

**Weaving Resistance:  
The Amazonian Women's Struggle against  
Extractivism in Ecuador**

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## Abstract

This dissertation centers on a coalition of women leaders from seven different indigenous nationalities in the south-central Ecuadorian Amazon who have organized against oil and mining projects in their territories. These women, who call themselves the *Mujeres Amazónicas* (Amazonian Women), confronted the Ecuadorian government with their declaration for a *Kawsak Sacha* (Living Forest) at the 2013 “March for Life” and have emerged as some of the most visible actors in Indigenous and anti-extractive movements across Latin America. Based on my co-labor ethnography with five members of this coalition, this dissertation combines historical and ethnographic analysis with decolonial, indigenous, and feminist theory to explore how the Amazonian Women produce their own ways of doing politics.

The dissertation is organized into two parts. The first part, composed of three chapters, advances a historical, methodological, and theoretical approach to “co-labor” and “rexistance.” A concept in dialogue with decolonial theorizations of *re-existencia* (re-existence), rexistance refers to how the Amazonian Women merge public expressions of resistance (such as mobilizations, protest marches, and other actions) with those everyday practices that reproduce life. Rexistance is, however, not just an analytical concept but an imagistic and ethnographic one as well, a product of my dialogue with the Amazonian Women’s self-descriptions. More specifically, my use of the term rexistance is inspired by an image that one member of the Amazonian Women wove into one of her *artesanías* (handicrafts) called “the Weaving Spider.” In her description of the Weaving Spider, this indigenous leader revealed how Amazonian women are spider-like themselves: they weave their own webs to sustain themselves, their extended families, and what they call their “historical territorial struggle” at the same time. Rexistance challenges interpretations of indigenous women’s organizing that obscure how these leaders emerged as active and long-term members of the broader Indigenous Movement. It also shows how their organizing cannot be understood as a mere act of resisting—that is, as simply rejecting or opposing state and extractive intervention—but must be seen within a more expansive web of practices that connect their everyday life to their political organizing. The first part of the dissertation sets the



stage and develops the importance of analyses that expand on the boundaries of the social scientific study of resistance.

The second part of the dissertation, which also comprises three chapters, focuses on three ethnographic motifs present in my co-labor with members of the Amazonian Women. The three motifs reveal the plurality of practices and relations through which these leaders sustain, reproduce, and represent their own struggle: *artesanías* (handicrafts), practices of forest-making (activities that make the forest into a living entity), and allyship (with urban environmentalists and international actors). All three enable the Amazonian Women's organizational strategies and point to the material dimension of their politics. There is a form of politics that artfully connects different facets of their struggle: from their arduous public mobilizations extending from the forest to highland cities, to the practices of weaving *artesanías* that sustain their livelihoods, to the forest-making practice of cultivating land and plants like yucca, to their written proposal for the "Living Forest" and allyship with international activists. Taken together, the three ethnographic chapters in part two reveal the plurality of practices and relations through which these leaders sustain, reproduce, and represent their own struggle.

*To the Mujeres Amazónicas, who fight with their songs, dreams, and the strength of  
the Living Forest.*

*And to the memory of my abuelos, Cesar Sempértégui and Carlos Barreiros.*

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## Acknowledgements

This project was born in late 2013 from a desire to understand one of the most important social movements in Latin America, the Indigenous Movement in Ecuador. Ecuador is my place of birth, and my childhood memories are marked by moments of political instability and family migration that followed the financial crisis of the year 2000. But they are also marked by an Indigenous Movement with the political strength to resist the advance of economic austerity and the popular legitimation to remove neoliberal elites from power. By 2013, however, I was a Master's student in Political Theory in Frankfurt, Germany, and the Ecuadorian political landscape was different than the one I grew up in during the 1990s and 2000s. Following a popular Constituent Assembly that had captured my young political imagination, a pro-austerity neoliberal government was replaced by a left-wing administration pushing a developmentalist and redistributive political agenda that would soon be called "neo-extractivism." Indigenous resistance was no longer unified against the implementation of a neoliberal agenda; rather, it was primarily (though not only) focused on opposing the massive expansion of oil and mining projects in indigenous and peasant territories. And now indigenous women, who have always been active members in the Indigenous Movement, were taking over spaces of public mobilization and political visibility in the anti-extractive resistance. In a sense, my project started when a group of indigenous leaders from the Ecuadorian Amazon, the *Mujeres Amazónicas*, organized their march against extractive expansion in October 2013. This protest march laid the seed that would grow into this dissertation project on their territorial struggle three years later.

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I now return to where I began these acknowledgments. This dissertation is dedicated to the *Mujeres Amazónicas* network. Their political activism has transformed my thinking and has taught me that it is the vital substance of the everyday that sustains anti-extractive resistance. I want to express my special gratitude to five members of this network: Zoila Castillo, Nancy Santi, Rosa Gualinga, Salomé Aranda and Elvia Dagua. Our countless conversations and trips together inspires and nourishes every part of this dissertation. Our co-labor makes them co-authors of many pages that follow.

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## Preface

### The “Body” of the Dissertation

“If the thesis were a body. [...] Because when you think about it as a human body it connects you with your emotions as well. You can locate each process of the thesis in that body, in the mind, in the heart. What things do you locate here, what things do you locate there.” (Member of the *Miradas Críticas del Territorio desde el Feminismo* collective, interview, August 22, 2018, Quito)

This dissertation is a *body*, but not just a written body. Like a living body that is rooted in complex webs of relations, places, affects, and dis-affects, it is constituted by real-life and place-based relations that have transformed me and others. If I were to imagine this dissertation as a human body, as the member of the Latin American feminist collective *Miradas Críticas del Territorio desde el Feminismo* quoted above suggests, I could locate each process that brought it to life in different parts of that body. In fact, I would even say that each part of this dissertation body was gestated and shaped by particular encounters, conversations, and *compartires cotidianos* [everyday sharing moments] with people whose life and legacy I deeply admire. And, like a living body that after gestation continues its trajectory in a concrete world, this dissertation will probably continue to build relations and forge encounters in the time to come.

The living body of this dissertation originated from my co-labor with some members from the network *Mujeres Amazónicas*, the Amazonian Women, the protagonists of this manuscript. This network is constituted by indigenous women from seven different indigenous nationalities in the Ecuadorian Amazon, who have resisted and *rexisited* the implementation of extractive projects in their territories and communities. While their anti-extractive fight is the argumentative line that connects each body-member of this dissertation, the analysis to be offered in what follows goes beyond a mere reflection on how a specific group of people resists oil and mining projects. This dissertation is primarily animated by a drive to understand how the political organizing of the Amazonian Women inspires questions related to the sustenance and possibility of human and non-human life *in the context* of the continuous threat of extractive occupation.

Before I realized the centrality of these questions of sustenance and the possibility of life in the Amazonian Women’s organizing, I began my dissertation by

researching how the *Mujeres Amazónicas* challenged and resisted the Ecuadorian state's nationalist discourse as well as developmental and extractive projects in their territories. In 2013, the Amazonian Women confronted the Ecuadorian government's plans to expand oil and mining projects in their territories with their declaration for a *Kawsak Sacha* [Living Forest in Kichwa]. By organizing an eight-day long march called the "March for Life" that arrived in Quito on October 22, 2013, these Amazonian leaders emerged as some of the most visible actors in Indigenous and anti-extractive movements across Latin America. Immediately after their "March for Life," I started following their protests, public declarations, and speeches on the internet as an international student living in Germany.

This initial period of interest in the Amazonian Women's mobilization was motivated by my longing to understand what was happening with Ecuador's politics. As an Ecuadorian who grew up in Quito during the neoliberal 1990s and who was politicized by the arrival of a self-declared anti-neoliberal, left-wing government in 2007, for me the year 2013 symbolized a confirmation of this government's extractive agenda. This agenda not only continued Ecuador's economic dependency on the exportation of primary resources and its geopolitical position in capitalism's extractive periphery, but also broke any type of accountability and dialogue with the anti-neoliberal social movements that helped this government come to power, including the prominent Indigenous Movement. Even though extraction had already started with the 2009 Mining Law, the dispute reached its climax when the government of then-president Rafael Correa, following the licensing process of the 11th oil round, decided not to renew the Yasuní Initiative<sup>1</sup> in 2013. The initiative, adopted by Correa in 2008, left oil reserves under the ground indefinitely in the Yasuní National Park. In 2013, the government declared the exploitation of oil in the Yasuní a national interest and a necessary step in its mission to end poverty and benefit the entire nation through public investment coming from extractive industries (see Vallejo 2014). Extractivism thus became the main dispute between a pro-extractive left-wing government, with a technocratic view of social spending and socio-economic redistribution, and anti-

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<sup>1</sup>Available from: <https://sitio.yasunidos.org/es/yasunidos/cronologia-de-hechos> (Accessed: August 12, 2020)

extractive social movements, with a critique of state-driven capitalism based on the continuous expansion of extractivism through a developmental agenda.<sup>2</sup>

The Amazonian Women organized their march with a discourse that confronted extractivism and the developmental state. Besides their explicit rejection of the 11th oil round and exploitation in the Yasuní National Park in their Living Forest Declaration (*Declaratoria del Kawsak Sacha*, October 2013), members from the Amazonian Women often questioned the state's developmental promises during their public interventions: "Where have we been during the distribution of the money from [oil] resources? We are not becoming anything!" (Waorani leader Alicia Cahuilla, speech at the National Assembly, October 2013, transcribed by the *Colectivo Miradas Críticas del Territorio desde el Feminismo* 2014, 78). Focusing on their political organizing, I thought, would bring me closer to a better understanding of the contemporary extractive state represented by a self-declared left-wing government, and to an understanding of how women from grassroots communities are shaping the anti-extractive, decolonial, and indigenous resistance in Ecuador.

It was in March 2016, when I visited Ecuador's Amazon and personally met some Amazonian leaders during a mobilization organized by the Amazonian Women, that I began to find my original research question both limited and limiting. My thinking was mainly entrapped in my desire to find answers about the extractive state in what I thought was one of the most radical anti-extractive resistance movements in Ecuador. Consequently, this question did not investigate what really sustains the Amazonian Women's "anti-extractive resistance" and makes their organizing not merely reactive to state power and extractivism. After many conversations, bus rides, and *guayusa*-mornings with these Amazonian activists, I started to realize that it is the vital substance of the everyday, the creative modes of "reistance" that make "protest" not an isolated object of analysis.

It was only after my first ethnographic visits in the Ecuadorian Amazon, then, that my project began to focus on and to think in terms of the *everyday*. This shift in my analysis did not exclude conceptual or historical thinking, however. As this dissertation shows, historical analysis and a deep engagement with the concepts and expressions that the Amazonian Women have produced through their public

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<sup>2</sup>For an in-depth and careful analysis on the politics of resource extraction during Ecuador's pink-tide government, see Thea Riofrancos' 2020 book *Resource Radicals: From Petro-Nationalism to Post-Extractivism in Ecuador*.

declarations, interventions, and *artesanías* [handicrafts] are a central part of my ongoing reflections about their organizing. In fact, the everyday is what challenges the official historical narrative about the Amazon as an “empty space” and what situates concepts like *Kawsak Sacha* in Amazonian communities’ practices of living. The everyday is also what troubled our co-labor relationship—an ethnographic term that I adopt from Marisol de la Cadena (2015) to describe my and the Amazonian leaders’ interests in working with each other—since it showed us how difficult it is to work across our power differentials and through our partial connections. Last but not least, the everyday forced my analysis to think harder about myself as an activist in struggle against the expansion of oil and mining projects in Ecuador.

Even though I have learnt a great deal about the extractive and developmental state by co-laboring with members from the *Mujeres Amazónicas*, this dissertation is primarily motivated by what I call the Amazonian Women’s “rexistance” against extractive occupation. Rexistance is a concept, in dialogue with decolonial theorizations on “re-existence,” that refers to how the Amazonian Women merge public expressions of resistance (such as mobilizations, protest marches, and other public actions) with those everyday practices that reproduce life. Rexistance is, nevertheless, not only an analytical concept but an imagistic and ethnographic one as well, a product of my co-labor and dialogue with the Amazonian Women’s descriptions of themselves and their struggle. My use of the term rexistance is indeed inspired by an image that one of my co-laborers wove into one of her *artesanías*, “the Weaving Spider.” In her own description of the Weaving Spider, this indigenous leader revealed how Amazonian women are spider-like themselves, because they weave their own web to sustain themselves, their extended families, and what they call their “historical territorial struggle” at the same time. Rexistance thus challenges interpretations of the Amazonian Women’s organizing that obscure how these leaders emerged as active and long-term members of the Indigenous Movement. It also shows how their organizing cannot be understood as a mere act of resisting, in terms of simply rejecting or opposing state and extractive intervention, because it is characterized by a broader web of practices that connects everyday life and political organizing.

The centrality of rexistance not only shows the influence that the Amazonian Women’s descriptions about themselves and their struggle have had on the analytical focus of this dissertation, but also reveals the transformative dimensions that real-world relations have exerted on my thinking and, most importantly, the always collective

ways in which knowledge is produced and reproduced. While my initial question was motivated by my personal interest in knowing more about the state and anti-extractive politics, “going into the field” transformed this personal enterprise into a co-labor project that generated its own questions. Furthermore, it is the co-labor relationship with members from the Amazonian Women and the effects of this relationship on me which have brought this dissertation body to life. Co-labor, in other words, is the heart that infuses each member of the body of this dissertation with existence. Even if the single authorship of the doctoral manuscript conceals the collective process behind this dissertation, each chapter should be understood as the product of a five-year-long relationship with the Amazonian Women.

## **Chapter Overview**

The dissertation body is organized into two parts. The first part, comprised of three chapters, advances a historical, methodological, and theoretical approach to co-labor and resistance. This work sets the stage, and develops analyses that expand on the boundaries of the study of resistance in the social sciences. Then, in the second part of the dissertation, I focus on three ethnographic motifs present in my co-labor with members from the Amazonian Women.

These motifs, individually addressed in three different chapters, are product of a process of “mapping” the ethnographic material I gathered during the last years of research visits in the rainforest. More specifically, these motifs emerged as the organizing and intersecting threads between seemingly disconnected reflections, dialogues, and memories after a long and often emotionally intense process of transcribing my recorded interviews and conversations, and after going through my ethnographic fieldnotes and visual materials between 2016 and 2019. At the same time, the motifs became malleable subjects that allowed me to think about the plurality of practices and relations through which the Amazonian Women sustain, reproduce, and represent their own struggle. These are the motifs of *artesanías*, practices of forest-making (activities that make the forest into a living entity), and allyship (with urban environmentalists and international actors).

The introductory chapter, entitled “The Amazonian Women: Sustaining the Indigenous Struggle, Taking Over the Space,” offers a more detailed and historical contextualization of the Amazonian Women’s organizing, than what I have offered in

this preface. I begin by describing the period when the Amazonian Women organized their first march in 2013, a time that was characterized by legislation favorable to extractive industries and by a developmental model based on the expansion of the extractive frontier especially in Ecuador's rainforest. Then, I explain how the Amazonian Women's organizing cannot be understood as a mere reaction to this recent period of extractive expansion, and show how this dissertation's research inquiry is in dialogue with the Amazonian leaders' self-definitions and descriptions of themselves and their struggle. In a second step, I offer a historical analysis of the Amazonian Women as part of the historical indigenous struggle against extractivism. I analyze their activism as being characterized by two elements: first, "sustaining" the indigenous historical struggle; and second, what some Amazonian women leaders call "taking over the space" within their indigenous organizations. Finally, in the closing section, I give a brief analysis of the Amazonian Women as a collective and malleable subject that constantly incorporates new leaders into its network. It is this malleable, yet complex political subject called *Mujeres Amazónicas*, who is the protagonist of this written body.

Chapter Two, entitled "Co-Labor as Methodology: Between Rooted Thinking and Ethnography," offers an overview of my research over the past several years. It begins with an epistemological explanation of the different theoretical traditions that guided my ethnographic co-labor with the Amazonian Women as well as my inquiry throughout this dissertation. These traditions and thinkers not only guided me through my stays in Ecuador, but also inspired me to "make space" for co-labor to be a transformative and dialogical relation. The second part of the chapter begins with a brief overview of the different activities that constitute my co-labor ethnography with the Amazonian Women. I then explain why my first ethnographic research stays were crucial for developing a co-labor relation with some Amazonian leaders. I also recount the different activities that characterized our co-labor relationship during my longest research stay in Ecuador between 2018 and 2019. In the third and final part, I explain how I analyzed and organized—or, in my case, "mapped"—the ethnographic data that resulted from my co-labor with the Amazonian Women, and how I use it in the rest of the dissertation.

In Chapter Three, "Rexistance: A Theory of Resistance and the Everyday," I center on the concept of reistance. In the first part, I explain how I initially approached the Amazonian Women's struggle as a form of resistance and yet, through their descriptions of their struggle and our co-labor, I ultimately came to understand it as a

form of resistance. Here I also put the concept of resistance in dialogue with decolonial theorizations of *re-existencia*, re-existence. Thereafter, I analyze how the Amazonian Women's resistance is characterized by their ability to express interdependence between indigenous and non-indigenous ways of living, and how this framing of their struggle should be understood as an "ontological design" that centers life and its interconnectedness. In the second part, I offer a historical reconstruction of state power in the Amazon, a history marked by the partial absence of the nation-state and by patriarchal logics of state intervention and occupation. This historical perspective allows for a different way of seeing how the Amazonian Women challenge the structural effects that the expansion of extractive projects exert on their communities, without limiting their resistance to a mere "reaction" to those effects. Finally, in the conclusion, I explain how the following chapters advance an analysis of resistance by exploring the concrete ways in which the Amazonian Women connect everyday practices with the more "public" practices in their territorial struggle.

Chapter Four, "Weaving Stories between Worlds: Making the *Artesanía Intelectual*," examines the important role of *artesanías* in my co-laborers' lives and territorial struggle. In the first sections, I reflect on why *artesanías* are more than mere cultural commodities. I do this by sharing important ethnographic moments with particular Amazonian co-laborers who, despite being economically dependent on selling their *artesanías*, resist weaving these objects *qua* commodities. In the second part of this chapter, I challenge accounts that interpret Amazonian material culture merely as objects carrying cultural meaning. I do this by explaining how *artesanías* and their materiality are themselves "woven stories" that tell us about important aspects about the Amazonian Women's lives and territorial struggle. In the third and final part of this chapter, I draw from Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui's understanding of *artesanía intelectual* [intellectual handicraft] as an important concept for understanding *artesanías* as "woven stories" that communicate lived experience (Rivera Cusicanqui 2015, 176). This allows me to engage in a partially connected dialogue with two examples of *artesanía intelectual*, which were produced by two of my Amazonian co-laborers: the *Mujer Mukawa* by Nancy Santi and the *Araña Tejedora* by Elvia Dagua. These *artesanías* are "woven stories" that give us important information about the Amazonian Women's reproductive labor and territorial struggle for resistance.

In Chapter Five, "Decolonizing the Anti-Extractive Struggle: The Amazonian Women's Practices of Forest-Making," I examine how affective relations between

human and non-human life in the forest nourish the Amazonian Women's political discourse, imaginaries, and strategies against extractive occupation. I begin by exploring their proposal to declare the Amazon *Kawsak Sacha*, which was publicly presented to the Ecuadorian National Assembly in 2013. This proposal weaves together a variety of "discourses"—including the discourse of indigenous autonomy and territoriality, along with environmentalist and ecofeminist discourses, among others—in order to challenge the state's colonial and neo-extractive agenda in the Ecuadorian Amazon. Secondly, I show how the Amazonian Women's *Kawsak Sacha* declaration goes beyond a discursive artifact and examine those practices that the document itself wants to make visible. Such practices of reproducing human and non-human life in the Amazon are what I call "practices of forest-making." In the last sections of the chapter, I focus on three specific practices of forest-making: cultivating the land, sharing dreams in the mornings, and singing with a purpose. By connecting different ethnographic moments, I show how these practices travel from the forest to the city and nourish the Amazonian Women's diverse political activities and interventions. With this analysis, I shed light on how the Amazonian Women are publicly decolonizing Western divisions between humans and nature that still mark contemporary imaginaries of the Amazon as an untouched territory to be preserved, and are thus decolonizing the anti-extractive struggle writ large.

Chapter Six, entitled "The Amazonian Women and Ecofeminists: Becoming-Together in Allyship," reflects on the allyship between the Amazonian Women, urban activists, and myself. The first sections of this chapter offer an overview of how relations of allyship have been examined by critical race theorists, critical whiteness theorists, and Amazonian studies focusing on alliances between indigenous and environmental activists. This overview allows me to contextualize my own usage of the term allyship and explain how relations between the Amazonian Women and their allies contain complicated and even contradictory modes of cooperation, as well as processes of "becoming-together." Here I also analyze how my own co-labor with the Amazonian Women evolved into a relation of allyship. I then examine the Amazonian Women's allyship with environmental and feminist activists, with a focus on the historical dynamics underlying their complicated relationship. Additionally, I explore their process of becoming-together by explaining how they simultaneously negotiate their relationships and extend each other's positions. Finally, I examine the tensions that allyship relations between the Amazonian Women and urban activists have created



within indigenous organizations. These tensions have required the Amazonian Women to find ways to negotiate the space of visibility they have gained through their allies with their *compañeros* and *compañeras* from the indigenous movement.

Finally, the conclusion offers an analysis of the Amazonian Women's politics of resistance by explicitly connecting it to the different motifs examined in this dissertation—*artesanías*, practices of forest-making, and allyship. Thereafter, I reflect on the contribution of this reading on the Amazonian Women's politics to academic and political analyses of neo-extractivism, indigenous politics, and women-led anti-extractive struggles in Latin America. Finally, I offer an overview of what has happened since 2019 (the period after I finished my last ethnographic visit in Ecuador), and what we can learn from the Amazonian Women's resistance in order to confront the current pandemic and the rampant environmental degradation of the Amazon.

# Chapter One – The Amazonian Women: Sustaining the Indigenous Struggle, Taking Over the Space

## Introduction

“As an Amazonian woman, on behalf of all the Amazonian Women, I want to tell you that we have come from the rainforest on our feet, leaving our children at home, leaving our responsibilities at home. Because, thinking that this was a decent and sovereign State, we want the Ecuadorian State to respond to the needs of Ecuador’s peoples and [indigenous] nationalities. We thought of it as a Plurinational State, that the State is us. However, we are not fairly consulted. That hurts us. [...] It hurts my soul when our little children have had to give up their lives, drowning in teargas bombs. Our brothers and sisters have died! That means that our President orders armed men to attack us—when we come in a peaceful struggle, Mr. President! What is happening in this Plurinational State? We cannot talk about development, when our territories, where we live, have being exploited for hundreds of years! They are granted as concessions, as new oil blocks! That really affects us. That is also why, as Amazonian women, we have come to tell you, Mr. President, to put yourself in our shoes and to put yourself in our conscience. [...] I do not feel alone, because this has been a just struggle from all Ecuadorian peoples—*mestizos*,<sup>3</sup> peasants, blacks, Afros, indigenous peoples, social sectors united in one voice.”  
(Miriam Cisneros, public speech during the live-streamed “Peace Dialogue” with the Ecuadorian government, October 13, 2019, Quito)<sup>4</sup>

Miriam Cisneros, former *Kuraka* [President] of the Kichwa *Pueblo* of Sarayaku from the Ecuadorian Amazon, shared these words twelve days into a nationwide strike against a structural reform package [*paquetazo* in Ecuadorian parlance] backed by the International Monetary Fund (IMF). After the Ecuadorian government announced the austerity *paquetazo* on October 1, 2019, it took less than one day for people to show their discontent through massive demonstrations in the streets. As Cisneros’ words reveal, the strike was met with unprecedented violence by the state. Eleven protesters died, including the indigenous leader Inocencio Tucumbi; hundreds of people were fatally injured; and many hundreds were arrested during violent clashes with the police and the military.<sup>5</sup> President Lenin Moreno declared a State of Exception across the entire national territory, giving the armed forces exceptional prerogatives to

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<sup>3</sup>*Mestizo* or *mestiza* is a term used in Latin America to refer to a person of a combined European and indigenous American descent.

<sup>4</sup>Available from: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DbISHnMP9Lc> (Accessed: April 19, 2021)

<sup>5</sup>Available from: <https://www.elcomercio.com/actualidad/conaie-muerte-edgar-yucailla-arbolito.html> (Accessed: April 19, 2021)

“reestablish public order.” Moments of brutal repression ensued, unparalleled in Ecuador’s recent history. In one such instance, mounted policemen threw tear gas bombs on the *Casa de la Cultura*, a theater that became a humanitarian shelter for indigenous families who had traveled to Quito from their communities to protest against the structural violence of neoliberal austerity.<sup>6</sup>

It is worth looking at this display of violence with the suspicion that we are witnessing the birth of a new monster, a new type of postcolonial state that, as recent conceptualizations would have it, mutates alongside neoliberalism’s multiple trajectories across Latin America and the world (Callison and Manfredi 2020). In the case of Ecuador, it is also worth looking at the period of gestation of this new monster. This ten-year-long period, under former President Rafael Correa, was a mix of social spending and redistributive policies, but also of unfulfilled progressive promises, the expansion of the extractive frontier, criminalization and repression of the social protest, strengthening of the armed forces and the surveillance state, and the accumulation international debt to be repaid with dollars and petroleum.<sup>7</sup> Today, the initial political project of Correa and his party *Alianza País*, which aimed at freeing the country from the so-called “Washington Consensus,”<sup>8</sup> has been replaced by the violent implementation of a new austerity package dictated by the IMF. Lenin Moreno, Correa’s successor and former Vice President for six years (2007-2013), mobilized the army prepared for an intrastate war last October.<sup>9</sup> The enemy: entities and organizations resisting the “structural adjustment,” such as the indigenous movement that Cisneros is part of.

This dissertation was researched and written during this same period of the Ecuadorian state’s mutation. It does not, however, take the state as its main object of inquiry. Rather, the reflections contained in this dissertation are product of an ongoing learning process with some of the peoples who have historically been defending their communities and territories against the extractive occupation the state both enables and

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<sup>6</sup>Available from: [https://www.eldiario.es/interferencias/Ecuador\\_6\\_950914902.html](https://www.eldiario.es/interferencias/Ecuador_6_950914902.html) (Accessed: April 19, 2021)

<sup>7</sup>Available from: <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/12/24/world/americas/ecuador-china-dam.html> (Accessed: April 19, 2021)

<sup>8</sup>Throughout the 90s, the “Washington Consensus” was used to refer to a package of short-term measures and adjustment programs designed and supported by financial institutions such as the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, and the U.S. Treasury (Grugel, Riggirozzi, Thirkell-White 2008, 505).

<sup>9</sup>These are words from Minister of Defense, Oswaldo Jarrín: <https://www.elcomercio.com/actualidad/oswaldo-jarrin-grupos-poderosos.html> (Accessed: April 19, 2021)

pursues itself. As Cisneros' words show, indigenous peoples have had no respite from such colonial and extractive occupation. On the contrary, the new monster seems to care less about what violent means it must employ to accomplish its extractive ends. Despite this increase of state violence, the indigenous movement is a political force too strong to be ignored or defeated. In fact, the nationwide strike in October, led by the Confederation of Indigenous Nationalities of Ecuador (CONAIE), forced the Ecuadorian government to revoke Decree 883, part of the controversial IMF austerity package that included a sharp increase in fuel costs.<sup>10</sup> But this triumph, as the Kichwa leader Patricia Gualinga from Sarayaku reminded us, “had been paid with indigenous lives [...] just as in all our history.”<sup>11</sup>

Here it is important to mention that the presence of the indigenous movement as the leading force of this nationwide strike—which also comprised of student movements, feminist collectives, labor unions, and peasant organizations<sup>12</sup>—shaped the special and successful character of this mass mobilization. The October strike, or “*el paro*,” was not simply a collective decision to stop working and paralyze the country. It was also, as the indigenous Achuar leader and CONAIE's President Jaime Vargas explained, a *levantamiento indígena y popular*—a popular indigenous uprising.<sup>13</sup> The *levantamiento indígena* has become part of the indigenous movement's political lexicon and contemporary plurinational<sup>14</sup> history since the nationwide *levantamientos indígenas* in 1990 and in 1992. During these two mass mobilizations, indigenous communities from the highlands and the Amazon region marched hundreds of kilometers to the capital city of Quito, bringing an array of demands that included the legalization of indigenous territories, the autonomy of intercultural bilingual education, and the rewriting and adoption of a new constitution (Sawyer 2004, 17ff.; Simbaña 2005, 201ff.).

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<sup>10</sup>Available from: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/oct/14/ecuador-protests-end-after-deal-struck-with-indigenous-leaders> (Accessed: April 19, 2021)

<sup>11</sup>Available from: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/oct/16/ecuador-indigenous-protesters-bittersweet-triumph> (Accessed: April 19, 2021)

<sup>12</sup>Available from: <https://www.cespi.it/it/eventi-attualita/dibattiti/america-latina-que-pasa/la-protesta-social-de-octubre-en-ecuador#.XnkrWXIfMlg.facebook> (Accessed: April 19, 2021)

<sup>13</sup>Available from: <http://www.resumenlatinoamericano.org/2020/01/14/ecuador-entrevista-a-jaime-vargas-presidente-de-la-conaie-el-levantamiento-de-octubre-fue-diez-veces-mas-grande-que-el-primer-levantamiento-del-ano-90/> (Accessed: April 19, 2021)

<sup>14</sup>Plurinationality is an indigenous political proposal, adopted in the 2008 Ecuadorian Constitution, according to which the unity of the nation is based on its recognition of it as a plural nation comprised by different peoples and indigenous nationalities.

The 2019 *levantamiento indígena* was a direct response to the government's neoliberal measures, which were affecting indigenous peoples as well as the broader population. However, it also actualized territorial demands by calling for the termination of all oil and mining projects in indigenous and peasant territories (Press Release from CONAIE, October 10, 2019). On the organizational level, the recent *levantamiento*, like those of the 1990s, mobilized indigenous peoples within their community bases and then extended itself across the national territory (Guerrero 1995, 124). This led to the economic, social, and political paralysis of the country for several days, the occupation of public space, like the capital city of Quito and interregional roads, and the symbolic appropriation of these public spaces—a strategy that forced the state to engage the protesters and respond to their demands.

Another important feature of these nation-wide *levantamientos indígenas* is that their organizing and upholding exceeds the organizational possibilities of any other social movement in Ecuador. In other words, there is no movement that can mobilize entire communities and paralyze the country as effectively as the indigenous movement in Ecuador. Of course, other sectors of Ecuadorian society played a critical role in the 2019 October strike. This was especially the case of those people who not only joined the protests against the IMF's *paquetazo* on the streets, but who, through their neighborhood, feminist, or student organizations, shaped the plural front of demands that gave the strike its own political dynamic in the city. These organizations were crucial in supporting and sustaining the *levantamiento indígena y popular* in Quito, where humanitarian shelters, community kitchens, and medical attention stations for the wounded were created in spite of the constant and brutal repression of the armed forces.<sup>15</sup> More than just expressing solidarity with the *compañeros y compañeras indígenas*, these organizations sustained the struggle against neoliberal austerity through collective acts of endurance. The *levantamiento*, as Cisneros notes, was shared by “*mestizos*, peasants, blacks, Afros, indigenous peoples, social sectors united in one voice.”

Nevertheless, it was the images of indigenous communities blocking the major highways of the country, cutting off food supplies, and flooding the streets of Quito that made the government tremble and led Lenin Moreno to move his presidency to the

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<sup>15</sup> Available from: [https://www.eldiario.es/interferencias/Ecuador\\_6\\_950914902.html](https://www.eldiario.es/interferencias/Ecuador_6_950914902.html) (Accessed: April 19, 2021)

city of Guayaquil. Political elites and *mestizo* journalists were left wondering how so many *indios* managed to come into the city. Did former President Correa's political allies, now opposing Moreno's government, pay them?<sup>16</sup> Or were they financed by external forces, like the Venezuelan government, to destabilize the country?

As during the 1990 *levantamiento*, when Ecuadorian political elites accused domestic and foreign groups of manipulating and using the *indios* (Pequeño 2007, 16), the current *mestizo* official discourse keeps denying indigenous peoples any autonomous capacity of collective action. For these colonial and rentier elites, it is truly impossible to imagine that there is a complex set of communitarian and territorial practices that make these *levantamientos* possible. Even though the mass mobilization of indigenous peoples into public spaces is what catches our attention, it is this set of practices and relations that makes the *levantamiento indígena* no spontaneous act. This depiction of the *levantamiento* is not an idealization of indigenous practices in Ecuador, but rather an acknowledgement of indigenous peoples' *lucha histórica* [historical struggle] against colonial and capitalist occupation, and the continuation and transformation of indigenous politics vis-à-vis the Ecuadorian state (Macas 2002). To ignore their *lucha histórica* is to live in a temporality of servitude, which many political elites seek to perpetuate by taking on the neoliberal debt at the international level.

This understanding of indigenous *levantamientos*, as dependent on practices and relations that precede public expressions of resistance, also acknowledges its transformative character. As the Kichwa leader Carmen Lozano from Saraguru told me during an interview, a *levantamiento* signalizes an "awakening" into a new time of indigenous struggle for future generations, "our fight is forever, for the future of our sons and daughters who will come" (interview, August 8, 2018, Quito). Indeed, the name of the Andean organization ECUARUNARI, where Lozano was an elected representative until 2019, is *Ecuador Runakunapak Rikcharimui* that means "Awakening of Ecuador's Indigenous Peoples." The 2019 *levantamiento* was thus not only an "up-rising," but it also implied a process of "rising-up" into a new time of struggle against a postcolonial state in mutation.

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<sup>16</sup>Available from: <https://4pelagatos.com/2019/10/04/paro-la-izquierda-lleva-otra-vez-agua-al-molino-de-correa/> (Accessed: April 19, 2021)

This dissertation is product of my relationship and co-labor<sup>17</sup> ethnography with a group of indigenous women leaders who, like Miriam Cisneros, Patricia Gualinga and Carmen Lozano, have been in the midst of preparing and “awakening” into this new time of struggle. In particular, it centers on the Amazonian Women from the south-central Ecuadorian Amazon.<sup>18</sup> Having organized the “March for Life” against oil and mining projects in October 2013, this group of Amazonian women have continued to organize as a network ever since and as active members of their indigenous organizations against the expansion of extractive projects in their territories since 2013. Members of the Amazonian Women’s network helped also mobilize their community bases and indigenous organizations during the 2019 *levantamiento indígena y popular*. While some of them, like Miriam Cisneros, joined the protests in Quito, others stayed in the Amazonian province of Pastaza, organizing and sustaining the struggle as local leaders.

The analysis advanced by the following chapters takes its point of departure in the Amazonian Women’s public expressions of resistance—their marches, protests, occupation of governmental buildings, public speeches, and political declarations. This will serve as an ethnographic position of access to dig deeper into the entanglement of territorial and communitarian practices that sustain their public mobilizations. Indeed, the Amazonian Women’s politics cannot be separated from the complex relations that organize and structure their everyday life as political leaders in the cities, in their communities, and in their territories. While moments of public visibility have catapulted members of the Amazonian Women’s network as crucial actors of the indigenous movement and the anti-extractive struggle at large, it is their relations to their communities and the rainforest that nourish the Amazonian Women’s politics and sustain their struggle in the city.

It was a challenge to recognize the importance of the Amazonian Women’s territorial and communitarian relations in their anti-extractive struggle. This challenge had less to do with lack of “knowledge”—i.e. it had less to do with the amount

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<sup>17</sup>As mentioned in this dissertation’s Preface, co-labor is a term and ethnographic relation that I adopt from Marisol de la Cadena (2015). It refers to the relationship I and some members from the Amazonian Women have built in the last years, defined by mine and their interests in working with each other. I expand on this concept in Chapter Two.

<sup>18</sup>The activists have called themselves *las Mujeres Amazónicas*, the “Amazonian Women,” in their declarations and public announcements (see *Mujeres Amazónicas del Centro Sur* 2013, 2016), and academic publications have adopted this description to refer to their mobilization (see García-Torres 2017; Vallejo and García-Torres 2017; Bravo and Vallejo 2019; Walsh 2015).

Amazonian literature I could read in preparation for the field—than with my ability to “see.” By this I mean that, as a researcher, I was initially unable to see the connections between the Amazonian Women’s anti-extractive struggle and their everyday struggles. It was a learning process to realize that their protest, their politics, and their public discourse vis-à-vis the state are nourished and sustained by their relations to their communities, their affective relations to human and non-human life in the rainforest, and the everyday practices that weave together the different worlds these women transit. This realization would have not been possible without the co-labor relationship I developed with some of these Amazonian women leaders. Shared moments of intimacy, long and sustained conversations, and my own involvement in their struggle gave me the affective and mental space to start grasping these connections. In other words, it was our co-labor relation as allies and friends, and the recognition of the partiality and limitation of this same relation, as I will show later, that helped me realize that the Amazonian Women’s struggle has less to do with solely resisting the extractive state, than with their capacity to *reexist*, reproduce and sustain human and non-human life against, despite, and beyond extractive occupation.

In this introductory chapter, I offer a historical contextualization of the Amazonian Women’s organizing, and present the dissertation’s research question. I begin by describing the period when the Amazonian Women organized their first march in 2013, a time that was marked by the so-called “neo-extractive model.” This period was characterized by new legislation favorable to extractive industries and by a developmental model based on the expansion of the extractive frontier especially in Ecuador’s rainforest. Then, I explain how the Amazonian Women’s organizing cannot be understood as a mere reaction to this recent period of extractive expansion, and show how this dissertation’s research inquiry is in dialogue with the Amazonian leaders’ self-definitions and descriptions of themselves and their struggle. In a second step, I offer a historical analysis of the the Amazonian Women as part of the historical indigenous struggle against extractivism. While the Amazonian leaders have positioned themselves as visible actors in the anti-extractive struggle and have drawn the support of many urban activists and academics, their organizing cannot be understood as separated from the broader indigenous struggle. On the contrary, I analyze their activism as being characterized by two elements: first, “sustaining” the indigenous historical struggle; and second, what some Amazonian women leaders call “taking over the space” within their indigenous organizations. Finally, in the closing section, I give a brief analysis of



the Amazonian Women as a collective and malleable subject that constantly incorporates new leaders into its network. This understanding of these leaders' organizing reveals the conflictive nature of this network as it makes more space to think about internal asymmetries and sometimes contradictory positions among its different members. It is this malleable, yet complex political subject called *Mujeres Amazónicas*, who is the protagonist of this dissertation.

### **The Birth of a New State: Ecuador's Neo-Extractive Development Model**

After assuming his first mandate in 2007, Ecuador's left-oriented President Rafael Correa promised to bring the country out of its "long neoliberal night" and to find new ways of governing the economy and natural resources (Bebbington 2011, 6). This included moving Ecuador away from being a primary export economy by adopting alternative energy sources to fossil fuels and implementing the principle of *Sumak Kawsay* [Good Living], adopted into the 2008 Constitution, as an alternative to Western notions of development (Acosta 2010). As an evidence of these post-extractive promises at the beginning of his presidency, Correa committed himself to protecting the Yasuní National Park in the rainforest—a highly biodiverse area inhabited by Waorani communities and indigenous groups living in voluntary isolation. The government's proposal, led by the former Minister of Energy and Mines Alberto Acosta, consisted of indefinitely leaving oil reserves under the ground in the sensitive oilfield of ITT (Ishpingo Tambococha Tiputini) in Yasuní, if the international community compensated half of the potential revenue that Ecuador would have received if drilling the oil (Ibid.). However, in August 2013, a decree for the extraction of crude oil in the Park overthrew the initiative.<sup>19</sup>

This governmental decision should be understood as part of the Correa's neo-extractive agenda, already implemented in 2009 and characterized by new legislation favorable to extractive industries and by a developmental model based on the expansion of the extractive frontier (Lang 2016, 13; Wilson and Bayón 2017, 158). This expansion included the licensing of the 11th oil round in 2013, which divided approximately two-thirds of the Amazon into sixteen oil blocks affecting seven indigenous nationalities

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<sup>19</sup>Available from: <https://sitio.yasunidos.org/es/yasunidos/cronologia-de-hechos> (Accessed: August 12, 2020)

(Secretaria de Hidrocarburos 2013), and the inclusion of new extractive sectors such as large-scale mining projects. Even though Ecuador has been traditionally an oil-extracting country, the government has granted large parts of territory to mining companies in the provinces of Imbabura, Azuay, El Oro, Loja, Zamora Chinchipe and Morona Santiago to secure a new source of revenues (Bebbington 2012, 14). What matters about these concessions is not only their size, but how they overlap with protected areas and indigenous and peasant territories (Ibid., 10).

The increase of territories under concession and the promotion of new extractive sectors evidences that Ecuador's Citizens' Revolution, as Correa's government used to self-proclaimed itself, was not moving away from its dependency on fossil fuels. On the contrary, it was intensifying its extractive economic model and its integration in the capitalist global energy market, characterized by the so-called "commodities' boom" and the high prices of raw materials at that time (Burchardt and Dietz 2013; Peters 2016). The Ecuadorian government argued that the socio-ecological impacts of extractivism were manageable, could be compensated, or even that they had to be accepted "in light of the general benefit for the whole nation" (Gudynas 2010, 10). Furthermore, the government's extractive discourse and intervention strategies in certain territories changed dramatically. The Amazon region, for example, was explicitly integrated into national development plans and held a strategic place in governmental anti-poverty discourse that sought to refound this "abandoned" region as "*Nueva Amazonía*," a New Amazon (Vallejo 2014). The expansion of extractive projects was portrayed as a necessary means to "attack poverty" and was legitimized by a developmental model that emphasized social programs (Svampa 2011, 388): "While I am President, I will make the most of every last grain, every last drop of natural resources, to move my country as quickly as possible from poverty."<sup>20</sup> However, these programs were often characterized by clientelism as their services were not implemented as long-term redistributive social policies, but rather as economic compensation in exchange for political support (Burchardt and Dietz 2013, 188).

A primary example of the government's plan to build the "*Nueva Amazonía*" was the construction of the *Ciudades del Milenio* [Cities of the Millennium] in the northern Amazon. These cities were conceived and constructed by the governmental

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<sup>20</sup> Available from: <http://www.efeverde.com/blog/noticias/el-presidente-deecuador-promete-acabar-con-la-pobreza-de-los-indigenas-del-yasuni/> (Accessed: April 19, 2021)

company *Ecuador Estratégico* [Strategic Ecuador] and became the model for another 200 planned cities that would bring development and urbanization to indigenous and non-indigenous communities in the Amazon (Cielo, Coba, and Vallejo 2016, 125). According to Correa, the construction of these cities was an expression of the government's commitment to benefit communities located in and near exploited oil fields, who as the “real owners” of oil revenues should benefit from the development of the market economy (SENPLADES 2011 in Cielo, Coba, and Vallejo 2016, 121). The reality is that just two of these cities were finished and their residents, like in the case of the City of the Millennium in Playas de Cuyabeno, confronted different problems when moving to these urban spaces in the middle of the rainforest. Besides prohibitions set by *Ecuador Estratégico*, like not being allowed to grow crops, nor smoke meat or fish, nor prepare *chicha* [traditional manioc-based and mildly fermented drink], residents of these cities became dependent on state subsidies to keep their access to installed services such as electricity or internet. These subsidies ran out after five years of the city's termination (Ibid., 126).

After seven years of economic prosperity, the funding for these projects and other social programs were cut due to the fall of oil prices in 2014. The volatility of the commodities; prices, set by global financial markets (Mezzadra and Neilson 2017, 14), evidences the shortcomings of this neo-extractive development. The reliance on fossil fuels export also impeded to take more structural measures during Ecuador's first years of economic prosperity, like investing in the diversification of its economy (Lang 2016, 6). This not only created an economic, political and social crisis in the country, worsened by the disastrous earthquake in April 2016, but also opened the way to new international lenders interested in the extraction of oil fields and minerals, like China. As in Venezuela and Bolivia, China became Ecuador's biggest lender, offering generous credit lines that demanded impossible payments and compromised extractive resources.<sup>21</sup> In addition to paying off China's debt with oil and new loans, Ecuador granted some of its most important “strategic projects” to Chinese companies, like the Mirador Copper Project granted to Ecuacorriente, a subsidiary of the Chinese consortium CRCC-Tongguan.<sup>22</sup> This shows how despite the fact poverty and extreme

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<sup>21</sup> Available from: <http://www.eluniverso.com/noticias/2016/04/18/nota/5533056/ecuador-suscribe-credito-2000-millones-china-inversion-publica> (Accessed: April 19, 2021)

<sup>22</sup> Available from: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-ecuador-mining/ecuador-begins-large-scale-mining-at-mirador-copper-project-idUSKCN1UD36F> (Accessed: April 19, 2021)

poverty, according to the Gini coefficient, were reduced during Correa's administration, these achievements were product of a temporary period of increased oil revenues than of redistributive policies. Today, the country is paying very hard for the lack of structural progressive changes, particularly popular sectors who have "returned" to poverty due to the current economic recession, layoffs, unemployment, and lack of economic opportunities (Enríquez Bermeo 2020).

It is also important to mention the conflicts that arose between the government of the Citizen's Revolution and the social movements, who supported Correa's election in 2007 and who played an active role in the formulation of Ecuador's new Constitution in 2008. Indigenous movements, feminist collectives, environmental groups, among others, distanced themselves from the government soon after the adoption of this new Constitution. Feminist groups, for example were victims of public denigration and persecution by the state, when they raised claims in favor of the legalization of abortion, LGBTQ rights, and same-sex marriage, among other demands. Correa attacked them and declared the war against the so-called "gender ideology" revealing his conservative stands.<sup>23</sup>

The neo-extractive development model also negatively impacted environmental and indigenous movements, particularly after the government and these movements broke their relation. The adoption of the indigenous principle of *Sumak Kawsay*, Good Living, into the 2008 Ecuadorian Constitution, for example, became a concept deployed in the government's official discourse to justify neo-extractivism as a necessary means to benefit the entire nation and ensure the population's "good living" (Ospina 2009, 131). Although *Sumak Kawsay* was initially introduced into the national debate by the indigenous movement, it helped the government retain its progressive and environmentalist image internationally, despite the expansion of the extractive frontier. This progressive image, accompanied by a nationalist language, portrayed anti-extractive claims as "particularistic," "anti-modern," negating progress, or even as "colonial environmentalism" promoted by non-governmental organizations (Svampa 2015, 73).

Correa's government was also characterized by the increasing criminalization and state repression of protest movements. The conflict with and subsequent delegitimation campaign against indigenous and environmental movements, who were

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<sup>23</sup> Available from: <http://mutantia.ch/es/la-violencia-de-la-cual-no-se-habla/> (Accessed: April 19, 2021)

critical of the negative social and ecological impacts of extractivism (Bebbington 2011, 6), revealed the democratic limits of the neo-extractive framework. For example, the government criminalized its anti-extractive opposition by accusing and investigating indigenous leaders, including former President of CONAIE Marlon Santi, for alleged “sabotage and terrorism.”<sup>24</sup> By launching investigations and legal actions against its opponents, the Correa’s government criminalized 213 people linked to the resistance against mining projects by 2015 (Svampa 2015b, 70).

Another example of state-related violence during Correa’s government are the murders of the Shuar men José Tendetza, Bosco Wisum and Fredy Taish. Tendetza was a Shuar leader violently killed in the context of his political work against the large-scale mining project Mirador in December 2014. Two years after his assassination, which is still in the impunity, the mining company Ecuacorriente, with the support of the public force, violently evicted 26 families in the Tundayme parish in order to start building the mining camp (*Colectivo de Investigación y Acción Psicosocial Ecuador* 2015, 92). Before Tendetza’s murder, the Shuar teacher Bosco Wisum was assassinated in the context of mobilizations in the defense of water, during a confrontation with the police in the city of Macas in 2009. Fredy Taish, also Shuar, was killed in 2013 at the hands of Ecuadorian army officers during one of their (now recurrent) “operations against illegal mining.”<sup>25</sup>

This is the context, in which the Amazonian Women organized as a network to oppose the expansion of extractive projects in their territories. As mentioned above, the years marked by the neo-extractive development model served as a period of gestation for the rise of a brutal state-apparatus that repressed anti-austerity protesters in October 2019. While the violence deployed by the state during the 2019 *levantamiento* left Ecuador’s population in shock, a similarly brutal yet unperceived violence was being perpetrated against territories to be sacrificed for extractive interests and against indigenous bodies like the ones from Tendenza, Wisum and Taish during Correa’s government. This violence, even if invisible to the *mestizo* population in cities like Quito or Guayaquil, was also being deployed to divide indigenous organizations. Parallel to the violent displacement and eviction processes against indigenous and

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<sup>24</sup> Available from: <https://www.culturalsurvival.org/news/indigenous-organizations-investigated-terrorism-ecuador-after-protests> (Accessed: April 19, 2021)

<sup>25</sup> Available from: <https://www.planv.com.ec/historias/sociedad/quien-mato-jose-tendetza> (Accessed: April 19, 2021)

peasant communities living in territories granted to extractive projects like Mirador, the neo-extractive state was constantly trying to fragment indigenous organizations and to co-opt indigenous leaders (Vallejo and García-Torres 2017, 7). The Amazonian Women's "March for Life" in October 2013 was a response to both, the violent expansion of extractive projects in their territories and the governmental attempts to divide and destroy their communities and organizations.

### **The Rise of the Amazonian Women's Network**

In October 12, 2013, despite the fear of repression and state violence, a coalition of approximately 200 women from seven indigenous nationalities—Achuar, Shuar, Sapara, Kichwa, Shiwiar, Andoa, and Waorani—walked hundreds of kilometers to make their voices heard: "to protect life, our territories, and speak out with our own voice" (*Declaratoria del Kawsak Sacha*, October 2013). The symbolic and arduous march proceeded from the edge of the Amazon through the steep hills of the highlands and into Quito. Their goal was to publicly show their rejection of the 11th oil licensing round and to oil extraction in the Yasuní National Park, as well as to meet former President Rafael Correa and give him their proposals. Correa avoided meeting with them in Quito and instead gave them an appointment in the Amazonian City of the Millennium of Pañacocha, in order to make them "see" the great progress achieved with oil revenues (*Colectivo Miradas Críticas del Territorio desde el Feminismo* 2014, 83). One of the Amazonian Women responded,

"He [the President] wants us to meet him in Pañacocha, he wants us to see City of the Millennium. Is that going to convince us? No sir! You are not going to convince us or buy us! [...] We don't like the city, we like the forest, this is why we protect the *Pachamama* [Mother Earth]." (Amazonian woman, October 18, 2013, Quito)<sup>26</sup>

After rejecting Correa's offer, the marching women requested an audience with Ecuador's legislative power, the National Assembly, in order to submit their demands in writing (*Pronunciamiento de Mujeres en Resistencia*, October 2013). Finally, on October 23, the National Assembly received the Amazonian Women, who publicly presented their proposal to declare the rainforest "*Kawsak Sacha*" or "Living Forest"

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<sup>26</sup>Available from: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OrQdqVDCEJs> (Accessed: April 19, 2021)

in English (*Declaratoria del Kawsak Sacha*, October 2013). The women also demanded the repeal of Decree 74, which declared oil exploitation in the Yasuní Park in the “national interest,” the annulation of all oil concessions included in the 11th oil licensing round, and the repeal of Decree 1247, which aimed at regulating the right of indigenous peoples to be consulted about extractive projects in their territories and was adopted without the participation of local indigenous communities (Ibid.).

The presence of the Amazonian Women’s chants, voices and proposals in Quito demonstrated the limits of the state’s ability to silence and intimidate the voices it thinks it governs. In fact, the coalition of Amazonian women who arrived in Quito not only spoke for themselves, but for the many voices they represented as indigenous leaders and grassroots delegates. When the Amazonian Women’s network self-organized in 2013, their most visible faces at that time—Zoila Castillo, Nancy Santi, Alicia Cahuilla, Gloria Ushigua, Patricia Gualinga, Rosa Gualinga—were either political representatives within their indigenous organizations or within their indigenous women’s associations (Coba and Bayón 2020, 141).<sup>27</sup> Their march was a public act of defiance to the politics of fear imposed by the state and a reaffirmation of the indigenous territorial struggle.

The Amazonian Women’s courage, nevertheless, was not absent from the criminalization of their actions by the state. On November 28, 2013, a smaller delegation of women arrived in Quito to protest with the environmental collective *Yasunid@s*<sup>28</sup> against the event at the Marriot Hotel, where the 11th oil licensing round was held. During their protest action, they publicly accused oil executives and politicians of being complicit in ethnocide. Few days later, Correa accused these women and other protesters of disturbing public order. Two Amazonian women leaders, along with other indigenous leaders from the Amazon, were also legally accused of verbal assaults by the Subsecretary of Hydrocarbons (*Colectivo Miradas*

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<sup>27</sup> Zoila Castillo was Spokeswoman of *Sumak Allpa* [Territorial Well-Being] of the Kichwa communities located on the Bobonaza river basin; Nancy Santi was President of the Kichwa Women’s Association *Kawsak Sacha Jarkata Warmikuna*; Alicia Cahuilla was Vice President of the Waorani Organization NAWÉ; Gloria Ushigua was President of the Sapara Organization NASE and was President of the Sapara Women’s Organization; Patricia Gualinga was Spokeswoman for Family and Women’s issues of the Kichwa People of Sarayaku; Rosa Gualinga was Spokeswoman for Family and Women’s issues at the Shiwar Organization NASHIE.

<sup>28</sup> The “*Yasunid@s*” collective was established in August 2013, after Rafael Correa signed the decree for the extraction of crude oil in the Yasuní National Park. Most of its members are young people and have received a lot of organizational support from the environmental organization *Acción Ecológica*. Available from: <http://www.amazoniaporlavida.org/es/Noticias/yasunidos-el-nuevo-activismo-urbano.html> (Accessed: August 12, 2020)

*Críticas del Territorio desde el Feminismo* 2014, 84). Besides these early acts of state-led criminalization, many Amazonian leaders and their allies have suffered different attacks against their lives. This is the case of the Waorani leader Alicia Cahuilla, the Sapara leader Nema Grefa, and the Kichwa leaders Patricia Gualinga and Salomé Aranda,<sup>29</sup> who received a series of attacks and death threats due to their anti-extractive position and leadership (*Colectivo de Investigación y Acción Psicosocial Ecuador* 2015; Amnesty International 2019).<sup>30</sup> Despite these violent acts, the Amazonian Women have continued to mobilize against renewed attempts by the state to expand the extractive frontier.

Their opposition to extractive projects also contrasts the position of some male indigenous local authorities and leaders, who signed agreements with the Subsecretary of Hydrocarbons in 2012. This is the case of the thirty-three indigenous Amazonian municipal mayors who supported the exploitation of the ITT<sup>31</sup> and the indigenous representatives who were invited to the 11th oil licensing round (*Colectivo Miradas Críticas del Territorio desde el Feminismo* 2014, 84). In August 2012, the Subsecretary of Hydrocarbons did an accelerated and dubious process of prior consultation in indigenous territories living in the south-central Amazon region, to be granted as oil concessions, and signed agreements with some leaders of indigenous organizations and local governments—predominantly men—in exchange for developmental projects in their communities (Bravo and Vallejo 2019). As indigenous organizations like CONAIE and environmental organizations like *Acción Ecológica* have pointed out, this process of prior consultation was unconstitutional and did not comply with international indigenous rights standards (Vallejo 2014).

The environmental discourse in Ecuador has used this contrast as an example of the incorruptibility of indigenous female leaderships versus male ones, which has

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<sup>29</sup> The case of Salomé Aranda is worth noticing, who was threatened with death by “strangers” who bombarded her house with stones two weeks after her participation at the Amazonian Women’s march in 2018: “After we went to Quito to meet with the President, I started to hear rumors that the oil company was going to take legal action against me. Then I was told that they were following me and that they know about the work that I do against the company. Last week, unknown people were asking where I live. The last thing that I heard was that the company plans to end its support for a community health promoter and the minimal support that they give towards our schools. And they told everyone that I was to blame for this.” (Salomé Aranda, phone call with Carlos Mazabanda from the environmental organization Amazon Watch, May 15, 2018). Available from: <https://amwt.ch/4274> (Accessed: April 19, 2021)

<sup>30</sup> Available from: <https://www.amnesty.org/download/Documents/AMR2800392019ENGLISH.PDF> (Accessed: April 19, 2021)

<sup>31</sup> Available from: <http://sitio.yasunidos.org/en/yasunidos/cronologia-de-hechos.html> (Accessed: August 12, 2020)



further emphasized the Amazonian Women's traditional role as the true "guardians of the forest" (see Sempértegui 2019). While some members of the Amazonian Women do embrace their representation as guardians of their territory as a strategic way to build their own space of enunciation and make their claims heard, they are also critical of this representation, especially when it portrays their leadership as separated from the broader indigenous struggle. It is worth looking at the disparities between male and female leadership during Correa's government as an example of how the colonial and patriarchal state engages with and co-opts male interlocutors as means to discipline and subjugate entire communities that have historically been able to reproduce life at the margins of state power. Without ignoring the Amazonian Women's internal criticism and defiance to the exclusion of their voices within the indigenous movement, their organizing plays out within the larger frame of the state's intromission and extractive occupation. Their organizing as a network of Amazonian female representatives, then, goes beyond any act of individual leadership and should be understood as a collective act of resistance against the state's attempt to divide, discipline, and subjugate their communities and territories; of rebellion against the state's disregard of their voices as historical female leaders; of sustaining the indigenous collective struggle in times of extractive violence, repression, and intimidation; and of "taking over the space" and thus renewing the indigenous movement from within.

### **The Research Question**

Taking into account the larger and complex context that permeates the Amazonian Women's anti-extractive organizing, this dissertation project inserts itself among the valuable work that academics like Miriam García-Torres (2017), Ivette Vallejo and García-Torres (2017), Andrea Bravo and Vallejo (2019), Vallejo and Corinne Duhalde (2019), and Lisset Coba and Manuel Bayón (2020); and collectives like *Colectivo Miradas Críticas del Territorio desde el Feminismo* (2014, 2017, and 2018) have elaborated on and in collaboration with the Amazonian Women. These important and complex analyses have been crucial not only for reflecting on the Amazonian leaders' organizing, but also for broadcasting their voices and political proposals. Furthermore, as the historical analysis in the next sections shows, my own research very often relies on this analyses' documentation, especially about those moments in the Amazonian Women's public appearances I could not be present. This

is why, I consider this dissertation project “in connection” and “in dialogue” with the work from these white and *mestiza* academics, activists and collectives.

Some of these authors (especially García-Torres 2017; Vallejo and García-Torres 2017; Vallejo and Bravo 2019) have interpreted the Amazonian Women’s current struggle from a feminist political ecology perspective as part of the Latin American trend called the “feminization of struggles” during neo-extractivism. The Argentinian sociologist Maristella Svampa coined the term “feminization of struggles” to describe a process in Latin America in the last decades, in which women have gained a greater role in social struggles and in processes of collective self-organizing (see Svampa and Viale 2014; Svampa 2015a). In the case of anti-extractive struggles, or what the author calls socio-ecological struggles, Svampa emphasizes that it is women from indigenous organizations, socio-environmental movements, and environmental non-governmental organizations who have a central role in resisting against the expansion of extractivism and state-led developmental projects (Svampa 2015a, 128).

While I agree with and adopt many elements from analyses on neo-extractivism and from feminist analyses on the effects of the neo-extractive state in territories like the Ecuadorian Amazon, this dissertation also moves away from certain analytical perspectives offered by both sets of analysis. In relation to analyses on neo-extractivism (Gudynas 2010; Acosta 2012; Bebbington 2011; Svampa 2013), even though they are effective at highlighting continuities in the developmental model and compelling us to search for alternatives, its immediate macro-analytical perspective problematically assigns a victimize or a reactionary position to affected populations as Veronica Gago’s and Sandro Mezzadra’s critique rightly notes (2017, 576). As the political theorist Thea Riofrancos describes, grassroots activists have been key protagonists and have shaped the contentious politics of oil and mining in Ecuador during the neo-extractive period (Riofrancos 2020, 14). In the case of grassroots collectives like the Amazonian Women, they have directly confronted the state and the broader public with proposals like the Living Forest, which directly challenge the neo-extractive depictions of the Amazon as a space to be made productive, to be urbanized, and even to be sacrificed in the name of the well-being of the nation. Furthermore, their organizing cannot be understood as a mere act of resisting the developmental state’s and extractive companies’ intervention in their territories. Rather, as I explain in detail in Chapter Three, the Amazonian Women’s struggle is characterized by a plurality of practices and relations that *defend* indigenous territories and the multiple lives that inhabit these territories, and thus

expand the political boundaries we have learnt to associate resistance with—as mere rejection to something.

In relation to feminist analyses on the patriarchal effects of the neo-extractive state, my examination agrees with the structural dimensions of these analyses, which make visible how the expansion of extractivism and state-led developmental projects introduce, deepen and reactivate patriarchal relations in territories like the Ecuadorian Amazon (*Colectivo Miradas Críticas del Territorio desde el Feminismo* 2018)—a point I also delve into in Chapter Three. My examination also acknowledges how Svampa’s term “feminization of struggles” is an accurate description that makes visible the leading role of women collectives in anti-extractive struggles across the region. Nevertheless, I think it is important to push back against “feminization” as *the only* term or perspective for analyzing the Amazonian Women’s struggle. Furthermore, I think an exhaustive dialogue with the ways in which the Amazonian Women themselves describe and depict their struggle can expand and extensively contribute to feminist analyses on the effects of the neo-extractive state

While Svampa does not suggest that women’s leading role in territorial struggles separates them from their movements and communities, it does assume a “feminized subject” that is becoming more prominent in the Latin American anti-extractive movement. Firstly, if we only rely on this assumption, we risk obscuring how the Amazonian Women emerged as political leaders and members of their indigenous territorial struggle through complex territorial and communitarian processes, and are accountable to their organizations. Secondly, the solely use of the term “feminization” also equalizes the Amazonian Women with other “feminized” actors they might be in allyship with—like ecofeminist activists. Though the Amazonian Women have built intricate and complex relationships with their urban allies, transforming each other in the process, it is important to insist on an analysis that underscores the Amazonian Women’s situated political development and specific organizational dynamics. *Mujeres Amazónicas*, as a collective subject, is not “only” a feminized or ethnic subject—even less so the “sum” of both fragmented categories (Espinosa Miñoso 2014, 310). Thirdly, the interpretation of the Amazonian Women as a feminized struggle has also had political implications for the network itself. While portraying certain women’s collectives as the “new protagonists” of the anti-extractive struggle is a positive step towards recognizing the fight these women have historically carried on, it often reinforces depictions mostly reproduced by *mestiza* and urban allies

that separates certain visible female faces from the communal *tramas* [entanglements] where their power and protection resides (Tzul Tzul 2018b, 404).

In an interesting article published by Ecuador-based researchers, Melissa Moreano, Karolien Van Teijlingen and Sofía Zaragocin point to the fact that this type of representation very often leads to an “individualization of resistance,” whereby certain important leaders emerging from collective processes are presented as “figures” isolated from their organizations, movements and communities, and thus become visible and easy targets for patriarchal and racist criminalization and violence by the state, extractive interests, and other actors (Moreano, Van Teijlingen and Zaragocin 2019, 18). This is the case for internationally recognized anti-extractive leaders like Berta Cáceres, Máxima Acuña, and Francia Márquez, but also for some visible leaders from the Amazonian Women’s network who have received a series of attacks and death threats due to their anti-extractive position, as previously mentioned. This is why it is politically important to reflect on the Amazonian Women as a collective struggle, whose tools vis-à-vis the state resides on their power to collectivize, connect, and weave a broader web of practices and relations for defending their territory.

It is precisely this web of practices and relations that my dissertation takes as its “object of inquiry.” As mentioned above, while the Amazonian Women’s public expressions of resistance are an important point of access into their territorial struggle, the following chapters examine the entanglement of practices and relations that organize their everyday life as political leaders in the cities and in their communities. This analytical focus would not have been possible without the relationship of co-labor I built with five members from the Amazonian Women’s network in the last years: Zoila Castillo, Nancy Santi, Elvia Dagua, Rosa Gualinga, and Salomé Aranda. This relationship forced me to change my initial interest in their “visible” and “public” struggle, and rather to focus on the everyday practices and relations that reproduce the lives of Amazonian leaders and their communities, and enable their anti-extractive political work. I call this web of practices and relations “rexistance.”

As an alternative angle for analyzing the Amazonian Women’s organizing, rexistance is a term in dialogue with decolonial theorizations on *re-existencia*, re-existence, in Latin America, as I examine in Chapter Three. My own use of the term, however, is mainly inspired by an image that the Amazonian leader Elvia Dagua wove

into one of her *artesanías* [handicrafts],<sup>32</sup> the *Araña Tejedora* [Weaving Spider]. For the act of resisting, according to Dagua, is spider-like itself:

“[The Weaving Spider] does not rest during the day or at night. We are like her, working women. [...] It is a spider that weaves 24 hours of the day” (Interview, August 27, 2017, Madre Tierra district close to the city of Puyo).

Dagua’s Weaving Spider *artesanía* captures in imagistic form the intersection between the Amazonian Women’s everyday struggles and their territorial struggle. In her own description of the *artesanía*’s design, Dagua reveals how she and other Amazonian (working) women weave their own spiderweb to sustain themselves, their extended families, and their territorial struggle at the same time. In this sense, the Amazonian Women’s resistance is characterized by merging together those practices and relations that make life and political organizing possible—in their communities, in the rainforest, and in the city.

The image of the spiderweb, like the *artesanía* woven by Dagua, is not only a metaphor for resistance, but also a methodological principle for my inquiry in the chapters that follow. As Marilyn Strathern explains about matters of analytical perspective, it is important to opt for “images other than those taxonomies or configurations that compel one to look for overarching principles or for core or central features” (Strathern 2004, xx). This is why my own analysis departs from Amazonian Women’s *artesanías* and other ways these leaders define and describe their struggle. This point of departure allows me to establish a dialogue (even if only a partial one) with the images they offer of themselves as “epistemic subjects” (Cabnal 2010, 12) and as producers of their own “ontological designs” and worlding practices (Escobar 2018, 5). The following chapters are thus an attempt to illuminate the Amazonian Women’s resistance and explore the connections between everyday practices and the seemingly more “political” practices in their struggle.

In what follows of this chapter, I offer a historical account on how the Amazonian Women’s organizing stems from a longer and more complex history of indigenous anti-extractive resistance in the south-central Amazon. I show how their 2013 mobilization was no spontaneous or one-time response to extractive expansion.

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<sup>32</sup>I use the word *artesanía* throughout this dissertation to refer to the different clay pottery and handicrafts—like bracelets, necklaces, and earrings made out of feathers or natural and synthetic seeds—produced by members from the Amazonian Women. I use this word, because this is how my co-laborers presented to me the different objects they produce and that accompany their territorial struggle.

While the “March for Life” became a symbolic moment of these women’s uprising, it is important to understand the Amazonian Women’s political work as embedded in the complex relations that characterize the indigenous movement. The Amazonian Women’s historical active participation in the indigenous movement, their background as indigenous leaders since the 1990s, and their political decision to self-organize as active members of their community bases in 2013 evidence this embeddedness.

### **The Amazonian Women as Historical Subject**

“Without knowing you say, ‘why do the *indios* need so much land? why do you need it, *indios*? You are lazy!’ You say this, maybe by mistake. But we are not lazy! It is a pity we are not prepared, it is pity we have not studied. [...] Mr. Government, for so long we have been fighting for a dialogue about our territory, but you haven’t said anything yet. [Today] we have walked here. We have walked as Ecuadorians, and we are here!” (Beatriz Gualinga, public speech at Ecuador’s Presidential House of Carondelet, April 1992, Quito)<sup>33</sup>

Beatriz Gualinga addressed these words to former President Rodrigo Borja in April 1992. Gualinga, a Kichwa woman from Sarayaku, marched along with over 2000 Kichwa, Achuar and Shiwiar peoples from the province of Pastaza to Quito. This 250-kilometer march, organized by the Organization of Indigenous Peoples from Pastaza (OPIP), set a precedent for Amazonian people to use marches to make themselves visible and bring their demands to the Ecuadorian state. The political importance of this *levantamiento* also resided in how “ambitious”—for the modern state—its demands were. The movement called for the communal titling of approximately 70 percent of the province of Pastaza and for the constitutional adoption of indigenous peoples’ political project for the nation, which aimed for Ecuador to be recognized as a plurinational state (Viteri 2005, 350). While the first demand aimed at using and transforming existing laws to grant indigenous peoples collective rights over their lands, the second challenged Ecuadorians’ idea of their country as a homogenous *mestizo* nation and aimed at securing Amazonian people’s autonomous right to live in their territories under their own terms.

Even though Rodrigo Borja ended up titling one and a half million hectares of land to indigenous peoples in Pastaza in May 11, 1992 (Coba and Bayón 2020, 143),

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<sup>33</sup> Available from: <https://www.facebook.com/luchamilenaria/videos/2449693438577980> (Accessed: April 19, 2021)

he accused the indigenous plurinational proposal of “seeking to dismember the national territory” (Sawyer 2004, 46). It was not until the adoption of the 2008 Constitution, after years of ongoing and heated debates within the indigenous movement about how ideas about the singularity and homogeneity of the nation served the implementation of a racist, colonial and neoliberal project (Simbaña 2005, 209), that Ecuador was declared a plurinational state.

The 1992 *levantamiento*, which was coined with the Kichwa phrase “*Allpamanda, Kawsaymanda, Jatarishun!*” [For land, for life, let’s rise up!], marked Amazonian people’s “awakening” into a new period of indigenous struggle, characterized by the greater incursion of extractive companies and military forces in their territories. This march also launched Beatriz Gualinga as an important symbolic figure of the indigenous movement. Her words and image have been resurrected over and over again. For example, in May 2020, the Confederation of Indigenous Nationalities of the Ecuadorian Amazon (CONFENIAE) circulated a statement commemorating Amazonian peoples’ first *levantamiento*. The image of her giving the 1992 speech was combined with the phrase “Today, more than ever, staying in our *chakras* [cultivation areas or gardens] and in the rainforest is an act of resistance!” (CONFENIAE’s Statement, May 2020). By underscoring the important role of indigenous communities in “conserving indigenous territories and working the land” (Ibid.), CONFENIAE reified the indigenous territorial struggle as a “concrete” solution to the current systemic crisis amidst a global pandemic that has hit Amazonian indigenous communities the hardest.



