

## Snakelike, Through These Grasses: Some Notes on Serpents and Portals

The snake as a symbol of healing in a broken world or the snake as violence, for healing “naturally” suggests the destruction that must happen before it can take place. The snake as a symbol of the fluidity of form and the endlessness of matter. The snake as mouth, as consumer, consumption, consummation, construction. The snake as loop, as refrain, as algorithm, as repetition. The snake as sleight of hand, as mirror image, as surface for projection, as stage and some serpentine movement across it. The snake as trick pony. The snake as image-system. The snake as art history and collective memory. The snake as politics and political history, as iconography, as non-violence, as symbolic sacrifice, as irrigation and lines both liquid and electric. The snake as symbolic power. The snake as art object. The snake a maximum affect and effect. “The beings of maximally increased circumferential graspable power—these are the snakes from Oraibi to Athens,” as a recent film goes.

But we were talking about snakes, not movies, though what is a snake if not moving images.

So. Snake, or shape, as a carrier of color—the green iridescence and deep pulls of hues and tints of Amazonia, which are also temperatures: hot, humid, wet, cool. Which are also gradients of color and light and resonance: green, blue, red, brown, some pink. The artist writes: Pink is a metal performance.<sup>1</sup> No. Pink is a mental performance. Sorry, my slip—as if on some wide, wet leaf, green and slippery and algorithmic as a snake. The mental performances of the artist’s work are also a kind of metal, though, kind of mineral. Lit pink or green or that deep and hallucinatory art-historical blue. Illumined with some biological, almost bioluminescent fervor, hot and cool as a fever, as the forest cover of office fluorescence. Bright then dark, like stepping into the black-green of rainforest, its glens and gradients and scales of shade.

Enough with color, though. Its signs, signifiers, linguistic performances; its pathos-laden, vibrational indexing. It’s like opening a package of cool cardboard in the wet blue of a northern morning, no? Already bored before the ordered product has been unwrapped, the cardboard rough then slippery in your hands.

I sometimes wonder what to make of the Western imaginary of the Amazon, its corporate paternalism, its cinematic flops. Why should our feudal late-capital turn to total inequity be awash in colonial-cinematic metaphors of untouched nature and authentic peoples and the deep greens of dripping forests? (For what was ethnography but cameras, cameras, cameras, that is, frame, frame, frame.) Why should our contemporary conditions of economic and ecological violence become naturalized to us through images—grainy then sharp, awash in dappled yellow light—of projected natures, or their

exquisite collapse , their apocalypse? Another question: Is the construction and projection of nature a prerequisite for violence, always? As elders from the Amazon like Ailton Krenak tells us, nature only exists if one thinks of oneself as outside of it.<sup>ii</sup> As the artist and writer Rember Yahuarcani, of the northern Peruvian Amazon, notes:

I also live with myths and stories, which are not static, but in constant movement. In the words of a fisherman or a hunter, the myth takes on another form and movement, like a great snake that slithers among the roots. The myth transforms itself into something real, alive, and transcendent that doesn't die. In this dynamic, human is nature, and nature is human.

The story as the great snake, then, slithering among the roots of political and technological and iconographic histories and cosmologies. What might it mean, then, when the artist herself writes that she is shopping a snake? Is she looking for or selling a story, a myth, a slippery narrative of rippling form and serpentine movement, crossing many worlds, their systems of belief and overlapping cosmos? Is the artist shopping online, scrolling like a snake, like some medieval female mystic, for images and forms that will deliver certain meaning, its trickle or flood of revelation, some kind of water, some kind of snake?

Aby Warburg once began a lecture, almost exactly a century ago, from the blinding white psychic collapse of a Swiss sanitarium on the shores of Lake Constance, by noting: If I am to show you images.... And then the first image he showed (we think) was of “serpent as lightning.” It was a Hopi drawing of a kiva and its altar, with four snakes shifting down (like some algorithm) from the ornamental heavens. The zigzag of their serpentine bodies look like some flashes of Zeus—but that is my projection. As the epigraph to Warburg's notes on his Hopi snake ritual lecture goes: It is a lesson from an old book: the kinship of Athens and Oraibi. Athens and Oraibi—the Hopi village said to be the oldest continuously occupied settlement in the now southwestern United States—being our projected sites of ancestral knowledges and all their political performances. How our mythologies and cosmologies and images curl and coil around each other, tightening and loosening, vibrating and hissing. Like snakes.

