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The Amazon River Basin: Extractivism, Indigenous Perspectives and a Political Aesthetics of Resistance[i]

Patrícia Vieira
(Centre for Social Studies, University of Coimbra)

At the heart of the Ecuadorian Amazon lies the Yasuní National Park, delimited by the Napo River, a tributary of the Amazon, to the north, by the Peruvian border on the east and by the Curaray River, a tributary of the Napo, to the South. Designated a UNESCO Biosphere Reserve in 1989, Yasuní is one of the most biodiverse regions in the world, its privileged location at the foothills of the Andes, where high mountain peaks give way to vast plains that stretch all the all to the Atlantic, contributing to the plethora of species thriving in its rainforests. In a recent stay at the Kichwa Indigenous community of Llanchama in Yasuní, I was fortunate to talk on several occasions with Don Andrés Manchoa, a village elder determined to show a foreigner like me the incredible wealth of plant and animal life in his home region. In our long walks through thick patches of rainforest I learned about a variety of wild, edible and medicinal plants, about edible and poisonous insects, dangerous snakes and felines and the best spots to hunt and fish for dinner. I heard how a pink dolphin married a local woman, about a man who one day simply decided to go and live in a city lying beneath the waters of an enchanted lake and about wild boars who take refuge from hunters in an alternative world they enter through a tunnel in the forest wetlands.[ii]

But Don Andrés also shared other stories pointing towards the deep transformations that have shaped the Ecuadorian Amazon over the past century and a half. He narrated his grandparents' move out of Kitchwa ancestral lands in the Archidona region west of Yasuní, fleeing an outbreak of measles brought by Christian missionaries that decimated most of their people. Following the Napo River, the survivors settled on the banks of the Tiputini River, where they founded the village I visited. At first, the newly arrived community worked in latex extraction, but, with the decline of the rubber trade in the area, they went back to subsistence farming, hunting and fishing. After spending his childhood, youth and much of his adult life living off the rainforest, the river and a few crops, including yucca and corn, planted in his family's plot of land, Don Andrés followed the fate of many other Ecuadorian Indigenous men from the Amazon and went to work for an oil company in the early 2000s. Oil extraction began in Ecuador in 1972 and Yasuní is at the epicenter of oil drilling, having about 40% of the country's oil reserves in the Ishpingo-Tiputini-Tambococha (ITT) area, where the Llanchama community is located.

Ecuadorian environmental activists spearheaded a plan to keep oil reserves on the ground in ITT, also known as block 43 of Yasuní, a project that was taken up in 2007 by the then-president Rafael Correa. The idea was to create a fund worth 3.6 billion American dollars, roughly half of the estimated value of the underground oil in the area, to compensate the country for stopping oil drilling. When the scheme collapsed for lack of funding, President Correa re-opened the area for oil extraction, with disastrous consequences for local human and non-human communities. Oil spills are frequent, polluting the rivers' waters and contaminating plants and animals, which exponentially increases the incidence of diseases such as cancer among Indigenous people living in the region.[iii] Roads cut across the rainforest to transport oil encourage settlers to flock to the territory, which, in turn, leads to illegal logging and hunting, including of endangered species to be sold as commodities in a global market. On my way to Llanchama, I witnessed first-hand the outward signs of massive oil extraction. Chimneys permanently billowing smoke and fire punctuate the banks of the Napo River and large barges transporting sometimes dozens of tanker trucks carrying oil contrast with the tiny boats of Indigenous families that crisscross the waters. The thick wall of green made of hundreds of species of trees is often interrupted by the dull, concrete-grey buildings of oil drilling plants, surrounded by high fences, as if to stop the life bursting in the forest around it to get in.[iv]

Sitting one late afternoon next to Don Andrés on one of the many beaches that dot the shores of the Tiputini River, I heard, while he pulled a net full of fish out of the waters, how oil companies lure Indigenous peoples into accepting drilling in their territories with the promise of high paying job opportunities, better sanitation, and education for their children. If members of his own community were given a choice, he muses, the majority would likely welcome oil extraction in their land. But Don Andrés is not easily fooled by the oil industry's assurance that there can be "clean" oil production with minimum environmental damage. During his time working in the industry, he has seen enough destruction to know where Llanchama would be heading if his people agreed to oil drilling in their territory. Northwest of Yasuní, in the area surrounding Lake Agrio, for instance, oil pollution is so extreme after decades of drilling that locals have organized so-called "toxitours" to show anyone interested the abandoned oil well pits and other waste contaminating the territory. What would become of our rivers and forests if we allowed that to happen in our land, Don Andrés asks rhetorically.