CONFEDERACIÓN DE NACIONALIDADES INDÍGENAS  
DE LA AMAZONÍA ECUATORIANA  
"CONFENIAE"

#### SALUDO A LAS NACIONALIDADES DE PASTAZA



Hoy se conmemora un aniversario más de la lucha histórica por la defensa de los territorios de las nacionalidades amazónicas de la provincia de Pastaza, recordándose la Marcha Histórica Allpamanda, Kawsaymanda, Jatarishunchik con la cual el 11 de Mayo de 1992 se logró la legalización de 1 millón de hectáreas de territorios indígenas en la provincia de Pastaza, durante el gobierno de Rodrigo Borja.

En medio de la pandemia, hoy más que nunca se ha demostrado el rol fundamental de los pueblos indígenas en el mantenimiento del equilibrio planetario de la Tierra, así como el papel fundamental de los productores del campo, de la finca y de la chacra como un aporte concreto para mitigar la crisis que enfrenta nuestro país y el mundo.

La conservación de los territorios indígenas y el trabajo del campo son las soluciones que estamos aportando las nacionalidades para enfrentar y salir de la crisis, por eso extendemos en este día nuestro reconocimiento a nuestros mayores que sembraron la ruta de la rebeldía en nuestros corazones y a cada uno de los hombres y mujeres de nuestras bases que fueron los artífices de esta jornada histórica de lucha de 1992.

...Allpamanda, Kawsaymanda, Jararishun!

**Hoy más que nunca quedarse en la chacra y en la selva es un acto de resistencia**

Puyo, 11 de mayo de 2020

CONSEJO DE GOBIERNO DE LA CONFENIAE

Image 1. CONFENIAE commemorating the legalization of over 1 million hectares of indigenous territories. Facebook, May 11, 2020: <https://www.facebook.com/comunicacionconfeniae.redacangau>. Screenshot by the author, taken May 20, 2020.

Beatriz Gualinga shows how Amazonian indigenous women have been on the front lines fighting against colonial, capitalist and extractive occupation, but also how they have shaped the indigenous movement's collective memory. Many members of the Amazonian Women's network took part in the historical *levantamiento* in 1992 as young leaders. Their active participation in this march and their continuous political work throughout the 1990s challenge interpretations that saw the 2013 "March for Life" as their first attempt to organize as indigenous women. In fact, in one of their first public statements after arriving in Quito in 2013, the Amazonian Women not only demanded Ecuador's National Assembly receive them, but also called on the government to "respect and recognize women's *lucha histórica* in defense of their people's lives and territories free of oil, contamination and exploitation; as well as their political participation and organizational politics" (*Pronunciamento de Mujeres en Resistencia*, October 2013).



As previously mentioned, the 1992 march marked the beginning of an intense period of mobilizations in the south-central region of the Amazon that would expand over several years as a response to the penetration of extractive capital in the 1990s (Yashar, 2005). This period of multinational petroleum extraction, or corporate colonialism, was characterized by the neoliberal governmentality of the “Washington Consensus” that sought to increase export production (especially oil), open the economy to foreign investment and trade, and reduce the state’s productive and distributive functions (Sawyer 2004, 11). The expansion of oil extraction activities played a huge role in Ecuador’s access to international loans and its capacity to finance its unpayable foreign debt (Ibid., 13). Nevertheless, the strong indigenous resistance in provinces like Pastaza and Morona Santiago temporally stopped the state’s planned expansion of oil operations, historically concentrated in the northern Amazon, to the south-central rainforest region (Vallejo and Bravo 2019). This period of resistance was strongly marked by Amazonian women, who, as active members of the Amazonian indigenous movement, blocked roads, took over the offices of oil companies, and sabotaged the work of seismic oil exploration (García-Torres 2017, 77).

One of the first mobilizations they organized was in 1994, when approximately 200 women from the Kichwa, Sapara, Shuar, and Achuar nationalities, who called themselves *Sinchi Warmikuna* [Strong Women], marched against the 7th oil licensing round (Vallejo and Bravo 2019). Three years later, a group of Amazonian women from Pastaza took over the installations of the Tripetrol oil company, which had begun a seismic exploration project in oil block 28, located in the San Jacinto commune. In June 1997, a small group of Amazonian women took over Tripetrol’s office in the Amazonian city of Shell and held one engineer for three days. In exchange for his release, OPIP forced the oil company to sign a statement agreeing to abandon oil operations in Pastaza (García-Torres 2017, 78). Zoila Castillo, member of the Amazonian Women’s network and OPIP’s Spokeswoman for Family and Women’s issues at that time, remembers:

“So, we went in and stayed there for three days, without coming out. I was with my baby, carrying my little baby and I had no diapers, nothing. My husband said, ‘She can go screw herself! What does she do that for!’ He didn’t even come to see me. Just my *compañeras* told me, ‘Zoilita, don’t worry, we will get you disposable diapers.’ They bought them! Then we signed a document and we sent Tripetrol out of Pastaza. Because everything was already a minefield [for seismic oil operation], everything was already tracked, mined. After that,

since they didn't leave right away and had an office in Quito, we went there too! [...] With money, without money [economic support from allies], we went there! All the women wanted to enter the office, despite the many police who were there. They didn't want to let us in, my daughter! But they left, Tripetrol has disappeared since then. They left!" (Interview, September 5, 2017, Puyo)

As Castillo describes, Amazonian women's crucial leadership against the expansion of extractivism at that time was anything but easy. To be an Amazonian female leader did not exempt women like her from having to take care of their children—they brought their children to the different activities they undertook as indigenous representatives. Practices of care were in fact part of the public display of anti-extractive activities Amazonian women took on without the support of their partners, who often criticized or even opposed their political work. As Castillo's words energetically convey, everyday struggles are woven into their memories of their courageous political work. This intersection between their anti-extractive struggle and their everyday struggles as reproducers of life in their families, communities, and organizations marks the Amazonian Women's anti-extractive politics to this day. These leaders have found ways not only of sustaining themselves and their extended families while politically organizing, but also of challenging how their indigenous *compañeros* in their organizations render their important role in the anti-extractive struggle as invisible, to be shown later.

An example of strong female communitarian leadership, which has caught the attention not only of national but international environmental and human rights organizations, is the case of the Kichwa women from Sarayaku. It is no coincidence that important political figures like Beatriz Gualinga, Patricia Gualinga, and Miriam Cisneros come from there. These women have played a leading role in Sarayaku's resistance against the Argentine oil company Compañía General de Combustibles (CGC) since 1996. Sarayaku women were the first to take the initiative to resist the oil company and seize the military's weapons after CGC illegally entered their territory with the support of local police and the military in 2002 (Coba and Bayón 2020, 147).<sup>34</sup> According to Patricia Gualinga, where "men doubted, women said 'no' from the beginning."<sup>35</sup> In fact, Gualinga became a leading voice in Sarayaku's international

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<sup>34</sup>Available from: [http://sarayaku.org/?page\\_id=521](http://sarayaku.org/?page_id=521) (Accessed: April 19, 2021).

<sup>35</sup>Available from: <http://www.publico.es/internacional/guardianes-selva.html> (Accessed: April 19, 2021).

struggle against the CGC, partaking in several international and climate change forums, such as the 2015 Climate Change Conference in Paris.

The leadership of Sarayaku women has doubtlessly influenced the articulation of the Amazonian Women's network. This has also created a strong negotiation process within the network. Negotiation processes intensify when leaders from other nationalities, who have also been leading the anti-extractive struggle in their communities without receiving that much attention from international organizations, see their leadership and voices overshadowed. In fact, even if some women from Sarayaku have many times become the spokeswomen of the Amazonian Women as a group, their network is composed and sustained by complex relations of allyship between Amazonian women from different indigenous nationalities, with different histories, organizational forms, and languages—Achuar, Shuar, Sapara, Kichwa, Shiwiar, Andoa, and Waorani.

As presented above, the Amazonian Women's call for respect and recognition by the state of their "*lucha histórica*" in their 2013 *Pronunciamiento* shows that they want their trajectory as historical leaders within the indigenous movement to be seen and acknowledged. In fact, as the aforementioned examples demonstrate, the Amazonian Women's emergence as a network cannot be separated from their active participation in the indigenous territorial struggle since the 1990s. Nevertheless, their call for recognition also tells us something important about the indigenous struggle and the way its protagonists relate to their own collective memory of resistance.

As Ecuadorian indigenous intellectuals explain, when indigenous peoples talk about their *lucha histórica*, they evoke and bring into the present a long-term memory of anti-colonial struggles. The word "*histórica*" does not mean that the indigenous struggle has been recognized as part of Ecuador's *official history*. On the contrary, indigenous peoples' *lucha histórica* is repeatedly negated and ignored by the Ecuadorian state and its political elites, as their response to the 2019 *levantamiento* shows. Nevertheless, indigenous people's exclusion from official historical narratives has not impeded the movement as it shapes and builds its own collective memory, which starts far before the birth of indigenous organizations like CONAIE, thirty-five

years ago.<sup>36</sup> Instead, as the historical leader and Kichwa educator Blanca Chancoso explains when commemorating the anniversary of the 1990 *levantamiento indígena*,

“Thirty years ago, we were celebrating what some in Spain called the 500th anniversary of our ‘conquest.’ For others, it was 500 years of the meeting of two worlds. It is impossible to accept that it was a ‘meeting’ of two worlds. For us, and for the people coming from popular sectors, it is 500 years of resistance.” (Speech during the Webinar “30 Años del Levantamiento Indígena,” June 6, 2020).<sup>37</sup>

The Kichwa sociologist Floresmilo Simbaña agrees with this statement and asserts that the “indigenous peoples’ struggle begins the same day that the conquest begins” (Simbaña 2020).<sup>38</sup> According to the former President of CONAIE, Luis Macas, the indigenous struggle is better understood as their collective resistance against an ongoing “tare” implemented with the colonization of the continent (Macas in Walsh 2013, 25). It is within this long-term trajectory of struggle, through which collective memories of resisting and reexisting colonial occupation accumulate, transforming the movement vis-à-vis state power, that the Amazonian Women situate their own struggle as well. It is thus no coincidence that their 2013 march departed from Puyo on October 12, the same day “the discovery of America” is commemorated (Coba and Bayón 2020, 142). Instead of celebrating, the Amazonian Women honored indigenous peoples’ resistance to colonialism.

## **Sustaining the Territorial Struggle**

To recognize the Amazonian Women’s organizing as a crucial element in the historical indigenous struggle locates their politics in a particular temporality. This temporality weaves the past, the present, and the future in such a way that it challenges any rapid conclusions about the implications of the Amazonian Women’s 2013 organizing. It is important to differentiate this temporality from a temporality that looks at the past from a position of guilt and shame, and that tends to position indigenous

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<sup>36</sup> The *Confederación de Nacionalidades Indígenas del Ecuador*, CONAIE, was formed in 1986, after indigenous federations in the highland and lowland started to rise and coordinate their agendas and actions in a more influential way (see Ospina 2009).

<sup>37</sup> Available from: <https://www.facebook.com/687975581303090/videos/672951940225856> (Accessed: April 19, 2021)

<sup>38</sup> Available from: [https://www.facebook.com/watch/live/?v=2597489027186299&ref=watch\\_permalink](https://www.facebook.com/watch/live/?v=2597489027186299&ref=watch_permalink) (Accessed: April 19, 2021)

women as mere victims of overlapping oppressions. It is also important to differentiate it from a temporality marked by the desire to purify the future from the past, which idealizes the Amazonian Women as the true “guardians of the forest” and their articulation as the new promise for indigenous women’s “liberation,” forgetting the complex entanglement of relations that have historically permeated their political work. Following the Amazonian Women’s own call for historical recognition, this analysis locates their politics in what the Aymara intellectual Carlos Mamani calls the *Nayrapacha* temporality, the temporality of the “living past,” in which the past is not “death” and can thus be renewed and become future as well (Mamani in Rivera Cusicanqui 2010a, 39). According to the *Nayrapacha* temporality, the Amazonian Women’s struggle is embedded in the complex practices and relations that characterize indigenous politics and the *lucha histórica*. At the same time their organizing enables a necessary and valuable space for challenging and “renewing” the indigenous movement and its collective memory *from within*.



Image 2. Image of an indigenous woman from the highlands during the October 2019 *levantamiento*. It commemorates indigenous peoples’ resistance since Christoph Columbus arrived in the Latin America in 1492. The image circulated widely on Facebook and became a symbol of the 2019 protests. Facebook, October 12, 2019: <https://www.facebook.com/conaie.org>. Screenshot by the author, taken October 13, 2019.

The *Nayrapacha* temporality, which implies the past’s liveliness and malleability, recognizes two elements, or “movements” as I call them, in the Amazonian Women’s emergence. The first movement is “sustaining” the territorial *lucha histórica*; the second is what some female leaders call, “*tomarse el espacio*”

[taking over the space]. Both movements have characterized the Amazonian Women's politics since their 2013 march.

Sustaining refers to the spectrum of actions that constitute and reproduce the indigenous territorial struggle. These actions include protests, marches and public statements, and practices that literally reproduce the struggle from an everyday perspective. This means that in order to understand the political implications of “sustaining” in the context of the indigenous movement, it is important to stop separating those practices that imply a public display of resistance from those mostly invisible practices that make resistance in the streets possible. As the Maya K'iche' sociologist Gladys Tzul Tzul explains, indigenous politics, which include the practices of self-governing indigenous territories and defending these territories from state occupation, cannot be separated from those practices that “make life possible” (Tzul Tzul 2018a, 43). In the case of the Amazonian Women, their political actions cannot be separated from those practices that make life possible during moments of confrontation with the state—e.g. making food available and finding ways to take care of their families while protesting—and those practices that have historically made life possible in the very territories they are defending—e.g. cultivating the land and reproducing human and non-human relations in the rainforest. Any separation of these two sets of practices ignores how everyday knowledge and relations have historically supported and reproduced the Amazonian Women's politics. This is a very important point that permeates the reflections along this dissertation and that has been at the center of my co-labor with the Amazonian Women.

When reflecting on the political implications of the Amazonian Women “sustaining” the territorial struggle in the Amazon in 2013, it is important to note that we are talking about a particular period of the Ecuadorian state. As mentioned earlier, 2013 was a period marked by the intervention of the neo-extractive state in the Amazon, and by the disruption and debilitation of the indigenous movement in the region. The debilitation of the indigenous movement was a consequence of the criminalization or co-optation of indigenous male leaders and the state's efforts to fragment indigenous communities and organizations. In regard to the latter, Rafael Correa's government was economically able to build a state machinery capable of entering the Amazon region with developmental projects like the Cities of the Millennium and channeling a lot of resources through the Ministry of Hydrocarbons. Through this Ministry, the state would offer Amazonian communities jobs, education, and health services. As a state officer at

the Undersecretary of Political and Social Management told me during an interview about the 2012 consultation process on the 11th oil round, which he preferred to call a “process of social participation,”

“The ministry, besides having its own administration and competencies, [sic] the right thing to do is to have an active role in politics. In other words, to have dialogue. So, it was necessary to do it through a territorial political team and, basically, we thought about everything that the state does. That is, if the community needs education, education must be present [offered]. Work, health, etc.” (Interview, August 8, 2017, Quito)

As his words make clear, this paternalistic relation set by the Ministry of Hydrocarbons was not without price. The word “dialogue” refers to that asymmetric exchange between the Ministry’s authorities and indigenous communities, in which the former offers jobs, health services and education in exchange for access to Amazonian peoples’ territories for extractive projects. Instead of directly channeling those services through the Ministry of Labor, Health or Education, my interviewee made clear that Amazonian communities’ bargaining possibilities and basic rights as citizens depended on their willingness to “cooperate” with the government’s extractive agenda.

In regard to indigenous organizations, the problematic 2012 consultation process generated internal divisions among indigenous organizations such as the Sapara organization NASE, the Shiwiar organization NASHIE, the Achuar organization NAE, and the Shuar Federation FICSH (Mazabanda 2013, 12). Furthermore, Correa’s government supported the election of certain leaders that did not come from legitimate processes of communitarian and collective decision-making. This was the case with CONFENIAE, a legacy indigenous organization in the rainforest region created in 1981 (Ruiz 1993, 109). After several confrontations with Correa government, the latter decided not to recognize CONFENIAE’s newly elected government, headed by the Achuar leader Marlon Vargas, and instead supported a dubious election that resulted in the pro-government indigenous leader Felipe Tsenkush being named the organization’s President in 2015. It was not until several protest actions and meetings between CONFENIAE and the National Secretary for Policy Management in 2017<sup>39</sup> that Marlon Vargas’ government was officially recognized by the state.

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<sup>39</sup> Available from: <https://www.elcomercio.com/actualidad/indigenas-amazonicos-toma-secretaria-politica.html> (Accessed: April 19, 2021)

The Amazonian Women's organizing was, then, an important moment of sustaining the indigenous *lucha histórica* at a time when the government was destroying the communitarian and organizational fabric in the Amazon. While the state's intentions are never to directly "destroy" the communities it thinks it represents or protects, its paternalistic vision for a "New Amazon" introduced an extractive agenda that aimed to gain access to indigenous territories and transform communitarian relations through the implementation of developmental projects. This, as the previous examples show, was done without engaging in any type of serious dialogue with Amazonian communities and organizations that would recognize them as real and equal interlocutors in the conversation. The Amazonian Women's decision to organize as grassroots leaders from their community bases was an important act of resistance against the government's extractive agenda, but also against the state's exclusion of their voices as female leaders and of their community members that were not present at the negotiation table during the "fake consultation process" in 2012 (*Declaratoria del Kawsak Sacha*, October 2013). Their organizing as a network challenged the neo-extractive state's attempt to decide over the future of entire communities and territories and reminded the neo-extractive government that "*no puede mandarse solo*," it cannot command itself (Tzul Tzul 2018a, 14).

Sustaining the indigenous struggle during these difficult times inevitably put the Amazonian Women's network in the national and international spotlight. This meant that due to the fragmentation of indigenous organizations, historically at the forefront of Ecuador's anti-extractive resistance, their voices and leadership gained a lot of attention from national and international non-governmental organizations, activists, and researchers. In fact, after the 2013 march, the Amazonian Women's relations with their non-indigenous allies became stronger and led to further political acts of resistance that were economically supported and covered in the media by environmental and ecofeminist organizations from Ecuador and the Global North. It is important to note that even though an array of environmental organizations—such as Oxfam, Amazon Watch, *Fundación Pachamama*, and *Acción Ecológica*—have been working with indigenous communities in the Amazon since the 1970s (Melo, Ortiz, and Lopez 2002, 5), this was the first time these and other organizations engaged in a sustained collaboration with Amazonian women organized as a network. In fact, the 2013 march required a great deal of logistical support and those female leaders, who had accumulated extensive organizational experience during their participation in



mobilization processes over the past decades, sought funding from urban and *mestiza* allies.

This led to interpretations about the Amazonian Women's political work in the international environmental discourse that overshadow their network's ties with the overall indigenous territorial struggle—exemplary in the mediatic depiction of these leaders as the “guardians of life” and “the forest.”<sup>40</sup> Nevertheless, it is important to push back against interpretations that, on the one hand, overlook that they organized as elected leaders from their communities and indigenous organizations, and that their network kept integrating other female elected leaders that were not part of the first the Amazonian Women's mobilization in 2013. On the other hand, even though the Amazonian Women have publicly criticized and confronted those male representatives who entered into negotiations with the state in 2012, their own ways of strategizing and understanding their organizing does not follow a “separatist” or a “feminized” logic: they are not replacing the indigenous struggle with a now gendered struggle that understands the Amazonian Women as the “new” protagonists of anti-extractive articulations. This is why it is important to understand their organizing and their criticism of the indigenous movement and their non-indigenous allies in their own terms, as a process of “*tomarse el espacio*” as the Amazonian Women.

### **“Tomarse el Espacio” as the Amazonian Women**

“This is when [2013] we articulated ourselves as a group of women and we called ourselves the Amazonian Women. This was possible because of our disposition to work united as women, and because we believed that by being united we could achieve several things. [...] With our organizing we wanted to make visible that we women *are present*, we are present in our territories, that indigenous women exist. [...] As young women we also seek to *take over that space*.” (Indira Vargas, interview, September 9, 2018, Community of Sabata close to the city of Archidona, my emphasis added)

“As women, we have fought for the space we want to have, this is what we've achieved. Young people, LGTBI people are in that same situation, we are all looking for a space. [...] I believe that young people should *earn that space for themselves* as women have. But this would also imply not asking someone for permission, because it is our right to be there.” (Abigail Gualinga, interview, August 8, 2018, Puyo, my emphasis added)

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<sup>40</sup>Available from: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/in-sight/wp/2014/11/03/3211/indigenous-women-fighting-oil-amazon/> (Accessed: April 19, 2021); and <https://amazonwatch.org/news/2014/0308-amazonas-guardians-of-life> (Accessed: April 19, 2021)

The phrase I introduced above, “*tomarse el espacio*,” comes from these conversations with two young members of the Amazonian Women’s network, Indira Vargas and Abigail Gualinga. According to Indira Vargas, the Amazonian Women’s organizing was an act of unity among women from different indigenous nationalities that made visible how indigenous women *are present*, “*estamos*,” in their territories and organizations. Both young leaders agree that indigenous women’s process of making themselves visible has been a struggle itself and praise the Amazonian Women’s organizing and prominence as an achievement in this long and ongoing fight. Furthermore, both agree that young indigenous peoples, also active members of the indigenous movement in the last several years, should follow the same strategy of “*ganarse el espacio*” [earning the space] and “*tomarse el espacio*” [taking over the space].

While “*ganarse el espacio*” could refer to the aforementioned historical role of Amazonian women in the indigenous struggle and their process of becoming grassroots leaders in their communities, “*tomarse el espacio*” could describe their process of taking over the space within the indigenous movement. In my adoption of the second phrase, I describe the Amazonian Women’s process of taking over the space as something that not only happens in their indigenous organizations but in environmental and feminist platforms as well. This process, as Abigail Gualinga mentions, has not implied “asking someone for permission.” Rather “*tomarse el espacio*” is characterized by the Amazonian Women’s different actions that have literally taken over the spaces available in indigenous and non-indigenous anti-extractive organizing to make their voices heard.

In relation to taking over the space in the indigenous movement, the Amazonian leader Katy Betancourt Machoa, former Spokeswoman for Family and Women’s issues of CONAIE, explained during our interview that the Amazonian Women have managed to “imprint a different dynamic within their organizations” by “occupying those spaces of power [official leadership posts]” and by “appropriating and fighting [for] the public space for themselves” (Katy Betancourt Machoa, interview, July 25, 2017, CONAIE’s office in Quito). As an example of both, she mentioned how indigenous women not only organize their own protest actions as elected leaders, but also strategize and physically appropriate the public space during the marches organized by the broader indigenous movement:

“There is something that happens a lot in the marches and that is that women, now that I am a representative at CONAIE, always wait for me to form a line of women. [...] Normally, there is always a line of authorities and the authorities are always men, we have never been visible there. So now, we always form a line of women in the marches, and we do similar things during other public actions. I think this is important, because it shows that women need our own space, to be visible, and that we are fighting for space.” (Ibid.)

Nevertheless, she agrees with Vargas and Gualinga that this has been a difficult and challenging process, which implies not only a public and explicit appropriation of the streets. Taking over the space also requires “a lot of work at the internal level of indigenous organizations” in order to show that indigenous women’s participation can strengthen the same organizations (Ibid.). To that point she added that the Amazonian Women’s network is also composed of those indigenous women who in their everyday realities, as grassroots members of the communities, have challenged the exclusion of their voices:

“There was an explicit criticism to those decisions taken by male powers, ‘why are we excluded from this?’ And within this process, departing from our humbleness and our leadership that has not been recognized as such, we decided to act. This is why there were many voices from different women who did not come from a leadership position as such, but it is the voice of grassroots women who speak from their everyday situation. And, of course, they criticized the fact that we did not feel ourselves represented in the political decisions taken by certain political male leaders.” (Ibid.)

Taking over the space, in the context of their everyday realities as grassroots members of their indigenous communities, has also characterized actions organized by the Amazonian Women since their 2013 march. This is the case with their initiative to organize a *Yaku chaski* [river message] in the Bobonaza and Curaray river basins in 2015 and 2016. As Miriam García-Torres relates, the idea of organizing a *Yaku chaski* was born when some members of the Amazonian Women’s network, gathered in a workshop in Puyo, discussed the idea of mobilizing within their communities (García-Torres 2017, 93ff.). The women argued that it was necessary not only to organize collective actions that challenge external actors like the state, but also to continue working in their communities, where a lot of people do not have the opportunity to make their experiences visible. In one of their statements they argued,

“We, the Amazonian Women who denounced the contamination and oil exploitation in our territories in Quito in 2013, continue our struggle by walking alongside our peoples and communities. We are Shiwiar, Waorani, Kichwa and Sapara women, we navigated the Bobonaza river basin in 2015, and now we navigate the Curaray river basin carrying our message and collecting the opinions, feelings and mandates of our peoples, who are increasingly affected by the presence of oil, logging, and mining companies.” (*Yaku Chaski Warmikuna* [Women Messengers of the River], February 20, 2016, Curaray river basin)<sup>41</sup>

During their *Yaku Chaski*, the Amazonian Women organized assemblies and workshops where they engaged in important dialogues with their communities and shared the negative impacts of oil exploitation based on the experiences these leaders gathered during their visits in the northern Amazon (García-Torres 2017, 95). They also took advantage of certain communitarian and everyday practices—such as *minkas* [communal work], preparing *chicha* [manioc beer], painting *mukawas* [clay pottery], drinking *guayusa* [infusion made of caffeinated tree leaf] and telling each other’s *musku*y [dreams as visions]—to talk about the specific impacts that extractive activities impose on women’s lives and to encourage women from these communities to initiate their own organizational processes (Ibid.). As I show later in the dissertation, the strategy of using everyday spaces to seed political action also characterized the co-labor workshops on territoriality and *artesanías* that some members from the Amazonian Women’s network and I co-organized. During these workshops, these female leaders taught new techniques in the production of *artesanías*, while slowly weaving in dialogue about the importance of protecting indigenous territories into these intimate spaces. It is in the context of these communitarian and everyday spaces that they incorporate other community members into the broader the Amazonian Women’s territorial struggle.

Initiatives such as the *Yaku Chaski* attest to how the Amazonian Women’s “permanent mobilization” is tied to their territories (*Pronunciamiento de Mujeres en Resistencia*, October 2013). Furthermore, they also show how these women have found a plurality of ways to put the reproduction of life at the center of their political agenda and political action at the same time. In this process, the constant dialogue with their indigenous and non-indigenous allies has been important. The Amazonian Women’s

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<sup>41</sup> Available from: <http://www.saramanta.org/2016/02/20/mujeres-amazonicas-inician-el-yakuchaski-warmikuna-por-la-cuenca-del-curaray/> (Accessed: August 12, 2020)

allyship with important indigenous leaders from the highlands like Carmen Lozano and Blanca Chancoso,<sup>42</sup> with organizations like the *Instituto Quichua de Biotecnología Sacha Supay* (IQBSS), and with collectives like *Saramanta Warmikuna*<sup>43</sup> was crucial for the organization and conceptualization of the *Yaku Chaski*. In fact, the Kichwa term *chaski* refers to a form of communication from indigenous peoples in the highlands, which the Amazonian Women adapted to the specificities of the rainforest's communication routes, its rivers [*yaku* can be translated into water and river at the same time]. Rivers are not only fundamental spaces that offer Amazonian communities the material conditions for the reproduction of life, but they are also spaces where everyday human and non-human relations take place (Coba 2016).

### **Taking Over International Women's Day**

While the Amazonian Women's allyship with a plurality of actors has provided them with a variety of tools for continuing their territorial struggle, the previous example shows how this women's network also appropriates these terms and strategies and consequently redefines and extends them on their own terms. This process of appropriation and extension has also permeated their allyship with environmental and feminist collectives and organizations, who have offered important logistical support and spaces to broadcast the Amazonian Women's voices. While the conflictive aspects of this allyship accompany the reflections along this dissertation project, I would like to focus on how the Amazonian Women have taken over one of the most important platforms for feminist organizing: March 8, International Women's Day.

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<sup>42</sup>These two leaders have been visible protagonists of the historical indigenous struggle, and have also promoted the political participation and leadership of indigenous women in the context of the "*Escuelas de Formación Política de Mujeres Líderes de ECUARUNARI Dolores Cacuango*" [ECUARUNARI's Schools for the Political Formation of Women Leaders Dolores Cacuango] (Palacios 2005, 312).

<sup>43</sup>The collective *Saramanta Warmikuna*, corn daughters, was formed in 2012 and was intended to be a meeting-point for indigenous, *mestiza* and peasant women from the coast, the highland, and the Ecuadorian Amazon regions (*Colectivo Miradas Críticas del Territorio desde el Feminismo* 2014, 51). This collective emerged in the context of the 2012 mobilization to defend water against the Mirador Mining Project, after forty *mestiza*, peasant, and indigenous women from various communities shared their experiences and problems related to extractive projects in their territories (ibid.). Two days before this mobilization, eight women from various organizations took over the Chinese Embassy after Correa signed the contract with the mining company Ecuacorriente.



Image 3. The Amazonian Women's March, March 8, 2016, Puyo.

In March 8, 2016, the Amazonian Women organized their second big march in the city of Puyo, where approximately 500 women from different nationalities were present.<sup>44</sup> The march was logistically supported and accompanied by national and international environmental organizations like *Acción Ecológica*, Pachamama Foundation (*Terra Mater* at that time), and Amazon Watch; and by the ecofeminist organization Women's Earth and Climate Action Network (WECAN). This mobilization was a demonstration of resistance against the governmental concession to exploit oil blocks 28, 79, and 83, which coincide with the headwaters of the main river basins in Pastaza and affect the Bobonaza and Curaray rivers inhabited by the Kichwa, Sapara, and Shiwiar communities, and indigenous peoples living in voluntary isolation.

Exactly two years later, the Amazonian Women organized another massive mobilization with the support of their environmental allies. Following the announcement by the Minister of Hydrocarbons to reactivate the licensing of the 11th oil round in February 2018, several indigenous women marched again in Puyo on International Women's Day. In their mobilization's press statement, they wrote

"We, the Amazonian Women, express our total rejection to this oil project that threatens more than 3 million hectares of ancestral territories where the Shuar, Achuar, Waorani, Kichwa, Shiwiar, Andoa, and Sapara nationalities live. Our subsistence, our way of life, and our ancestral culture, whose main characteristic is to maintain harmony with nature, depend on this rainforest. We remind the governmental entities that this project was already rejected by indigenous nationalities since we were not consulted, nor did we give our free, prior, and informed consent." (*Boletín de Prensa XI Ronda Petrolera*, February 2018)

<sup>44</sup> Available from: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VHXHz6aajxY> (Accessed: April 19, 2021)



Image 4. The Amazonian Women's March, March 8, 2018, Puyo. Photograph by Zoila Castillo.

The march was followed by a two-day Amazonian Women's Assembly at the CONFENIAE headquarters. During this assembly, members from the Amazonian Women's network prepared a mandate to the State composed of 22 demands. This time, Siona, Siekopai, and Kichwa women from the northern Amazon and Shuar women from the southern Amazon joined the process (Vallejo and Bravo 2019).

It is important to emphasize that both marches were not organized by any urban feminist movement, but rather by the Amazonian Women with the support of national and international organizations and other activists. The platform and visibility that the International Women's Day offers thus served as a space where the Amazonian Women presented their territorial and anti-extractive agenda, departing from their situated reality. This agenda makes visible, among other things, the disproportionate violence that Amazonian women experience against their bodies and lives in circuits of extractive exploitation and as a result of the state's interference and division of their indigenous organizations and communities (*Mandato de las Mujeres Amazónicas*, March 2018). At the same time, the Amazonian Women's territorial agenda expands feminist debates over the invisibility of reproductive labor by showing how the reproduction of human and non-human life is vital for continuing relations of territoriality in their communities and for sustaining the life of future generations in the rainforest.

“Welcome to this day that we’re [sic] making Women’s Day. We have never had the opening to organize a march and make Amazonian women’s voices heard, the voices of our nationalities. You are welcome to participate with us. The *compañeras* who are here will express what they feel. They have been suffering, as women we are mistreated, raped, so we want to express all the feelings we have had. Today we have the opportunity to be and to have freedom. Freedom to walk, freedom to express, freedom to express our opinion about the effects of extractivism.” (Ena Santi from Sarayaku, public speech, March 8, 2016, Puyo)

“Oil companies are coming into my community. This is the land that my ancestors left me, and the land that I am going to leave my children. This is the land where women make our *chakras*, we work in the *chakras*, where we eat the yucca and make *chicha*. We are not going to negotiate over this territory, this land. I have come here with the Sapara women and with the Sapara men to protect the land. [...] It is for my children and my children’s children. I am not afraid.” (President of the Sapara Community of Torimbo, public speech translated from Kichwa to Spanish by Nina Gualinga, March 8, 2016, Puyo)

As Ena Santi’s words tell us, Amazonian women had never previously found the space to organize their own political march and make their voices heard during International Women’s Day. This is why the phrase “*tomarse el espacio*” catches so well the meaning of this process in which the Amazonian Women do not wait to be seen and rather take over this type of spaces to make their and their people’s demands visible. Nevertheless, taking over March 8, a very important date for the Latin American feminist struggle, has not implied that the Amazonian Women consider themselves feminists (Sempértegui 2019, 2). On the contrary, during each march these women reaffirm themselves as the collective subject they are, “*Mujeres Amazónicas*,” while expanding debates at the center of the feminist struggle. It is from this collective agency as the Amazonian Women that they defend their territories from extractive occupation and weave relations of allyship with a plurality of actors.

### **The *Mujeres Amazónicas*: The Collective Subject of this Dissertation**

Along this introductory chapter I have tried to illustrate how the Amazonian Women’s network situates itself within a complex entanglement of relations and interconnected struggles. As the previous sections show, the Amazonian Women have not only been able to position themselves as visible actors within the indigenous historical struggle, but have also imprinted their own political thinking when collaborating with their urban allies. This understanding of their organizing as



intertwined in a complex set of relations and practices challenges any rapid interpretations about their politics and motivates the question of this dissertation project, which asks about the plural ways in which the Amazonian Women *resist* extractive occupation in the Ecuadorian Amazon.

In this concluding section, I would like to share some considerations about the “*Mujeres Amazónicas*” as the protagonists of this written body. While most of the reflections along this dissertation are product of my ethnographic co-labor with five members from the Amazonian Women, and are shaped by their personal experiences, political trajectories and interpretations that constantly link their personal struggles with their territorial struggle, this dissertation understands the “*Mujeres Amazónicas*” as a collective subject. This understanding has less to do with a negation of the important role of certain leaders within indigenous organizations, as if the indigenous movement were constituted by an undistinguishable collective mass. Even less do I want to overshadow the important transformations that the strong leadership of many female leaders have brought about within the indigenous movement. On the contrary, the understanding of the Amazonian Women as a collective subject is intended to underscore the historical and communitarian entanglements that sustain their political organizing. At the same time, an understanding that highlights the malleable nature of their network, which constantly incorporates newly elected leaders, is also intended to make more space to think about the internal asymmetries and sometimes contradictory positions among its different members.

As their 2013 Declaration indicates, indigenous female representatives from different nationalities decided to organize their first mobilization as “*Mujeres Amazónicas por la Vida*” [The Amazonian Women for Life] with the “organizational support of CONAIE and GONOAIE (CONFENIAE’s name at that time)” (*Declaratoria del Kawsak Sacha*, October 2013). The support of CONAIE and CONFENIAE also accompanied the organizing of their 2016 and 2018 marches, challenging assumptions that the Amazonian Women’s organizing was somewhat an attempt to built an organization of indigenous female leaders separated from their indigenous organizations. Rather, despite the fact the Amazonian Women’s relationship to their regional indigenous organizations has not been absent of internal tensions and disputes, they understand themselves as *organic* to the broader indigenous movement. To be “organic” [*ser orgánicas*] to the indigenous movement, a phrase often mentioned during different conversations I had with some Amazonian leaders about their political

work, implies that behind every mobilization, every protest, every decision-making process, there is a thread of concrete practices—what Gladys Tzul Tzul call *tramas comunales* [communal entanglements] (Tzul Tzul 2018a)—that bear, prepare, and validate political actions. These practices are what legitimate the Amazonian Women’s representatives to organize assemblies and marches, and mobilize members from the communities they represent. Without this communitarian and territorial legitimation, the Amazonian Women would be structurally unable to organize their protest actions.

To be “organic” to the indigenous movement necessarily means that the Amazonian Women are a malleable and plural collective subject that incorporates newly elected female leaders and members from communities who decide to join their anti-extractive struggle. This is the case of many leaders that were elected by their communitarian and regional organizations after October 2013 and who became the Amazonian Women’s active members—like Salomé Aranda, Spokeswoman for Women and Family Issues of the Kichwa communities of Villano; Nema Grefa, President of the Sapara organization; and Lineth Calapucha, Vice President of the Kichwa organization of Pastaza PAKIRU (former OPIP). This is also the case of indigenous nationalities and communities from the southern and northern Amazon who joined their mobilization in 2018. This elasticity and plurality can lead to conflictive processes of difficult negotiations and rearrangements within the Amazonian Women’s collective, as the problems that arose during the 2018 assembly show—I talk about this at length in Chapter Six. These conflictive processes are partly product of the complex relations between different indigenous nationalities and communities in the Amazon, also inherent to regional political bodies like CONFENIAE that, as an indigenous confederation, represents different local organizations. At the same time, the visibility that certain women leaders have gained from their allyship with non-governmental organizations also adds more pressure on this process of incorporating new leaders and members into the Amazonian Women’s collective.

This is why understanding the Amazonian Women as a “network,” composed and “confronted by heterogeneous actors” (Escobar 2008, 32), describes well how they operate as a collective subject. On the one hand, this network-account describes this organic process of incorporating new members into the Amazonian Women’s collective. In fact, the nature of a network is that “no one” really owns it or can unanimously decide about who integrates it. Rather, the Amazonian Women are constituted by those female leaders and community members who *become part* of the

territorial and anti-extractive struggle and decide to claim the name “*Mujeres Amazónicas*” as their fighting flag. On the other hand, this description of the Amazonian Women as a network also makes more space to think about internal asymmetries and sometimes contradictory positions among its different members. These asymmetries are not only product of how certain members and leaders have more visibility than others—e.g. leaders from Sarayaku, but also of how each indigenous community and nationality has its own dynamic, political proposals, and different ways to relate with external actors like the state, missionaries, and non-governmental organizations. This plurality necessarily requires from the Amazonian Women’s network to rethink and rearrange itself constantly in order to “come together around dissimilar interests” and sustain an “uncommon” unity against extractive occupation (de la Cadena and Blaser 2018, 6).

This uncommon ground, characterizing the Amazonian Women’s process of building a collective subjectivity, also points to an internal tension in the terms they have chosen to depict themselves. Instead of using an indigenous language, these women have selected the Spanish term “*Mujeres Amazónicas*” to name their plural network. This can point to the fact that picking up an indigenous language like Kichwa, which has become a tool for communication and translation among different indigenous nationalities in the south-central rainforest, could legitimize internal political hierarchies among different indigenous nationalities. While this speculation is contradicted by the Amazonian Women’s decision to collectively adopt the Kichwa conception of *Kawsak Sacha* as their political proposal to the state, it is worth thinking about what the Spanish term “*Mujeres Amazónicas*” tells us about their self-definitions and understanding about their network. For this, I suggest examining “*Mujeres Amazónicas*” as a “partially connected” term.

The framework of partial connections has been developed in feminist thinking and ethnography to disrupt the conceptualization of entities or identities as simple units (Haraway 1991; Strathern 2004; de la Cadena 2015). While Marilyn Strathern (2004) describes “partial connection” as a way of conceiving how entities made and reproduced in different ways work together, Donna Haraway exemplifies this framework through the figure of a cyborg, a nonholistic organism that is part animal and part machine (cited in Strathern 2004, 37). This conception of relational convergences and disjunctions is a useful tool for analyzing complex entities that do not form closed units but respond to and may even incorporate divergent and dominant

positions in complex ways. The framework of partial connections is adopted by Marisol de la Cadena (2010 and 2015) to think about connections between indigenous and hegemonic practices (de la Cadena 2010, 348).<sup>45</sup> Similar to de la Cadena, I adopt partial connection to contest a view of the *Mujeres Amazónicas*'s politics as simply separate from alien or hegemonic practices in Ecuador. Rather, hegemonic practices have partly constituted indigenous organizing, with the latter even adopting elements of dominant discourses in their own political speeches and self-definitions.

To understand "*Mujeres Amazónicas*" as a partially connected term points exactly to how they have built a collective subjectivity "in constant relation with" dominant entities. The analysis offered in the next chapters indeed situates itself on a wide spectrum of human and social sciences that understand Amazonian indigeneity formation in Ecuador is product of a complex set of historical relations between Amazonian indigenous communities, the state, missionaries, and urban activists in the rainforest (see Taylor 1994; Muratorio 1994; Sawyer 2004; Prieto 2015). In the case of the *Mujeres Amazónicas*, while this process of constant relation positions their politics in a strategic and even "pragmatic" path of action, it also reveals a self-understanding that is not separated, not even "purified" from the rainforest's colonial past. In fact, the term *Amazónicas* derives from *Amazonía* [Amazon], a widely used term by Ecuador's peoples and academy to refer to the rainforest region. This term dates back to the Europeans first voyage down the rainforest's biggest and lengthiest river, which would become known as the Amazon River. During this colonial expedition, Spanish *conquistadores* motivated by the legend of *El Dorado*, a wealthy city governed by a king who painted his body in gold dust, encountered "fearsome natives" who attacked the Spaniards before melting back into the forest (Slater 2015, 5). As it is the case of many fantastic stories and desires that shape dominant imaginaries about the rainforest and its peoples, the natives were identified as the warrior women Amazons described in ancient Greek mythologies.

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<sup>45</sup> De la Cadena adopts partial connections to describe the political struggle of indigenous leaders from the community of Pacchanta in the highlands of Peru. Partial connections were implicit, she explains, within this community's political fight against the domination of the hacienda Lauramarca. The indigenous leader, Mariano Turpo, was not only an individual interlocutor to the state but was inevitably the *yachaq* (a person who knows) of Pacchanta, who was always acting *in-ayllu* (existing with other human and non-human beings). This perspective facilitated by "partial connections" permits de la Cadena to understand the political fight of Mariano as an example of how indigenous communities have learned to speak in the terms of the state without ignoring the political role that, for example, the mountain Ausangate played in the land struggle of the community of Pacchanta (de la Cadena 2015, 57).

Their usage of the Spanish term “*Mujeres Amazónicas*,” however, does not mean that they succumb to those colonial imaginaries or to what dominant assumptions about indigenous peoples think they are—fearsome natives, noble savages, guardians of the rainforest. On the contrary, “*Mujeres Amazónicas*” as a self-definition challenges any interpretations that leave aside the complex historical roots that mark Amazonian indigenous history and that shape their politics today. It also contests rigid analytical frameworks that make sense of the Amazonian Women’s network in gendered and ethnic terms only. The conjunction of the words “*Mujeres*” and “*Amazónicas*” points precisely to the fact that they do not want to just be seen as “women” and that their struggle is not only a gendered one. Furthermore, the usage of the term “*Amazónicas*” instead of “*Indígenas*” also reveals that their territorial struggle is not only an ethnic one in terms of an indigenous cultural reinvindication. Rather, the *Mujeres Amazónicas*’ politics and organizing reveal how they take on the strength that their self-definition evokes to position themselves, not as savages or as guardians of an almost extinct region and past, but as contemporary political subjects with the strength and historical experience of fighting colonial and extractive occupation.

The following chapters take seriously the Amazonian Women’s self-definition as “*Mujeres Amazónicas*,” a contemporary and complex collective subject that is shaping indigenous and anti-extractive politics at large. This does not mean that they do not consider themselves “indigenous” or do not use their “indigenous identity” in order to strategize their relationship with the state and urban allies. However, the *Mujeres Amazónicas*, similar than Ecuador’s indigenous movement, position their organizing not as an ethnicized or cultural struggle for “indigenous peoples only,” but present their demands as a broader set of political proposals for society at large.

## Chapter Two – Co-Labor as Methodology: Between Rooted Thinking and Ethnography

### Introduction

“[T]he first thing we need to clarify to ourselves is the motivational link between us and what we are researching on. [...] the metaphorical connection between research topics and lived experience.” (Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui, interview by Veronica Gago, 2016)<sup>46</sup>

The centrality of *experiencia vivida*, “lived experience,” in the work of the Bolivian thinker Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui is not an easy mantra to repeat, much less to practice. What Rivera understands as the “vital compromise” with our topics of research refers to something beyond the superficial link between theory and practice. The latter is normally limited to indicate how empirical work can inspire theoretical reflection. Rivera Cusicanqui’s thinking, by contrast, is not only inspired by lived experience; it is a form of “rooted thinking,” or *pensamiento enraizado*. One way to confirm this is how difficult it is to order her in any particular intellectual tradition, in fact, she incorporates a little bit of everything in her own and unique way. Rivera Cusicanqui’s rooted thinking also evidences her as someone who thinks hard. And, to paraphrase Donna Haraway, these are times in which we *must* think hard (Haraway 2016, 37).

This dissertation project is inspired by people who taught me to think hard and who think hard themselves. Whether through conversations, ethnographic exchange or written texts, these people have used their situated life experiences as the locus of collective knowledge, survival, and theory creation. Some of them have learnt to think hard in situations of displacement, violence, racism and sexism; whereas others, like myself, mainly started to think hard through forms of lived collaboration. This chapter centers on my process of ethnographic “co-labor” with the Amazonian Women, whose have and continue to resist amidst extractive projects in their territories in Ecuador. At the same time, the following methodological reflections are also inspired by a handful of other indigenous, black, decolonial, and feminist thinkers and activists.

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<sup>46</sup> Available from: <http://www.revistaanfibia.com/ensayo/contra-el-colonialismo-interno/> (Accessed: April 22, 2021)

Before explaining how this particular process of ethnographic co-labor started, as well as the meaning of “co-labor” as an ethnographic relation that I adopt from the anthropologist Marisol de la Cadena (2015), I would like to begin with a comment about what guides this dissertation project more broadly. The work of most of the thinkers that inspire and guide the analysis along this dissertation could be described as different versions of rooted thinking. In their unique way, most of these thinkers have offered paths of rooted thinking of their and our times. The importance of their work lies not only in how they force us to understand thinking as both embodied and embedded in history, as well as a geopolitically contextual effort linked to everyday life; it also lies in the rootedness of their social critique. As Encarnación Gutiérrez-Rodríguez rightly notes, the purpose of social critique is not simply to achieve hermeneutical understanding, since critique itself “begins where understanding finds its limits, where the focus on discontinuities and multiple antagonisms complicates our view and drives us to interrogate the epistemic pillars of our scientific presuppositions” (2016, 49).

The limits that Gutiérrez-Rodríguez references here are hard to experience personally. They are full of confusion, sadness, uncertainty, and anger about the “reality” we inhabit. Yet it is precisely the difficulty of this processes that can give birth to rooted thinking, that is, when our thoughts about wrongs of this world and the possibilities of alternative worlds compel us to think through the embeddedness of our existence. Contrary to Western philosophy’s founding myth of “original wholeness,” the ability of these rooted thinkers to think from the boundaries provides models for a kind of thinking based on creative survival in a damaged world (Haraway 1984, 176). Audre Lorde’s reflections in “Sister Outsider,” for instance, are exemplary expressions of this ability. When speaking of her own poetry, Lorde points to the importance of finding creative ways to give a name to the nameless, to the already felt but still formless, so that it can be *thought* (1984, 37). This critical, creative connection between lived reality and linguistic expression is at the core of rooted thinking; and it is what has encouraged me to think harder in times I have found myself stuck at the limits of my own epistemic presuppositions about the world.

Most of all, however, I am grateful to the Amazonian activists who have been my main source of inspiration as I crashed against these limits. This is not because I have found answers in our conversations. On the contrary, many of our encounters and exchanges helped me become even more conscious about the limits of my

understanding. This is rather because it produced our changing relationship of “co-labor,” forcing me to rethink and ask new questions of myself and others. And the possibility of new questions is linked to new ways of thinking about decolonial practices and decolonial politics.

In what follows I offer a general overview of my research over the past several years, during which time I have been following and participating in the Amazonian Women’s struggle against extractivism. In the first part, I offer an epistemological explanation of the different theoretical traditions that guided my ethnographic co-labor with the Amazonian Women as well as my inquiry throughout this dissertation. Given that my own thinking is embodied and embedded in an array of dialogues, experiences and theories that preceded my relationship with Amazonian Women, some of them guided me through my stays in Ecuador. They also inspired me to “make space” for co-labor to be a transformative and dialogical relation. The second part of the chapter begins with a brief overview of the different activities that constitute my co-labor ethnography with the Amazonian Women. I then explain why my first ethnographic research stays (between 2016 and 2017) were crucial for developing a co-labor relation with some Amazonian leaders. Thereafter, I illustrate how co-labor became not only an ethnographic tool but a relation that continued over distance when I returned to Germany in 2017. I also recount the different activities that characterized our co-labor relationship during my longest research stay in Ecuador between 2018 and 2019, and describe the political work of each of my co-laborers. In the third and final part, I explain how I analyzed and organized—or, in my case, “mapped”—the ethnographic data that resulted from my co-labor with the Amazonian Women. Finally, in the concluding section, I describe how I use my ethnographic material in the rest of the dissertation.

### **Rooted and Relational Thinking**

Methodologically and disciplinarily I situate this research project at the intersections of sociology, anthropology, cultural studies, and political theory. Yet the rooted thinkers that guide my reflections here come from a plurality of intellectual backgrounds, disciplines, and traditions of knowledge-production. They include indigenous thinkers like the communitarian feminist Lorena Cabnal, and the sociologists Gladys Tzul Tzul and Aura Cumes; black feminist thinkers like the



sociologist Patricia Hill Collins; decolonial thinkers like the philosopher Yuderkys Espinosa Miñoso, the aforementioned sociologists Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui and Encarnación Gutiérrez-Rodríguez, and the anthropologists Marisol de la Cadena and Arturo Escobar; and feminist theorists like the historian Silvia Federici, the historian of science Donna Haraway, and the anthropologist Marilyn Strathern.

What these thinkers, activists and scholars share is an intellectual and political critique of Eurocentric forms of producing “knowledge,” particularly the conception of knowledge as scientific rationality and value-neutrality. According to methodological defenses of the scientific “vocation” as a value-neutral endeavor, the possibility of science, especially social science, depends on the ability of the researcher to become a “detached observer” by distancing himself from his “object” of study (see Max Weber’s Lecture “Science as a Vocation,” originally delivered in 1919, Weber 1973). By contrast, rooted thinkers are aware of how the “products of thought bear the mark of their collective and individual creators, and the creators in turn have been distinctively marked as to gender, class, race, and culture” (Harding 1986, 15; see also Jaggar 1983; Haraway 1984; Hill Collins 2000).

This situated epistemological stance is necessarily connected to a second element that these rooted thinkers share in common. Importantly, they think *about* relations and *with* relations. Instead of locating the possibility of knowledge production in the intellectual subject (human, white, and male) who *thinks*, the aforementioned rooted thinkers locate the practice of knowledge in the relations that connect and change people (including researchers), living territories, and non-human beings. Thus they emphasize the forms of knowledge that certain relations make possible (or impossible). As Patricia Hill Collins rightly notes, epistemology, as an overarching theory of knowledge, is not an apolitical study of truth, but one that “points to the ways in which power relations shape who is believed and why” (Hill Collins 2000, 252). Being aware about how power relations legitimate certain peoples and beings as valid knowledge producers and relegate others as mere objects of inquiry opens the possibility to think about alternative relations that involve dialogical connections and ways of theorizing that challenge Eurocentric epistemological practices.

In the case of this research project, my ethnographic relationship, as a *mestiza* researcher born and raised in Quito, with the Amazonian Women was certainly complicated by asymmetrical relations of power with deep roots in colonial history and racist practices of exclusion carried by the *mestizo* population. The Amazonian region

has served as an imaginary space onto which the *mestizo* nation has projected their greatest dreams and their darkest nightmares—the kinds of wishes and anxieties constitutive of collective identity formation. Representations of this region as a space of unlimited richness, as well as macabre narratives about “cannibals eaters of people” have all been part of gathering images and tropes for Ecuadorians to invoke when talking about the Amazon. I am part of one of the last generations that grew up repeating the claim of *Ecuador País Amazónico!* [Ecuador, Amazonian Country!], that is, before the Ecuadorian government renounced its direct access to the Amazonas river and ended its border dispute with Peru in 1998. I also grew up listening to my *mestizo* family use the word *jíbaro*, a racist term that refers to Shuar people as “savages,” as an insult for people without “good manners.”

While these examples not only show the ambivalent role of the Amazon in the Ecuadorian imaginary, they also reveal the violent energies that underlie the *mestizo* racist imaginary towards the different peoples inhabiting this territory. In comparison to the *indio* from the Andes, long the historical object of everyday racism, “well educated” Ecuadorian citizens could simply imagine the “savage” from the Amazon. Historical neglect and the lack of contact with inhabitants of the rainforest complicated later encounters, particularly since Amazonian communities organized in the 1970s. Even after their appearance as political subjects, interpellated in the terms of the modern nation state, the earlier representations of Amazonian communities as “imagined savages” have permeated public discourse and the official state narratives to this day.

The Amazonian Women’s awareness of the asymmetrical power relations constantly permeated our encounters and foretold the kind of open-ended negotiation that would come to characterize our ethnographic relationship. It also marked how we both were invested in building a different type of connection beyond a relation that would position me as a detached observer and them as the people to be analyzed and categorized. Indeed, the Amazonian Women’s foundational statement in their first public declaration—“to protect life, our territories, and speak out with our own voice” (*Declaratoria del Kawsak Sacha*, October 2013)—reveals that they were not asking for anyone’s “help” to figure anything out about themselves (de la Cadena 2015, 12). On the contrary, “co-labor,” as a term and ethnographic relation that I adopt from Marisol de la Cadena, refers to the relationship I and some members from the Amazonian Women have built in the last years, defined by mine and their interests in working with each other (Ibid.).

My first encounters with some Amazonian leaders made clear that they wanted me to contribute to their struggle politically. This meant joining their protest actions, collaborating logistically with some activities, facilitating connections in the global north, and other things I detail in the sections below. In fact, the complex web of allyship relations that the Amazonian Women have woven with different urban activists and researchers showed me that, if I wanted to connect with them, I too had to become part of this web. And by becoming part, I was able to find new ways to think about decolonial practices and politics in Ecuador during a time of massive expansion of extractive projects. My interest in anti-extractive practices and politics has characterized my academic and activist life and is what primarily motivated me to work with the Amazonian Women's collective.

The Amazonian Women's efforts to speak out with their own voices also required a different type of epistemological approach—an approach that would not merely be invested in “analyzing” them, but in seriously engaging with their proposals, their self-definitions, and their own ways of describing and representing their struggle. This is where rooted thinkers' call to think *about* relations and *with* relations proved so important to me. Instead of “picking up a theory” that would analyze the Amazonian Women as “gendered,” “ethnic,” or “subaltern” subjects, I drew useful tools from the work of rooted thinkers to *dialogue* with my co-laborers as historical subjects, as owners of their own analyses and narratives about themselves and their struggle.

The nuts and bolts of this dialogue are full of unstable moments and partiality. In fact, as our co-labor did not guarantee complete intelligibility in our interactions and shared experiences, the dialogical relation with some members from the Amazonian Women did not assure a complete “understanding” of their struggle. On the contrary, my co-labor relationship with some Amazonian leaders constantly required me to think in “uncommon terms” about what held us together in our laboring (de la Cadena and Blaser 2018). This means that our ethnographic encounters were permeated and challenged by our different historical realities and ways of producing meaning. At the same time, as I explain next, the dialogical relation with Amazonian leaders as epistemological subjects is not about understanding “what they are.” Rather, it opens up the possibility for me—and the reader—to acknowledge the immense contribution that their territorial struggle represents for anti-extractive politics in Latin America and beyond. Dialogical relation as an epistemological approach, then, serves as tool to engage with the Amazonian Women's proposals, self-definitions and narratives, and to

expand on debates that are crucial for the Latin American anti-extractive struggle during these times of massive extractive expansion—debates that span political organizing, the reproduction of life, human and non-human relations, and political allyship.

### **Rooted Thinking as Dialogical Relation**

“Dialogical relation” is a term I adopt from Patricia Hill Collins to refer to how certain “changes in thinking may be accompanied by changed actions” and how “altered experiences may in turn stimulate a changed consciousness” (Hill Collins 2000, 30). Contrary to a dialectical relationship that links oppression and activism together, a dialogical relation characterizes how lived experience, as an often-neglected epistemological source, can inform and transform thinking and consciousness (Ibid.). Hill Collins develops this concept to challenge Eurocentric epistemological practices that exclude Black Women as epistemological subjects, and to explain how Black Women’s historical experiences with oppression have defined their standpoint thinking and fostered their activism (Ibid., 29).

While I recognize that my adoption of Hill Collins’ concept is limited to describe my own relationship with my co-laborers and does not do justice to its origins in Black Women’s history of resistance, “dialogical relation” became a powerful tool for understanding how my relationship with some Amazonian leaders transformed my thinking. For this transformation to happen, it was important for me to realize how co-labor, as an ethnographic relation, was not a research tool to be merely “deployed.” Even less was it a device to “gather material” and “test” my hypotheses about the Amazonian Women. On the contrary, as mentioned above, my co-labor with some Amazonian leaders ended up inspiring the guiding question of this dissertation—*how do the Amazonian Women resist extractive occupation?* Above all, my co-labor with some Amazonian leaders, when interpreted as a dialogical relation, became a main source of theory production, as it transformed me in unexpected ways and expanded my views on activism, politics, and solidarity.

Decolonial feminist thinkers have also offered important analyses on the influence that lived experience exerts on theory production. Along similar lines as Black feminists in the U.S. and in dialogue with them, decolonial feminists like Yuderkys Espinosa Miñoso have criticized the academic divisions between theory

production and embodied knowledge (Espinosa Miñoso 2014). In fact, decolonial thinkers situated in *Abya Yala*<sup>47</sup> have developed modes of thinking that depart from the lived experiences of women of color, whose stories are permeated by oppressions that intersect class, race, gender and sexuality (Espinosa Miñoso, Gómez Correal, and Ochoa Muñoz 2014, 32). For feminists of these traditions, decolonial thinking is embodied knowledge because it emerges from particular historical and material conditions (Gutiérrez-Rodríguez 2016, 50). However, its embeddedness in particular realities is also critical to the commodification of decolonial concepts in the global academic market as mere labels for knowledge or as mere political corrections separated from relevant social practices and critiques (Rivera Cusicanqui 2010b; Espinosa Miñoso, Gómez Correal, and Ochoa Muñoz 2014; Gutiérrez-Rodríguez 2016).

Indigenous thinkers such as the Maya-Xinka communitarian feminist Lorena Cabnal, the Maya-Kaqchikel sociologist Aura Cumes, and the Maya-K'iche' sociologist Gladys Tzul Tzul have also contributed to making visible the situatedness of their theoretical analyses and the particular forms of oppression that indigenous women experience across Latin America. While this stance has developed an internal critique concerning the exclusion of indigenous women's voices within (often male-dominated) indigenous movements, it has also troubled western feminist positions that portray indigenous women as passive victims of a patriarchal system (see Cabnal 2010; Cumes 2012; Tzul Tzul 2018a). These thinkers have shown how communitarian and territorial relations are a source of political power for indigenous women, without implying that they do not confront hierarchical relations within their communities and organizations, or that they do not negotiate their own positioning therein (Tzul Tzul 2018b). Concepts like Cabnal's *territorio cuerpo-tierra* [body-land territory] have been crucial in this effort to recognize the political body as embedded in territorial relations and to focus the battle against extractivism—as a colonial-capitalist-patriarchal form of occupation—on defending those relations (Cabnal 2015).

In the case of this dissertation, black, decolonial and indigenous expanded my views on certain concepts and inspired me to “make space” for co-labor to be a transformational and dialogical relation. For example, the work of decolonial and

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<sup>47</sup> *Abya Yala* is a term used within decolonial and indigenous thought, opposed to the colonial denomination of *América*, to refer to the American continent.

indigenous thinkers like Yuderkys Espinosa-Miñoso, Lorena Cabnal, Aura Cumes, and Arturo Escobar were crucial for conceptualizing what it means to build a dialogue with the Amazonian Women as a collective and historical subject, as owners of their own political proposals and designs. Furthermore, the work of Gladys Tzul Tzul has been an indispensable guide to dialoguing with the Amazonian Women's own ways of describing their political and organizational work as indigenous leaders. For instance, Tzul Tzul offered me analytical tools to better grasp how my co-laborers negotiate their political place within their communities and indigenous organizations. This, in turn, has complicated my reflections on the diverse allyship relations between the Amazonian Women and urban feminist activists, including myself, and required new ways of thinking about asymmetrical relations beyond the simple dichotomy of "cooperation among equals" or "domination between antagonists."

Other specific examples of rooted thinkers that guide this dissertation include Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui, whose work on *artesanía intelectual*, or intellectual handicraft, has been fundamental to conceptualizing the Amazonian Women's *artesanías* as "woven stories" and to expanding debates on commodification and material culture (Chapter Four). Encarnación Gutiérrez-Rodríguez' work on affective labor in connection with Silvia Federici's materialist account on reproductive labor have also been crucial to building a dialogue with the Amazonian Women's ways of understating their everyday labor. Both have helped me to appreciate the connections between Amazonian leaders' political proposals, like the Living Forest, and the affective practices that reproduce human and non-human life in the rainforest (Chapter Five). Finally, the work of feminist and decolonial historians of science and anthropologists like Donna Haraway, Marilyn Strathern, and Marisol de la Cadena have been central to dialogue with the Amazonian Women's complex ways of building relations with their allies, and to acknowledge how these relations are often unstable, partial, and deeply transformational at the same time (Chapter Six).<sup>48</sup>

With the last three scholars, I was able to conceptualize relations in terms of "partial connections" with the Amazonian Women's complex collective identities and

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<sup>48</sup> It is important to clarify that these examples are not an exhaustive or exact list of all the different rooted thinkers and traditions that guide my reflections throughout this dissertation. Even less is it a precise description of the different ways in which certain concepts and contributions are deployed in the chapters that follow. Many often, I use and re-use the same concept in several chapters, for different purposes and in different ways. This section just offers a general summary of the thinkers and traditions that I consider have influenced my co-labor relation with the Amazonian Women and my writing the most.

political practices. As mentioned in Chapter One, the framework of partial connections was developed in feminist thinking and ethnography to disrupt the conceptualization of entities or identities as simple, closed units, and to show that their constitution partly carries the very relations that produced them over space and time (Haraway 1991; Strathern 2004; de la Cadena 2015). This understanding of relations is not only a useful way to theorize *about* relations, but it also helps thinking *with* relations—that is, without forgetting that the theoretical outcome or ethnographic description yielded by this relational thinking is always partial.

In the case of my co-labor with the Amazonian Women, this has meant that my dialogue with their proposals, self-definitions, and descriptions can always only produce a partial perspective of what they *really* mean. This is not a consequence of the impossibility of exchanging epistemological ideas. On the contrary, our co-labor relation was very much characterized by epistemological exchanges as well. Furthermore, in my experience, the Amazonian Women are very interested in disseminating their concepts and proposals with researchers, activists, and the broader public. While we are connected by our shared intention to work together, co-labor happens across different ontological dimensions, marked by our different *historias* [histories and personal stories], worlding practices, and relations that constitute our experiences (see Vázquez 2017 and Escobar 2018). To paraphrase Hill Collins, this is why the dialogical relation, as a relation that alters thinking *and* consciousness, is not only an epistemological one, but has the power to transform our perception and make us acknowledge the plurality of worlds that inhabit this same earth. Moreover, the ontological and epistemological transformations connected to dialogical relations can bring the people involved in them closer together, without implying their unification or becoming-each-other. How this transformation happened concretely, in my thinking and my consciousness during my co-labor with Amazonian leaders, is something I explore in what follows of this chapter.

### **Methodological Summary**

From a methodological point of view, the experiences that nurtured the writing of this dissertation can be organized into three phases: an initial phase of preparatory research, a period of initial contact with the Amazonian Women, and an ethnographic

phase of in-person and long-distance co-labor with five members from the Amazonian Women.

The initial phase of preparatory research, or the period that preceded my first research stays in Ecuador, can be traced back to November 2013, right after the Amazonian Women organized their first protest march. Since then, I began following the Amazonian Women's organizing and collecting material related to their activism—videos, news articles, declarations and social media publications—while also inquiring into the unique and complex historical relations in the Amazon. That the Amazon constitutes a territory of “historical absences” was a realization that compelled me to research and reflect on the Amazon historically, which in turn constitutes the first phases of this dissertation project.

Although I began following the Amazonian Women's organizing in 2013, I did not know I would write an ethnographically-based dissertation until the beginning of 2016. It was only after February 2016, after I was accepted as a doctoral candidate at the Sociology Department in Gießen, Germany, that the second period of initial contact with the Amazonian Women began. This period comprised two research visits in the Ecuadorian Amazon, one in March 2016 and another between July and September 2017. During both visits, I conducted five semi-structured interviews with urban activists supporting the Amazonian Women's network, eight semi-structured interviews and long conversations with leaders from the Amazonian Women, and participant observation during five political activities and trips involving members from the Amazonian Women. The latter included the Amazonian Women's March in Puyo in 2016, an Amazonian Women's workshop in Lago Agrio in 2017, a workshop organized by CONFENIAE to a Shuar community in the *Cordillera del Condor* in 2017, an activist hearing for affected communities by mining projects in Gualaquiza in 2017, and the sixth congress of CONAIE in the city of Zamora in 2017. All of these ethnographic activities provided the opportunity to meet the Amazonian leaders, gather important information about their political organizing against extractive occupation and, most importantly, develop a co-labor relation with some of them.

While I explain in depth what co-labor entails as an ethnographic relation in the next section, it is important to mention that co-labor is product of this second period of initial contact, which also involved a period of negotiation with some members of the Amazonian Women. This period of negotiation was marked by my interest in not only “observing” the Amazonian Women's activism as a doctoral researcher, but by my



realization that I needed to become part of the network of scholar activists that have been working with and writing about the Amazonian Women. As an activist who has been connected to different anti-racist movements in Germany, I saw this political involvement as the only fair and responsible way to gain a deeper insight into their territorial struggle and to expand my views on anti-extractive decolonial politics in Ecuador. When I told some Amazonian leaders about my intention to write a doctoral dissertation on their organizing while supporting their territorial struggle, they expressed their interest in working with me, though only if they knew we were embarking on a long-term relationship that could benefit their struggle—"I hope you do what you say, and come back to work with us for our territory. Not like the others who do one interview and never come back." (Zoila Castillo, fieldnotes, September 5, 2017). In fact, as I realized later, only a long-term relationship offered us the time and emotional space to navigate and continuously work across power differentials, permeated by how colonial history often places us in asymmetrical positions. Moreover, as an initial outsider to their allyship networks, I needed to prove that I was going to "keep my word," as Zoila Castillo said, and that I was ready to embark on a sustained relation of co-labor with the Amazonian leaders.

I could say, then, that the third ethnographic period of co-labor started during the last weeks of my 2017 research visit, when it became clear which members of the Amazonian Women I would co-labor with most closely. I describe this as an ethnographic phase of long-distance and in-person co-labor, given that my co-laborers and I continued to build our relationship after I "left the field" in 2017. As I show below, the period of long-distance co-laboring between November 2017 and July 2018 was crucial in order to develop a relation of trust with some Amazonian leaders. In my case, this transatlantic co-labor comprised activities like collecting funds for the Amazonian Women's next mobilization march in 2018, and supporting some Amazonian leaders by looking for fair trade distributors or local shops in Germany where they could sell their *artesanías*.

After this period of long distance co-labor, I travelled back to the Ecuadorian Amazon for my longest research stay. During this visit, which took place between August 2018 and March 2019, I conducted more semi-structured interviews with other urban activists and with members from the Amazonian Women's network I could not meet a year before. By the end of this last research stay, I collected a total of twenty-seven semi-structured interviews: nine interviews with the Amazonian Women's allies

and the rest (eighteen) with members from the Amazonian Women. I also continued my co-labor with five members from the Amazonian Women: Rosa Gualinga, Zoila Castillo, Elvia Dagua, Nancy Santi and Salomé Aranda. Most of the visual, recorded and written material I gathered during this time is a direct product of the activities these Amazonian leaders and I conducted together. These activities included five workshops on *artesanías* and territorial defense, which allowed me to visit their communities of origin and learn about their political work. It also included co-organizing with Rosa Gualinga and Zoila Castillo a panel called “The Amazonian Women Weave Resistance” during the International Congress “Bodies, Territories, and Dispossession: Life under Threat,” at the Universidad Andina Simón Bolívar in October 2018.