From Athens and Oraibi to Silicon Valley and (the) Amazon. I scroll through their images and stories and iconographies and performances—white, pink, blue, green—like snakes through the historical grass, as they do their political work. Of Amazon, which I approach in my scrolling, unwitting, I am stumped, I am stopped. I am bit. The American capitalists and their Amazonian imaginary wed life to theft, such snakes! In their image-strewn technological languages, here is some last, pure, endangered nature and threatened peoples; here is a biosystem to romanticize and colonize after they dully destroy

the rest of earth's ecosystems, or at least in which to set their commercials and their movies and the metaphors of their speeches at their corporate retreats. How have they fulfilled their Amazonian imaginary? As they might fulfill an order. With 24-hour delivery and global indentured labor and a corporate state of zero taxes and zero benefits and an attendant and engulfing ecocide. It's no way to live, but it is our world.

If the corporate-colonial-cinematic Amazonian imaginary is about apocalypse, always, normalizing its violence for us, what about the virus of this imaginary, how it spreads. But then, we're in a pandemic, and it seems wrong to use sickness as metaphor here. And anyway, epidemics within the Amazon and without it have always been more than metaphor, more than real. How to imagine oneself without an imaginary of expropriation in which our place in the world is assumed, in which the world is itself constructed to be consumed, to be burned or flooded? How to construct an imaginary that does not depend on the destruction of peoples, animals, earth, health, spirit, human and nonhuman alike? It's an old question—many tire of it, but mostly us: the consumers.

There are other colors, other spaces, other stories, other forms in which our matter takes some shape, though. I am thinking of the artist's portals, those deep blue lightboxes as gothic windows, the way in which she uses color as a narcotic, something to slip into, like a skin, or out of, like a skin, like a snake's skin. These works recall the blue hour, that threshold between night and day. They recall church windows, which are thresholds between interior and exterior, spiritual shelter and the profane public. Their shape suggests the lancet arch, I read, in which each of the arcs, or curves, of the arch have a radius longer than the width. Such arched windows take their name from being shaped like the tip of a lance. A lance is like a spear, an arrow, or not—I don't know. But the lancet window is one of the typical features of the 13th-century period in Gothic architecture, this I know for sure.

So. Three centuries before the long sixteenth century, before "first contact" and all the virus-strewn contacts that ensued, before settler society and our contemporary world as we know it was set into dark, burning motion, these gothic windows were one's portals to other places. Spaces of imagination and the blue of distance. I look at them, I look through them, and I imagine some light burning, a forest burning, some image burned into a photograph. Fluorescence and fire both, green and red and then the blue wick of flame, extinguished. What is archaic about our need for color, though, to be eliminated by it? Is it an archaic desire to shed our skin or to adorn in, so we might pass into other registers, spaces, bodies, systems, smells, skins, spirits, images?

Shopping a snake. Shopping a snake. Shopping a snake. *Shopping a snake.*

Or the snaking path that rivers or lakes or comets or trails or institutions take.

On the top floor of a museum built on the shores of Lake Constance, the artist's snake is still then sidewinding, its patterned and rippling and reflective skin and scales concealing a network of sensors and semiconductors. Its algorithms and radiations connect our bodies, our senses, and I think of *kené*, the Amazonian Indigenous graphic art of mystical geometries and sacred plants, passed down and practiced by Shipibo women, mostly. The anthropologist Luisa Elvira Belaunde notes that the “polysemy of *kené* lies in the association between the lines and the concept of *cano* (path or way).” She writes:

The lines form a structure of abstract paths along which beings move, travelling, communicating with each other and transporting knowledge and power. There are paths on every scale from the macro to the micro. In the sky, the *kené* lines are associated with the paths of the Milky Way. In the jungle, they are associated with the snaking course of rivers. These same rivers are also identified with the adornments of the female body.<sup>iii</sup>

The snaking course of rivers and *her* “house of meme,” *her* design, *her* body, *her* body of water. It's been said that *kené* designs express the philosophical thought and vision of Indigenous nations, attending to the profound and entangled relationship between human beings, the spiritual worlds, vegetal metaphysics, and ancestral territory. In an embroidered *kené* work by the artist Chonon Bensho that I recently came across, called *Jene Nete (el mundo del agua)* (2020), an enormous snake fills the entire frame, looped back and forth across on the ground of the image.

