

THE MILLENNIUM CITY:  
OIL POLITICS AND URBANIZATION IN THE NORTHERN ECUADORIAN AMAZON

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## ABSTRACT

Angus Lyall: The Millennium City:  
Oil Politics and Urbanization in the Northern Ecuadorian Amazon  
(Under the direction of Gabriela Valdivia)

Oil production in the northern Ecuadorian Amazon has facilitated the urbanization of some of the world's most biodiverse rainforests. New highways into the jungle, snaking pipelines, and population centers have followed in the wake of oil explorations and drilling over the last fifty years. Oil companies and the state have also sought indigenous consent to oil production in their territories in exchange for infrastructures, such as roads, electrification, and, in a few cases, urban-like settlements. Researchers, environmentalists, and engaged citizens have denounced urban development in indigenous territories as an unsustainable imposition of Western culture on otherwise isolated, unwilling or unwitting communities. However, such narratives overlook the social legacies of prior waves of colonial capitalism in the northern Amazon. Histories of racism and racial capitalism are often erased by ahistorical representations of the Amazon as a timeless, uniform space of pre-Hispanic cultures, effectively obscuring the violence that produced modern *Amazonía*.

In this dissertation, I detail the history of an indigenous community of subsistence farmers, fisher-people, and hunters that recently negotiated with the state oil company to receive an urban-like settlement in the rainforest. I describe their newfound hardships in a place at the far margins of market society, where they lack food, money, and maintenance, and I document nostalgia for farm life. Yet, by the same token, I describe their collective struggles to sustain this so-called "Millennium City," rather than abandon it. For generations, racism has been a motor

driving these families to pursue integration into market relations, Western education, and urban spaces, as strategies to mitigate the physical and symbolic violence of dominant, white society. Today, negotiations over oil production between indigenous communities, the state, and companies in the northern Amazon unfold on an uneven social terrain shaped by centuries of oppression. This dissertation draws on multiple periods of fieldwork over six years that included interviews, video ethnography, and focus groups in the Cuyabeno Wildlife Reserve, as well as archival research in the Amazon and Andes.

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## **PREFACE: A WORLD DIVIDED IN TWO**

In 2009, I was in a town meeting in a rural Andean parish when several indigenous men stood up to denounce me as an “imperialist.” I was working for North American archaeologists at the time, as their logistics guy. And I had requested the meeting to offer work to locals in exchange for access to new dig sites on their farms. At the opening of the meeting, I was rebuked for not deferring to local leadership to call the meeting to order; by the end of the night, I had been accused of stealing Incan gold on behalf of the U.S. government.

I was successful at negotiating access to new sites, but our staff was later chased off of several sites by farmers waving axes and shovels at them. It seemed that I had struck deals that were no longer tolerable once white people began digging up their lands. Worse still, the archaeologists had been storing artifacts in the estate of a local elite family that had once owned the parish and held the indigenous population in indebted servitude until the 1970s. That history lingers.

Although I was already in my third year in Ecuador, I still struggled to understand social context. When I had first arrived, at the age of twenty-two, my plan was to spend a summer learning Spanish and then travel on to Brazil, Haiti, maybe Lebanon. But I landed a job guiding mountain bike tours. I knew little about bikes – even less about the country, but my Dutch boss joked that whatever tourists asked me, I was free to make things up. I spent my days rolling down the sides of glacier-topped volcanos, among patchwork Andean hills, and through cloud forests. It was an altogether different world for a young man from Cape Cod.



It was an exciting time for the country as well. A bright young socialist economist named Rafael Correa was running for president against the billionaire banana tycoon, Alvaro Noboa. Correa promised to defend socioeconomic justice, rebuild institutions, and end the ‘long neoliberal night’ – ten turbulent years in which the country cycled through seven presidents. Correa pledged to oversee the construction of a new and progressive national constitution. On the night of Correa’s upset victory, I joined masses dancing salsa in the streets. Ecuador seemed like a place of tremendous possibility.

I enrolled in a master’s program in cultural anthropology in Quito. For my thesis, I wrote an ethnography centered on how memories of peasant struggles for land in the 1960s influence contemporary peasant politics, as modern agroindustry manages to re-concentrate that land. In that research, I enjoyed privileged access to plantation owners and workers by leveraging my cultural capital as a foreigner – as my professors had suggested, I spoke English with the owners.

I later landed a series of jobs writing rural development proposals. Although I was writing in Spanish, one boss after another commented that they were excited to have someone who could “write like a gringo”: *concise, clear, convincing*. My Spanish did not match such high expectations (to this day, I confuse the words for soap and Japan!), but they tasked me, nonetheless, with capturing the imaginations of funding agencies regarding agroecology, ecotourism, and other eco-projects in indigenous communities. When word got out in my hometown that I was working to improve the genetic stock of pigs in Andean towns, the neighbors asked my mom, “what does Angus know about pigs?” Of course, I did not know much of anything. But such diverse opportunities to navigate the unknown seemed to be part of the enchantment of Ecuador. I later worked as a consultant for national and international NGOs, conducting studies that I also did not feel qualified for, but that were all the more exciting to write home about. I

dropped into scenic communities to evaluate irrigation projects, labor relations, tuberculosis, rural housing access...

I was slow to fully-recognize that there was a veiled logic to why I – a man from suburban USA – could move through such spaces so seamlessly, even recognized as an ‘expert’ in rural development. In 2014, I began a 3-year respite, as a graduate student in North Carolina. There, professor Alvaro Reyes introduced me to the writings of Frantz Fanon and challenged me to reflect more intensively on the connection between my experiences of freedom and my identity as a white man. In *The Wretched of the Earth*, Fanon (2004[1963]) writes, “...it is clear that what divides this world is first and foremost what species, what race one belongs to” (5). Of course, Fanon did not believe that race was biological; rather, he wrote of the *experience* of a world as if it were divided in two. In Latin America, the fact of *mestizaje* or hybrid identity does not displace from everyday experience a set of binary racial stereotypes – white and non-white. This schema is inscribed in language, economics, habits, and landscapes.

Reading Fanon challenged my thinking about identity. In academic settings, I had been taught to analyze identity as an historical, shifting construct. In professional settings, I had been taught to represent indigenous identities a-historically (‘strategically’), as natural stewards of the environment. For Fanon, academic attention to the actual fluidity and complexity of identities engenders inaction against the institutions that work to fix identities in stereotypes. Strategic celebrations of indigeneity are a necessary, but, Fanon says, insufficient reaction that leaves the colonial structure intact. He calls on his readers to reach beyond imposed identities: “I propose nothing short of the liberation,” he writes, “of the man of color from himself” (1986 [1967], 2). And he challenges his readers to consider their roles in this “absurd drama” (1994[1967], 153).

What do I stand to gain from a world in which whiteness and indigeneity are inherited as meaningful categories, and what do I lose?

The summer after I started reading Fanon, I was in the back of a taxi in Quito and the driver commented, “Your mother-in-law must be very happy to have *extranjero* in the family.” *Extranjero* means ‘foreigner,’ but the term is used to refer to white North Americans and Europeans. If I had been a Venezuelan refugee or a Cuban doctor, he likely would have referred to me as an ‘immigrant.’ Being an *extranjero* implied that one was wealthy, educated, and ‘cultured’ (i.e., efficient, punctual, cosmopolitan, English-speaking). I understood the driver’s intention, but feigned naivete. “It’s a [source of] pride,” he continued, “to have an *extranjero* in the family.” We both recognized this as a widely-shared social fact, despite what our own evaluations or criticisms of that fact might have been.

This social fact of whiteness had enabled my ease of movement through work and everyday life in Ecuador. If you are white, money comes faster and your savings, your looks, and your university degree go further. They carry an inflated value. Even your weaknesses are re-interpreted as strengths – e.g., whether you speak Spanish or dance salsa poorly, you are apt to receive recognition for speaking and dancing well (*for a gringo*). My body in this space was marked and elevated long before I had become fully aware of how or why. Back in 2009, I had represented this social fact to the farmers who angrily reacted by labeling me an “imperialist,” later accepting and rejecting our presence on their lands. However, I only began to grasp the weight of this social fact during my doctoral research.

In 2014, I set out to study the experiences of a remote community of subsistence hunters and farmers in the northern Amazon called Playas del Cuyabeno (known as ‘Playas’), which had recently risen up against oil workers in their territory. Rather than demand an end to oil

extraction, as environmentalists hoped, they requested urban development as compensation. The state subsequently built an urban resettlement in the rainforest that included modern houses, roads, electrification, plumbing, Wifi, and a host of urban services. I traveled to this place expecting to find a dystopia with disillusioned inhabitants. Over the following months and subsequent visits, I found that isolated urban space in the ‘jungle,’ in fact, did not make any practical sense. Residents were struggling to access food, infrastructural maintenance, and money. But I also discovered a remarkable determination among residents to occupy this place, rather than abandon it for their farms. I began to study the history of the community and the region. This place at the confluence of the Aguarico and the Cuyabeno rivers had witnessed numerous attempts to colonize and control indigenous groups, from the arrival of Franciscan missionaries in the 18<sup>th</sup> century to the spread of indebted servitude and indigenous enslavement in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries and more recent attempts by missionaries, merchants, and state actors. It was a history that stunned me – in part due to the levels of violence it disclosed and in part because I had never heard any mention of it, either in popular culture or academic spaces. For people on the outside, it seemed, the northern Amazon was timeless; Amazonian peoples had no history. Over the following years of archival and ethnographic research, I came to appreciate that the residents of this urban resettlement and their ancestors had endured exploitation and violence at the hands of the “*blancos*” or white people for generations. This urban space, which resembled the spaces of white society, was experienced as a form of redemption and a strategy to mitigate the ethnic subordination of future generations.