Since I left Ecuador in March 2019, my co-laborers and I have continued our relationship over distance. What started as a relation marked by our common interest in working with each other has evolved into a transatlantic friendship that continues today. While I do not see this period as an “integral part” of my ethnographic co-labor, given that it is mostly based on our spontaneous willingness to maintain contact with each other in contrast to our planned effort to co-labor like during our 2018 workshops, it has offered us many opportunities for working together at the distance. This has also offered recent updates on their territorial struggle, which I briefly refer to in Chapter One and in the Conclusion. As an example of this co-labor, I organized two crowdfunding campaigns with the Amazonian Women and Ecuadorian migrant activists in October 2019 and April 2020. While the first campaign was meant to support the Amazonian Women’s participation at the strike against the neoliberal reforms in Ecuador in October 2019, the second one channeled resources for the Amazonian Women to assist communities negatively impacted by a major oil spill and unprecedented rains during the peak of the pandemic in April 2020. Another example was when Zoila Castillo and I co-organized a virtual panel on the impacts of the pandemic on the Amazonian Women’s territorial struggle during the International Colloquium “Visualidad y Poder” hosted by the Universidad Andina Simón Bolívar in October 2020. All of these activities have allowed me to gain a closer look at the Amazonian Women’s organizing in the context of the pandemic and neoliberal extractivism in the Amazon.

In the next sections, I narrate and analyze in detail two of the aforementioned research periods: the period of initial contact with the Amazonian Women, and the ethnographic phase of in-person and long-distance co-labor with some Amazonian

leaders. I start by offering an in-depth explanation of what co-labor entails as a relation of working with each other. I then describe how the initial research period evolved into a co-labor ethnography with some members of the Amazonian Women. Finally, I describe in detail our co-labor workshops in Ecuador, and the other activities that characterized my ethnographic co-labor with each of the five Amazonian leaders.

### **How Ethnography Became Co-Labor**

Ethnography has been traditionally defined as the work of describing particular cultures by learning from the people who are an active part of it (Spradley 1979, 5). In order to achieve an accurate description of a specific cultural background, the central aim of ethnographic methods is to achieve a “thick description” of a culture’s systems of meaning (Geertz, 1973). Along the lines suggested by Elizabeth Povinelli, my ethnographic approach shifts away from this anthropological commitment and leans toward a problematization of thick description (Povinelli 2011, x). What Povinelli calls “austere ethnography” is closer to my own ethnographic approach, as the “ethnographic material” I have been gathering since my first experiences in the Amazon has been severely “restricted” by my relationships with the Amazonian Women. And these relationships have been very much defined by their everyday routines and activities.



Image 5. Elvia Dagua at her house, August 23, 2017, Madre Tierra district.

Most of the ethnographic “methods” in this project were pursued in the context of the Amazonian Women’s daily and anti-extractive activities, which in turn

transformed my ethnography into a project of “co-labor.” Returning to Marisol de la Cadena’s understanding of co-labor, though “co-laboring” may sound similar to “collaborative research,” I do not see myself as using my expertise to “help” the Amazonian Women (de la Cadena 2015, 12). “Collaboration” or “collaborative ethnography” is widely used in participatory research projects to refer to researchers and informants working together to achieve a common goal—e.g. producing new scientific knowledge or co-writing texts to be disseminated within local audiences (see Cornwall and Jewkes 1995; Katz and Martin 1997; Lassiter 2005). Contrary to this understanding of collaboration, my relationship with Amazonian women did not have a “common goal” if understood in terms of the “same goal.”

Even less does my writing or research intend to give the Amazonian Women “a voice.” The Amazonian Women, as historical members of the indigenous movement, already constitute a plurality of voices strategically connected to demands from their community bases. They come with hegemonic political languages, but they also translate the complex entanglements of human and non-human languages in the rainforest into terms appealing to the international environmental discourse. As I show in Chapter Three, one fundamental characteristic of the Amazonian Women and Ecuador’s indigenous movement is how both frame their struggle in “universal terms” and are interested in stitching “global connections” with other struggles that are not necessarily articulated in territorial or communitarian terms (Tsing 2005).

This is why I understand co-labor as a very concrete relationship with some members from the Amazonian Women’s network defined by our (mine and their) interests in each other’s presence. That is to say, while I had an interest in learning from their resistance against extractive occupation and expand my views on decolonial practices and politics, the Amazonian Women showed interest in my political contribution to their struggle.

As mentioned in Chapter One, our co-labor opened my eyes to the non-separation between their territorial struggle and their everyday struggles more generally—e.g. their struggle to provide for their families while laboring as indigenous representatives in the city. This linkage has influenced my inclusion of certain activities in my ethnographic work, which might seem separate from anti-extractive resistance but which I claim are critically connected to their activism. An example of these activities is the Amazonian Women’s production of *artesanías*, which I discuss below and is the central motif in Chapter Four. Furthermore, the non-separation of their

territorial struggle and everyday struggles also forced me to renounce certain classic ethnographic methods, to adapt my presence to their daily activities, and to displace rooted thinking in other arenas from the ones that still make my dissertation project part of the academic repertoire.

### **First Ethnographic Visits in Ecuador**

My first visit in the Ecuador's south-central Amazon took place in March 2016. I travelled with a group of environmental activists from the non-governmental organizations *Fundación Pachamama*, Amazon Watch and the Women's Earth and Climate Action Network (WECAN), and researchers and students from the Latin American Faculty of Social Sciences (FLACSO) from Quito to Puyo in order to join the Amazonian Women's march on International Women's Day. During this very first visit, I was an unknown participant and observer for members from the Amazonian Women's network, and I was still applying for funding to start my doctoral research.

After my doctoral stipend started in October 2016, I was able to conduct my first longer research stay in Ecuador from July to September 2017. Previously, I had planned to spend time in the capital city of Quito and in the Amazonian city of Puyo in order to carry out semi-structured interviews with environmentalist and indigenous organizations and collectives as well as with members from the Amazonian Women who have been leading the anti-extractive struggle. The interviews and informal conversations I had with urban activists and workers from environmental organizations supporting and cooperating on different levels with the Amazonian Women—such as the *Yasunid@s* collective, *Fundación Pachamama*, the *HAKHU* Foundation, the collective *Samaranta Warminkuna*, and *Minka Urbana* (a collective I was an active member until it disintegrated in 2019)—were crucial in order to receive the contact information of the Amazonian Women. I also conducted two semi-structured interviews with the indigenous Spokeswoman for Family and Women's issues at CONAIE and with the Vice President of the Andean Confederation ECUARUNARI at that time, who previously joined the Amazonian Women's protest actions, and who were living and working in Quito at that time. However, the most useful aspect of these initial conversations was their encouragement to travel to Puyo as soon as possible to meet with Amazonian activists personally.

I spent almost two thirds of my total research stay in Puyo and in buses travelling to different parts of the rainforest. While I thought that I would be mainly conducting semi-structured interviews with the leading figures of the Amazonian Women's network, I ended up having long, sustained conversations during my first encounters with them. All of these conversations did not end in the same place they started, as our dialogues quickly turned into short or longer trips together. Most of the time the activists would invite me into their houses, or they would ask me to continue our conversation on the way to their political activities and meetings. Some of them also took me to longer trips to other parts of the rainforest, such as the northern city of Lago Agrio and the Shuar territory in the *Cordillera del Condor*.

During this research stay, I had conversations with a total of eight Amazonian women who have been the main organizers and leaders of the anti-extractive struggle since 2013. Some parts of these conversations were recorded, with the previous consent of the activists; other parts are recalled and described in my field research notes. Over time I built close relationships with four Amazonian women from the Kichwa, Waorani and Shiwiar nationalities. Two of them—Elvia Dagua and Zoila Castillo—were elected representatives of CONFENIAE, and the other two—Rosa Gualinga and Manuela Ima—were official representatives at the Shiwiar women's organization *Ikiam Nua* and Waorani women's organization AMWAE respectively.

These four relationships, which later evolved into transatlantic friendships, allowed me to perceive how and why the activism and proposals of these women are rooted in their daily living. Most of our conversations began with my interest in understanding more about what happened during the “historical moments” of their mobilization since 2013. Their generous acts of re-describing these moments, once and again, rapidly exposed the complex organizational entanglements that gave birth to these different public acts of resistance. I came to understand that these organizational entanglements are not just extremely intricate because they bring together different women from different nationalities, with different interests and in different languages. They also demand many personal sacrifices from each the women involved in order to keep the networks of resistance alive. Their personal sacrifices ranged from how their political activism affected their marital relationships to finding ways to sustain themselves in the cities where their marches and protests took place. The “historical moments,” or the visible parts, of their anti-extractive struggle that interested me at the beginning thus became the points of departure for understanding how their anti-

extractive activism and demands are necessarily connected to their daily struggles and strategies of resistance.

Another important dynamic that allowed me to perceive the presence of the everyday in their activism was how our conversations took place across reproductive activities. Many conversations, for example, continued in the Amazonian leaders' houses, including the presence of the activists' youngest children or grandchildren. Their presence made clear that reproductive labor did not stop as their political and social activities began—a fact that makes the presence of these children at previous marches and other mobilization activities more than a form of symbolism. Even if I went to Ecuador with no pretensions of “objective research,” as I was conscious of the politics involved in my very presence, I never imagined the Amazonian activists would include me, so quickly and so openly, into their daily activities. The invitations into their houses to share a meal or *chicha* did not just involve me in their reproductive activities; they also demanded me to think hard about activism in terms of the everyday.

### Observing and Being Observed



Image 6. The author being filmed by a member from the indigenous press at the VI CONAIE Congress, September 2017, Zamora. Photograph by Daniel Cuty.

One of my last trips in 2017 was to the city of Zamora, where I attended, as an “observer,” the sixth congress of CONAIE. My observer status was facilitated by Zoila Castillo and Elvia Dagua from CONFENIAE. I was thrilled to be part of an event organized by one of the most important social and political organizations in Ecuador. As mentioned in Chapter One, since its foundation in 1986, CONAIE has been the

organizational head of an alliance of social movements against neoliberal structural adjustment policies in the country. From the beginning of the Congress, I recorded everything I could and penned extensive notes about what was taking place.

Nevertheless, as is the often case with ethnographic moments that surface in the aftermath, the experience I remember best was a feeling of embarrassment. I realized that I was being filmed by the indigenous press while taking notes at the congress. The above photo was taken by a friend and researcher who was also in attendance with the same “observer” status. With a touch of humor and irony, he sent me the photo with the following description: “when the anthropologist is suddenly under observation by the ‘other.’”

When reflecting on this moment, I did not feel embarrassed because I was being observed by the “other.” Even if the picture, and my friend’s statement about it, contained a certain ironic truth about my positionality, it was unsurprising that I was being observed. *Of course*, I was being observed. Even if the method of “participant observation” often accentuates the hierarchical binary between the subject (researcher) and the object to be analyzed (the other) on the paper (dissertation), this relationship is constantly inverted in the field. However, the scene that the photo captured showed me just how selfish, superfluous, and even bizarre such a research activity is in these political arenas. In this respect, as Isabelle Stengers rightly suggests, “bizarre” has little to do with feelings of guilt about our presence as researchers in the lives of other people, which just put “us” (academics) at the center again (Stengers 2011, 12). It rather reminds us that no one is actually calling for our presence.

In fact, my superfluous role as an “academic” in the CONAIE Congress is a reminder that no one was calling for my presence. It reveals the obvious limits of *only* academic tools for any kind of transformation, of knowledge or otherwise. To naively think that academic practice can stop being what it is—largely selfish and most often meaningless for political action—if we just depart from a critical posture is as limited as to think that because I was being observed I would stop being an academic subject still reproducing colonial relationships. By this realization I do not mean to imply that I embrace a pessimistic politics about decolonizing academic institutions. I do believe, in fact, that academic politics can offer important tools in transforming the institutions that perpetuate coloniality. Nonetheless and at the same time, the realm of academic politics concerns “us” (academics) and cannot be used as an effective corrective for research encounters, especially if we are still using academic tools as usual.



Paraphrasing Audre Lorde's question in "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House," we might ask: What does it mean when the tools of academic research are used to examine the fruits of colonial relations that the academy has partly reproduced? In response, Lorde offers an answer herself: "It means that only the most narrow perimeters of change are possible and allowable" (Lorde 1984, 111).

To accept that my deployment of "participant observation" was superfluous for the political agenda of the Amazonian Women is, at the very least, an important point of departure—if only for asking myself where transformational forms of rooted thinking might be located in my case (and where they certainly are not). The information I gathered through participant information in the four longer trips during my stay in 2017—to the aforementioned congress in Zamora, to an Amazonian women's workshop in Lago Agrio, to a Shuar community in the *Cordillera del Condor*, and to an activist hearing for affected communities by mining projects in Gualaquiza—was crucial in order to better understand the consequences of extractive occupation in the Amazon. Nevertheless, the most important fact about these trips was not the information I gathered by deploying "academic tools *only*," but how it continued my conversations with some Amazonian women that exceed this academic project. These conversations served as a platform for negotiating our co-labor project. And it is in this co-labor relation, where rooted thinking is located, that displaced my initial conception of the form and function of decolonial politics.

### **Co-Laboring between Research Stays**

What required me to think harder, above all else, was the co-labor project that blossomed out of my conversations with four Amazonian leaders. Co-labor was the only way to continue building a relationship at the distance with some Amazonian leaders. Indeed, our dynamic relationship of mutual interest of working with each other continued after I left the field. Furthermore, I would even go so far to suggest that our co-labor intensified as soon as I left Ecuador and returned to Germany in 2017, because this is when relationships of trust began to develop.

Back in Germany, our co-labor continued in two ways. First, I supported the Amazonian Women by collecting funds for a new mobilization against the renewed governmental attempt to license the 11th oil round in March 2018. Here I was able to establish contact with the German foundation, *Stiftung Umverteilen*, that covered the

transportation costs of activists travelling from their communities to the city of Puyo, where the Amazonian Women's assembly would take place. I also organized a crowdfunding campaign where friends and family could contribute to their mobilization. This political form of co-labor across continental boundaries strengthened our relationship of trust.

A lack of trust was a major factor in the negotiation of our co-labor in Ecuador, however. In our conversations, my Amazonian co-laborers often mentioned how they often felt disappointed when researchers or urban activists “abandoned them” after leaving the field or finishing a project. At that time, I had no evidence to convince them that I would be different, and the fact that I could not stay longer than three months in Ecuador that year clearly meant that our co-labor relationship could only continue over distance. Co-laboring with them from Germany became, then, an enabling factor to continue our relationship, though it also “brought me back to the field” in a way I had not planned. My Amazonian co-laborers would constantly update me about the development of their mobilization by leaving me voice messages, sending me pictures over Facebook Messenger, or calling me via WhatsApp. I did the same regarding developments in my crowdfunding efforts. I appreciated how they included me in their struggle despite how busy they were organizing every detail and facet of their mobilization.

The second way we co-labored at a distance was through their *artesanías*. Before I left Ecuador, three Amazonian co-laborers—Zoila Castillo, Elvia Dagua, and Rosa Gualinga—asked me to help them sell their *artesanías* and look for fair trade distributors or local shops in Germany. While I was willing to bring some *artesanías* to Germany and to see how I could contribute to their interests within the realm of my capabilities, I did not (initially) consider this part of our co-labor relevant to my own interest in their anti-extractive struggle and politics.

During my stay in Ecuador, I had already gotten an idea of how crucial the production of *artesanías* is for the everyday life of some Amazonian women. I also witnessed the way that selling *artesanías* covered the various costs that confronted the women when they joined a mobilization in the city. Nevertheless, I did not initially consider the production of *artesanías* extremely relevant for the anti-extractive struggle writ large. Although some interesting initiatives like the *HAKHU* project promote *artesanías* as an alternative source of income to extractive industries in indigenous communities, I had my concerns about the fact that *artesanías* are mostly sold as a

cultural commodity in the (national and international) market and that indigenous producers (mostly women) end up being the last link in the capitalist production chain.

While such concerns remain part of my reflections on the role of *artesanías* in the Amazonian Women's anti-extractive struggle, I changed my mind, and my "theoretical" critique, after realizing about the relations *artesanías* revealed, connected, and reproduced in my co-laborers' lives. Furthermore, I also learnt from some Amazonian leaders about the importance of certain *artesanía* designs in their lives, and for the transmission of knowledge within Amazonian communities, particularly between women of various generations.

This shift did not occur in Ecuador, but while transcribing certain conversations with members from the Amazonian Women in Germany. In addition to economically facilitating some Amazonian women's political work in the cities, the form and meanings of *artesanías* reflect their knowledge about the forest and its living beings. Although these meanings become invisible in monetary exchanges, the materiality of *artesanías* is more than a condensation of these women's labor power; it also reflects how their creativity, work, and thinking is rooted in the everyday. If I were going to take seriously the question of what really sustains the activism of these women, I realized, I would also have to engage and ask why the production of *artesanías* comprises such an important practice of resistance, and how this practice exceeds the extractive occupation by connecting resistance to everyday life.



Image 7. Zoila Castillo selling her *artesanías* during the VI CONAIE Congress, September 2017, Zamora.

This dissertation project tries, then, to think hard about *artesanías*—to think beyond handicrafts as cultural “folklore” or as monetizable “commodities”—and to

build a dialogue with them as “woven stories.” While it is important to take into account the economic rationalities that govern the world, grasping the ways that *artesanías* both constitute and transmit knowledge within Amazonian communities may contaminate our assumptions about *artesanías* as “cultural commodities only.” This recognition also challenges common racist and colonial assumptions about indigenous women as natural “makers” as opposed to “thinkers” (Cumes 2012, 2).

To challenge our assumptions about *artesanías* as unskilled manual labor allows for a different perspective on the practice of their production as a different mode of rooted thinking. Indeed, *artesanías* evidence a form of thinking not limited to writing or verbal practices, as I show in Chapter Four. The displacement of rooted thinking from literate to “illiterate” territories contributes to what Haraway calls “inventing new practices of imagination” (Haraway 2016, 51). This displacement is crucial for decolonizing the ways in which we image and reproduce anti-extractive politics. It is also central to building strategies that resist and reexist extractive occupation vis-à-vis modern and hegemonic understandings of politics as rational that exclude alternative forms of political expression.

### ***Artesanías*, a Material and Transformational Bond**

The presence of *artesanías* in our co-labor relationship with some members from the Amazonian Women thus inspired a first major transformation in my thinking and consciousness. Questions that became recurrent after I left Ecuador in 2017 were: What does it mean that some Amazonian women gave *me* their *artesanías*? What is the effect of *artesanías* on our co-labor relationship? How did *artesanías* position me in relation to my co-laborers?

The *artesanías* I brought with me to Germany did indeed become an important link between me and three Amazonian leaders. This link transformed co-labor from its initial phase, namely as a relation originally defined by our shared interest in working with each other. Our relationship evolved through a deeper involvement in each other’s lives, especially my own involvement in their lives and struggle. Paraphrasing Elizabeth Povinelli, “to be involved” has a much stronger meaning and effect than to be merely interested in the Amazonian Women’s struggle (Povinelli 2014, 6). It is precisely this involvement and my close relationship with some Amazonian leaders that

allowed me to continue expanding my thinking and learning from their lives and struggle at a distance.

Concretely, this involvement meant actively trying to find friends and people interested in buying Amazonian Women's *artesanías* in Germany, becoming interested in knowing more about the meaning of the different necklaces, bracelets and earrings I had with me, learning about the role of *artesanías* in the lives of my three co-laborers, and consulting with them about how I should present and talk about the *artesanías*' elaboration and meaning with potential distributors and buyers. This close involvement in my co-laborers' lives allowed me to become aware of the complex ways in which Amazonian leaders weave relations between different worlds through the production *artesanías*—the living forest, the community, the capitalist market (Rivera Cusicanqui 2019)<sup>49</sup>—and negotiate their positionality in each of these worlds with a tremendous creative force. At the same time, it forced me to build a dialogue with *artesanías* not only as text—this is, not only as cultural meaning—but as a material link to my co-laborers, with very concrete effects on my thinking and consciousness.

The fact that *artesanías* were material carriers of my relationship with Zoila Castillo, Elvia Dagua, and Rosa Gualinga, and the fact that they facilitated a relation of trust with these three Amazonian leaders at a distance, intensified the aforementioned questions and transformed some initial ideas and expectations I had about our relation and about my own role as a co-laborer. In order to explain the extent of this transformation, it is helpful to compare the effect that *artesanías* had on me with the effect that “writing ethnography” has on the researcher.



Image 8. Rosa Gualinga and her *artesanías*, August 8, 2017, Puyo.

<sup>49</sup> Available from: <https://www.elsaltodiario.com/feminismo-poscolonial/silvia-rivera-cusicanqui-producir-pensamiento-cotidiano-pensamiento-indigena> (Accessed: April 22, 2021)

Weaving together an ethnographic narrative about experiences that “happened” in the past is a strange and sometimes challenging enterprise. The question that often arises is, where to start? One subsequently picks up a fieldwork memory that has the power to let one’s thinking “run riot”—a “Strathernian” depiction—about the matter one is trying to unfold. Marilyn Strathern has called the “ethnographic moment” the time when the field of observation is recreated in an analytical way (Strathern 1999, 6). What is interesting about her description is not that the ethnographic moment allows a “trans-temporal comparison” through which the “anthropologist’s knowledge about certain pasts is brought to bear on certain futures” (Holbraad and Pedersen 2009, 384). More relevant is how its temporal implications “intensifies” the fieldwork experience (Ibid.).

I could say that the presence of *artesanías* throughout my research intensified many aspects of my fieldwork experience related to how the Amazonian Women’s politics are permeated by everyday practices and relations that enable and reproduce life. Furthermore, the presence of certain *artesanías*’ designs, like the *Araña Tejedora*, motivated my interest in the Amazonian Women’s struggle in terms of resistance. However, in contrast to Strathern’s description about the ethnographic moment, as a moment in which the researcher recreates the field of observation in an analytical way, *artesanías* did not only intensify and expand my fieldwork memories in analytical terms. *Artesanías*’ material presence additionally continued my relationship with my co-laborers and, in doing so, told something very specific about that same relation.

In fact, they materialized a reproductive bond between me and my Amazonian co-laborers. By reproductive bond I mean that *artesanías*, as objects that were given to me, involved me in a reproductive relation of laboring with some Amazonian leaders. This reproductive relation was primarily characterized by how, by selling my co-laborers’ *artesanías*, I was directly contributing, at least minimally and temporarily, to their capacity to resist—namely, their capacity to sustain and reproduce life for their families, and to fulfil their political labor as indigenous representatives at the same time. What is interesting about this involvement is that it not only placed me as an observer of their struggle, but it also positioned me and my co-laborer precisely at the intersection that transforms their resistance into resistance.

This revelation forced me not only to think *about* resistance, but to think *with* resistance. This is how I started thinking about our co-labor and my role as a co-laborer

in different terms I did not foresee when visiting Ecuador in 2017. The important presence of *artesanías* in Germany thus transformed my thinking and consciousness about my co-labor relationship with some Amazonian leaders, and forced me to re-negotiate my next research stay under different terms. This re-negotiation and re-framing inevitably led to the co-labor activities my Amazonian co-laborers and I conducted in 2018.

### **Ethnographic Co-Labor in Ecuador**

My longest research stay in Ecuador took place between August 2018 and March 2019. During this extended period of time, I was able to meet members from the Amazonian Women I could not interview a year prior or who recently joined the network since their 2018 mobilization on International Women's day. I met with a total of fourteen Amazonian leaders, in addition to the eight leaders I met a year ago.

I was also able to conduct more semi-structured interviews and informal conversations with feminist, environmental, and indigenous allies of the Amazonian Women. This included members of the collective *Miradas Críticas del Territorio desde el Feminismo*, the environmental organization Amazon Watch, and the indigenous organization IQBSS. I also conducted a semi-structured interview with the indigenous representative for Family and Women's issues at ECUARUNARI, and a semi-structured interview with the President of CONFENIAE. Finally, I conducted a semi-structured interview with an employee at the Ministry of Hydrocarbons working at the Ministry's Undersecretary of Political and Social Management.

In relation to the last interview, it is important to mention that interviewing governmental authorities was not part of my overall research plan. This initial decision was not the product of the lack of importance of the Amazonian Women's relation with the state. On the contrary, the Amazonian Women's complex relation with the state is something I explore in detail in Chapter Three. The decision was based on the fact that my political co-labor with members from the Amazonian Women required of all of my time and exhaustive involvement in their political activities while being in Ecuador. At the same time, my reflection on their relationship with the state took the Amazonian Women's organizing as its point of departure. However, this one interview gave me very important clues about the conflictive 2012 consultation process on the 11th oil round, and about how the Ministry of Hydrocarbons sees its role in the Amazon region

and its relationship with Amazonian communities. Besides this interview, as mentioned previously, I did historical research on the partial absence of the nation-state and the establishment of logics of state abandonment, intervention and occupation in the rainforest region. I have also been systematically gathered information on the state's extractive agenda since 2017 by doing a weekly news monitoring on extractivism in Ecuador (and the Latin American region)—a news monitoring I share on a weekly basis with my colleagues in *Comunálisis*<sup>50</sup> and a diverse coalition of Ecuadorian anti-extractive organizations called *Caminantes*.<sup>51</sup>

Besides my work with Rosa Gualinga, Zoila Castillo and Elvia Dagua of the Amazonian Women, in 2018 I also built a co-labor relationship with two other leaders from two important Kichwa organizations. This is the case of Nancy Santi, the first female president, *Kuraka*, of the Kichwa *Pueblo* of Kawsak Sacha located on the Curaray river basin; and Salomé Aranda, former Spokeswoman for Family and Women's issues of the Moretecocha commune and former President of the Sumak Kawsay association of the Villano river basin. During this research stay, I decided not to continue seeking a co-labor relationship with the Waorani leader Manuela Ima. While we developed a good relationship in 2017, she was not the President of the Waorani Women's association AMWAE any longer. At the same time, my second visit coincided with internal problems within the AMWAE association regarding the election of its next president. It was thus not politically opportune to try to build a co-labor relationship with any Waorani leaders as long as those internal disputes remained unresolved.

The fact that I ended up closely working with four Kichwa leaders and one Shiwiar leader meant that being in a deeper dialogue with members of those two indigenous nationalities. As previously mentioned, the Amazonian Women's network is composed of different indigenous nationalities, with different histories, organizational forms, and languages—Achuar, Shuar, Sapara, Kichwa, Shiwiar, Andoa, and Waorani. While I met with and talked to leaders from the majority of these different nationalities during my ethnographic research (except leaders from the Andoa nationality I could not locate and interview during my two visits), most of this dissertation is inspired by my work with these five co-laborers.

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<sup>50</sup> Available from: <https://twitter.com/Comunalisis> (Accessed: April 22, 2021)

<sup>51</sup> Available from: <https://www.facebook.com/CaminantesPorTerritoriosSinMineria> (Accessed: April 22, 2021)



On the one hand, this posed a challenge to my attempt to reflect on the Amazonian Women's network as part of a collective territorial struggle. Unfortunately, the distance and the fact I could not be in Ecuador to join important protest actions, like the 2018 mobilization, was a big limitation in my attempt to work with the Amazonian Women as a collective. At the same time, the power that Kichwa women have gained in Amazonian regional politics—leaders like Zoila Castillo, for example, have important political posts at regional organizations—and how they use this power to logistically facilitate the different political actions of the Amazonian Women's network, made the co-labor with Kichwa leaders more likely.

On the other hand, it was precisely those relations of co-labor with some Amazonian leaders that allowed me to see how their work is embedded in a set of complex communitarian and territorial relations. Co-labor, then, even if it restricted my relation to some members of the Amazonian Women, accentuated my understanding of the collective dynamics of their struggle. This was crucial to understanding how the network is not an attempt to build an organization of indigenous female leaders separated from their indigenous organizations. Rather, as mentioned in the Introduction, the Amazonian Women understand themselves as organic to the broader indigenous movement.

In what follows, I recount the different activities that characterized my co-labor with these five members from the Amazonian Women between 2018 and 2019, and I offer a short description of the political work that each of my co-laborers do.

### **Workshops on *Artesanías* and Territorial Defense**

The co-labor with five members from the Amazonian Women mostly comprised visits in their communities of origin between mid-August and mid-November. Already in 2017, when discussing possible co-labor activities for the next year, Dagua, Castillo and Gualinga shared with me that they wanted to organize workshops in their communities about territorial defense, with the goal of sharing their political work, connecting with their community bases, and further expanding the knowledge and experience of women and younger people on extractivism. Given that many Amazonian leaders are forced to migrate from their communities to fulfil their political work at their indigenous organizations located in the city of Puyo, some were very interested in visiting and showing me their communities of origin. This was the

case for three of my co-laborers, with the exception of Rosa Gualinga, who lives in Puyo half of the time and in the Shiwiar community of Kurintza for the other half; and of Nancy Santi, who lives in the Kichwa territory of Kawsak Sacha most of the time.

My Amazonian co-laborers also suggested to include the production of *artesanías* into our activities. As previously mentioned, I did not consider the production of *artesanías* relevant for the Amazonian Women's anti-extractive struggle in 2017. Nevertheless, after the presence of *artesanías* in Germany transformed my entire approach and understanding of my relationship with my co-laborers, I became interested in including their production in our 2018 workshops.

Here, it is important to mention that I oriented my role as co-organizer of these workshops to what my co-laborers thought I could contribute. Given that my five co-laborers are experienced political leaders, who own a vast knowledge about political strategies for territorial defense and about the impacts of extractive industries in indigenous territories, I restricted my presence to what they asked me to do. Furthermore, my main interest in co-organizing a workshop with them was to learn about their political labor. Nevertheless, they asked me to share information about current topics they thought their communities needed to learn more about. Dagua, Gualinga, and Aranda, for example, explicitly asked me to talk about climate change. Castillo and Santi asked me to talk about the government's plans to continue expanding the 11th oil round. I suggested to introduce my verbal presentation by doing a collective "mapping of the body-territory," a proposal to which they agreed.

This mapping is an activity that I adopted and adapted from the feminist collective *Miradas Críticas del Territorio desde el Feminismo* (see their methodological guide *Mapeando el Cuerpo-Territorio* 2017). In fact, the idea of introducing my presentation with this collective mapping was product of important exchanges I had with this collective. My first exchange took place in Germany, where I participated and helped to logistically organize a workshop called "Mapping the body-territory as strategy of resistance" at my university in Gießen in June 2018, as part of the feminist collective's European tour. My second exchange was with one member from the collective who I interviewed and who suggested the mapping could be a useful tool to engage with the Amazonian communities I was planning on visiting. Important to mention here is that many of my Amazonian co-laborers had already participated at different workshops offered by *Miradas Críticas del Territorio desde el Feminismo*.



Image 9. Kichwa women from the San Jacinto commune mapping the body-territory, October 5, 2018, community of Puerto Santana.

By mapping their body-territory, participants of the workshop shared the different territorial relations that shape their daily living and the places they care about most, such as rivers, lagoons, their *chakras*, the communal house, schools, medical centers and communal churches. They did this by first drawing or describing these places on paper cards I distributed at the beginning of the workshop. Very often children participated or helped their parents with this activity of writing or drawing on the cards. In a second step, the participants placed the cards on a big sheet of paper with the sketch of a body. Finally, they were invited to share with the group what places they had on their cards and why they located them on a particular part of the body-sketch. This mapping helped me situate the discussion about climate change and the 11th oil round, taking as its basis the lived experiences and territorial relations the workshop participants had mapped themselves. After finishing my presentation, I restricted my presence to assisting my co-laborers during the rest workshop and learning how to weave the *artesanías* designs they taught.

An interesting aspect of this collective exercise of mapping the body-territory is that it varied from community to community. It is important to mention that communities from the Villano river basin and the San Jacinto commune are closer to the city of Puyo and their community members travel more often to the city. Furthermore, communities in Villano, in contrast to the other communities I visited, are in a constant relationship with the oil company. While the Shiwiar nationality and the Kichwa peoples of Teresa Mama, San Jacinto, Kawsak Sacha have historically resisted extractive projects in their territories, the Italian company AGIP has been extracting oil in the Kichwa territory of Villano for more than three decades.<sup>52</sup>

<sup>52</sup>“In July 1988, ARCO Oriente, Inc. (60%), along with its partner AGIP Petroleum Ecuador Ltd. (40%), signed a “Service Contract for Exploration and Exploitation of Hydrocarbons in Block 10 of Ecuador’s

Another important aspect of this collective mapping is that some of my co-laborers, like Castillo, Dagua and Aranda, used the map in their own way to talk about the anti-extractive work they do as elected representatives. They talked about the essential work performed by indigenous organizations like CONFENIAE and CONAIE, and about the importance of resisting the entry of oil companies or the expansion of oilfields in their territories.

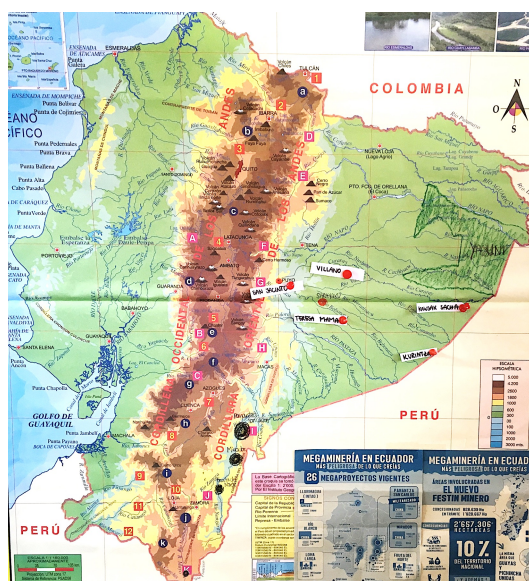
One last aspect worth noting about these workshops is that, while organizing them, I engaged in a negotiation process with my co-laborers regarding my logistical and monetary contribution to the process. While it was clear from the beginning of our relationship that, if I wanted to visit their communities, I would need to pay for some of my own food, transportation and stay (something I was willing and able to do given the funding I received from my graduate school in Germany), we needed to find some kind of mechanism to incorporate the workshop into the logistics of my personal visits. This required me to be completely transparent and honest about my restricted economic situation as a graduate student. We thus came up with a strategy that would use my personal and institutional resources to buy a small quantity of workshop supplies for my co-laborers to teach their *artesanías* designs, and some products like rice, canned goods and bread. I exchanged both things for shelter and food when arriving into their communities, and paid for my transportation separately.

While this was one of the most complicated parts of our co-labor, it allowed me to see how my Amazonian co-laborers negotiate their role as political leaders in their communities. Without a doubt, this is a very complicated and challenging form of labor, as Amazonian leaders are consistently confronted with different expectations from the different actors they engage with. This often means trying their best to fulfill the expectations and mandates from their community basis, while negotiating with external entities and allies like myself. It also made evident how the presence of external actors and resources can easily lead to tensions within communitarian relations. This is why I had to be clear at the beginning of every workshop about the fact that my Amazonian co-laborers were not personally benefiting from our co-labor workshops—i.e., to explicitly explain that I was not paying them any money. I also had to explain that I

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Amazon Region” with the Ecuadorian government. Block 10 is located in the Pastaza Province in the rainforest area known as the “Oriente.” In 1992, it was announced the discovery of a major petroleum reserve at a site called Villano. In February of 2000 AGIP Oil Ecuador B.V. took over 100 percent of the asset to become the Operator of Block 10.” (Vacas, Gonzalez, Sanabria and Madera 2002)

was a graduate student and that I was working mostly for my own interest and not in the name of any governmental or non-governmental organization.



## Zoila Castillo

Image 11. Zoila Castillo during our co-labor workshop, September 2018, Kichwa community of Teresa Mama on the Bobonaza river basin.

of the Amazonian Women. In 2013, she was Spokeswoman of *Sumak Allpa* of the Kichwa communities located on the Bobonaza river basin and the main coordinator of the Amazonian Women's "March for Life" (*Pronunciamiento de Mujeres en Resistencia*, October 2013). In 2016, she was elected Vice President of CONFENIAE's Indigenous Parliament, a sort of legislative organism of the Amazonian regional organization.

Besides being an indigenous leader, Castillo is one of the most well-known and experienced *artesanía* artisans and instructors in Puyo. Though she learned the practice of weaving clay from her mother, she taught herself how to weave bracelets, necklaces, and earrings made out of feathers and natural and synthetic seeds. She told me,

"I learned it by myself, when I was *wambra* [young], by practicing how to weave over and over again. One day, I practiced with the Peruvian *mullu* [synthetic seed] my mother had. I knew how to make *chapa walka* [mullu choker]. My *ñanito* [younger brother] was also a good thinker. At that time, we worked with nylon. We wove with nylon, and we used to make *manilla* [bracelet]. But [it was] stiff! I used to make *mukawas* [clay pottery], I knew that. But I was also learning these other things. [...] I created little things on my own." (Recorded conversation during our co-labor workshop, September 14, 2018, community of Teresa Mama)

We organized our co-labor workshop on *artesanías* and territorial defense in the community of Teresa Mama in mid-September of 2018. Her priority was to teach the youngest members of her community about the importance of defending their territory against extractivism. At the same time, she wanted to teach them how weave *artesanías* as a practice that could potentially bring them some income in the future, and that could also "build them into hard-working" members of their community (Fieldnotes, September 13, 2018).

Besides our co-labor workshop in Teresa Mama, Castillo, Gualinga and I organized a panel called "The Amazonian Women Weave Resistance" during the International Congress "Bodies, Territories, and Dispossession: Life under Threat" at the Universidad Andina Simón Bolívar in October 2018. During this panel, Castillo and Gualinga shared their experience as historical members of the indigenous movement, and talked about the role of *artesanías* in their political labor.

**Rosa Gualinga**





Image 12. Rosa Gualinga during our co-labor workshop, September 2018, Shiwiar community of Kurintza.

Rosa Gualinga is one of the first Amazonian leaders I met during my research stay in 2017. Gualinga is also one of the founding members of the Amazonian Women and, at the time of their first march in October 2013, she was Spokeswoman for Family and Women’s issues at the Shiwiar Organization NASHIE. When we met in July 2017, she and other Shiwiar women were in the process of getting legal recognition for their Shiwiar Women’s Association *Ikiam Nua* [in Shiwiar, “Women of the Forest”].

We organized our co-labor workshop on *artesanías* and territorial defense at the beginning of September 2018. Gualinga’s goal with the workshop was to strengthen the ties among Shiwiar women from her community, talk about the work that the Amazonian Women do, and teach the women different *artesanía* techniques—a practice that helped her advance her own political labor. As she explained during our interview,

“I want to make [sic] from the women, I want women leaders, and I want to elaborate proposals in order to organize workshops [...]. Yes, yes. Because they are saying now, I went inside, they are talking about appointing a woman for [president of] the NASHIE organization. [...] That’s why we have to gather as women. We have to have, I said, one heart.” (Interview, August 22, 2017, Puyo)

During the time we were logistically preparing our workshop, she expressed that she wanted to invite a second Amazonian leader, as she needed help imparting *artesanía* techniques the members from her community wanted to learn. She decided to invite Elvia Dagua, also an expert *artesanía* artisan and instructor, and an official representative at CONFENIAE.

### **Elvia Dagua**



Image 13. Elvia Dagua during our co-labor workshop, September 2018, Shiwiar community of Kurintza.

Elvia Dagua is also among the first Amazonian leaders I interviewed. When I arrived in Puyo in 2017, she was the Spokeswoman for Women and Family issues at CONFENIAE. Similar to Castillo, this was not the first time that Dagua has had a political position at an indigenous organization. Dagua started her political work as an indigenous leader in the 1990s when she was just seventeen years old. At this young age, she and other Amazonian women from the San Jacinto commune founded the women's organization *Amaru Warmi*, which means “Boa Woman” in Kichwa. After this, she became Spokeswoman for Women and Family issues at the Organization of Indigenous Peoples from Pastaza (OPIP) and CONAIE. Dagua recalled,

“I have worked directly as a leader in the organization since I was seventeen years old. Of course, my process began when I was a child. I saw how my parents, my uncles, my grandparents were working in the struggle to defend and recover the land.” (Interview, August 23, 2017, Puyo)

It is important to mention that Dagua is not a founding member of the Amazonian Women. In fact, even though she joined the network and helped organize the 2018 mobilization on International Women's Day, she has had a difficult relation with some allies and of from the Amazonian Women, which led to conflictive situations during the 2018 mobilization, as a discuss at length in Chapter Six.

Dagua and I organized our co-labor workshop on *artesanías* and territorial defense at the beginning of October 2018. Dagua's goal was to talk with the participants of the workshop about topics related to climate change and alternative sources of income to extractivism. At the same time, by imparting new *artesanía* techniques, she wanted to teach the women from her community “something they can bring back home”



(Speech during our co-labor workshop, October 5, 2018, community of Puerto Santana in the San Jacinto commune).

### Nancy Santi



Image 14. Nancy Santi, November 2018, Kichwa community of Lorocachi.

Nancy Santi is also a founding members of the Amazonian Women. Although I tried to interview her in 2017, I could not meet her in Puyo since she spends most of her time in the Kichwa territory of Kawsak Sacha, a place difficult to reach that borders the Yasuní National Park and the Ecuadorian border with Peru. When I met Santi for the first time, in September 2018, she had recently become the first female *Kuraka* of Kawsak Sacha. Before that she was president of the Kichwa Women's Association *Kawsak Sacha Jarkata Warmikuna* [Strong and Powerful Women of the Living Forest] in 2013. Her role as president of this association helped her become president of her entire Kichwa *Pueblo*. It revealed her as a leader of the anti-extractive struggle:

“I’ve just started walking this path. It’s four months since I’ve assumed the position of *Kuraka* of the Kawsak Sacha Ancestral *Pueblo*. But before that, I founded the *Kawsak Sacha Jarkata Warmikuna* Women’s Association, with the women of the Kawsak Sacha Ancestral *Pueblo*. Before I was in the leadership of my community as president, I have been there working with my people, with my community and with the women. Since I was twenty-five years old I have been with the organization of my people. [...] As women we do not have to neglect our people, for example, by accepting any lies, the oil companies. Any trickery from extractive companies who enter [our territory] with their lies and tricks.” (Interview, September 10, 2018, Puyo)

We organized our co-labor workshop on *artesanías* and territorial defense at the beginning of November. Santi was the only Amazonian leader who wanted to teach new clay pottery techniques and designs. She is also one of the most recognized

*maestras* [masters] in clay pottery, a practice that helped her sustain herself and her family after she left her first husband and lived in Puyo several years before I met her.

With our workshop, she was also interested in strengthening the anti-extractive position of her community members in Kawsak Sacha, as the expansion of 11th oil round directly impacts their territory. In fact, just a week before my arrival in Kawsak Sacha, the Ecuadorian Ministry of Hydrocarbons opened the licensing process for two oil blocks that geographically covers all of Kawsak Sacha's territory. This meant that we had to rearrange plans for our co-labor workshop and include another clay pottery instructor. Though Santi still participated during the workshop, she simultaneously organized an assembly for Kawsak Sacha's communities to discuss the government's extractive plans. I also extended my stay in Kawsak Sacha by two weeks, as Santi asked me to provide technical support in writing a declaration of resistance against the state's extractive project in and beyond their territory. I examine the complex declaration writing process in Kawsak Sacha as a form of allyship in Chapter Six.

### Salomé Aranda



Image 15. Salomé Aranda during our co-labor workshop, October 2018, Kichwa community of Tarapoto.

Salomé Aranda was Spokeswoman for Family and Women's issues of the Moretecocha commune and President of the *Sumak Kawsay* association of the Villano river basin when I met her in August 2018. Just months beforehand, she had joined the Amazonian Women in March 2018. In contrast to the majority of members of the Amazonian Women, as previously mentioned, Aranda comes from a community that decided to accept the entry of the Italian oil company AGIP into their territory three decades ago. It was at the beginning of 2018 that some community members from

Villano—especially women members—started to denounce AGIP’s presence and negative impacts on their lives,

“That is what provoked the most anger in me. Every time, they would tell a community that was living more forgotten than ever, that they [AGIP] had come to help them: ‘We are going to help you with this and this, we are going to give you a health promoter for your community, but support us!’ But people are no longer the same as before. They know how it was, their lies, how it was. The manipulation to get in, what they offered to enter, what deals they signed, but never complied.” (Interview, August 10, 2018, Puyo)

Aranda and I organized our co-labor workshop on *artesanías* and territorial defense at the end of October 2018. Particularly during this workshop, the learning and weaving of *artesanías* offered a necessary and intimate space for participants to share feelings, fears and desires related to extractive occupation, as I explain in Chapter Five. Furthermore, Aranda was very interested in finding alternative sources of income that could replace her community’s economic dependency on the oil company. This is why she decided to invite Nina Gualinga, a member from the Amazonian Women and an internationally renowned indigenous rights activist. Gualinga is also the co-founder of *HAKHU Amazon Design*, a Fairtrade initiative that aims at creating alternative sources of income for indigenous women.

## **Mapping Co-Labor**

The process of organizing and analyzing my ethnographic and non-ethnographic material was an inductive one, guided by what could be called a qualitative practice of “mapping” (for a general overview of qualitative methods see Flick 2005, 243–359). The idea of mapping was initially a product of my conversations with my doctoral supervisor, Professor Encarnación Gutiérrez-Rodríguez, who suggested I could “map” my material in order to gain some clarity and to restructure my dissertation according to my first ethnographic findings and experiences. Given that my previous training as a political theorist made such an inductive approach very difficult at the beginning of my doctorate, this methodological insight was meant to guide me through this process of data analysis and to prevent me from forcing my own theoretical categories upon my empirical material.

This is why, after returning from my 2017 field research stay, I started “mapping” all the ethnographic and non-ethnographic material related to the Amazonian Women’s organizing—including the videos, news articles, declarations, and social media publications I have been gathering since 2013. I mapped them according to the “recurrent motifs” present in my conversations with the Amazonian leaders. The recurrent motifs that came out of this first phase of mapping included: “the Living Forest” (as a concrete territory and as a political proposal), “the everyday” (as a dimension that shapes and nourishes the Amazonian Women’s organizing), *artesanías* (as an epistemic language and as part of Amazonian leaders’ labor), and violence (as a dimension that differently shapes the Amazonian Women’s relation to the state, extractive companies, the broader *mestizo* society, and their families).

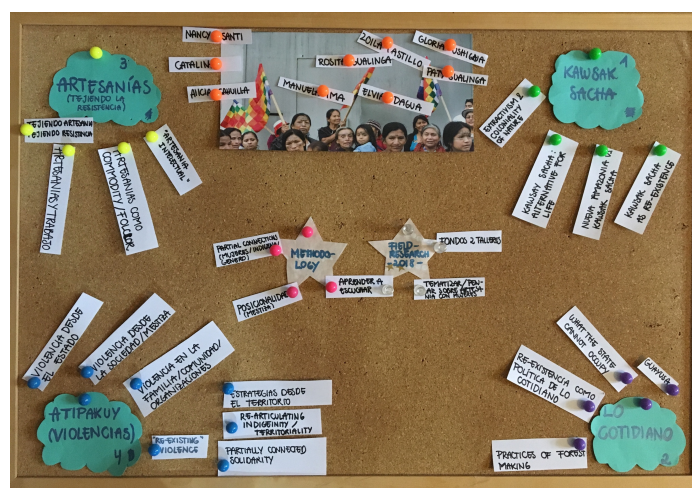


Image 16. First “Map” of my ethnographic material, February 2018.

One initial and noteworthy aspect of this process is that I developed these “recurrent motifs” while transcribing, listening, re-reading and mapping my fieldnotes and conversations with the Amazonian Women. In other words, there was no strict or temporary division between the act of developing the motifs and the act of mapping my material. On the contrary, the “recurrent motifs” were developed in the process of working through my ethnographic material, which itself shaped and transformed these motifs. The “messiness” of this process of mapping was, to a certain degree, necessary for “troubling” my previous research question and rethinking the Amazonian Women’s anti-extractive organizing in terms of the everyday.

Another interesting aspect is that this period of data mapping happened while I was in contact and in co-labor with some Amazonian Women at a distance. This

intensified my relationship with them and served as a basis for writing the first draft of my methodological chapter, which included our long-distance co-labor as a constitutive part of our evolving relation.

A third noteworthy aspect is how transformative and troubling it was to “come back” to my ethnographic material during this initial phase of mapping. This “coming back” involved a long process of re-reading personal notes and diaries while transcribing my recorded conversations with the Amazonian Women. Given that many of these conversations were longer than three hours, I spent most of my time listening to the women and myself. The combination of close listening and detailed transcription of almost every element of our conversations—like transcribing every silence or the exact way words were pronounced—enabled spaces for feelings of embarrassment and confusion to emerge. Listening to myself made me realize just how partial and limited my capacity to *listen* was. There were many times I felt embarrassed about my interventions, wishing I would have kept quiet in moments I felt entitled to comment on the Amazonian Women’s narrations.

This experience of listening and transcribing, then, made me realize my own limitations in *listening*, a crucial political practice in my co-labor with the Amazonian Women and in allyship more generally. On the one hand, this experience prepared me for my next research stay, as it taught me that I needed to let quiet moments take over my conversations with Amazonian activists, if only as a way of giving more space for their narrations and more time for me to stay with the trouble of *not* understanding. In other words, I realized the importance of “making space” for the Amazonian Women’s voices, of letting them trouble my assumptions about them and their struggle, and of harnessing my intention to pursue full comprehension of their organizing in *my terms*—at that time, I was still thinking about their struggle in terms of “resisting” extractivism and the state.

On the other hand, this process illuminated the political urgency of what Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui calls the “*pudor de meter la voz*,” the modesty to hold one’s voice.<sup>53</sup> This kind of modesty may allow us to stop silencing historically marginalized voices. Rather than asking “can the subaltern can speak,” then, it may be more generative to follow Gayatri Spivak’s later reflections on the question of “Who will listen?” For our

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<sup>53</sup> Available from: <http://www.revistaanfibia.com/ensayo/contra-el-colonialismo-interno/> (Accessed: April 22, 2021)



limited access to and knowledge about the other's worlds may be better bridged by silence than by trying to put our own words in other's mouths (Spivak 1986, 59). This strategy may prove more effective in opening new spaces and strategies for rooted thinking and for dialoguing with people(s) who challenge our assumptions about the world.

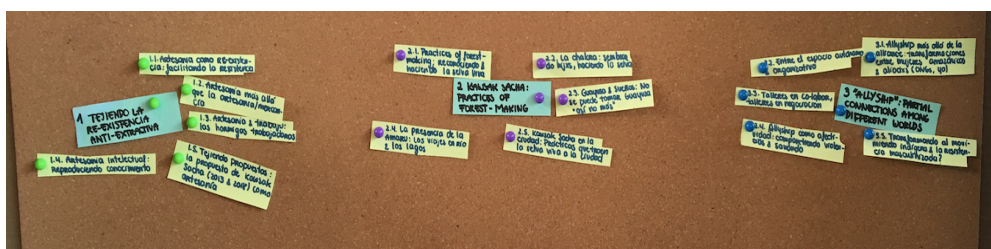


Image 17. Second “Map” of my ethnographic material, May 2019.

The second period of mapping started in February of 2019, after having conducted the five co-labor workshops with the Amazonian Women in their communities. This second process of mapping my material began while I was still in Ecuador and in a constant exchange with my co-laborers. Similar to the first mapping phase in 2017, I followed the same logic of re-developing the “recurrent motifs” while transcribing, listening, re-reading and mapping my fieldnotes and conversations with the Amazonian Women. The difference this time was that I already had the orientation of my previous map, which offered me a baseline for re-developing the dissertation’s motifs, which in turn made this second phase much less confusing than the first one. Additionally, I had already developed a strong intuition about what would constitute the thematic core of my dissertation: resistance. A final difference was that my own understanding of “mapping” was transformed by my exchange with the feminist collective *Miradas Críticas del Territorio desde el Feminismo*.

After participating in their workshop “Mapping the body-territory as strategy of resistance” during the feminist collective’s European tour in 2018, and after interviewing one of the collective’s members in 2019, I started to see the act of “mapping” in a different light. Instead of viewing it as a way of only organizing and analyzing my data, I saw my dissertation’s map as a living body. To imagine my dissertation as a human body, as I mentioned in the Preface, was a suggestion made by the member of the feminist collective I interviewed in 2019. This idea allowed me to see my dissertation as rooted in complex webs of real-life relations, places, affects and

disaffects. Mapping during this second phase thus became a constant act of recognizing the real-life and place-based relations that constitute the motifs of my dissertation and that brought its body to life.

From this second phase of mapping emerged the following motifs: *rexistance* (a motif that stems from the previous motif of “the everyday” and that constitutes the topic of Chapter Three and guides the whole body of the dissertation); *artesanías* (a motif that roughly remained the same throughout the two periods of mapping and that constitutes the subject of Chapter Four); practices of forest-making (a motif that stems from the previous motif of “the Living Forest” and that constitutes the theme of Chapter Five); and allyship (the only new motif from this second period of mapping that constitutes the key concept of Chapter Six).

An important consequence of focusing on the Amazonian Women’s *rexistance* as the guiding and connecting motif of this entire dissertation is that the previous motif of “violence” faded away as a category of analysis in itself. Different episodes of violence coming from the state, extractive companies, the broader *mestizo* society, and the Amazonian Women’s families are instead narrated and analyzed throughout different parts of the dissertation. The reason behind this is that, on the one hand, my co-laborers shared episodes of violence when discussing general issues in their political and personal lives. This is why I have tried to maintain the broader context in my writing when referring to punctual episodes of violence. On the other hand, this dissertation body understands the motifs of *artesanías*, practices of forest-making, and allyship as integral elements to the Amazonian Women’s *rexistance*. Moreover, as I explain in Chapter Three, these three motifs allow us to grasp the very material ways in which the Amazonian Women connect everyday practices and the seemingly more “public” practices of their territorial struggle. In the case of the violence the Amazonian Women confront as indigenous female leaders, it is a direct consequence of the structural ways that colonial, capitalist and patriarchal history has positioned them and the Amazon as body-territories to be rendered invisible, sacrificed or occupied. This means that, while the Amazonian Women have often oriented their actions to confront structural violence at a personal and political level, their territorial struggle cannot be reduced to an act of constantly “dealing-with-violence.” On the contrary, the Amazonian Women’s *rexistance* evinces the vital ways in which these leaders *defend* their territories and life in its multiple forms.

## **A Note on Ethnographic Material and Co-Labor**

As I mention in the methodological summary, my co-laborers and I have continued our relationship since I was last in Ecuador. This means that while our ethnographic co-labor ended in March 2019, our friendship has given continuity to our political co-labor at a distance. This form of long-distance co-labor has complemented the recent updates on their territorial struggle I refer to in the opening and closing sections of this dissertation. Nevertheless, the following chapters are mainly a product of my ethnographic research that began in March 2016 and ended in March 2019.

With respect to how I work with information from this period of ethnographic research, I use my co-laborers' real and complete names throughout the dissertation. On the one hand, these leaders are very public figures. They regularly appear in public forums, international fora, in newspapers, on social media, and at times on television. On the other hand, my co-laborers agreed to having their real names in my dissertation. While many of our conversations contained a great deal of personal and intimate testimonies about their lives, these Amazonian leaders expressed interest in making these aspects of their lives, of their *historias*, visible. This form of formal recognition is a way of acknowledging their *historias* and their direct contributions to the analysis contained in this dissertation.

I have also decided to use the real names of other members of the Amazonian Women I interviewed, who are also public figures. The exception to this practice are community members I encountered in my co-labor workshops with the Amazonian Women, who have been given fictive names to protect their anonymity. Another exception is the names of certain urban activists and of one worker at the Ministry of Hydrocarbons. In the latter case, his anonymized words serve to exemplify a particular logic of the neo-extractive state in the Amazon. All places and dates are true to history.

In relation to the photos I use along this dissertation, the majority of them are mine. For other photos, I asked and received permission from their authors, whose names I acknowledge or reference as their source. In the case of the interview fragments I use, the vast majority were conducted and recorded by myself, with the permission of my interviewees. The two exceptions to this practice are the interviews conducted by Corinne Duhalde Ruiz and Lorena van Bunningen, and the interviews broadcasted via YouTube and social media or published in other written sources, which are referenced accordingly. The English translations of all interview fragments are mine.



Finally, with respect to my relation to the Amazonian Women, it is important to note that I had a “closure conversation” with each of my co-laborers at the beginning of 2019. During these conversations, I asked them how they felt about our process of working together over the last years, what they thought about the co-labor workshops we conducted in their territories, and how they envision our relationship moving forward.

Many of them expressed positive feelings about the fact that I could visit their communities and that our relation was not reduced to a limited number of interviews:

“With other students who have come there has only been something like one conversation, one interview. With you, we have walked together, there has been a path to reach out to the community.” (Elvia Dagua, interview, March 5, 2019, Madre Tierra district)

“Your visit [in the community] was quite, quite good, because you helped us a lot with your technical support in order to write the declaration of the Kawsak Sacha people. So, the people were happy, especially the other community leaders.” (Nancy Santi, interview, March 1, 2019, Puyo)

“My people were happy with our visit, to say the least.” (Salomé Aranda, interview, January 15, 2019, Quito)

Some of them also expressed pride while noting how important it was that I visited their communities, that I witnessed what their “real work” as Amazonian leaders looks like:

“We had a beautiful trip. I arrived in my community and said: this is my territory!” (Rosa Gualinga, interview, March 1, 2019, Puyo)

“You saw how my work is. I’m in the organization, I’m in the house, I’m with my children, fighting, arguing. But no matter what, I’m there, at the front of the struggle. You saw that.” (Zoila Castillo, interview, March 1, 2019, Puyo)

In relation to how they envision our relationship moving forward, all of them mentioned that they hoped we could continue our relationship in the future and do not lose contact with each other—“There are researchers who no longer answer me, I don’t know what happened to them. So, I hope that you don’t forget about us.” (Elvia Dagua, interview, March 5, 2019, Madre Tierra district). As previously mentioned, we have been able to maintain contact with each other to this day, which has allowed forms of long-distance co-labor in 2019 and 2020.

With each and every one of my co-laborers, I discussed the possibility of organizing a smaller meeting after completing the first draft of my dissertation. This meeting was meant to present the preliminary analysis of this dissertation, but also to think about future co-labor opportunities with the Amazonian Women. Unfortunately, I finished the first draft of my dissertation amidst the coronavirus pandemic in August 2020, which made a trip to the Amazonian logistically and financially impossible. I hope that, in the upcoming year, I can return to the Ecuadorian Amazon and co-organize such a meeting with my co-laborers.

## Chapter Three – Rexistance: A Theory of Resistance and the Everyday

### Introduction

Like the Amazonian Women, many peasant and indigenous coalitions across Latin America are fighting against the expansion of extractive projects in their territories. Important examples include the communitarian resistance against the Conga Mine in the northern highlands of Perú,<sup>54</sup> the struggle of the indigenous Lenca people against the Agua Zarca Dam in Honduras,<sup>55</sup> and the fight of the Xinka people against the Escobal Mining Project in Guatemala.<sup>56</sup> In all of these struggles, women have taken on leadership roles and gained visibility in defending their territories. And, like in the case of the Amazonian Women, these coalitions are not merely resisting extractive projects. Rather, their organizational strategies and discourses are shaped by their effort to reproduce communitarian and territorial relations against extractive occupation, and by making new languages of valorization of life visible. These new languages of valorization of life encompass humans, animals, rivers, land, mountains, and other “earth beings” as living entities to be defended (de la Cadena 2015).

These plural struggles have not only gained the attention of feminist activists and academics across Latin America; they have also transformed many feminist collectives’ discourses, self-definitions, and places of enunciation. This is the case for the feminist groups *Colectivo Miradas Críticas del Territorio desde el Feminismo* and the *Red Latinoamericana de Mujeres Defensoras de los Derechos Sociales y Ambientales*, who have shared important platforms of exchange with many indigenous and peasant land defenders, including the Amazonian Women (García-Torres 2017, 32). Importantly, the existence of these platforms is product of a long-term and sustained collective effort to organize inter-class, inter-ethnic and urban-rural encounters among different women facing extractivism in the region. One significant example of these encounters was the “*Encuentro Regional Feminismos y Mujeres*

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<sup>54</sup>Available from: <https://www.servindi.org/actualidad/112611> (Accessed: April 24, 2021)

<sup>55</sup>Available from: <https://www.bbc.com/mundo/noticias-america-latina-39149512> (Accessed: April 24, 2021)

<sup>56</sup>Available from: <https://www.ocmal.org/prometer-solidaridad-con-el-pueblo-xinka-de-guatemala-en-su-lucha-contr-una-empresa-minera-canadiense/> (Accessed: April 24, 2021)

*Populares*” held in Quito in June 2013, which included women participants from Ecuador, Argentina, Costa Rica, Mexico, Paraguay, Peru, Colombia, Venezuela, and Bolivia (Rosa Luxemburg Foundation 2013).

In the case of the *Colectivo Miradas Críticas del Territorio desde el Feminismo*, its collective comprises a diverse group of urban activist and academics from different countries, who have been in dialogue and solidarity with different territorial struggles in Ecuador and Latin America. While I offer a broader analysis of how this collective has transformed its self-definitions and place of enunciation through its allyship with the Amazonian Women in Chapter Six, it is important to mention that their activism has been inspired by the activism and political proposals of Latin American indigenous thinkers. This is the case of the “Body-Land Territory” proposal, developed by the Maya-Xinka communitarian feminist and anti-mining activist Lorena Cabnal (2010; 2012), adopted and adapted by the collective *Miradas Críticas* into their feminist activities. In 2017, the collective launched the methodological guide *Mapeando el Cuerpo-Territorio* [Mapping the Body-Territory], describing the body as “our first territory” and recognizing “the territory in our bodies” (Ibid., 7). With this guide, the collective has highlighted the importance of generating methodologies that reflect on how extractive and capitalist projects occupy territories, as well as how these territories—including urban ones—must be defended as social and corporeal spaces crucial for the reproduction of life (see *Colectivo Miradas Críticas del Territorio desde el Feminismo* 2018 and 2020).

In the case of the *Red Latinoamericana de Mujeres Defensoras de los Derechos Sociales y Ambientales* their transformation makes itself evident in how the network has pluralized its strategies and campaigns. The network was created as a response to the expansion of mega-mining projects in the Latin American region in 2005.<sup>57</sup> At the beginning of their organizing, their international campaigns were mostly focused on making visible the increasing criminalization of female communitarian leaders involved in the anti-mining resistance. After years of encounters and exchanges with different indigenous and peasant collectives and activists, the network launched campaigns like “*Mujeres Tejiendo Territorios*” [Women Weaving Territories] in 2017 and “*Rexistir: Tejiendo Cuerpos Territorios*” [Rexist: Weaving Bodies and Territories]

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<sup>57</sup> Available from: <https://www.redlatinoamericanademujeres.org/nosotras> (Accessed: April 24, 2021)

in 2018.<sup>58</sup> Both campaigns show how the network's point of departure has shifted from mainly focusing on denouncing the criminalization of anti-extractive leaders to underlining the crucial role that these leaders play in generating assertive, vital, and distinctive ways of defending their territories as spaces crucial for the reproduction of life. While this shift does not imply that the *Red Latinoamericana* has stopped denouncing the criminalization of anti-mining activists by state and private actors, it does show how they frame their campaigns inspired by the plural ways in which land defenders relate to their territories.

With these examples, I want to show how different Latin American indigenous, peasant, urban and feminist activists have been in a constant exchange with each other, transforming each other's political organizing and proposals. The processes of transformation evidence the ways that many anti-extractive struggles in the region go beyond opposing extractivism. While all of these collectives denounce how extractive projects structurally exacerbates problems like the masculinization of decision-making processes, male violence, and a gendered division of labor that underpin the figure of the "male provider" and the "dependent woman" in their communities (*Colectivo Miradas Críticas del Territorio desde el Feminismo* 2018), their organizing cannot be reduced to those anti-extractive denunciations. Rather, their interconnected struggles are mainly focused on centering the reproduction of life in their organizing and pluralizing languages of valorization of life.

In what follows, I focus on how the Amazonian Women's network contributes to this process of pluralizing languages of valorization of life in Latin America. By centering my analysis on their "rexistance," I highlight the centrality of practices that reproduce and sustain human and non-human life in their territorial organizing. To this end, the chapter is organized into two parts. In the first part, I explain how I initially approached the Amazonian Women's struggle as a form of resistance and yet, through their descriptions of their struggle and our co-labor, I ultimately came to understand it as a form of rexistance. Here, I also show how rexistance is in dialogue with decolonial theorizations of *re-existencia* [re-existence] that conceptualize "re-existence" as a dynamic state of being that confronts an established hegemonic reality. I then analyze how the Amazonian Women's rexistance is characterized by their ability to express interdependence between indigenous and non-indigenous ways of living, and how this

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<sup>58</sup> Available from: <https://www.redlatinoamericanademujeres.org/campanas> (Accessed: April 24, 2021)

framing of their struggle should be understood as an “ontological design” that centers life and its interconnectedness. In the second part, I offer a historical reconstruction of state power in the Amazon, a history marked by the partial absence of the nation-state and by patriarchal logics of state intervention and occupation. This historical perspective allows for a different way of seeing how the Amazonian Women challenge the structural effects that the expansion of extractive projects exert on their communities, without limiting their resistance to a mere “reaction” to those effects. Finally, in the conclusion, I explain how the following chapters advance an analysis of resistance by exploring the concrete ways in which the Amazonian Women connect everyday practices with the more “public” practices in their territorial struggle.

### **Beyond Mere Resistance**



Image 18. The Amazonian Women’s March, March 8, 2018, Puyo. Photograph by Zoila Castillo.

In each of the mobilizations, the Amazonian Women combined the words “defense,” “life,” “Mother Earth,” and “rainforest” to name their proposals and written documents. For example, in their 2013 announcement and *Kawsak Sacha* Declaration, they named their march “*Mobilización de las Mujeres Amazónicas por la Vida*” [The Amazonian Women’s Mobilization for Life]; in their 2016 announcement they named their assembly and march “*Mujeres: Mi Voz Por La Defensa De La Pachamama*” [Women: My Voice for the Defense of Mother Earth]; and in 2018 they named their mandate “*Mandato de las Mujeres Amazónicas Defensoras de la Selva de las Bases frente al Extractivismo*” [Grassroot Mandate of the Amazonian Women Defenders of

the Rainforest against Extractivism]. Their word choice indicates, with the exception of one time they use “*Mujeres en Resistencia*” [Women in Resistance] in their 2013 announcement, that their struggle is less about “resisting” the state than it is about “defending” life and the rainforest from extractive occupation. It is also important to note that what the Amazonian Women defend, namely “life” and the “rainforest,” is not external to themselves or a passive place to be “preserved.” Rather, the Amazonian Women’s relation to the rainforest, as a living forest, is marked by their affective relations with its different entities and by reproducing practices that make human and non-human life possible in the Amazon (Sempértegui 2020).

This observation takes me back to the definition of resistance as a concept that describes the connection between everyday practices that reproduce life and organizational practices that defend life from extractive occupation. The merging of everyday dimensions in the Amazonian Women’s lives with those moments of visible political action has two effects worth singling out. On the one hand, it intensifies the political meaning and complexity of apparently “insignificant” relations and practices crucial for the Amazonian Women’s capacity to sustain and reproduce life in the forest (such as cultivating their *chakras*) and in the cities (such as selling their *artesanías* or maintaining their allyship relation with urban activists). On the other hand, this merging also amplifies and transforms the notion of “resistance” so widely used across social sciences. While resistance is considered in political theory as a highly political happening and separated from the reproduction of life (see Arendt 2009 [1963]), or as something that defends or preserves the reproduction of life (see Hage 2015, who despite his thoughtful analysis on “alter-politics” subsumes what he calls “practices of resilience” to the realm of life to be preserved by “practices of resistance”), my co-labor with Amazonian leaders showed me that the reproduction of human and non-human life is at the core of their activism. Moreover, everyday practices that sustain and reproduce life even inspire and shape the Amazonian Women’s resistance strategies.

This is why, as this dissertation shows, it was not enough to just give a complex account of these women’s struggle by using the word resistance. Rather, the Amazonian Women’s self-descriptions about their struggle, like Dagua’s *Araña Tejedora*, and our co-labor had the effect of transforming “resistance” into “resistance.” In other words, the important role that their everyday practices of living play in their self-definitions and how they permeated our relationship as co-laborers took over my previous

impression of their struggle and transformed my understanding of the concept of resistance.

This transformation goes beyond a mere conceptual replacement of an “older” term (resistance) by a “newer” one (rexistance). Much like the political theorist Léa Tosold’s use of the word *(r)existência* which refers to the collective struggle of the Mundurucu and riverside peoples in the Brazilian Amazon (see Tosold 2018 and 2020), rexistance emphasizes how practices that make communities’ life possible are at the center of their political organizing. The semantic transformation here aims to render explicit how resistance is not a “consequence to power,” but comprises communities’ collective modes of action that even “precede” specific power formations (Morril, Tuck, super futures Haunt Collective 2016 in Tossold 2018, 60).

It is important to mention that by describing the Amazonian Women’s struggle in terms of rexistance, I do not intent to imply that they do not resist or actively confront the state and extractive companies’ intervention in their territories. As just mentioned, the Amazonian Women do sometimes use words like “resistance” to describe their struggle. Furthermore, “resisting,” in terms of confronting the state, is a crucial element in their public appearances. Rather, rexistance expands the political boundaries we have learnt to associate with resistance—as mere rejection to something—and incorporates the plural ways in which members of the Amazonian Women’s network depict their struggle. This is also more broadly the case with Amazonian communities, whose complex relationship with the Ecuadorian state and external actors like extractive companies cannot be simply described in terms of resistance. On the contrary, the state is very often the main addressee of Amazonian people’s demands. Its history of intervention in the region has required Amazonian communities to build a pragmatic relationship with state entities. While this has not implied the elimination of “spaces free of state occupation” in the Amazon, Amazonian peoples have incorporated pragmatic and creative strategies to relate with the state, not as a monolithic entity, but rather as a plural power formation (see Sempértegui 2019). This complicated relationship with the state and external actors is also part of the Amazonian Women’s rexistance.

