

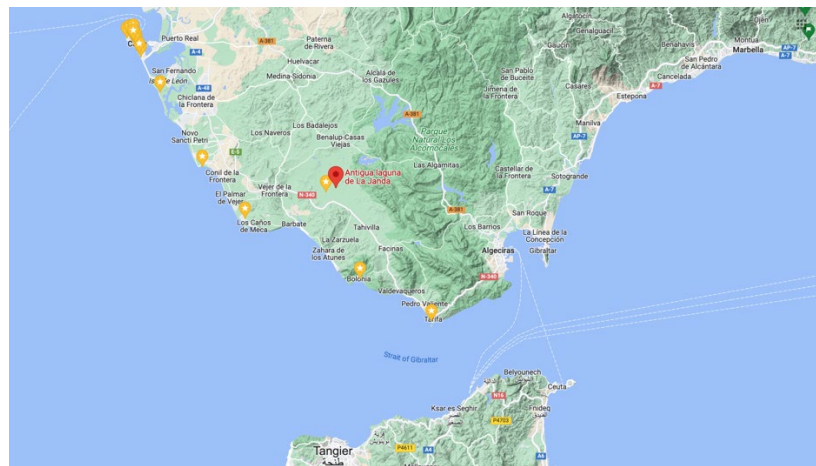
The Alternative and the Planetary as Told Through La Janda Wetland (Cádiz, Spain)

In this working paper, I will use the example of La Janda Wetland to extend humanist concepts in cultural and postcolonial studies towards the ecological, or the planetary. I want to tentatively show how areas of these areas of study that mature as the humanities disengage from nature, can be usefully turned back to that interest, at a time when cultural concepts in general need to be able to interface with the ecological. The concepts that I want to develop are: ‘the alternative’ – a concept from Raymond Williams, and the ‘planetary’ which I take from Edouard Glissant. This is an exploratory paper.

La Janda

La Janda is a 7,000 hectare wetland in the south of Spain, held in the basin that connects the settlements of Facinas, Vejer and Benalup. North of the Gibraltar straight, where Tarifa reaches towards Ceuta, it is filled by the Celemín, Almodóvar and Barbate rivers. Its extensive fresh and shallow waters make it a site of unique residence, rest and passage for millions of birds migrating between African and Europe, since at least the neolithic era.

I visited La Janda twice in the Autumn of 2021 and Spring of 2022





The alternative

I want to show how La Janda might help us extend the humanist concept of the alternative towards the planetary, so first I will briefly explain ‘the alternative’.

In a book I wrote a couple of years ago, called *Sonic Intimacy* I sought to understand the uneven transformation of alternative cultural politics through the sound system assemblage. That is, through reggae sound systems, jungle pirate radio and grime YouTube music videos. I was interested in the uneven social, sonic and technological transformations of alternative cultural politics in capitalism and what they implied for a felt sense of living against the grain, or in the minor key, that is to say with the alternative. Alternative culture then refers to those aspects of everyday life, meaning making and expression that contain/carry/transmitted, through sound and intimacy in that case, a freer articulation of society, where freedom was connoted with a general notion of justice.

The language of the alternative is derived from Raymond Williams, who was seeking from a Marxist perspective, to understand how heterogenous forms of domination and residual revolution were lived in a post-revolutionary moment, which is to say after the full onset (or so we then thought) of consumer capitalism. In his famous essay published in *New Left Review* in 1973 ‘Base and Superstructure in Marxist Cultural Theory’ he writes:

“That is why instead of speaking simply of ‘the hegemony’, ‘a hegemony’, I would propose a model which allows for this kind of variation and contradiction, its sets of *alternatives* and its processes of change... [W]e have to recognize the *alternative* meanings and values, the *alternative* opinions and attitudes, even some *alternative* senses of the world, which can be accommodated and tolerated within a particular effective and dominant culture” (Williams 2010, p.38-39 my emphasis).

Here, Williams breaks from what Adorno called the ‘determinate negation’ – the influential idea that in the context of consumer capitalism, liberation can only come through a negative reaction to domination. Instead, in Williams we find the inheritance of Adorno in the notions of ‘contradiction’ and ‘change’ – what EP Thompson and Stuart Hall later refer to as ‘struggle’ – but also, further on in his writing, the appearance (or reappearance) of a positive hermeneutic, an alternative on its own terms which can be ‘residual’ or ‘emergent’.