When I told a classmate in the U.S. about this community, he responded in distress: “they need Fanon.” Perhaps. However, Fanon argued that strategies of the dominated to seek a place in dominant society are not a pathology of a single individual or a community; they are the shared

legacy of a colonized world. This dissertation is not a judgement of choices made by the residents of Playas, but rather a reflection of a world divided in two – and its materialization in the Amazon.

This dissertation is also necessarily about my own experience of a world divided in two. I used my whiteness to gain access to oil workers and high-ranking politicians (acting no longer as a rural development expert, but rather as an oil expert). And I accessed the stories of Playas residents by volunteering to teach English in their school. But more broadly, this dissertation is about my own experiences in Ecuador in the sense that they had always been contingent on constructions of whiteness and indigeneity – on the same “absurd drama” that obliged Playas residents to bring urban space into the Amazon. In the following chapters, I explore how the enduring social fact of a world divided in two, between white spaces and their exterior, has shaped the politics of oil and urbanization in the northern Amazon.

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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

CEPE	<i>Corporación Estatal Petrolera Ecuatoriana</i> [Ecuadorian State Oil Corporation]
CGC	<i>Compañía General de Combustibles</i> [General Fuel Company]
CONAIE	<i>Confederación de Nacionalidades Indígenas del Ecuador</i> [Confederation of Indigenous Nationalities of Ecuador]
CONFENIAE	<i>Confederación de Nacionalidades Indígenas de la Amazonía Ecuatoriana</i> [Confederation of Indigenous Nationalities of the Ecuadorian Amazon]
FARC	Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia [Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia]
FCUNAE	<i>Federación de Comunas Unión de Nativos de la Amazonia Ecuatoriana</i> [Federation of Communities – Union of Natives of the Ecuadorian Amazon]
FENOCIN	<i>Confederación Nacional de Organizaciones Campesinas Indígenas y Negras</i> [National Federation of Peasant, Indigenous, and Black Organizations]
FONAKISE	<i>Federación de Organizaciones de la Nacionalidad Kichwa de Sucumbíos</i> [Federation of Organizations of the Kichwa Nationality of Sucumbíos]
IERAC	<i>Instituto ecuatoriana de reforma agrarian y colonización</i> [Ecuadorian Institute of Agrarian Reform and Colonization]
INCRAE	<i>Instituto nacional de colonización de la región amazónica ecuatoriana</i> [National Institute of Colonization of the Ecuadorian Amazonian Region]
SENPLADES	<i>Secretaria Nacional de Planificación y Desarrollo</i> [National Secretary of Planning and Development]
UCODEP	Unity and Cooperation for the Development of Peoples (Italian NGO)
UNAE	<i>Unión de nativos de la Amazonía ecuatoriana</i> [Union of Natives of the Ecuadorian Amazon]
WWF	World Wildlife Fund

## CHAPTER 1. MANICHEAN SPACE: OIL AND URBANIZATION IN THE AMAZON

“When you examine at close quarters the colonial context, it is evident that what parcels out the world is to begin with the fact of belonging to or not belonging to a given race... This is why Marxist analysis should always be slightly stretched every time we have to do with the colonial problem... It is neither the act of owning factories, nor estates, nor a bank balance which distinguishes the governing classes. The governing race is first and foremost those who come from elsewhere...” – social theorist and militant Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (2004[1963], 40)

### *Introduction*

Oil production in the northern Ecuadorian Amazon has facilitated the urbanization of some of the world’s most biodiverse rainforests. New roads and highways into the rainforest, snaking pipelines, and population centers have followed in the wake of oil explorations and drilling, particularly since modern oil export from this small Andean nation began in 1972. An additional mechanism of oil-driven urbanization emerged in the 1990s, as oil production expanded into regions where indigenous communities had territorial rights. Oil companies and the state began to seek indigenous consent to oil production in exchange for compensation packages. Forms of compensation have included cash payments and market goods, as well as infrastructures, such as highways, electrification, and, in a few cases, urban-like settlements. Critical researchers, environmentalists, and politically-engaged citizens have denounced urban development in indigenous territories as an unsustainable imposition of Western culture on otherwise isolated, unwilling or unwitting communities. In this dissertation, I argue that such narratives overlook the legacies of prior waves of colonial capitalism in the northern Amazon,

which became a region of resource exploitation and rapid cultural change long before the arrival of oil companies.

Beginning in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, non-indigenous actors from ‘the outside,’ including missionaries, merchants, and military officers, have used violence, monopolies on Western goods, and subtler expressions of power to establish a dominant – albeit contested – social and spatial hierarchy in the northern Amazon. Over five hundred years, rankings of personhood, such as ‘civilized,’ ‘semi-civilized,’ and ‘savage,’ have been incorporated into everyday discourse, social relations, norms of respect and recognition, as well as parental aspirations for their children. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, ‘civilized’ status became closely associated with educational credentials, formal work, and urban migration. In fact, for decades, indigenous peoples in this region – particularly men – have migrated to urban spaces (Holt, Bilsborrow, and Oña, 2004; Lu and Bilsborrow, 2011; McSweeney and Jokisch, 2007), often leaving behind material sufficiency in exchange for urban hunger and hardship (Davis et al. 2017). Today, negotiations over oil production between indigenous communities, on the one hand, and the state and oil companies, on the other hand, unfold on this symbolic terrain. And, while emerging aspirations for urban development deep in the Amazon may make little material sense, they can change physical, social, and political landscapes nonetheless.<sup>1</sup>

Rarely do there exist consensuses in communities over how or whether to negotiate with the state and companies (e.g., Cepek 2018; Valdivia and Lyall 2018; Vallejo 2014). Some communities do reject oil production and compensation packages outright, particularly in the

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<sup>1</sup> Anthropologist Gina Crivello (2015) observes that “‘aspirations’ are about much more than abstract ‘futures’; they orient actions in the present” (39) (also, see Aguilar-Støen 2019; Appadurai 2007[2004]; Holloway *et al* 2009; Smith and Gergan 2015).

central and southern Amazon.<sup>2</sup> My claim is that the northern Amazon's regional history of colonial capitalism transformed cultural perceptions, practices, and aspirations in some communities, in effect enabling state institutions to secure oil flows through the promise of infrastructural development. The violent history of ethnic domination in this region is often erased by the narratives of environmentalists and development institutions alike. It has yet to be confronted by a nation that insists on representing the Amazon as a uniform space of pre-Hispanic cultures, negating injustices that helped to produce modern Ecuador and dehumanizing its inhabitants.

In the following chapters, I trace the histories of half a dozen indigenous Kichwa families of subsistence farmers, fisher-people, and hunters, from their entrance into rubber extraction work in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century through their formation of a community and school in the 1960s and to their recent negotiations with the state oil company to achieve relocation into an urban-like settlement in the Amazon. In Chapter 2, I describe the variety of positive and quite negative experiences of residents, but I highlight that residents, nonetheless, struggle collectively to maintain and expand this urban space at the far margins of market society. The importance of urban space for these residents is socially- and historically-situated in relation to distinct experiences of ethnic subordination. In subsequent chapters, I examine the historical accumulation of events and relationships with white, urban society that structured urban aspirations in this unlikely place.

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<sup>2</sup> Colonial terms of personhood have never been hegemonic in the Americas. Felipe Guamán Poma de Ayala's 16<sup>th</sup> century chronicles of conquest in Peru reveal critical perceptions among local populations of a violent, exclusive Spanish occupation. Colonial rule was marked by continuous local indigenous rebellions, though larger rebellions, such as that of Tupac Amaru in Peru, have dominated the historiography. Noted indigenous uprisings in Ecuador include the Quijos rebellion of 1578, the uprisings led by Fernando Daquilema in 1871, and the uprisings of the 1990s and of 2019, but frequent, smaller uprisings come into focus in local histories, such as the histories of particular haciendas (e.g., Becker and Trujillo 2009) or of particular periods of heightened exploitation and contestation, such as the late 18<sup>th</sup> century (Moreno Yáñez 1985).

My objective in this case study is to sketch what geographer Doreen Massey (2009) referred to as the politics of place “beyond” (413) place – i.e., examining the broader or regional webs of political economic relations that made possible the production of this particular place. And perhaps I also aim to understand the politics of place *before* place. In Cuyabeno, historical relations of ethnic domination linger in contemporary modes of perceiving and negotiating with white market actors. Historical modes of thought and emotion “fold back on themselves,” as anthropologist Ann Laura Stoler (2016) writes, “and, in that refolding, reveal new surfaces” (26) – and new places.