Due to how the Amazonian Women’s struggle transformed the concept of resistance to rexistance in my analysis, I understand rexistance as an ethnographic-analytical concept. As Marisol de la Cadena and Mario Blaser describes, ethnographic concepts signal their connections to place as they emerge through fieldwork encounters



and involve the practices of the anthropologist and of those that “she works with” (de la Cadena and Blaser 2018, 5). Contrary to a “floating concept,” ethnographic concepts are thus embodied knowledge (Gutiérrez-Rodríguez 2016, 50), because they emerge from situated encounters between ethnographic co-laborers. In my case, I also add “analytical” because my relationship with some members from the network has analytically expanded and transformed the concepts I used to “carry with me” to make sense of their struggle before our co-labor “took effect.” As defined in Chapter Two, co-labor evolved from being a relation primarily defined by the Amazonian leaders’ and my interest in working with each other into a deeper involvement in each other’s lives. It is precisely this involvement that expanded and changed my thinking.

This of course does not mean that I claim to “know” what their struggle is about. For the Amazonian Women’s activism exceeds any ethnographic description I can offer in this dissertation. Moreover, as discussed in the previous chapter, I understand our differences (mine and Amazonian women’s) in terms of ontological difference (see Escobar 2018, xvi), characterized by how our different historical realities, worlding practices, and ways of producing meaning did not guarantee full intelligibility in our interactions and shared experiences. Rather, what I learned to appreciate and expect from myself was that our conversations, interactions, and shared experiences would permeate and transform my thinking. These transformations are what brought us closer together as co-laborers and friends, and what formed my usage of certain concepts like *rexistance*.

In the next sections, I examine *rexistance* as an ethnographic-analytical concept and place it in dialogue with certain decolonial theoretical debates about *re-existencia* [re-existence]. Even though the concept of *rexistance* does share etymological similarities with re-existence, it has different roots. While “*rexistance*” grows out of “resistance,” “re-existence” stems from “existence,” creating shared but distinct universes of signification.

### **Decolonial Theorizations on *Re-Existencia***

“I conceive re-existence as all devices that communities create and develop in order to invent life on a daily basis, and thus confront the reality established by the hegemonic project that has inferiorized, silenced and negatively made visible the existence of Afro-descendant communities from colonial times to the present. Re-existence aims to de-center the established logics in order to search in the depths of cultures—in this

case, Indigenous and Afro-descendant cultures—for organizational, production, food-related, ritualistic and aesthetic practices that can allow us to dignify, re-invent and transform life. Re-existence points to what the community, cooperative and union leader Héctor Daniel Useche Berón ‘Pájaro’ [Bird], murdered in the municipality of Bugalagrande in the Cauca Valley, Colombia, in 1986, once asked: ‘What are we going to invent today to continue living?’” (Adolfo Albán Achinte 2013, 455)

An important contribution of Latin American Decolonial Thinking—*Pensamineto Decolonial*—is its observation that theoretical examinations are always also methodological ones. This compels us to question the motivations behind our research interests and inquiries, and never to simply “apply” a theory, as neutral and disembodied observers, to a certain context or phenomenon in order to “explain” it. This means that decolonial theoretical inquiry, as a tradition that questions relations of coloniality that have suppressed and disqualified subaltern peoples and their modes of being and knowing since the conquest of America (see Quijano 2000; Escobar 2004; Lugones 2008; Mignolo 2011; Walsh 2012; Espinosa Miñoso 2014), must be honest about its places of enunciation, its motivations, and its interests. At the same time, its main purpose is to challenge and unsettle hegemonic scientific practices that construct universal claims about “others” and that reproduce hierarchical binary categories and relations between the “researcher” and the “observed.”

Challenging this binary thinking, some decolonial authors have offered alternative ways of thinking with communities about their own practices of living and challenging the hegemonic order. This is the case of the Colombian anthropologist and artist Adolfo Albán Achinte, who has coined the term re-existence as an alternative concept to the binary oppression-resistance. Re-existence refers to those practices that certain communities develop in order to “invent life on a daily basis” and thus be able to confront the established hegemonic reality (Albán Achinte 2013, 455). On the one hand, this concept does not depart from an understanding about subaltern communities as mere victims of a totalizing system of oppression that completely governs, regulates, and dictates how they ought to live. On the other hand, it does not consider their political agency as limited to their capacity of only resisting and rejecting the hegemonic order. Instead, it locates political subversiveness in the situated ways certain communities—“Indigenous and Afro-descendant cultures” in the case of Albán Achinte’s analysis—“dignify” and “re-invent” their daily living against modern/colonial impositions (Ibid.).

The decolonial cultural theorist Catherine Walsh conceptualizes re-existence from a pedagogical perspective that refers to struggles which resist “not to destroy, but to build” (Walsh 2017, 19). Evoking the legacy of Paulo Freire, Walsh emphasizes that the physical and cultural subsistence of oppressed groups is rooted not in resignation or adaptation to regimes of domination, but in their continuous rebellion against injustice—rebellion as a self-affirmation of life—and in a “resistance that keeps [people] alive” (Freire in Walsh 2017, 25). According to Walsh, it is this form of continuous rebellion as a self-affirmation of life that resonates with Albán Achinte’s conception of re-existence, since its objective is the re-definition and re-signification of autonomous and dignified modes of living (Ibid.).

The Colombian sociologist and philosopher Betty Ruth Lozano uses Albán Achinte’s re-existence to describe the struggle of Afro-Colombian *mujeresnegras*<sup>59</sup> [blackwomen] in the Colombian Pacific. Lozano focuses on the important role that midwives have had in weaving networks that root communities in their territories through their midwifery practices (Lozano 2017, 276). Coinciding with Elvia Dagua’s woven story of the Weaving Spider, Afro-Colombian midwives are considered the successors of *Ananse*, the name that Afro-descendants in the Diaspora have given to the spider. *Ananse* is a self-sufficient bisexual goddess whose body is able to provide the material to weave her home and secure her food at the same time. This capacity for self-sufficiency is what *Ananse* has inherited from Afro-Colombian *mujeresnegras* and midwives. According to Lozano, it is also what is essential for the re-existence of communities in the Colombian Pacific (Ibid., 280).

The Puerto Rican philosopher Nelson Maldonado-Torres also adopts Albán Achinte’s concept to reflect on art as a territory of re-existence. He theorizes re-existence in the context of excessive violence exerted against bodies that have been “negated in their non-modern existence” (Maldonado-Torres 2017). This violence is historically anchored in colonization, racialized slavery, and genocide; and it currently manifests itself in scarce resources, environmental degradation, early death, systematic murder and rape, and territorial displacement of racialized and feminized bodies. According to this decolonial thinker, art is not only a purely aesthetic sphere but must be conceived as a territory “of and for decolonization,” which contributes to the creation

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<sup>59</sup> According to Lozano, “I use “*mujernegra*” together, since it is impossible to compartmentalize the experience of being a woman and being black” (Lozano 2017, 175).

of life-affirming zones while still expressing horror and scandal against the naturalization of violence and death in the modern/colonial world (Ibid.).

Finally, Enrique Leff and Carlos Walter Porto Gonçalves have also offered a similar definition of r-existence—a term that slightly varies from “re-existence”—expanding debates on the contribution of socio-environmental movements to Latin American political ecology. According to the authors, “indigenous peoples, Afro-Americans, and peasants” resist dispossession and de-territorialization, but also “redefine their forms of existence through emancipation movements, by reinventing their identities, their ways of thinking, their modes of production, and their livelihoods” (Porto Gonçalves and Leff 2016, 73). These communities’ forms of existence have in turn re-signified ideas about nature by challenging the nature-culture divide and revaluing it as an ecological-cultural space where their territorial and cultural practices and relations take place (Ibid.).

Albán Achinte’s concept of re-existence, and these different decolonial accounts, offer more than just a “third alternative” to the oppression-resistance framework. They reclaim ways of conceptualizing politics from other logics and spaces of life that have not even entered the binaries imposed by European modernity, as is the case with communitarian spaces of life. Claiming politics from these spaces not only points to a “different” dimension apart from modern and colonial binaries like public-private, oppression-resistance, or culture-nature, but also exploits them.

This in turn implies that re-existence forces us to think differently and harder about how the exercise of power works. Re-existence does not imply that communities that re-invent their own ways of living are excluded from colonial, capitalist or patriarchal domination. On the contrary, as Albán Achinte’s description tells us, communities re-invent and re-signify life to be able to “confront the reality established by the hegemonic project” (Albán Achinte 2013, 455). This indicates that communities that re-exist are in constant relation with the impositions of power in order to confront them, while at the same time the ways in which they redefine their existence are not entirely “preoccupied,” saturated, and governed by the dominant modes of occupation. Similar to the anthropologist Ghassan Hage’s account of “alterpolitics,” re-existence offers an alternative to “a resistance that has become its own end and does not have a space that is independent of both occupation and the resistance to occupation” (Hage 2015, 172).

This decolonial understanding of re-existence is in dialogue with other accounts of power, which also recognize that power is not “a phenomenon of mass and homogenous domination” (Foucault 1979 [1976]) and does not equally and indiscriminately touch all elements of the social fabric (Brown and Scott 2014, 339). This understanding of power challenges definitions of state power as centralized control over a determinate territory; it is instead more interested in exploring its margins, where “the history of some is not the history of others” (Foucault in Stoler 1995, 70). In other words, re-existence as a concept invites us to think harder about how “colonized” communities have never been completely colonized, how they have historically created spaces free of complete colonial and state occupation, and how they challenge hegemonic impositions that seek to dictate how they ought to survive by re-inventing subversive forms of living.

This understanding of re-existence vis-à-vis power necessarily implies that we cannot confuse it with resilience. Especially in the context of climate change, notions of resilience have become popular and have caught the attention of policy-makers who increasingly focus on whether or not so-called “vulnerable communities” are resilient enough to radical ecological shifts (Nightingale 2015, 183). According to this usage, resilience refers to the capacity of these “vulnerable communities” to “absorb” or “adapt” to shocks or rapid changes. This understanding is inextricably linked to neoliberal notions of economic development. Especially in the case of “microenterprise” or “microcredits,” developmental institutions have relied on an understanding of resilience that sheds light on the ability of the poor and marginalized communities to take care of themselves and survive in the face of “alienation, deprivation and marginalization” (Elyachar 2002, 499). In fact, in the 1990s, “survival techniques” in the informal economy were studied around the globe by networks of researchers, funded by institutions such as the World Bank, to be replicated and taught by non-governmental organizations and lending officials across the “Third Worlds of the globe” (Ibid., 500).

Contrary to these notions of resilience, re-existence is not mere survival or adaptation to environmental degradation. As the aforementioned thinkers have put it, it is a reaffirmation and re-invention of life that is not submissive but subversive to hegemonic impositions. While re-existence as a framework of analysis is not immune to the danger of idealizing the practices of the “oppressed,” it makes visible the complex modes in which certain communities battle to self-determine and reproduce their lives

and the ones of future generations. These modes of re-existence are characterized by how some communities respond to new configurations of power without necessarily assuming the position assigned to them: poor communities in need, undeveloped populations, resilient entrepreneurs. Rather, what the re-existence of many indigenous, afro-descendant, peasant, and urban communities across Latin America have shown is that through organizing, they are able to displace the place the dominant order assigns to them (López Bárcenas in Gutiérrez 2018, 65). This displacement revolves around finding their own ways of rearranging interdependence and reproducing life, which goes beyond guaranteeing mere material survival.

The decolonial concept of re-existence shares many similarities with the Amazonian Women's struggle for *rexistence*. They both share a complex understanding and relation to current power-formations. As I mentioned earlier, the Amazonian Women's *rexistence* is permeated by how Amazonian communities have built a complex but pragmatic relation with instances of power, like the state, while at the same time maintaining and enabling spaces free of state occupation. This means that these communities have learnt how to live, as Donna Haraway has put it, "not on the basis of original innocence, but on the basis of seizing the tools to mark the world that marked them as other" (Haraway 1991, 175). These tools include using the language of the state in their proposals and appealing to governmental institutions to achieve their demands. At the same time, the Amazonian Women subvert those same languages and encounters in order to make visible their ways of living, knowing, and relating in the rainforest—something I analyze in detail in Chapter Five.

Another similarity between the concept of re-existence and that of *rexistence* is how the Amazonian Women challenge the notion of resilience in the everyday dimensions of struggle. The Amazonian Women's practices of sustaining and reproducing life draw from their affective relations with human and non-human life, and from their deep knowledge about the rainforest. The reproduction of these practices in combination with other practices we might call "modern" (like selling their *artesanías* in capitalist market circuits) is proof that these women have never just passively adapted or merely survived the transformations brought by the different waves of colonization, Christianization, and capitalist development in the Amazon. On the contrary, their territorial struggle is marked by how they reproduce and even re-signify their practices of living by putting them at the center of their political activism. This re-signification is characterized by how these Amazonian activists have translated

some of these practices into anti-extractive political proposals that challenge modern conceptions of nature as separated from culture. The Amazonian Women's *Kawsak Sacha* proposal is indeed a political translation of Amazonian practices of living. Furthermore, this proposal uses dominant and hegemonic discourses (e.g. environmental conservation, constitutional rights, and international human rights) to make human and non-human life visible in its more radical sense, namely that of a "Living Forest" (Sempértegui 2020, 126 ff.).

Reproducing, re-inventing, and re-signifying complex networks of life to confront colonial, capitalist and patriarchal occupation are thus similarities between re-existence and the Amazonian Women's rexistance. Nevertheless, an important aspect of the Amazonian Women's struggle that exceeds the decolonial concept of re-existence, which grows out of the notion "existence," is the active resistance and confrontation of these leaders against the state and extractive occupation. The aggressive expansion of the extractive frontier and the intensification of violent methods used to access Amazonian peoples' territories have required the Amazonian Women to re-invent and re-signify their ways of living while also physically and publicly resisting the eminent and constant threat of the extermination of their territories. As mentioned earlier, my usage of the word rexistance does not intend to replace resistance as a concept. Rather, I want to expand the political boundaries we have learnt to associate resistance with—as mere rejection to something. This is the reason why rexistance grows from resistance.

Another element in the Amazonian Women's rexistance that varies from decolonial accounts of re-existence, without necessarily contradicting them, is how these Amazonian leaders explicitly merge those everyday dimensions of their lives with moments of visible political action. In fact, the Amazonian Women often relocate the vitality that characterizes their communitarian life to the "public sphere." This means that their public struggle often intentionally reproduces certain territorial and communitarian practices during their encounters with state and corporate institutions. For instance, as I analyze in Chapter Five, it is very common to see members of the Amazonian Women preform their traditional chants during their protests, marches, and meetings with governmental authorities. The presence of these kinds of practices, normally excluded from "acceptable" ways of interlocuting with the state and non-indigenous actors, are what characterize the Amazonian Women's politics of rexistance. Furthermore, the public appearance of these practices shows the Amazonian

leaders' subversive potential to create what Marisol de la Cadena calls "onto-epistemic openings" that challenge "doing politics as usual" (2010, 345).

### **Rexistance: A Universal and Ontological Design**

"The defense of our territory, of our *Pachamama*, is not only for us, but for the whole world. Only the Amazonian Women are the solution so that oil exploitation [sic] remains under the ground. [...] We, indigenous women, are defending the whole world from climate change. This is only the solution." (Nancy Santi, public speech, March 8, 2016, Puyo)

"We are not from a different world, we are from Ecuador. We want you to respect those people [Tagaeri-Taromenane peoples living in voluntary isolation] who are also important. If you expand your [oil] block, their lives will be over. [...] If life ends, with what medicine, territories will they live? [...] Respect our territories! We don't have another rainforest. Your children and our children need this forest. [...] You should study in depth what we, Waorani women, are saying." (Alicia Cahuilla, speech during meeting with the Minister of Hydrocarbons, November 14, 2018, Quito)

"The Amazon that exists is thanks to the struggle and blood of indigenous peoples. Because if it were up to the governments and companies, they would have already destroyed the entire Amazon. For us the pandemic is a direct result of all this depredation. [...] If they destroy the Amazon, the life of humankind is destroyed as well. The Amazon's eco-systemic balance maintains the balance in the Arctic, in the Sahara, in Congo. This connection cannot be dissociated." (Patricia Gualinga, statement during the Webinar "*COVID y la guerra contra la Amazonía*," June 3, 2020)

The statements of these three leaders from the Amazonian Women's collective illustrate how they understand and present their struggle as something that extends beyond indigenous peoples' concerns. They were addressed to three different interlocutors and audiences, and took place during three different moments in the Amazonian Women's organizing. First, Nancy Santi, former *Kuraka* of the Kichwa people of Kawsak Sacha, gave her speech during the Amazonian Women's march in 2016. As her words clearly indicate, the Kichwa's territorial defense is not only for themselves but also "for the whole world." Santi's message also presents the Amazonian Women's struggle as part of "the solution" for climate change through their efforts to keep oil reserves under the ground. Second, Alicia Cahuilla's speech took place after the Amazonian Women and the *Yasunid@s* collective occupied the building of the Ministry of Hydrocarbons and forced its Minister to meet with them. In her statement, which was transmitted through the *Yasunid@s* Facebook site, she decries



the negative impacts that the expansion of oil extraction in the Yasuní National Park have on Waorani communities and on the Tagaeri-Taromenane peoples living in voluntary isolation. After demanding that the Minister respect indigenous peoples' territories, Cahuilla ends her speech by reminding him that “we don't have another rainforest” and that he “should study in depth” what Waorani women are saying. Finally, Patricia Gualinga's statement during a live-streamed Facebook Webinar links the broader indigenous territorial struggle with the current pandemic and reminds the audience that if the Amazon rainforest is destroyed, “the life of humankind is destroyed as well.”



Image 19. “Let's defend our future: The Living Forest,” March 8, 2018, Puyo.  
Photograph by Zoila Castillo.

As I have been mentioning, the Amazonian Women's resistance is characterized by practices and relations that reproduce life and enable the Amazonian Women's anti-extractive struggle. Nevertheless, these three statements reveal another aspect of the women's fight, namely how they confront their audience with the importance of the Amazonian Women's struggle for everyone's existence. Beyond this being just a strategy to profile themselves as the “true guardians of the forest,” these statements give us important clues about the “design” of the Amazonian Women's resistance. This design is characterized by their ability to express interdependence between indigenous and non-indigenous ways of living, make their audience identify with their struggle, and “universalize” their demands by linking them to current global problems in terms used by the international community—like climate change.

This shows us the necessity of establishing dialogical lines of connection between the Amazonian Women's struggle and other struggles that permeate our times. This, of course, requires taking a closer look at how the Amazonian Women express

their demands in “universal terms.” In order to do this, I firstly offer an analysis of the Amazonian Women’s framing of their territorial struggle as “universal.” Second, I show how this framing is shaped by the Amazonian Women’s “own design”—rexistance as an ontological design—that puts life and its interconnectedness at the center.

## A “Universal” Struggle

When describing the Amazonian Women’s capacity to translate their demands into “universal terms,” I am referring to their capacity to build what the anthropologist Anna L. Tsing calls “global connections.” In her book *Friction: An Ethnography of Global Connection* (2005), Tsing does an ethnography of global connections in the rainforests of Indonesia, with the particular interest of overcoming the academic division between universality, or what she calls “the universal as an aspiration,”<sup>60</sup> and the local formation of culture. She criticizes the fact that scholars, especially anthropologists, have failed to acknowledge how “universals are indeed local knowledge” (Tsing 2005, 7). As an alternative, she defines universals as knowledge that “moves across localities and cultures” helping “to form bridges, roads and channels of circulation” in the process (Ibid.). This mobility does not happen outside the practice of power; universals are implicated in both “imperial schemes to control the world and liberatory mobilizations for justice and empowerment” (Ibid., 9). Rather, they are shaped by strange interactions across difference, in which local knowledge percolates into universals’ channels of circulation, “charging and changing their travels,” and universals need the shape of historically specific cultural assumptions in order to work in a practical sense (Ibid., 8ff.). This in turn implies that universal dreams—shared by the powerful and powerless alike—can never fully accomplish their promises of universality. These interactions across difference are what the author calls “friction.”

The Amazon rainforest has not only been a place of circulation of (mostly Western) universals at different points in modern history, but the “history of the universal” has also been produced in the colonial encounters that took place here (Ibid., 1). Widespread myths like *El Dorado*, for example, a mythical and unlimited wealthy

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<sup>60</sup> For Tsing, the universal as an aspiration does not only include Western *universal* dreams and schemes. These are only one “particular kind of universality” (Tsing 2005, 1).

place, were indeed nurtured and shaped by the different experiences and desires the Spanish *conquistadores* projected onto the rainforest. In Ecuador, imaginaries about the Amazon as *El Dorado* were fashioned during the first expeditions in search for gold and other precious species (such as cinnamon or cotton) between the years of 1540 and 1580 (Taylor 1994, 26), and were revived centuries later when the first barrels of oil (or “black gold”) were promised as a national salvation for Ecuador’s indebted economy in the 1970s. Furthermore, the image of the “cannibal,” synonymous of savage and devil that shaped the Conquest in the Americas and the Inquisition in Europe, was also manufactured during the first colonial expeditions and was used to dominate and control native populations in the “New World.”

In the case of Ecuador’s Amazon, the few city-foundations built at the beginning of the colonization process were abruptly uninhibited after they were devastated by two major indigenous uprisings in the area of Quijos in 1578 and in Macas in 1599 (Garcés 1992, 57ff.). After the uprisings, this region was abandoned for nearly a century and the image of Amazonian indigenous peoples as cannibals, fierce warriors and allies of the devil, without God and law, was consolidated in the colonial imaginary (Cabodevilla 1999, 66). This image certainly marked later attempts to dominate Amazonian communities through the so-called *reducciones indígenas*<sup>61</sup> in the 1680s, and through other missionary and military efforts in the twentieth century (Esvertit Cober 2005, 16).

Undoubtedly, these Amazonian encounters have shaped Western history, its narratives legitimating the superiority of the West as defined against its Others, and its later imperial undertakings in the rainforest. It is no coincidence that the Amazon as a region became the scenario for magniloquent projects like Theodore Roosevelt’s exploration of the Amazonian tributary, the “River of Doubt,” under the auspices of the American Museum of Natural History (Haraway 1984, 22); or Henry Ford’s construction of the rubber city “Fordlandia” in the Brazilian rainforest (Grandin 2009); or Werner Herzog’s film *Fitzcarraldo* (1982), where the film director sought to replicate his title character’s obsession to pull a steamship over an Amazon mountain (see the documentary *Burden of Dreams*, directed by Les Blank 1982). Of course, all of these endeavors have shaped cultural, popular, political, and even scientific ideas

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<sup>61</sup>*Reducciones indígenas* were intended to bring together groups of indigenous peoples in small population centers in order to evangelize them and, at the same time, use them as cheap labor for the extraction of precious metals and other regional products (Trujillo 2001, 21).

about nature, wilderness, civilization, wealth, progress, and development across the globe. But what they also share, despite their extravagance and arrogance, is the confrontation with serious difficulties in implementing or fully accomplishing their civilization promises. Roosevelt and his explorers nearly died during their journey, and doubts were raised about his own account of the expedition after he returned to the United States; Fordlandia failed as a project and the city was abandoned in 1934; and Herzog's film underwent a troubled production process in which some indigenous actors and workers were mortally injured and others accused the film director of exploitation. Paraphrasing Anna Tsing, these examples show how modern ideas about progress, civilization and science have been built across “awkward, unequal, unstable” interconnections—frictions—and have failed to accomplish the universal promises of progress and civilization (Tsing 2005, 4).



Image 20. City of the Millennium “*Playas de Cuyabeno*,” in Ecuador’s Northern Amazon. © <http://www.presidencia.gob.ec>

According to Manuel Bayón and Japhy Wilson, even though the Millennium Cities are a distinct capitalist project to that of Fordlandia, they share a similar utopian (spatial) vision, each of which ultimately failed to fulfill their promises of progress and prosperity. Many of the Millennium houses have been abandoned (Wilson and Bayón 2017).

The aforementioned encounters in Ecuador’s Amazon have inevitably shaped the relations and channels of communication between indigenous communities and different actors like the state, missionaries, and environmental organizations. Missionaries, especially, have played a significant role in the Amazon since colonial times, even though their presence was never consistent, long term, or effective. Nevertheless, missionary interventions had an important historical function in representing the indigenous “Other” as dangerous, uncivilized, or vulnerable in the

colonial imaginary, an image that has played a role in attempts to “modernize” the Amazonian region and its inhabitants (Prieto 2015; see also Breton 2000). These representations have additionally created hierarchical binaries (civilized versus savage), crucial for the state to justify the subordinate role of the *indio* in *mestizo* notions of the Ecuadorian nation throughout the second half of the twentieth century. Even commonplace racist sayings such as “*muestre su patria, mate un indio*” [show your patriotism, kill an indio] in the 1990s suggest that indigenous peoples must modernize and renounce to their “uncivilized” ways of living in order to assimilate into the modern *mestizo* nation-state (Sawyer 2004, 35).

The civilized/savage divide has also influenced contemporary modes of cooperation between indigenous communities, missionaries, and environmentalists in Ecuador’s rainforest. Environmental organizations, for example, who came with the intention of helping affected indigenous communities in the northern Amazon in the 1970s, have exported an image of indigenous activists as “noble savages” and “guardians of the Amazon” in international discourse (Muratorio 1994; Concklin and Graham 1995; Ulloa 2004; Descola 2004). It is within these environmentalist narratives that various indigenous groups seeking territorial autonomy in the south-central Amazon found a channel for political organizing, articulating their demands, and pressuring the state.<sup>62</sup>

While these political expressions are strategic rather than “truthful” examples of indigenous politics, Amazonian peoples’ identity and struggle are not simply the products of this interaction with missionaries and environmental groups. As global players in the environmental struggle and the battle against climate change, indigenous peoples have also exported their “own agenda,” engaging in global connections and permeating environmental narratives about the Amazon with their own proposals. This is the case of the Kichwa people of Sarayaku who have taken part in several international and climate change forums, and have presented their own proposals as an international alternative to the extractive development model. In the context of the 2015

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<sup>62</sup>An example of how religious and environmentalist groups have contributed to indigenous self-organizing is the first indigenous organization in the Amazon, the Interprovincial Federation of Shuar and Achuar Centers (FICSH). Without the support of Salesian priests influenced by liberation theology and the collaboration of environmental organizations, FICSH would not have been possible (Sawyer 2004, 42). The Shuar and Achuar people primarily organized against the government’s colonization policies, which, according to a 1964 law, identified the territory as a “wasteland” under state patrimony (Gondard and Mazurek 2001). Ten years later, the Shuar Federation joined CONFENIAE and cooperated with environmental organizations to oppose petroleum projects in their territories.

Climate Change Conference in Paris, for example, Sarayaku leaders presented their proposal to declare the Amazon as a Living Forest by bringing the “Canoe of Life,” a handmade canoe built in Sarayaku, and sailing on it down the Seine. The presence of the “Canoe of Life” in Paris became a powerful moment that spread “the message from the Ecuadorian Amazon” in the northern hemisphere,<sup>63</sup> politically exceeding the restrictive platforms made available for indigenous peoples’ voices at the Climate Change Conference.

The visibility that indigenous peoples like Sarayaku and the entire indigenous movement in Ecuador have gained over the last fifty years of direct confrontation with the state has made it possible for them to become important political actors, to shape national and international politics, and even to “universalize” their own proposals, as Tsing indicates. This is the case of political proposals like Plurinationality and *Sumak Kawsay*, developed by Amazonian, Andean and Coastal indigenous communities, and adopted in Ecuador’s 2008 Constitution. In the case of Plurinationality, the bursting of this proposal into Ecuadorian politics with the indigenous *levantamientos* in 1990 and 1992 marked a break with Western political theory and its account of the nation-state, commencing a new practice of theorizing the state and indigenous politics, as the indigenous thinker and lawyer Nina Pacari has suggested (2020, 18). This proposal is based on the idea that indigenous and afro-descendant communities in Ecuador should be recognized as nationalities (not ethnicities), since they have been organizing their territories and ways of living in an autonomous way (Sawyer 2004, 46ff.). Plurinationality thus uses certain elements of the dominant discourse of nationality in order to express what Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui calls a “counterhegemonic project for modernity” (2010b, 53). With this, indigenous peoples in Ecuador have succeeded in shifting the terms of the debate around territory, nationhood and sovereignty, and have ended—at least legally—“minority-recognition” policies motivated by liberal multiculturalism in the 1990s.

In the case of *Sumak Kawsay* [Good Living], the proposal was presented by the indigenous movement as an alternative to the neoliberal development model and as the basis for a new social and political pact (see Ospina 2009). While *Sumak Kawsay* is defined as a “new form of public coexistence, in diversity and in harmony with nature”

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<sup>63</sup> Available from: <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/video/2015/dec/10/the-amazonian-tribespeople-who-sailed-down-the-seine-video> (Accessed: April 24, 2021)

in the preamble of the 2008 Constitution, its Kichwa meaning is much more extensive. According to the indigenous leader and intellectual Luis Macas, the Kichwa word *Sumak* stands for fullness, greatness, the “sublime,” while *Kawsay* stands for life or existence in a permanent state of transformation (Macas 2011, 52). Its adoption as a constitutional “guiding principle” was thus not a sudden political event and required the indigenous movement to translate this principle into terms the state and the broader society could understand and partially identify with. As Macas explains, *Sumak Kawsay* was built into a political proposal after many years of indigenous resistance against the implementation of neoliberal adjustment programs in Ecuador since the 1980s (Ibid., 51). Its “translation” or presentation as a nationwide proposal and a new paradigm was meant to restructure Ecuador’s society and state, but also Western impositions like “development” and “progress,” which are products of what the author calls the “Western-Christian civilization matrix” (Ibid., 57).

Importantly, the constitutional adoption of Plurinationality and *Sumak Kawsay* broke with the image of indigenous peoples as ethnicized subjects that could only speak in cultural terms. It also positioned them as important political actors demanding structural changes, with the power to shape Ecuador’s politics. Furthermore, the translation of both proposals into hegemonic terms—like nationality—did not intend to renounce their ambitious goal of restructuring the nation-state and society writ large. Rather, these proposals use hegemonic language as a point of entry to challenge established notions of indigenous peoples’ place in the nation in terms of their assimilation, and to “universalize” indigenous peoples’ own designs and projects of decoloniality. Even though the question about the “success” of these proposals in decolonizing the state and Ecuador’s society remains unanswered, the constitutional adoption of indigenous designs in the Ecuadorian social pact has profoundly destabilized the predominant *mestizo* ideal of a homogenized Ecuadorian nation-state at its very core. As designs that offer “another point of departure to analyze totality,” as Rivera Cusicanqui puts it,<sup>64</sup> Plurinationality and *Sumak Kawsay* have become well-known concepts in international debates about what Miriam Lang (2017) calls “alternative civilization projects” (see Acosta 2009; Gudynas 2011, Farah and Vasapollo 2011; Prada 2013).

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<sup>64</sup> Available from: <http://revistaanfibia.com/ensayo/contra-el-colonialismo-interno/> (Accessed: April 24, 2021)

## The Amazonian Women's Rexistance as Ontological Design

The Amazonian Women's framing of their territorial struggle as a "universal" one thus departs from a strategy that has marked indigenous politics vis-à-vis the state and the broader Ecuadorian society in the last decades. Santi's, Cahuilla's, and Gualinga's statements make clear that they are interested in creating a web of global connections with other struggles that are not necessarily articulated in territorial or communitarian terms—like climate change, as Santi mentions—and with other geographical regions: the Arctic, the Sahara or Congo, as Gualinga mentions. Furthermore, by framing their struggle as interconnected with other struggles around the world and vital for humanity's existence, the Amazonian Women remind their interlocutors that they are not outside "the global stream of humanity" even as it often excludes them (Spivak in Tsing 2005, 1). This is why their struggle should not be interpreted as constituted by "local," "cultural," or "particular" demands only. Rather, despite these leaders' awareness about the modern-colonial ways in which their lives, territories, and ways of living have been historically rendered invisible for the majority of society, their proposals and demands are global—and their struggle has universal aspirations (Tsing 2005, 7).

Of course, their struggle is still rooted in situated practices and relations crucial for Amazonian communities and the rainforest's existence. Place-based rootedness does not mean to live untouched or outside of global modernity. In fact, the Amazonian Women's reistance as a design is characterized by their ability to build global connections when translating the complex networks of life in the Amazon into their proposals and political strategies. This means that these proposals and strategies are *material* in the sense that they are inspired and nourished by very concrete practices and relations that make human and non-human life possible in the Amazon. In order to make the Amazonian Women's design and its material rootedness graspable, it is useful to come back to the image of the *Araña Tejedora*.

Similar to the aforementioned Colombian sociologist Betty Ruth Lozano's account of the *Ananse* in the struggle of Afro-Colombian *mujeresnegras* in the Colombian Pacific, the power of the *Araña Tejedora* resides in its self-sufficiency, namely in its capacity to provide the labor and the material necessary for weaving her



home and securing her food at the same time (Lozano 2017, 280). Furthermore, in order to be self-sufficient, the spider needs to design her web, the place where she is going to live and that will connect her to the world. She must find the right spot to build her spider-web, stitch it in such a way that it protects her from predators, and build a net that is still visible and appealing enough to attract her food.

Following Elvia Dagua's description that the Amazonian Women are like the *Araña Tejedora*, we can say that their resistance is also characterized by these leaders' self-sufficiency and ability to materially sustain, reproduce, and enable life. At the same time, their struggle is also characterized by their ability to use the creative force of reproduction to design their strategies, discourses, and proposals that defend the Amazon as a Living Forest. Precisely when talking about the Amazonian Women's resistance as a design, we are recognizing how they creatively use the reproductive force crucial for their day-to-day living to design their political organizing. This means that this design wants to appeal and attract others, as it recognizes that the success of its message depends on other people connecting with the Living Forest. In other words, the power of Amazonian Women's resistance resides in its rootedness and capacity to appeal globally.

This rooted and still global design of the Amazonian Women's struggle is thus a potent and necessary political alternative to capitalist and neoliberal rationalities that lack the capacity to build sustainable and systemic responses to the different crises we are going through—ecological, social, political. As Donna Haraway reminds us when talking about the necessity to build “tentacular” thinking as a transformative and situated alternative to the Anthropocene: “Nothing is connected to everything; everything is connected to something. This spider is in place, has a place, and yet is named for intriguing travels elsewhere” (Haraway 2016, 31). In the case of the stories that the *Araña Tejedora* and *Ananse* tell, I would also add that their power resides in how their spider protagonists “are in” and “have” a place from which they travel, but also reproduce and *carry in themselves* the materials to build and re-build their webs, places, and worlds. Here is where the power of the Amazonian Women's resistance resides, in how they *carry in themselves* the material to build their world and worlding proposals. This makes their struggle and proposals so politically important and necessary.

This is why I propose to engage with the Amazonian Women's resistance not only as a design, but as an “ontological design” (Escobar 2018, 5). As the decolonial

thinker Rolando Vazquez rightly explains, the ontological dimension of struggles like the Amazonian Women's resistance departs from the recognition that, while we inhabit the same earth, this planet is inhabited by a plurality of worlds, "anthropological social and historical realities" (Vazquez 2017, 79). Consequentially, the potential of proposals like the one from the Amazonian Women lies in how their design dignifies alternative relational worlds, and, in doing so, confronts colonial, capitalist, and extractive ways of devastating, unworlding, and defuturing the earth (Ibid., 77ff.). According to him, modernity's propensity to "defuture" does not lie in the fact that its anthropocentric hubris lacks the power to imagine, but on the fact that its imagination is "earthlessness," since the earth is turned into an object of representation (Ibid., 80). Examples of earthless imaginaries are financial, financial-extractive,<sup>65</sup> or even "post-earth" futures that are represented as unlimited and seek to escape the earth by claiming it as disposable or soon-to-be uninhabitable—see attempts to expand extractive activities in the outer-space<sup>66</sup> or Jeff Bezos project to build space colonies.<sup>67</sup> By contrast, the Amazonian Women offer us an alternative whose "material" for outlining the future is rooted in the very place that makes their lives possible—the rainforest. In other words, they design an alternative future departing from the relational possibilities of that future in this particular place called the Amazon. By this, they are also making it possible for future generations, including those in non-Amazonian communities, to live and design their future as well.

## **The Amazonian Women and the State**

The Amazonian Women's resistance, as an ontological design rooted in the practices and relations that make human and non-human life possible in the Amazon, indirectly reveals something important about the relationship between Amazonian communities and the state. It shows that the practices that underlie the Amazonian Women's self-organization and self-definitions have, to a certain extent, emerged as

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<sup>65</sup> As Verónica Gago and Sandro Mezzadra rightly explain, extractivism is not just organically related to financial operations that, for example, determine the prices of extractive commodities. Finance also has an extractive dimension: its expansion depends on the specific production of territories, including territories located in other planets, and on the process of their valorization (Gago and Mezzadra 2017, 577ff.)

<sup>66</sup> Available from: <https://www.ft.com/reports/space-mining> (Accessed: April 24, 2021)

<sup>67</sup> Available from: [https://www.vice.com/en\\_us/article/3k3kwb/jeff-bezos-is-a-post-earth-capitalist?utm\\_campaign=sharebutton&fbclid=IwAR1qX23OekzL3AmU6WS2Xfzb5LwxQ\\_ne9bCa32ZXgT\\_K1MA7LwFFDj-HTA](https://www.vice.com/en_us/article/3k3kwb/jeff-bezos-is-a-post-earth-capitalist?utm_campaign=sharebutton&fbclid=IwAR1qX23OekzL3AmU6WS2Xfzb5LwxQ_ne9bCa32ZXgT_K1MA7LwFFDj-HTA) (Accessed: April 24, 2021)

external to (not outside of) state power. As previously mentioned, this observation does not imply that the state has not constantly intervened in the region or that Amazonian communities have not built complex relations with state entities as the main addressee of their demands. However, Amazonian communities have also been able to maintain “spaces free of state occupation,” which in turn have been crucial to upholding a certain autonomy of their ways of living and political organizing.

Spaces free of state occupation are in fact product of what I call the historical “partial absence” of the nation-state in the Ecuadorian Amazon—both in terms of material benefits and discursive inclusion within the national narrative. As I show in the next sections, this partial absence of the state has conditioned spaces of relative autonomy and opened up possibilities for practices of living that survived and emerged external to state power. Particularly in the south-central Amazon, non-capitalist means of existence have survived along with local sources of mobilization and resistance, which have long confronted the extractive “invasion” of the state and other actors in their territories. These partly autonomous ways of living have also encouraged indigenous political proposals that challenge modern understandings of nature and territory, and have become the source of their resistance and resistance strategies against territorial occupation.

In the following sections, I analyze the historical complexities that feature the relationship between the state and indigenous communities in the Amazon. This historical analysis, however, is not interested in complementing Ecuadorian official history by including the missing “native histories” from the perspective of indigenous peoples themselves. This would not only be a misleading strategy of historical “correction.” As postcolonial theory has thematized for almost half a century (Said 1979 [1978], Spivak 1999), it would also constitute a problem of colonial representation. At the same time, I do not believe that a historical re-writing of these peoples in our terms will transform our objectifying tendencies and colonial imaginaries about Amazonian communities. For the Western notion of history is part of our regime of truth, as Marisol de la Cadena reminds us, and will thus inevitably require evidence for an “event” to become a “fact” for or about these historical subjects (de la Cadena 2015, 28). This would both be an absurd requirement and an impossible task to accomplish—imagining that it would require “evidence” of what indigenous peoples experienced in the past. But, more importantly, it would ignore the forms in

which Amazonian communities have kept—in their own terms—the *historias* of their people alive.

Situating this project in the context of Amazonian communities' absence in Ecuadorian official history is my strategy for critically re-describing certain historical moments of *our* history that show the colonial, patriarchal and capitalist roots of state absence and intervention in the rainforest. This mode of historical contextualization serves as the frame for a more complex analysis of how the partial absence of the state changed during neo-extractivism. In fact, neo-extractivism was the first period when the state consistently tried to expand its presence in the Amazon, yielding a great deal of tension and confrontation with indigenous communities. This historical context is also important for understanding how the Amazonian Women's currently relate to the state as a patriarchal, colonial and extractive power, and how they challenge the structural effects of extractivism and state intervention without limiting their struggle to a mere "reaction" to those effects.

### **The Partial Absence of the State in the Amazon**

“When you don’t count with the presence of any structure, of anything, you solve everything by yourself. Like in the *hacienda*, you have the patron and peon [relationship]. That is the mentality that works a lot there [incomprehensible], direct relations. So that was there from the beginning, it was not an effect of the hydrocarbon industry. Rather, what was previously established here, determined this direct company-community relationship.” (State officer at the Ministry of Hydrocarbons, interview, August 8, 2017, Quito)

“I am going to listen to what you’re going to propose. And this has to be presented at the executive level, to see what they decide. However, we’re always safeguarding the national interest of the seventeen million people of this nation. You’re more than welcome to share your concerns with me. I know you have a document and I will present it to the president.” (Former Minister of Hydrocarbons Carlos Pérez, speech during a meeting with the Amazonian Women live-streamed from Yasunid@s’ Facebook, November 14, 2018, Quito)

These two quotations—from a worker at the Ministry of Hydrocarbons and a former Minister of the same agency—capture how the state currently understands its historical legacy in the Amazon. The first interviewee, a worker at the Undersecretary of Political and Social Management at the Ministry, makes evident how the history of state’s abandonment in the Amazon has molded a more “direct relationship” between indigenous communities and the hydrocarbons industry. Quite straightforwardly, he

traces structural relations in the Amazon back to a *hacienda* mentality between “patron and peon,”<sup>68</sup> according to which the company or the state entity needs to “solve everything.” Interestingly, while he described to me all of the “exaggerated” requests that his Undersecretary received from Amazonian communities during the “process of social participation” during the 11th oil round, he was very clear that the Ministry was reluctant to engage in a dialogue with indigenous organizations like CONAIE or CONFENIAE—“they always say that we don’t respect them, that’s a lie!”

The speech of the former Minister of Hydrocarbons Carlos Pérez (2017-2020) shows the new role of the state in the Amazon, characterized by its mission to redress the wrongs of the past and “listen” to Amazonian communities. While this mission had its peak during Rafael Correa’s neo-extractive government, the Minister’s speech illustrates how this state entity sees itself. That is, almost like a patient father who listens to a few of his children—the Amazonian Women—but who reminds them that he has to look over the well-being of the entire household—the nation.

In order to understand the foundations of the state’s current modes of self-representation, especially of this particular state Ministry which has played a major role over the Amazon in the last fifth-teen years, it is important to understand the historical roots of the partial absence of the state in the Amazon.

What I propose calling the “partial absence” of the state refers to its highly ambivalent role in the Amazonian region since Ecuador’s independence in 1830. Since the birth of the Ecuadorian nation-state, the Amazon has been mostly removed from the national “imagined community” (Anderson 1991). While the state expanded in the Andes in modern times, the Amazon remained relatively marginalized from contemporary politics, the market, and the state’s role in each (Yashar 1997). This does not exclude the fact that colonial powers and later on the nation-state periodically intervened in this region, permanently and arbitrarily shaping the Amazon’s social, cultural, ecological and political dynamics. The state presence, however, has been largely limited to its economic, political, and military interests in the rainforest, and its violent interventions have continuously ignored the existence of indigenous communities.

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<sup>68</sup> *Hacienda* or the *hacienda* system refers to a form of large landed estate systems, which originated during the colonial period in Latin American. These *haciendas* were characterized by a form of servitude (obligation to work) organized around the large landowners and indigenous peoples (de la Cadena 2015, 41).

The limited state role and exclusion of the rainforest region into the Ecuadorian modern political imaginary do not evince the residual relevance of the Amazon for the process of building Ecuador's nation-state. Rather, this region has been historically constitutive of the Ecuadorian state's "territorialization." The Amazon was, in other words, projected as an extensive border of the nation. Paraphrasing Encarnación Gutiérrez-Rodríguez on the constitutive power of borders, one could say that this region has constantly re-constituted the official history of the nation-state through the very mechanisms of its negation—that is, as a distinct territory with its own history, and with different ways of living practiced by its inhabitants (Gutiérrez-Rodríguez 2001, 86). The negation of the Amazon as an inhabited space of lived histories and indigenous communities, however, did not primarily serve to destroy these ways of living; it also carved partial, largely invisible lines of continuity for non-capitalist forms of existence.

In the first decades of Ecuador's independence (1830-1860), the Amazonian region played a marginal role in the country's economic, social and political dynamics (Taylor 1994, 37). In 1858, the Ecuadorian parliament officially declared the Amazon "barren wasteland" and sold off extensive pieces of land to repay foreign debt Ecuador contracted during the independence wars, signifying the invisibility of the Amazon's inhabitants in the state's view (Esvertit Cober 2005, 91).

Motivated by territorial expansion, the Peruvian government ordered its military to intervene in the disputed Amazonian territory (Taylor 1994, 37). From this moment on, the Amazonian region burst onto the scene of Ecuadorian politics. Put another way, it was only a conflict with the Peruvian military that suddenly gave the Amazon a prominent role in the formation of the Ecuadorian nation-state. In fact, the conservative President García Moreno (1860-1875) implemented the first consistent project of national organization. The Amazon was discursively deployed by Ecuadorian nationalism, denouncing the Peruvian military intervention as an external threat to the nation's peace. The project, implemented in close collaboration with the Catholic Church, became an instrument of political and ideological cohesion. However, beginning in 1870s, the conservative nationalist project could not stop the increasing infiltration of foreign economic actors interested in extracting rubber from the Amazon (Ibid., 21). The "rubber boom" quickly challenged and reduced the control of the church and state in the Amazon, and produced new power dynamics that impacted the daily practices and political organization of various Amazonian communities (Hernández 2012, 165).

In 1912 the price of rubber rapidly fell in the international markets, paralyzing further exploitation of the raw material (Taylor 1994, 21). Subsequently the region was abandoned once again—that is, until the border conflict with Peru reached its peak in 1941 (Trujillo 2001, 23). Following the logic of the constitutive power of borders, the conflict became a catalyst for the Ecuadorian state to incorporate indigenous populations living around the disputed borders into religious missions, with the central purpose of creating the so-called “living borders” (Prieto 2015, 6). The means and ends of this project were many: it introduced Ecuadorian military presence into the disputed areas; it controlled and “securitized” the borders with Peru; and it intensified the evangelization and education of indigenous peoples from the region—a continual “problem” for the *mestizo* nation (Esvertit Cober 2005, 420). While the living borders were the first symbolic attempt to “develop” the Amazon, the scope of the project within Amazonian territory remained marginal given its geographical concentration at the borders.

With the 1970s oil boom, the state became more present and visible in the rainforest. Although oil exploration and extraction was mostly sponsored by foreign oil companies, the northern Amazon provided almost half the state budget (Espinosa 1998, 28). A massive debt crisis began when oil prices dropped in 1982, accompanied by a neoliberal governmentality for conducting extractive activities. This indirect mode of governance aimed at increasing oil production and exports, opening the economy to foreign investment, and reducing the state’s productive and distributive functions (Sawyer 2004, 11). It was not until 1992, however, that neoliberalism transformed the political-economic landscape of the country—i.e., when the state increasingly assumed the role of fiscal manager. Its central goal then became expanding borders for oil extraction and ensuring oil revenues so that it could repay its foreign debt (Melo, Ortiz, Lopez 2002, 59).

During this period of neoliberalism, communities in the northern Amazon remained excluded from access to basic infrastructure, education, and health. Northern Amazonian communities were often displaced to more remote areas because of the immigration of low-skill laborers to work in the oil fields (Cielo, Coba and Vallejo 2016, 127). Taking a “pastoral role,” oil companies compensated for the state’s relative absence in the area by assuming social responsibilities. Oil companies began to give “gifts” (such as airplane rides or high school scholarships) and to allocate resources for infrastructure projects in the communities surrounding its operational centers (Sawyer

2004, 9). These kinds of activities were used to avoid conflicts with local groups and to shape indigenous individuals into “appropriate” neoliberal subjects who follow their alleged self-interest by exchanging their territory for consumer goods and short-term jobs. While oil companies’ pastoral role intensified indigenous communities’ dependence on external monetary aid in the northern Amazon, the southeastern area remained excluded from oil exploitation, mostly because of conflicts between the state and various indigenous communities living there (Ruiz 1993, 97).

The state’s marginalization of Amazonian indigenous communities, then, did not destroy their ways of living. On the contrary, these partly autonomous ways of living encouraged indigenous political proposals that formulate, in interesting ways, demands for territorial autonomy. This is the case of the written proposal *Acuerdo Territorial* [Territorial Agreement], a document presented after Amazonian indigenous peoples marched to Quito in 1992. Indigenous peoples presented this proposal to the government after arriving in Quito, mixing indigenous memory and practices with language from the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People and with the idea that the state should recognize their communities as nationalities (Sawyer 2004, 46). Extending indigenous positions by speaking in the idiom of human rights and nationality exemplifies how indigenous peoples used elements of dominant discourses in order to express and evince their own claims to territorial autonomy and self-determination. This “extension” exceeded the terms of the debate the state offered at that time, requiring the state to recognize indigenous territorial rights and the principle of Plurinationality in the 1998 and 2008 Ecuadorian Constitutions, as mentioned earlier.

The *Acuerdo Territorial* proposal thus exemplifies how indigenous politics go beyond antagonistic divisions between indigenous and nonindigenous practices. The Amazonian indigenous movement has challenged these divisions through complex processes of political identity formation. These identities are partially constituted in contradistinction to *the Other* (the missionary, the environmentalist, and the state) or, in Stuart Hall’s words, in “relation to what it is not” (1996, 5). At the same time, their identities are partially constituted from within—that is, from indigenous people’s daily realities and practices that the state constantly renders invisible. This constitution from “within” does not designate aboriginal cultures accidentally living in a “pure outside, untouched by the modern” (Escobar 2008, 218). It refers to realities of living that, despite being rendered invisible, marginal, and exterior to modernity, have challenged



the normative power of the One (the missionary, the environmentalist, and the state) and permeated its institutions, discourses, and practices (Gutiérrez-Rodríguez and Tate 2015, 8).

### **The Neo-Extractive State and Patriarchal Occupation**

It is exactly the indigenous people's power to effectively organize and challenge state narratives and projects, which the state needed to discipline or eliminate during the neo-extractive period. In fact, this was necessary to guarantee the government's ambitious expansion of oil and mining projects in the Amazon. As I narrated in Chapter One, under Rafael Correa's presidency the state was discursively and strategically invested in weakening the anti-extractive opposition. On the one hand, this weakening included the fragmentation, co-optation and criminalization of indigenous leaders and organizations that resisted extractive projects in the Amazon. On the other hand, delegitimation campaigns against indigenous and environmental movements opposing extractivism were crucial to the entire process. By replicating discourses that foreground the idea of the "nation," Correa accused these groups of being accomplices of US-American imperialism or of threatening the national socialist project of political change with their "particularistic agenda" (Ramírez 2010, 98). This nationalist discourse thus legitimized Correa's government as the only legitimate "left" and defined it as the only political actor with the democratic capacity to represent the people's interest and to decide on extractive projects.<sup>69</sup>

The state apparatus' investment in weakening and delegitimizing indigenous dissidence during neo-extractivism reveals how transformations at the level of state power and capitalism are more often than not "re-active" to social organizing. Feminist historians like Silvia Federici, for example, have shown how capitalism's origin was itself a response to the ways of living, organizing and resisting of the European peasantry—often led by women—and the colonized peoples in the Americas. In *The Caliban and the Witch* (2004), Federici provides a groundbreaking historical examination of capitalism's patriarchal and colonial origins, and places the witch-hunts of the 16th and 17<sup>th</sup> at the center of her analysis on primitive accumulation. According

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<sup>69</sup>For an expanded analysis of the state vision of "extractive democracy" in Ecuador, see Thea Riofrancos' 2020 book *Resource Radicals*, Chapter Four.

Federici, “the persecution of the witches, in Europe as in the New World, was as important as colonization and the expropriation of the European peasantry from its land were for the development of capitalism” (Ibid., 12).

The Argentinian political theorist Verónica Gago follows this feminist reading on capitalism’s violent origins and observes how neoliberalism, as a global regime of capitalist accumulation, violently “emerged in response to specific struggles” in Latin America (Gago 2020).<sup>70</sup> In *Neoliberalism from Below* (2017), Gago offers a meticulous account of neoliberalism’s mutant character in Latin America and challenges analyses that portray neo-extractive governments, like the one headed by Rafael Correa, as post-neoliberal political forces in the region (Ibid., 5). On the contrary, her thesis is that these governments evolved alongside neoliberalism’s own mutations in the region. Gago describes this political transformation at the state-level as “neoliberalism from above,” which “recognizes a modification of the global regime of accumulation that induces a mutation in nation-state institutions” (Ibid., 6).

In the case of Ecuador, changes in the accumulation regime, characterized by the so-called “commodities boom,”<sup>71</sup> induced the creation of new governmental institutions and the mutation of already existing ones. The goal was to increase the state’s capacity to suppress dissident groups or “negotiate” over economic and developmental compensations with Amazonian communities in exchange for access to their territories. This is the case for state institutions like the Ministry of Interior which increased its power and resources to legally “investigate” indigenous leaders suspected of sabotage and terrorism, and linked to the anti-extractive resistance.<sup>72</sup> Institutions like the Ministry of Hydrocarbons also “mutated,” becoming a powerful entity capable of channeling large amounts of state resources in response to communities’ demands. Furthermore, the reform of the Hydrocarbons Law in 2010, which stated that 12% of

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<sup>70</sup>Neoliberalism’s mutant character has not only been discussed among feminist academics, but has shaped current debates and theorizing about recent developments. Verónica Gago formulates this in her commentary on the collective volume *Mutant Neoliberalism* (2020) edited by William Callison and Zachary Manfredi. The introduction and various chapters of the book show how “even political conjunctures that seem to be animated by an opposition to neoliberal presuppositions can ultimately give them new impetus, reassembling and relaunching neoliberalism in ways that demonstrate its mutant cunning” (Gago 2020). Furthermore, as contributors to the book like Wendy Brown, Melinda Cooper, and Leslie Salzinger theorize, “neoliberalism forms new alliances with retrograde and conservative forces from white supremacy to religious fundamentalisms” (Ibid.).

<sup>71</sup>This term refers to the increase in the prices of commodities like oil and metals due to the growing international demand for these raw materials, specially from countries like China.

<sup>72</sup>Available from: <http://www.accionecologica.org/criminalizados/articulos/1487-ecuador-criminalizacion-de-la-protesta-social-en-tiempos-de-revolucion-ciudadana> (Accessed: August 21, 2020)

oil profits should go to social investment projects (Cielo, García, Vallejo, and Valdivieso 2018), led to the creation of state-owned companies like *Ecuador Estratégico*. This company was in charge of planning and constructing local development projects in the name of Amazonian People's "Good Living." Among the most emblematic projects that *Ecuador Estratégico* built—before the sharp drop in oil prices—are the aforementioned "Cities of the Millennium" and the "Millennium Educational Units" which, according to Correa in 2013, "are a source of joy, progress, Good Living" (Ibid.).

The mutation of Ecuador's neo-extractive state shows how this transformation was crucial for increasing state power to discipline what it saw as an impediment to capitalism's expansion in the Amazon. Furthermore, its attempt to implement relations of obedience through the co-optation of male leaders, criminalization of social protest, and developmental intervention is exemplary of the patriarchal features of state intervention. When speaking of patriarchal features, I am not referring to how the state is a mere tool to pursue "the 'interests' of men" (Brown 1992, 14). Rather, my usage of "patriarchal" recognizes state power beyond a unitary system of dominance and refers to how the state figuratively takes the role of a patriarch who punishes, rewards, and disciplines its subjects. At the same time, it installs and uses patriarchal relations to advance its capitalist and developmental interests (see ecofeminist approaches to the intersection of patriarchy, capitalism, and development in Agarwal 1992; Shiva and Mies 1993; Mellor 2000).

In other words, the Ecuadorian state's patriarchal features during the neo-extractive period were characterized by how, in contrast to its previous absence filled by oil companies' pastoral role, the state presented itself either as an authority with punitive prerogatives or as caregiver with the mission to convert indigenous individuals into developmental subjects. At the same time, the state's co-optation of mostly male leaders during the 2012 "process of social participation" during the 11th oil round (*Colectivo Miradas Críticas del Territorio desde el Feminismo* 2014, 84), like its promise of monetarized jobs for indigenous men in extractive circuits, shows how state power establishes gender hierarchies within indigenous communities and organizations in order to advance its extractive interests. This, of course, does not mean that hierarchical relations "arrived" with the neo-extractive state in Amazonian communities. Supporting this assertion would not only contradict the Amazonian Women's criticisms of the male chauvinism they have confronted in their own

indigenous organizations; it would also ignore how former colonial powers, such as missionaries, used gender role divisions in order to subjugate and Christianize Amazonian communities (Trujillo 2001, 21).

However, it is important to mention that the neo-extractive establishment of gender hierarchies through developmental and extractive projects attacks the core of where Amazonian peoples' power resides. Namely, it attacks their autonomous power to sustain and reproduce human and non-human life in the Amazon. In the case of the Amazonian Women, practices that reproduce human and non-human life not only make their lives and material subsistence possible, but are a source of power and connection with the rainforest. As I discuss in depth in Chapter Five, these practices are embedded in a diverse set of relations that include knowledge production and transmission, as well as reciprocal relations between human and non-human beings. When extractive industries or developmental projects like the Cities of the Millennium arrive, these connections are interrupted and the communitarian and territorial organization of work change (see Cielo, Coba and Vallejo 2016, 119). Hierarchical relations between men and women are established through the institution of masculinized and monetarized economic relations (Ibid., 128). This in turn degrades Amazonian women's power in their communities and erodes those same practices of living that have been crucial for maintaining a certain degree of indigenous autonomy from the intervention of the state and extractive companies.

### **The Amazonian Women's Resistance of Patriarchal Occupation**

Through their organizing, the Amazonian Women have challenged the neo-extractive state, contested the effects of patriarchal occupation in their territories, and publicly confronted the disciplinary strategies that have attempted to silence their voices. One important and symbolic example of "indiscipline," or what Lisset Coba describes as "belligerency" against extractivism and male violence (Coba 2019, 98), was the Waorani leader Alicia Cahuilla's speech at the National Assembly shortly before the Amazonian Women arrived in Quito in 2013. Cahuilla was invited to speak about the benefits of oil extraction in the Yasuní National Park. Defying the expectations of the governmental party *Alianza País*, this Waorani leader and former Vice President of the Waorani Organization NAWO refused to read a speech given to

her and spoke out openly against extractivism (interview with Alicia Cahuilla, October 17, 2018, Quito).

Another important example of defiance against the neo-extractive state is when many members of the Amazonian Women publicly rejected the “*trabajitos*” [little, insignificant jobs] offered to them in the context of extractive projects (*Colectivo Miradas Críticas del Territorio desde el Feminismo* 2014, 46). Rather than being a mere opposition to how indigenous women are excluded from extractive labor circuits or a mere rejection of the economic opportunities offered by neo-extractive development, the Amazonian Women have expressed how these kinds of projects devalue their autonomous ability to reproduce life in the forest. By rejecting the intervention of extractive industries in their territories, they primarily challenge state narratives that positions them as developmental subjects and as passive recipients of the state’s anti-poverty agenda:

“We are rich, we have what we want in our territory, everything, our products are for the supply for all of us, and it is organic and not fumigated. [...] We are not poor.” (Interview with Amazonian woman, *Ibid.*, 70)

“Being poor is not having a territory for cultivating. Not having our nature is to be poor.” (Interview with Amazonian woman, *Ibid.*, 74)

“The 11th oil round wants to destroy the province of Pastaza, and we can’t allow this to happen while we have the power to speak and shout. We have decided to stay here [in Quito]. They want to be like the Spaniards 450 years ago, they think they can dominate us, but we don’t receive orders, we are not servants, the time of the colony is over.” (Interview with Amazonian woman, *Ibid.*, 75)

It is precisely their power to reproduce and sustain human and non-human life that is at the center of the Amazonian Women’s territorial organizing and that characterizes their resistance. In a similar vein as Latin American analyses of reproduction that underscore how political struggles are fundamentally linked to those practices that keep the struggle “alive,” practices crucial for the reproduction of life in the Amazon inspire and nourish their resistance as an ontological design. Instead of talking about practices that nurture the ideological foundations of political struggles, feminists in the region have shed light on those reproductive practices—like preparing food, taking care of others, sharing affects during a protest—that sustain particular struggles and inspire political strategies at the same time (see Composto and Navarro 2014; Gutiérrez 2018; Vega, Martínez and Paredes 2018). As Encarnación Gutiérrez

and Cristina Vega note, reproductive practices are a powerful source of inspiration within human and political life, without forgetting their connections and disconnections to the capitalist market, the different peoples that reproduce them, and the inequalities they are founded on (Gutiérrez-Rodríguez and Vega 2014, 9).

Indigenous thinkers have analyzed the relationship between their territorial struggles and the reproduction of life departing from the situated reality of their communities. This is the case of the sociologist Gladys Tzul Tzul who has theorized how territorial struggles are intrinsically related to those concrete practices that continue the reproduction of life in the community. Tzul Tzul's concept of "*gobiernos comunales indígenas*" (2018a) [communal indigenous governments], for example, makes visible the various ways in which "the everyday organization of life" in the community are transformed into political practices of indigenous self-government and political strategies for defending life and indigenous territories against state occupation (Ibid., 24). Vice versa, autonomous ways of indigenous governance and decision-making processes are crucial to communally organize and reproduce life (Ibid., 15).

This analysis challenges the modern binary between public and private life, according to which "political practices" correspond to the public sphere. Indigenous analyses—like the one offered by Tzul Tzul, but also Lorena Cabnal (2010) and Aura Cumes (2012)—take a different route than the 1970's feminist saying, "the private is political" by locating political action in communitarian practices. This has expanded but also exploited private-public binaries by locating the analysis of the political in the community. It is thus the community and the reproduction of communitarian life that are the source of the political energies that shape territorial struggles against capitalist occupation.

The Amazonian Women's resistance is very much connected to these Latin American theories on reproduction. First, their resistance, characterized by practices that enable and reproduce life and defend it from extractive occupation, is in dialogue with Latin American conceptualizations that understand political struggles as fundamentally linked to those practices that keep the struggle alive. Second, these women's own ways of describing their struggle with images like the *Araña Tejedora* coincides with indigenous theorizing on reproduction that thinks of political action outside of the classical binary between public and private life, and instead locates it in communitarian practices. In fact, the Amazonian Women's resistance is characterized by how these leaders weave their own spiderweb to sustain themselves and their

extended families, and their territorial struggle at the same time. This spiderweb is in turn connected to a complex set of communitarian and territorial relations that gives them the tools and the knowledge to weave it. At the same time, it is this set of relations that serves as a legitimizing force for the Amazonian Women to politically organize their protest actions and bring demands from their communities to the state.

The important role that reproduction, as a material and creative force, has in the Amazonian Women's organizing should not be interpreted as an essentialist quality of their politics or as a desire for complete independence from the state. On the contrary, the Amazonian Women's politics and discourses often display a tension when combining languages that underline autonomy and self-determination, while including very concrete demands on the state, such as access to education, the healthcare system, and economic benefits. However, instead of considering this tension a mere contradiction, the previous historical analysis reminds us that Amazonian politics have always been characterized by complex processes of identity formation in absence of and in relation to the state.

### **The Material Dimensions of Rexistance**

In the following chapters of this dissertation, I analyze the concrete practices and relations that characterize the Amazonian Women's reistance. Each of the three ethnographic chapters that follow—on *artesanías*, on practices of forest-making, and on allyship—allow us to grasp the very material ways in which the Amazonian Women connect everyday practices with the more “public” practices in their territorial struggle. However, before proceeding to these chapters, it is important to mention some specific characteristics of the relations and practices at the center of my ethnographic analysis.

First, relations and practices that reproduce human and non-human life enact deeply affective connections. The relationship between humans and the forest is not merely one of material or utilitarian correspondence. It is also characterized by an affective recognition and sense of co-constitution. As I explore in Chapter Four, for many Amazonian leaders with whom I co-labored, practices like weaving clay pots, preparing *chicha*, or cultivating *yuca* [manioc] connects them with the people they care for, as well as with the earth that nourishes them. For women like the Kichwa leader Nancy Santi, cultivating her *chakra* and complying with certain “rules” transmitted from generation to generation during the cultivation process is an act of loving the earth.

It is only through loving the earth that the earth “loves you back” by providing you with her products (Nancy Santi, interview by Lorena van Bunningen y Corinne Duhalde Ruiz, November 1, 2018, Community of Sisa located on the Curaray river basin). It is precisely the affective dimension of relations that reproduce human and non-human life that inspire proposals like the Living Forest declaration.

Second, communitarian and territorial practices not only reproduce human life, but non-human life as well. In Chapter Five, I describe how practices like cultivating the land, weaving clay pottery, sharing dreams in the mornings, or singing “with a purpose” build affective relations between the human and non-human worlds, and also constantly recognize, relate to and even make the forest into a living entity. This is the reason why I call practices that reproduce human and non-human life “practices of forest-making.” As the words “forest-making” describe, the acknowledgement and enactment of these practices make the forest, in one way or another, into a living entity inhabited by a multiplicity of lifeforms. At the same time, these practices of forest-making nurture Amazonian women’s organizational strategies and political discourse when confronting the state and oil companies.

Third and finally, the Amazonian Women’s distinctive ways of reproducing human and non-human life in the Amazon contradict limited and limiting interpretations of reproduction as a merely repetitive force, and instead contribute to the vast array of Latin American debates on reproduction. While reproduction in its “unproductive” mode is minored as a practice that “repeats life,” reproduction in its radical, creative, undisciplined and rexisistent mode “enables life.” As I explain in Chapter Six, the multifaceted relations of allyship that sustain the Amazonian Women’s struggle are permeated by a pragmatic force that responds in different ways to the state and extractive expansion, and by creative ways in which allies come and “become-together” in order to defend life in its multiple forms. The Amazonian Women’s rexisistance is thus characterized by a pragmatic and creative force, as it must remain vigilant about the ways power seeks to occupy, while also using the vital force of reproduction to weave strategies and relations of allyship crucial for defending the Living Forest.



## Chapter Four – Weaving Stories between Worlds: Making the *Artesanía Intelectual*

### Introduction

“He told me: ‘I’m not going to buy you Zoila, you have to do what I decide.’ What he wants.... I replied that I’m not going to [let] him trample on me, I’m not doing what he wants. Because my *artesanía* is, *as it should be*. Those flowers are not just flowers, they have a name! [...] I do not do for the sake of doing! I make tiger, because there is tiger in my rainforest. I make parrots, because they live in my rainforest! I make toucan, because toucan is in my rainforest. If I make some birds, they are from the rainforest! If I make boa bracelets, I make them because the boa lives in my river. I make those *meanings*!

If he doesn’t understand that, we are wrong!”

(Zoila Castillo, interview, September 5, 2017, Puyo, my emphasis added)

Zoila Castillo is an Amazonian woman who has the power to powerfully communicate what she thinks and feels. According to her and other Amazonian women who work with her, this ability to make herself heard by others is what led her to become a leader in her indigenous community. Through my conversations and shared experiences with her during my co-labor, I learned that her *artesanía* is *more* than what we—consumers, ethnographers, and political allies—normally think it is: a folkloric commodity or a cultural symbol—an object divorced from the everyday struggles of its creator.

This chapter is an attempt to think hard “about *artesanías*” and “with *artesanías*.” The following pages thus do not aim to explain what *artesanías* “really” are. Rather, I will share reflections on the different moments *artesanías* appeared during my co-labor with several Amazonian leaders, and the relations *artesanías* revealed, connected, and reproduced in those moments. By analyzing those moments, I hope to make some space for thinking about *artesanías* as more than “just handicrafts” and to let them and the hands that weave them reveal important aspects of the Amazonian Women’s territorial struggle for resistance.

Since 2016, *artesanías* have sporadically appeared during my ethnographic visits in Ecuador. Over time, they became a fundamental tie between me and my five Amazonian co-laborers. As I mention in Chapter Two, before I returned from fieldwork in 2017, three Amazonian leaders asked me to help them sell their *artesanías* and look for fair trade distributors or local shops in Germany. This request extended my relation

and long-distance communication with these leaders and provided me with a material link to our co-labor.



Image 21. Necklace made out of wayruru-seeds by Rosa Gualinga, November 18, 2017, Frankfurt, Germany.

Nevertheless, at that time I did not consider the production of *artesanías* relevant to the project of understanding the Amazonian Women’s anti-extractive struggle vis-à-vis the state—my main research interest at that time—except in that selling them covered the various costs that confronted women when they joined a protest in the city. However, the link created by *artesanías* became stronger and produced a shift in my thinking. This intensified when my co-laborers suggested we include the production of *artesanías* in our workshops on territorial defense in their communities. Even when I negotiated with each one of them separately, all five strongly wanted to dedicate at least two days of the workshop to teaching the participants the *artesanía* designs they had mastered. Elvia Dagua even told me that women from her community were tired of so much “talking” during workshops and that she wanted to change the dynamic of ours to teach participants “something they can bring back home,”

“I have proposed to work this way, to offer a training in both things. This includes the practical as well. Because women often fall asleep from so much listening during trainings that are only about talking, talking, talking. And they go home without anything in their hands.” (Elvia Dagua, speech during our co-labor workshop, October 5, 2018, Community of Puerto Santana)

At first, I understood this request as a means of introducing a “productive activity” in the workshop, or an activity that could generate monetary income for the community in the future. Some of them shared with me their dream of creating an association of local producers of *artesanías* in their communities, and described this as a necessary *emprendimiento* [economic undertaking] to generate an alternative source of income for indigenous families that want to send their children to study in the city. There are important examples of Amazonian women’s associations that were organized in order to generate alternative economic opportunities in their communities such as the Kichwa women’s associations *Sinchi Warmi* [Strong Women] and *Sacha Warmi* [Forest Women], which produce and sell natural medicinal products and *artesanías* out of clay, feathers and seeds, or the Waorani women’s association AMWAE that produces and sells Fairtrade chocolate and various *artesanías* out of the *chambira* palm. Even though these women’s associations aim to “rescue their cultural and social ancestral practices” (*Sinchi Warmi* 2017) and present an economic alternative to extractive industries that “arrive and offer easy money” in indigenous communities (AMWAE’s President Patricia Mencay, interview, September 23, 2018, Community of Sabata), the *artesanías* and the knowledge their creators produce are mostly consumed as cultural commodities in the tourism market.