This version of the alternative appears throughout cultural and postcolonial studies, with subtle variations. Against the grain, minor key, undercurrents, subterranean and fugitivity are all synonyms noting not only dominance in its various guises, but collectively providing an archive, not of neat opposition, but of an alternative persistence. While somewhat derided in more stridently activist and politically orientated studies towards freedom and justice, my argument is that these cultural alternatives, which are also humanist, remain essential to knowing and realising any contemporary form of freedom.

La Janda 2

So how does La Janda wetland help us develop this humanist understanding of the alternative to more planetary position. To try and answer that question, I will briefly tell the story of Paco Jimenez; an account I have adapted and translated from the Spanish equestrian and nature magazine *Horse Press*.

Paco Jimenez was born in the district of La Janda. Interviewed in 2018 when he was 75 years old, he reflected on the slow demise of the bustard which seemed to fall from the sky. It fell as the military parachute regiment started its airborne training many years ago, and as the cultivation of agricultural land and use of poisonous yield improving chemicals, disrupted the nesting habits, terrains and the biological balance of these shy birds.

Jorge, as Paco called him, was the last of the bustards, a small but beautifully plumed male who died in 2006, victim of a crash into the high voltage powerlines that now cross the valley taking the electricity generated by the air turbines to nearby cities.



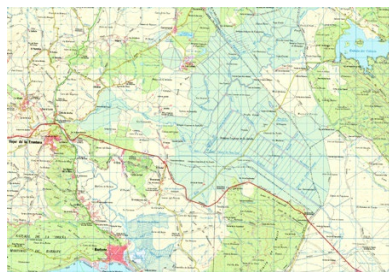
In 1968 when Paco was younger man, La Janda was quite different - an extensive wetland; one of the largest in Europe. Like its western neighbour Doñana, its extensive fresh and shallow waters, made it a site of unique of residence, rest and passage for millions of birds migrating between African and Europe in Spring and Autumn.

As a young man, Paco was familiar with these birds these because the finca on which he carried out his agricultural labour look him to the water's edge, where he the duck and frogs made a "scandalous noise". He later became an expert in local wildlife taking European birders for tours of the lake in his taxi.



When Paco was a teenager that the landscape started to dramatically change. Unsuccessful drainage of the lake had begun at the end of the 19th Century, and again in the 1920s but at the end of the Spanish Civil War, Franco's government made use of the 1918 Law of Drainage of Lakes, Wetlands and Swamps more decisively carry out the project. Until then the lake had been renegade, refilling despite canals and pipes stuffed through its strata.

In 1954, the public land of La Janda was sold via concession to the company Colonias Agrícolas, and they were tasked with draining the rebel lake. This was part of a belated move to an industrial scale agricultural revolution carried out across Spain by the Institute of Agrarian Reform. In 1957 after the lake triumphed and Colonias Agrícolas failed, the concession was passed to the company Lagunas de Barbate. Extensive canalisation was undertaken, and enlarged drainage tunnel dug, and dams on the Almodóvar, Celemín and Barbate rivers built.



The territorialisation of La Janda # 1 - Mapa Topográfico Nacional 2003.



The territorialisation of La Janda # 2, 2010

That mastery over nature transformed the landscape and marked a sharp reduction in bird life. Many of the cranes, orioles, bee-eaters and rollers that had stopped for millennia, now passed over high in the air. Paco no longer saw the jackdaws, Egyptian vultures, honey buzzards, white storks and ospreys in the quantities of the past. The bald Ibis all but vanished.¹



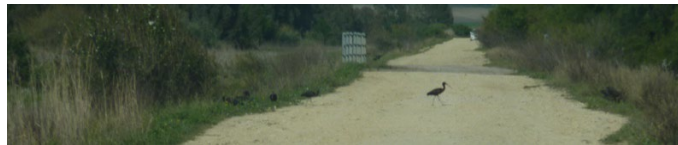
At the end of 2021, I drove to La Janda on the recommendation of friends from nearby Vejer de la Frontera. Aside from the obvious topography of an extensive valley floor, La Janda (one of the most important ornithological sites in Europe) is formally unannounced and not marked on Google Maps. But as you drive down a dirt access road into what would have been the lake's bed, you still encounter an extraordinary number of birds and a persistent cacophony of song. We saw 100s of cranes, black wings kites, black winged stilts, green sandpipers, among others. In spring 2022 we returned to visit the summer residents - flamingos, spoonbills, stilts, shrikes, rollers, bee eaters and the recently reintroduced glossy ibis.