In this first chapter, I sketch the modern history of oil production and urbanization in the northern Amazon. There exists an extensive literature on the history of oil in this region, but only recently have authors begun to focus their analyses on the relationship between oil and urban expansion. I examine influential, Marxist and Foucauldian theorizations of the forces driving this urbanization. Finally, I discuss my own approach to studying urban development in areas of oil production. I enter into dialogue with theories on the enduring effects of colonization, in particular, the writings of militant and theorist Frantz Fanon. Fanon described social contexts that forced colonized peoples to seek out the literal and figurative place of the colonizer in the *metropoli*. While he was hopeful in the 1950s and 1960s that waves of decolonization would produce formal independence, new societies, and new subjectivities, unburdened by fixed notions of dignified spaces and subjects, Fanon also worried about the durability of commitments to urban- and euro-centric notions of personhood. I discuss contemporary Latin American theories inspired in Fanon, particularly those of sociologist Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui, that examine the institutionalization and everyday reproduction of colonial symbolic structures. In Cuyabeno, urban aspirations respond to shared experiences of ethnic subordination at the

peripheries of urban centers. The pursuit of urban futures is commonly experienced as a self-conscious strategy to evade symbolic subordination and an affective obligation to future generations. I close this first chapter by providing an overview of the narrative structure of the dissertation and my methodology for working with historical archives, oral histories, and contemporary ethnography.

### *Urbanization in the Northern Ecuadorian Amazon*

In this first section, I detail two major mechanisms driving urbanization in the northern Ecuadorian Amazon since the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. First, oil companies drove the extension of highways, secondary roads, and pipelines. In turn, population centers appeared along these roads that built or demanded electrification, telecommunications, and other material, networked infrastructures. Second, the state has provided urban development in contested areas of oil extraction in order to secure local consent. I focus on this second mechanism in this dissertation, although they are interrelated.

Following the Spanish conquest, colonial forces conceived of the Ecuadorian Amazon or the *Oriente* as a frontier region whose populations were best left administered by Catholic missions (Esvertit 2008; Muratorio 1991). This perception persisted after the founding of an independent republic in 1830. By the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, correspondences from governors of the Amazon province to central state administrators expressed growing frustrations with the lack of state investment in infrastructure, particularly with the lack of a road that might extend eastward into the Amazon from Papallacta, a town in the eastern Andean foothills. In 1921, the state signed a contract with the Leonard Exploration Company, a Delaware-based oil firm, to explore for and extract oil in the Amazon (*Registro Oficial*, May 12, 1923). In the following years, the

state divided the *Oriente* into two provinces to improve administration. However, the central government in Quito continued to resist investing in infrastructure in a region sparsely populated and marginal to state affairs.

Between 1937 and 1944, U.S.-based Shell Oil conducted extensive explorations along the border with Colombia and, by 1959, Shell, Standard Oil, California Oil, Tennessee, and Western Geophysical Co. had obtained concessions to explore more than 5 million hectares of the northern Amazon (García 1999; Muratorio 1991). Expeditions used dynamite to measure the movement of shock waves underground and cleared forest for encampments, but they did not require road networks or permanent settlements. That is, these explorations did not generate major changes in the landscape.

A concerted effort to introduce networks of modern infrastructure into the northern Amazon began in the 1970s, but it was not spearheaded by the state. Rather, in 1964, the North American firm Texaco-Gulf received a 40-year concession of 1.4 million hectares (Gordillo 2003) and, within three years, the company had discovered a series of large reserves at sites in the rainforest called Shushufindi, Sacha, and Lago Agrio. Largely due to investments made by private and public oil firms, each of these sites would become urban centers by the end of the century, with populations today ranging from 16,000 in Shushufindi to 92,000 in Lago Agrio.

In 1971, Texaco completed the highway eastward from Papallacta that governors in the Amazon had been demanding for decades. It extended to a former missionary-run estate called Coca, on the shores of the Napo River, a major fluvial artery. In 1972, the public-private consortium CEPE-Texaco formed and the subsequent global oil crisis of 1973-1974 boosted oil prices by almost 400%, propelling industry growth. Migrants flocked to the Amazon in search of work from the coast and the Andes – particularly the southern Andes, which was facing severe

droughts (Iriarte de Aspurz 1980). In this time, Texaco completed a major road between Coca and Lago Agrio, as well as a pipeline from Lago Agrio to the coastal town of Esmeraldas.<sup>3</sup> Under a modernizing, military government, CEPE-Texaco financed new transportation and electrical and communications grids, facilitating flows of workers and equipment into the Amazon (González and Ortiz de Villalba 1977).

National land reforms in the 1970s accelerated the growth of farmer cooperatives and population centers (Mena et al 2006; Wasserstrom and Southgate 2013). The Ecuadorian Institute of Agrarian Reform and Colonization (IERAC) facilitated land titles to Andean migrants (Iriarte de Aspurz 1980), also spurring the growth of other industries, like African Palm production and illegal logging. Into the 1980s, CEPE-Texaco continued to build capillary road networks to new oil blocks and production sites (Martz 1987, 364), driving the creation of new town and urban centers, such as Tarapoa, that would become municipal or parish centers by the turn of the century.

Much of the urbanization witnessed in the northern Amazon since the major 1964 Texaco-Gulf concession has been directly related to oil exploration and extraction activities. Towards the end of the century, a distinct oil-related mechanism of urban expansion emerged. The state began to develop urbanization budgets and projects as forms of social compensation in oil-producing territories to subdue social protest.

In the northern Amazon, indigenous leaders and communities began to organize in the 1970s in response to new territorial pressures, as communities on the Aguarico River allied with Capuchin missionaries to pursue land rights. Young leaders from thirty Kichwa communities

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<sup>3</sup> While Coca had been founded by missionaries in 1958 as a small agrarian estate (see Cabodevilla 1996), by 1982 it had approximately 4,000 inhabitants and Lago Agrio had surpassed Coca with a population of well over 7,000 (Cabodevilla 1989, 27).



formed the Kichwa federation *Jatun Comuna Aguarico* (JCA). Settlers continued leveraging institutional biases in IERAC to claim lands, while occasional indigenous conflicts with settlers and oil workers gained little national attention. Yet, by the 1990s, indigenous and environmentalist protests over the socio-environmental impacts of oil production and a perceived lack of local redistribution of revenues began to force reactions from the state, leading to the creation of targeted forms of compensation.

In the late 1970s, a conservationist movement formed in Quito (Lewis 2016; Lyall 2017a). Indigenous and environmentalist organizing converged in the wake of the government's 1983 decision to expand the oil frontier into important national parks. CEPE signed contracts with private firms Occidental Petroleum Corporation (Oxy) and Conoco to explore parts of the Cuyabeno Wildlife Reserve and the Yasuní National Park (both parks were founded in 1979). Environmentalists and human rights advocates launched a campaign that, by 1989, included the U.S.-based Natural Resource Defense Council (NRDC) and Rainforest Action Network, drawing international attention to potential impacts on flora, fauna, and indigenous peoples (Reider and Wasserstrom 2018, 186-187). NRDC-sponsored lawyers and scientists inspected CEPE-Texaco oil fields, finding that millions of gallons of toxic residues were being dumped into the environment (Kimerling and Henriksen 1991, 31). NGOs such as *Acción Ecológica* [Ecological Action] (founded in 1989) and the Foundation Pachamama (founded in 1997), as well as indigenous organizations and human rights organizations, such as the *Fundación Regional de Asesoría en Derechos Humanos* [Regional Foundation of Advising in Human Rights] (INHRED) (founded in 1993), questioned the lack of consultation, transparency, and compensation in the industry. An association in Lago Agrio called the *Frente de Defensa de la Amazonía* [Front for the Defense of the Amazon] began registering complaints about territorial loss and

contamination and helped 30,000 colonists, Cofán, Siona, and Secoya file a class-action lawsuit against Texaco for failing to remediate contamination and compensate communities (Valdivia 2007). By the close of the century, national and international media were paying attention to oil-related conflicts in indigenous territories of the Amazon. Moreover, as growing numbers of foreign oil companies entered the Amazon in the 1990s, environmentalists, indigenous organizations, and oil worker unions rejected industry liberalization as an affront to national sovereignty (Valdivia 2008).<sup>4</sup>

With growing scrutiny of human rights and environmental impacts, as well as industry liberalization, local and regional protests slowed or even halted production at some sites. In response, legislators inaugurated a new era of social compensation designed to secure oil flows. In 1991, the government created the Fund for Regional Amazonian Eco-development, financed with 6 cents from the sale of every barrel of oil. It distributed funds to local governments and the newly-formed Institute for Eco-development of the Ecuadorian Amazon Region (ECORAE), which invested in plumbing, roads, and bridges, as well as economic development initiatives. The so-called “Trolleybus Law” of 2000 directed 35% of oil profits to road construction in the Amazon (this was increased to 40% in 2005).