Snakes often cross Bensho's works, their bodies a kind of scaffolding—sometimes coiled, sometimes hanging from a cross-like form—for the unfolding cosmos and sacred plants and waters which she depicts. *Kené* is a kind of writing of historical and medicinal memory, she has said, its designs as detailed and elaborate and vibrational and ancient as snakeskin itself.

I try to remember that Warburg's lecture was not simply about Hopi snake rituals (though what is simple about that) but about the serpent's place and use in both Indigenous and Christian cosmologies of healing. It was about symbolic sacrifice replacing physical sacrifice, and the snake as the iconic form at that shift's center. It was about the medicinal and political performances of such serpentine images—the work of psychic healing and resistance they might do, not the work of servitude.

So, forget: Bezos, Herzog, Kinski, Cameron, Warburg, even. Forget Europe, as Fanon said.<sup>iv</sup> And yet: It is a lesson from an old book: the kinship of Athens and Oraibi. Or: Amazon and the Amazon, as the artist writes.

Here is another story, both old and new:

I am walking an ancient path across the top of an island in the Eastern Mediterranean. It is late afternoon and the ancient stones I walk are warm. I come from Southern California, intimate with its trails and animals and trials, so I know that snakes liked to rest on warm stones near dusk. One has to be careful not to step on them. I have been writing about snakes all morning, about the snakes of the Hopi and the snakes of the Amazon and the snakes of ancient Egypt and Greece. I have been writing about the Ouroboros, its tail in its mouth, devouring itself as its rebirths itself, continually. An alchemical emblem of gnosticism, the Ouroboros symbolizes the eternal fluidity of material and spiritual form: nothing disappears it just shifts shape. So my body, which was once stardust, is careful on the hot stones on the ancient path snaking across the high, dragonlike spine of mountainous Amorgos. I do not want to step on a snake, nor see what might become of it.

Warburg might have called the Ouroboros one of these “heraldic abstractions” of the ornamental treatment of animals, “an image not just to be looked at but read. Situated as it is on some “intermediary stage between naturalistic image and sign,” as he writes, “between a realistic mirror image and writing.” The Ouroboros, then, as a kind of ancient meme, constantly circulating, renewing its meaning in whoever grasps it, reads it, rewrites it, recirculates it. So it is that I am reading and rereading the warm rocks for danger; the sign of the snake being just that.

In his Hopi snake lecture, Warburg includes a line drawing of a serpent which he notes was sketched for him on January 10, 1896, in his room at the Palace Hotel in Santa Fe, New Mexico, by Cleo Jurino, “the guardian of the Estufa at Conchita.” Warburg writes that, “C. J. is also the painter of the wall-paintings in the Estufa.” At the base of the sketched snake’s tail are four rings. Warburg’s annotations note that these four rings “signify that whoever approaches the serpent and does not tell the truth, drops dead before one can count to 4.”

A century after Warburg’s lecture, as I walk in strong wind across the island of Amorgos, watching the red coin of sun drop through a gradient of pinks and blues behind a smaller island just offshore, my friend in front of me suddenly shrieks. I freeze. In front of me, just to the left of the ancient path, in the lean shadow of bushes of purple thyme and sage, is an enormous green snake, coiled and quaking. It is almost levitating, uncoiling and then spiraling again under our gaze. It moves up and

down like electricity, like some expert technology. It is the color of limes, with silver iridescence glittering, almost mathematically, where its belly touches the hot white ancient stone. We are frozen. After some seconds or centuries, the snake finally flees into the underbrush of herbs—their oil scent sharp in the still hot air of dusk—and we quickly move away and then down the mountain.

As we descend the darkening path to an abandoned village in a narrow, serpentine valley, “hearts racing,” as might be written, I tell my friend that I have been writing snakes all morning, shopping them into language. She says I must have conjured this lime-green snake then. Written it into being, despite my attentive fear. Why not, I think, some cold feeling, like metal, running up and down my spine, devouring it. We move down the mountain on a path walked for thousands of years. Have I told the truth? I have, but what does that mean? *One, two, three, four*, I count my steps, moving sideways, like a snake.