The Llanchama region of Yasuní stands at the forefront of a conflict that has been raging throughout the Amazon for decades between different visions of the world or, perhaps more accurately, between different worlds that frequently collide at a time of increased demand for energy, raw materials, and agricultural products. This special issue foregrounds the clash between extraneous interests seeking to capitalize on Amazonia, like those of the oil industry at work in Yasuní, and local struggles, including those of Indigenous and other traditional communities, as well as of more-than-human beings, who counter this exploitation of regional resources. The issue brings together a selection of articles that reflect upon the various cycles of extractivism that have impacted the Amazon River Basin from the beginning of the past century onwards, fueled by international investment and condoned or even encouraged by the national governments of Amazonian countries, and communal, political and artistic resistance to these predatory practices.

Several essays focus on the first few decades of the twentieth century, a time when the international demand for latex led to the so-called rubber boom in the Amazon and drew attention to a territory what had hitherto been considered a backwater within South America. Amazonia, like much of the colonized world, was for centuries regarded as a mere source of foodstuffs, other raw materials and, to a lesser degree, Indigenous slave labor. The remoteness of the region made it the perfect mirror upon which Europe could project its dreams of prodigious riches that coalesced, for instance, in the legend of El Dorado, a city made of gold located, according to early explorers such as Walter Raleigh, in the midst of the rainforest. Yet, such colonizer fantasies of easy enrichment failed to materialize and, up until the late nineteenth century, the Amazon remained peripheral to the colonial and, later, to the national economies of the newly independent South American nations. Its main exports were the so-called “drugs of the backlands” (“drogas do sertão,” in Portuguese) that included Brazil nuts, cacao, guarana, annatto, and carnation wood.[v]

This situation radically changed with the rubber boom, a time during which the wildest dreams of El Dorado seemed to materialize. The international demand for latex extracted from the native Amazonian rubber tree, or *Hevea brasiliensis*, a species that grew only in the region at the time, was such that its price skyrocketed. The “white gold,” as latex was then dubbed, attracted a large number of migrants who flocked to the territory in search of a more prosperous life, only to find themselves forced to work in save-like conditions under powerful rubber lords that dominated latex extraction and exports. The rubber industry, together with the influx of foreign migrants, transformed the demographics of the territory. Cities such as Belem, Manaus or Iquitos grew exponentially, as latex extraction encroached upon Indigenous territories. Many Indigenous peoples were exposed to pathogens against which they possessed no immunity, while others were de facto enslaved to work in the rubber industry.

While the rubber boom began to subside from the second decade of the past century onwards, as cheaper rubber from Asia flooded the international market, the rubber trade made Amazonian nations conscious of the region’s potential to generate wealth. Countries rushed to effectively enforce their sovereignty over the territory, which led to border clashes such as the Acre War (1899-1903) between Bolivia and Brazil over the rubber-rich region of Acre that used to be part of Bolivia and was incorporated into Brazilian territory as a result of this conflict.

Beyond the effort to delimit and effectively control their borders, South American countries invested in massive infrastructure to connect Amazonia to other areas of the nations and gain easy access to its products. In “‘The flying ability of the mosquito made the situation difficult to cope with:’ Contamination, Containment, and the Biopolitics of the Madeira-Mamoré Railway,” Carolina Sá Carvalho analyses one such infrastructure project, namely the construction, between 1907 and 1912, of a railway that had been one of Bolivia’s demands enshrined in the Treaty of Petropolis that ended the Acre War. The railway was designed to link Bolivia’s rubber production to the rest of Amazon River Basin and, thus, to the Atlantic Ocean, from where it could be shipped to the rubber-hungry markets of North America and Europe. The project was developed by the Brazil Railway Company, a branch of a North American trust that controlled several other infrastructure in Brazil, and headed by American entrepreneur Percival Farquhar, thus exposing the alliance between national and foreign capital to exploit regional resources.