In addition to rent redistribution, the Ecuadorian government ceded to demands from the indigenous movement regarding consultation, signing onto the International Labour Organization’s (ILO) Convention 169 in 1998. The convention was the first international treaty to recognize ancestral land rights, including the right to be consulted about extractive activities and receive compensation. This so-called “territorial turn” (Bryan 2012; Erazo 2013; Offen 2003) in indigenous governance across the Americas offered a new legal framework for

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<sup>4</sup> In 1992, the CEPE-Texaco consortium dissolved and Texaco withdrew from Ecuador.

communities and organizations to engage the state. But some organizations pushed for additional rights, particularly as oil prices spiked upwards in the 2000s (Valdivia 2008). For example, the so-called “Bi-provincial Assembly” of local governments and indigenous organizations formed in the Sucumbios and Orellana provinces of the northern Amazon and spearheaded protests to demand more local benefits, especially infrastructure, such as highways. In 2005, a neoliberal regime responded by increasing contributions to ECORAE to 50 cents per barrel.

The following year, presidential candidate Rafael Correa offered more profound transformations in oil governance. After his election, he not only increased the ECORAE contribution to \$1 per barrel, but, more significantly, he called a national vote to dissolve the government and form an assembly to draft a new, “post-neoliberal” constitution. The 2009 constitution offered expanded socioeconomic rights for poor and indigenous peoples, including the recognition of indigenous rights to consultation and compensation for extractive activities in their territories. In turn, Correa also authorized an institutional review of compensation policies to define a more robust role for the state in mediating relations between oil companies and communities. During this review, the planning ministry held meetings in two communities in the northern Amazon that had recently risen up against oil operations, including the community at the center of this dissertation, Playas del Cuyabeno (most commonly known as ‘Playas’). With community input, the ministry proposed a model of compensation that would be coordinated by multiple ministries to respond to long-term development objectives, including housing, public services, tourism development, and healthcare. In late 2011, Correa approved an alternative model, wherein the state oil company itself would oversee the rapid construction of urban-like resettlements that would feature a host of public services (e.g., modern housing, streets, schools, medical clinics, electricity, plumbing, internet). According to multiple former officials at the

planning ministry, Correa’s objective was to quickly disarm local resistance and conspicuously demonstrate to the national electorate the benefits of a progressive form of resource governance (Lyll and Valdivia 2019b).

Soon thereafter, Correa constituted a public institution called *Ecuador Estratégico* or “Strategic Ecuador” to channel private and public oil profits (among other revenues) into spectacular infrastructure projects in contested areas of resource extraction. In 2012, Strategic Ecuador’s investment budget was \$115 million. This budget doubled the following year, as its activities eclipsed those of ECORAE. Government propaganda featured Strategic Ecuador’s projects on billboards, television, and state newspapers, as evidence of how oil could expand citizenship rights. By its third year, Strategic Ecuador had planned or completed 1,214 infrastructure projects, concentrated in the northern Amazon, including electrification, internet connections, plumbing, schools, health clinics, and urban-like resettlements called “Millennium Cities” or “Millennium Communities” (*Ministerio coordinador de sectores estratégicos* 2016).



Figure 1. Playas del Cuyabeno, 2013

Source: [www.planv.com.ec/investigacion/investigacion/ciudades-del-milenio-similar-la-civilizacion-1](http://www.planv.com.ec/investigacion/investigacion/ciudades-del-milenio-similar-la-civilizacion-1)

Correa frequently appeared on television inaugurating or touting infrastructural projects in what he referred to as “the new Amazon.” He promised to transform the Amazon with the construction of 200 Millennium Cities.



Figure 2. Frontpage Article Featuring Playas in State-Owned Newspaper, October 2013  
Source: [https://issuu.com/elciudadano\\_ec/docs/ec\\_143b](https://issuu.com/elciudadano_ec/docs/ec_143b)

Ultimately, Correa only oversaw the construction of five Millennium Cities because oil prices collapsed in 2014, due to a glut in international supplies driven by fracking in the United States. Strategic Ecuador’s spending budget plummeted from \$216 million to \$37 million (*Ecuador Estratégico* 2016, 51) and, by 2018, a new government declared that the institution would be phased-out. A subsequent moment of fiscal crisis and political tumult has witnessed further legal and policy innovations geared towards infrastructural development in oil-producing territories of the Amazon.

The so-called “Amazonian Law” passed in 2018, augmenting distributions of oil rents (as well as mining and hydroelectric rents) to local governments, largely for public services, roads, and telecommunications, and creating a planning entity and two development funds. Under Correa, local governments in the Amazon had demanded a greater share of oil rents for their own infrastructure projects, but Correa had responded that municipal and provincial governments had to express support for extractive industries before he would approve any increase. Yet, in 2017, Correa ceded amid fiscal crisis in order to stir hopes and expectations. As one Petroamazonas executive explained to me, falling oil prices and public spending in strategic territories brought back the specter of “social risk” or unrest. Since 2019, the Amazonian Law has channeled \$1 per barrel (set to double in 2020) and 4% of the value of every barrel into local and regional investment budgets, in effect combining the models of ECORAE and Strategic Ecuador by drawing funds both from a fixed sum per oil barrel and a percentage of oil rents.

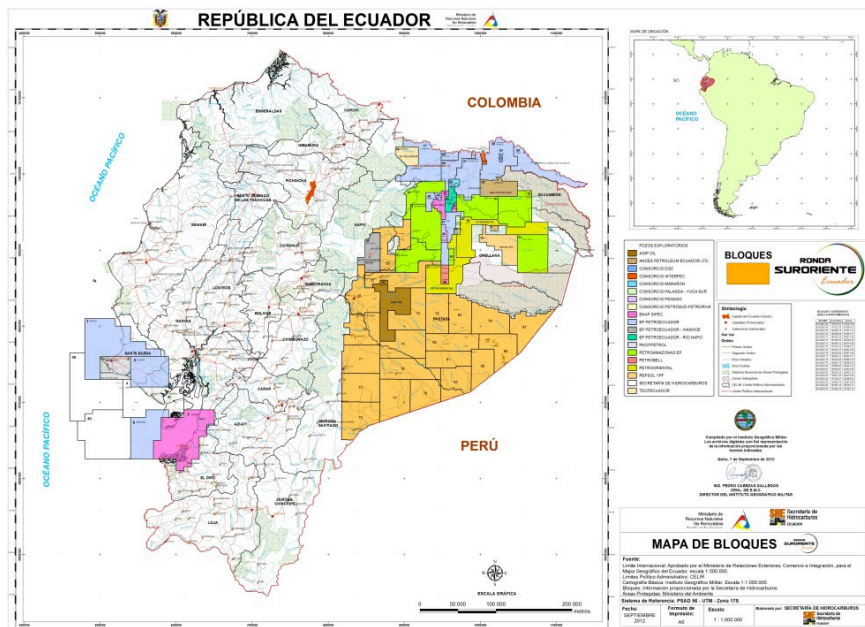


Figure 3. Secretary of Hydrocarbons Map of Oil Blocks in the Ecuadorian Amazon, 2012 (Orange Blocks at Auction)  
 Source: www.geoyasuni.org

Thus, from 1972 to the present day, the expansion of the oil industry has facilitated the expansion of the urban fabric in the northern Amazon, both as a function of activities related to oil exploration and extraction and as a form of social compensation in indigenous territories. In the next two sections, I discuss influential interpretations of these forms of urban expansion. The first set of interpretations understands urbanization as an imposition of capital flows and a development state on unwilling communities. This narrative, I argue, tells us little of the experiences and aspirations of those indigenous families and communities that actively leverage territorial rights in order to secure urban development.

### *Urbanization as Dispossession*

In recent years, political ecologists, resource geographers, and other critical researchers have put a spotlight on how the oil industry generates multiple forms of dispossession – i.e., cultural, material, environmental, and territorial – in indigenous territories of the northern Ecuadorian Amazon (e.g., Fiske 2017; Silveira et al. 2017; Vallejo 2014). Many have described urbanization as one of these processes, as it displaces indigenous peoples from hunting territories and traditional habitations (e.g., Kimerling 1990, 882; Rogge 1997, 32; Sawyer 2004, 13). According to this interpretation, ecologically-diverse rainforests are being “expropriated” (Lu and Bilsborrow 2011, 148) by expanding nuclear settlements and roads, in addition to the concurrent expansion of logging, monocrop agriculture, and other market-oriented and extractivist livelihoods (e.g., Bozigar and Gray 2016; Fadiman 2009; Gray et al. 2008; Murphy 2001).

Similarly, researchers associated with the National Center of Strategy for the Right to Territory (CENEDET) – geographer David Harvey’s short-lived, Quito-based research lab –

have labeled oil-funded infrastructures in the Amazon as manifestations of a violent process of “planetary urbanization” (Wilson et al. 2015; Wilson and Bayón 2016). While conventional urban theorists have defined cities in terms of population density (e.g., Orum 2007, 5159), Andy Merrifield (2011; 2013) and Neil Brenner (Brenner et al 2011) encourage researchers to develop urban theory “without an outside,” re-framing urbanization as a process of geographically-expanding frontiers of capital accumulation. “Extended urbanization,” argue Neil Brenner and Christian Schmid (2015, 167), refers to the incorporation of non-urban sites within circuits of capital accumulation at urban centers, as peripheries of capital become “subsumed within and operationalized” (Brenner 2013, 16).