My perspective changed as we started conducting our workshops in the summer of 2018. What at the beginning looked like the “practical” part of the workshop became, from my perspective, the most important moment of our visit. My involvement in learning how to weave the different materials that the Amazonian leaders brought for the workshop allowed me to engage in conversations with the participants. My status as a foreign visiting researcher, and the fact that I did not spend more than a handful of days in each community, made these moments of collective weaving crucial for exchanging experiences and learning more about many of the participants’ lives. More important still, these moments were a crucial opportunity for my co-laborers to talk about their work at their indigenous organizations, about the difficulties they confront when living in the city, and about the importance of keeping oil and mining companies out of their territories. In fact, the practice of “weaving clay”<sup>73</sup> and weaving bracelets, necklaces and earrings out of feathers and seeds also created spaces for weaving other

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<sup>73</sup>The act of “molding” clay is described by Kichwa women as an act of “weaving” clay (Whitten 1976; Guzmán-Gallegos 1997; Premauer 2016).

kinds of things that I had not predicted and which comprise a central part of this chapter. As Salomé Aranda told me, the time weaving *artesanías* was a very important opportunity for her and the women from Villano to talk, in an intimate way, about the oil company AGIP and the different ways in which the presence of the company negatively impacts their lives (Fieldnotes, October 22, 2018). Moments of collective weaving were, then, “dialogic” moments (Hill Collins 2000), which allowed members of the community to weave personal stories, memories, desires and fears together, and reassert their collective experiences at the same time.

In addition to this eye-opening experience during our co-labor workshops, I also learned from Amazonian leaders the importance of certain *artesanía* designs in their lives. After our workshops or during our personal conversations, I would ask them about the meaning of the different *artesanías* they produced. The question as such was often answered with a brief response, but it opened up other personal and life-changing stories they wanted to share. I had learned about the importance of clay pottery for the transmission of knowledge between women of various generations within Kichwa communities from anthropological texts (Whitten 1976), but my co-laborers’ *artesanías* connected their knowledge and affective relations to the rainforest with their personal stories in a different and unique way. Through the Boa Necklace, for example, I learned about the moment in Castillo’s life when she found her “own strength” and decided to identify herself with the boa. Through the *Mujer Mukawa* [clay pot in form of a woman’s head], I learned about Nancy Santi’s understanding of Kichwa women’s everyday labor and why she likes being considered a “hard-working woman.” Through the *Sisa* [flower in Kichwa] Earrings, I learned about Dagua’s hard experience as a young indigenous leader in Quito and the ups and downs of raising her six children by herself.



Image 22. Boa Necklace by Zoila Castillo, September 14, 2017, Zamora.

In other words, I learned how weaving *artesanías* is an important practice of reflecting, negotiating, and expressing Amazonian leaders' own history as well as the history of their people in the present. This lesson became clearer at the end of my research, showing me that my and some of my colleagues' understanding of *artesanías* was incomplete. This lesson thus begins from the fact that I do not “own” the knowledge *about* and the relation *to* *artesanías* that my co-laborers have. And still, their spoken and weaved stories motivate the reflections contained in this chapter about the entanglement of relations that the Amazonian Women enact through their *artesanías*, as well as challenge established assumptions about certain aspects of the Amazonian Women's lives, such as their reproductive labor and territorial struggle.

The following sections of this chapter attempt to resituate how we, as allies and academics, tend to understand *artesanías*—that is, what we think they are. Beginning with Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui's call to distance ourselves from the *archiconocido*, the “very well known,”<sup>74</sup> the first part of this chapter offers a reflection “about *artesanías*” as something more than cultural commodities. I will share important ethnographic moments with Amazonian leaders like Castillo, who, despite economically depending on the sale of their *artesanías*, resist weaving them *qua* commodity, solely fabricated for the market's wishes. In fact, the Amazonian Women weave relations between different worlds (Rivera Cusicanqui 2019)<sup>75</sup>—the forest, the community, the market, the capitalist world—and negotiate their position in each with a tremendous creative force.

In the second part of this chapter, I distance myself from the anthropological impulse of wanting to “save” *artesanías* from the capitalist market by focusing on their cultural meaning. This impulse differentiates between the objects that the Amazonian Women I worked with weave—considering clay pottery as material culture, but necklaces, bracelets and earrings made with synthetic seeds as handicrafts—and is consequentially only concerned with the former in understanding the complex relations of Amazonian women. I have encountered this impulse in my conversations with some anthropologists in Ecuador. Moreover, I have not found any work reflecting on the

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<sup>74</sup> Available from: <https://www.elsaltodiario.com/feminismo-poscolonial/silvia-rivera-cusicanqui-producir-pensamiento-cotidiano-pensamiento-indigena> (Accessed: April 26, 2021). I would like to thank Andrea Bravo Díaz for referring to this article on Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui's work.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

production of clay pottery and objects made out of feathers or natural and synthetic seeds simultaneously, even though they are weaved on an everyday basis by many Amazonian women I met who have an urban and semi-urban life.

This is the reason why, while acknowledging the work of anthropologists whose contributions have shaped my understanding of how certain practices like clay weaving are complex and creative practices of knowledge production and affective exchange among Kichwa communities (Whitten 1976; Whitten and Scott Whitten 1993, 1996, 2008; Reeve 1988; Muratorio 1987; Guzmán-Gallegos 1997; Uzendoski 2006), I decided to use the term *artesanía* to refer to clay pottery and fabrics out of feathers or natural and synthetic seeds produced by the Amazonian leaders I worked with in this chapter.<sup>76</sup> Another important reason for using the term *artesanía* is that this is how all my co-laborers—especially Zoila Castillo, Elvia Dagua, and Rosa Gualinga—have referred to their creations. Finally, though the term carries a mostly pejorative connotation in ethnographic circles, derived from the difference between “art” objects and “artisanal” objects, it is important to reflect on how some Amazonian women redefine this term and negotiate their position as indigenous women, expressive creators, and weavers of life in the context of the material conditions of our present. To paraphrase Aura Cumes, it is necessary to stop seeing indigenous women as a “cultural reserve” or as “museum pieces” (Cumes 2012), and begin seeing them as contemporary subjects with practices and narratives that actively negotiate between the past and the present, and between the present and their future. The Amazonian Women’s *artesanías* are, then, their own way of telling their *own history*; they are “woven stories.”

The third and last part of this chapter engages in what I call a “partially connected” dialogue “with *artesanías*” about two important and interconnected aspects

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<sup>76</sup>Even though members from the Amazonian Women’s network come from different indigenous nationalities, my Amazonian co-laborers were mostly Kichwa women with the exception of Rosa Gualinga from the Shiwiar nationality. This means that the *artesanías* I write about in this chapter are mostly produced by Kichwa women. Nevertheless, it is important to note that this does not mean that their *artesanías* are “essentially” Kichwa. Kichwa peoples, especially the peoples living around Puyo and along the Bobonaza, the Curaray and the Villano rivers are not homogeneous. Rather they are characterized by processes of transculturation and ethno-genesis, whereby Kichwa-speaking Quijos, Sapara, Achuar, and Shuar peoples were in constant exchange and transformation with each other, creating new identities that transcended local ethnic divisions (Whitten 1976 and Reeve 1988 in Guzmán-Gallegos 1997, 23 ff.). Furthermore, exchange relations among different peoples have had the result that, for example, Shuar clay pottery is a product of Canelos Kichwa women marrying Shuar peoples and teaching their skills to other Shuar women (Whitten 1976, 17). In the case of *artesanías* made out of feathers or natural and synthetic seeds, the constant exchange of materials and designs among Amazonian women, especially with an urban and semi-urban life, makes it impossible to determine what nationality they are “characteristic of.”

of Amazonian leaders' life: their reproductive labor and their territorial struggle for resistance. I draw from Rivera Cusicanqui's thinking in *Ch'ixinakax utxiwa: Una reflexión sobre prácticas y discursos descolonizadores* (2010) and *Sociología de la Imagen: Miradas Ch'ixi desde la Historia Andina* (2015), both of which offer important analytical and political tools to decolonize our way of seeing "images," including those of the *artesanías*. Rivera Cusicanqui's thinking helps us to see the *artesanía* as an *artesanía intelectual*, an intellectual handicraft, a concept that is important for understanding the Amazonian Women's own ways of telling and communicating lived experience (Rivera Cusicanqui 2015, 176). To this end, I engage in a partially connected dialogue with two examples of *artesanía intelectual* that were produced by my Amazonian co-laborers: the *Mujer Mukawa* by Nancy Santi and the *Araña Tejedora* by Elvia Dagua. These *artesanías* are "woven stories" about the Amazonian Women's reproductive labor and territorial struggle for resistance.

### ***Artesanías, Not "Just Handicrafts"***

During my stays in Ecuador, I often encountered skepticism among academic colleagues and friends towards the increasing proliferation of income generating initiatives like communitarian tourism or the production of native fish, cacao, medicinal plants, *guayusa*, and handicrafts in the Amazonian rainforest. These initiatives are mostly understood as a local response to processes of globalization in Amazonian communities, which have dramatically changed their ways of living, intergenerational relations, and modes of cultural reproduction (Muratorio 2000, 241). They are also considered a response to the absence of the state and limited access to education, healthcare, and other basic services (Cielo, Coba, and Vallejo 2016, 127).

During my visits, I found that these initiatives were very often debated during communitarian and regional assemblies and strongly desired by the Amazonian leaders I interviewed. From the perspective of these leaders, their communities depend on monetary income from new economic activities like the production of *artesanías* in order to enable their kids to finish high school or attend university, to take a family member to the hospital, or to travel to buy certain products in urban areas. Here are several statements that I recorded on the importance of these novel means of raising funds to indigenous peoples in the Amazon:

“We do it as a small business, as a business that we want to carry as Waorani women. We have our [chocolate] brand. It is from the sale of our *Wao* chocolate that the money goes back to our territory, to the communities that do not have a project. There are mothers who cannot educate [their children]. Education is important, to learn, to educate, and thus to be able to master Spanish. This is why we want to help those women in need.” (Patricia Mencay, interview, September 23, 2018, Community of Sabata)

“We want to go out and show the world that with our own resources we can create an economy in the communities, but without damaging the forests! So people outside, if it doesn’t have a good presentation, they simply don’t value it, because that’s just the way it is. For example, if I make a bottle or a syrup, if it doesn’t have a nice label they won’t buy it. Or if it’s not clean they won’t buy it. I want to strengthen that part [in our communities] in order to create that economy [...]. I want to create a kind of small business and communities to cultivate their own medicines.” (Rosa Canelos, interview, *ibid.*)

“[Indigenous] nationalities and peoples do not live [only] defending the forest, just talking over here, over here. We need economy. [...] Because we need to strengthen the implementation of community tourism, or alternatives such as *artesanías*. We make wonderful clay pots! But for that we need funds.” (Lourdes Jipa, public speech during CONFENIAE’s assembly, *ibid.*)

The skepticism of my colleagues mostly centered on the fact that these initiatives, much like those of oil companies, only partially fulfill what is ultimately the state’s obligation to provide basic educational and health infrastructure to these communities. Another reason for skepticism is that these initiatives are mostly financed by external actors like international non-governmental organizations, thus creating asymmetrical relations of economic dependency. Finally, according to some colleagues, these “income generator” initiatives insert Amazonian communities into a capitalist market where they are not only at an extreme disadvantage as local producers but subsume or replace non-capitalist practices still crucial for controlling the means of communitarian reproduction of life.

Even if I very much agree with the critical impulse behind these concerns, the more time I spent with my co-laborers, the more aware I became of the importance of thinking carefully about these specific Amazonian initiatives. One important danger of these concerns is that it becomes easy to either project all the solutions onto a state that has historically proven unable to relate to indigenous peoples as legitimate interlocutors. Furthermore, this type of concern sometimes ends up inspiring conservationist and paternalistic desires, not only in relation to the rainforest, but also to certain living practices of indigenous peoples we think need to be preserved.



In the case of *artesanías*, I encountered concern among urban activists and academics during my different stays in Quito and Puyo (Fieldnotes, September 6 and 28, 2017) regarding how these products *become* folkloric commodities when sold on the national and international market and how indigenous producers (mostly women) also *become* the last link in the production chain when involved in this process. In Amazonian cities like Puyo, it is not uncommon to find vast touristic shops or outdoor handicrafts fairs that sell Amazonian clay pottery or products made out of feathers and seeds to national and international tourists.<sup>77</sup> Furthermore, these products are mostly produced and sold by some Amazonian women who can afford having an urban or semi-urban life—in contrast to other Amazonian women who do not have the means to leave their communities—but who also have to compete against each other in a very small market.

However, even if *artesanías* are indeed consumed as a cultural commodity on the tourism market, it is necessary to challenge our impulse to give so much authority to the analytical frameworks through which we make sense of Amazonian women's production of *artesanías*. We must especially challenge the assumption, inspired by certain interpretations of Karl Marx's definition of commodity as an "external object" (Marx 1990 [1867], 125), that as soon as an object starts circulating in the capitalist market, it *becomes* a commodity. By contrast, Rolando Vázquez' analyzes the colonality of the commodity and argues that commodities are characterized by their "kinship to earthlessness and the loss of relational worlds" behind their production, which, as Marx himself noted, is mystified in the eyes of the consumer who consumes the commodity as a libidinal object (Vázquez 2017, 85). According to Vázquez's decolonial reading of Marx's analysis of commodity fetishism, commodities are thus characterized not only by extraction and exploitation, but also by how these processes turn the "consumption of life into a pleasure principle" (Ibid., 86). This certainly is not the case of my co-laborer's *artesanías*—their production is not "earthless," much less alienated from their labor. In fact, my co-laborers' *artesanías* reveal a set of relations between the Amazonian Women and their communities, the forest, and the capitalist market itself.

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<sup>77</sup> Available from: <https://www.lahora.com.ec/noticia/1102120667/la-cultura-se-vive-en-el-malecon-de-boayaku-en-pastaza> (Accessed: April 26, 2021)

Analyses that depart from the assumption that certain processes of capitalist exchange have the magical power to radically expand themselves, and thus to separate—alienate—objects from the relations in which they were once embedded, become totalizing when we are trying to understand what it means for Amazonian women to sell their *artesanías* in Puyo, in Quito, or in Germany. With this observation, I do not wish to put Amazonian women into a position of impermeability in relation to the material conditions that globally shape our lives, or to say that *artesanías* do not have any attributes of commodities at all. Of course, *artesanías* are commodities in particular contexts, like when tourists buy them to satisfy their desire to own an exotic souvenir. Nevertheless, they are not *mainly* or *only* commodities.

The fact that an *artesanía* can be exchanged as a commodified object does not “overdetermine” what *artesanías* are. If not we are fetishizing the commodified object—giving it an exaggeratedly powerful and “mystical character”, to put it in Marxist terms (Marx 1990 [1867], 164), that we as consumers, academics, or allies “see,” instead of recognizing that we do not completely understand *artesanía*’s production, meaning, and relationality. Worse still, we undertake a critical analysis of the people we say we work with “behind the latter’s back” (Viveiros de Castro 2015, 13), without engaging in a dialogue with them about how they understand their relation and resistance to a dominant and dominating market system.

Furthermore, the claim that Amazonian women instantly become the last link in the production chain when they sell *artesanías* also gives commodities the power to “overdetermine” the nature of the people who produce them. This analysis is still entrapped in the contrast between things produced for the capitalist market and things produced for other types of exchange, and how this analytical differentiation applies to other peoples’ representations. From a philosophic-anthropological perspective, this contrast has been inspired by Marcel Mauss’ famous differentiation between the commodity and the gift. According to Mauss, whereas commodities’ external (alienated) nature separate them from the people who produced them, gifts are considered part of the person who produced them or carry aspects of personhood, which makes them “living” or unalienable objects (Mauss 1990, 7). In the case of Kichwa Amazonian communities, anthropological studies on clay pottery, such as María Guzmán-Gallegos’s work with the Kichwa peoples of Canelos (1997), have described these objects as unalienable objects, objects that are constitutive to the people—Kichwa women—who produced them. However, the problem, as Guzmán-Gallegos herself

notes when thinking with Marilyn Strathern, is when people use this anthropological description as an ontological marker to make sense of a “determined society” (Strathern 1988 in Guzmán-Gallegos 1997, 71 ff.).

Much like Guzmán-Gallegos (and Strathern), I do not think it is politically or analytically accurate to make ontological claims about the people who produce the objects we as ethnographers “see.” On the one hand, the *artesanía* I am talking about here, similarly to the person who produced it, refuses spatial classification due to its ability to travel from the community to the handicraft shop or to the international fair, and thus refuses to be ordered in one specific system of relations. In fact, *artesanías* and their creators, as Rivera Cusicanqui rightly notes, weave relations among different worlds: the forest, the community, the capitalist market, the dominant world (Rivera Cusicanqui 2019).<sup>78</sup> On the other hand, the fact that the *artesanía* relates to the capitalist exchange market does not necessarily mean that it remains as an alienated object through this relation, as mentioned earlier. Nor does this mean that the person that weaved the *artesanía* stays alienated from its creation. In contrast, I would like to argue that the Amazonian co-laborers I worked with enact a particular type of relation with the capitalist exchange market through their *artesanías*. This relation, as I will soon show, is strongly negotiated. This is why portraying Amazonian women as the last link in the production chain when they engage with the market misses how they actually demand to be seen. As Rosa Canelos, representative at PAKIRU and member of the Women’s Association *Sacha Warmi*, said in our interview:

“Because, as I say, they don’t value [our work]. [...] A woman who knows how to make pottery is a woman artist! A man who knows how to make a house is an architect! In other words, they want us to believe that we are not capable.” (September 22, 2018, Community of Sabata)

### ***Artesanías* and the Fairtrade Market**

I do not want to represent the Amazonian Women as living outside of capitalist relations or as resilient entrepreneurs and creative survivors of the capitalist market. As Silvia Federici rightly notes when referring to Julia Elyachar’s critical analysis of microfinance, researchers’ portrayal of certain peoples as capitalism’s resilient

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<sup>78</sup> Available from: <https://www.elsaltodiario.com/feminismo-poscolonial/silvia-rivera-cusicanqui-producir-pensamiento-cotidiano-pensamiento-indigena> (Accessed: April 26, 2021)

survivors has led to the identification of these same resilience strategies as economic resources to be exploited (Federici 2018, 69). I also recognize the everyday violence that my Amazonian co-laborers confront when they have to sell their creations, their labor, and their knowledge to a racialized market that pays little money for products that most of the time were laboriously weaved for hours and even days—“*no nos valoran*,” they do not value us or our work (Elvia Dagua, interview, August 23, 2017, Puyo).

However, it is important to understand that the Amazonian Women have their own ways of relating to and even resisting the market conditions with which they are confronted. At the beginning of this chapter, I quoted a passage in which Castillo expresses her determination to resist making what people tell her to produce, which contradicts the assumption that Amazonian women are passive and alienated producers of folkloric commodities. Castillo was speaking about her past experience with the initiative *HAKHU Amazon Design*. This Fairtrade initiative—founded by two internationally recognized Kichwa human rights activists, Leo Cerda and Nina Gualinga—aims at creating alternative sources of income for indigenous women by selling different *artesanías* (necklaces, bracelets, and earrings made of natural and synthetic seeds) through an online platform. Nina Gualinga is also part of the Amazonian Women’s network. When I interviewed Leo Cerda, he told me that the idea for the initiative emerged after he and Gualinga realized how important the *artesanías* were in the lives of some of the Amazonian Women. He explained,

“I saw that in the 2013 and 2016 marches, in most of the marches to Quito, women leaders like Zoila, Gloria, Rosita, but especially Zoila and Rosita came with their *artesanías*. So they came and sold that [*artesanías*] and had money to eat, for the bus, to buy something, to support their children. Zoila sent two of her children to the university. So I said, we can improve this kind of process by getting access to the market. So in October, I started a crowdfunding campaign and in January of this year I started working on this project.” (August 3, 2017, Quito)

Castillo, along with other leaders of the Amazonian Women from the Waorani, Kichwa and Sapara nationalities worked with *HAKHU* at the very beginning of the initiative’s creation. Castillo even led one of *HAKHU*’s first workshops with more than sixty participants. However, conflicts emerged after Castillo and Rosa Gualinga were invited to learn about new *artesanías*’ designs from a young professional designer from Quito. Castillo recalled the moment with a mixture of indignation and humor. After all,

Castillo is not just a proud artisan, but an experienced designer of different kinds of *artesanías* herself. She said,

“I created little things on my own. [...] That’s how the *gringas* [non-Hispanic girl or woman] bought me, really! I made flower necklaces just by looking at necklaces designs on television. That’s how I made them. I made a lot of designs. Now they [other artisans] copy my models. I taught myself without receiving any training, because I could weave new *artesanías* from the models I had in my head. That’s why, when HAKHU told me that they were going to teach us different models, I ended up teaching them new ones!” (Recorded conversation during our co-labor workshop, September 14, 2018, Community of Teresa Mama)

The conflict thus originated when Castillo was confronted with *HAKHU*’s marketing strategy to gain greater access to the international online market by offering “attractive” *artesanía* designs. *HAKHU*’s strategy was to work on demand: “for example,” Leo Cerda explained, “a customer makes an order, so I ask the community for the specific *artesanía* that was ordered and I pay them directly for that labor” (Interview, August 3, 2017, Quito). This approach conflicted with the Amazonian leaders’ self-understanding of themselves as autonomous creators of their own designs. It also conflicted with the way Castillo, Gualinga, and Dagua are used to producing, selling, and exhibiting their creations, primarily by displaying their *artesanías* in public fairs.



Image 23. Rosa Gualinga and Zoila Castillo exhibiting their *artesanías* at the Universidad Andina Simón Bolívar, September 28, 2018, Quito.

This does not mean that *HAKHU* as an initiative is not appealing to other Amazonian women. As mentioned in Chapter Two, Salomé Aranda suggested

organizing our co-labor workshop with *HAKHU*, given that Kichwa women from Villano were very interested in working with the initiative. For these communities, *HAKHU* offers an attractive and alternative form of income for indigenous women that could replace the strong relations of economic dependency generated by the oil company AGIP.

Nevertheless, initiatives like *HAKHU* and other Fairtrade distributors in other parts of the world have to play by the rules of the market and offer products they can “sell.” As the Argentinian owner of a Fairtrade store in Frankfurt told me after I showed her the *artesanías* made by my co-laborers,

“I have to sell. I cannot buy something that does not sell. Artisans want to sell at market price and there is no way I can compete with those prices. Necklaces do not sell. They have to understand the rules of the market. I don’t want to be mean, but I have to pay my bills. Artisans often do not understand that and get angry.” (Fieldnotes, November 20, 2017, Frankfurt a.M.)

This makes collaborations between Fairtrade initiatives and Amazonian leaders like Castillo, Gualinga and Dagua difficult and sporadic, since they are not willing to completely submit to the rules of a market that does not acknowledge the different reasons why they weave their fabrics. And to paraphrase Castillo again, it is important to understand that they do not weave *artesanías* “*por hacer*” [for the sake of just doing it]. As I will show in the next section, their creations also tell stories.

### ***Sociología de la Imagen: Decolonizing Our Way of “Seeing” Artesanías***

“We need to rethink the role of visibility in domination and also in how it can be a useful form of resistance. It is about decolonizing our own consciousness, overcoming Western ocularcentrism, and transforming our sense of sight as part of a complete and organic experience, which involves other senses as well such as smell and touch. In other words, we should reintegrate our sight into the body.”  
(Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui, 2019)<sup>79</sup>

According to Rivera Cusicanqui, the way we *see* things is important. Seeing something in order to categorize it according to our pre-established assumptions about the world is different from *seeing* something and staying with it, staying with the

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<sup>79</sup> Available from: <https://www.elsaltodiario.com/feminismo-poscolonial/silvia-rivera-cusicanqui-producir-pensamiento-cotidiano-pensamiento-indigena> (Accessed: April 26, 2021)

trouble that it produces in us. The latter also implies taking time with what we *see*, even if there is no relation to the thing yet or any guarantee of understanding. To see something, especially something produced by peoples we have learned to categorize as the “Other,” in the search for underlying patterns of cultural and social thought turns very often into an extrapolation. It is a way of projecting what we know well onto a thing to make sense of it, a way of forcing a relationship onto something we do not know by overlooking it. Edward Said writes that we transform the “distant and often threatening Otherness” of the thing “into figures that are relatively familiar” (Said 2003 [1978], 21). This is why Rivera Cusicanqui’s decolonizing project of *Sociología de la Imagen*, the Sociology of the Image, is devoted to thinking about and challenging the ways in which we are accustomed to seeing things. This is a task that involves not only our eyes, but our whole bodies. The decolonial impetus of her project is thus oriented on rooting—*reintegrar*—our way of looking at things in the body, a strategy that demands calling back forgotten ways of approaching things.

As previously examined, perceiving Amazonian Women’s woven creations exclusively as cultural commodities is a very problematic way of forcing an understanding about their *artesanías*. It offers very limited insight into their labor, because it uses the perspective of the commodity to understand the totality of the Amazonian Women’s complex relations to the market. In fact, while offering me advice on this chapter, the anthropologist Corinne Duhalde Ruiz even suggested that there was no point in using the term *artesanía*, as it is already a commodified concept. She argued that my strategy for approaching this chapter was already a form of misrepresenting my co-laborers’ creations. She wrote,

“A suggestion: what you’re looking at are not *artesanías*. It is material culture or everyday objects, or whatever you want... But not *artesanía*.” (Fragment of our WhatsApp chat, September 12, 2019)

She also advised me to read texts that analyze the symbology behind clay objects. However, as I mentioned in the introduction of this chapter, I decided to keep the term *artesanía* to refer to the different fabrics the Amazonian Women weave for several reasons. On the one hand, the term *artesanía* is how all my co-laborers have referred to their creations, including clay pottery. On the other, though the term carries a mostly pejorative connotation, it is important to reflect on how some Amazonian

leaders re-signify this term and negotiate their position as indigenous women, expressive creators, and weavers of life through it.

Corinne's suggestion, however, reminded me of an ethnographic experience she and I had during our stay in the Kichwa territory of Kawsak Sacha, a moment that became an important source of reflections for this chapter, in which my friend's understanding of material culture—objects merely carrying cultural meaning—was confronted with clay presented as a “woven story.”

### **The *Mukawa* as “Woven Story”**

Corinne Duhalde Ruiz is an anthropologist who has worked more than thirty years with Amazonian peoples. She is also very committed to her politics. Her labor as an engaged anthropologist has been oriented towards working at the service of Amazonian communities. She contributed, for example, to co-writing the *Plan de Vida* [Living Plan] for the Shiwiari nationality, a crucial document for indigenous peoples legitimizing their territorial rights vis-à-vis the nation-state. She has also co-organized workshops like the one on “Coloniality” she was supporting when we met in Kawsak Sacha. This political commitment is something she has taken very seriously, and that has pulled her away from pursuing a pure academic job. She is, indeed, someone who is not really interested in writing for the academy only, as she once told me. This aspect of her work makes her a very rare and, in my opinion, a very admirable anthropologist, someone who does not work for the sake of academic knowledge alone and who lives with the different uncertainties of following this path.

She is also very interested in learning with voracious attention the life stories of the peoples she encounters during her visits to the Amazon. In our experiences together, she was always very eager to learn the stories told by the people we spent time with in Kawsak Sacha and the stories behind the objects they carried or produced. One morning, my friend and I were at the house of Carla, a young Kichwa woman and very skillful clay weaver living in the community of Sisa. Carla was showing us the different *mukawas* she had at her house. My friend became very interested in a beautiful *mukawa* with a harpy eagle painted on the inside. She asked Carla what the meaning behind the harpy eagle was, a question that Carla answered by saying simply that she just painted it from her imagination. Despite Carla's short answer, my friend decided to buy the



*mukawa*, enchanted by its drawing, and replied that it is a very rare event to see a harpy eagle in the rainforest and that what “interests her is not the thing (the *mukawa*), but the story behind the thing” (Fieldnotes, November 4, 2018).

At that time, I ignored the motivation behind my friend’s reply—the anthropological hope that the story behind the *mukawa* could reveal another important aspect of the culture of Kichwa peoples. Coincidentally, the week she made that assertion, Nancy Santi, Carla and I were organizing our co-labor workshop on territoriality and *artesanías* in the community of Lorocachi. Carla was chosen by the women from Kawsak Sacha to teach new *mukawa* designs during our workshop, so I had to travel with her in the canoe from Sisa to Lorocachi the same day of our conversation at her house. Like many other conversations begun by my anthropologist friend, I continued the conversation about the *mukawa* in the canoe. Carla replied, again shortly, that she painted her designs from her imagination and, sometimes, out of her *muskuy* [dreams as visions]. The fact that I was doing ethnographic fieldwork for the first time made me a very unskillful questioner, especially in comparison to Corinne. So, I stopped the conversation there and only learnt afterwards that clay and *muskuy* are very closely related to each other (Whitten and Scott Whitten 2008, 180 ff.).

However, this lack of anthropologist formation at that moment proved helpful when trying to learn how to weave clay during our workshop. Instead of asking about the meaning behind the things I was touching, my questions mostly centered on knowing how to work with clay, a material I had never touched before. I had many problems molding the shape of my *mukawa* and preventing the clay from breaking apart. While some women were already doing their second *mukawa*, I was still trying to put my first together. Carla repeated over and over again that I was like a child, and that I needed first to develop my own relationship to the clay and to learn “not to do it the wrong way” (Fieldnotes, November 2, 2018). I learned about other situations when clay breaks or what happens when people do not follow the rules of how to weave clay. A young Kichwa man who was observing us explained to me, for example, that he cannot touch the clay before or during the process of weaving it, because it would break it. Carla also told me that her hair was falling out because she had been using her own hair as a brush to paint the *mukawa*. She explained that Kichwa women should take a piece of hair from their partners or their male children instead (Fieldnotes, November 2, 2018).

At the end of the workshop I finished my “*pilchi mukawa*” with Carla’s help—the most basic *mukawa* form there is to learn. Her advice and the different explanations of what happens when people work with clay the wrong way taught me that to weave a *mukawa* is not just a matter of mastering the technique, but also a matter of getting to know the clay by building a relationship with it.



Image 24. My *Pilchi Mukawa*, November 6, 2018, Community of Lorocachi.



Image 25. Weaving Clay, November 6, 2018, Community of Lorocachi.

I cannot claim that my *Pilchi Mukawa* is proof of me successfully learning how to build a relationship with clay, or that my experience at the workshop was a successful implementation of Rivera Cusicanqui’s call for decolonizing the mind by “rooting our way of looking at things in the body again.” Building a true relationship with clay, like the one that Carla has, would require not just years of practice, but also changing my mindset and stopping my impulse to reframe Carla’s advice about clay in my own terms—like my interpretation that her hair loss was a product of Carla being sick with malaria during her recent pregnancy. However, my participation in the workshop and my lack of “anthropological knowledge” about clay allowed me to approach the *mukawa* with a different predisposition than Corinne. I did not have any option other than to become committed to the material in order to learn how Carla “tells” stories

with clay. As a result of this experience, I learned to distrust the importance of the “stories behind the things.” This is what I wrote in my ethnographic diary the evening after Corinne bought the *mukawa*,

“I think stories and things are the same. The *mukawa* and the act of weaving it are already elements in the act of telling a story. Kichwa women tell stories when molding different forms. And this are not only forms but *woven stories*.” (Fieldnotes, November 4, 2018, my emphasis added)

An important attribute of clay, I learned, is that it is an element that cannot be separated from the story that the woman weaving it is going to tell. There is not a story “behind” the *mukawa*—the *mukawa* is the embodiment of the story the woman was inspired to tell. The *mukawa* itself is a *woven story*. This is why the creations out of clay are not explained by their authors as “meaning only:” they are not a materialization of mental representation (Premauer 2016, 38).<sup>80</sup>

As described by Tim Ingold, understanding material culture—in this case the *mukawa*—as a “realm of discourse, meaning and value,” where “culture is conceived to hover over the material world but not to permeate it,” forcedly separates meaning from things (Ingold 2000, 340). One problem with this approach is that it ends up attaching or imposing meaning onto things, while their materiality remains completely ignored. In the case of Carla’s *mukawa* with the harpy eagle, reducing it to its cultural meaning does not allow us “to see” the story Carla already told by weaving her *mukawa*.

Another important problem with this understanding of material culture, according to Strathern, is that it “is bound up with the very impetus of anthropological study,” which at the same time “derives from Western ways of creating the world” (Strathern 1988, 4). In other words, we recreate the cultural and social world of others in our terms and according to the tools we have at our disposal, like “cultural meaning.” In this process, we fail at even trying “to see” other people’s creations, like the Amazonian Women’s *artesanías*. Until we understand material culture as more than a vessel for carrying cultural meaning, we do not reveal anything about the “Other” but

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<sup>80</sup>Anna Premauer developed an excellent master thesis on clay pottery made by Kichwa women: *Cerámica Kichwa: Cuerpo, Materialidad y Representación* (2016). Her work has been a great reference and inspiration for this chapter, not only because of its careful and thoughtful analysis, but also because she worked with two of the Amazonian women I worked with. I am thankful with Ivette Vallejo for referring me to Premauer’s work.

merely reflect our own preconceptions; we keep othering peoples, their practices, and their own ways of telling their stories in our narratives about them.

### ***Artesanía Intelectual: “The Hand Knows”***

“It is also a recognition that the body has its own ways of knowing.  
Here, in the collective, we use to say that ‘the hand knows’.”  
(Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui, 2019)<sup>81</sup>

My experience with Carla and Corinne taught me that weaving clay is an act of telling a story that cannot be reproduced in abstracted words. What can be reproduced in words are other stories connected to the *mukawa*, stories and lessons from ancestors, stories and experiences about the present, and hopes and desires for the future. Other fabrics made out of feathers and natural or synthetic seeds have a very similar relationship with words and stories. Even if clay is a very important element in the forest—it is the element of *Nunkuli*, the goddess of the soil that also nurtures the *chakra*, whose knowledge needs to be transmitted from older women to younger women (Whitten 1976, 11)—I learned from my co-laborers that other *artesanías* are not mere things “representing” stories or abstract meanings. The material they are made of is crucial at the moment of telling a story.

The stories that *artesanías* tell, then, do not “hover” over their materiality as an abstraction. The materiality of these *artesanías* actually has specific effects on the person who carries them. I learned from my co-laborers, for example, that indigenous male leaders like to buy tiger headbands made with synthetic seeds and wear them at important public events. I also learned that *artesanías* made out of *wayruru* seeds protect people from their enemies, or that many female leaders wear earrings or necklaces made from feathers in order to strengthen their power when speaking or singing at public events. In other words, the Amazonian Women’s *artesanías* made with seeds, clay, feathers, or *chambira* are characterized by their embodied nature and the agency of their materials at important political moments.

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<sup>81</sup> Available from: <https://www.elsaltodiario.com/feminismo-poscolonial/silvia-rivera-cusicanqui-producir-pensamiento-cotidiano-pensamiento-indigena> (Accessed: April 26, 2021)



Image 26. Rosa Gualinga wearing her *Shiwiar* necklace made out of feathers and *wayruru* seeds during the Amazonian Women press conference, September 10, 2018, Puyo.

This embodiment is also characterized by the involvement of the hands in the complex and affective process of weaving *artesanías*. We must not analyze *artesanías* as mere artefacts, without taking into account the hands that produce and relate to them—“nothing makes itself” (Haraway 2016, 58). Indeed, the hands that produce the *artesanías* are of extreme importance for Rivera Cusicanqui, because it is not the head or the abstract intellect but the hands that need to know how to weave *artesanías*. “The hand knows” is thus a reminder that the body knows and that if we want to approach *artesanías* as woven stories, we cannot forget the ways in which the body incorporates knowledge.

This reminder is also very important for thinking about *artesanías* as contemporary woven stories, because it is the body that accumulates lived experience and incorporates knowledge. It is the present body that learns from the past and from other people’s hands in order to relate to the materials to be woven together. It is also the body that feels and learns from personal experiences, has visions and dreams about the places it has been, and fights against extractive occupation. Premauer describes contemporary clay pottery as a way for Amazonian women to negotiate relationships within their communities as contemporary social, political and economic actors (Premauer 2016, 113). Similarly, the Amazonian Women’s *artesanías* are also a way these leaders build relationships *between* the different worlds they inhabit.

*Artesanías* are thus not part of a nearly extinct and mythical indigenous past, left to be studied as indigenous remains or as “ornamental” things (Rivera Cusicanqui 2015, 9). Rather, *artesanías*, as woven stories, are a physical manifestation of what the

Amazonian Women want to express about themselves and their world. This is why they need to be considered in their complexity, in how they incorporate diverse and even contradictory positions: *artesanías* can be inspired by the spirit of *Nunkuli* and by what Amazonian women experience in the everyday; they weave complex relations to a commodified market and are at the same time crucial for Amazonian peoples' knowledge reproduction; they combine natural seeds and synthetic materials in order to tell different stories. This is why Rivera Cusicanqui's adoption of the Aymaran concept of *ch'ixi*—entities and beings that are products of the juxtaposition of opposites and end up becoming one thing and its contrary at the same time (2010b, 69)—is one of the most accurate ways of approaching *artesanías* in their motley [*abigarrado* in Spanish] nature. In fact, the Amazonian Women's *artesanías* are weaved “at the very border of those antagonistic poles” of the capitalist market and the indigenous project of reexisting extractive occupation (Rivera Cusicanqui 2015, 226).

This motley nature of *artesanías* does not mean that they lack a historical analysis of the present. As Rivera Cusicanqui also notes, the *ch'ixi*—in contrast to the idea of “hybridity” used to designate elements that are a fixed outcome of a process of mixture—characterizes entities that do not have a static or stable identity but rather are expressions of “living history,” *historia viva*, “subjected to the game of forces that updates them” (2010b, 6). This means that entities like *artesanías* are in a constant dialectical process of negotiating the different histories they are embedded in, actively rearranging their contradictory elements, always recombining their different worlds. Furthermore, the visual nature of *artesanías* is of political and theoretical importance as it challenges the dominance of the literate world in determining official history (Rivera Cusicanqui 2015, 91 ff.). To consider *artesanías* as bearers of alternative *histories* and theoretical reflection is thus crucial for building a dialogue with the Amazonian Women as epistemic subjects. Especially in the context of a country like Ecuador, with a fragmented vision of its own society and history, *artesanías* are an important means of transmitting particular experiences and stories of how the Amazonian Women have reexisted colonial, capitalist, and extractive occupation.

### **Creating a Partially Connected Dialogue with the *Artesanía Intelectual***



Image 27. Elvia Dagua distributing synthetic *mullus* [seeds] during our co-labor workshop, October 6, 2018, Community of Puerto Santana.

As previously explained, Rivera Cusicanqui's work teaches us that what people express through images is not just an illustration, but evidence of critical interpretations and social narratives about the present (2015, 176). The Amazonian Women's *artesanías* should be understood in the same light, as a means to analyze and theorize their lived experience. To acknowledge this is very important in the context of the history of the Ecuadorian nation-state, characterized by the absence not only of indigenous peoples' own narratives about themselves, but also and especially of indigenous women's own narratives. People within the dominant *mestizo* perspective knew little or nothing about indigenous women throughout the twentieth century, about "what they felt, how they lived or how they have changed" (Prieto 2015, 2).

In the next sections, I adopt Rivera Cusicanqui's *artesanía intelectual*, intellectual handicraft, as a useful concept in order to establish a dialogue with the Amazonian Women's *artesanías* as woven stories. This concept understands *artesanías* as materiality, image, and narrative. At the same time, it offers us another point of departure to analyze certain aspects of Amazonian Women's lives. This point of departure, as Aura Cumes explains when writing about the necessity of indigenous women's analyses of their own reality, is an essential one at the moment of understanding the different ways in which systems of domination operate in particular territories (Cumes 2012, 11). In the case of the Amazonian Women's *artesanías*, their woven stories offer an essential and yet often ignored means through which to access the Amazonian Women's own understanding of their labor and territorial struggle for resistance.



Here, I should stop to note that, in the following section, I do not intend to appropriate my co-laborers' *artesanías* by, for example, "analyzing" and "vindicating" their thoughts in my own terms. Nor do I want to use *artesanía intelectual* as a strategy to claim for myself the ability "to see well" (Haraway 1988, 585), or write from the standpoint of the Amazonian Women. It is very easy to fall into this tendency by, for example, reproducing the asymmetry between academic knowledge—my academic analysis—and everyday knowledge—*artesanías* as objects to be analyzed. The concept of the *artesanía intelectual*, however, provides a means to develop a "partially connected dialogue" with the Amazonian Women's *artesanías*. This dialogue is interested in exploring two important and interlinked aspects of my co-laborers' lives: their labor and their territorial struggle for resistance. For this it becomes important, as previously shown, to put a limit to our own interpretations about what *artesanías* are, and to stop approaching them as vessels for abstract meanings that we, as academics, need to "uncover." As the concept *artesanía intelectual* discloses, the *artesanía* is itself an intellectual entity that already tells a woven story.

I will now offer a partially connected dialogue with two examples of *artesanía intelectual* weaved by my co-laborers: the *Mujer Mukawa* by Nancy Santi and the *Araña Tejedora* by Elvia Dagua. This partially connected dialogue continues real-time dialogues I had with these two Amazonian leaders about two *artesanías*. The partiality of this dialogue resides in the fact that the nature of this dissertation—as an academic document composed of ethnographic experiences narrated in an analytical way (Strathern 1999, 6)—is not able to establish a "real" dialogue with my Amazonian co-laborers at this point in time. There are two important reasons for this assertion.

First, even if my relationship with some members from the Amazonian Women continues in terms of our political allyship and friendship, the content of what I will present next is not the product of a real dialogue I had with my co-laborers in real time. Rather, the dialogue to be presented is, so to speak, an extension of real dialogues I had with them while visiting Ecuador. This extension of real dialogues departs from my own analysis and speculation inspired by how our co-labor changed me and transformed my analysis about their territorial struggles.

Second, the onto-epistemic differences and asymmetries between Amazonian practices of knowledge production—like the ones reproduced by *artesanías*—and Western academic practices of knowledge production—that this dissertation is still required to follow in order to count as legitimate academic knowledge—pose very



serious obstacles to a “real dialogue.” Even if I were to write this dissertation physically near my co-laborers, the impossibility of real dialogue lies in the fact that I must reproduce our exchanges in a social sciences dissertation, which is a document that necessarily must be written by a single author. This means that the Amazonian Women’s voices and the stories weaved in their *artesanías* can only be reproduced, translated, and interpreted through my voice.

Despite these challenges, the following partially connected dialogue is not superfluous or without any important political consequences. It is a necessary reflection on how *artesanía intelectual* can challenge our established assumptions about the Amazonian Women’s reproductive labor and territorial struggle for resistance.

### **Labor and the *Mujer Mucawa***

As presented in Chapter Three of this dissertation, debates in Latin America about the reproduction of life teach us that we cannot understand any political struggle if we separate it from those practices that keep the struggle alive. Similarly, my co-labor with Amazonian leaders has taught me how the reproduction of human and non-human life is at the center of their territorial struggle. Nevertheless, their capacity to reproduce life in conditions marked by occupation—the threat of being politically occupied, as well as the concrete occupation of extractive companies—is not an example of resilience. Rather, it demonstrates how the Amazonian Women continue to reproduce their forms of living, at the same time as they confront and resist extractive projects. Here, it becomes necessary to “slow down” our thinking and challenge our mental “habits” (Stengers 2005, 185), especially our feminist “habits” in their totalizing key, when evoking the word “reproduction.” This is when a partially connected dialogue with Nancy Santi’s *Mujer Mukawa* becomes necessary

While many forms of reproductive labor are still unpaid or underpaid in the capitalist exchange market (Federici 2004, Preface), different conversations with the Amazonian Women have shown me that they value their everyday reproductive labor practices highly. Moreover, even if they create relationships with the monetarized market by selling their *artesanías*, the main way the Amazonian Women sustain their families is through their unpaid reproductive labor—like tending to their *chakras*,

taking care of their children, and preparing food. As the Shuar leader Catalina Chumbi describes,

“Day by day we, women, work carrying our children, going to our *chakra* in the morning, despite the sun that burns us. [...] Money cannot be eaten, money cannot be made into soup and eaten. Rather it is the products that indigenous women labor, which we sell in the market and use to feed our children day by day. [...] For this reason, comrades of the [indigenous] nationalities, comrades of Pastaza, comrades of the *colonos* who live in this province: you have to support us! Don’t tell us: ‘Those women, the ones who are shouting on the streets, are lazy.’” (Public speech during the Amazonian Women’s march, March 8, 2016, Puyo)

However, my co-labor with Amazonian leaders also taught me that what they mean by “labor,” *trabajo*, does not necessarily correspond with my understanding of labor, even when we include reproductive practices under this term. Specifically, my conversations with Nancy Santi about the *Mujer Mukawa* and stories that this *artesanía* weaves together, challenged my understanding and assumptions about the Amazonian Women’s labor.



Image 28. *Mujer Mukawa*, November 6, 2018, Community of Lorocachi.

The *Mujer Mukawa* is a woven story about a woman that is sustaining a *mukawa* with her arms and her head. Nevertheless, if the observer takes a closer look at the *mukawa* from above, the women’s head becomes the *mukawa* itself and is the vessel that will carry the vital fluids to be shared. This means that this *mukawa*, beyond being a metaphor or a symbol representing Amazonian women’s lives, tells a story about the *Mujer Mukawa* every time it carries the *chicha*, water, or food that the Amazonian woman who uses it produces and shares with her family.

According to Santi, the *Mujer Mukawa* is a very important *mukawa* for her and her people. For this leader, the importance of this *mukawa* lies in the fact that it tells the story of a woman who is always very busy, who has a lot of work on her shoulders, who sustains a lot of weight. This woven story connects to other Kichwa women's and to Santi's understanding of labor in a unique way. She told me the following, after we finished our co-labor workshop in Lorocachi:

"It's like we have a *mukawa* full of water, or *chicha*, or food on top of us. It means that we are busy every day, with work. [...]. It's like we have a weight on us, of all the things we have to do every day. My mommy says that only dead we are going to stop doing things as women... The daily things. That *mukawa* is very important for us." (Interview, November 6, 2018, Community of Lorocachi)

Santi, like the *Mujer Mukawa*, is a very hard-working woman. My stay in the territory of Kawsak Sacha allowed me to witness the huge amount of work that Santi carries on her shoulders. Santi masterfully combines her labor as a Kichwa woman—cultivating her large *chakra*, preparing food for her family, taking care of a one-year-old baby, preparing *chicha* for communitarian assemblies—with her duty as the *Kuraka* of her Kichwa *pueblo*. While her labor keeps her busy at home, the latter permeates all of her communitarian relations and keeps her busy every time she organizes an assembly, or when she travels to the city of Puyo in order to bring the claims of the community to the different authorities. During our conversations, Santi often expressed how these two full-time responsibilities are not easy to combine:

"Yes, now I'm seeing that leading a *pueblo* as a *Kuraka*, as a woman, is not easy, it has been more difficult than anything else. First, a woman has to be responsible with her family, with her children, with her community, and with her people. That has been difficult for me, because I have my children and my husband who sometimes does not understand that I have to spend time here in the city and he has to spend time in the community. Because the people [from the community] are always watching. Or if we [as leaders] are absent, the couple always asks for us. So it is difficult. My children inside [in the community] go to elementary school, and here [the city of Puyo] I have two children who are in high school. So I have to make an effort to be inside with my family, with the people, and also here with my children. I also need to do political administrative tasks in the city." (Interview, September 10, 2018, Puyo)

In fact, even though her husband supported her decision to accept becoming Kawsak Sacha's *Kuraka*, Santi spoke with me about how difficult it was for her

husband to see her becoming a female leader years ago. When she started her political post as President of Kawsak Sacha's Women's Association, her husband and her community criticized her heavily. She explained,

“First of all, I had a lot of difficulties when I started to work as president of the Women's Association. For example, my husband didn't like it, there was criticism, gossip, for example, jealousy. Every time, after I came back from some workshop or meeting, he felt bad, because others said that women are like this and like. Gossip, you know.” (Interview by Lorena van Bunningen y Corinne Duhalde Ruiz, November 1, 2018, Community of Sisa)

Like Santi, my other Amazonian co-laborers criticize the little or non-existent support they receive from their partners when they take on any form of leadership position. While Santi lives with her partner and has managed to challenge his lack of support for her political leadership, Amazonian female leaders like Dagua, Gualinga, Aranda, and Castillo have separated themselves completely from their partners or have an independent life. Castillo, in many speeches, strongly criticizes men's lack of support. Moreover, she characterizes the amount of work that falls on the shoulders of the Amazonian Women when they become leaders as a consequence of men's *machismo*. In one speech, she said,

“They have been sexist all their lives, because when a woman wanted to be in charge they would say: ‘she is lazing around, throwing her children away.’ Don't men have hands to cook? Men are more complete, because they do not lose blood, we do lose blood to give birth to our children. That's why they are complete, [they have] hands, pure air, and breath! Only skirts are what men don't put on. That's why I say that they have every right to wash and do everything. Women also have the right to rest, not only men!” (Zoila Castillo, statement at the university seminar “Alternatives to Development,” February 21, 2019, Universidad Andina Simón Bolívar in Quito)

However, when I asked Santi why she did not propose that her husband should share her reproductive labor, implying that she was taking on two “full-time jobs,” this leader showed strong opposition to my suggestion. She said it was impossible for her to stop doing certain activities, like preparing *chicha* or cultivating her *chakra*, because she is a “Kichwa woman” (Fieldnotes, November 9, 2018). Her assertion communicated, contrary to any external interpretations of her situation as an example of a “relation of domination” of “men” over “women” (Strathern 1988, 13ff.), that there is another factor that makes Santi and the *Mujer Mukawa* sustain their labor “on their

shoulders.” This does not mean that Santi did not characterize certain actions and attitudes from her husband as violent, or that she does not negotiate and actually share some reproductive activities with him. The stories she told me, after we talked about the *Mujer Mucawa*, revealed that she already left her previous partner because of his violent actions, and that she also threatened her current husband with leaving him if he does not support her (Fieldnotes, November 9, 2018). What her reluctance to my suggestion revealed is that Kichwa women have a particular way of relating to their labor and, thus, to the reproduction of life. This reminded me of the importance of slowing down my universalizing feminist intuitions and keeping in mind that being a “Kichwa woman” is not the same as being a “woman” in the universal sense (Espinosa Miñoso, Gómez Correal and Ochoa Muñoz 2014, 14).

The question now is: what is Santi’s particular relation to her labor? What is that “something else” that makes Santi and the *Mujer Mukawa* want to take this labor “on their shoulders?” Here, it becomes important to ask the *Mujer Mukawa* why she tells the story of a woman who “sustains” a *mucawa* and her own head at the same time.

I speculate that the *Mujer Mukawa*’s response is the following: she sustains the *mukawa* and her head at the same time, not exactly because they “are the same,” but because the hands that mold the *mukawa* are also molding the woman who weaves the *mukawa*. The hands that weave clay and tell a story are the hands that labor the land, mix *chicha* in water, and prepare food for a family. It is these working hands that can mold Kichwa women into *sinchi warmikuna*, strong women, and gives them the strength and power to tell their own story and even become political leaders. In other words, sustaining the reproductive labor “on their shoulders,” means for Kichwa women becoming able to sustain their own lives, their own heads on their shoulders, and the lives of their families and their people:

“So I admire them [women]. They are brave, powerful, they carry a lot on their shoulders. Look how brave we, women, are! We are used to carry a basket of yucca that is, oh [heavy]! That’s how we work inside [in the rainforest], we carry our baskets that we call ‘*puchu*.’ We carry them with food and *chicha*. When men do it, they realize how much weight we women have to carry. And sometimes with our bellies, when we are pregnant, we carry like this. You should admire us!” (Zoila Castillo, statement at the international congress “Bodies, Territories and Dispossession: Life under Threat,” October 16, 2018, Universidad Andina Simón Bolívar in Quito)

As Anna Premauer notes, there is a vital link between the act of molding clay and the ways in which Amazonian women mold and transform their lives through their everyday labor (2016, 15). Inspired by Norman Whitten and Dorothea Scott Whitten's work, Premauer underlines the importance of certain everyday practices in the lives of women like Santi and Castillo—with whom the author worked as well—especially those practices that make Amazonian women feel that they have their lives “in their own hands” (Ibid., 127). This is probably why Santi identifies with the woven story of the *Mujer Mukawa*; it tells the story of a hard-working woman who, despite carrying a lot of weight on her shoulders, is strong enough to sustain her own life and the lives of her family.

This tells us that the way Kichwa women relate to their own reproductive labor strongly contrasts with the way we—as in my case—have learned to understand our own reproductive labor throughout our lives: as labor that happened behind the walls of our mother's and grandmother's houses, labor that, as critical feminism has taught me, has historically been the first activity with our female bodies to be appropriated through capitalism's primitive accumulation (Federici 2004, 15). Moreover, the *Mujer Mukawa* tells a story that cannot be really understood if we categorize reproductive labor according to the division between culture and nature. According to this divide, the reproduction of life is a repetitive action, part of the natural world, and follows the “natural order” of things. By contrast, the *Mujer Mukawa* shapes herself and the human and non-human world that surrounds her simultaneously. She also sustains her life and the life of others she cares for with the wisdom and creativity of her hands. This is at the core of understanding Kichwa women's labor as embodied and non-alienated labor (Guzmán 1997, 144).

Of course, Kichwa women's labor cannot and should not be idealized. As the *Mujer Mukawa* herself tells us, it is hard to take these burdens on your shoulders. The woven story she tells contains ambiguity. This ambiguity, as previously mentioned, also marks the way the Amazonian Women negotiate their role as partners, care-givers, and members of their communities. However, as Blanca Muratorio reminds us, Kichwa women do not see their labor as something that, as such, “enslaves” them or “oppresses” them (Muratorio 2000, 246). Kichwa women, as well as other Amazonian women like the Waorani, Shuar, Achuar, Shiwiar, and Sapara, see their labor as a connecting force that allows them to become strong with-the-other. As the Waorani female leader Alicia Cahuilla shared during the 2016 Amazonian Women's march in Puyo, the Amazonian

Women are as strong as “working ants,” because even if the work is hard, they have the power to defend together what they care for,

“It is the song of our women, of our grandmothers, who sang the message of each spirit that inhabits the rainforest. These are the songs that our ancestors left us. Because all indigenous women, Kichwa, Shuar, and other [indigenous] nationalities, are working women. They work like ants. That characterizes us, women, the double work we do. We take care of our *wawas* [children], we cook, we make *chicha*, we collect yucca, we collect ancestral medicine. So, this is a song that talks about working ants, talk about us.” (Public speech during the Amazonian Women’s march, March 8, 2016, Puyo)

### **Reproductive Labor as Affective Labor**

The connective force of reproductive labor also shapes the Amazonian Women’s affective relations. My conversations with Santi especially showed me that she does not labor just for the sake of being seen by others as a strong woman or for the sake of accumulating political support from the community. Rather, as Santi expressed several times, her reproductive labor is an act of love. In opposition to the patriarchal ethos that defines “female love” as the capacity to “sacrifice yourself” for others (Federici 2013, 38), Santi’s understanding of love is deeply relational and transforms certain tasks into very satisfying activities. She described how doing certain everyday activities connects her not only to the people she sustains, but also to the earth that keeps the clay and grows the *yuca* [manioc]. Santi’s labor is, in fact, an act of loving the earth that nurtures her and the people in Kawsak Sacha,

“It gives you food, when you cultivate, when you love the land. So, for me, having my house clean around my *wasipunku* [parcel of land], my garden, my crops, it is like being connected with everyone, with nature, with plants, with my production. So, for me, you have to love the land like you love yourself. That’s why I like to treat the land well. For example, I don’t like to mistreat it by throwing away pollution, or plastic bags in the river. Instead I burn them. So I don’t like to throw away the things that I bring from the city, things that pollute, because I love the land. I like to have my garden clean, well maintained, my house too. Because that land, that *Pachamama*, is like a mother that gives us everything. So, we have to love her, we must not harm her.” (Interview, November 1, 2018, Community of Sisa)

As Santi’s words show, Amazonian women’s labor is a very affective type of labor. Even the way in which she explains how she cultivates the earth and the earth

gives her family what they need to live is expressed in terms of “love,” showing the radical affectivity behind reproductive practices in the rainforest. Here, affects should be contrasted to emotions. In fact, my approach takes Encarnación Gutiérrez-Rodríguez’ analysis on “affects” as reference, who challenges and expands the significance of reproductive labor in terms of “emotional labor.” According to the author, while emotions like sadness, fear, and happiness can be ordered under cognitive frameworks through which the person who feels them can grant them “meaning” and “value” in their life, affects are diffuse and unstructured and deeply relational at the same time:

“Affects are energies that derive from encounters, not always conceivable in language, but sensed bodily. While emotions address the cognitive level of personal feelings, affects engage with often “unspecified” energies, linked to our relational and social character as human beings.” (Gutiérrez-Rodríguez 2011)

Here it is important to mention that Gutiérrez-Rodríguez’s contribution to analyses on affects is characterized by not excluding negative affects (or “disaffects”), product of how humans experience social hierarchies and reproduce exclusionary relations. In this section, however, I only adopt one aspect of her analysis on affects to address the political dimension of reproductive labor as affective labor that is not repetitive, but has the potential of nourishing the anti-extractive struggle. This, of course, does not exclude that the Amazonian Women’s reproductive labor is not full of ambivalences, disaffections and hierarchical relations.

Gutiérrez-Rodríguez’s understanding of affects as relational can also, according to the author, become a source of political energy in contexts marked by interconnectedness and interdependence (Ibid.). In the case of the Amazonian Women, the different practices that reproduce life—practices that might look very simple and repetitive such as cleaning the *wasipunku* or the *chakra*—are marked by strong affective energies that emphasize the relation between the person who does the activity and what surrounds her. Moreover, this “reinstatement” of the relation happens not as a process external to the body, but as an activation of that part of the relation that the body carries in itself, because affective relations are “intra-relations” (de la Cadena 2015, 32). Cleaning the *wasipunku* and the *chakra* is taking care of the earth that is inside of you, because it nurtured you and your family. Reproductive labor in the



rainforest thus does not continue survival by repeating certain practices crucial for keeping the body alive, but rather enables life by reinstating the relations that connect and nurture human and non-human life.

The political potential of affective labor in the Amazon, then, is rooted in how, when extractive occupation threatens the Amazonian Women's territory, women like Santi do not only see their material means for survival in danger—everything that makes life livable, enjoyable, pleasant, and worth living is in danger. Reproductive labor, as labor embedded in radical affectivity, moves the Amazonian Women to defend their territory with everything they have at their disposal:

“So, you follow your path with your heart, with your mind. You fight to defend what our ancestors have left.” (Elvia Dagua, interview, August 23, 2017, Puyo)

“Yes, we are going to defend, with our teeth, with our nails, we will defend. This is our truth.” (Zoila Castillo, statement at the International Congress “Bodies, Territories and Dispossession: Life under Threat,” October 16, 2018, Universidad Andina Simón Bolívar in Quito)

### **Anti-Extractive Resistance and the *Araña Tejedora***

What does this understanding of labor tell us about the Amazonian Women's territorial struggle? How does their labor connect to how the Amazonian Women defend their territory from extractive occupation? And what type of politics does this relation between reproductive labor and territorial struggle reveal?

The Amazonian Women's labor also sustains, in very concrete ways, their struggle. Similar to Santi, who directs her reproductive labor towards providing for her family while fulfilling her role as *Kuraka* of Kawsak Sacha, the Amazonian Women who have migrated to the cities have found their own ways of sustaining for their families while also fulfilling their political responsibilities. This is the case of Amazonian women like Dagua, Gualinga and Castillo who have found in the production of *artesanías* an important source of income to provide for their families and sustain themselves in their struggle against extractive occupation. However, in order to understand how the Amazonian Women's labor sustains their struggle, it is necessary to engage in a partially connected dialogue with the *Araña Tejedora*.



Image 29. Elvia Dagua, weaving *artesanías* at her house, August 27, 2017, Madre Tierra district.

The *Araña Tejedora* bracelet appeared at the very beginning of my co-labor relation with Elvia Dagua. This means that I completely ignored the woven story that the *Araña Tejedora* had to tell at the moment of our first encounter. In fact, I was not even interested in taking a photograph of this *artesanía*.

As mentioned in the Introduction to this dissertation, the *Araña Tejedora* tells a story about a spider that works all the time to build her web—“It is a spider that weaves 24 hours of the day” (Elvia Dagua, interview, August 27, 2017, Madre Tierra district). Dagua told the woven story of this *artesanía* just after we came back from our visit to the Shuar community of Tzutzuin. Tzutzuin is a community located in the Cordillera del Condor, very close to the mega-mining project *Mirador*. One year before our visit, Tzutzuin and the community of Nankintz experienced one of the most violent episodes in the recent history of these Shuar communities. In December 2016, the state sent the military to evict Shuar peoples from their territory in order to install the workers’ mining camp. The houses in Nankintz were completely removed, displacing the Shuar peoples to other Shuar communities, and Tzutzuin was temporally occupied by the military. This violent occupation left behind irreparable damage to this Shuar community, who was forced to see how *Mirador* transformed part of their territory into an open-pit copper mine.



Image 30. Nankintz turned into a mining camp and owned by the Chinese company Ecuacorriente, August 25, 2017, community of Nankintz.

Dagua organized our visit to Tzuntzuin with another representative from the organization CONFENIAE to bring some food and donations, and to show support to the Shuar peoples who have been displaced from their territory. Our journey to Tzuntzuin happened right after I interviewed Dagua for the first time. It also marked the initial phase of my research stay and introduced me to the various difficulties that Amazonian leaders encounter when fulfilling their organizational duties: the challenge of convincing the first bus driver to bring our load of donations, the struggle of carrying the numerous bags of food and donations while walking on the highway during the night, and the fear of getting lost on our way to Tzuntzuin. In the case of Dagua, she was also dealing with the difficulty of how to organize herself in such a way that she could leave her two younger kids at home.

During our journey to Tzuntzuin, I had the opportunity to ask Dagua how she organizes her life as CONFENIAE's Spokeswoman for Women and Family Issues, given that she does not earn a salary as an indigenous leader. My co-laborer told me that her *artesanías* have become a crucial source of income, especially since she left her first partner more than twenty years ago and was faced with raising her children by herself (Fieldnotes, August 26, 2017). Nowadays, Dagua weaves her *artesanías* after finishing all of her political responsibilities, i.e. in the evening after she puts her youngest kid to bed, or on her way to her political activities, i.e. during her bus rides. This is the reason why Dagua and other women like Gualinga and Castillo have a relation of gratitude to their *artesanías*. While *artesanías* allows them to travel between different worlds—for example, by selling their *artesanías* they are able to afford bus tickets to cities like Quito and pay for other costs related to their political travels—it also enables them to provide for their families. The practice of weaving *artesanías* is

thus a practice that lets the Amazonian Women weave their own webs of sustenance when they become leaders,

“So, this sustains us, me most of all. This *artesanía* sustains me during the day, as you could see. I’m at events, workshops, meetings, visits, but at night, I get to work, I weave my *artesanías* until 11 at night, 12 at night. Sometimes my husband gets angry, ‘Why don’t you sleep?!’ he says. And I reply: ‘Are you giving me enough to eat, to walk with my organization, where I have been elected?’ Sometimes, during the marches, I sell my *artesanías*. That’s how I sustain my life, how I feed my children. [...] We don’t have [money], Rosa is the same, she doesn’t have a salary, but she has her *artesanías*, we live with that. It is the sustenance of our organization, the sustenance of our struggle. We are the Amazonian Women who fight for our forest, against extractivism, against mining. So we are sustaining with that.” (Zoila Castillo, statement at the International Congress “Bodies, Territories and Dispossession: Life under Threat,” October 16, 2018, Universidad Andina Simón Bolívar in Quito)

“I sell my *artesanías*. I’m in the political struggle thanks to my *artesanía*. I’m not earning money month by month, no. I’m dedicating myself to that. I walk with the *compañera* [Zoila Castillo]. Sometimes the *compañera* says, ‘come to sell,’ then I come.” (Rosa Gualinga, *ibid.*)

The woven story of the *Araña Tejedora* thus describes the story of its author, Dagua, but also Castillo’s and Gualinga’s. It tells us how they weave their own spider-webs in order to sustain their families and their political responsibilities as indigenous leaders. Furthermore, as Castillo’s words reveal, the *artesanía* sustains their organization and the struggle itself. Even as these stories have been largely ignored when interpreting indigenous politics and territorial defense, as mentioned in the Introduction to this dissertation, the *Araña Tejedora* describes in an imagistic way the connections between the Amazonian Women’s everyday practices that reproduce life and the political features of their territorial struggle.

### **The Amazonian Women Weaving Resistance**

Throughout this chapter, I have shown how the Amazonian Women’s *artesanías* challenge our assumptions about what we think they are: folkloric commodities, cultural objects, or artifacts separated from their authors’ intentions and stories. I have shown how my co-labor relationship with members of the Amazonian Women revealed the epistemic character of *artesanías*, whose weaving and materiality

communicate important aspects of these women's lives, labor, and territorial struggle. The epistemic dimensions of *artesanías* are, nevertheless, not a product of what their "symbolology" communicates, as if there were a separation between the thing and its meaning. Rather, *artesanías* are woven stories themselves, whose materiality is crucial at the moment of telling a story.

*Artesanías* are also relational artifacts, in that they are composed of relations—e.g. a person cannot weave a *mukawa* without having developed a relationship with clay—and facilitate relations—e.g. the Amazonian Women create relations to their communities, the cities, and even the international market through *artesanías*. The relational character of *artesanías*, interestingly, reveals their motley nature, as it offers the opportunity to track the different ways in which they incorporate diverse and even contradictory positions. *Artesanías* can be inspired by the spirit of *Nunkuli* and by what leaders like Zoila Castillo watch on television; they weave complex relations to a commodified market and are at the same time crucial for Amazonian peoples' knowledge reproduction; they combine natural seeds but also synthetic materials in order to tell Amazonian women's personal stories.

The relational qualities of *artesanías* are also capable of generating a sequence of effects upon the person who weaves them and the people with whom they come into contact. In the case of leaders like Nancy Santi, we saw how the *Mujer Mukawa* tells the story of a hard-working woman, but the act of weaving clay itself also molds the weaver into a hard-working woman, whose strength can be a source of political power and leadership. In my case, my own encounter with *artesanías* had the effect of transforming my understanding of the Amazonian Women's organizing and of inspiring a dialogue with *artesanías* as intellectual entities with the power to communicate knowledge. The *Araña Tejedora* bracelet even inspired the concept of *rexistance* as an analytical category for this dissertation.

The woven story that the *Araña Tejedora* tells is not detached from its author's biography. Its story describes Dagua and other Amazonian leaders like Castillo and Gualinga who, spider-like themselves, relentlessly weave their *artesanías* in the evening, on bus rides, or while attending conferences, workshops, and political events. This in turn allows them to weave anti-extractive *rexistance* as indigenous leaders while also providing for their families.

The story of *rexistance*, when told by Dagua, Castillo and Gualinga as *Arañas Tejedoras*, is thus the story of the connections between the Amazonian Women's

everyday practices of living and the political aspects of their struggle. These connections, however, do not happen coincidentally or arbitrarily, but rather are carefully designed and weaved by the Amazonian leaders the same way as they design their *artesanías*. The purpose behind it is to make everyday practices, like weaving *artesanías* and cultivating the forest, visible. At the same time, the public display of certain practices, apparently separate from their territorial struggle but in actuality crucial for its sustenance, is the Amazonian Women's distinctive feature that characterizes their own ways of doing politics.

As mentioned in Chapter Three, *rexistence* is an ontological design characterized by the Amazonian Women's ability to build global connections when translating the complex networks of life in the Amazon into their proposals and political strategies. According to this understanding of *rexistence*, the act of weaving is not only an instrumental practice in producing their *artesanías*, but a world-making practice—or as Donna Haraway notes “weaving is a [...] relational worlding” practice (Haraway 2016, 96)—that shapes the politics underlying the Amazonian Women's territorial defense. In the next chapter, I show how the *act* and *art* of weaving relations between the human and non-human worlds, the city and the forest, the seen and unseen, is at the center of the Amazonian Women's political proposals and public discourse vis-à-vis the state. Taking their proposal to declare the Amazon a “Living Forest” as a point of departure, I show how this document is not just a rhetorical artifact. It literally grows out of practices like cultivating the land, sharing dreams in the mornings, or singing “with a purpose” that constantly recognize, relate to and even make the forest into a living entity.

## Chapter Five – Decolonizing the Anti-Extractive Struggle: The Amazonian Women’s Practices of Forest-Making

### Introduction

One of the biggest lessons I learned from the co-labor workshops on territoriality and *artesanías* concerned the necessity of alternative ways of “talking” about territorial defense. Amazonian female leaders have developed the ability to talk about their territory in a plurality of ways. This ability is not product of them knowing their territory better than their own people. Rather, it is related to how they, as indigenous leaders, are constantly traveling between different worlds and carrying the voices of their community basis to the city. It was very common, for instance, to hear the word “*territorio*” during their political speeches, a word that is deployed in order to communicate with outsiders at the universities, state institutions, and international fora what it is what they defend. “*Territorio*,” here, is most of the times used as a wide-ranging word to refer to the complex affective relations in the rainforest that makes life possible. This description resists other people’s views that reduce or misinterpret the Amazonian Women’s territorial struggle in terms of just wanting to preserve “a plot of land” in order to survive, as the following speech shows:

“Why are we defending? Until now indigenous peoples have had no protection, that is why we are telling the national government to respect those territories that are sacred to us. Because our life is there, for future generations that we want to live. To the world, we are telling that the Waorani people and other [indigenous] nationalities still have territory. [...] We have our guardian birds, eagles, condor. That is important for us, that is why we want you to hold hands with us and support us so that the Yasuní forest doesn’t die.” (Alicia Cahuilla, speech during the public launch of Sarayaku’s *Kawsak Sacha* proposal, July 28, 2018, Quito)

When Amazonian leaders find themselves in their communities, they also talk about their territories with their families and community members and about the importance of defending them against extractive occupation. However, the way of talking about territorial concerns requires a different “stage” than the one offered in the cities where the Amazonian Women give their talks, a stage mostly composed by the invited speaker and the urban listeners. In a very subtle and unexpected way, the act of

weaving *artesanías* during our co-labor workshops offered the perfect space for fruitful conversations about territorial concerns.

