VISUAL ESSAY 2

TRANSLATING AND TRANSFORMING TOXICITY: MOVING BETWEEN ETHNOGRAPHY AND GRAPHIC ART

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One of the principal means through which outsiders have come to recognize histories of oil contamination in the Ecuadorian Amazon is through "Toxic Tours" in which a guide brings students, lawyers, environmental activists, journalists, and tourists to visit toxic sites. Inspired by the creative ways that the guides engage participants – inviting them to smell crude oil or to step out onto logs suspended over 3 meters of crude waste – the graphic novel *Toxic: A Tour of the Ecuadorian Amazon* immerses readers in the materiality of toxic contamination and struggles for environmental justice in everyday life. Based on 27 months of ethnographic research conducted by Fiske between 2011 and 2013, the novel narrates the discovery of crude oil in waste pits and the stories of Ecuadorian interlocutors living alongside industry through the journey of three participants on a "Toxic Tour."

Following the story of three fictional participants, readers visit the waste pits, gas flares, and homes of people living in this region. Along the way, the participants struggle with encounters with toxicity *in vivo*, seeking to make sense of the weight of histories of oil extraction in Ecuador that are woven through the air, water, soils, and the stories recounted by their guide, Donald and his young daughter, Leonela (Figures 1 and 2).

Amazonian toxic tours have been closely aligned with the plaintiffs in the longstanding *Aguinda v. Texaco* lawsuit, and rely on local figures to offer first-hand experiences with contamination and struggles for justice. By drawing on experience with oil operations – such as farm animals lost from falling into uncovered waste pits, or miscarriages from toxic exposures – Toxic Tours combine personal and anecdotal knowledge to convince visitors of the immediacy of environmental struggles with pollution.

Toxic Tours are a sensory engagement with contamination: participants pull oily soil from the ground with an auger, squish black and slippery leaves between their

FIGURE 1   Donald leads the group through the forest around the edge of the Aguarico-04 waste pit while narrating how oil operations began in Ecuador. This Toxic Tour is the first up-close encounter for these participants with the realities of oil contamination.

FIGURE 2 One opening of the gooseneck pipe sits inside the waste pit, where rainwater collects on the surface of old crude oil. When the pit becomes too full, the toxic runoff trickles through the pipe and drains down the bank and into the nearby waterways. Donald helps the participants to see aspects of the Amazonian landscape that they would not otherwise.

FIGURE 3 Billowing smoke offers readers a sense of the suffocating effects of gas flares for those in their midst. These are draft sketches that the final artwork for the *Toxic* graphic novel will be based upon.
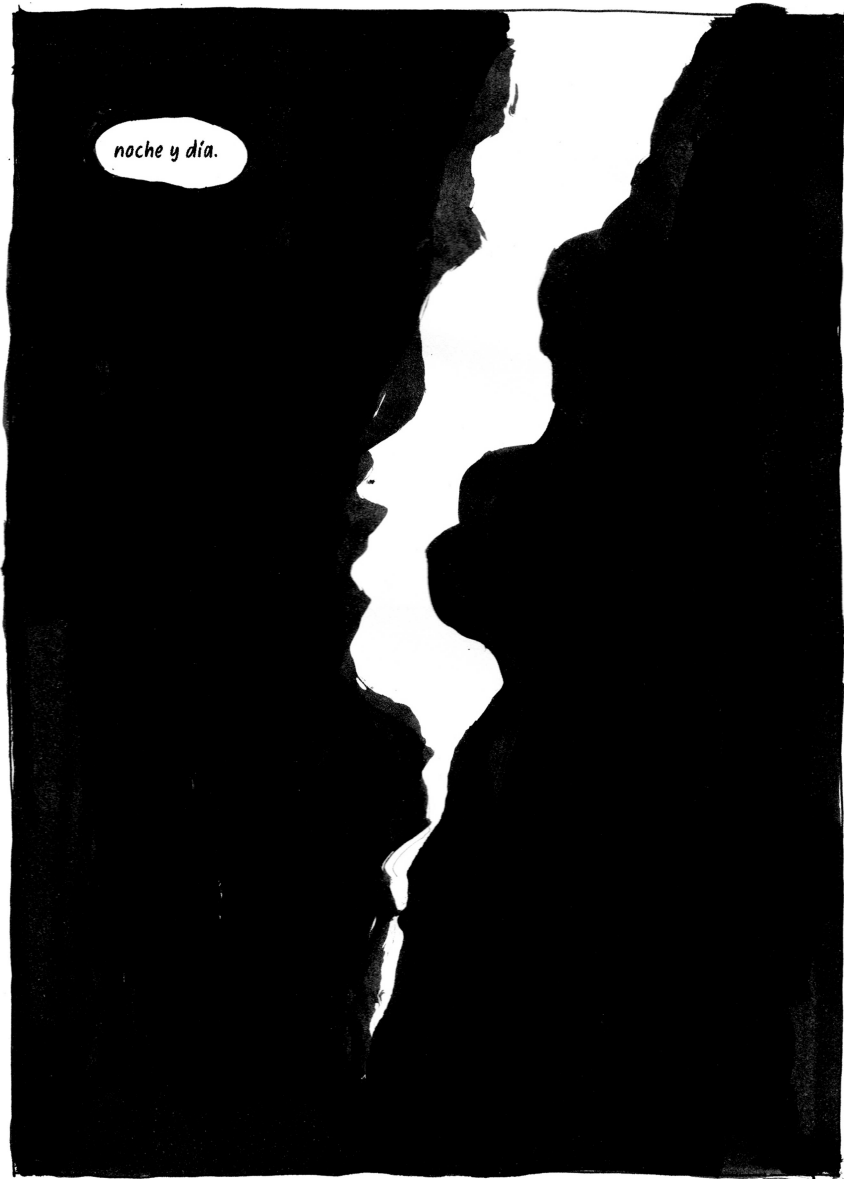
FIGURE 4   The inversion of smoke against the skies suggests the enduring effects of the chemicals released from the flares. These are draft sketches that the final artwork for the *Toxic* graphic novel will be based upon.

FIGURE 5   Using gloves, participants on the tour get to experience the feel and smell of contamination first-hand. The genre of the graphic novel is ideal for playing with the many sensory aspects of the Toxic Tour. These are draft sketches that the final artwork for the *Toxic* graphic novel will be based on.

FIGURE 6   Feeling the squish of crude between their gloved hands is a powerful experience for the participants. These moments of toxic encounter in the graphic novel also help readers to relate to the experiential aspects of the Toxic Tour. These are draft sketches that the final artwork for the Tóxico graphic novel will be based upon.

FIGURE 7   Personal narratives of Amazonian residents that are recounted to participants on the tour are visually overlaid with oil derricks and pipelines, illustrating some of the literal and metaphorical entanglements of extraction.