In a sense, Brenner and other planetary urban theorists seem to be re-inventing discussions in urban geography and sociology since the 1970s, regarding urban expansion beyond the metropolis (e.g., Friedmann and Wolff 1982; Scott ed. 2001; Smith 2010[1984]). “[E]very place on earth,” wrote urban geographer Edward Soja (2005), “from the Amazon to Antarctica, is being both globalized and urbanized.”<sup>5</sup> In fact, concerns about the “urbanization of the world” (Wirth 1938, 1) motivated the formation of urban studies in North America and Europe in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. “Will the city disappear or will the whole planet turn into a vast urban hive?” asked Lewis Mumford (1989 [1961], 3). Perhaps the hallmark of planetary urbanization literature today is its consistent references to sociologist Henri Lefebvre, especially his 1970 book *The Urban Revolution*, in which Lefebvre associated urbanization directly with the incorporation of new spatial frontiers into circuits of capitalist production and consumption (and only indirectly with population growth and infrastructure). “In this sense,” Lefebvre

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<sup>5</sup> Similarly, Ash Amin and Nigel Thrift (2002) asserted that the traditional division between the urban and the rural had been “destroyed” (1).



(2003[1970]) elaborated, “a vacation home, a highway, a supermarket in the countryside are all part of the urban fabric” (3-4).<sup>6</sup> Contributors to conversations on planetary urbanization today argue that state and market actors are no longer merely attempting to overcome geographic constraints to capital accumulation, as Lefebvre hypothesized; rather, they are being remarkably successful at breaking down such barriers.

Researchers across the Amazon have adopted this idiom to characterize urbanization in “remote, isolated hinterland communities” (Kanai 2014, 1082), highlighting investments in intercontinental market connectivity – i.e., “the annihilation of space with time” (Marx 1973)<sup>7</sup>, as well as new infrastructures for oil and mining (e.g., Árboleda 2016; Castriota and Tonucci 2018; Kani 2014; Kanai and da Silva Oliveira 2014; Kanai and Schindler 2018). “Capital as subject” (Árboleda and Banoub 2018, 11) is urbanizing the globe, writes Brenner (2013), including “erstwhile ‘wilderness’ landscapes, from the Arctic, the European Alps and the Amazon...” (174).

Many of these researchers have further characterized ‘planetary’ urbanization as a particularly violent expression of what David Harvey (2004) coined “accumulation by dispossession” (e.g., Aulestia et al. 2016; Encalada-Falconí 2016; Kroger 2012; Pieck 2011; Rivero and Cooney 2010; Thaler 2017). Reformulating the thesis that capitalism relies not only

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<sup>6</sup> Similarly, Manuel Castells (1977) famously critiqued urban sociology itself as an ideology that mystified the reproduction of capitalist relations of production that defined urban processes.

<sup>7</sup> “Capital by its nature drives beyond every spatial barrier. Thus the creation of the physical conditions of exchange- of the means of communication and transport- the annihilation of space by time-becomes an extraordinary necessity for it.... Thus, while capital must on the one side strive to tear down every spatial barrier to inter- course, i.e., to exchange, and conquer the whole earth for its market, it strives on the other side to annihilate this space with time, i.e., to reduce to a minimum the time spent in motion from one place to another. The more developed the capital, therefore, the more extensive the market over which it circulates, which forms the spatial orbit of its circulation, the more does it strive simultaneously for an even greater extension of the market and for greater annihilation of space by time.... There appears here the universalizing tendency of capital, which distinguishes it from all previous stages of production” (Marx 1973, 524).

on formal labor relations, but also on violence and theft (also, see Luxemburg 1913; Lenin 1999[1916]; Amir and Pearce 1974), Harvey (2004) emphasizes that capital requires<sup>8</sup> geographic “expansion and spatial reorganization” (63), often materializing as a violent expansion of the urban fabric. As capital continues to seek out frontiers of investment, there is a violent “equalization” (Smith 1982, 143) or “homogenization” (Brenner and Elden 2009, 368) of space, particularly urban space, on a global scale.<sup>9</sup>

Such theories of spatial homogenization driven by the requirements of capital accumulation have enjoyed remarkable degrees of academic and popular acceptance in diverse contexts. By the same token, feminist, critical race, queer, and postcolonial scholarship has questioned these theories for too readily reducing mechanisms of spatial transformation to economistic laws of capitalist crisis and expansion. Critics have argued that Harvey erases within a “capital-centric” (e.g., Parker 2016; Reddy 2018; Werner et al. 2018) or “masculinist” (Rose 1993) gaze diverse social formations and histories that shape capitalism, the urban fabric, and the broader social landscape. In his book *Seventeen Contradictions and the End of Capitalism* (2014), Harvey responds to his critics by likening capitalism to an “economic engine” and a “closed system” that can be studied in isolation from “everything else that is going on” (8) (in this passage, “everything else” refers specifically to racism and gender domination). Elsewhere, Harvey (1996) seems to bracket ‘everything else’ as mere context: “Where does context begin or end?” (239), he asks, rhetorically. It is this bracketing-off of relations that he has deemed independent from (or the bi-products of) an impersonal capitalist machine, rather than

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<sup>8</sup> This requirement is due to capital’s tendency towards falling rates of profit. See chapter 13 of *Capital* volume 3 (1993[1894]) for Marx’s elaboration of a theory of the rate of profit to fall. In *Grundrisse* (2005[1857]), he would refer to it as the most significant law in political economy, although there are many debates about the validity and mechanisms of Marx’ observation among Marxists today (e.g. Roberts 2016; Shaikh 2016).

<sup>9</sup> Urbanist Melvin Webber (1963) referred to the emergence of homogenous urban space on a global scale as the “urban non-place realm” (49).

constitutive components of historical capitalism that has incited frustration among many critical geographers. In 1996, feminist geographer Cindi Katz wrote, “despite years of feminist, postcolonial, queer, and antiracist critique, and the rich, different productions of knowledge offered from these quarters, much social theory remains largely impervious to this work” (488, cited in Oswin 2018, 3). These critiques have been renewed in relation to the planetary urbanization thesis (e.g., Derickson 2015, 2018; McLean 2018; Oswin 2018), reinvigorating what geographer Julie Cupples (2019) refers to as a “tense intellectual struggle... between those who engage with feminist and decolonial perspectives and those who are more firmly grounded within Marxist and political economy approaches” (217).

There is no doubt that such a polarization exists in academia today, though such a characterization of two camps obscures the diversity of Marxist traditions. In fact, one might readily derive critiques of planetary urbanization literature from that paradigm’s chosen godfather, Henri Lefebvre. In many of Lefebvre’s writings from the 1950s through the 1980s, he distinguished between abstract *strategies* of capital accumulation and the actual, historical production of space. In many of his works, Lefebvre explicitly denied that abstract “spaces of capital” are hegemonic, insisting instead that space is also shaped by cultural perceptions, experiences, and longer social histories, within webs of dialectical relationships (2003[1970], 3; 1991[1974], 4; 1991[1977]; 2004; also, see Goonewardena et al. 2008; Loftus 2018). Taken in its full scope, Lefebvre’s cultural Marxism stands rather apart from the law-like theories of historical-geographic materialism.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> David Harvey (2004) writes that the production of space is “the organization of wholly new territorial divisions of labour, the opening up of new and cheaper resource complexes, of new dynamic spaces of capital accumulation, and the penetration of pre-existing social formations by capitalist social relations...” (65-66). “For Harvey,” explains geographer Scott Kirsch (2009), “theorizing the geography of capitalist accumulation... meant focusing... on the tensions between capital’s need for spatial fixity... and its demand for spatial mobility and new ‘spatial fixes’ ...” (167).

There is a tendency among researchers to apply theories such as “planetary urbanization” or “accumulation by dispossession” in diverse contexts, without accounting for how distinct social-historical contexts challenge or transform theory. Edward Said (1983, 2001) explored this tendency in terms of Georg Lukacs’ theory of commodification, illustrating how theory itself becomes commodified. He demonstrated that, as theories ‘travel’ from their points of origin to other social contexts, social analysts too often reify them or awkwardly ‘apply’ them to disparate contexts. Literary critic Barbara Christian (1988) gestures towards incentives within academia that have shaped these trends in terms of a “race for theory,” or the tendency to write about theory in ways that are detached from textual analysis (for similar critiques, see Cusset 2008; Gordon 2014; Graeber 2001, 30)<sup>11</sup>. Likewise, theories of historical-geographic materialism rooted in the experiences of the industrialized world often fail to ‘stretch’ Marxism to the colonial context, as Frantz Fanon (2007[1963], 40) insisted, accounting for how and why social relations of production and spatial transformations have articulated in particular ways in (formerly) colonized countries.

In this dissertation, I explore the struggles of subsistence indigenous peoples to bring urban space into the Amazon, at the far margins of market society. How might we account for demands for urbanization where it is not imposed by capital or a capitalist state; where urbanization does not facilitate the production and accumulation of capital – that is, where it makes little or no strategic sense from the point of view of Capital? The planetary urbanization thesis does not offer us guideposts in such places.