Javier Uriarte also addresses the drive to modernize the Amazon through the construction of an infrastructure network that would facilitate the implementation of outside businesses in the region in his essay “Nature, Labour and Infrastructure in the Amazon: Miguel Triana’s *Por el sur de Colombia*.” Uriarte analyzes the plans of Colombian civil engineer Miguel Triana to build roads, railroads, bridges and other infrastructure as a means to bring so-called “civilization” to the Amazon. Bogotá-born Triana saw the Amazon as a backward territory that would benefit from being connected to the more prosperous and purportedly more industrious Andean areas of Colombia.

Similar to the more recent transit of crude through roads built in Yasuní, the transport of latex through of the Brazilian Madeira-Mamoré Railway, as well as Triana’s Positivist plans to development the Colombian Amazon by way of a transportation network, responded to foreign demands and had little concern for the impact of those enterprises upon the local human and more-than-human populations. Both Sá Carvalho’s and Uriarte’s texts emphasize Amazonian resistance to these projects. Sá Carvalho shows how disease-carrying mosquitoes thwarted the designs of capitalist expansion in the region, as a biopolitics of containment carried out by foreign businesses was unable to prevent contamination. The author highlights the centrality of more-than-human agency in the construction of the railway and reveals the racialized discourse that accompanied sanitation efforts. Uriarte's essay examines Triana's ambivalent views on the Amazonian Indigenous population whom the Colombian author saw as a potential hindrance to progress in the region.

The rubber boom brought the rift between diverging, local, national and international perceptions of the Amazon into sharp focus, but it also allowed for alternatives to unbridled extractivism to emerge at the confluence of regional and global challenges to a capitalist economy. My essay "An Anarchist Rainforest: Cooperation in Ferreira de Castro's *A selva*" discusses how the notion of intra- and inter-species cooperation at work in the Amazonian natural environment chimes in with the anarchist idea of mutual aid and defies the abusive labor practices of the Amazonian rubber industry. Extractivism objectifies both more-than-humans and oppressed humans, who resort to mutual aid in their struggle against exploitation.

The large-scale extractivist practices of the rubber boom exacerbated an understanding of the Amazon as a storehouse of raw materials for global consumption and set the stage for other industries to enter the territory. Gianfranco Selgas's article "*El secreto de la tierra*: Entangled Poetics and the Venezuelan Amazon in *Una ojeada al mapa de Venezuela* (1939), by Enrique Bernardo Núñez" examines the portrayal of Venezuelan Amazonia as a land of limitless riches in the wake of the development of the oil, and later the mining industries, in the region. The extraction of these commodities positioned Venezuela as a petro-state, funded by the sale of fossil fuel, and indifferent to the damage inflicted by such a petroleum-dependent economy on traditional peoples and more-than-human communities.

Simon Lobach further examines the construction of infrastructure in the area, linked to the growing demand for energy in the second half of the twentieth century. In the essay "Ecological Stereotypes: Perceptions of Indigenous and Maroon Communities in Late Colonial Suriname" he discusses the construction of the Brokopondo Dam between 1958 and 1964 in the Surinamese Amazon to provide energy for the country's mining and industrial sectors, especially the mining of bauxite and its transformation into aluminum to be sold internationally. Following a well-established pattern of building massive infrastructure as a means to extract wealth from the territory, this project was met with fierce opposition by local Maroon communities, whose villages and ancestral territories were flooded once the dam started to function. As in the case of the rubber boom and of oil drilling in the Yasuní, non-Amazonian interests dictated the fate of region.