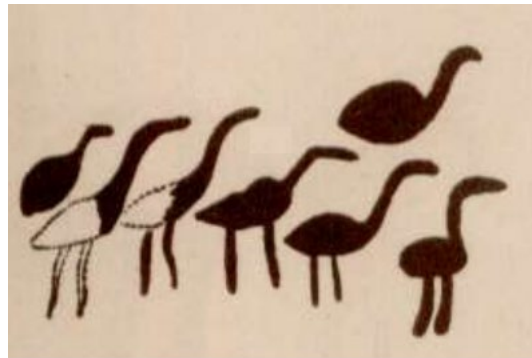
¹ https://www.diariodejerez.es/noticias-provincia-cadiz/Janda-primera-colonia-reproductora-eremita_0_470953098.html



But as you can see from the images, the lake is no longer there. Wet farmland, devoted to the growing of rice, threaded through with drainage canals and pipes, is the landscape.



Nonetheless, amidst the technologies of territorialisation imposed upon it, the rain water still collects, and the birds too. The 20,000-year-old cave paintings of birds at El Tajo de las Figuras in the hills above, tell of a stubborn alternative; a sedimented cultural history, a planetarity, that Paco also knew.



The term planetary is used by various post-colonial theorists: to engage with alterity, a worlding that is not global, and more recently has been turned to the ecological. There is a lot to say and indeed disagree with in some of these formulations, but rather than do that, I want to turn to a more productive framing developed by Edouard Glissant; one concerned directly concerned with ecology and indeed with humanism.

For Glissant, ecology – and we might think of La Janda in these terms – is part of a wider politics of rupture and connection, counterposed to territory – the seizing of the earth. This “politics of ecology”, says Glissant, is a story of a thousand parts, that...

“...has implications for populations that are decimated or threatened with disappearance as a people. For, far from consenting to sacred intolerance [territory], it is a driving force for the relational interdependence of all lands, of the whole Earth” - *Tout-Monde, All-World* (Glissant 1997, p.146).

To understand La Janda as Paco did, is a small part of an alternative wisdom of the world, a form of sediment, an ecological planetary sense, that the violence to La Janda detracts us from knowing (Glissant 1997, p.159-60).

Writing on Glissant in his book *Critique of Black Reason*, Mbembe clarifies:

“But humanity as a whole delegates itself in the world and receives from the world confirmation of its own being as well as its fragility. And so the difference between the world of humans and the world of nonhumans is no longer an external one. In opposing itself to the world of nonhumans, humanity opposes itself. For, in the end, it is in the relationship that we maintain with the totality of the living world that the truth of who we are is made visible” (Mbembe 2017, p.180).

March for the recovery of La Janda



March for the recovery of La Janda, 2 de febrero de 2019. Foto Ecologistas en Acción

<https://www.ecologistasenaccion.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/Marcha-Janda-2-2-19-1.jpg>

To end, I want to note, that since 2018 a collection of activist and conservation organisations² have launched a series of legal, physical protest and media actions to bring an end to the territorialisation of La Janda; to restore the wetlands and bring them back into public ownership.

While the right leaning Andalusian Regional Government is still opposed, in 2021 the central Government granted an enquiry on the recovery of the land and determined that legally La Janda was still public and could therefore be restored and returned to public use.³ That campaign continues. And while absolutely necessary, it is also the case that a cultural understanding of the La Janda is too. Because the reservoir of life that humanity needs to sustain itself require both a political commitment and cultural knowledge. The desire for life, which Mbembe calls “the cornerstone of a new way of thinking about politics and culture” is not otherwise possible (Mbembe 2017, p.181).

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² Asociación de Amigos de la Laguna de la Janda Ecologistas en Acción, Greenpeace, SEO/Birdlife, AEMS-Ríos con Vida, Fundación Savia o la Red Andaluza de Nueva Cultura del Agua.

³ <file:///Users/mj272/Zotero/storage/6KZH2TGY/la-janda-una-inmensa-laguna-para-recuperar.html>
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