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<sup>11</sup> “Critics are no longer concerned with literature,” Christian writes, “but with other critics’ texts, for the critic yearning for attention has displaced the writer and has conceived of herself or himself as the center” (67-8).

In the next section, I address influential research that has sought to account for urban aspirations in these peripheries in terms of the power of development *discourse* to “interpellate” (Althusser 2014[1970]) or create new subjects and new desires. These discussions are largely rooted in French post-structural and posthuman theorizations of the subject, as a placeholder or effect of power, readily transformed by discourse (Althusser 2014[1970]; Deleuze and Guattari 1988; Derrida 2001; Foucault 1982). In so doing, they place little import on history, the legacies of colonial capitalism, and the *longue durée* of aspirations for ethnic inclusion in this region.

### *Urbanization as a Function of Desire*

A handful of studies acknowledge that indigenous communities in the northern Amazon have demanded urban development in exchange for their consent to oil extraction. They have explained that the post-neoliberal state produced these demands, transforming indigenous subjects and their desires. On the one hand, researchers inspired in the psychoanalytic Marxism of Jaques Lacan, Louis Althusser, and Slavoj Žižek have described these desires as a function of capitalist ideologies. On the other hand, Foucauldian researchers have accounted for them as effects of development discourse. By explaining urban aspirations as an effect of contemporary representations, both approaches implicitly dismiss the weight of history in the formation of human perceptions, norms, practices, and aspirations (i.e., subjectivities).

While the aspirations of subsistence hunters and farmers to use oil rents to build urban spaces in the Amazon make little sense in terms of bare material interests, Marxists have attempted to explain these aspirations in terms of the incapacity of these hunters and farmers to clearly perceive their material (i.e., class) interests. In many other social and historical contexts,

Marxists have explored and fleshed out Marx' and Engels' sparse writings on "ideology"<sup>12</sup> to account for contradictions among workers' material interests and their lack of revolutionary practice. Engels (1893) characterized ideology as the root of "false consciousness" or a mode of thought in which the historical development of the economy and that of the state, law, and other institutions erroneously seem independent. Most importantly, he argued, ideology mystifies class relations, such that the working class misrecognizes the origins of class inequalities. While skeptics have questioned as reductive Engel's argument that social relations of production determine modes of thought, countless Marxists have re-fashioned the concept (e.g., Adorno 2005[1946]; Marcuse 1966[1955]; Eagleton 2014). For his part, philosopher Luis Althusser (2006[1970]) attempted to universalize ideology within the human psyche, describing it in broad terms as the "imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence" (181) – indeed, as an integral part of subject formation (also, see Žižek 1994). All subjects, he argued, are interpellated or "hailed" into existence by ideology. Sociologist Stuart Hall (1996) offered to de-link ideology from economic determinism by identifying it within complex, shifting cultural formations. Amid such conceptual diversity, ideology has, nonetheless, continually referred to mental frameworks – i.e., languages, representations, modes of thought – that individuals use to make either erroneous or incomplete sense of economic inequalities, alienation, and exploitation.

In the northern Amazon, several researchers have attempted to account for the pursuit of urban futures among subsistence hunters and farmers in terms of their presumed lack of awareness of their true interests and collective political potential. In the most widely-read account, geographers Japhy Wilson and Manuel Bayón (2018a; 2018b) of CENEDET

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<sup>12</sup> In *A Critique of the German Ideology* (1970[1932]), Marx and Engels argued that the class that holds the means of production regulates – through its "theorists, ideologists and philosophers" (28) – the dominant ideas and ideals of a society, generating the illusion that their own interests were universal.

characterized the Millennium Cities as representations of what Žižek calls a “fantasy of origins,” illusions that help people to repress and cope with the violence of capitalist development. Wilson and Bayón suggest that indigenous peoples pursuing urban futures suffer from a “conservative fantasy of idyllic small town USA” (2018a, 239). Similarly, cultural analyst Alejandra Espinosa Andrade (2017) argues that indigenous peoples who accept urban resettlement have been “interpellated into participation... through a discourse of progress that they find hard to refuse” (320) – that is, she writes, the very “desire for progress [was] imposed from the outside” (322).

Still other researchers have turned to philosopher Michel Foucault and Martin Heidegger to account for the production urban aspirations. Such aspirations are conceived of as the effects of development state actions to enframe or represent the world in terms of developed and underdeveloped, in effect cultivating new subjects and new desires. In his influential critique of development, Foucauldian anthropologist Arturo Escobar (2011[1995]) argued that development is a set of practices and knowledges that shape subjectivities and “through which people come to recognize themselves as developed or underdeveloped” (10), rendering them controllable or governable. Escobar closely followed Foucault in this regard, demonstrating how development operates much as any other “apparatus” of disciplinary power that aims to “create – through a series of practices, discourses, and bodies of knowledge – docile, yet free, bodies” (Agamben 2009, 19). Likewise, researchers in the Amazon have argued that urban development discourses and practices has transformed subjectivities and cultivated new desires among subsistence communities. Citing Foucault, Valladares and Boelens (2017) argue that urbanization projects “obliterate the inhabitants’ values” (1018), simultaneously ““(re)constructing subjects’ (Foucault 1980) ... to get indigenous families to govern themselves as obedient citizens” (ibid.). Citing

Escobar, Cielo et al. (2016) argue that discourses on urban development have “seduced” indigenous communities, producing new “forms of subjectivity” (284).

These Marxist and Foucauldian researchers often conflate the circulation of (ideological) discourses by powerful actors (e.g., the state) with subjective commitments to those discourses (see Lyall et al 2018). As theorist Lawrence Grossberg (2010) writes, much Foucauldian research erroneously equates “dreams of power and regulation with the realities of power, intention with effect” (320, endnote 17).<sup>13</sup> Researchers in the northern Amazon too lightly hop from the fact of a discourse to the presumption of interpellation. In doing so, they evade questions related to the regional-historical construction and durability of subjectivities.<sup>14</sup> The weight of individual and shared history becomes inscribed in enduring perceptions, practices, and norms – what anthropologists have long defined simply as “culture” (Kroeber & Kluckhohn 1952, 357).<sup>15</sup> As geographer Matthew Hannah (2018) rightly argues, subjectivities have a “weight and durability” – i.e., a culture – that cannot be “interpellated with every passing encounter or hailing” (4).

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<sup>13</sup> Likewise, Henri Lefebvre once protested that Foucault himself “never... bridges the gap between the theoretical (epistemological) realm and the practical one, between mental and social, between the space of the philosophers and the space of people who deal with material things” (1974[1991], 4). O’Malley et al. (1997, 504) point out that Foucault’s “lack of attention to social relations occurs by epistemological design, not by accident.” While Foucault never actually claimed to write social histories or ethnographies, but rather accounts of modes of thought (Agnew 2014; for critiques of critical realist appropriations of Foucault, see Rabinow and Rose 2003; Rose 1999; Rose et al 2006; Lemke 2002), researchers working on urbanization in the Amazon do assert that state development discourses produce subjectivities. Grossberg (2010) writes, “I often have serious problems with much of this post-Foucauldian work on governmentality, not only because it tends to find it everywhere it looks, but even more because it constructs a seamless web between capitalism... politics, and subjectivity. It ignores the historical specificity of such practices” (320, endnote 17).

<sup>14</sup> Marxist historian E.P. Thompson (1978) famously decried the displacement of empirical-historical research on social experience by interest in discursive formations in his 200+ page diatribe against Althusser.

<sup>15</sup> “Culture,” stated Kroeber and Kluckhohn (1952), “consists of patterns, explicit and implicit, of and for behavior acquired and transmitted by symbols, [...] including their embodiment in artifacts; the essential core of culture consists of traditional (i.e. historically derived and selected) ideas and especially their attached values; culture systems may, on the one hand, be considered as products of action, on the other hand as conditioning elements of further action” (357).



In this dissertation, I develop an understanding of urban aspiration as something akin to what French philosopher and anthropologist Pierre Bourdieu<sup>16</sup> referred to as a *structured practice*, i.e., socially-inherited habits of perception and practice that are “durably embedded in things and in bodies,” as opposed to “simple mental representation, a fantasy (‘ideas in people’s heads’), an ideology” (41).<sup>17</sup> The people I interviewed for this dissertation were born into a social world in which the ability to access urban worlds already had manifold implications in terms of social- and self-respect. The recent circulation of urban ideology or development discourse was not needed to cultivate perceptions of urban spaces as centers and non-urban spaces (and subjects) as peripheries. Yet, in this dissertation, I also diverge from Bourdieu. Some Playas residents express a critical awareness of these urban-centric norms. They do not pursue urban futures out of blind habit, but as a self-aware strategy to mitigate ethnic subordination for them and their children.

Whereas descriptions of the interpellation of subjectivities by urban development discourses fail to address whether or not history holds any relevance in the formation of subjects and their aspirations, the case study in this dissertation demonstrates that, in fact, they do. In the next section, I discuss relevant theories regarding the enduring history of colonialization on subjectivities and spatial aspirations.