During our co-labor workshops, most Amazonian female leaders would start with a short salutatory introduction in order to move right away to the *artesanías* workshop. Very often I asked myself if they decided to talk about extractivism and territorial defense at the end of the workshop or if they even decided not to talk about it at all. After a while, I realized that the “talking” was happening at the same time that the collective weaving of *artesanías*. The workshop with Zoila Castillo in the Kichwa community of Teresa Mama taught me, for example, that weaving *artesanías* is an activity that facilitates more intimate spaces to talk with the workshop participants about the importance of protecting their territory and about the possible negative impacts that extractive activities could generate in their communities. As Castillo taught us how to weave new *artesanía* designs, these intimate spaces were woven together. This showed me the need for alternative pedagogies than the ones we know—like the expert-community exchange—to talk about territorial defense. Alternative pedagogies like this one allow and incite other ways of being, feeling, doing, thinking, looking, listening and knowing, as Catherine Walsh describes when writing about decolonial pedagogies (Walsh 2013, 28). Designed and proposed by my Amazonian co-laborers, the pedagogy of weaving *artesanías* created intimate spaces ideal for talking about the feelings, desires, and fears involved in their territorial defense.

These intimate spaces were very important during the co-labor workshop with Salomé Aranda in the Kichwa territory of Villano. Here, the presence of the oil company AGIP has not only generated visible socio-environmental impacts, such as the contamination of the soil that no longer allows certain crops to ripe on the trees, or the pollution of the water that has generated many skin diseases and cancer in bodies that relate to the river on a daily basis. The company has also fragmented communitarian relations by introducing individualistic forms of negotiation. AGIP, besides being the first employer for Kichwa men—even if for precarious, short-term jobs—, has also been in charge of providing western medicine kits, health promoters, school supplies, and other minor compensations. This has generated the territorial fragmentation and parceling of communal land into private plots of land, where each family individually seeks to access its own benefit vis-à-vis the oil company (Barrera Arroba 2014 in García-Torres 2017, 70). While these “benefits,” which Salomé Aranda describes as *migajas* [scrums], have not really turned into community hospitals, high

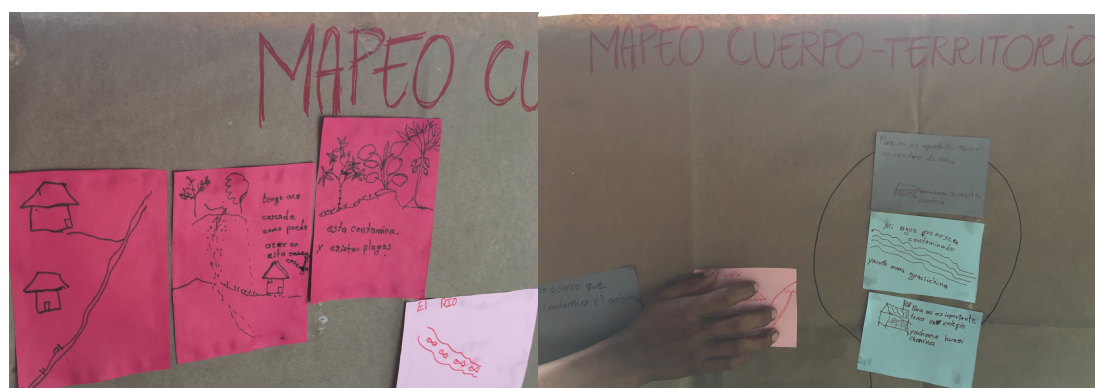


schools, or long-term jobs, they have managed to occupy communitarian and territorial relations.

Furthermore, my constant exchange with Aranda showed me how her own relation, as an anti-extractive activist, with her community and family members was marked by their constant fear of being “punished” by the company if they “speak out” against the negative impacts derived from oil extraction. Occupation worked, in this case, by using fear and blackmail against Aranda and her closest ones in order to stop any attempt of exchanging experiences and feelings related to oil extraction.

However, since early 2018 some community members—especially women—have showed that they are tired of the oil company’s lack of accountability and have started to denounce how AGIP’s presence has impacted their lives—“[W]e have enough from the company! I don’t know what those who work there think, but I don’t have anything [from AGIP], only damages!” (Kichwa woman from Villano, statement during the body-territory mapping, October 23, 2018, Community of Tarapoto). On March 8, 2018, Aranda and a group of brave Kichwa women from Villano joined the march organized by the Amazonian Women’s network against the company’s intention of extending its oil-drilling operations to the Onglan, Moretecocha and Jimpikit fields.<sup>82</sup>

It is in this particular context that the intimate space woven together during the *artesanías* workshop not only motivated its participants and Aranda to share fears and feelings related to extractive occupation. It also revealed how communitarian relations of trust were carefully re-woven, thus strengthening the ties necessary for confronting the extreme violence exerted by AGIP. At the same time these intimate spaces gave us all the feeling that these are the kind of spaces that extractivism cannot occupy.



<sup>82</sup> Available from: <https://amwt.ch/4274> (Accessed: April 28, 2021)

Image 31. Kichwa women from Villano sharing the negative impacts caused by oil extraction during the body-territory mapping, co-labor workshop on territoriality and *artesanías*, October 23, 2018, Community of Tarapoto.

This chapter focuses precisely on the Amazonian Women's art of weaving relations for the anti-extractive struggle. Like their ability to weave *artesanías* to sustain their work as political leaders, as examined in the previous chapter, their ability to weave other type of connections is at the center of their territorial strategies and politics against extractive occupation. In the case of our co-labor workshops, their ability to weave intimate spaces for talking about territorial concerns was accompanied by the organizational activities required to put together such a community gathering—e.g. letting all community members know about the workshop, organizing food, transportation, and recreational closure activities. These organizational practices are related to Amazonian female leaders' awareness about the importance of reactivating and strengthening the affective relations within their community members. In fact, these are the affective relations that mobilize hundreds of families when extractive firms, in compliance with the state, seek to enter their territories without previous consultation. Furthermore, as my ethnographic co-labor with the Amazonian Women shows how behind every declaration, every public speech, and protest there is a plurality of relations that sustain their struggle.

The Amazonian Women's thinking and politics cannot thus be separated from the complex "*tramas comunales*" [communal entanglements] that organize and structure everyday life in their communities (Tzul Tzul 2018a, 26ff.). They are exemplified, for instance, by the organization of *minkas* to collectively facilitate communal life, and by other activities that require collective action like the organizing of community gatherings and celebrations. These activities are not separated from indigenous politics, according to Gladys Tzul Tzul. On the contrary, it is the same vitality and ability that characterize the organization of everyday communal life that is translated into political rebellions (Ibid.). In the case of the Amazonian leaders I co-labored with, these entanglements of life are also composed by affective relations between the human and non-human life in the forest. Affective relations in the forest are in fact present in the Amazonian Women's descriptions about their territory as a "sacred space where life takes place," as Alicia Cahuilla expressed in the quote above. Moreover, these affective relations not only take place in the community, but also

nurture in a plurality of ways the Amazonian Women's strategies and imaginaries when developing their proposals and their public discourse vis-à-vis the state.

In the following pages, I examine how affective relations between human and non-human life in the forest nourish the Amazonian Women's political discourse, imaginaries, and strategies against extractive occupation. I begin by exploring their proposal to declare the Amazon *Kawsak Sacha*, which was publicly presented to the Ecuadorian National Assembly in 2013. This proposal weaves together a variety of "discourses"—including the discourse of indigenous autonomy and territoriality, along with environmentalist and ecofeminist discourses, among others—in order to challenge the state's colonial and neo-extractive agenda in the Ecuadorian Amazon. Secondly, I show how the Amazonian Women's *Kawsak Sacha* declaration goes beyond a discursive artifact and examine those practices that the document itself wants to make visible. Such practices of reproducing human and non-human life in the Amazon are what I call "practices of forest-making." In the last sections of the chapter, I focus on three specific practices of forest-making: cultivating the land, sharing dreams in the mornings, and singing with a purpose. By connecting different ethnographic moments, I show how these practices travel from the forest to the city and nourish the Amazonian Women's diverse political activities and speeches. With this analysis, I shed light on how the Amazonian Women are publicly decolonizing Western divisions between nature and the human, which still mark contemporary imaginaries of the Amazon as an untouched territory to be preserved, and are thus decolonizing the anti-extractive struggle writ large.

Similar to Tzul Tzul's critique of certain academic depictions of indigenous politics, the reflections contained in this chapter run against an attempt to reconstruct a "local history" about how indigenous women, as an "ethnic" and "female" minority, resist oil projects (Ibid., 34). Rather, the Amazonian Women's anti-extractive struggle establishes them as crucial contemporary political actors against extractive occupation and makes evident the continuum between resistance strategies and the reproduction of human and non-human life in the rainforest. In other words, it makes evident their struggle for rexistance.

### **Speaking with "Our Own Voice"**

On October 4, 2013, Ecuador's National Assembly declared that oil exploitation in the Yasuní National Park was in the national interest (*Colectivo Miradas Críticas del Territorio desde el Feminismo* 2014, 77). The park, internationally praised as one of the world's biodiversity "hotspots,"<sup>83</sup> had become the symbol of a state-led attempt to combat climate change. In 2007, former president Rafael Correa adopted the Yasuní Initiative and proposed keeping the oil in the ITT area under the ground—if Ecuador received international compensation. By 2013, just 0.37% of the donations' target set by the government was provided by international donors.<sup>84</sup>

For many supporters of the government and environmentalists outside Ecuador, the initiative represented a fair proposal for international "co-responsibility" in the battle against climate change.<sup>85</sup> For anti-extractive social movements in Ecuador, the initiative became a smokescreen that obscured the government's neo-extractive agenda and repressive policies. Furthermore, for Ecuadorian anti-extractive activists, the vote in the National Assembly and the termination of the Yasuní initiative represented the end of this smokescreen and the start of a more direct confrontation with the government, who could now legitimize its pro-extractive agenda by blaming the international community for its lack of support.

Today, the question of whether the Yasuní initiative was a smokescreen or not seems irrelevant. Oil extraction entered its second phase in the ITT area already in 2018<sup>86</sup> and Lenin Moreno's neoliberal policies included the rapid concession of oil blocks and mega-mining deposits to compliance with the IMF's prescription of "reducing state deficit" and attracting international investors (Vallejo and Bravo 2019). To meet these objectives, the Ecuadorian government tried to push forward with plans to extract oil from at least two more platforms located in the buffer zone for the Tagaeri-Taromenane peoples living in voluntary isolation (Intangible Zone) in the Yasuní National Park.<sup>87</sup>

Even though state-led initiatives to battle climate change seem extremely necessary in the face of an increase of ecological disasters, especially if they are based

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<sup>83</sup> Available from: <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2016/oct/26/oil-drilling-underway-beneath-ecuadors-yasuni-national-park> (Accessed: April 28, 2021)

<sup>84</sup> Available from: <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/poverty-matters/2013/sep/19/world-failed-ecuador-yasuni-initiative> (Accessed: April 28, 2021)

<sup>85</sup> Ibid.

<sup>86</sup> Available from: <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2018/jan/10/new-round-of-oil-drilling-goes-deeper-into-ecuadors-yasuni-national-park> (Accessed: April 28, 2021)

<sup>87</sup> Available from: <https://www.elcomercio.com/actualidad/jose-agusto-briones-concesiones-activos.html> (Accessed: April 28, 2021)

on a concept of co-responsibility that makes more powerful countries accountable for keeping fossil fuel resources unexploited, Yasuní and its peoples have become a territory to be sacrificed for the “national interest.” The nationwide environmentalist consciousness inspired by the adoption of the Yasuní initiative a decade ago could not prevent the expansion and intensification of extractive interests in this part of the Amazon. Furthermore, the government and mainstream national media sees Yasuní’s oil deposits as a replacement for dying extraction wells in the northern rainforest.<sup>88</sup> The question that remains now is: how could Yasuní’s territory go from being a symbol for global conservation to becoming a strategic site for the perpetuation of Ecuador’s extractive economy so quickly?

Yasuní has historically been an internal colony for its resources—whether cinnamon, rubber, or oil—and remains a sacrifice zone for the nation-state today, even though fossil fuel extraction in the park is unconstitutional<sup>89</sup> and its oil deposits are of poor quality.<sup>90</sup> With this claim, I do not want to imply that oil extraction in Yasuní was unavoidable. However, the initiative’s legal and ecological terms for protecting the park are easily undone when it becomes “inevitable” for the government to reestablish the region as a sacrifice zone. In fact, it is precisely the environmental terms praising Yasuní’s biodiversity that have been used by governmental representatives to acclaim their “care for the environment,”<sup>91</sup> while oil drilling continued in this part of the Amazon.

This is why a different framework, a different way of speaking about and relating to these territories, becomes a political necessity in Ecuador and everywhere

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<sup>88</sup>Available from: <https://www.eluniverso.com/noticias/2020/01/04/nota/7674834/petroleo-precio-crisis-medio-orient-iran-estados-unidos> and <https://www.eluniverso.com/noticias/2020/01/05/nota/7675860/petroleo-incremento-produccion-petroamazonas-ecuador> (Accessed: April 28, 2021)

<sup>89</sup>“It also contradicts Ecuador’s constitution, which recognizes the rights of nature and seeks to protect sensitive ecosystems from ‘activities that could lead to species extinction, the destruction of ecosystems, or the permanent alteration of natural cycles’.” Available from: <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2018/jan/10/new-round-of-oil-drilling-goes-deeper-into-ecuadors-yasuni-national-park> (Accessed: April 28, 2021)

<sup>90</sup> “[F]ew understand the government’s insistence on exploiting the ITT. In its subsoil, Block 43 holds 20% of Ecuador’s untapped oil reserves. But it is a low-quality heavy crude—14 degrees API—which will be very costly to extract due to the lack of infrastructure and the need to blend it to transport it.” Available from: [https://elpais.com/elpais/2016/06/02/planeta\\_futuro/1464880726\\_920455.html](https://elpais.com/elpais/2016/06/02/planeta_futuro/1464880726_920455.html) (Accessed: April 28, 2021)

<sup>91</sup>Former vice-president Jorge Glas declared in 2018: “This is the start of a new era for Ecuadorean oil. In this new era, first comes care for the environment and second responsibility for the communities and the economy, for the Ecuadorean people.” Available from: <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2016/oct/26/oil-drilling-underway-beneath-ecuadors-yasuni-national-park> (Accessed: April 28, 2021)

else. A different framework that, if taken seriously, could open up the possibility of decolonizing our imaginaries about certain territories, while challenging the current capitalist world order that makes it almost impossible for Global South countries to undertake any meaningful action to battle climate change.<sup>92</sup> If we cannot develop alternative imaginaries and practices towards these places framed as internal colonies for the accumulation of capital, we just end up postponing their reoccupation until it seems “inevitable.” Interestingly, a different framework was offered by a variety of voices that made themselves heard the same day that Yasuní’s initiative was terminated. One of them was the Waorani leader Alicia Cahuilla.

Cahuilla is an Amazonian female leader who knows what it is to live in a territory constantly threatened by colonial and extractive expansion. Cahuilla grew up with her grandparents at the border of Yasuní. Her community of Noñeno is located next to the Shiripuno River, contaminated by oil activities coming from the Northern Amazon. After her grandparents died, she found out that a road has been built through the cemetery where their bodies were buried (*Colectivo de Investigación y Acción Social* 2015, 20). It is the *sentimiento* [feeling] produced by this experience that motivated her to get involved in defending her people’s territory and to found, with other Waorani women, the Waorani Women’s Association AMWAE in 2005. After becoming president of AMWAE in 2009, Cahuilla was elected Vice-president of the Waorani National Organization NAWO by her people in 2013, due to her anti-extractive activism. Cahuilla remembers,

“That place, where the oil wells of the Repsol company are located, used to be my grandparents’ territory. It was all full of oil tanks. I started to say, ‘why did they not respect us?’ Then, I started to have a *sentimiento*, to feel all sorts of things. That’s when I started to say they should consult, they should consult us, they should ask, they should inform the Waorani people if they wanted to enter. But how did they enter? By violating our lives, without respect, without the consent of the people. So that’s when I started.” (Interview, October 17, 2018, Quito)

As mentioned in Chapter Three, Cahuilla was invited to speak about the benefits of oil extraction in her territory the same day the National Assembly was voting to

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<sup>92</sup>Major evidence of this is how despite the increase of climate change-fueled environmental disasters, fossil fuel corporations and Global North countries keep taking over any international attempt to battle climate change. Available from: [https://www.democracynow.org/2019/12/11/cop25\\_walkout\\_indigenous\\_leaders\\_global\\_south](https://www.democracynow.org/2019/12/11/cop25_walkout_indigenous_leaders_global_south) (Accessed: April 28, 2021)

declare that oil exploitation in Yasuní was in the national interest. While two other indigenous guests spoke about a new era of progress with Correa's government, she refused to read a speech given to her by the governmental party *Alianza País*:

"They said, 'let them come in!' The Kichwa *compañera* from Orellana came in [...]. She read from a document, all prepared, and said: 'yes, I agree with the execution.' She said that we have not benefited [from oil in the past], nothing, I don't remember all what she said, but she agreed. And then they said to me, 'you come in!' And I came in. And I said to myself, 'now I'm not going to read that document I have.'" (Ibid.)

Instead she spoke out openly against extractivism:

"We've come here to say that there are seven companies operating in the Amazon, in our territories, in the Waorani territory. And what benefits have we received from these seven companies? We have been left in greater poverty. [...] I am a woman who was born in Yasuní. Nowadays people are talking a lot about Yasuní, but we as Waorani don't agree with exploiting it. Because we are women, who have been in the struggle, taking care of our forest, our rivers, our trees." (Fragment from Alicia Cahuilla's speech transcribed by the *Colectivo Miradas Críticas del Territorio desde el Feminismo* 2014, 77-80)

Cahuilla's words not only undid the government's script, but revealed the limits of state-power in silencing the voices it thinks to govern. This Waorani female leader used this platform of visibility at the National Assembly, in order give voice to other voices that are normally muted when the nation-state speaks in the name of environmental conservation or extractive occupation. In fact, Cahuilla not only spoke for herself, but she "brought" the many other voices that elected her as their leader to the National Assembly:

"They elected me as Vice president of NAWA. So my people have elected me. But the elders said: 'We give you our power so that you can speak in favor of the Waorani people, not in favor of the government. Alicia, you have to do something for our territories!' So that message they gave me. I said, 'I have the opportunity to speak.'" (Interview, October 17, 2018, Quito)

Cahuillas's powerful speech discloses a different type of anti-extractive politics coming from the very margins of state power than the politics of environmental conservationism proposed by the Yasuní initiative. These different politics, even if most of the times negated and rendered invisible, are not located "outside" of the state or "untouched" by modern power relations. Rather, they are product of these same power relations, which shaped Cahuilla's life and are exposed when she speaks about

the poverty generated by the seven companies oil operating in her people's territory. Moreover, this type of politics also speaks to state-power, when leaders like Cahuilla remind Ecuador's National Assembly that the Waorani people living in Yasuní are the ones who should decide whether oil can be drilled or not.

These politics, as I show next, also characterize the activism of the Amazonian Women's network. As narrated in Chapter One, shortly after Cahuilla's speech, the Amazonian Women organized their 219 km "March for Life." Like Cahuilla, they arrived in Quito aiming to speak out with their own voices and meet president Rafael Correa. When Correa avoided meeting with them in Quito, the marching women opted to request an audience with the National Assembly. On October 23, the National Assembly received the Amazonian Women, who publicly presented their proposal to declare the rainforest *Kawsak Sacha* (*Declaratoria del Kawsak Sacha*, October 2013).

### **The Art of Weaving Relations: The *Kawsak Sacha* Proposal as *Artesanía***

"Let us generate a proposal, a model, at the world level and at the country level. Not only based on rights, but based on our scared Amazonian world, cosmovision, territorial space. Let's declare this model the Living Forest. Let's not allow it to be declared a zone of national interest, but it should be declared a zone of life excluded from all oil exploitation."

(Patricia Gualinga, speech at Ecuador's National Assembly, October 23, 2013, Quito)



Image 32. Patricia Gualinga (October 23, 2013)<sup>93</sup> and Alicia Cahuilla (October 4, 2013),<sup>94</sup> at Ecuador's National Assembly, Quito. Screenshots by the author, taken August 20, 2020.

The complex entanglements of relations woven together and sustaining the Amazonian Women's 2013 public speeches are important clues in order to comprehend how they challenge dominant narratives. I use the words "woven together" not only as

<sup>93</sup> Available from: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Zj-WvhPyXmg> (Accessed: April 28, 2021)

<sup>94</sup> Available from: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oqqfjBCmxwI> (Accessed: April 28, 2021)



a metaphor, but as a tangible description of the different relations that support and produce the Amazonian Women's politics vis-à-vis the nation-state. This is the case of the particular relations that sustained and made Patricia Gualinga's speech possible.

Gualinga is a nationally and internationally well-known Kichwa leader. She was delegated by the Amazonian Women's network to give a speech and present their proposal at the National Assembly in October 2013. Beyond misinterpretations that solely read into this historical moment the dominance of Kichwa peoples in Amazonian politics, Gualinga's role as spokeswoman for the network was sustained by the complex relations of allyship between members from the Amazonian Women.<sup>95</sup> After several conversations with some of the organizers of the march it became clear to me that their decision to delegate Gualinga was not absent of tensions, however, it was a strategic move to take advantage of her visibility as an internationally known indigenous activist in order to make their collective voices heard.

Furthermore, the Amazonian Women's decision to adopt the Kichwa term of *Kawsak Sacha* for the proposal did not necessarily mean renouncing to their particular proposals or their own ways of expressing them—like the Achura *Sapa-Entza* plan of life, the *Sham Nua* [Forest Woman] proposal of the Shiwiari women, or the Waorani “*deje vivir*” [let us live] proposal for Yasuní.<sup>96</sup> On the contrary, it was meant to express the Amazonian Women's resistance against extractive occupation as a unified voice:

“This is what we are proposing, the Living Forest, because as women we do not want the oil people to enter our territory. Why? Because we as women, as mothers of nature, we cultivate. That's what we do above all for our children, our future grandchildren, to be free and not contaminated. We want it to stay under the earth, the oil. So that is what we want more than anything else. With this proposal, we are saying no.” (Rosa Gualinga, interview, August 8, 2017, Puyo)

“The proposal of the Living Forest is adopted by the Amazonian Women from the proposal of the Sarayaku people. This proposal is, let's say, the motto of the Sarayaku people. But there are more proposals that are based on the life plans

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<sup>95</sup> The complexity of these relations becomes evident when one looks at colonial relations that marked the territorial conflicts between different nationalities, like between the Waorani and the Kichwa peoples: “Those old people always called us, the Capuchin and the evangelical missionaries from the ILV, they called us *Aucas*, *patas coloradas*, because of our culture, our clothing was [from] another world, from the forest; then the Inihua was a great Waorani warrior, he went to spear in the Coca river and killed the Kichwas saying, ‘why are they invading our territory?’ [...] Our territory was immense but the governments that enter every time, have reduced us.” (Alicia Cahuilla in Vallejo and Ávila 2017, 333)

<sup>96</sup> Available from: <https://www.ohchr.org/SP/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=23864&LangID=S> (Accessed: April 28, 2021)

of each indigenous nationality and that focus on the *Sumak Kawsay*. The Shuar people also have a proposal that is very similar to that of the Sarayaku. They also demand an alternative to development and also to forms of economic development for the Amazon. In this sense, the Amazonian Women's movement is composed by many proposals." (Katy Betancourt Machoa, interview, July 25, 2017, Quito)

As the Shiwiar female leader Rosa Gualinga expresses, the handing-in of the *Kawsak Sacha* proposal to the government was the Amazonian Women's way of saying "no" to oil extraction. Furthermore, as former CONAIE representative Katy Betancourt mentions, the adoption of this proposal does not change the fact that the political agenda of the Amazonian Women's network is composed by many other proposals. The *Kawsak Sacha* proposal should thus be understood as the alternative frame that weaves together the Amazonian Women's different proposals and voices, or what Donna Haraway calls the "thousand names of something else" (Haraway 2016, 52)—a "something else" that challenges the lack of alternatives to endless capitalist accumulation and, in the particular case of Ecuador, the sense of inevitability in the government's decision to extract oil from territories like Yasuní. And a "something else" that speaks in the name of life in its more radical sense: in the name of the Living Forest that the modern division between nature and culture has historically made unthinkable.

The way that the Amazonian Women weave together their proposals and voices into the *Kawsak Sacha* declaration has a similar logic than when these leaders weave their *artesanías*. As mentioned in the previous chapter, *artesanías* weave complex relations with the commodified market, where their fabrics are most of the times consumed as folkloric commodities. At the same time, *artesanías* are crucial part of Amazonian peoples' systems of knowledge and for the indigenous project of reexisting extractive occupation, because their materiality and narratives offer us critical interpretations about the present. This is why these fabrics need to be studied in their complexity, in how they offer us critical analyses about the present, while actively building relations to the same systems of domination that dismiss and even ignore these analyses. This understanding of *artesanías*, allow us to consider the Amazonian Women's "other fabrics" as complex proposals that speak to the state and to the international community—as Patricia's speech reveals when she speaks about *Kawsak Sacha* as a new model to be adopted nationally and internationally—without this implying they submit their propositions to dominant discourses. Rather, the *Kawsak*

*Sacha* proposal is constituted by the situated histories and diverse voices of Amazonian women coming from different territories, which aims at declaring the rainforest a “zone of life” instead of a “zone of national interest.” This understanding challenges interpretations about indigenous practices that position them as cultural specifics excluded from “the universal”<sup>97</sup> (Tsing 2005, 1), and acknowledges their potential for constructing political alternatives “beyond the trappings” of “asymmetrical recognition” (Gordon and Roberts 2009 in Gutiérrez-Rodríguez 2020, 114).

Another important aspect about *artesanías* is how their fabrics combine different materials in order to tell their different stories. This understanding of *artesanías* differs from certain analyses that interpret Amazonian material culture as objects carrying cultural meaning, but exclude from this consideration necklaces, bracelets, and earrings out synthetic seeds. The *artesanías* produced by my Amazonian co-laborers are fabrics that combine clay, feathers or natural and synthetic seeds in order to “seduce” the eyes of “others” (Rivera Cusicanqui 2010b, 73), at the same time that they weave together stories the Amazonian Women want to tell. *Artesanías* are thus not part of an almost extinct and mythical indigenous past to be studied, or folkloric products to be consumed (Rivera Cusicanqui 2015, 9). Rather, *artesanías*’ designs are an expression of the Amazonian Women’s lived experience and of how they, as contemporary subjects, relate to different actors through their creations.

Similarly, the proposal to declare the Amazon as Living Forest should not be understood as product of the Amazonian Women’s “traditional” ways of relating to nature. Much less should it be interpreted as a reaffirmation of the Amazonian Women’s natural role as “bearers of life” and protectors of the forest (Muratorio 1994; Ulloa 2004). As Blanca Muratorio mentions, the “conservative essentialism” that naturalizes women’s identities and fosters the stereotypical identification of indigenous women with “Mother Earth” marginalizes Amazonian women’s political voices (Muratorio 2000, 240). The Amazonian Women’s proposal, on the contrary, interestingly combines a variety of different discourses to form a politics that defends life against extractive occupation: the discourses of indigenous autonomy, knowledge, territoriality and the *Sumak Kawsay* project, with the hegemonic discourses of

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<sup>97</sup> “[T]he universal is what, as Gayatri Spivak has put it, we cannot not want, even as it so often excludes us. The universal offers us the chance to participate in the global stream of humanity. We can’t turn it down.” (Tsing 2005, 1)

environmental conservation, ecofeminism, the constitutional rights of nature, and international human rights. It reads,

“Our main objective is to ensure the continuity of Amazonian peoples’ life, to preserve and conserve the biological richness of our territories, nature, biodiversity and cultural and natural heritage, according to the concept of *Sumak Kawsay* and *Kawsak Sacha* that our peoples have maintained since the beginning of their existence until today, thanks to their close relationship and coexistence with nature. [...] Extractive activities in our territories are aimed at fragmenting our communities, and also generate *machismo* [male chauvinism] and socio-cultural problems such as alcoholism and domestic violence. [...] Considering: That, in full exercise of our right to SELF-DETERMINATION, and calling on the Ecuadorian government’s obligation to comply with the Constitution, we make the following statement, based on Amazonian men and women’s knowledge - *Sacha Runa Yachay*. [...] That article 71 of the Constitution establishes that Nature or *Pachamama*, where life is reproduced, has the right to be fully respected in terms of its existence as a living being and in terms of the maintenance and regeneration of its life cycles. That articles 56 and 57 of the Constitution guarantee the rights of indigenous peoples over their territory, culture and life. [...] In exercise of the rights enshrined in international pacts, treaties and conventions that protect indigenous peoples, we make public the real proposal of conservation, preservation and coexistence with the Ecuadorian Amazon forest: the declaration of the -KAWSAK SACHA- (LIVING FOREST) OF THE INDIGENOUS PEOPLES as a new category of preservation that takes into account Amazonian peoples’ philosophy and worldview that recognizes the interrelationship between human beings and nature.” (*Declaratoria del Kawsak Sacha*, October 2013)

As this abstract of the *Kawsak Sacha* declaration shows, there are a variety of words—such as “preserving,” “biodiversity,” “*machismo*,” “self-determination,” “Amazonian men and women’s knowledge,” “the rights of indigenous peoples,” “international pacts,” among others—deployed in the proposal that refer to the different discourses woven together in the document. The usage of these words, interestingly, does not conceal the Amazonian Women’s particular demands by legitimizing their struggle in hegemonic terms only. Instead, the combination of these languages makes their own proposal for conservation visible. Indeed, as the document reveals later on, the Amazonian Women demand *Kawsak Sacha* to be recognized as the “real proposal for conservation,” which takes into consideration “Amazonian peoples’ philosophy and worldview” (*Declaratoria del Kawsak Sacha*, October 2013). This exposes the political outcome of “partially connecting” different languages (Haraway 1991; Strathern 2004): presenting the idea of a Living Forest not as a mere “indigenous belief” (de la Cadena 2010, 335), but as a necessary political recognition in order to change our relations to

a territory we have learnt to see as an internal colony. This decolonial outcome is at the center of the Amazonian Women's politics.

The art of weaving *artesanías*, then, becomes a useful source to expand our approaches when reading the Amazonian Women's political proposals. Contrary to our tendency to find contradictions in indigenous peoples' political strategies that include dominant and hegemonic discourses (e.g. state, human rights or environmental discourses), the web of discourses offered by the *Kawsak Sacha* proposal discloses the complexity of indigenous political practices and challenges an understanding of indigenous identities as simple or closed units. Rather, indigenous peoples and the Amazonian Women are not only partly constituted by national and transnational hegemonic discourses (de la Cadena 2010 and 2015, also Tsing 2005), but they also incorporate the same discourses with the purpose of generating their own ways of speaking to the state and the society at large. As Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui rightly notes, the Amazonian Women's proposal to declare the Amazon as *Kawsak Sacha* is their "*encuadre propio*," i.e. their own framing and their own design, which allows for the appropriation and modification of concepts in order for the women to talk with their own voices (Rivera Cusicanqui 2015, 25).

### **The Amazonian Women's Practices of Forest-Making**

"*Kawsak Sacha* is the living space of all beings in the forest, from the most infinitesimal beings to the largest and supreme ones, including the animal, vegetable, mineral, cosmic and human worlds. It is a transcendental territorial space destined to elevate different emotional, psychological, physical and spiritual facets vital to the energy and health of indigenous peoples." (*Declaratoria del Kawsak Sacha*, October 2013)

The *Kawsak Sacha* proposal, as an alternative frame that offers a different way of speaking about and relating to the rainforest, is not just a discursive artifact. According to the written document itself, the Living Forest is a "transcendental and territorial space," in which a multiplicity of beings live. These beings belong to the human but also the non-human worlds: "the animal, vegetable, mineral," and the "cosmic worlds." In fact, the purpose of presenting the rainforest as a space of life consists in highlighting the importance of continuing those particular practices that reproduce human and non-human life in the Amazon.

In this and next section, I offer a link between the *Kawsak Sacha* proposal and the concrete practices that some Amazonian female leaders have shared as important territorial practices that reproduce human and non-human life. Highlighting this link not only recognizes how the Living Forest is nurtured by practices that are “anchored to the organization of everyday life” (Tzul Tzul 2018a, 22). It also opens our eyes to existing alternative ways of inhabiting the rainforest as a zone of life beyond the nature-human divide.



Image 33. Flying over *Kawsak Sacha*, October 30, 2018.

As mentioned in Chapter Three, the Amazon, also called *oriente* [orient] in Ecuadorian parlance, has been mostly presented in the nation’s official historiography either as a mystical space of uncivilized pre-history or as an invisible, allegedly empty area (Taylor 1994; Melo, Ortiz, Lopez 2002; Sawyer 2004). This framing has persisted to our days even though this “forgotten” region has had constant interactions with the rest of the country and other actors since colonial times (Esvertit Cober 2005, 90).

These colonial imaginaries are product of a system of social classification, mainly engendered during the European colonial system and identified by the Peruvian sociologist Anibal Quijano with the term of “coloniality” (2000), that shape our social relations of production as well as our ways of being, thinking and representing the world to our days. As representatives of the Modernity/Coloniality project have exposed, it is the “coloniality of nature” that has contributed to Latin American nation-states’ incorporation of territories like the Amazon into a condition of inferiority (Alimonda 2019). This condition of inferiority, on the one hand, has configured the Amazonian region as a subaltern space to be exploited, as a resource to be extracted, or as wasteland to be “developed” by processes of exploitation, spoilage and thus destruction of these territories’ ecological and cultural mechanisms of reproduction

(Leff 1986 and Coronil 2000). On the other hand, this condition of inferiority has systematically negated indigenous people's presence and claim to this territory, and contributed to the subordination of Amazonian peoples at the epistemological and ontological level—like the subordination of Amazonian people's systems of knowledge (Leff 2006), or the denial of their practices of living as members of complex networks of existence where animals, plants and forest's "supreme protectors" cohabit together (*Declaratoria del Kawsak Sacha*, October 2013).

Many anthropological studies in Ecuador have challenged the Amazon's image as an uncivilized space or as an empty area. Ethnographies ranging from Phillippe Descola's work with the Achuar (1989), Norman E. Whitten and Dorothea Scott Whitten's work with the Kichwa Canelos and Puyo Runa (1976 and 2008), María Guzmán-Gallegos' work with the Kichwa Canelos (1997), Eduardo Kohn's work with the Kichwa Runa of Ecuador's Upper Amazon (2013), and Laura Rival's work with the Waorani people (1996 and 2015) have showed the rainforest's cultural and social "nature." All of these ethnographies share the observation that the Amazonian forest, far from being an uncontrolled or "savage" universe of "natural spontaneity" (Descola 1989, 434), is deeply influenced by both intentional and unintentional human practices of forest management (Rival 2015, 46ff.), and by the constant interactions and mutual transformations between humans, plants, animals and other kinds of beings (Guzmán-Gallegos 1997, 9; Kohn 2013, 19). These studies have thus contributed to the vast critique of Western ways of conceptualizing "human," "cultural," and "social" practices as separated from nature's reproduction (see also Tsing 2001).

The Amazonian Women's proposal to declare their rainforest as *Kawsak Sacha* confronts the human-nature separation in their own terms. Furthermore, several conversations I had with Amazonian female leaders have revealed not only that they challenge the "idea" of the Amazon as an empty space or as an untouched territory to be preserved, but also that *Kawsak Sacha* is rooted in particular practices with very concrete implications:

"We are trying to go beyond the creation of a concept that is understandable to ordinary people. [...] Rather, it is a new way of relating to nature. This is the Living Forest, a new form of relationship, which does not imply a strict conservation of trees or forests. Rather, it explicitly recognizes that nature exists, because someone works for it. Someone regenerates it." (Patricia Gualinga, interview, August 8, 2017, Puyo)

As Gualinga explains, the *Kawsak Sacha* proposal goes beyond offering a theoretical concept of conservation. It wants to inspire a new form of relationship with nature that recognizes that “nature exists because someone works for it” and “regenerates it.” Who works for it? According to Gualinga herself, “it is not necessarily indigenous peoples, but other forces that act to make it exist” (Ibid.).

According to Abigail Gualinga from Sarayaku, despite the fact that it is difficult to explain in words what makes *Kawsak Sacha* a living entity, this awareness is felt in everyday interactions between indigenous peoples and the forest, like cultivating the *chakra* or hunting:

“*Kawsak Sacha*, I think young people who live there can feel it, but they cannot interpret or explain it in words. However, we have the same idea that it is true that everything is alive. We have *chakra*, where our food comes from, and if we don’t do the *chakra*, we don’t get anything in return. We do the *chakra*, they give us, nature gives us. So I think *Kawsak Sacha* is alive, we are connected. Because you see, you feel the reaction of the forest. I personally didn’t understand that they have an owner, I thought it was something that happened before, that these were stories or myths. In Sarayaku we have the *Sisa Ñambi* [flowers’ path]. My father took me there and he told me that you are not allowed to pee or poop close to the lagoons, because it reacts, it could start raining. I never believed him, that lesson didn’t do anything to me, until we went to the limit [*Sisa Ñambi*]. I could hear that my dad had killed a *sajino* [peccary], I heard the shot, it took less than five minutes and it started raining. Branches started to fall. It reacted. It didn’t like that someone shot there. After fifteen minutes the reaction was over. Then I realized that it’s true that it reacts. It has an owner.” (Abigail Gualinga, interview, August 31, 2018, Puyo)

Abigail Gualinga’s description of how she learned that *Kawsak Sacha* is alive is similar to what the Amazonian Women I worked with shared. Different conversations, trips together, and other moments I shared with my co-laborers taught me that the recognition of their territory as a living entity is not easy to explain in abstract words or as a conceptual metaphor. Rather, as I will argue in the next section, the experience of the rainforest as a living being is embedded in concrete, affective practices carried out in their daily lives. These practices include cultivating *yuca* in their *chakra*, producing and sharing *chicha*, dreaming and sharing dreams while drinking *guayusa*, molding visions in clay pottery, and singing with a purpose.

What all of these practices share in common is that they do not just materially enable indigenous peoples’ lives in the Amazon. These practices also imply an experience of interconnectedness and interdependence with the forest, exemplified in



how Abigail Gualinga and her family cultivate their *chakra* and the forest gives them nourishment in return. Furthermore, they also transform the person who performs the practice and the being, the animal, or the plant the practice is directed to, exemplified in how the lagoon protectors reacted to the shooting of a *sajino* and how this experience had the power to change Gualinga. The relation between humans to the forest is thus not one of material or utilitarian correspondence, but rather one of affective recognition and co-constitution. Practices that draw on affective recognition and interaction with the rainforest as a living entity, and on “mutual becomings” between the Amazonian Women and the rainforest’s living beings (Guzmán-Gallegos 2019) are what I call “practices of forest-making.” As the words “forest-making” describe, the acknowledgement and enactment of these practices make the forest, in one way or another, into a living entity inhabited by a multiplicity of life forms.

Practices of forest-making thus entail extremely affective connections that position the Amazonian Women not as “guardians” of an imagined and mythical space, but as reproducers of human and non-human relations and defenders of a territory that is crucial for their lives. While the affective dimensions of these practices inspired their *Kawsak Sacha* declaration, they are also a source for the Amazonian Women’s ongoing organizational strategies and political discourse when bringing their voices and proposals to the city. This means that these practices not only take place in the rainforest, but are also “brought” by members of the Amazonian Women’s network into cities.

Next, I will focus on three practices of forest-making—cultivating *yuca*, signing with a purpose, and learning how to dream—important in the lives of the Amazonian Women. By connecting different ethnographic moments, I show how these practices travel from the forest to the city and nurture Amazonian leaders’ diverse political activities and interventions. While the effects of reproducing these practices in the rainforest or “bringing” them to the city differ, the politics enacted when these practices appear during protest marches, public interviews and meetings with state authorities are very powerful. Paraphrasing Patricia Gualinga’s previous speech, the manifestation of these practices in the cities has the potential of generating a variety of transformations at different structural levels, with epistemological and ontological consequences on what we think the forest “is” and how we relate to it.

## Cultivating *Yuca*, Cultivating Children

The act of “bringing” practices of forest-making to the city, does not always mean to actually reproduce them in these urban spaces. Bringing these practices to cities like Quito or Puyo also imply making them visible during particular public interventions. This is the case of the practice of cultivating, a very important practice of forest-making in the Amazonian Women’s lives, which is recurrently mentioned during their speeches against extractive occupation:

“[Exploitation] affects us because we cultivate, if they extract [oil] no food will be produced, nothing will grow, the food and the animals will die, it affects them, they will go far away from the extractions. They are already making the forest small, where are the animals going to go? Us? If they exploit it, nothing will exist.” (Sapara woman, statement at the 2013 “March for Life,” in *Colectivo Miradas Críticas del Territorio desde el Feminismo* 2014, 73).

“Where are our children going to bathe when the water is contaminated? Where are we going to bathe? What is going to happen to the lands where we cultivate our *chakras*? I would like to say that if these oil companies enter the [oil] blocks, we as women are not going to allow them to do so without consulting us. If they come to our communities, we are going to defend our territory for the sake of our children, for the future.” (Shiwiar woman, statement during the FLACSO event “*Políticas Extractivas en el Ecuador Contemporáneo y el Derecho a los Pueblos Indígenas a la Consulta Previa, Libre e Informada*,” June 5, 2013, Quito)

“But we want to leave a message for all the women who defend and fight every day, for what we are doing. Because we women harvest, we cultivate, we take care of our *wawas*. Where do we cultivate? In our territory, in our land, the land gives us food for our children, for our family.” (Alicia Cahuilla, public speech during the Amazonian Women’s march, March 8, 2016, Puyo)

As these different Sapara, Shiwiar and Waorani voices communicate, cultivating is an important practice that provides the necessary means of subsistence for the Amazonian Women’s families. Moreover, Amazonian women from the rainforest region are most of the times the ones in charge of cultivating *yuca* and other products, even though the entire family also helps—while children are in charge of clearing the scrub of the forest, men do the heavy lifting (Cielo, Coba, and Vallejo 2016, 127). However, when extractive industries arrive in indigenous territories the community’s organization of work change, like it is the case in the Northern Amazon. Besides the negative socio-ecological impacts that recurrent oil spills generate, like

contaminating the soil and making it unfertile, the arrival of petroleum companies generate hierarchical relations by primarily engaging with masculine interlocutors and offering them short-term jobs at the oil company (Ibid., 128). The introduction of masculinized and monetarized economic relations in indigenous communities degrades Amazonian women and their reproductive labor as cultivators in terms of “unproductive” or “non-paid” labor, and erodes their economies of subsistence (Federici 2013, 146). Defending their territory against extractive occupation thus means to defend their means and economies of subsistence and their communitarian relations.

Nevertheless, material subsistence is not the only reason why the Amazonian Women reject extractive activities in their territories. As Silvia Federici mentions, when referring to the different dimensions of reproductive labor, reproduction also gives “meaning to our life” and nourishes “our struggles” in different ways (2018, 5). The Amazonian Women’s practice of cultivating is embedded in a diverse set of relations, which include knowledge production and transmission, as well as reciprocal relations between human and non-human beings. These set of human and non-human relationships could be transformed by the presence of oil extraction, as it has already happened in contemporary petroleum circuits in the provinces of Orellana and Sucumbíos (Cielo, Coba, and Vallejo 2016, 123).

As mentioned in the previous chapter, cultivating is very much related to the Amazonian Women’s affective relations with the forest. Similar to Abigail Gualinga, female leaders like Nancy Santi describe the act of cultivating as an act of loving the land, which is reciprocal—“it gives you its food, when you cultivate, when you love the land” (Nancy Santi, Interview by Lorena van Bunningen y Corinne Duhalde Ruiz, November 1, 2018, Community of Sisa). What makes the practice of cultivating particularly important is that this reciprocity between human and non-human life is not as metaphorical as readers might think. The practice of cultivating *yuca*, in particular, produces a variety of effects for the humans and plants involved, as the *apamama* [an old and wise *Kichwa* women] Narcisa Gualinga tells:

“Yes, we plant *yuca* on Saturdays. On Saturday, or Monday if you’re in a hurry, but it is more advisable to plant on Saturday. [...] They say that is even better with the moon, to wait for the full moon, it is an advice from the ancestors that we have to plant everything on the full moon. But sometimes we break it. [...] After cultivating we have to do *sasi* [special diet]. If not, it won’t grow, they say. It might grow a little one [tuber], or two little, but it is like the garbage that is cleaned, if the *yuquita* is cleaned it doesn’t have much. Other times, when we

eat the chili, it rots, the *yuca* tastes rotten. Otherwise [when complying with all the rules], the *yuca* grows big, even if it is ripe it doesn't rot, it cooks well. But when we do not comply with the diet, it rots. [...] We don't bathe because we paint with *achiote* [annatto seed]. [We do] all that, we don't bathe, we don't wash, we have to lie down. [...] That is our ancestral belief, that the *yuquitas* are children, they are little children. They start with us, and they suck our blood, they say. That's why, seeing the red [*achiote*] they don't suck our blood. It doesn't suck. They leave us without energy when they, [silence]. And after they suck our blood that is too much, they grow too much, they develop, the *yuca* plants. Because they are, sometimes we plant without painting us." (Narcisa Gualinga, interview by Lorena van Bunningen y Corinne Duhalde Ruiz, November 1, 2018, Community of Sisa)

According to the *apamama*, there is a set of "rules" women should learn and follow in order to cultivate *yuca*. What she calls *sasi* is in fact a special diet of food like *aji* [chili] and of other activities like sweeping or sleeping with your partner, which the woman who cultivates should implement for the *yuca* to grow big and healthy. According to anthropological interpretations of Kichwa and Achuar practices (Whitten 1976; Descola 1989; and Guzmán-Gallegos 1997), the manioc plants are related to the female being called *Nunghui* or *Nunkuli* [in Amazonian Kichwa]. *Nunkuli*, as the goddess of the soil, is also the mother of all *chakra* plants and the source of cultivation knowledge (Guzmán-Gallegos 2019). The *sasi* diet is part of a set of practices that the woman reproduces in order to establish a good relationship with *Nunkuli*. Taking care of the *yuca* plant is thus considered, by these anthropological interpretations, Amazonian women's way of acknowledging the presence of *Nunkuli* and attaining a good relationship with her (Ibid.).

Important to note is how the omission of certain rules can also have consequences for the woman who cultivates. As Narcisa Gualinga mentions, the "*yuquitas*" are "little children," because their lives start and depend on the female cultivator. Though if the woman fails to paint her face with *achiote*, the *yuca* can suck too much of her blood. For other Kichwa women like Nancy Santi, the danger of not painting your face with *achiote* is explained by the fact that *yucas* are "oneself," "persons" who the cultivator needs to treat with love and respect:

"My mother taught us that we always have to do the practice of the *sayachina* with the *yuca*, right, of the *yuca* we plant. We paint our faces with *achiote* the day we are planting the *yuca*. Because they said that when you don't do that practice, the woman's blood is sucked by the *yuca*. Because it is one of [sic], for us it is life, a person, a thing that lives and something that for you is... no, you can't understand us. So, it kind of sucks us, because we don't do that, when

we don't paint our faces with *achiote*. So all of that. [...] You have to respect the *yuquita*. When it is three months old and you start the first cleaning. You don't have to mistreat it. You take out the leaves because otherwise they won't carry well. My mommy used to say that it has its little milk, it is the blood of the *yuca*. So when you cut it, it cries. You shouldn't throw it away, you should plant the seeds, plant them well. Then, when you take out the *yuca*, you cover it well, the holes. If not, your [human] child will come out without hair." (Interview by Lorena van Bunningen y Corinne Duhalde Ruiz, November 1, 2018, Community of Sisa)



Image 34. The *yuca* plant and tuber at Nancy Santi's *chakra*, October 31, 2018, Community of Sisa.

María Guzmán-Gallegos narrates in her book, *Para que la Yuca Beba nuestra Sangre* (1997), that the relationship between a Kichwa woman and her *yuca* is manifested in how the woman nourishes the plant with her blood for it to be able to grow. The *yuca*, as a person, thus incorporates a part of the woman, her blood, creating a "special bond" between both of them (Ibid., 76)—Descola understands this special bond in terms of "consanguinity" (see Descola 1989; and Guzmán-Gallegos 2019 critique on Descola and Taylor). Nevertheless, not only the plant acquires an important element from her cultivator. Conversely, the woman incorporates the qualities of the *yuca* she planted. Large and thick *yucas* are, for example, not only proof of a woman's ability to be a good cultivator, but also evidence her strength and capacity to create and sustain for herself and her family (Guzmán-Gallegos 1997, 77ff.). However, if the woman does not follow the rules set by *Nunkuli*, the manioc plants could kill the woman or even the woman's new born by sucking too much of their blood (Guzmán-Gallegos 2019). Cultivating *yuca*, beyond being a practice of romanticized and ethnicized motherly love with nature, embodies the special bond between the woman and the *yuca*-person, between human and non-human life in the forest, with very concrete consequences for both of them.

The practice of cultivating *yuca* thus mirrors the complex network of affects and relations in the forest, which nourish the Amazonian Women's struggle. By affects here, I do not necessarily mean positive or idealized drives, but "unspecified energies" linked to human and non-human relations (Gutiérrez-Rodríguez 2011). Paraphrasing Gladys Tzul Tzul, practices of forest-making like cultivating are thus embedded in the Amazonian Women's entanglements of life, which organize their everyday life, reproduce human and non-human bonds, sustain their concrete means of subsistence, and sustain their politics (Tzul Tzul 2018a, 26). This is the reason why "bringing" practices of forest-making to the city is a crucial element in the Amazonian Women's anti-extractive struggle. In fact, when the Amazonian Women talk about the importance of cultivating the land, they are making life in its multiple forms visible. Even though the state and other interlocutors cannot understand this multiplicity of life, the act of enouncing it is extremely political as to be showed next.

### **Chants with a Purpose, Chants to "Enchant"**

In March 2018, the Amazonian Women's network came, for a second time, to meet Ecuador's elected president in Quito, Lenin Moreno. Their goal was to present their *Mandato de las Mujeres Amazónicas Defensoras de la Selva de las Bases frente al Extractivismo* [Mandate of the Grassroots' Amazonian Women Defenders of the Rainforest against Extractivism].<sup>98</sup> Moreno did not receive them right away. As a response, the Amazonian Women organized a five-day *plantón* [a picket of a government building] in front of the presidential palace in order to pressure the president to meet with them, an action that positioned the Amazonian Women's network in the national and international spotlight again. While they were waiting for the president, some of the women were interviewed by journalists representing the national media.

Janeth Hinostroza, the host of the morning news program *La Mañana de 24 Horas* aired on the *Teleamazonas* channel, spoke with the Amazonian leaders Noemi Gualinga and Catalina Chumpi.<sup>99</sup> Hinostroza's first question concerned the Amazonian Women's demands in their *Mandato*. Her last question focused on their proposal to end

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<sup>98</sup> Available from: <https://www.eluniverso.com/noticias/2018/03/16/nota/6669664/mujeres-indigenas-entregaran-mandato-protoger-amazonia> (Accessed: April 28, 2021)

<sup>99</sup> Available from: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OHhmPbUy2-s> (Accessed: April 28, 2021)

oil dependency. She asked, “What proposal are you developing in order to replace [...] and make up the money that we would leave with the oil under the ground?” Noemi Gualinga explained that the money coming from oil deposits in the other parts of the Amazon had not reached indigenous communities, that basic services like education and health were lacking, that the soil and rivers close to oil platforms were contaminated, and that communitarian tourism would be a better economic alternative than oil extraction. After this, she finalized her response with the following words:

“We have the proposal of the Living Forest, where we have rivers, sacred trees, we have mountains, we have lots of... the forest is alive! Why can’t we demonstrate to the world, that these sacred places, these places with life, can be much better for ecotourism? [...] Because they [the government] don’t think about that, they just think about the oil that someone else started. Why not starting [sic] something new?” (Noemi Gualinga, interview with *La Mañana de 24 Horas*, March 16, 2018, Quito)<sup>100</sup>

While Hinostroza’s last question focused on the money that the state “would leave with the oil under the ground,” Noemi Gualinga finished her statement by presenting the Living Forest proposal as an alternative for life and as an opportunity to “start something new.” Without the intention of romanticizing Gualinga’s response, which offers ecotourism as an economic alternative to oil extraction, this dialogue bluntly shows the different terms, the different “languages,” organizing the conversations between the Amazonian Women and *mestizo* elites like Hinostroza. Major differences exist between these different languages, the language of the Living Forest and the language of “viable economic alternatives.” To paraphrase Marisol de la Cadena, these differences not only relate to these languages’ radical different content, but also to which one of them is acceptable for modern scientific paradigms that have banned ideas—like the one that understands the forest is a living entity—from modern politics (de la Cadena 2010, 343). However, these differences are not an obstacle preventing the Amazonian female voices from expressing their ideas in these contexts. On the contrary, Amazonian female leaders like Noemi Gualinga are skilled interlocutors that know how to navigate the questions and demands formulated in the name of “viable economic alternatives” or “the national interest.” Even more, they not only navigate these questions, but are able to create “openings” during these interactions in order to talk about something else the interviewer or the state-

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<sup>100</sup> Available from: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OHhmPbUy2-s> (Accessed: April 28, 2021)

representative was not prepared to hear. The presence of this something else, of the forest as a living entity inhabited by a multiplicity of life forms, is an extremely political moment in these scenarios. Why?



Image 35. Catalina Chumpi, Shuar leader, and Noemi Gualinga, Kichwa leader from Sarayaku, at the news program *La Mañana de 24 Horas* with Janeth Hinostroza, March 16, 2018, Quito.<sup>101</sup> Screenshot by the author, taken August 20, 2020.

The appearance of the Living Forest in this type of televised exchange is a moment of “onto-epistemic rupture” of prevalent colonial, rationalistic, and neoliberal formations, which normally exclude indigenous thinking, practices, and political proposals from “real,” “acceptable,” or “viable” political alternatives (de la Cadena 2010, 343). This onto-epistemic rupture consists of the Amazonian Women taking advantage of the spaces of visibility they achieve through their marches, *plantones* and counter-occupations of state institutions, in order to “disrupt prevalent political formations” and to render illegitimate the exclusion of indigenous practices and proposals from the nation-state discourse (Ibid., 336). Similar to Alicia Cahuilla’s act of “bringing” the Waorani voices marginalized by the state’s decision of extracting oil in the Yasuní Park with her 2013 speech, Amazonian leaders like Noemi Gualinga thus “bring” the voices and the proposals of their people through their public statements and challenge the government’s claim that there is no political and economic alternative to extractivism.

There were other moments of “onto-epistemic rupture” taking place during the Amazonian Women’s *plantón* in Quito. Interestingly, these moments were not limited to speeches in Spanish, but also included practices of forest-making like singing.

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<sup>101</sup> Ibid.



It is very common to see the Amazonian Women performing their traditional chants during their protests, marches and other interventions in the cities. According to the activist Ivonne Ramos, a member of the environmental organization *Acción Ecológica*, the 2013 Amazonian Women's march was "guided" by Amazonian leader's chants (*Colectivo Miradas Críticas del Territorio desde el Feminismo* 2014, 82). Their *plantón* in March 2018 was no exception, as Waorani, Kichwa, Shuar, Achuar, Sapara, and Shiwiar filled the plaza in front of the presidential palace with their chants.<sup>102</sup>



Image 36. Rosa Gualinga singing at the Amazonian Women's *plantón* in front to Ecuador's presidential palace. Photo by COFENIAE, Facebook, March 13, 2018: <https://www.facebook.com/comunicacionconfeniae.redacangau>. Screenshot by the author, taken March 14, 2018.

Rosa Gualinga is very well known by her friends and allies for her ability to sing. This ability entails knowing many *cantos* [songs or chants], which her mother and grandmother taught her throughout her childhood, but also denotes the power to sing with a purpose, or to sing with the power to influence the course of events. During one conversation I had with Rosa Gualinga, she referred to her *cantos* as a power she uses when necessary and that makes you "get" where your purpose is located by performing certain sacrifices, like fasting:

"My grandmother taught me that one, she taught my mother and my mother taught me. I always ask the elders how I should live defending my territory. Singing is sacrificed, but they told me, 'that's how you should sing, you have

<sup>102</sup> Available from: <http://www.albatv.org/Mujeres-amazonicas-defienden-en.html> (Accessed: April 28, 2021)

to have power.’ So I sing when I have to, I have to sing until I get there. If I sing, I cannot eat food. I cannot eat food, nor drink water, nor eat chili, nor salt. It’s a bit of a hassle, because if you eat chili, especially, you cannot control the power.” (Interview, August 9, 2018, Puyo)

Phillip Descola describes in his ethnographic work with the Achuar—closely related to the Shiwiar and Shuar peoples—that the word *anent* [chant in Achuar, Shiwiar and Shuar] comes from the same root as *inintai*, “the heart,” the organ where thought, memory and emotions reside (Descola 1989, 273). The *anent* are “discourses of the heart” adapted to different circumstances in Achuar’s public and domestic life, like cultivating, hunting, improving relations with relatives or settling a dispute. These supplications are addressed to all kinds of recipients with a “receptive sensitivity,” whom the Achuar want to convince, seduce, or “enchant” by the content of the *anent*. Examples of recipients are entities like *Nunkuli*, but also animals, plants and humans. The *anent* is therefore a magic spell, an “enchantment,” and an intimate plea from the heart used in order to influence the course of things (Ibid.).

The ability to sing with the heart is thus a very precious practice of forest-making that connects the person who sings with the beings to whom the chant is directed in a very intimate way. Rosa Gualinga even described how singing with the heart makes her cry very often—“I feel sad, I cry when I sing, really, you cry” (interview, August 9, 2018, Puyo). This Amazonian leader has used this power for many things and purposes. Examples she shared range from singing in order to “find” meat in the forest (when hunting) or in order to find a partner, to *cantos* that bring unity within indigenous peoples in order to defend their territory:

“In the Shiwiar nationality we have to defend our territory. For that we have a different song. It is a song that we dedicate to defend and not to get angry with each other. Without anger between us we can find unity in each nationality.” (Statement at the international congress “Bodies, Territories and Dispossession: Life under Threat,” October 16, 2018, Universidad Andina Simón Bolívar in Quito).

Other Amazonian leaders like the Shuar leaders Dominga Antún and Maria Taant are also very well known for their *anent*, which they bring to their public interventions. Antún, who comes from the Shuar community of San Luis Inimkis very close to the mega-mining project Mirador, shared one *anent* with a purpose similar to that of Rosa Gualinga during one event I had the opportunity to attend in the city of Gualaquiza. She explained:

“With this mining that is going to come, we are going to lose our identity, as women, men and children. That is our concern, we don’t want to lose our customs, our traditions. [...] Now we are in danger, now that mining is coming. For those who do not understand Shuar, I, my intervention [song] was for us to be together now. To be together with our peoples, our nationalities. To be always united, not to separate, not to abandon our territory, not to leave our house. All of us have to be united.” (Statement at the public hearing “*Verdad para la Vida*” against mega-mining projects, September 2, 2017, Gualaquiza)<sup>103</sup>

It is clear for Rosa Gualinga that singing in the forest, surrounded by its powerful beings, has a different effect than singing in public spaces like in front of the presidential palace, surrounded by the chaos of the city. Descola inclusively describes the *anent* as personal treasures for Achuar peoples, which are jealously guarded, shared among close relatives or passed on during secret ceremonies (Descola 1989, 274ff.). However, the recurrent appearance of the Amazonian Women’s *cantos* during their public interventions certainly challenges the interpretation that the forest-making practice of singing can only take place in the forest. The Amazonian Women’s decision to publicly perform their chants in other spaces position their practices of forest-making as contemporary political interventions that disrupt the way governmental or *mestizo* “politics as usual” are reproduced (de la Cadena 2015, 37). The politics as usual, reproduced by people like Janeth Hinostroza or by state-representatives who designate zones of extractive sacrifice, are the politics of disenchantment, the politics of no alternative to “more capitalism”, more “extractivism” or more “viable economic solutions” for the current state of things. The politics enacted by practices of forest-making like singing, are on the contrary the politics of enchantment, the politics that “chant” a different “world into existence” in order to re-enchant our imaginaries about alternative futures (Linebaugh’s preface in Federici 2018, xvii). The Amazonian Women’s politics of enchantment, therefore, do not consist of superstitious magic or beliefs, products of a mystical or archaic way of “being indigenous.” Instead, this politics’ magic is rooted in its pragmatic power to transform the “habits, or stakes” that characterize our way of approaching current situations (Stengers 2005, 195). By making certain voices that are typically excluded from public debates available to a broader audience, the Amazonian Women are transforming the stakes that shape hegemonic debates on the Amazon as a territory to be either protected for its

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<sup>103</sup> Available from: <https://verdadparalavida.org/2017/08/audiencia-de-la-cordillera-del-condor/> (Accessed: April 28, 2021)

biodiversity or exploited for its resources, and make visible the human and non-human lives at stake if extractive expansion continues.

There is no better way to show the contrast and confrontation between these two politics than by focusing on how the Amazonian Women's visit ended in Quito. Moreno decided to meet with the Amazonian Women's network in the presidential palace on March 23, 2018. After Moreno publicly announced he wanted to continue "dialogue and converse,"<sup>104</sup> a delegation of the Amazonian Women met with the president and other representatives for approximately two hours. The Amazonian leaders called for an end to extractive concessions, denounced the death threats and attacks that leaders like Patricia Gualinga, Nema Grefa, Alicia Cahuilla and Salomé Aranda have received due to their anti-extractive activism,<sup>105</sup> and debunked claims that affected communities were properly consulted on current and future oil and mining projects.<sup>106</sup> During the meeting, Moreno repeated his openness for dialogue and told the women that he "worries a lot about oil and mining, because we have a future to take care of,"<sup>107</sup> even though it is almost "impossible for a world to exist without oil and mining."<sup>108</sup> After a last round of speeches, the governmental politics of "dialogue" were challenged by Nina Gualinga from Sarayaku, who, after sharing one Kichwa *canto* said the following: "Look at the women's faces, look at them, look at their children, and stop lying! How can you lie to us? You tell us you want to dialogue, you want to consult us for this and that. Lies! We all know that!" (Speech during the meeting with President Moreno in Quito, March 23, 2018, live-streamed by Comunicación Sapara in Facebook). Nina called out the politics of disenchantment by name, an exceptional and historic moment to remember.

## Learning to Dream and Becoming a Leader

For Kichwa people, certain animals like the boa, entities like *Nunkuli*, or *supay* [forest protectors] like *juri juri* are beings that poses certain qualities or a certain vitality

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<sup>104</sup> Available from: <https://amazonwatch.org/news/2018/0323-amazonian-women-give-president-fifteen-days-to-respond-to-their-demands> (Accessed: April 28, 2021)

<sup>105</sup> Available from: <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2018/mar/23/keep-off-our-land-indigenous-women-tell-ecuadors-president> (Accessed: April 28, 2021)

<sup>106</sup> Available from: <https://amazonwatch.org/news/2018/0323-amazonian-women-give-president-fifteen-days-to-respond-to-their-demands> (Accessed: April 28, 2021)

<sup>107</sup> Ibid.

<sup>108</sup> Available from: <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2018/mar/23/keep-off-our-land-indigenous-women-tell-ecuadors-president> (Accessed: April 28, 2021)

that humans need. The practice of singing with a purpose, similarly than what Descola describes, works as a kind of communication channel between the Kichwa person who sings and the being recipient of the chant, with goal of “transmitting” to the person the vitality she or he is invoking (Guzmán-Gallegos 1997, 52 ff.). Eduardo Kohn describes this practice of constant communication between Kichwa peoples from the Upper Amazon and non-human beings as a process that, to an extent, involves communion. According to him “communication with others entails some measure of what Haraway (2008) calls “becoming with” these others” (Kohn 2013, 18). In this section, I examine the Amazonian Women’s processes of “becoming with” others, especially in relation to what relations and what encounters have had an important role in them becoming political leaders. Nevertheless, instead of focusing on the practice of singing with a purpose, the following analysis focusses on a different practice of forest-making that has the power of transforming humans, this is the practice of dreaming.

For almost all Kichwa Amazonian leaders I co-labored with, but also many Waorani, Sapara, Shiwiar and Shuar leaders I interviewed, their dreams have had a special role in their lives. According to these conversations and to several ethnographic descriptions (Guzmán-Gallegos 1997; Whitten and Scott Whitten 2008; Kohn 2013; and Descola 1989), the Amazonian practice of dreaming is not to be misunderstood as the abstract journey of the mind while sleeping. Rather, dreams are real “journeys of the soul” to the world of spirits, where a different reality is revealed and where it is possible to communicate with the souls of certain animals, plants, and other spirits (Descola 1989, 274). Additionally, dreams during the sleep or induced by the consumption of certain hallucinogenic plants are also revelatory visions about the future and about the person who dreams (Whitten and Scott Whitten 2008, 59ff.). In fact, it is common for Amazonian leaders like Rosa Gualinga, Nancy Santi, Zoila Castillo, Elvia Dagua or Patricia Gualinga to go to a *shaman* [spiritual leader]—who most of the times is a close relative—in order to have a better understanding of their problems, illnesses or diseases through the guided consumption of plants like ayahuasca or huanduc:

“In everything there are rules, restraints with which we have to act. We cannot go around in a disorderly way or committing imprudences. All the knowledge from our *Yachay* [wise person in the community] and our *Shamanes* come from nature. They have had the power to talk, to engage in a dialogue of information with nature.” (Patricia Gualinga, interview, August 8, 2017, Puyo)

Elvia Dagua, for example, has been able to predict with the help of her dreams not only experiences like our two co-labor trips to the Amazon, but also certain important aspects about her personal life:

“I just dreamed, recently, it was like, mmhh, maybe three or four days before we came here that I dreamed. It was a tree, I dreamed of, that I was climbing. And I was being followed by people who wanted to attack me with a spear. I said: ‘Why are they following me? Oh, I’m going to fly, I’m going to demonstrate!’ And I flew, I went to the other tree. And I said: ‘I want to fly higher!’ That’s what I did, like that [she shakes her arms]. I couldn’t fly any higher! Only low. I went from tree to tree, but only about a hundred meters, like that, I flew. How much I wish I could keep dreaming like that! And it’s because I was going to come here. Because I wasn’t sure I was going to come, you know! To leave, not to leave, and then, bam! I decided! Did you see? [laughs]. [...] One night I had a dream like that. A dream that told me that they were going to give me to my husband the next day, my husband. I dreamed that I was crossing, there was a small river, and next to that river there was one of these trees that are here, from *Ungurahua*. But, very tall! It had fallen towards the river. I had to cross the river, so I was going, so I climbed the tree. When I climbed the tree, there was a boa. That boa was with the tree, but it was a boa of this size [big]. It’s been lying down. And that boa goes, ‘Whoo!’ on my foot with its tail. I was, ‘oh, the boa, the boa, the boa, the boa, the boa got me!’ And I would look, I would stand still and the head would be over there, and the boa would show me her tongue like that. And I was: ‘aaaaay!’ Bang! I woke up. It was because they were going to hand me over. She already took me with her tail. They were going to give me to my husband.” (Interview, September 6, 2018, Shiwiar community of Kurintza)

While the first part of Dagua’s narration relates to a dream she had just before we flew together to the community of Kurintza in September 2018—we actually flew over the massive trees surrounding of the Bobonaza river—the second part refers to a premonitory dream she had before her first marriage. Dagua was forced to marry her first husband when she was only fourteen years old. As her dream reveals, it was the boa through her act of grabbing Dagua with the tail that warned her about the fact that her parents were going to “give her” to her husband. This experienced strongly marked this Amazonian leader’s life, who had a lot of difficulties with her first partner and separated from him twelve years after their union. During this period of her life she learned to become a strong leader and to value her political work over her marriage:

“In CONAIE I founded the ‘School for Women Leaders.’ [...] I left good guidelines there, because I wanted my *compañeras* to work. I left that project and said, ‘today, I will dedicate myself to my home. I dedicate myself to my

home, to my husband, everything.’ But it seems that it was wrong. It didn’t work out well for me. I was too dedicated to the home. So that happened [split from her husband]. After that, I was appointed coordinator of Ecuador’s indigenous women. It is another instance that includes peasant and indigenous women.” (Interview, August 23, 2017, Puyo)

Despite the constant discouragements from her partner, who not only did not support her political work but actively tried to lower her self-esteem, Dagua started her activities at her indigenous organization when she was seventeen years old. At this young age, she and other Kichwa women from the San Jacinto *comuna* founded the Amazonian women’s organization *Amaru Warmi*, the “Boa Woman.” Interestingly, the animal spirit that told Dagua about her marriage was the same animal she and her female *compañeras* decided to name their organization after.

