities, between children and their parents, and of persons with themselves, in an attempt to recover the aesthetics of place, the work ethic, and the coherence of the persons who seek and build a better world (11).

The aim is to take a stand for health and from the recovery of places. For recovering the soils depressed by pollution and monoculture, for the life that flows in rivers and hides in the jungles, for the plants that dare give us their properties when we approach them with tenderness, like the Kichwa indigenous people who before taking them for their infusions they tell them “kawsari, kawsari” (awaken, awaken), so that they give all their healing potential, or when they domesticate them, taking them to their houses so that upon knowing them they feel befriended and give all their properties. We are recovering the history that brought thousands of people to a wonderful jungle that was knifed by the oil industry and murderous companies like Texaco and deceitful ones like Chevron, which filled soils, rivers, plants, animals and families with death.

We have to make the path of return, recovery and repair, of reconstruction of life from joy, from history, from games and art, and from those traditions that were loaded with truth and we were told that they were not scientifically sound. We have to overcome this neoliberal maxim from the United States of the 1980's, which boasted that “a pessimist is a well informed optimist”. We cannot afford the luxury of pessimism, we have to recover the *alegremia* at any price, and our places in nature.

It is not strange that it is a philosopher who has had to call attention to the new illness, *solastalgia*. Also, Richard Louv, a US journalist, described in 2005 “nature deficit disorder”, referring to those anomalous behaviors in children that lead them to obesity or sadness. Louv is convinced that for a truly healthy childhood, direct exposure to nature is a must; as well as for the emotional and physical development and wellbeing of adults. What's curious in both cases is that none of those who described these illnesses is a doctor, because we spend our time applying protocols of intervention, accusing those who engage in traditional medical practices, or pretending to climb up in hospital centers, or lost in the chemical paradigm, but far from nature.

Welcome all those puppeteers, artists, animators, healers, shamans and herbalists, artists and singers, theater makers of *alegremia*, crusaders in defense of life, firebreathers, fortune tellers and jugglers, clowns, storytellers and humorists, guardians of places and defenders of nature, because you more than anyone are needed to construct health. We cannot permit it to be trapped, confined in the hands of doctors. Let them cure disease, but among us all let's construct that health which is founded on joy.

Adolfo Maldonado, salud@accionecologica.org
Acción Ecológica, Ecuador, <http://www.accionecologica.org/>

- (1) <http://psychoterratica.com/solastalgia.html>"<http://psychoterratica.com/solastalgia.html>
- (2) Trujillo, Laura (2009) *Ecología política del desarrollo sostenible*. Unpublished document. Universidad Andina Simón Bolívar, document submitted in the doctoral course on Collective Health, Environment and Society.
- (3) <file:///home/adolfo/Esitorio/Informaci%C3%B3n%20Salud/comunidad-aborigen-canada-emergencia-oleada.html>
- (4) http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/native-american-youth-suicide-rates-are-at-crisis-levels_us_560c3084e4b0768127005591
- (5) https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/the-hard-lives--and-high-suicide-rate--of-native-american-children/2014/03/09/6e0ad9b2-9f03-11e3-b8d8-94577ff66b28_story.html
- (6) http://www.eldiario.es/theguardian/adolescencia-pensaba-dias-suicidarme-aborigen_0_493101032.html
- (7) Global Witness 2015 *¿Cuántos más?* April 2015.
<https://www.globalwitness.org/en/campaigns/environmental-activists/cuantos-mas/>
- (8) Barrero, Edgar (2006) *de Macondo a Mancuso: Conflicto, violencia política y guerra psicológica*

en Colombia. Ediciones Desde Abajo, Colombia, p.73

(9) Krause, Bernie en http://www.eldiario.es/cultura/fenomenos/negro-silencio-exticcion-especies_0_522847830.html

(10) <http://www.altaalegremia.com.ar/>

(11) <http://wrm.org.uy/es/articulos-del-boletin-wrm/seccion1/energias-alterativas-cuando-la-unica-alternativa-es-la-transformacion-integral/>