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<sup>16</sup> Despite his critics (e.g., Burawoy 2012), Bourdieu did not dismiss the human capacity to develop critical awareness or even change their practices; yet, his objective was to explain why people *tended* to reproduce social norms in practice, even – in some cases – in spite of their critical awareness or desire to act otherwise.

<sup>17</sup> Anthropologist Marcel Mauss (1979[1935]) qualified the human capacity for pre-conscious learning as *habitus*, a term that philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1942) signified as a “nascent logos” (25) that sets the conditions for conscious interpretation. Merleau-Ponty (ibid.) argues that the body packages phenomena within “schemes of perception” that order them for interpretation (also, see 1945). Bourdieu built on Merleau-Ponty, arguing that people come into social space equipped with a practical sense for following norms to pursue social recognition and mitigate subordination. Subjects learn to navigate and reproduce patterns of interaction prior to developing a conscious awareness of them.

## *Manichean Space*

Throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Marxists in Latin America explored the persistent social production of territories of ethnic difference,<sup>18</sup> as the basis of extractivist forms of capitalism in the region. In the 1960s and 1970s, anthropologists and sociologists inspired in Dependency Theory<sup>19</sup> closely documented the social production of indigenous and black regions as racially- and culturally-inferior for the purpose of labor exploitation and resource extraction (e.g., Cotler 1967; González Casanova 1965; Haven and Flinn 1970; Stavenhagen, 1965). According to this literature on “internal colonialism,” urban centers became sites of material and symbolic accumulation in relation to the material and symbolic production of peripheries. Moreover, ethnographers in this tradition documented how intersectional or “combined exploitation” (González Casanova 2006[1969], 194) shaped self-perceptions and aspirations among exploited

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<sup>18</sup> In the 16<sup>th</sup> century, Europeans characterized Latin American conquest not as an encounter of civilizations (with distinct languages, religions, and histories), but as Civilization’s discovery of a new, savage world. Invaders responded to the challenge that the Americas represented to the European conception of self (at the center of the universe) by characterizing peoples of the Americas as objects of discovery, external to civilization. Conquest involved a mixing of European males with native populations, generating perceptions of what philosopher Nelson Maldonado-Torres (2016) calls “subontological difference” or difference in “degrees of being human” (69). A semi-fluid caste system emerged in which individuals who could claim greater European descent could sustain social, political, and economic advantages. In the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, processes of formal political independence were led by *criollo* or white-mestizo elites (with the exception of Haitian independence), who sustained colonial-like social, political, and economic structures, along with a material and symbolic division between European-descendent elites, on the one hand, and black and indigenous populations, on the other hand. “That is the question,” wrote the Argentinian intellectual Domingo Faustino Sarmiento (2003[1845]) following Argentina’s independence, “to be savages or not” (35). Personhood continued to be tied to a racial and cultural proximity to Europe and, increasingly, to the politically- and economically-ascendant figure of the United States (Martí 1986[1891]). In Peru, for example, José Mariátegui (1928) famously rejected the commonplace notion that the Peruvian economy was semi-feudal, instead arguing that the exploitation of indigenous land and labor had long fed capitalist markets in industrial centers.

<sup>19</sup> Economist André Gunder Frank (1969) and other ‘dependency theorists’ (Cockcroft et al. 1972; Cueva 1974) described the uneven development of the “metropolis” and its “satellites,” both at the scale of international trade and *within* former colonies. In the African context, Kwame Nkrumah (1965) would refer to these ongoing trade relations as “neocolonialism.” Geographer Neil Smith (2010) would popularize theories of uneven development among Anglophone geographers, building on Marx, Lenin, and Trotsky, as well as Frank and other Latin American ‘dependency theorists’ (see Smith 1982, 333-335; 1997, 172); however, Smith’s theorization partially obscured the production of territories of social difference for capital expansion – what geographer Laura Pulido (2016) has more recently referred to as “capitalism’s incessant need to actively produce difference somewhere” (527-528). Neil Smith’s (e.g., 1998; 2005) work on gentrification does discuss the role of racialization in the production of spaces for reinvestment.

populations. For example, anthropologist Pablo González Casanova (1965) showed how indigenous peoples in Mexico sought to mitigate their subordination through strategies of education, behavioral change, migration, and cultural expressions – a host of imitations or performances that sociologist Bolívar Echevería (2010) would later coin *blanquitud* or “whiteness.” This literature on the aspirations of marginalized subjects drew from writings on the subjective impacts of colonialism – i.e., “the colonization of souls” (Mirés 1987) – by Aimé Césaire (1972[1950]), Albert Memmi (1990[1946]), and Frantz Fanon (1952; 1959; 1963; 1967). In this section, I discuss the particular relevance of Fanon’s writings on the symbolic power of the *metropoli*.

In the 1950s and 1960s, social theorist, militant, and psychiatrist Frantz Fanon wrote of the dehumanizing effects of colonization on colonizer and colonized, and of the processes and perils of institutional, social, and subjective decolonization. Fanon offered a stark vision of the paralyzing impacts of colonialism on colonizers and colonized, who find themselves trapped within fixed identities that become inherited through language, segregation, violence, and subtle gestures. Fanon famously described the colonial world as “a world divided into compartments... [into] native quarters and European quarters, of schools for natives and schools for Europeans...” (2004[1963], 37). He elaborated the symbolic effects of these divisions in the following passage of *The Wretched of the Earth*:

*The settlers’ town is a strongly built town, all made of stone and steel. It is a brightly lit town; the streets are covered with asphalt, and the garbage cans swallow all the leavings, unseen, unknown and hardly thought about... The town belonging to the colonized people, or at least the native town, the Negro village, the medina, the reservation, is a place of ill fame, peopled by men of evil repute. They are born there, it matters little where or how; they die there, it matters not where, nor how... (2004[1963], 39).*

Theorists Stefan Kipfer (2007, 2018) and Ato Sekyi-Otu (1996) have highlighted these spatial dimensions of Fanon's writings, but few Fanon scholars have failed to observe the explicitly spatial nature of his analysis. Fanon famously described colonialism as a process of spatial and symbolic compartmentalization.

Fanon also examined the role of segregation in shaping the fraught aspirations of the colonized for social recognition (I say 'fraught' because, in a colonial society, Fanon argued, authentic recognition is not possible). He argued that "[t]he look that the native turns on the settler's town is a look of lust... And this the settler knows very well; when their glances meet he ascertains bitterly, always on the defensive. 'They want to take our place'" (2004[1963], 39). The native, he wrote, was born into a world in which the colonized had to aspire to assume the position of the colonizer.<sup>20</sup> Writing of dominant social aspirations in his native Martinique, Fanon (2008[1952]) observed, "All colonized people... position themselves in relation to the... metropolitan culture. The more the colonized has assimilated the cultural values of the metropolis, the more he will have escaped the bush" (2). Colonized peoples sought to mitigate their subordination by seeking out a place in urban centers. Such aspirations, Fanon emphasized, did not reflect a pathology or psychosis – i.e., an internally-derived inferiority complex, but rather they were imposed by the force of violence and social stigmatization. In other words, the colonized were "made to feel inferior" (2008[1952], *emphasis mine*) by disparate lines of force, from segregation to material inequalities, language, gestures, and brute violence.

In his foreword to *The Wretched of the Earth*, postcolonial literary critic Homi Bhabha (1994) critiqued Fanon for producing Manichean or starkly binary characterizations of racial

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<sup>20</sup> Similarly, in his lectures on the state, Bourdieu (2014) argued that modern state formation involves the production of "the provinces as a lesser existence, as the deprivation of [everything done in the] capital... the provincial [is endowed with] an inferior symbolic capital" (228, original italics).

identities in a postcolonial world better characterized by hybrid identities and spaces, with their own, shifting uniqueness that necessarily overcomes the histories that produced them (also, see Edward Soja's (2008) theorization of "thirdspace"). Fanon scholars have responded that Fanon also believed in – and celebrated – the innate plasticity of human identity and transforming, which was precisely why he was so concerned with the colonial institutions and mechanisms that attempted to trap social *experience* within fixed, binary identities (Gibson 1999; 2007; Gordon 2015; Reyes 2012). That is, Fanon's critique was centered on "the colonized economy, thinking, and institutions" (2004[1963], 120) that shaped the *experience* of social identities and spaces *as if they were* fixed and hierarchical, restricted within rigid compartments.<sup>21</sup>

This dissertation is very much about the social life of an abstract binary – its creation, renewal, changing signifiers, and effects on human aspirations. White/non-white, civilized/uncivilized, educated/uneducated, and urban/non-urban are social inventions in the northern Amazon – abstract categories or reifications that do not reflect the tremendous social diversity of the region. Nonetheless, they shape shared notions of dignity and social status. The people whose perspectives I explore in this dissertation do not always see through a binary lens. For example, in one moment, an informant in Cuyabeno might refer to merchants, missionaries, tourists, or state officials 'from the outside' as distinct social groups or they might describe them as *mestizo* (an identity that merges white and indigenous ancestries into what Bhabha (1997) refers to as a hybrid or "liminal" position between colonizer and colonized); yet, in other moments of conflict, in which power is at play and symbolic status is in question, people might refer to all of these diverse actors as 'white people' or simply 'whites.' By the same token, these

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<sup>21</sup> I am very grateful to Dr. Alvaro Reyes. Out of his seminar "Frantz Fanon: Racialized Spaces and Proper Places" at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in 2015 emerged the ideas discussed here regarding Fanon's theorization of colonialism and its effects.

binaries tend to mediate social hierarchies within communities. As we will see, a Kichwa man in Cuyabeno might refer to himself and his wife as indigenous people of distinct ethno-linguistic lineages in some instances, but in moments of conflict claim white ancestry and refer to his wife as a ‘jívaro’ or savage. As we will see in many instances throughout this dissertation, racialized, binary modes of perception generally become triggered and expressed when people are either claiming superiority or questioning it. The social and historical diversity of the northern Amazon is remarkable, but I am concerned with the situations in which people experience a world divided in two and with how social binaries of civilized and savage become renewed in distinct forms (i.e., educated/uneducated; urban/non-urban).