The building of hydroelectric power dams continued to affect Amazonia until the present. Tiffany Higgins examines Indigenous Munduruku people's strategies of resistance against the Teles Pires and São Manoel dams, located on the southern section of the Brazilian Amazon, in her article "Wakoborun Rescued her Brother's Head from Enemy Hands: Amerindian Perspectivism and Cosmopolitical Territory in Munduruku Letters." Higgins analyzes a series of collective letters penned by the Munduruku, where they demand the return of sacred urns removed during the Teles Pires dam construction and taken to the Natural History Museum of Alta Floresta in the state of Mato Grosso. The Munduruku strategically conflate the environmental and cultural damages caused by the dams to signal their abiding link to the territory and the indistinction between more-than-humans and humans faced with the onslaught of megadams, allied to mining and agribusiness industries, against their land.

The Mundukuru letters denounce the cultural and intellectual extractivism involved in the appropriation of sacred Indigenous artefacts placed in a museum without the community's consent. Amanda Smith and Alexandra Macheski also touch upon the extractivism of Amazonian Indigenous expertise in "Sensing Shipibo Aesthetics Beyond the

Peruvian Amazon: Kené Design in *Ikaros: A Vision* (2016).” The article discusses the commodification of Indigenous healing and the development of ayahuasca tourism designed to offer Western travelers a glimpse of the shamanic experience. At work since the beginning of colonization, extractivist practices targeting Indigenous knowledge of plants and animals have expanded to include Indigenous spirituality, medicine and aesthetics, often appropriated without acknowledging their source.

The analyses of the novels, essays, travel narratives, letters, film, photography and artworks undertaken in this special issue point to the preponderance of an extractivist mindset in the approach to Amazonia and its peoples in recent history. At the same time, this collection of articles also showcases the creative ways in which Amazonian communities and their partners—intellectuals, journalists, activists, and so on—forge counternarratives that underline their affective ties to the land. An alliance between more-than-humans and humans affected by extractivism has proven key to developing political and aesthetic strategies of resistance that point to alternative, non-exploitative ways to live in the Amazon. Drawing on a variety of disciplinary approaches, ranging from literary and film studies to historiography and anthropology, the articles gathered here analyze the multiple human and more-than-human ways of imagining Amazonian existences beyond the commodification of the region under the stranglehold of extractivism.

The number of Amazonian countries represented in the articles of this special issue—Brazil, Colombia, Suriname, Venezuela, Peru—, as well as the variety of historical moments analyzed, shows that the current situation in Ecuador, where we are witnessing an advance of the extractivist frontier in Yasuní, is not an isolated case. If anything, history repeats itself throughout the Amazon with every new cycle of exploitation, from rubber, to electricity, mining and agribusiness products, oil, and so on, carrying ever-more devastating consequences. In Yasuní, oil drilling is nearing the so-called “intangible” zone, home to the Tagaeri and Taromenane Indigenous people living in voluntary isolation from non-Indigenous society.[vi] The expansion of the oil industry in the region poses an existential threat to these peoples, not to mention to other traditional communities and to the more-than-human world.

There are growing attempts to move beyond extractivist models of development in Amazonia. On May 9, the Ecuadorian Constitutional Court ruled in favor of a petition brought before the country’s justice system by the Yasunidos environmental NGO ten years ago for a national referendum to take place to decide on whether oil should be indefinitely kept on the ground in block 43 of Yasuní. In case the people vote against oil drilling, all crude extraction activities need to stop in the area after one year. The decision that arises out of the referendum will direct impact the people of Llanchama, located just north of the intangible zone, well-within block 43. No matter the outcome, Don Andrés will certainly continue to narrate the stories of his community, involving a close, lived experience binding humans and more-than-humans, as an implicit form of resistance against the ravages of extractivism in his land.

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Notes

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[ii] For a discussion of myths and legends from the Amazon that share many elements with the stories narrated by Don Andrés, see Slater 2002, passim and, specifically about dolphins, see Slater (1994), passim.

[iii] See Sebastián et al. (2001).

[iv] For na in-depth analysis of the politics of oil extraction in Ecuador, see Sawyer (2004).

[v] For an analysis of the cycles of extractivism in the Amazon until the eighteenth century, focusing particularly on the case of Brazil, see Gomes (2018).

[vi] For a reflection of the notion of intangibility in the Yasuní, see Gómez-Barris (2017, 17-38).