The boa is the animal that symbolizes strength and that has guided Dagua, as well as other Amazonian leaders, throughout their political work. *Amaru* or the boa is for Amazonian peoples the female spirit of strength and the protector of the rivers, where the organization of Amazonian communities’ everyday life takes place (López Canelas and Cielo 2018, 55). These characteristics are, nevertheless, not only hypothetical or imagined representations about the boa, but qualities that the real animal possess. The water boa is feared and admired for her enormous force, as it can overturn a canoe, kill its passengers or even kill people, especially kids, who are bathing in the river. The boa is also associated with the power of the water and its spirits, a power that manifests itself in the flooding of rivers or in the endless days of rain that can change the appearance of the forest in just few hours (Guzmán-Gallegos 1997, 51). As I learned during our twelve-hour long canoe trip with Zoila Castillo to her community of Teresa Mama, we had to show a lot of respect and caution when passing certain places along the river in order not to wake-up or upset the boa who resided there. When we did not show respect or discretion, like when we stepped out to push the canoe due to the river’s low-water, Castillo read the boa’s anger in the sky:

“The boa will get angry and make it rain. [...] You can see that kind of sun in the sky that tells you it will make it rain. I can see that clearly.” (Recorded conversation in the canoe, September 12, 2018, Bobonaza river)



Image 37. Canoe trip to the Kichwa community of Teresa Mama, September 12, 2018, Bobonaza river.

Being an *amaru warmi* or identifying with the spirit of the boa denotes the Amazonian Women's strength and leadership. Besides Dagua, leaders like Castillo or Santi often paint their faces with *wituk*-designs that identify them with the boa before attending protests or other political events. They also weave their *artesanías* in clay or seeds with the shape of the boa. For Santi, for example, the boa is a very important animal in her life, who constantly appears in her dreams and who has contributed to her own strength:

“I like to paint *mukawas* with the design of different boas like the *yanamaru*, *acuamaru*, *pishcamaru*. I like to paint the boa because I always see them in my dreams, the boa is part of me, it always accompanies me, it gives me advice, that's why I'm not afraid.” (Interview with Nancy Santi in Premauer 2016, 110)

As Santi mentions, her constant encounters with the boa in her dreams have transformed her into a strong woman who is not afraid. These encounters have even implied a process of communion with the boa—“the boa is part of me.” This close relationship of becoming with the boa is what she honors through her *mukawa* designs. For Santi, as well as for the other Amazonian leaders who weave clay like Castillo, being able to maintain a continuous contact with the boa through the forest-making practice of dreaming makes them strong and gives them knowledge. As Norman E. Whitten describes in his work, it is said that the spirit of the boa visits Kichwa women in their dreams in order to teach them *mukawa* designs, the wisdom of their ancestors, and to give them advice about their lives (Whitten 1987 in Premauer 2016). Because of this capacity to communicate with the boa, a woman who is an expert in pottery making is respected by her community as a strong and visionary woman. The power of *muskuna* [dreaming and “seeing”] and to have *muskuy* [dreams as visions] is for Kichwa people



fundamental in strengthening their bodies and souls (Whitten and Scott Whitten 2008, 61ff.). This is why the woman who possesses this wisdom is called *muskuyuj warmi* [visionary woman or the woman who sees] or *sinchi muskuyuj warmi* [strong visionary woman] (Ibid., 70).

It is thus no coincidence that strong and visionary women like Dagua, Santi and Castillo have become political leaders of their communities and indigenous organizations. Nevertheless, this power to dream and to become a *sinchi muskuyuj warmi* is not something that someone inherently possess. On the contrary, this power is cultivated throughout Kichwa peoples' lives and can be strengthened or weakened by certain actions and relations. In the case of Dagua, she attributes her power to dream and her leadership to her stepfather, who "taught" her how to cultivate powerful visions through the ingest of certain plants:

"If you want to get more strength, more energy, you want to be stronger in life, you have to keep going, keep going, keep taking tobacco, tobacco and ayahuasca. When I was 21 years old, a *shaman* told me 'you are going to be a lot.' [...] I have dreamt traveling. I have dreamt with many people that I am talking. Sometimes I can't talk, sometimes there are more old people than me and I keep walking or I keep seated. The dream already tells you, so you have just to fulfill it. [...] I should thank my stepfather. Since I was a little girl, he used to tell me 'sit down, kneel down, you have to have dreams!' And he made me inhale tobacco in the afternoons, before going to bed. "Hey, don't eat much!" he would say. I used to say, 'what for?' I thought he did that to punish me, to give me a lesson. But it wasn't that. [...] After 3 o'clock in the morning, when we drank *guayusa*, he would say: 'Wash your mouth with *guayusa*!' Then, in a pot he would cook other plants, *chuchuwaso*, cedar, *caracaspi*, *amaruncaspi*." (Interview, September 8, 2018, community of Kurintza)

As Dagua remembers, the inhalation of tobacco or the ingest of *guayusa* and other plants in the mornings were important practices that cultivated powerful visions about her future. Even though it was difficult to understand the role of plants as a child, Dagua and other Amazonian leaders nowadays value and attribute their powerful visions, their qualities of hard-working women and their leadership to the consumption and relation to certain plants. Santi, for example, attributes her capacity to dream, her strength and disposition as a hard-working woman to her mother's cleansings with *ortiga* [nettle]. She describes this practice as a way of transmitting certain desired attributes from one person to the other:

“Our *muskuy* are very important for us. I was taught since I was little to interpret my *muskuy* in order to avoid any... [...] *Muskuy* is the power that nature will give you, that [alerts you] when something is going to happen to your family, some death, or some danger that is going to happen to you. So I know how to interpret many dreams and avoid danger and bad things to happen. I, for example, have taught my daughters, especially my women. Because this is how our mothers taught us. Mothers teach their daughters, fathers teach their sons. For example, in order for your daughter to be a good worker, you make her *ortigar* [cleansing ritual with nettle]. It’s not like you are mistreating her. Rather, it cleans you. My mother did a lot of that to me. She said, ‘so that when you grow up, you don’t be lazy, don’t be idle, or a liar and a thief.’ All of that. She said three things: *manashuana*, *manakuyana* and *manalullana*. So she applied that to us, she cleaned me with *ortiga*, she made me sit on *ortiga* during the traditional festivities and that was like a cleansing for us, it was not a punishment. It is a cleansing that leaves us that power. They [the mothers or fathers] pass it on to us. Today, I also practice that. For example, when I see a man or a hard-working woman I like to make them clean my children with *ortiga*. People do that so that someday you, in your mature age, do everything. So that you don’t become an idle woman, or husband.” (Interview by Lorena van Bunningen y Corinne Duhalde Ruiz, November 1, 2018, Community of Sisa)

The qualities that Santi mentions—“*manashuana*, *manakuyana* and *manalullana*,” not to be lazy, a liar or a thief—are important political attributes in the eyes of people from her community, who elected her as the first female *Kuraka* of her Kichwa *pueblo*. As María Guzmán-Gallegos describes, these political attributes are also what differentiate Kichwa people from Spanish-speaking people, *mestizos* and *mestizas* from the city, who are considered *jahuallacta*. *Jahuallacta* are people who have the ability to rapidly establish relationships of domination and who possess the arrogance and conviction that their way of life is better (Guzmán-Gallegos 1997, 16). Moreover, *jahuallacta* do not know the forest-making practice of dreaming; that is to say, they may have dreams while sleeping, but their souls forget these visions because of their different way of thinking and understanding the world. This is why *mestizas* like me or the author cannot not communicate or “become with” the spirits of the forest and our body is generally weaker (Ibid., 44).

Nevertheless, despite these differences between *jahuallacta* and *runakuna* [Kichwa people], the practice of sharing dreams in the mornings while drinking *guayusa* is not exclusive to the Amazonian Women. On the contrary, I was able to share a lot of special moments with my five co-laborers in the early mornings, when I was invited to share my dreams while drinking *guayusa* and to purify my body and soul—the purification consisted of inducing the vomit through the ingestion of litters of

*guayusa*. With Dagua, for example, I went to drink *guayusa* and share dreams at her brother's place, right after we came back from CONAIE's sixth congress in Zamora; with Aranda, I had *guayusa* at her uncle's place as we talked about the latest news concerning the complicated relationship between the oil company AGIP and the Kichwa communities of Villano; and with Santi, I drank *guayusa* almost every morning before attending the political assembly she and other communitarian representatives organized to write a declaration against the licensing of two oil blocks in their territory.

It is through these experiences that I came to comprehend that sharing dreams in the mornings constituted highly political moment, when Amazonian families and community members have the opportunity to talk about different type of concerns, including territorial ones, and listen to the advice of their elders. As Rosa Gualinga mentions:

“At two o'clock in the morning we get up, cook *guayusa*, call those who make mistakes, and give advice to our children. We give advice, ‘how are you going to live? How are going to move forward?’ When you are appointed leader, you also have to say how you are going to move forward.” (Rosa Gualinga, statement at the international congress “Bodies, Territories and Dispossession: Life under Threat,” October 16, 2018, Universidad Andina Simón Bolívar in Quito)

Similar than the practices of forest-making mentioned in the previous two sections, the practice of dreaming can be shared with *jahuallacta*. This practice also trespasses the boundaries between the forest and the city. In fact, the Amazonian Women include the practice of drinking *guayusa* and sharing dreams into their political mobilizations in the city. For example, the assembly that took place before the Amazonian Women's 2018 march included the so-called “*guayusada*” or “*toma de guayusa*” (*Descripción de la Marcha y Asamblea de Mujeres Amazónicas*, March 2018). Drinking *guayusa* in the city has thus become an important moment to gather strength before their mobilizations and to share to dreams, thoughts, and concerns with their allies.

## **Decolonizing the Anti-Extractive Struggle**

As showed in this chapter, there is a set of practices and relations that infuse Amazonian Women's political discourse, strategies and proposals, and reveal the complex entanglements behind their anti-extractive organizing. In the case of their

*Kawsak Sacha* proposal, its message has not been only carefully designed and woven together in a similar way as Amazonian leaders' *artesanías*—i.e. as a complex “fabric” that includes a plurality of elements, discourses, and concepts. Its content is also directly linked to and inspired by concrete practices that reproduce human and non-human life, and make the Amazon into a living forest. These practices, which I call “practices of forest-making,” include cultivating the land, singing with a purpose, and learning how to dream. I analyzed each of these practices in detail, examining how they create and recreate affective relations with the forest and the non-human world. I also showed how these practices are not only reproduced in the forest, but travel to the cities, permeating the Amazonian Women's diverse ways of doing politics.

When looking at the manifestation of these practices in the cities, we can understand another aspect of *rexistance*. As mentioned in Chapter Three, *rexistance* is a concept that expands the limited ways in which we understand anti-extractive resistance, as mere rejection to any extractive activities, and incorporates the plural modes in which the Amazonian Women defend their territories. These plural modes are characterized by elements like the public enactment of practices of forest-making on the streets of Quito or during meeting with state authorities, which not only reject extractive and developmental policies, but challenge them by making visible the interdependent chains of human and non-human life in the forest.

Even if the government or *mestizo* elites do not really seem to accept, much less understand, the terms of the Amazonian Women's proposals, the public display of their declarations and the presence of their voices and practices of forest-making in the cities are changing the dominant stakes that have shaped confronting narratives and politics about the Amazon. The Amazon is neither a mythical place full of unlimited resources to be exploited nor a natural “Eden” of biodiversity in danger of extinction. Rather, and paraphrasing Marisol de la Cadena, the Amazonian Women are reshuffling “hegemonic antagonisms” about the Amazon—that positions extractive-developmental vs. environmentalist-conservationist discourses as legitimate antagonists—and are enacting new forms of “doing politics” that defend the Amazon as a living space (de la Cadena 2010, 345).

The way that the Amazonian Women's network is challenging dominant narratives about the Amazon has certainly transformed the anti-extractive struggle in Ecuador. Ecuadorian environmentalist organizations like *Acción Ecológica*, the *Yasunid@s* collective, or the feminist collective *Miradas Críticas del Territorio desde*

*el Feminismo*, as well as US-based non-governmental organizations like Amazon Watch and WECAN have not only actively supported the Amazonian Women's struggle, but have also partially adopted the vocabulary and proposals offered by Amazonian indigenous leaders as I show next. Without ignoring the ongoing tensions and asymmetrically allyships between the Amazonian Women's network and environmental activists, these transformations evidence how indigenous voices are transforming the environmental struggle in Ecuador and abroad. These transformations are necessary in order to decolonize our imaginaries about territories like the Amazon and to resist what capitalist extractivism is trying to occupy: life in its multiple forms.

## Chapter Six – The Amazonian Women and Ecofeminists: Becoming-Together in Allyship

### Introduction

One of my most intense experiences of co-labor in the Amazon took place during my stay in the Kichwa territory of Kawsak Sacha. On October 23, 2018, one week before my arrival there, the Ecuadorian Ministry of Hydrocarbons had opened the licensing process for the oil blocks 86 and 87. While block 86 mostly affects Shiwiari and Sapara communities, block 87 geographically covers all of Kawsak Sacha's territory, as well as one part of the buffer zone of the Tagaeri-Taromenane peoples living in voluntary isolation in the Yasuní National Park. The context of this licensing process completely changed the nature of my stay, which was originally planned as a co-labor workshop on *artesanías* and territoriality with Kichwa women from the communities of Lorocachi, Sisa, Yana Yaku and Jatun Playa. Nancy Santi asked me to stay longer than planned and to provide technical support in order to write a declaration of resistance against the extractive interests of the state.

I was not the only person foreign to the community who helped write the declaration. Santi also included others into what she called the *equipo técnico* [technical team] in charge of writing the declaration, all of whom were coincidentally in Kawsak Sacha for different reasons. This group included the director of the IQBSS, a Chilean anthropologist, a Dutch-Chilean filmmaker, and two Ecuadorian anthropologists from the Ministry of Justice in charge of periodically “monitoring” whether people in voluntary isolation were moving outside of the Yasuní Park. While all of us had different experiences of working with the people of Kawsak Sacha—for example, the director of IQBSS, a Kichwa Saraguru woman originally from the southern Andes, was Kawsak Sacha's closest ally in different conservationist projects that were crucial for the legal recognition of Kawsak Sacha's territory by the state in 2011—we all became part of the *minka* that wrote the declaration. *Minka* has been described as a form of cooperative work within Kichwa communities by various anthropological studies (Faas 2018). However, I learned from Amazonian and Andean Kichwa women to extend the

definition of *minka* to a constant practice of relating to the other, crucial for the creation and strengthening of communitarian bonds.<sup>109</sup>



Image 38. Nancy Santi and Kawsak Sacha's Pastor pointing to the oil blocks 86 and 87 that covers all of Kawsak Sacha's territory, meeting between IQBSS and the political representatives of Kawsak Sacha, November 3, 2018, Community of Sisa.

My memories of this *minka* are many and diverse. As a process of collectively weaving a declaration of resistance, it was not easy. Even if the text of the declaration became a web of different voices and different languages that speak to and beyond the state, the collective exercise of writing it was often very complicated. Santi's leadership and wisdom was crucial during the entire process, always "bringing back" the voices of the Kawsak Sacha community members in the writing process. Nevertheless, despite her wisdom and role as a "translator" between the Spanish-speaking world—embodied by us, the foreigners, in charge of typing the text for the declaration—and the *Runa* world—embodied by Kichwa elders and political representatives from Kawsak Sacha, in charge of sharing ideas from the community with us—the voices of the community were often silent. This happened not only in the moments when the Spanish-speaking world "colonized" the discussion under the banner of "political strategy" and centered the debate on the question of which legal articles to use from the Ecuadorian constitution and other international treaties. The silencing also took place even after we realized that we were appropriating the discussion and decided to "hold back" our

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<sup>109</sup>Kuymi Tambaco and I offer a detailed reflection on *minka* as a bonding practice in our 2019 German article "Reflexionen über die Minga aus den Anden: Praktiken der Partizipation in Gemeinschaft," in *Wissenschaft und Frieden (W&F)*.

voices and “listen,” as we became aware that our written interpretations of what the elders were sharing with us were always missing something.

By describing this ethnographic moment, I do not want to give the impression that the writing process of the Kawsak Sacha declaration was a failure. On the contrary, it was a powerful and creative process of bringing different voices and worlds together—voices and worlds that were negotiated, translated, mistranslated, changed, and engaged in moments of “becoming-together.” Even in those moments when the Spanish-speaking world was reducing the debate to a legal matter, the community members made space for this to happen. Actually, the community wanted us there precisely because of our access to legal and technological matters, and the roles of Santi and the IQBSS director as *runa* consisted in carefully leading the discussion and making space for the different voices, present in the room, to “be heard.” By sharing this experience, I want to bring to the surface the complexities behind relations of allyship in action, relations that neither happen among equals nor on equal terms.

In this chapter, I reflect on “allyship” as a concept that is intended to make space for thinking about relations between allies that come together for common and uncommon reasons (Blaser and de la Cadena 2018, 4). As the word “ally-ship” suggests, this becoming-together does not occur between obvious and familiar partners, since it is not based on kinship linkages of familiarity, linkages of really “knowing each other,” in which “knowing about one’s kin is also knowing about oneself” (Strathern 2005, 69). As my experience in Kawsak Sacha shows, allyship happens *between* different allies and different worlds that happen to work together, even as their encounters are marked by histories that reproduce asymmetrical relations of coloniality, racism, and patriarchy. The lack of kin in allyship relations does not prevent this working, coming or doing together. On the contrary, allyship relations have the power to create moments of becoming-together that change the allies in deep and long-lasting ways.

I use the term “becoming-together” and “become-together” to speak of relations of allyship, that is, relations in which allies are involved in intense processes of changing each other while creating modes of reexisting extractive occupation. This concept of “becoming” is primarily inspired by Encarnación Gutiérrez-Rodríguez’s reflection on “transversal becomings” (2015), Donna Haraway’s call for engaging in relations of “becoming-with each other” (2016), and Eduardo Viveiros de Castro’s work on the Deleuzian concept of “becoming” through intensive/extensive relations



(2014). I use the term becoming-together because “together” underscores the interdependence that exists among allies that do not share kin-based relations.

In the following sections, I reflect on particular moments of allyship between the Amazonian Women, urban activists, and myself. The complexity of all such moments forces me, on the one hand, to sidestep the concept of identity in its closed and static version. By contrast, allyship is a radically relational concept, which understands identities as “contradictory, partial, and strategic” (Haraway 1991, 155) and relies on different metaphors of “relations to uncover relations” (Strathern cited by Lebner 2017, 3). The complexity underwriting “moments of allyship” is another reason I focus this analysis on such moments, as opposed to using allyship as a way to describe a perpetual state of being between the Amazonian Women and their allies. This analytical decision for the chapter does not negate the relation that the Amazonian Women have managed to weave with urban activists and academics outside the moments to be described later on. However, in order to avoid the tendency to “explain away” contradictions by highlighting some benevolent purpose behind relations of allyship, my analysis of these moments of allyship seeks to describe the coexistence of violent contradictions—produced by colonial, racist and patriarchal histories that still permeate our relations—and other forms in which allies converge and even become-together in unexpected, unforeseeable ways.

The first sections of this chapter offer an overview of how relations of allyship have been examined by critical race theorists, critical whiteness theorists, and Amazonian studies focusing on alliances between indigenous and environmental activists. This overview allows me to contextualize my own usage of the term allyship and explain how relations between the Amazonian Women and their allies contain complicated and even contradictory modes of cooperation, as well as processes of becoming-together. Here I also analyze how my own co-labor with the Amazonian Women evolved into a relation of allyship. In the second part of the chapter, I examine the Amazonian Women’s allyship with environmental and feminist activists, with a focus on the historical dynamics underlying their complicated relationship. Additionally, I explore their process of becoming-together by explaining how they simultaneously negotiate their relationships and extend each other’s positions. Finally, I examine the tensions that allyship relations between the Amazonian Women and urban activists have created within indigenous organizations. These tensions have required the Amazonian Women to find ways to negotiate the space of visibility they

have gained through their allies with their *compañeros* and *compañeras* from the indigenous movement.

### **Allyship for Resistance**

The concept of “allyship” in social justice movements has been explored by critical race and critical whiteness studies. While critical race theorists in the United States have offered important analyses for understanding how racism permeates the material fabric of our institutions and society (The Combahee River Collective 1978; Bell 1992; Delgado and Stefancic 2001), critical whiteness studies build on the tenets of critical race theory to make visible the ways in which whiteness and white privilege perpetuates racial oppression (McIntosh, 1988). Within this context, the term “ally” has been used to define those who are part of a privileged group committed to supporting members of historically oppressed communities (Patton and Bondi 2015). But instead of actually contributing to ending systems of oppression, many critical whiteness scholars argue, this relationship often ends up privileging those same “white allies” who see themselves in a position of “rescuing” or “saving” the other (Tatum 1994; Batts 2002). Thus, relations of dominance are inherently connected to allyship, positioning people of color as in need of assistance and whites as providing the support, maintaining hegemonic systems of oppression (Indigenous Action Media, 2015 in Sinclair and Powell 2020).

In the Latin American context, the complexities and asymmetries behind relations of alliance between indigenous communities and environmental activists have been analyzed by authors like Blanca Muratorio (1994), Beth A. Conklin and Laura R. Graham (1995), Astrid Ulloa (2004), and Philippe Descola (2004). In their article “The Shifting Middle Ground: Amazonian Indians and Eco-Politics,” Conklin and Graham argue that while the international alliances between Amazonian communities and non-governmental organizations have benefited both environmentalist and indigenous interests, these relations are rooted in contradictions between indigenous realities and the ideas about “Indians” that have inspired support within a broad public (1995, 696). By defining it as the “shifting middle ground of Amazonian eco-politics,” the authors describe how environmentalists and Amazonian activists frame their political discourse in terms of the assumption “that native peoples’ views of nature and ways of using natural resources are consistent with Western conservationist principles” (Ibid.).

Following a similar framework of analysis, Ulloa's book *La Construcción del Nativo Ecológico* (2004) focuses on how the image of the "ecological native" in Colombia has been constructed by the environmental and conservationist discourse, at the same time that indigenous communities have used this same image to shape and position their political demands.

Taking these tenets of critical analysis as reference for analyzing the relations between the Amazonian Women and their allies, I understand allyship neither as outside relations of dominance and hegemonic systems of oppression, nor as characterized by harmonious and intelligible intentions between parties. Rather, relations of allyship are highly contradictory; they are deeply marked by the history of colonization in the Amazon and by conflictual and sometimes irreconcilable imaginaries of territory, nature, community and even solidarity. While my conceptualization of relations of allyship focuses on the effects of this complicated colonial history, it also examines how the parties involved in them do not necessarily relate to each other through external relations, but through "intra-relations" that are integral to the entities themselves (de la Cadena 2015, 32) and that can in turn produce processes that "become-with each other" (Haraway 2016, 4). In other words, relations of allyship should be understood as partially connected relationships that ultimately extend the others' positions in order to facilitate laboring with each other.

As mentioned in the introduction, the process of allies becoming-together does not lead to a fixed state of being, but rather perpetuates itself through the ways allies continuously change in flux with each other. In order to let the becoming happen, despite and through our divergences, allies are required to recognize a shared existence, an interdependence. This recognition is vital because we do not always have the privilege to choose our allies, and we know we cannot fight capitalist occupation alone. Becoming-together thus occurs by recognizing our interdependence with different peoples, beings, and worlds, without idealizing the notion of relationality or normativizing what it is at stake. The moment we idealize relations by reducing "reciprocity to altruism" (Interview with Marilyn Strathern, Fausto and Viveiros de Castro 2017, 56), or by advocating for "mere tolerance of difference" among us, we end up either using each other or falling into "the grossest reformism" (Lorde 1984, 111). In other words, in order to become-together in allyship, even if only partially, we need to relate to each other by engaging in "serious practices of disagreement" (de la

Cadena 2017) about what it is at stake with people and beings whose thinking diverge from and exceed our own.

Upon this basis, we turn to the concept of *trama* [entanglement] as a way of imagining how allyship works. For the sociologist Gladys Tzul Tzul, *tramas* are composed of everyday and political relations wherein subjects are not separated from but constituted by the struggles they are involved in (2015 and 2018a). In other words, the entities involved in the *trama* cannot be thought outside of the relations that compose it; which is to say, community members defending their territory cannot be thought outside the communitarian relations that reproduce their territory (Tzul Tzul 2015, 128). At the same time, the *trama* is also entangled in relations that precede our present existence, relations that were there before us but also permeate us deeply in the present (Tzul Tzul 2018a). In order to weave ourselves in allyship—to become-together—we need to recognize how history positions us differently within the *trama*, without forgetting that we always carry something from the other inside. This means that *tramas* also include asymmetrical linkages or threads, which sometimes run the risk of breaking when there is too much pressure, too much domination. However, when a thread breaks, it grows and connects in other directions. The logic of growing is an extensive one that continues the struggle(s) in other spaces whose driving force might not be allyship but something else. This makes the *trama*'s extensive relations resistant to hierarchy. It rather grows as an act of becoming-together again, instead of replacing, subsuming, and annihilating the other in order to survive. Allyship as a *trama*, then, is connected to a multiplicity of becomings, even if these appear to yield extremely different ends. This leaves open the possibility that if we trace the extensions, we can find each other again.

To slow down this abstraction about relations of allyship as relations of becoming-together, let's return to the ethnographic moment discussed above. Here, I would like to continue by quoting the Kawsak Sacha people's declaration:

“We are the *kawsak sachá runakuna*, spokespeople for all beings that exist in this living rainforest; we speak on behalf of the *supay*, animals, forests, ancestors, peoples and worlds that constitute the *sumak allpa*, *sumak yaku* and *sumak waira*. The Ancestral Kichwa People of Kawsak Sacha, in full exercise of their right to autonomy and self-determination, declare their rejection to all forms of racism, colonization and colonialism that have historically plundered our territories [...]. In exercise of Art. 98 of the Constitution, which recognizes the right to resist any state's actions or omissions [...], the Ancestral Kichwa

People of Kawsak Sacha declare ourselves in resistance against the oil exploitation of blocks 86 and 87 in our territory.” (*Pueblo Ancestral Kichwa Kawsak Sacha*, November 2018)

As described above, the allyship between the people from Kawsak Sacha and people foreign to this community, like myself, was crucial to writing the declaration. While I do not wish to imply that our presence was completely indispensable or that the moments of silencing previously mentioned were unimportant, the different languages and worlds expressed in this short abstract evidence how we made our differences work in order to create a declaration of resistance against extractive occupation. Some of these languages speak to the state in the name of autonomy and self-determination, without this implying a position demanding complete independence from the state. Independence, as Nancy Santi mentioned several times, would imply playing the dirty game of the state that demonizes indigenous autonomy as pure separatism and the withdrawal or disavowal of their rights as Ecuadorian citizens:

“[W]e are writing the declaration and developing our own proposals at the same time [...]. Because we are Ecuadorians too and the government is indebted to us! They should give us that [basic education, health, infrastructure] by law, by law! So that we don’t have to accept the offers from the Ministry of Hydrocarbons. [...] We have to be clear that the State is in debt to us!” (Nancy Santi, speech during a communal assembly, November 9, 2018, Community of Lorocachi)

Even if “independence” would seem the most radical interpretation of this declaration to most external eyes, the people of Kawsak Sacha do want to engage with the state. Indeed, parallel to writing this declaration, three other commissions wrote three proposals on education, health, and territorial rights to be handed over to the government. This engagement with the state, however, resists “domestication.” As the declaration shows, the people of Kawsak Sacha demand talking with the state, though not in terms of what the developmental state thinks they are: namely, poor communities or ethnic minorities demanding their cultural rights (Ruiz 1993; Sawyer 2004). Rather, they talk to the state as “*Kawsak Sacha runakuna*, spokespeople for all the beings that exist in this living rainforest.” The radicality of this declaration lies precisely in this opening assertion, which remained partly in Kichwa, respecting the *Kawsak Sacha runakuna*’s wish.

Becoming-together in moments of allyship is thus a practice of creating shared spaces, languages, or—as in this case—a *minka* for “working together/keeping distinct” (Verran 2018, 112). This means that allies find ways of working together while knowing how to use their differences, that is, how to make their differences work. And of course, in this process of making differences work, allies also change each other. Transformations do not happen in the way allies imagine it would, but in unpredictable ways that allow allies to make more space for others within themselves. In my case, it was very difficult to understand what the people of Kawsak Sacha were telling us about the complex systems of life in the swamps, lagoons and rivers located in their territory. According to Baltazar, a *shaman* or spiritual leader from Kawsak Sacha, the lagoon between the communities of Lorocachi and Sisa is not really a lagoon, but a *pueblo*, inhabited by different *supay* who protect it:

“We [as visitors] step on a lagoon, the lightning [as *supay*] strikes immediately”.  
(Baltazar, conversation during a communal assembly, November 9 2018, Community of Lorocachi)

The intense experience of sharing with the people from Kawsak Sacha evolved into an intense becoming, where I had to search for spaces free of Western logics of classification and categorization. Furthermore, to paraphrase Marilyn Strathern, I had to become able to play my understandings—as certainties—about nature and the reproduction of life, against my misunderstandings—as uncertainties—about what the people of Kawsak Sacha were telling us about the rainforest (Interview with Marilyn Strathern 2017, 41). After this experience, I cannot see, understand, or relate to the rainforest in the same way as I did when I arrived.



Image 39. Graphic representation by members of Kawsak Sacha of the *turu* [swamp] area located between the communities of Lorocachi and Sisa, IQBSS workshop on territorial mapping, November 9, 2018, Community of Lorocachi.

I must emphasize one important aspect from the Kawsak Sacha's writing *minka* as a process of making differences work and creating a document composed by different languages. This aspect is what situates allyship relations beyond a position of mere resistance—as opposition—to extractive occupation. Relations of allyship do not work according to the dialectical dynamic of “I negate (resist), so I exist.” Much like Ghassan Hage's account of *Alter-politics*, relations of allyship are not “primarily oriented towards the negation of the existing colonial order of domination”; rather, they resist by rendering visible and formulating “alternative modes of existence that can supersede colonialism” (Hage 2015, 171). In other words, relations of allyship work according to processes of becoming-together and extending themselves in order to resist capitalist occupation.

The use of Article 98 from the Ecuadorian Constitution—the right to resist any state's actions or omissions—in Kawsak Sacha's declaration could thus be interpreted as a way of extending resistance to resistance. As mentioned, the declaration in its totality is not just dedicated to talking with state; it is not completely preoccupied with extractive occupation. Rather, it goes beyond the terms that the state normally uses to shape the debate in favor of extractivism—terms like “progress,” “poverty alleviation,” or “modernization”—by using and creating a combination of languages that defend life in its multiple forms. The writing process of Kawsak Sacha's declaration is an example of what I call “allyship for resistance,” which also characterizes the different moments of allyship between the Amazonian Women and their allies to be discussed in the next sections.

The conceptualization of allyship relations as “allyship for resistance” restructures debates on anti-extractive solidarity in terms of “resisting extractive occupation,” since it puts life and the reproduction of life at the center. As discussed in Chapter Three, we cannot speak of territorial resistance without speaking of the reproduction of life in its multiple forms. Following Silvia Federici's (2004) call—followed by indigenous-communitarian thinkers like Gladys Tzul Tzul (2018a) and feminist thinkers like Encarnación Gutiérrez-Rodríguez (2012), Raquel Gutiérrez (2017), and Cristina Vega Solís, Raquel Martínez Buján and Myriam Paredes Chauca

(2018)—it is consequently important to think about relations outside of the primary separation between production and reproduction that capitalism forces us to think.

My usage of the concept of *rexistance* in connection to allyship is thus a conscious attempt to put the reproduction of life at the center of my analysis of relations of solidarity. In this way I hope to contribute to extending debates about resistance by using a concept that emphasizes the creative force of reproduction. While reproduction in its “unproductive” version is minored as a practice that “repeats life,” reproduction in its radical creative and re-existent mode “enables life.” Allies *rexisting* capitalist occupation, then, require a great deal of pragmatic and creative force at the same time, because they must remain aware of the ways in which power occupies while also finding new strategies for enabling and breeding life.

In other words, allies can only *rexist* extractive occupation by recognizing the different ways in which capitalism, patriarchy, and colonialism affect their lives, while finding creative ways of becoming-together in order to defend the reproduction of life in its multiple forms. Allyships for *rexistance* thus give birth to “interests in common which are not the same interests” (Stengers in Blaser and de la Cadena 2018, 4), where the reproduction of life as a creative human and non-human force becomes pluralized, too.

### **Co-Labor as Allyship**

What is the relation between allyship and my co-labor with the Amazonian Women? As my experience in Kawsak Sacha shows, co-labor as a practice and concept, which has shaped my relation with the Amazonian Women and nurtured the reflections in this dissertation, is not separate from allyship. That is because co-labor as a “not only” academic relation situated me, very often and often without my full awareness, in different political projects and activities that the Amazonian Women initiated. Moreover, the everyday sharing that my co-labor with some of the Amazonian Women implied evolved into intensive relations that still mark my life and activism. By including my auto-ethnographic voice in this chapter, I do not want to fall into a “confessional, redemptive, self-serving” narrative of how I became a “good ally” (Roman 1997 in Land 2015, 23), much less into “subtract from engaged activism” some “deeper” or more “truthful” insights about allyship (de la Cadena 2010, 358). Rather, I want to examine how my co-labor became part of the Amazonian Women’s relations



of allyship and forced me to find ways to think hard about complex relations of allyship departing from my own experience.

As mentioned before, allyship does not happen between familiar partners, but rather happens between different peoples that have found ways of working, coming and doing together, and changing each other in the process. The coming together of seemingly separated entities and even “enemies” is not new in Amazonian contexts. As Eduardo Viveiros de Castro describes, different Amazonian peoples have found their own forms of sociality with “the other” (Viveiros de Castro 1993, 1995, and 1996). These practices of relating to the other mark Amazonian political history and, most definitely, the relations within Amazonian regional organizations like CONFENIAE and the Amazonian Women’s network. This yields important insights about the fact that to be regarded “as different” is not only marked by colonial history, even if sometimes that is the only history we have access to in making sense of moments like the one in 2016 I describe above. However, it is important to mention that I was confronted with a plurality of ways of understanding and experiencing difference during my stay in the Amazon—differences that include but exceed relations of coloniality.

It is important to mention this, not only as a strategy to keep decolonizing our minds and to stop imposing our interpretations about what it means to be “different.” It is also important as a way of creating practices of conviviality with “each other” that makes space for other ways of understanding difference. In the case of the Amazonian Women and their environmental and ecofeminist allies, there are probably many other strategies besides extending each other’s positions that could give us deep insights into these practices of conviviality. Unfortunately, I did not have full access to such practices during my research in Ecuador. In my case, it is precisely when I started making more space within myself for the Amazonian Women’s ways of navigating differences among us that our relations of co-labor intensified and evolved into practices of conviviality.

Encarnación Gutiérrez-Rodríguez develops the concept of “transversal conviviality,” in the context of feminized and racialized domestic work in Europe, to explore spaces of “living together” as networks of energetic and affective relations that challenge the normative and neoliberal power of accommodating cultural differences (Gutiérrez-Rodríguez 2011 and 2015). In a similar spirit, I adopt “conviviality” as those everyday affective and energetic practices that allowed the Amazonian Women and

myself to navigate our differences and create spaces of living together. As mentioned in Chapter Two, our co-labor with some members of the Amazonian Women's network was characterized by our constant experience of *caminar juntas* [walking together]. We walked together to their houses, to my house, to their communities, to the university conference, to the protest march, to the market, to their assemblies, to our co-labor workshops on territoriality and *artesanías*. This *caminar juntas*, as a constant movement from place A to place B, was guided by the Amazonian Women's exhaustive agenda as political leaders, but also by our shared projects and friendship. In fact, our co-labor workshops on territoriality and *artesanías* and other shared activities were very often described by my co-labor partners as an act of *caminar juntas*, even if they took place in the same space. *Caminar juntas* thus became a practice of conviviality that generated spaces of living together, and transformed our co-labor in a relation of allyship and friendship.



Image 40. “Here is our *compañera*, now it is one year that we are walking with Andrea. She asked me to meet her and we became friends. Now we are continuing to work together.” (Rosa Gualinga, statement at the international congress “Bodies, Territories and Dispossession: Life under Threat,” October 16, 2018, Universidad Andina Simón Bolívar in Quito). © <https://www.uasb.edu.ec/>

While spaces of living together were partially marked by our radical differences and a constant process of negotiating through equivocations—especially in the context of our co-labor workshops—they were also marked by intensive moments of sharing with each other: sleeping in the same room, bathing in the river, sharing the same *chicha*, drinking *guayusa* in the mornings, telling each other about our dreams, and laughing together. While such intensive moments of sharing with each other, as “women,” could be interpreted in Amazonian anthropology as product of the

Amazonian Women's ability to build "affinity" with other women who are not kin—as affinity encompasses consanguinity (Viveiros de Castro 1993; Descola 1996 [1993])—sharing with each other in the context of allyship resists reading kinship into affective and energetic relations even if these contain a great deal of intimacy. Similar to Marilyn Strathern's resistance to reading into relationality a female sensitivity (Interview with Marilyn Strathern, Fausto and Viveiros de Castro 2017, 56), I reject these interpretations of relationality because it reduces the political character of allyship as product of kinship-derived strategies of building fictional "sisterhood" among—the same—"women." Rather practices of conviviality between Amazonian leaders and my person should be read in a "pragmatic feminist key," where the starting moment of deciding to work together was a political decision of recognizing interdependency and allowing processes of becoming-together in the context of our co-labor.

In other words, by recognizing the political character of allyship among separated entities—who, in our case, happened to be not-the-same "women" and not-only "women"—we recognize the possibility of allies becoming-together "without becoming the other" (Blaser and de la Cadena 2018, 11). This political characteristic of allyship also includes the possibility of deciding to come back together after episodes of "break-ups" and separations. Here, it is important to mention that practices of conviviality, of intensive sharing with each other, do not reduce the potential of strong disagreements and, even, separations between allies. As I show in the next sections, to acknowledge this possibility is very important in the context of the Amazonian Women's resistance against extractive occupation. The reason behind this is that, despite the fact that the Amazonian Women share strong affective links with their allies, they are situated in other sets of relations that might sometimes set boundaries to processes of becoming-together among allies.

### **The Amazonian Women and their Allies**

Who are the Amazonian Women's allies in their struggle against extractive occupation? How and why did they become allies? How do they negotiate different interests despite and through their differences and the colonial history that permeates their relations? What makes these interests common and uncommon at the same time? What are unforeseeable consequences of their allyship? What has their allyship enabled and how has it contributed to the Amazonian Women resisting extractive occupation?

Throughout this dissertation, I have mentioned some crucial actors who have worked with the Amazonian Women in their struggle against extractivism. In the following pages, I take a closer look at some of these relations, which I consider relations of allyship, by analyzing some ethnographic moments I discussed at the beginning of this chapter. Most of these moments are directly related to my research, such as in March 2016, when I was commencing my doctoral project and had my first personal contact with the Amazonian Women's network; in March 2018, when some Amazonian leaders and I were consolidating our co-labor at distance; and between August 2018 and January 2019, the period when five Amazonian female leaders and I organized co-labor workshops in their communities. And yet the following analysis also connects to previous periods of time, which help to explain complex relationships in the Amazon. This means that the following sections will take moments of allyship as points of departure to analyze the partial, asymmetrical, and ambiguous roots that have shaped complicated modes of allyship between the Amazonian Women and urban activists.

### **The Amazonian Women and Ecofeminists in Ecuador: A Complicated Allyship**

In March 2016 over five hundred Amazonian women from the south-central rainforest assembled in the city of Puyo to protest the state's decision to sell three oil blocks in the Amazon to the Chinese company Andes Petroleum. While the motto of the 2013 "March for Life" centered on the rights of indigenous women "to protect life, our territories, and speak out with our own voice" (*Declaratoria del Kawsak Sacha*, October 2013), the 2016 mobilization consolidated the Amazonian Women's agenda focused on "strengthening ties between various organizations involved in defending territory" (*Comunicado "Mujeres Amazónicas se Mobilizarán el 8 de Marzo en Pastaza,"* March 2016). In fact, as the 2016 demonstration commenced, the Amazonian Women showed their ties with ecofeminist and environmental activists who came to support their struggle and who spoke at the opening forum. These activists represented groups ranging from academics and non-governmental organizations from Quito, such as *Acción Ecológica* and *Terra Mater*, to US-based non-governmental organizations like WECAN and Amazon Watch. Casey Camp-Horinek, a WECAN member and leader from the Ponca Nation in the US, was even honored with leading the spiritual ceremony to begin the march.

Toward the close of the march, various leaders and women from Amazonian community bases took the stage. Their multilingual speeches illustrated a complex relationship with the urban activists and academics, including my person who joined the march with a group of politically active researchers from the anthropology department at FLACSO. The Amazonian Women's speeches subsumed the climate change agenda Ecuadorian and U.S. non-governmental organizations represented under the indigenous struggle for territory. In fact, one Amazonian woman from the Curaray river basin asked urban supporters to join "our struggle for the defense of our territories, the *Pachamama*, since this is not only for us but for the rest of the world" (speech, March 8, 2016, Puyo). Further, the gratitude Amazonian activists displayed to the domestic activists in the audience became ambivalent. In their respective speeches, two Amazonian women from the Kichwa and Sapara nationalities referred to us as *colonas*, a term translatable as "colonialists" (supporters of the colonial system) or as "colonists" (settlers). The Sapara representative asked *colonas* not to refer to the Amazonian Women as "these lazy women who are just yelling in the streets; we are screaming for everyone and defending nature" (speech, March 8, 2016, Puyo).

While the first translation of the word *colonas* carries a clear negative connotation referring to a historical system of oppression, the second term is not more neutral since it also refers in the Ecuadorian context to the majority of *mestizos* who migrated to and "colonized" rural areas including the Amazonian region after the 1964 Agrarian Reform (Gondard and Mazurek 2001, 15). Either usage, given the discursive ambiguity of *colonas*, could indicate the Amazonian Women's awareness of asymmetrical power relations between indigenous and urban activists, a relation with deep roots in colonial history and the *mestizo* population's racist practices of exclusion. Beyond the reminder that asymmetrical power relations permeate any encounters with academics, ecofeminist and environmental activists, this moment also revealed the kind of open-ended negotiation that characterizes their—our—relationship. Such a ceaseless negotiation process does not prevent urban activists, academics and the Amazonian Women from working together, though invoking *colonas* necessarily troubles our allyship and forces me to read this ethnographic moment beyond the simple dichotomy of complete "cooperation" or "antagonism."

To dig up in the contradictory aspects of relations of allyship, evident in the previous ethnographic experience, I focus particularly on the relationship between the Amazonian Women and ecofeminist activists in Ecuador. I think about the different

ways in which the Amazonian Women and ecofeminist groups—especially the organization *Acción Ecológica* and the *Colectivo Miradas Críticas del Territorio desde el Feminismo*—have managed to work together and change each other despite and through their differences and the colonial history that permeates their relation.

As mentioned in Chapter One, from my conversations with leaders active both in the Amazonian Women’s collective and in the indigenous movement’s Amazonian organization—represented by CONFENIAE—the majority reject calling themselves “feminists,” with the exception of few younger women who have been in contact with Latin American feminist movement(s) and identify themselves as “communitarian feminists” (Indira Vargas, interview, September 22, 2018, Community of Sabata). Some women also vehemently reject the hegemonic and ethnocentric agenda of Western feminism that criticizes their ways of negotiating their role as Kichwa women in their families, communities, and organizations. For example, Elvia Dagua told me that she “stopped going to feminist events” because she once felt judged in her way of living as a Kichwa woman (Interview, August 23, 2017, Puyo).

Despite this refusal to self-identify as feminists, the Amazonian Women have adopted certain elements of the ecofeminist discourse. This adoption has contributed, on the one hand, to situate their strategies and politics within the broad indigenous movement and, on the other hand, to create spaces to articulate the Amazonian Women’s proposals and illuminate their voices nationally and internationally.

The complex relationship between indigenous communities, missionaries, environmental activists in the Ecuadorian Amazon are crucial for historically contextualizing the allyship between the Amazonian Women and ecofeminists today. The relations of allyship between indigenous communities, missionaries, and environmentalists allowed for the establishment of the so-called *candado social* [social blockade] in the south-central Amazon. As the president of the public oil company Petroecuador observed, the *candado social* is the pact between social, religious, and indigenous movements that successfully blocked the expansion of oil blocks in this part of the rainforest (Melo, Ortiz, López 2002, 57). The *candado social* exemplifies a complex set of positions, deeply permeated by colonial, racist, and patriarchal history, that are partially, asymmetrically, and even ambiguously connected. Such allyships between indigenous communities, missionaries, and environmentalists are marked by increasing economic dependence and, as narrated in Chapter Three, by environmentalists very often representing indigenous activists as “guardians of the

Amazon” in international discourse (Muratorio 1994; Concklin and Graham 1995; Ulloa 2004; Descola 2004). The image of indigenous peoples as “guardians” results not only from environmental organizations’ unwillingness to recognize indigenous peoples on their own terms, but also from hegemonic discourses shaping knowledge about these peoples, “making some ideas thinkable while at the same time cancelling the possibility of notions that defy the hegemonic habits of thought” (de la Cadena 2015, 76).

In this context, environmental and ecofeminist positions intersect and indeed become mutually engrained. The intersections with ecofeminism—which encompass a broad spectrum of feminist approaches whose central goal is to make the intersectional oppression of nature and women visible (e.g. Warren 1996)—shape the *candado social* in the south-central Amazon, and the strategic claims of environmental groups in Ecuador. A prime example of these crossroads of positions is the influential environmental group *Acción Ecológica*, whose agenda and claims have become more “ecofeminist” in the last six years. Even had *Acción Ecológica* not publicly declared itself an ecofeminist organization, it is widely considered a regionally representative of an ecofeminist perspective (Walsh 2015, 122). Its oldest members—like Esperanza Martínez—have played crucial roles in reshaping and reformulating certain concerns, goals, and allyships of the group in ecofeminist terms.<sup>110</sup> This discursive reformulation of *Acción Ecológica*’s concerns in ecofeminist terms is also a product of the organization’s collaboration with younger generations of feminist academics and activists from the *Colectivo Miradas Críticas del Territorio desde el Feminismo*:

“[E]nvironmental circles used to strongly reject feminism. I experienced that rejection when I was working at *Acción Ecológica*. At the beginning, it was very hard, very difficult to discuss any feminist themes during any discussion. However, I feel that the processes of Amazonian, Andean, and peasant women organizing themselves as women's collectives have influenced environmental organizations [...]. They now understand better the relation between environmentalism and feminism, and the importance of this relationship.”

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<sup>110</sup> Martínez co-authored the 2012 book *Ecofeminism from the Perspective of the Rights of Nature* which recognizes the parallel but separate development of Ecuador’s feminist and environmental movements, but also illustrates how extractive occupation affects and oppresses women and nature, revealing women’s crucial role in territorial struggles (Shiva, Flores, Martínez 2012, 1). Ivonne Yáñez, another active member of *Acción Ecológica*, wrote in a 2014 online article about women’s key role in resisting the extractive model in Ecuador; she uses an ecofeminist analytical framework to discuss how capital accumulation subjugates both women and nature (Yáñez Ivonne, “Why are Women Fighting against Extractivism and Climate Change?” Available from: <https://wrm.org.uy/articles-from-the-wrm-bulletin/section1/why-are-women-fighting-against-extractivism-and-climate-change/> (Accessed: April 29, 2021)).

(Member of the *Miradas Críticas del Territorio desde el Feminismo* collective, interview, August 22, 2018, Quito)

Their collaboration in the book *La Vida en el Centro y el Crudo bajo Tierra: El Yasuní en Clave Feminista* (2014) places in dialogue the voices of various indigenous, environmental, and feminist academics and activists who reflect about oil extraction and resistance in the Yasuní National Park and south-central Amazon. This important intergenerational dialogue contributed to the meeting of feminist multi-vocal reflections on the impacts of extractivism in the lives of various women.

The intersection between environmental and ecofeminist positions through these two collectives has been crucial for denouncing extractivism's negative impacts on Amazonian women's bodies, as problems like alcoholism, domestic violence, and prostitution evidence; and for revealing their resistance against the expansion of oil extraction projects since 2012 (Shiva, Flores, and Martínez 2012; *Colectivo Miradas Críticas del Territorio desde el Feminismo* 2014). The evidence of negative impacts should not imply that Amazonian women were passive victims of extractivism before the 2013 Amazonian Women's march. *Acción Ecológica's* contribution in documenting women's anti-extractive resistance started almost two decades ago. The environmental organization collaborated in the mid 1990s with the Kichwa people of Sarayaku, who led and organized anti-extractive resistance, with Amazonian women taking a leading role (Martínez 2012).

Members of *Acción Ecológica*, peasant women, and indigenous women have made other joint attempts to broadcast their voices, for example creating the *Samaranta Warmikuna* in 2012. This collective emerged in the context of the 2012 mobilization to defend water against the Mirador mining project, after *mestiza*, peasant, and indigenous women from various communities shared their experiences and problems related to extractive projects in their territories (*Colectivo Miradas Críticas del Territorio desde el Feminismo* 2014, 51). This discussion resulted in a manifesto which declared women "defenders of the *Pachamama*."<sup>111</sup> *Acción Ecológica*, *Samaranta Warmikuna*, and the *Colectivo Miradas Críticas del Territorio desde el Feminismo* have also actively assisted and documented their mobilization during the 2013 "March for Life." Two years later, members of these three collectives supported and joined the Amazonian Women and the IQBSS organization in their *yakuchaski*.

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<sup>111</sup> Available from: <http://www.saramanta.org/?p=493> (Accessed: April 29, 2021)



Various factors are crucial for understanding the emergence of the Amazonian Women as visible and important subjects in the indigenous territorial struggle in Ecuador, which is not only restricted to historical male leaders' loss of legitimacy in the indigenous movement as I examined in the Introduction to this dissertation. Within this context, ecofeminist collectives have been particularly important in generating organizational channels and spaces of dialogue for and with Amazonian activists (Ibid., 13). Furthermore, as I presented in this section, *Acción Ecológica's* recent ecofeminist analyses on the impacts of extractivism on women's bodies and nature, and the emergence of younger generations of activists like the *Colectivo Miradas Críticas del Territorio desde el Feminismo* have been crucial in revealing the Amazonian Women's concerns and claims in relation to extractive projects. While the anti-extractive struggle of the Amazonian Women started long before 2013, these factors have recently contributed to the visibility of their struggle, consequently enabling their allyship with ecofeminist collectives, even when the Amazonian Women's collective does not publicly identify as a feminist group.

### **Becoming-Together by Extending Positions**

That ecofeminist groups contribute to making the Amazonian Women's struggles visible does not mean that their allyship has been without conflict. As discussed above, the Amazonian Women's use of the word *colonas* in the 2016 march to refer to Ecuadorian activists reflects contradictory and conflicting aspects of their allyship. These complexities are rooted in the partially connected relationships between indigenous communities and environmental organizations in the Amazon, marked by the hierarchical binaries (civilized vs. savage; or culture vs. nature) that have reduced indigenous populations to their role as "guardians of the Amazon."

Even if some Amazonian leaders embrace their representation as guardians of their territory,<sup>112</sup> there are also moments of resisting these representations especially

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<sup>112</sup>In the visual testimonials "*Amazonas: Guardians of Life*," Ecuadorian photographer Felipe Jácome captures how Amazonian activists see themselves as the ones who "take care" and "defend our land, our jungle, the rivers, the mountains and the trees that house the spirits of the jungle." (Available from: <http://www.felipejacome.com/visual-testimonies/the-last-amazonas/> (Accessed: April 29, 2021)). Given that the Amazonian Women are often responsible for reproduction of life in its multiple forms (see Cielo, Coba, and Vallejo 2016), this self-understanding is not only the product of fictional self-representation, and has resonated in the international environmental media covering their mobilization (e.g. Bennett Caroline, "Amazonas: Guardians of Life," available from <http://amazonwatch.org/news/2014/0308-amazonas-guardians-of-life> (Accessed: April 29, 2021)).

when it is used to subsume them in essentialized and fixed roles as bearers of indigenous culture and traditions. This was the case when I accompanied two Amazonian female leaders to a workshop with Amazonian women from the northern rainforest. After the *mestiza* environmental activist and workshop organizer implied that Amazonian women from the north are more ready to accept offers made by the state in exchange for letting oil drills in their territories and that they are “losing their culture,” several Amazonian women vehemently resisted this assertion. The *mestiza* activist said:

“They [the state] give them [Amazonian communities] the city of the millennium, and then they enter to drill 18 oil blocks [...] This is why, *compañeras*, you have to take care of your culture, to rescue your culture! You are losing it, for God’s sake! Let’s rescue it, that’s the only thing [you have]. [...] You are no longer thinking like Secoya, [...] the Secoya thinking is almost extinct. [...] Let’s rescue it! I know that among your nationality some people can still be rescued. And this is the same in other [indigenous] nationalities.” (Mestiza environmental activist, statement at a workshop with Amazonian women from the province of Sucumbíos, August 7, 2017, Lago Agrio)

In a heated debate, one woman from the Secoya nationality sarcastically told the *mestiza* activist that because they do not “wear their typical clothing all the time does not mean that they have stopped thinking as Secoya” (Fieldnotes, August 8, 2017).

Several activists were also critical of how environmentalists benefit from “using” their voices. In an interview I conducted with a Kichwa woman, she complained that Ecuadorian non-governmental organizations use indigenous women to legitimize the organization’s agenda and “earn money by just sitting down [...] while we are the ones who talk, defending the territory [...] and women’s rights!” (September 4, 2017, Puyo). This criticism mirrors the material disparities and power asymmetries that permeate their allyship and trouble their cooperation as “equal partners.” Moreover, as Miriam García-Torres explains and from what I could tell from my co-labor experience with Amazonian leaders, the organizations contributing to the Amazonian Women’s activism have also prioritized economically and logistically supporting just some indigenous nationalities—Kichwa, Waorani, and Sapara—and certain individual Amazonian female leaders (García-Torres 2017, 103). These forms of environmental organizations’ selection and prioritization of certain relations condition and debilitate the Amazonian Women’s communitarian processes and relations as I examine in the last sections of this chapter.

These examples show how allyship between the Amazonian Women and ecofeminist organizations is embedded in a combination of positions that are partially, asymmetrically, and ambiguously connected. At the same time, allyship arises from webs of positions that—even when marked by histories of colonization, racism, and patriarchy—are “able to join with [one] another” and become-together (Haraway 1991, 193). This account of allyship troubles any understanding of relations between allies as working together as “equal partners” and for a “common goal.” In contrast, moments of becoming-together in allyship are composed by common and uncommon positions that partially merge into one another without creating a unitary front or a “unified system of activism” (de la Cadena 2010, 351). Merging into one position would mean to fall in the universalist trap, so often adopted by leftist and feminist rhetoric that has “tried to overcome the idea of a dichotomous or divided world with...visions of totality” (Strathern 2004, 37). In contrast, becoming-together depends on the ability of allies of constantly negotiating difference to create plural fronts of resistance against extractive occupation.

An example of how the Amazonian Women and ecofeminist activists negotiate difference is by extending each other’s positions. As analyzed in Chapter Five, the Amazonian Women’s *Kawsak Sacha*, Living Forest, proposal adopts elements of the ecofeminist condemnation of extractivism (*Declaratoria del Kawsak Sacha*, October 2013). With the main objectives of declaring the Amazon a Living Forest and “recognizing indigenous peoples’ world view in terms of the interrelationship between human beings and nature,” this document recognizes women as the “major victims” of “the serious socio-environmental impacts of oil operations,” suffering from “diverse forms of direct and structural violence” (Ibid.). Furthermore, the Amazonian Women not only bring women into their argumentation about the negative impacts of extractivism, but directly denounce extractive activities as generating “*machismo* and socio-cultural problems, such as alcoholism and domestic violence” (Ibid.).

The *Kawsak Sacha* proposal can be understood as an extension of the broader indigenous condemnation of extractivism as an economic model that violates territorial rights; it denounces extractivism as fostering *machismo* and structural violence against women’s bodies. This document ends up adopting elements of ecofeminist analyses on extractivism as patriarchal and capitalist in order not to portray the Amazonian Women as passive victims of the impacts of oil operations, but to highlight the importance of

continuing with their practices of reproducing human and non-human life in the Amazon:

“This space [the Living Forest] is where our and other [non-human] beings’ ways of living are reproduced. This space keeps the interconnection between the human beings and what surrounds them together, revealing their interdependence since both human and non-human beings act in unity, as one body.” (Ibid.)

These practices are in fact, what makes *Kawsak Sacha* a concept and a practice that resists extractive occupation. This extension shows how, instead of replacing the broader indigenous condemnation of extractivism with an ecofeminist stance, the Amazonian Women are utilizing ecofeminist elements in order to situate their claims within the indigenous struggle, and to rethink indigenous resistance against extractivism in terms of resistance. The ecofeminist extension does not designate the Living Forest proposal as ecofeminist. However, the collaboration and exchange between Amazonian and ecofeminist activists, has been central to position the reproduction of life in its multiple forms at the center of environmental and indigenous movement’s debates on extractive occupation.

Ecofeminist activists have also extended their positions. As Catherine Walsh describes, *Acción Ecológica* has been in constant conversation with various women activists from popular sectors who are actively contributing to a “pluriversal” understanding of feminism (Walsh 2015, 122). Collaborations between Amazonian and Andean activists have transformed the organization’s understanding of nature beyond traditional Western explanations that value “nature” mostly only for its biodiversity. In an online publication from *Acción Ecológica*, the environmental organization commemorates the 10-year anniversary of the constitutional adoption of the Rights of Nature. While they strongly criticize the extractive governmental agenda, the activists adopt the indigenous concept *Pachamama* [Mother Earth] as crucial for rethinking our relationship with nature and for recognizing how “*Pachamama...is vital to our existence.*”<sup>113</sup>

An especially telling feminist extension is the *Colectivo Miradas Críticas del Territorio desde el Feminismo*’s self-representation as more than an ecofeminist group. Even if this collective officially declared itself ecofeminist in a 2014 publication,

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<sup>113</sup> Available from: <http://www.accionecologica.org/editoriales/2250-2018-01-02-21-59-16> (Accessed: August 28, 2020)

an interview I conducted with one of its members made clear that their relations of collaboration with Amazonian and other women from the Global South have transformed this self-representation:

“Departing from our practice, experience and political positioning towards life we are linked to feminist and ecological themes. And the truth is that, yes, as a collective we have not reached a consensus on whether we should define ourselves as ecofeminist. However, there was a moment in which we began to name ourselves so, especially when we wrote things. [...] Now, there has been a turn in the last two years more or less, since we wrote the methodological guide *Mapeando el Cuerpo-Territorio*. We read and reflected [our positioning] again and decided that we are not ecofeminists, rather, we want to define ourselves from another position. So we are in that process now, looking at each other and understanding each other. [...] Our understandings, reflections, politics, and academic practices are strongly influenced by everything that the Amazonian Women are doing.” (Member of the *Miradas Críticas del Territorio desde el Feminismo* collective, interview, August 22, 2018, Quito)

Echoing their analysis of how women from various Caribbean and Latin American contexts are “redefining feminism from their own practices,” they no longer completely identify as ecofeminists (*Colectivo Miradas Críticas del Territorio desde el Feminismo* 2014, 15). Rather, they feel closer to feminist positions that prioritize the situatedness of the lived experiences of urban, peasant, and indigenous women from the Global South, with whom they have been working.

The collective launched the methodological guide *Mapeando el Cuerpo-Territorio* (Mapping the Body-Territory), describing the body as “our first territory,” claiming to “recognize the territory in our bodies” (2017, 7). As mentioned in Chapter Three, the indigenous communitarian feminist Lorena Cabnal initially developed the “Body-Land Territory” notion to link the ways in which the body and territory have both been historically and structurally expropriated (Cabnal 2012). Latin American feminists gathering at the 2014 “Feminist Encounter for Latin America and the Caribbean” (EFLAC) have also adopted a similar proposal called “Body as Territory.” The organizers of this feminist encounter authored a “Body as Territory Manifesto,” an attempt to engender dialogue between an established feminist “understanding of the body as a political category” and marginalized perspectives within Latin American feminisms that see “our individual and collective bodies as part of a community and constituent part of territories” (XIII EFLAC 2014). While this manifesto deploys “Body as Territory” as a proposal to agglutinate various feminist perspectives on the body, the methodological proposal of *mapeando el cuerpo-territorio* (mapping the body-

territory) from the *Miradas Críticas del Territorio desde el Feminismo* collective situates itself closer to Cabnal's thinking, since women's territorial struggles resisting extractivism "from different territories" inspired the proposal (*Colectivo Miradas Críticas del Territorio desde el Feminismo* 2017, 34).

The *Colectivo Miradas Críticas del Territorio desde el Feminismo* has developed and shared this methodology with urban, peasant, and indigenous women resisting extractivism from their respective "territories." The collective practiced their methodology at the "Meeting for Women Fighting Extractivism and Climate Change" in 2014, where several members from the Amazonian Women participated (Ibid.). Many of the indigenous voices are quoted by the activists from the collective as testimonies evidencing how Amazonian activists understand the affectation of their territories in their own bodies (Ibid., 35). In fact, the Amazonian Women have emphasized several times how their bodies feel the affectation of their territories, as in a statement from the 2013 "March for Life," in which the Amazonian Women describe how they "feel from the deepness of our wombs, the threats of extractivism" (quoted and translated by Walsh 2015, 119).

The collective's adoption of "Body-Territory" can thus be read as an attempt to extend feminist views of the body as a site of political struggle to perspectives that recognize the body as embedded in a multiplicity of territories. This extension has been more than necessary for the *Colectivo Miradas Críticas del Territorio desde el Feminismo* in order to "particularize" their own position, rooted in their reality as activists coming from an "urban territory," and to make space for other forms of being, feeling and relating to the body and territory.

"What happens is that feminism is still very urban. This has generated rejection, because, as urban, it has also been thought from our urban positionings. And also because this is our reality, our feminism departs from ourselves, from our embodied ways of experiencing what we are fighting for." (Member of the *Miradas Críticas del Territorio desde el Feminismo* collective, interview, August 22, 2018, Quito)

The "Body-Territory" and the "Living Forest" proposals thus show, to paraphrase Donna Haraway, the potential to create a network of relations "among very different- and power-differentiated-communities" (Haraway 1988, 580). Both proposals are examples of how the Amazonian Women and ecofeminists have engaged in a constant process of negotiation, deeply rooted in the Amazon's colonial history,

and have extended their positions in their mutual encounters. The Amazonian Women and ecofeminists' allyship is thus a process of becoming-together that creates declarations and proposals, which, as plural fronts of resistance to extractive occupation, embrace different languages and voices.

### **Between Allyship and the Indigenous Movement**

As the previous sections show, allyship as a process of becoming-together is not characterized by its foreseeable or "ideal" outcomes. Rather, processes of becoming-together change both allies in ways they can neither predict nor really choose. Furthermore, as Stuart Hall insisted when discussing anti-racist politics as a "politics without guarantees" (Hall 1997), the existence of allyship relations should also be thought as processes of becoming-together "without guarantees." In fact, allyship as a bonding practice, between allies organized against extractive occupation, does not have "any guarantees built into it, [...] there is no law of history which tells you we will win, we may lose" (Ibid.).

For the Amazonian Women this has meant that, while their allyship with urban activists has enabled spaces of visibility for their own proposals without completely compromising their positions to environmental or ecofeminist narratives, it has also generated criticism and resistance from their own indigenous organizations. Given that many of these female leaders are active spokeswomen for their communities and regional organizations, this criticism has forced them to find ways to negotiate the space of visibility they have gained through their urban allies in national and international fora with their *compañeros y compañeras* from the indigenous movement. And, in this process, relations of allyship with urban activists have found their limits. It is precisely these processes of negotiation and the limits to their relations with urban activists that reveal how the Amazonian Women strongly situate their struggle in their communitarian ways of doing politics, where the driving force is not allyship but something else. In the next pages, I share another ethnographic moment that shows how the Amazonian Women's allyship with ecofeminist and environmental activists have produced unforeseeable consequences for the Amazonian Women's positioning within the indigenous movement.

In February 2018, the Amazonian Women were planning their next mobilization for the International Women's Day. I was already back in Germany, so I

could not be present at the mobilization's preparations in Ecuador. However, as I mentioned in Chapter Two, our co-labor with some women continued at distance and we were able to establish contact with a German foundation and organize a crowdfunding campaign so people (in the Global North) could contribute to their mobilization. This political form of co-labor across continental boundaries brought me, even if partially, "back to the field," as Amazonian leaders constantly updated me about the development of their mobilization, and as I actively followed them and their allies—like *Acción Ecológica*, the *Yasunid@s* collective, *Minka Urbana*, and Amazon Watch—on social media.

From their different nationalities and community bases, the Amazonian Women marched in Puyo on March 8, 2018. Following this march, they assembled in CONFENIAE's house in order to discuss about the "divisions in their organizations and communities" produced by extractive companies and the state, and to write a proposal to "strengthen communitarian solidarity ties to confront violence and injustice" (CONFENIAE's report from the assembly, March 9, 2018, Union Base). Three days later, with a written document in their hands, a delegation of the Amazonian Women went to Quito to present it to the government. Their main goal was to present their proposal to President Lenin Moreno (Zoila Castillo, interview, September 11, 2018, Puyo). As mentioned in the previous chapter, after their eight-day-long *plantón* in front of the presidential palace, representatives of the Amazonian Women's network met with the President and presented their Mandate of the Grassroot Amazonian Women Defenders of the Rainforest against Extractivism on March 22.

After arriving in Ecuador, for my second fieldwork stay in July 2018, I talked with two of the main Amazonian female organizers of the march and the assembly, Elvia Dagua and Zoila Castillo, who work at the regional indigenous organization CONFENIAE. While Castillo told me that they were successful with their goal of elaborating a mandate against extractivism despite the disagreements and problems with their *mestiza* allies, Dagua told me how bad she felt during the whole process. Dagua is not one of the Amazonian Women's network's most visible faces. Despite the fact that she started her political involvement in the indigenous movement in the 1990s, she has been absent from indigenous politics for personal reasons during the time the Amazonian Women organized their first march in 2013. Furthermore, her current political responsibilities at CONFENIAE started when the Amazonian Women's network was already established.



Dagua told me that she was not invited to the initial planning meetings for the march, organized by some Amazonian leaders and *mestiza* allies, and that she was also excluded from the delegation of the Amazonian Women who went to present their mandate in Quito: “*fuleron las de siempre*” [the same faces as always went [to Quito]] (Fieldnotes, August 11, 2018). This phrase revealed to me how moments of allyship between the Amazonian Women and their allies were also characterized by practices of exclusion. In the case of the different organizations who supported the Amazonian Women in March 2018, they were not only important allies for planning and financing the participation of many Amazonian women in the march and assembly in Puyo, but also crucial to nationally visibilize and circulate the *Mandato de Mujeres Amazónicas*. However, their prioritization of relations with certain female leaders over other leaders received a lot of criticism from Amazonian leaders who are not among the Amazonian Women’s most visible faces. What was supposed to be an assembly for discussing the “divisions in their organizations and communities” enhanced the divisions between these Amazonian female leaders working in the same indigenous organization CONFENIAE. In fact, Elvia Dagua, as CONFENIAE’s official representative, never signed the mandate. She wanted to publicly express her disagreement.

I do not know if the conflict between these two female leaders would have not been expressed without the presence of environmental organizations during the 2018 mobilization. Both women are strong Kichwa female leaders, with a long trajectory in the indigenous movement and, from my extended conversations with both of them, with a history of personal encounters and disencounters. This conflictual history between Dagua and Castillo cannot be reduced to a personal quarrel, as it is deeply rooted in the complex history of relations between different Kichwa peoples living in the Amazon. While one woman comes from the Bobonaza river basin, the other comes from the Comuna San Jacinto located in the outskirts of the city of Puyo. This means that their communal politics and strategies of relating with the mestizo world diverge (Whitten and Scott Whitten 2008). Moreover, their disagreements are also deeply rooted in the political struggle between different Kichwa peoples to gain the hegemony of Amazonian regional organizations.

Nevertheless, it is important to note that the way Dagua expressed her disagreement was a response to her exclusion from the 2018 mobilization, where environmental organizations played an important economic and organizational role. In fact, she used her political power as CONFENIAE’s representative to disclaim the

delegation of the Amazonian Women meeting with the President in Quito. Her disagreement played out at the level of organizational indigenous politics, a political sphere where female leaders of the Amazonian Women's network are active members too.

The conflict between these two leaders troubled my relation with them. Nevertheless, my continuous conversations with them despite their divergences taught me to stop "explaining away" differences and conflicts among Amazonian female women as the product of internal power politics. Thus I started to ask: what is behind apparent internal power politics that reproduce conflicts between Amazonian female leaders? Even if the Amazonian Women do engage in power politics—a phenomenon that challenges idealized representations of their struggle as "guardians of the forest"—the reduction of their conflict to an internal dispute imposes our modern and uni-dimensional interpretations on indigenous politics and ignores the deeper and complex dimensions of their resistance struggle. Moreover, even if some members from the Amazonian Women's network felt they achieved their goal in Quito, they also set more evident boundaries to their relation with some *mestiza* allies after March 2018. Despite the fact Amazonian leaders like Zoila Castillo have been closely working with them the last thirty years, the failure of their allies to acknowledge the organizational logics in the indigenous movement and the Amazonian Women's political role as "official representatives of their indigenous organizations" made leaders like Castillo set these limits (interview, September 11, 2018, Puyo). Other members from the Amazonian Women's network are conscious about the ways in which certain moments of allyship exclude some individuals from important decision-making processes that connect their leadership to their community bases:

"Women from the indigenous bases need to be summoned [to our meetings] so that they can actively analyze [the situation]. This is important for the Amazonian Women's network to work well, in the best way. If not, we will continue with this conflict the rest of our lives." (Ena Santi, interview, March 3, 2019, Puyo)

In other words, the relationship between the Amazonian Women and their allies found its limit after this experience, product of *mestiza* allies' incapacity to recognize other relations that precede allyship. The tensions and conflicts that arose during the 2018 mobilization are thus product of the Amazonian Women's active involvement in

their indigenous organizations, where the driving force is not allyship but what they and other people active in the indigenous movement call *ser orgánicas* [being organic] to the indigenous movement.

