

Astrid Korporaal on *Stones Have Laws*

A remote part of Suriname, a community discusses whether to share their stories with the white people who have come to make a film: *Stones Have Laws*. Out of the depths of the waters, at intersections with an immense forest, through sugar cane, rocks and trees, the voices of Maroon wisdom make themselves known. They are descendants of enslaved Africans who managed to escape the plantations, to learn from indigenous peoples and to carve out a life based on the lessons of ancestors, spirits and nature. Their survival has been based on keeping things hidden from colonising forces.

*Not everything can be said. An oath has been made that certain things should remain secret.*

One of the elders speaks these words off-camera. This conviction comes from a space outside the frame. And yet, as the increasing encroachment of mineral and logging firms threatens their way of life, the community agrees to find a way to become visible on their own terms. Through a process of translation, scripting and re-appropriation, directors Lonnie van Brummelen and Siebren de Haan worked with theatre maker Tolin Erwin Alexander and poet and village captain Dorus Vrede to set the stage for an ethical exchange. Gradually, in the right order and with proper attention to rituals, the audience is permitted to enter into a story that crosses oceans and stretches through uncharted territories.

The map of this landscape is unmoored from Western accounts of Suriname, and re-spoken through the languages of the Okanisi and Saamaka peoples. What is felt and experienced is separated from mere hearsay: the word for history is spoken in the Dutch colonists' tongue. Each of the protagonists tells their part of the story in their own style, a performance amplified by ritual and the cooperation of non-human actors. The air of the film is thick with sounds, simultaneously suggesting and obscuring many more messages to which we are not yet attuned. Images seem to rise up from the mists of the forest, as a token of the gods' approval.

The laws referred to in the title of the film are not dogmatic rules. They open up spaces for interpretation and dialogue, for collective movement of imaginations into the future and the past.

From the start, we are made aware that this is a tale of mythic proportions. The common origin at its heart is ecological rather than human. It is a tale of water that submerged the land and remained, and a warning that it will rise again. Even more than its stunning depiction of the natural beauty and vitality of a world in jeopardy and the accounts of creative endurance, the value of this film lies in its appeal for audiences to enter into conversation with what is beyond our small sphere of habitual consideration.

Astrid Korporaal is a curator and writer, and PhD candidate in Visual Cultures at Goldsmiths University.