Warburg’s snake lecture of 1923—unrecorded, we know it only through myth and notes—was a petition for release, a performative proof of his mental sanity. He performed it on the Swiss shores of Lake Constance, also called Bodensee, at the Bellevue Sanatorium, an institution Warburg had been interred at for two years and desperately wanted to leave. On the far side of the same immense lake, same See, is Kunsthaus Bregenz, in Austria, where the artist Pamela Rosenkranz showed her *House of Meme* exhibition in 2021.<sup>v</sup> On the top floor of the museum—the titular “house” of her exhibition title—placed atop its cool concrete floor, was the artist’s algorithmic snake, all green and silver scales, its stillness or sidwinding movement dictated by the mobile phones of the spectators who flowed around it. I was one of those spectators, one spring evening. Maybe Warburg, in his sanitarium across the lake almost exactly 100 years ago, was too. He railed against the telephone—all his most recent technologies which closed “natural” distance—but still.

Warburg’s snake lecture did not only concern the Hopi snake ritual, though. It also took in the European iconography of the serpent and its religious and political import via a famous local snake. Nearby his Swiss sanitarium, and the site of his lecture, stands the Basilica of St. Ulrich, whose chapel features a ceiling mural depicting Moses and the Brazen Serpent, that is, a snake wrapped around an enormous cross, prefiguring the crucifixion. The chapel’s foundation stone was placed in 1650—as European colonialism continued its early genocidal incursions into Indigenous lands, including Hopi and further south, in Amazonia, all of which they called the Americas. The frescoes of the serpent, painted later, are by Franz Ludwig Herrmann. In 1650, though, the Hopis were fighting off Franciscan priests and Spanish soldiers and their many crosses, many guns and epidemics. Meanwhile, in Kreuzlingen, in the Chapel of St. Ulrich, light flooded in from windows in the shape of the lance. Was the light blue, were these gothic windows portals, was the snake a snake, and what was Moses

supposed to instruct you? His serpent stretched and coiled around his cross, prefiguring the body that would die there, all the bodies that would die elsewhere.

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But we were talking about snakes, not movies, though what is a snake if not moving images.

Moving images, moving forces, memes moving and circulating like snakes: How do these connect to Warburg’s theory of the *Pathosformel*—the “pathos formula” of symbolic expressions, and the movement of memory they trigger, suggesting the energy of an originary mode of experience? Or to the art historian’s *Wanderstraße der Bilder*, that is, his “Image in Motion,” or his *Wanderstraße der Symbole*, his snaky trail of symbols?<sup>vi</sup> How do they not? To go from Warburg’s *Mneme* as a collective form of pictorial memory, to the contemporary Internet meme, to a certain artist’s *House of Meme* on a certain lake, a certain See, one simply needs to move serpentine from image to image, reading to rereading, writing to rewriting, along a certain collective and circulating and, yes, ancient trail. Is this trail iridescent and colored like a snake? Or is this trail the red earth and white stone that the snake itself moves over, sidewinding and stopping to warm itself in the day’s fading heat? What color is this scene? Is it conscious or unconscious, by the See or some Sea? On what do we set our sight?

So many questions, I know; I see them circling, coiling, consuming themselves. So, a coda in color:

Snakes do not possess blue or green pigments. They might be solid, spotted, striped, green, red, blue, yellow, black, brown, orange. Ornate and highly patterned, they might be iridescent. Iridocytes create this iridescent appearance. Their color schemes serve myriad functions: heat absorption or reflection, camouflage, or “other, less understood roles.” Their scales assist their snakelike movement by

providing a friction buffer between the snake and the ground. The soft integument of a snake might be a different hue than their hard scales, a form of “predator determent.”<sup>vii</sup>

When is a snake not a snake, though? When is a window not a window? When is a snake a portal— not just for color and form and movement, but for political resistance and all of its performances? When is a snake psychic healing? When was the world not broken? When did we not need healing? When was a snake not an iconography for medicine— sacred or Western—but an embodiment of? When did the performance of sacrifice replace actual sacrifice? When did symbolism— such as the snake and its iconography through the ages— first appear on screen? When did we first start scrolling, snakelike, through these grasses? When did the artist first hold the snake in her hand? When was the art historian let out— of the psychiatric institution, I mean? What did his healing, via a lecture of the circulating serpents of history and its various cosmologies, mean? When did words like “freedom,” like “understanding,” like “culture,” like “nature,” like “capital,” like “meme,” begin to bite, like a snake? What do their toxins do to us? And what is the antidote— what language— and in what form and color and temperature does it arrive to us?

An image I find online is captioned: “A shed snake skin in nature.” *In nature*, I read. I scroll past it. For nature only exists if consider ourselves outside of it.

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