### **From *Doble Militancia* to *Doble Tramas***

Latin American feminists have carefully reflected on indigenous women's *doble militancia* [double militancy] in their indigenous movements and indigenous women's organizations, and how this has complicated the relationship of indigenous women with their indigenous organizations and feminist allies (e.g. Marcos 2005; Hernández Castillo 2010). Paraphrasing Sylvia Marcos, *doble militancia* could be described as those politics carried out by indigenous women's organizations that are a "part" of the indigenous movement that is "apart" (2005, 93ff.). Nevertheless, the situation described above is not directly derived from the Amazonian Women's *doble militancia*. Rather, it is related to how their *doble militancia* and their decision of challenging the exclusion of their voices at the negotiation table between the state and male indigenous leaders have situated them in different networks of relations at the same time—with their allies and with their indigenous *compañeros y compañeras*—where conflicts are produced by how both networks work in different ways.

Departing from Tzul Tzul's definition *tramas comunales*, as described in Chapter Five, I also understand the indigenous movement as a form of *trama*. How does the *trama* of the indigenous movement in Ecuador work, composed as it is by different indigenous organizations at the communal, regional and national level? Similar to Tzul Tzul, who defines *tramas comunales* [communal entanglements] as the practices that organize everyday communal life and also translate into political rebellions (2018a), Ecuadorian indigenous intellectual Luis Macas has insisted on the fact that the indigenous movement, even though it speaks to the state and the Ecuadorian society at large, is deeply rooted in the different communal indigenous "institutions"—institutions like (in the case of Kichwa communities) the *ayllu* [extended family], *minka*, or *yurarinakuy* [agreements] (Macas 2002). Macas' reflection should not be understood as an abstraction that indicates the communal "essence" of indigenous organizations today, organizations that have also partially adapted to the requirements of the Ecuadorian nation-state of the late 1970s in order to

be recognized as legitimate interlocutors.<sup>114</sup> Rather, indigenous institutions like *minka*, which as a concrete practice of communal work constitute communitarian and territorial relations of belonging (Tambaco and Sempértegui 2019), nurture the different modes of participating in communal, regional and national organizations. This is why people who are not active in these institutions do not deserve the same recognition when deciding on matters that concern the whole community, something that is also pointed out by Tzul Tzul in her account of the political role of communal work in indigenous communities in Guatemala.<sup>115</sup> In fact, after a long conversation with my co-labor partner Zoila Castillo, I started to understand that to participate in a *minka* is not one of the many “formal requirements”—as qualifications—to fully participate in communal politics, but is a practice of “*convivencia de la comunidad*” [communitarian conviviality] intrinsic to indigenous politics (Interview, February 21, 2019, Quito).<sup>116</sup> In other words, people who are not active practitioners and bearers of communitarian and territorial relations of belonging are not organic to the indigenous movement’s community bases.

This reveals how, behind every mobilization, every protest, and every decision-making process at the level of regional and national indigenous organizations, there is a thread of concrete communal practices that bear, prepare, and validate these political actions. Elvia Dagua explained at our co-labor workshop that in order for her to organize any event as representative of the Amazonian regional organization, she has to coordinate with many different indigenous representatives until reaching the community bases:

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<sup>114</sup> In 1979, Ecuadorian President Jaime Roldós announced the end of a discriminatory indigenous policy in the Amazon to make way for a reformist *neoindianismo*, that offered a direct relationship with indigenous organizations in order to meet the demands from their communities, provided they do not require structural changes. This kind of *neoindianismo* praised the cultural aspect of indigenous federations, while ignoring their most fundamental demands for territory and self-determination (Ruiz 1993, 116). Even though Roldós’ government broke with the most discriminatory policies linked to the “indigenous problem,” the terms of negotiation between the state and indigenous peoples were still marked by the boundaries imposed by the mestizo notion of the nation-state. Furthermore, the “indigenous problem” still determined educational policies where the substitution of indigenous practices through the assimilation of the *indio* into Ecuadorian national culture and through the development of indigenous communities was the priority of integrationist campaigns like the *Mision Andina* (Prieto 2015, 29; Breton 2000, 19).

<sup>115</sup> Available from: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F5GSQqMg5ic> (Accessed: April 29, 2021)

<sup>116</sup> This conversation with Zoila Castillo and the joint reflection with Kuymi Tambaco made me understand that the relationality that characterizes *minka* makes it a political practice, since it guarantees an effective participation in communitarian affairs by producing territorial and communitarian bonds. In other words, this understanding of *minka* shows us how there cannot be any effective political participation in a collective if the people involved in it “do not participate to constitute this same collective” (Tambaco and Sempértegui 2019).

“As CONFENIAE representative, I cannot come to your community and directly tell you, ‘you know what? I will organize a workshop for you!’ I always have to coordinate with the female representative of PAKIRU [indigenous organization representing Kichwa communities in the Pastaza province], because she represents everything that used to be called OPIP, now called PAKIRU. Then, she has to coordinate with the representative for women’s issues or with some other representative of the *comuna* of San Jacinto. This is what we’ve done!” (Statement during our co-labor workshop on territoriality and *artesanías*, October 5, 2018, Community of Puerto Santana)

Paraphrasing Tzul Tzul’s analysis of indigenous forms of communal government in Guatemala, these concrete communal practices are ultimately the ones that generate and defend at the same time the means for the reproduction of life (Tzul Tzul 2015, 128). Amazonian female representative Nancy Santi, for example, understands her position as *kuraka* of the Kichwa people of Kawsak Sacha as the immense responsibility of carrying the voice of her people to regional and national organizations. This position, however, is not understood by Santi as something that locates her in a higher position than anyone else in her community. Even if Santi presided over most of the communal assemblies while I was visiting Kawsak Sacha, she never stopped preparing *chicha* and serving it to her community after the assembly was over. When I asked Santi why she kept preparing *chicha* like other women, despite the fact her responsibility as *kuraka* was already very demanding and exhausting, she told me that she has to show how she, as a Kichwa woman, is able to politically represent her people while at the same time “sharing the same duties as any other indigenous woman from my *pueblo*” (Fieldnotes, November 3, 2018).

This statement could be interpreted as an example of how difficult it is for indigenous women to carry a political responsibility normally taken by male leaders. In our conversations Santi and other Amazonian leaders frequently expressed the huge expectations that their communities, families, and *compañeros* from the indigenous movement have of them as political female representatives:

“So there has been a lot of failure on the part of male leaders. Today, for example, they tell me, ‘Let’s see if you can do it as a woman! Show us you are capable!’ That’s how I’ve been told. But that gives me strength, when they tell me that I need to show that I’m capable as a woman.” (Nancy Santi, interview by Lorena van Bunningen y Corinne Duhalde Ruiz, November 1, 2018, Community of Sisa)

“We, women, have not been taken into account. Until now there has been a lot of *machismo*. They used to say that we women were only [made] for the kitchen. When they held assemblies, congresses, we women were cooking and serving the people at the assembly. So, we’ve been talking about these issues and said, ‘comrades now [...] it’s time that we assume as well [...].’” (Lourdes Jipa, interview, September 23, 2018, Community of Sabata)

“Before, men used to decide in the house, while women took care of the house, women raised the children. Men used to say, ‘I am a man!’ Today, since our organization started, we have been fighting for women. There are women leaders. Before, only men were leaders.” (Zoila Castillo, statement during the university seminar “Alternatives to Development,” February 21, 2019, Universidad Andina Simón Bolívar in Quito)

“On certain issues, I felt the opposition of many *compañeros* and that has had to be broken. I believe that in order to be a women’s leader, you have to have all the strength to challenge them. There has been a lot of questioning from their side as to why there is a women’s leadership if we were all in the same organization? [...] If they want to start a leadership position that represents men, if they feel discriminated [silence]. But the women’s leadership has its own ways of proposing things, as women. [...] So yes, I believe that in this case there has been, I feel, a lot of difficulty.” (Patricia Gualinga, interview, August 8, 2017, Puyo)

However, without negating the expectations, difficulties and excessive amount of work that Amazonian female leaders carry on their shoulders, we should not interpret Santi’s decision to share her *chicha* with her *pueblo* as a surrender to patriarchal communal structures. Even if patriarchal societal structures do permeate the Amazonian Women’s everyday life, to use the lens of “patriarchy everywhere” in order to explain this situation would negate Santi’s way of doing communitarian politics. Rather, Santi’s words teach us that the concrete practice of sharing *chicha* nurtures her position as a leader, who is not separated from her community bases and who “works with her *pueblo* and feels the same necessities and worries as her people” (Interview, September 10, 2018, Puyo). In other words, Santi’s decision of weaving communitarian bonds through her *chicha* illustrates her way of being organic to the people she represents.

“To be organic” to the indigenous movement, a phrase that my co-laborers would often use to describe their political work as indigenous representatives, is thus the driving force that connects indigenous organizational politics to its community bases. Furthermore, “to be organic” connects indigenous leaders to the communitarian and territorial relations crucial for territorial defense and for the reproduction of life in

its multiple forms. Nevertheless, this “organicism” to the indigenous movement should not be understood, as Tzul Tzul reminds us when describing communal politics in Guatemala, as “an essence that has to be maintained” or an “archaic form of the past” (Tzul Tzul 2015, 129). The indigenous movement *trama* in Ecuador, as a heterogeneous movement composed by different indigenous peoples with different languages, histories, trajectories and communal institutions, is characterized by its multiple strategies to speak with and beyond the state, by its creativity when deploying the dominant discourses. This heterogeneity and creativity characterizes the Amazonian Women too, as each chapter of this dissertation shows in different ways.

Even less is this “organicism” a sacred attribute that has to be taken care of, so that it is not contaminated with “external forces” (Tzul Tzul 2015, 129). On the contrary, it is also characterized by power relations, hierarchies, and asymmetries, which sometimes “take over” this “being organic” to the indigenous movement and reproduce “politics as usual”<sup>117</sup>—e.g. when some indigenous leaders individually negotiate with the state or extractive companies ignoring the mandate from their community bases. Episodes of “politics as usual” tell us about the soft spots of the indigenous movement and about the necessity of understanding this “being organic” as an ensemble of concrete practices. These practices are not absent of negotiations and transformations, and have the power to update and recompose the indigenous movement itself.

As mentioned in Chapter One, the Amazonian Women are active members and political representatives at their indigenous organizations. To reach these political posts at the level of not only communitarian but even regional organizations has not been easy. All of them share a history of “advancing” to these posts by “being organic” to and gaining the trust of their community bases. Furthermore, some of them were elected to represent their whole indigenous nationality, because of their antiextractive positions when they were representing their indigenous women’s organizations. This is, their antiextractive positions became popular among their community bases from their *doble militancia* at their indigenous and women’s organizations, like in the case of Nancy Santi, Alicia Cahuilla and Rosa Gualinga:

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<sup>117</sup>Marisol de la Cadena uses “politics as usual” to designate “politics as power disputes within a singular world” and differentiate it from “another one that includes the possibility of adversarial relations among worlds” (de la Cadena 2010, 360).

“It has just been four months since I assumed the position of *Kuraka* of the ancestral *pueblo* of Kawsak Sacha. But before that I founded the women’s association *Kawsak Sacha Jarkata Warmikuna*, together with the women from Kawsak Sacha. So, before that, I’ve been leading my community [community of Sisa, part of Kawsak Sacha] as president. I have been working with my people, with my community, and with the women since I was twenty-five years old. I have been with the organization of my people since then.” (Nancy Santi, interview, September 10, 2018, Puyo)

“We have a very big forest, where men decide. But women can also move forward with their organization, organize as an association, and say no to negotiations over oil, no to negotiations over timber, no to negotiations over other organizations. We are people that can administer, develop our life plan, with our thoughts, with our approach, with our magic and with our own visions and mission as Waorani.” (Alicia Cahuilla, interview, October 17, 2018, Quito)

“In 2010, they appointed me. I continued working as an organizer of the Shiwiari nationality. Then, from there on, Zoila Castillo called me, because we were challenging men. Why? Because they wanted to do it [allow oil extraction]. So, we as women are confronting them. So that they stop being like that [...]. That’s how we took him out [former president of NASHIE, involved in corruption scandals in 2013]. That’s what happened to us.” (Rosa Gualinga, interview, August 8, 2017, Puyo)

The Amazonian Women’s self-organizing as a group of different Amazonian female leaders who have carefully weaved themselves into a network, should be understood as product of their antiextractive mandate—derived from their *double militancia* and “being organic” to their community bases—and their decision to publicly challenge the extractive state. These elements made a direct cooperation between the Amazonian Women’s network with environmental organizations possible.

### **“We are not Separatists!”**

The previous section shows how the conflict that arose during the 2018 Amazonian Women’s mobilization is not derived from the Amazonian Women’s network’s decision to separate themselves from the indigenous movement. The Amazonian Women’s background as indigenous leaders and their political decision to self-organize as official representatives of their community bases in 2013 challenges this interpretation. Nevertheless, it is important to note that their allyship with environmental and ecofeminist activists has changed the positioning from which the Amazonian Women negotiate their relations with their indigenous organizations and



communities, and has sometimes even disregarded important indigenous practices that prepare and validate political mobilizations.

This is especially the case for the Amazonian female leaders whose territorial struggle has gained national and international visibility through their allyship with certain non-governmental organizations. For example, leaders like Alicia Cahuilla, who has become a renowned face of the anti-extractive defense of the Yasuní National Park, has encountered a great deal of resistance and criticism from her own organization. The current representatives at the Waorani organization NAWE have challenged her allyship with some *mestiza* activists and her role as “*lideresa del pueblo waorani*” [female leader from the Waorani people], especially now that her political position as NAWE’s Vice President is over (Waorani Organization NAWE, Facebook post, August 27, 2018). Furthermore, the fact that some environmental organizations economically facilitate Alicia’s participation at certain national and international fora over other leaders active in the defense for the Yasuní National Park produces the effect of “individualizing” the collective Waorani struggle by focusing on her activism and renders invisible the everyday struggles of the community bases living in Yasuní.

However, the largest tensions resulting from the Amazonian Women’s allyship with environmental and ecofeminist organizations stem from economic support from the latter for certain political actions, such as the 2018 Amazonian Women’s march and assembly. Economic support, especially if it comes from international funding, induces a different temporality that is not organic to the indigenous movement’s temporality. The reason behind this is that, even if some environmental organizations are well intentioned and conscious about the difficulties of financing an indigenous mobilization with the participation of their community bases, the “mobilization moment” gains primacy over other communitarian and territorial practices. This can end up displacing the organizational logics of the indigenous movement and enhancing already existent conflicts between certain indigenous leaderships.

These serious problems with allyship relations do not mean that members from the Amazonian Women have ceded to the agenda of their allies when organizing antiextractive protests and events. Criticisms that portray the Amazonian Women as “separatists” to the indigenous movement, due to the visibility of their political actions, have been refuted by most of the members from the Amazonian Women’s network:

“But we are participating, we are walking. When she, when she had a conflict with her, with Zoila, when we went to deliver the mandate, I was there. But I gave her good advice, for the benefit of the organization [and] of women, we do not have to be enemies. None of us. Even if she is a leader, an elected leader, no. I mean, we have to be united. In other words, we have to be united. We all have to be united to achieve what we want.” (Ena Santi, interview, March 3, 2019, Puyo)

“Yes, without that [separatism], but trying to understand and position ourselves. And without trying to make men feel that they are under threat because women want to take power, there is no competition. No. But we are all together for the same objective, which is the defense of our territory. In different ways, because we are women and because they are men.” (Patricia Gualinga, interview, August 8, 2017, Puyo)

“The struggle is for everyone, young people, men and everyone. But there is a group of women who are clearly fighting, men support us. The struggle is with the political organization, the great CONFENIAE, which is made of men and women, and of the support of our communities. Men and women are in one cause.” (Zoila Castillo, statement during the university seminar “Alternatives to Development,” February 21, 2019, Universidad Andina Simón Bolívar in Quito)

Furthermore disciplinary attempts within CONFENIAE to “penalize” them after the 2018 mobilization were strongly resisted and challenged by Amazonian female leaders themselves:

“To all the Amazonian Women, recently there was an assembly, she said that they decided to sanction all the Amazonian Women. Then I said: ‘but, why!’ [...] All women, as a group of Amazonian Women, we are all united. That is how we all coordinate. We do not say: ‘I’m the leader and you obey me, you have to be under my orders, you have to comply with what I say.’ Why are they like that? Sanctioned, why? If they sanction us, we are also Amazonian women [...]. Let’s go ahead as Amazonian Women, I am also an Amazonian woman! As a leader, I am going to take a strong stance to stop them.” (Salomé Aranda, interview, January 15, 2019, Quito)

Furthermore these disciplinary efforts contrast with how certain indigenous authorities, like the Presidents of CONFENIAE and CONAIE, have publicly supported the Amazonian Women’s activities. Marlon Vargas, CONFENIAE’s President since 2016, supported and talked at the Amazonian Women’s press conference prior to their march and assembly (Facebook post, March 1, 2018). Additionally, despite the indigenous movement internal criticism towards the divisions that became evident during the 2018 march and assembly, Jaime Vargas, President of CONAIE since 2017,

referred to their eight day-long *plantón* in front of the presidential palace as the “start of the indigenous movement’s resistance” against the government of President Lenin Moreno (Public statement during CONAIE’s press conference, March 14, 2018, Quito).

This shows that the Amazonian Women’s self-organizing is not a case of separatism, much less evidence of their striving for autonomy from their male-dominated organizations. Rather, Amazonian female leaders are negotiating their visibility, their positioning, and their demands within the “*horizonte interior*” [interior horizon] of the indigenous movement (Gutiérrez 2017, 31).

Another form of criticism—also coming from the left-wing *mestizo* activist milieu in Ecuador—depicts the Amazonian Women as coopted by environmental non-governmental organizations. This and similar representations ignore the Amazonian Women’s own agenda and do not perceive the complex ways in which they negotiate this agenda in moments of allyship:

“They say, according to them, they say that we are taking money from non-governmental organizations [...]. They told us: ‘Open your eyes Amazonian Women, if you want to work. Because they are manipulating you.’ It is not like that! [...] But if you as leaders do not move, do not mobilize, and continue... The others will continue signing agreements, for the interest of money [...]. That’s why they are like that, envy sometimes. Why do you have to do that?” (Salomé Aranda, interview, January 15, 2019, Quito)

This form criticism effectively represents Amazonian female leaders’ capacity for building relations of allyship as impossible. At the same time, it excludes indigenous women from the complex history of relations between missionaries, environmental activists and indigenous organizations in the rainforest. To justify this criticism, by alleging that the Amazonian Women’s network is not an “official” organization within the indigenous movement, is to negate the Amazonian Women’s power to self-organize and to negotiate spaces of visibility for their own demands against extractive occupation.

### **Rexisting through Complicated Relations**

In the first two parts of this chapter, I analyzed how allyship relations between the Amazonian Women and their urban allies (including myself) are constituted by complicated and even contradictory modes of cooperation, as well as by processes of

transforming each other, or what I call processes of becoming-together. While the contradictory aspects of allyship are characterized by how these relations do not exist outside hegemonic systems of oppression and by how they do not incorporate intelligible notions of what is at stake, becoming-together is illustrated by how the Amazonian Women and urban activists, like the ecofeminists, have managed to work together and change each other along the way. Even though this has not been a process among “equal partners” working together for “the same goal,” it has definitely extended each side’s positions, proposals, and agendas.

In the last sections, I examined how relations of allyship between the Amazonian Women and ecofeminists have generated tensions within indigenous organizations. These tensions are mostly rooted in how allyship relations have made the leadership of some Amazonian women more visible than others and have sometimes even displaced important indigenous practices that prepare and validate political mobilizations. This has certainly clashed with the indigenous movement’s own logics of political legitimation and complicated the Amazonian Women’s position within the same movement. Nevertheless, Amazonian leaders challenge criticisms that portray them as “separatists” to their indigenous organizations and see themselves as active actors within the indigenous *trama*, who negotiate their positioning and demands with the intention of transforming the indigenous movement from within.

It is important to note that the complicated features of allyship are rooted in its deeply relational and historical character, which distinguishes allyship from other ways of theorizing relations. Under neoliberal conditions, for example, an alliance is usually conceived as a relation between two self-interested, closed units that part ways after achieving their goals. Allyship, by contrast, is composed by entities that are partially connected to each other and incorporate each other’s positions. In the case of the Amazon, partial connections among allies are shaped by the rainforest’s colonial history and by how this same history has situated indigenous peoples and urban activists in asymmetrical and even conflictual positions. Allyship can thus incorporate relations of coloniality and decoloniality at the same time, and moments of allies breaking with each other and coming back together in different scenarios.

With this depiction of allyship, I am not trying to justify the problematic practices of exclusion and coloniality from *mestiza* activists in 2018, or to defend Amazonian women’s allyship with environmental and ecofeminist organizations at all costs. On the contrary, I want to show the complexities behind Amazonian Women’s

political decision to build allyship relations with *mestiza* activists. By entering these relations, the Amazonian Women have been able to make visible certain aspects of their own struggle through the platforms that environmental and feminist activists have made available. At the same time, they negotiate this visibility with their indigenous organizations, and even place limits on allyship relations when urban allies impose their own logics of political organizing.

If we, as activists and scholars who are committed to decolonizing our bonding practices, cannot recognize the Amazonian Women's political decision to build allyship relations as a conscious and purposeful act, we run the risk of affirming that "aspect of patriarchal [and racist] culture" where female bonding is not possible or is understood as an act of treason to our communities, as bell hooks reminds us (2000, 15). The Amazonian Women are constructing different spaces for their voices and demands to be heard inside and outside of their indigenous organizations in order to defend life in its multiple forms. In fact, the Amazonian Women's mode of organizing through resistance depends on relations like allyship, the connecting force of which does not stem from a simple position of rejection to extractive occupation. Rather, allyship for resistance is nourished by allies becoming-together as they recognize their shared existence and the interdependence of their lives on this earth.

## Conclusion

### The Amazonian Women's Politics of Resistance

“I, as an Amazonian woman, come in the name of my people, of my nature, of the *supay*. [...] I come here to speak about the oil blocks that are affecting us, the Shiwiar, Sapara and Kichwa indigenous peoples of the ancestral territory of Kawsak Sacha, blocks 86 and 87. I am asking the president and the minister of hydrocarbons, Carlos Pérez, to apologize for not acknowledging that indigenous peoples live in the territories that overlap with oil blocks 87 and 86. He [the minister] must apologize to indigenous peoples for not recognizing that we exist as peoples! [...] We do not speak only for ourselves, we speak for nature's multiple living beings that exist for us. There are many worlds in the Amazon that Western people do not know about. [...] The Ecuadorian state must receive us and obey the mandate of the Amazonian Women!” (Nancy Santi, testimony during the Amazonian Women's protest at the Ecuadorian Ministry of Hydrocarbons, November 14, 2018, Quito)<sup>118</sup>

The Amazonian Women are disrupting politics as usual in Ecuador and making it difficult to ignore their voices and their message. The context in which Nancy Santi spoke the words above reveals the kind of politics the Amazonian Women enact through their organizing: Santi gave this speech in front of the Ministry of Hydrocarbons, while her other *compañeras* were inside the building exerting pressure on former Minister Carlos Pérez to meet with them. They occupied the ministry for two days in response to the licensing of four oil blocks in the Amazon and the possible exploitation of the Ishpingo oil block in the Yasuní National Park.<sup>119</sup> On the same day a massive march called “The March for Water,” led by indigenous and peasant communities, flooded the streets in Quito.<sup>120</sup> While the main message of this march was that the communities rejected mining projects, it was also a public dismissal of Lenin Moreno's worn-out strategy, which was to engage in a pretense of dialogue with social movements while advancing mining activities across the country.

The Amazonian Women's takeover of the Ministry successfully forced Pérez to meet with them and listen to each of their demands. Like Santi, they spoke in the name of their people, nature's multiple “living beings,” and the forest as a living space in

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<sup>118</sup> Available from: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WNN0\\_r7Ohvw&feature=youtu.be](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WNN0_r7Ohvw&feature=youtu.be) (Accessed: April 19, 2021)

<sup>119</sup> Available from: <https://www.eltelegrafo.com.ec/noticias/politica/3/ministro-energia-representantes-mujeres-amazonicas-yasunidos> (Accessed: April 19, 2021)

<sup>120</sup> Available from: <https://www.elcomercio.com/actualidad/marcha-agua-movimiento-indigena-cutuglagua.html> (Accessed: April 19, 2021)

which human and non-human life is reproduced. Through these statements, they challenged how extractive expansion renders their people's lives invisible and exerts violence on their bodies. They also used this public meeting to expand the scope of what the *mestizo* citizenry thinks extractive projects occupy. Extractivism violently erases the actual presence of indigenous communities in the rainforest, as happened when Pérez denied the existence of indigenous communities where oil blocks 86 and 87 are located. It also renders invisible the “many worlds,” as Santi puts it, that exist in the Amazon as a living space. By making the “unseen” intelligible and doing it at a place where decisions regarding extractivism are taken, they positioned themselves as the main actors with whom the Minister was forced to engage—“The Ecuadorian state must receive us and obey the mandate of the Amazonian Women!”. With this action, they challenged the extractive politics that have systematically excluded their voices and their historical leadership.

The Amazonian Women's presence in Quito also revealed how they are able to seize public platforms generated by their allies and organizations, and how complicated these processes can be. While environmental activists and allies like myself were supporting the Amazonian Women's actions outside the Ministry, environmental groups like the *Yasunid@s* collective were inside of the building with them. The presence of this environmental collective, whose activism and effective media presence have spread the word about the importance of the Yasuní National Park in urban centers, generated several moments of tension with the Amazonian leaders. Several indigenous women complained about *Yasunid@s* only talking about Yasuní and overshadowing the struggle of the Amazonian Women (Fieldnotes, November 15, 2018). Nevertheless, during the final meeting with the Minister, the Amazonian Women successfully set the agenda and dominated the conversation with Pérez through their speeches, while *Yasunid@s* live-streamed the exchange.

The fact that the indigenous march was arriving in Quito while the Amazonian Women were occupying a governmental building strategically granted them the opportunity to also make their claims heard during the anti-mining protest. The day after their meeting with the Minister, the Amazonian Women joined the “The March for Water” in front of the former Ministry of Electricity and Renewable Energy. Zoila Castillo joined the speakers of the march and took the microphone to talk on behalf of the Amazonian Women. Her intention was not only to represent the voice of her *compañeras*, but also to express their rejection of oil extraction, which was absent from

the marcher's demands. The leaders of the march, Yaku Pérez from ECUARINARI and Jaime Vargas from CONAIE, although critical of mining, did not explicitly criticize the recent licensing of four oil blocks in the Amazon. Angered by this omission, Castillo spoke against oil extraction. However, while she was speaking, CONAIE's president took the microphone away from her. This act of silencing was for Castillo exemplary of some indigenous male leaders' fear of the Amazonian Women's "radical position." As she told me afterwards, "they are afraid of us because we are radical on the oil issue" (Fieldnotes, November 15, 2018).



Image 41. The Amazonian Women joining the "The March for Water," November 14, 2018, Quito.

This ethnographic description of the Amazonian Women's presence in Quito is exemplary of how they take over the spaces and platforms available to them inside and outside their indigenous organizations. These are the contours of their politics vis-à-vis the state, their allies, and the indigenous movement. While the Amazonian leaders relate differently to each of these actors, their primary goal is to make their demands manifest and their voices heard, as I have exposed throughout the different chapters of this dissertation. Even though some actors describe the Amazonian Women's demands as radical, something that leaders like Castillo proudly embrace, their radicalism is not characterized by a mere position of rejecting extractive projects *tout court*. Rather, it is infused by how they defend life in its radical key, which includes human and non-human life, and how they understand the Amazon as a Living Forest. This defense is not merely a rhetorical one—it is characterized by how the Amazonian Women weave together public expressions of resistance (such as mobilizations, protest marches, and other public actions) with those everyday practices that reproduce life.

Practices like weaving *artesanías*, cultivating the land, or building allyships with urban movements inspire and enable the Amazonian Women's organizational strategies. They also point to the material dimension of their politics. The Amazonian



Women's political struggle is characterized by how they masterfully connect written proposals like the "Living Forest" with very concrete practices that reproduce human and non-human life in their territories (practices of forest-making), or with practices that economically sustain their activism in the cities (like weaving and selling *artesanías*). The merging of the Amazonian Women's everyday practices and the seemingly more "public" practices in their territorial struggle is what I have called *rexistance* throughout this manuscript. In short, while the contours of the Amazonian leaders' politics are marked by strategies of seizing different platforms to make their demands visible, the content and material dimension of their political demands are characterized by *rexistance*.

In what follows, I will offer a final analysis of the Amazonian Women's politics of *rexistance* by explicitly connecting it to the different motifs examined in this dissertation—*artesanías*, practices of forest-making, and allyship. Then, I will reflect on the contribution of this reading of the Amazonian Women's politics to academic and political analyses of neo-extractivism, indigenous politics, and women-led anti-extractive struggles in Latin America. Finally, I offer an overview of what has happened since 2019 (the period after I finished my last ethnographic visit in Ecuador), and what we can learn from the Amazonian Women's *rexistance* in order to confront the current pandemic and the rampant environmental degradation of the Amazon.

### **Three Perspectives on the Politics of *Rexistance***

*Rexistance* refers to the connections between the Amazonian Women's everyday practices and the seemingly more "public" practices in their territorial struggle. *Rexistance* is, nevertheless, not only an analytical concept but an imagistic and ethnographic one as well, inspired by the *artesanía* of the *Araña Tejedora* designed and created by the Amazonian leader Elvia Dagua. In her own description of this *artesanía*, Dagua reveals how Amazonian women are spider-like themselves, because they weave their own spiderweb to sustain themselves, their extended families, and their territorial struggle all at the same time. *Rexistance* is thus an ethnographic-analytical description of Dagua's *artesanía* and of the Amazonian Women's organizing.

The effects of understanding the Amazonian Women's politics in terms of *rexistance* are twofold. First, this understanding expands the political boundaries social

scientists have learned to associate with anti-extractive resistance beyond a mere rejection of state-power, capitalism, and extractive projects. Second, it incorporates the multiple ways in which members of the Amazonian Women sustain, reproduce, and depict their organizing. Throughout this dissertation, I have demonstrated how the Amazonian leaders concretely expand these boundaries by focusing on the role of *artesanías*, practices of forest-making, and allyship in their territorial struggle. At the same time, I have shown how these three motifs, despite their exclusion from dominant interpretations of the Amazonian Women's mobilizations in the mass media and major academic works, are essential elements of their organizing. In what follows, I review how *artesanías*, practices of forest-making, and allyship exemplify politics of resistance, and expose how each of these three motifs expand resistance as a political field of scrutiny.

### **Weaving *Artesanías*, Weaving Resistance**

As examined in Chapter Four, *artesanías'* role in the Amazonian Women's territorial struggle is related to how they enable their organizational work as indigenous leaders. In Zoila Castillo's words, *artesanías* are the "*sustento*" of their "indigenous organizations and of their fight as indigenous leaders" (Speech at the International Congress "Bodies, Territories and Dispossession: Life under Threat," October 16, 2018, Universidad Andina Simón Bolívar in Quito). *Sustento* is a word in Spanish that could be either translated as "sustenance" or as "support." The first translation denotes the material aspect of *artesanías* as providers of food, transportation, and other necessary goods when the Amazonian Women need to travel to the city to fulfil their duties as indigenous leaders. The second denotes the broader and symbolic meaning that the practice of weaving *artesanías* has for leaders like Castillo, Gualinga, and Dagua. Weaving is an intellectual and relational worlding practice, which embodies how the Amazonian Women weave a multiplicity of webs that support their territorial struggle.

As suggested in various parts of this dissertation, resistance should also be understood as a web of practices and relations carefully designed by the Amazonian Women in order to sustain and continue their territorial struggle. In other words, when I refer to resistance as the set of connections between the Amazonian Women's

everyday practices and the public practices of their struggle, this is not something that happens coincidentally or arbitrarily. Rather, as I mentioned in Chapter Three, *rexistance* is the Amazonian Women's ontological design for their struggle, characterized by how these leaders carefully weave together different practices and relations vital to their lives and territorial struggle, in the same way that they weave their *artesanías*. The purpose of this design is to attract support for the Living Forest as a proposal that is interconnected with other proposals around the world and vital for humanity's existence.

What does the practice of weaving *rexistance* as a design tell us about the Amazonian Women's politics? It reveals that their political practice is invested in making explicit the links between their mobilizations on the streets and those elements that inspire and make these mobilizations possible. Beyond this being an identifying feature of their politics as "female leaders" who cannot leave reproductive practices outside the realm of the public sphere (in contrast to male leaders), *rexistance* points to the deeper dimensions of indigenous and communitarian politics, as indigeneous thinkers like Gladys Tzul Tzul or Luis Macas have exposed (see Chapter Six). In the case of the indigenous communities from which the Amazonian leaders come, the activities that enable and reproduce communitarian life very often coincide with the activities that support political decisions (like *minkas*, communal work). In the case of the Amazonian Women, they also intentionally take advantage of other communitarian and everyday practices—such as preparing *chicha*, painting *mukawas*, or drinking *guayusa*, and telling each other's *muskuys*—to seed political action in their communities (see Chapter One) and to facilitate spaces for sharing political strategies with their allies in the cities (see Chapter Five).

The Amazonian Women's practice of weaving *rexistance* points to how their territorial struggle goes beyond the perpetual mode of resisting state intervention, capitalist occupation, or extractive projects within indigenous communities. Their politics of *rexistance* is also a design, carefully woven together, that connects a multiplicity of public, modern, communitarian, and reproductive practices that sustain and defend life. This understanding of Amazonian politics certainly moves our attention away from the apparently omnipresent and totalizing power of extractivism, and births alternative analyses from the ones that grant "affected populations" a mere reactionary or conjunctural position.

## Transgressing Political Boundaries through Practices of Forest-Making

Chapter Five, on the Amazonian Women's practices of forest-making, focuses on how specific practices like cultivating the land, singing with a purpose, and learning how to dream are exemplary of the complex entanglements of life that make the forest into a living entity. By analyzing each of these practices, I showed how the Living Forest is not an abstraction, but rather is permanently constituted by these practices and how they create affective relations between both human and non-human worlds. What is novel about the Amazonian Women is how they not only reproduce these practices in their communities, but also how they intentionally "bring" these practices into the public eye. By reproducing practices like singing in their meetings with state representatives, or sharing dreams during the *guayusada* with allies in the cities, they challenge the idea that these forest-making practices can only take place in the forest.

What does the public enactment of practices of forest-making reveal about the politics of resistance? On the one hand, it shows that these leaders are challenging modern conceptualizations of "the political" as either an exclusive realm of liberal deliberation (Habermas 1975) or as a realm of adversarial confrontation (Mouffe 2000). The Amazonian Women, by contrast, challenge both their political adversaries' and allies' assumptions about the Amazon through their verbal and performative depictions of the rainforest as a space of life. The performance of practices of forest-making in public spaces is certainly a symbolic strategy of visibility, but is more importantly an attempt to bring those material relations, crucial for the reproduction of life in the Amazon, to those same places that tend to mystify the rainforest as either a space of economic sacrifice or as an untouched space to be preserved.

On the other hand, the public enactment of certain practices like singing, considered intimate practices to be jealously guarded and secretly shared in many Amazonian communities, is also a political act of transforming what "being indigenous" means. Contrary to interpretations that attribute to indigenous communities a static identity, the Amazonian Women are challenging a stereotypical identification of indigenous women as "tradition keepers" that marginalizes their political voices (Muratorio 2000, 240). While leaders like Rosa Gualinga are aware that singing in the forest has a different effect than singing in the city, the public performance of this practice uses the "magical power" of Amazonian chants to position

the Amazonian Women as the spokeswomen of alternative futures and to put life—in its radical human and non-human key—at the foreground.

### **Allyship Relations and Rexistance**

My dissertation's last chapter, on the allyship between the Amazonian Women and urban activists, focuses on the relationships that have shaped the Amazonian leaders' organizing outside of the indigenous movement. I specifically focus on the allyship between the Amazonian Women and ecofeminists, and on how these relations are constituted by contradictory modes of cooperation and by processes of "becoming together." While the contradictory aspects of allyship are permeated by colonial history and structural asymmetries, processes of becoming together are marked by how indigenous and urban activists have transformed each other by working together. This complicated and transformative allyship has produced a lot of tensions within indigenous organizations, because it has granted some Amazonian female leaders a lot of visibility and often displaces important indigenous practices in order to legitimize political mobilizations. Nevertheless, the Amazonian Women defy criticisms that accuse them of being "separatists" and see themselves as change-generating actors within the indigenous movement.

What does the allyship between the Amazonian Women and ecofeminists, and its effects on the indigenous movement, reveal about the politics of reistance? It reveals that reistance is not only marked by indigenous practices, but is also composed of complicated but necessary relations that continuously transform what it means to be "indigenous." In fact, the Amazonian Women's allyship with ecofeminists demonstrates the Amazonian leaders' strategic necessity of building pragmatic relations with actors that offer them political support and platforms of visibility. At the same time, it reveals how indigenous politics are deeply transformational and invested in rearticulating what it means to be indigenous in order to make allyship work and advance a political agenda that guarantees and protects access to their territories. These transformations certainly find their limits, manifest in how, for instance, the Amazonian Women adopt certain elements from ecofeminist discourse that are useful to their own struggle and proposals, while leaving others aside—such as declaring the Amazonian Women's network a feminist group. Despite these limits and the fact these transformations generate a lot of tensions within the indigenous movement, the

Amazonian female leaders negotiate these allyship relations with their indigenous *compañeras* and *compañeros* without separating themselves from the broader indigenous organizational structures.

In sum, the complicated allyship between the Amazonian Women and urban activists reveals that the politics of rexistance are articulated by Amazonian leaders not as pure ethnic actors to be idealized but rather as contemporary political subjects, who combine the deeper and historical dimensions of indigenous politics with strategic and contemporary relations necessary for the political success of their proposals.

### **The Power of Rexistance: Defending Life in a Radical Key**

By reviewing how *artesanías*, practices of forest-making, and allyship exemplify the Amazonian Women's politics of rexistance, I have demonstrated how these leaders are transforming the concept of "resistance" used in the social sciences and in common interpretations of anti-extractive politics in Latin America. As discussed in Chapter Three, this transformation neither replaces an older concept with a newer one, nor implies that the Amazonian Women do not actively resist the state's and extractive companies' intervention in their territories. Rather, rexistance expands the political boundaries we have learned to associate with resistance—as a highly public happening separated from the reproduction of life (see Arendt 2009 [1963]), or as something that only defends the reproduction of life but is not constituted by it (see Hage 2015)—and incorporates the plural ways in which members of the Amazonian Women's network depict their struggle.

Here, I would like to take Gladys Tzul Tzul's insightful analysis of indigenous politics one more time as a reference to illuminate the overall contribution—practical and intellectual—of the Amazonian Women's politics of rexistance. During an interview made by Argentinian journalists from *la tinta* in 2019, Tzul Tzul analyzes the important legacy of Ecuador's indigenous movement, with whom she worked during her research years in Ecuador.<sup>121</sup> Departing from her prior examination of the role of communal structures in building effective strategies and advancing the indigenous agenda for ending the *hacienda* system in the 1990s, Tzul Tzul calls on us to complexify and to be more careful with our current analyses of indigenous anti-extractive

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<sup>121</sup> Available from: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F5GSQqMg5ic> (Accessed: April 19, 2021)

resistance. According to the sociologist, communal structures, often criticized or not understood by leftist activists as effective political tactics, have historically proven to be the most effective strategies for advancing indigenous communities' demands. Even though, while pursuing communal strategies, indigenous activists use rhetoric stressing that they are ready to defend their territories "even with their own lives," in reality indigenous communities are fighting and deploying these strategies because they *want to live*.<sup>122</sup> Tzul Tzul's elucidation of indigenous politics thus challenges readings that minimize the political role of communal structures or that misunderstand their deployment as an act of sacrificial politics characteristic of marginalized communities.

The Amazonian Women's politics of resistance should be considered in a similar light, as primarily committed to defending indigenous territories, the multiple lives that inhabit these territories, and Amazonian communities' will to live. As previously mentioned, when Amazonian leaders like Castillo embrace a depiction of their demands as radical, the radicality of their politics should be contextualized as a product of how the Amazonian Women defend life in its radical key. Defying conservative depictions of "radical politics" as an absolute rejection or as a nihilistic negation of reality, the Amazonian Women's resistance is characterized by how they defend life in its human and non-human forms, and how they defend indigenous territories as concrete living spaces that the modern division between nature and culture has historically rendered invisible. That is to say, their struggle is not a struggle of sacrifice or, even less so, a struggle that tries to "conserve what indigenous peoples have left." Rather the Amazonian Women's struggle powerfully draws from practices that sustain life in order to defend a space where life in its plurality is possible.

Departing from this understanding, in which resistance stands for a politics that defends life in its radical key, what is the contribution of the Amazonian Women's struggle to academic and political analyses of neo-extractivism, indigenous politics, and women-led anti-extractive struggles in Latin America?

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<sup>122</sup> Ibid.



Image 42. *Chichada* and Dancing after finishing a community assembly, courtesy of Zoila Castillo, March 8, 2019, Kichwa community of Teresa Mama.

In relation to analyses of neo-extractivism (Gudynas 2010; Acosta 2012; Bebbington 2011, Svampa 2013 and 2015), the Amazonian Women's politics of resistance illuminates how indigenous communities not only react to extractivism as a developmental model, but, when organized, they also shape the lines of political confrontation vis-à-vis the state and extractive capital. As I mentioned in Chapter One, while analyses of neo-extractivism are effective at highlighting continuities in the developmental model, its immediate macro-analytical perspective problematically assigns a victimized or a reactionary position to affected populations, even though grassroots activists have been key protagonists in the contentious politics of oil and mining in Ecuador in the last decades (see Gago and Mezzadra 2017; and Riofrancos 2020). In the case of the Amazonian Women, their distinctive ways of confronting extractive projects evinces their organizing as sustained and complex rather than immediate or spontaneous strategies of engaging the state and multinational corporations. Furthermore, their politics of resistance have forced Ecuador's National Assembly, the President, the Minister of Hydrocarbons, and the broader public to listen to their proposals and engage with the unimaginable ways—for the *mezitizo* world—in which the Amazonian Women defend their territories and life. Finally, the Amazonian Women's resistance, in conjunction with the anti-extractive activism of their local organizations and allies, have been able to effectively halt the expansion of the 11th oil round in the Amazon. They are, as Tzul Tzul rightly notes, "*la piedra en el zapato*" (the stone in the shoe) of extractive capital.<sup>123</sup>

In relation to different conceptualizations of indigenous politics, this dissertation's interpretation of the Amazonian Women's struggle is situated on a wide

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<sup>123</sup> Ibid.



spectrum of human and social sciences that understand indigenous politics as embedded in complex historical dynamics, and indigenous peoples as active political agents. In the Ecuadorian context, social scientists and indigenous intellectuals such as Luis Macas (1991), Nina Pacari (1993), Blanca Muratorio (1994), Anne-Christine Taylor (1994), Victor Breton (2000), Suzana Sawyer (2004), Pablo Ospina (2009), and Mercedes Prieto (2015), have traced the indigenous movement's historical constitution and development and portrayed indigenous peoples as relevant political subjects negotiating their claims beyond the limits state-power imposes. In the case of the Amazonian Women's politics of resistance, I have shown how their struggle is part of this long-term history of indigenous anti-extractive resistance in the south-central Amazon. At the same time, the Amazonian Women's organizing has challenged the exclusion of their voices from their indigenous organizations and used their public visibility to negotiate their positionality and transform the indigenous movement from within. This process of internal transformation, in terms of how indigenous women manage to renew anti-extractive resistance without breaking with indigenous organizational structures, should receive greater attention from scholars and activists. Furthermore, the novel ways in which the Amazonian Women include practices of forest-making into their public interventions are certainly pluralizing indigenous political expressions when defending territorial autonomy.

Finally, regarding analyses that focus on women-led anti-extractive struggles in Latin America, resistance expands interpretations of the Amazonian Women's organizing as part of a Latin American trend called "the feminization of struggles" during neo-extractivism. While I agree with the structural dimensions of these analyses, which center on how the Amazonian Women's network resists the ways in which extractivism introduces, deepens, and reactivates patriarchal relations in the territories it occupies (*Colectivo Miradas Críticas del Territorio desde el Feminismo* 2018), it is equally important to be in dialogue with the other ways in which the Amazonian Women themselves describe and depict their struggle. In the case of this dissertation, the dialogue with imagistic depictions like Dagua's *Arana Tejedora* has opened the possibility of grasping the political dimensions of their struggle that are nourished by other aspects of their lives and are not completely saturated with colonial, capitalist and extractive occupation. Furthermore, concepts like resistance point to the theoretical and methodological effects that a dialogue like this can instigate. Instead of being another framework of analysis to be applied, resistance is an ethnographic-analytical concept

that is a direct product of my co-labor relation with some Amazonian leaders. Co-labor has thus allowed me to expand and enrich the views, ideas, and language I use to understand the Amazonian Women's immense contribution to anti-extractive politics in Ecuador and beyond.

### **Final Words: On the Pandemic and Environmental Degradation in the Amazon**

How are the Amazonian Women currently resisting extractive occupation? Since I left Ecuador in March 2019, a lot has changed. In fact, asking this question feels more challenging than ever. These times are marked by the global pandemic caused by the spread of the coronavirus disease COVID-19. Yet the phrase “pandemic times” falls too short, as the plurality of problems that we are confronting precede the pandemic itself. What characterizes our historical moment is not only the “warfare” the virus has declared on our bodies, as some politicians have put it. Rather, the “microbiological warfare” has made evident other types of social, political, and ecological “warfare” against our bodies and communities, and how the distinct motions of our colonial and racist history position us differently and asymmetrically in our ability to protect and reproduce our lives.

In Ecuador, sustaining and reproducing life has become especially challenging since the spread of the coronavirus started. The combination of both microbiological and neoliberal warfare has brought disastrous consequences especially for those brown and black “essential workers”—farmers, educators, informal vendors, domestic workers, among others—who sustain the country at the “lowest level.” In cities such as Guayaquil, which filled the national and international news as the epicenter of the coronavirus in Latin America in April 2020, the situation became so untenable that the problem was no longer how to keep people with COVID-19 alive, but what to do with the dead. While desperate *Guayaquileñas* and *Guayaquileños* demanded from state authorities to at least care for their deceased relatives, the government massively failed to remove corpses from people's homes and even denied their existence.<sup>124</sup> This calamity was compounded by healthcare workers' protests due to the lack of medical

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<sup>124</sup>Available from: <https://www.elsaltodiario.com/el-rumor-de-las-multitudes/guayaquil-colonial-virus?fbclid=IwAR012Z-5cG-xyW9ZhgnjPqFeSGVx-8fFzOHyfQs1KakX1LiiETc6Dk7Lh8> (Accessed: April 19, 2021)

resources,<sup>125</sup> the government's decision to pay its external debt to bondholders on March 24,<sup>126</sup> and the uncovering of several corruption cases during the pandemic.<sup>127</sup> Unlike the indigenous and popular uprising of October 2019, in which the Ecuadorian people massively mobilized against the structural adjustment plan dictated by the IMF, social outrage against the government has been expressed with home-based *cacerolazos* ["casserole," a form of popular protest] and smaller protests in Quito in contempt of the State of Exception that was extended until mid-September 2020.

In the Amazon region, indigenous communities have been hit the hardest. The absence of the state in terms of hospitals or healthcare centers, and its failure to provide these communities with sanitary equipment and preventive measures to contain the spread of coronavirus has given free rein to the virus. Furthermore, continuous and unprecedented rains negatively impacted indigenous communities in the south-central Amazon—especially Kichwa communities like Pakayaku, Sarayaku, Jatun Molino, and Teresa Mama—which saw their homes, schools, and crops washed away by the river's flooding in April 2020. Without a place to live and the possibility to sustain themselves from their crops, these communities were not able to stay in their territories and comply with the quarantine. According to the Amazonian Women's member Patricia Gualinga, the massive floods are a direct consequence of the Amazon's deforestation and of climate change,

"This pandemic has made visible the magnitude of the [state] abandonment in which the indigenous peoples have always been. In this context, it was surprising that there was a flood of such magnitude, as we have never seen before, which has wiped out 80% of our crops along the Bobonaza river. But it was not only the Bobonaza, there were other rivers as well. Week after week we saw other river basins flooding, where indigenous peoples live. We believe that this is a direct consequence of the depredation and deforestation in the Amazon, but above all of climate change." (Speech during the Webinar "*COVID y la guerra contra la Amazonía*," June 3, 2020)<sup>128</sup>

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<sup>125</sup> Available from: [https://issblog.nl/2020/04/09/covid-19-ecuador-covid-19-and-the-imf-how-austerity-exacerbated-the-crisis-by-ana-lucia-badillo-salgado-and-andrew-m-fischer/?fbclid=IwAR16XXJTZSzx5AJ4TjF\\_L5B8GUmlYEJvj4nR2cTKU7ti3aYkHQAiSm5VTk](https://issblog.nl/2020/04/09/covid-19-ecuador-covid-19-and-the-imf-how-austerity-exacerbated-the-crisis-by-ana-lucia-badillo-salgado-and-andrew-m-fischer/?fbclid=IwAR16XXJTZSzx5AJ4TjF_L5B8GUmlYEJvj4nR2cTKU7ti3aYkHQAiSm5VTk) (Accessed: April 19, 2021)

<sup>126</sup> Available from: <https://www.expreso.ec/actualidad/economia/ecuador-debe-pagar-hoy-324-millones-deuda-externa-coronavirus-7604.html> (Accessed: April 19, 2021)

<sup>127</sup> Available from: <https://www.nytimes.com/es/2020/06/20/espanol/america-latina/corrupcion-coronavirus-latinoamerica.html> (Accessed: April 19, 2021)

<sup>128</sup> Available from: [https://www.facebook.com/watch/live/?v=664432654106867&ref=watch\\_permalink](https://www.facebook.com/watch/live/?v=664432654106867&ref=watch_permalink) (Accessed: April 19, 2021)

As if this were not enough, communities along the Coca and Napo rivers witnessed the destruction of their territories due to an oil spill after two pipelines collapsed in the San Rafael waterfall area on April 7.<sup>129</sup> According to CONAIE's Facebook site, the oil spill prevented more than 27,000 people from accessing clean water and negatively impacted other sources of nourishment like fish and crops. The government initially did not report or confirm the oil spill. The affected communities were the first ones to bring to light the contamination of their rivers, which spread towards the Amazon River in Peru.<sup>130</sup> Geologists do not rule out that the collapse of the waterfall and the pipelines may be related to the poor sediment management at the Coca Codo Sinclair hydroelectric plant, constructed by the Chinese company Synohydro and marked by several irregularities in the construction plans and corruption scandals.<sup>131</sup>

With the crude in the rivers and the international oil prices at their lowest—in April 2020, the price of oil fell to an unprecedented low, negative 37.63 dollars<sup>132</sup>—the government was forced to stop oil extraction twice, declaring a “situation of force majeure” to its contractors. Given Ecuador's dollarized economy and dependency on crude oil exports, the future looks desolate. The alternative that is left, according to the government, is the aggressive expansion of mega-mining projects, and to take loans from the IMF and China, to be repaid with millions of barrels of oil.<sup>133</sup> In this context, new contracts are being negotiated with foreign mining companies<sup>134</sup> and attempts are being made to move forward with “on-hold” projects like Llumiragua<sup>135</sup> now that the communities who have historically opposed this mega-mining project are stuck inside their homes. In spite of the national quarantine, mining companies have continued their work, the state-owned company Petroamazonas has built a new road in the middle of a

<sup>129</sup> Available from: <https://gk.city/2020/04/09/derrame-petroleo-amazonia/?fbclid=IwAR0E7pxFyPdXrbfZXTfDLTD54cFFpDAX05ZOySt-jNx4IQ17gQuBJ4sy-dI> (Accessed: April 19, 2021)

<sup>130</sup> Available from: [https://gk.city/2020/06/14/comunidades-indigenas-denuncian-entregas-kits-derrame/?fbclid=IwAR2L0S4vZcRiG\\_B2IQ2ZiV9ROmb9oxDlaXyeZ9ManFb0pDY0StxzAAMrQwc](https://gk.city/2020/06/14/comunidades-indigenas-denuncian-entregas-kits-derrame/?fbclid=IwAR2L0S4vZcRiG_B2IQ2ZiV9ROmb9oxDlaXyeZ9ManFb0pDY0StxzAAMrQwc) (Accessed: April 19, 2021)

<sup>131</sup> Available from: <https://gk.city/2020/04/09/derrame-petroleo-amazonia/?fbclid=IwAR0E7pxFyPdXrbfZXTfDLTD54cFFpDAX05ZOySt-jNx4IQ17gQuBJ4sy-dI> (Accessed: April 19, 2021)

<sup>132</sup> Available from: <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/21/upshot/negative-oil-price.html?action=click&module=Spotlight&pgtype=Homepage> (Accessed: April 19, 2021)

<sup>133</sup> Available from: <https://www.elcomercio.com/actualidad/barriles-petroleo-venta-ecuador-china.html> (Accessed: April 19, 2021)

<sup>134</sup> Available from: <https://prensaminera-org.cdn.ampproject.org/c/s/prensaminera.org/amp/empresa-australiana-oferta-us-420-millones-manera-inmediata-proyecto-minero-ecuador/> (Accessed: April 19, 2021)

<sup>135</sup> Available from: <https://periodismodeinvestigacion.com/2020/04/16/llurimagua-la-fiebre-del-cobre/> (Accessed: April 19, 2021)

protected area of the Yasuni National Park,<sup>136</sup> and the Ministry of Hydrocarbons is planning on reactivating the 11th oil licensing round to fulfil its commitments with its debt holders. Indigenous peoples like the Waorani and the Shuar have blamed the continuous entry of oil and mining company workers for spreading the virus in their communities.

The coronavirus's uncontrollable spread and deadly toll in Ecuador makes evident whose lives are disposable for the state—black and brown lives from the city's poorest sectors and from those territories to be sacrificed for extractive interests. Furthermore, the spread of the coronavirus in the Amazon makes the territorial struggle that indigenous peoples and collectives like the Amazonian Women have carried forward especially challenging. More than ever, the question of how to resist the expansion of extractive projects is linked to the capacity of these communities to reproduce and sustain their lives in a forest whose regeneration and life cycles are being pushed to the limit by capitalism's predatory logic. Nevertheless, drawing on the lived experiences and wisdom that have permeated the collective memory of indigenous peoples, whose livelihoods have been constantly under siege, Gualinga mentions,

“This situation has marked our entire lives. Forst, because we are people who fight and defined our territories, the Amazon. [...] We encourage ourselves by saying: ‘We have resisted for more than 500 years, we have been here, we are native peoples, we have suffered viruses and pandemics. [...] We are going to continue, *they are not going to finish us off.*’ So, what our communities have done, seeing the state's neglect, is to return to our roots. Return to the medicinal plants. [...] *Return to our roots in order to be able to cope.*” (Ibid., my emphasis added)

As her words make clear, Amazonian peoples and their territorial struggle will endure these times. Relying on their own practices of knowledge-production and healing, namely on their “roots,” they are sustaining their lives and those of their families during the pandemic. In other words, Amazonian communities are still finding their own ways to *reexist* extractive occupation and beyond. However, what these challenging times will take from Amazonian communities is still unforeseeable. By now, COVID-19 has already taken the lives of important Shuar, Waorani, Secoya, and Kichwa elders who were crucial transmitters of knowledge in their communities and

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<sup>136</sup>Available from: <https://es.mongabay.com/2020/06/carretera-parque-yasuni-ecuador-indigenas-aislados-y-petroleo/> (Accessed: April 19, 2021)

important leaders in the indigenous territorial struggle. The question of resistance during these “pandemic times” is thus more relevant than ever.

My co-laborers, Zoila Castillo, Rosa Gualinga, Elvia Dagua, Nancy Santi, and Salomé Aranda have found their own ways to resist these challenging times. As local and regional indigenous leaders, some of these Amazonian leaders have managed to organize food and water distribution for the communities that have been impacted by the massive rains in the south-central Amazon and by the oil spill in the northern Amazon. Others have participated in public fora to draw attention to the difficult situation of their communities during the pandemic, but also to stress how the pandemic confirms the utmost importance of defending their territories. As Zoila Castillo shared during her participation at a virtual colloquium organized by Universidad Andina, in which both of us partook:

“The pandemic is killing the whole world. The [*Mujeres*] *Amazonicas*, thank God, we are still [sic] receiving clean air. For what reason? Because we defend our forest, because we have our pharmacy in the forest. This is why they have not finished us off yet. [...] This is why now, with much more reason, we will defend the forest, the river, the animals, the trees, the medicines.” (Speech during the Virtual International Colloquium “*El giro visual en las luchas socio-ambientales*,” October 22, 2020)<sup>137</sup>

The purpose of this dissertation, besides examining the Amazonian Women’s overall political contribution to the anti-extractive struggle in Ecuador and Latin America, is to put their resistance at the center of current social, environmental, and political debates that go beyond extractivism. As described above, questions about the reproduction of life during the COVID-19 pandemic mark the concerns that many people in Ecuador and across the world, especially in Black and Brown communities, are confronting at this moment. It is thus important to establish dialogical lines of connection with those peoples who have historically been on the front lines of the anti-colonial, anti-capitalist, and anti-extractive battles, like the Amazonian Women. Furthermore, it is important to pay attention to those vital aspects of their organizing that make their political struggle possible, while also enabling the reproduction of life in a broader sense. Indeed, dialoguing with images like the *Araña Tejedora* and the way the Amazonian Women present their struggle as an ontological design, instead of

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<sup>137</sup> Available from: <https://www.facebook.com/AndinaVirtual/videos/650622585638224/> (Accessed: April 19, 2021)

analyzing them as mere cultural and strategic representations, has the power to decolonize our own political designs and approaches in order to find better ways to sustain ourselves and resist during these challenging times.

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## Appendices

### Appendix A: Glossary

AGIP (Azienda Generale Italiana Petroli)	General Italian Oil Company
AMWAE (Asociación de Mujeres Waorani de la Amazonia Ecuatoriana)	Association of Waorani Women of the Ecuadorian Amazon
CGC (Compañía General de Combustibles)	General Fuels Company (from Argentina)
CONAIE (Confederación de Nacionalidades Indígenas del Ecuador)	Confederation of Indigenous Nationalities of Ecuador
CONFENIAE (Confederación de Nacionalidades Indígenas de la Amazonía Ecuatoriana)	Confederation of Indigenous Nationalities of the Ecuadorian Amazon
ECUARUNARI (Ecuador Runakunapak Rikcharimui)	Confederation of Peoples of Kichwa Nationality
FICSH (Federación Interprovincial de Centros Shuar)	Interprovincial Federation of Shuar Centers
FLACSO (Facultad Latinoamericana de Ciencias Sociales)	Latin American Faculty of Social Sciences
IMF	International Monetary Fund
IQBSS (Instituto Quíchua de Biotecnología “Sacha Supay”)	Kichwa Institute of Biotechnology “The Forest Protector”
ITT oilfield	Ishpingo Tambococha Tiputini oilfield
NAE (Nación Achuar del Ecuador)	Achuar Nation of Ecuador
NASE (Nación Sápara del Ecuador)	Sapara Nation of Ecuador
NASHE (Nación Shuar del Ecuador)	Shuar Nation of Ecuador
NASHIE (Nación Shiwiar del Ecuador)	Shiwiar Nation of Ecuador
NAWE (Nación Waorani del Ecuador)	Waorani Nation of Ecuador
OPIP (Organización de Pueblos Indígenas de Pastaza)	Organization of Indigenous Peoples from Pastaza
PAKIRU (former OPIP)	Kichwa Organization of Pastaza
WECAN	Women’s Earth and Climate Action Network

### Appendix B: Words in Spanish, Kichwa, Shuar, and Shiwiar

Abya Yala	term from the Kuna language, which means “land in its full maturity,” used by Latin American activists and scholars to refer to the American continent
Achiote	Spanish term for “annatto seed”
Amaru	Kichwa term for “boa”
Amazonía	Spanish term for the “Amazon Rainforest”
Anent	“chant” in Achuar, Shiwiar, and Shuar
Apamama	old and wise Kichwa women
Araña Tejedora	“Weaving Spider” in Spanish, handicraft designed and made by Elvia Dagua

Artesanías	Spanish term for clay pottery and handicrafts produced by members from the Amazonian Women
Auca	Kichwa term for “savage”
Ayllu	Kichwa term for “extended family” or “community”
Cacerolazos	Spanish term for “casserole,” a form of popular protest
Caminar	Spanish term for “to walk,” which is used by Amazonian leaders to refer to the process of becoming involved in their territorial struggle
Candado social	Spanish term for “social blockade”
Cantos	Spanish term for “songs” or “chants”
Chapa walka	Kichwa term for “choker” made of synthetic seeds
Chakra	Kichwa term for “cultivation area” or “garden”
Chambira	Spanish and Kichwa term to refer to a large and spiny palm native to the Amazon
Chicha	Kichwa term for manioc-based and mildly fermented drink
Colona, colono	Spanish term for “settler”
Compañeras, compañeros	Spanish term for “comrade”
Compartires cotidianos	Spanish term for “everyday sharing moments”
Conquistadores	conquerors from Spanish descent
Danta	Spanish term for “tapir”
El paro	Spanish term for “strike”
Emprendimiento	Spanish term for “economic undertaking”
Equipo técnico	Spanish term for “technical team”
Experiencia vivida	Spanish term for “lived experience”
Gringas	Spanish term for “non-Hispanic girl or woman”
Guayusa	Spanish term for infusion made of caffeinated tree leaf native to the Amazon
Hacienda	Spanish term for large landed estate systems that originated during the colonial period in Latin American
Historias	native to the Amazon for “histories” and “personal stories”
Ikiam Nua	“woman from the forest” in Shuar and Shiwiar
Inintai	“heart” in Shuar and Shiwiar
Indios	pejorative Spanish term to refer to indigenous peoples
Jarkata Warmikuna	Kichwa term for “strong or powerful women”
Jíbaro	racist Spanish term to refer to Shuar people as “savages”
Kawsak Sacha	Kichwa term for “Living Forest”
Kuraka	President of a Kichwa community or communities
Levantamiento indígena	Spanish term for mass indigenous mobilization
Lucha histórica	Spanish term that refers to indigenous peoples’ historical struggle against colonial and capitalist domination
Machismo	Spanish term for “male chauvinism”
Maestras	Spanish term for “master,” “teacher” or “expert”
Manilla	Spanish term for “bracelet”
Mestiza, mestizo	Spanish term for a person of combined European and indigenous American descent

Minkas	communal work in Kichwa communities
Mujer Mukawa	clay pot in form of a Kichwa woman's head
Mujeres Amazónicas	Spanish term for "Amazonian Women"
Mukawas	Kichwa term for "clay pottery"
Mullu	Kichwa term for "seed," it also refers to synthetic seeds
Muskuna	Kichwa term for "dreaming" and "having visions"
Muskuy	Kichwa term for "dreams as visions"
Ñanito	younger brother in Ecuadorian parlance
Nunkuli	Kichwa term for the goddess of the soil
Ortiga	Spanish term for "nettle"
Pachamama	Kichwa term for "Mother Earth"
Paquetazo	economic neoliberal reform package in Ecuadorian parlance
Pensamiento enraizado	Spanish term for "rooted thinking"
Pilchi mukawa	Kichwa term for a clay pot with the shape of the "pilche" (gourd) fruit
Plantón	Spanish term for a "picket" of a government building
Puchu	Kichwa term for "basket" to carry products from the cultivation area
Pueblo	Spanish word for "community village" or "people"
Runa	Kichwa people
Sacha Runa Yachay	knowledge or wisdom from Kichwa peoples from the forest
Sacha Warmi	Kichwa term for "forest women"
Sajino	Spanish term for "peccary"
Sasi	Kichwa term for "special diet"
Sayachina	Kichwa practice of painting your face with <i>achiote</i> the day you plant manioc
Sentimiento	Spanish term for "feeling"
Ser orgánicas	Spanish term for "to be organic," i.e. to respect the structures, relations, and practices that validate political actions within the indigenous movement
Sinchi	Kichwa term for "strong"
Sisa	Kichwa term for "flower"
Sisa Ñambi	Kichwa term for "flowers' path"
Sumak Allpa	Kichwa term for "territorial well-being"
Sumak Kawsay	Good Living, Kichwa principle adopted into the 2008 Constitution
Supay	Kichwa term for "forest protectors"
Territorio	Spanish term for a vast area of land where indigenous peoples live, gather food, hunt, transit, and relate to non-human beings
Trabajitos	Spanish term for "little" or "insignificant jobs"
Tomarse el espacio	Spanish term for the political process of "taking over the space" within the indigenous movement and environmental and feminist platforms
Turu	Kichwa term for "swamp"
Wambra	Kichwa term for "young" or "younger person"
Warmi, warmikuna	Kichwa woman, women

Wasi	Kichwa term for “house”
Wasipunku	Kichwa term for “parcel of land”
Wawa	Kichwa term for “baby” or “child”
Wayruru	Kichwa term for red and black seeds from the wayruru tree
Wituk	Kichwa name for a fruit with a dark pigment used by indigenous people to paint their faces with motifs inspired by animals or other deities
Yachay	Kichwa wise person in the community
Yaku	Kichwa term for “water” or “river”
Yaku chaski	Kichwa term for “river message”
Yuca	Spanish term for “manioc”
Yurarinakuy	Kichwa term for “agreements”

### Appendix C: List of Personal Interviews

Aranda, Salomé, Spokeswoman for Family and Women’s issues of the Moretecocha commune and President of the Sumak Kawsay association of the Villano, August 10, 2018, Puyo.

—, January 15, 2019, Quito

Betancourt Machoa, Katy, CONAIE’s Spokeswoman for Family and Women’s issues, July 25, 2017, Quito.

Cahuilla, Alicia, former Vice President of the Waorani Organization NAWA, October 17, 2018, Quito.

Canelos, Rosa, PAKIRU’s Spokeswoman for Family and Women’s issues, September 23, 2018, Community of Sabata close to the city of Archidona.

Castillo, Zoila, Vice President of CONFENIAE’s Indigenous Parliament, September 5, 2017, Puyo.

—, September 11, 2018, Puyo.

—, February 21, 2019, Quito.

—, March 1, 2019, Puyo.

Cerda, Leo, Co-founder of *HAKHU* Amazon Design, August 3, 2017, Quito.

Dagua, Elvia, CONFENIAE’s Spokeswoman for Family and Women’s issues, August 23, 2017, Puyo.

—, August 27, 2017, Madre Tierra district close to the city of Puyo.

—, September 4, 2017, Puyo.

—, September 6, 2018, Shiwar community of Kurintza.

—, September 8, 2018, community of Kurintza.

—, March 5, 2019, Madre Tierra district close to the city of Puyo.

Gualinga, Abigail, Spokeswoman for Youth of the Sarayaku *Pueblo*, August 8, 2018, Puyo.

—, August 31, 2018, Puyo.

Gualinga, Patricia, former Spokeswoman for Family and Women's issues of the Sarayaku *Pueblo*, August 8, 2017, Puyo.

Gualinga, Rosa, former Spokeswoman for Family and Women's issues of the Shiwiari Organization NASHIE, August 8, 2017, Puyo.

—, August 22, 2017, Puyo.

—, August 9, 2018, Puyo.

—, March 1, 2019, Puyo.

Jipa, Lourdes, CONFENIAE's Vice President, September 23, 2018, Community of Sabata close to the city of Archidona.

Lozano, Carmen, ECUARUNARI's Spokeswoman for Family and Women's issues, August 8, 2018, Quito.

Member of the *Miradas Críticas del Territorio desde el Feminismo* collective, August 22, 2018, Quito.

Mencay, Patricia, President of the Waorani's Women's Association AMWAE's, September 23, 2018, Community of Sabata close to the city of Archidona.

Santi, Ena, former Spokeswoman for Family and Women's issues of the Sarayaku *Pueblo*, March 3, 2019, Puyo

Santi, Nancy, *Kuraka* of the Kawsak Sacha Ancestral *Pueblo*, September 10, 2018, Puyo.

—, March 1, 2019, Puyo.

—, November 1, 2018, Community of Sisa located on the Curaray river basin.

—, November 6, 2018, Community of Lorocachi on the Curaray river basin.

State officer at the Undersecretary of Political and Social Management, August 8, 2017, Quito.

Vargas, Indira, Member of CONFENIAE's communication team *Lanceros Digitales*, September 9, 2018, Community of Sabata close to the city of Archidona.

#### **Appendix D: List of External Interviews**

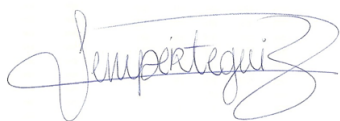
Gualinga, Narcisa, *Apamama* of the Sarayaku *Pueblo*, by Lorena van Bunningen y Corinne Duhalde Ruiz, November 1, 2018, Community of Sisa on the Curaray river basin.

Santi, Nancy, *Kuraka* of the Kawsak Sacha Ancestral *Pueblo*, by Lorena van Bunningen y Corinne Duhalde Ruiz, November 1, 2018, Community of Sisa on the Curaray river basin.

## **Eigenständigkeitserklärung**

Ich erkläre hiermit:

Ich habe die vorgelegte Dissertation selbständig, ohne unerlaubte fremde Hilfe und nur mit den Hilfen angefertigt, die ich in der Dissertation angegeben habe. Alle Textstellen, die wörtlich oder sinngemäß aus veröffentlichten Schriften entnommen sind, und alle Angaben, die auf mündlichen Auskünften beruhen, sind als solche kenntlich gemacht. Bei den von mir durchgeführten und in der Dissertation erwähnten Untersuchungen habe ich die Grundsätze guter wissenschaftlicher Praxis, wie sie in der „Satzung der Justus-Liebig-Universität Gießen zur Sicherung guter wissenschaftlicher Praxis“ niedergelegt sind, eingehalten.

A handwritten signature in blue ink, reading "Sempértegui". The signature is stylized with a large, sweeping initial 'S' and a long horizontal stroke extending to the right.

Gießen, 03.05.2021

Andrea Sempértegui