The people whose perspectives I explore in this dissertation are often critical of this Manicheanism, but recognize it as a shared, *social* fact to which they must respond in order to mitigate social subordination. In Playas, I have heard criticisms of people in the community that claim ancestry from Quito: “They think they’re white... They want to appear as if they were more from the outside.” Such comments reflect both a critique and a recognition of Manichean perceptions of urban space – ‘on the outside’ – as both ‘white’ and status-granting.<sup>22</sup> Similarly, residents of neighboring communities often critique Playas residents for their resettlement by saying, “they think they’re white” – though each of these neighboring communities have plans to lobby the state for similar settlements. In this context, Manicheanism reflects a ‘domination without hegemony’ (Guha 1977; Beasley-Murray 2010) that I will trace back to indigenous relations with rubber merchants in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

That is, as I detail in Chapter 3, Spanish colonization in this region violently imposed Manichean experiences and, in turn, perceptions of a social space divided between civilized and

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<sup>22</sup> As Fanonian scholar Alvaro Reyes (2012) writes, there is a “certain circularity... between the classificatory schemas... and the physical manifestation of apartheid” (14).

savage. Subsequently, white actors have periodically modified the trappings of civilization (e.g., Western goods, education, urbanism), in the very process renewing white authority. During the rubber boom, the social world was divided between those indigenous families that accessed Western goods from white merchants and ‘savages’ who did not. With the appearance of missionary schools, the social world was divided between those who could access educational credentials and those who could not. With partial territorial and market integration over subsequent decades, the social world was divided between those who accessed urban spaces and labor markets and those who did not. In each moment, market, religious, and state authorities transformed and renewed experiences of a social space divided in two.

In Playas, a teenager named Marco Noteno laments that his extended family and peers grew up with “broken thoughts, that the indigenous were lesser than the *mestizos*, than the whites – that we speak our language, that we are ugly.” Despite his critical analysis of ethnic subordination, nonetheless today Marco is pursuing education as a pathway off of the farm and into the formal, urban labor market ‘on the outside.’ For many like Marco in this region, the symbolic significance of urban space is a social fact, despite their own critiques of how or why that came to be. Urban life attracts social recognition or respect and urban space is a medium for accessing institutions that consecrate status (i.e., modern schools and labor markets). Over the course of this dissertation, I describe the experience of a Manichean, hierarchical division of social space across distinct historical conjunctures. The legacies of ethnic domination have shaped spatial aspirations in Playas, as residents attempt to mitigate subordination either by migrating into cities or bringing urban space into the Amazon.

Much distinguishes Fanon’s world – up-ended by revolutions of decolonization in Africa and Asia and revolutionary struggles in the Americas – from contemporary Latin America. The

global South has witnessed the consolidation of national elites, as well as the rise of political parties and multicultural governance budgets, programs, and institutions that claim to respond to aspirations for inclusion among marginalized populations. Politicians express interest in the frustrations of subaltern people who seek inclusion, for example, into urban spaces, and offer promises and partial solutions. In turn, frustrations become channeled into the realm of electoral politics or domesticated in everyday, often individual, family, or community pursuits for education and development projects. Yet, in the 1960s, Fanon did anticipate that during and, potentially, following decolonization, domestic elites would try to reaffirm the economic, institutional, and cultural structures of colonialism, including spatial segregation, and re-consolidate the spaces of elites as centers of personhood, national belonging, and prestige. If they were successful, he worried, then colonized subjects would continue to experience a world “divided in two” (Fanon 2004[1963], 3). Spaces would continue to be racialized through segregation, language, and pre-conscious learning (e.g., everyday gestures, glances, body language)<sup>23</sup> that “walled in” (1986[1967], 89) colonizers and colonized.

In this section, I have briefly discussed Fanon’s ideas on the enduring effects of colonialism on the spatial aspirations of peripheralized subjects. In the 1960s and 1970s, the writings of Frantz Fanon were highly-influential across Latin America and were taken up in North America by anti-colonial Marxists, such as the Black Panthers (e.g., Carmichael and Hamilton 1967), and among radical academics to explain the exploitation of Black (e.g., Blauner 1969) and Chicano (e.g., Barrera et al. 1972) communities. Today, Fanon has inspired many contemporary political and intellectual traditions, from black radicalism<sup>24</sup> (Moten 200; Sexton

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<sup>23</sup> “[I]t is precisely this absence of will—this offhand manner; this casualness; and the ease with which they classify him,” writes Fanon (2008[1952]), “[that] imprison him at an uncivilized and primitive level...” (15).



2016; Wilderson 2010) to postcolonial and decolonial theories (Bhabha 1986; Mignolo 2011; Said 1986).

Despite this rich legacy<sup>25</sup>, in Latin America Fanon is most often associated with an intellectual milieu of the past (see Torres Guillén). Indeed, many of the most influential writers on the legacies of colonialism in the region disavowed Marxist traditions in the 1980s and 1990s, channeling debates on Eurocentrism – what Anibal Quijano (2000) coined the “coloniality of power” – through postmodern concerns about the relationship between power and knowledge. Following Heidegger and Foucault rather than anti-colonial Marxism, a generation of Latin Americanists has focused on documenting examples of anti-systemic or ‘non-modern’ discourses and practices among indigenous peoples in order to foster alternative modes of thinking and being (e.g., Blaser 2009a; Escobar 2007; De la Cadena 2015; Mignolo 2009; Walsh 2010)<sup>26</sup>. In the 1960s and 1970s, writers concerned with internal colonialism had ridiculed similar liberal

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<sup>24</sup> Relatedly, in North America, researchers increasingly refer to internal colonialism to illuminate processes of racial capitalism (e.g., Bledsoe and Wright 2019; Cowen and Lewis 2016; Pinderhughes 2011; Talley 2017; Vasudevan and Smith 2020).

<sup>25</sup> On a global scale, Dipankar Dey (2015) writes, “[i]n recent years, when unrestrained global capital is aggravating the economic and social inequalities among various regions and ethnic groups, the theory of internal colonialism is increasingly being considered as an appropriate tool to analyze such developments” (2).

<sup>26</sup> An initial postmodern move in Latin American studies drew inspiration from postcolonial and subaltern studies on southeast Asia (see Mallon 1994) that were concerned with deconstructing Eurocentric cultural and academic production (Guha 1998; Said 1978) and undermining essentialized representations of colonial identities (Bhabha 1994; Spivak 2010[1988]). In Latin America, researchers turned away from the *experience* of colonization towards historically- and analytically- deconstructing or revealing colonial identities, such as indigeneity, as contingent, discursive formations (Prieto 2004; Rappaport 2014; Wade 1997). A subsequent postmodern move in Latin American studies has pivoted away from critiques of colonial difference as mere representation to embrace the political potential of celebrating cultural difference. “Decolonial studies” (Mignolo 2009; Walsh 2008), also known as “M/C/D” (“modernity/ coloniality/ decoloniality”) document nonmodern or “border” thinking in indigenous territories (Mignolo 2009; Walsh 2010) – i.e., at the geographic and epistemic “borders of the colonial/modern world system” (Escobar 2010, 56). Similarly, ethnographers working in the “ontological turn” (Escobar 2007) document nonmodern forms of *being* or relationality, such as non-binary relations between humans, plants, and landscapes (Blaser 2009a; 2009b; Escobar 2007; De la Cadena 2015). Mario Blaser and Arturo Escobar have inspired ethnographic work that magnifies non-modern indigenous cosmologies or “ontological difference” (Maldonado-Torres 2010, 103). In the 1990s, Arturo Escobar (1995) also fomented “post-development” studies (also, see Sachs 1997), critiquing development as a Eurocentric project of regional control and inspiring contemporary discussions in Latin America about “*buen vivir*” or alternatives to development (Working Group on Alternatives to Development 2012).

and *indigenista*<sup>27</sup> discourses that characterized indigenous peoples as if they had been isolated from Western society, cultural authority, and influence.<sup>28</sup> Recently, Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui (2010) has provided a nuanced interpretation of that influence, arguing that indigenous and *mestizo* subjects express contradictory practices and aspirations – i.e., self-negation and celebrations of self; assimilation and enduring alterity<sup>29</sup>. Nonetheless, Rivera Cusicanqui insists that colonialism would not have been effective, if it had not enrolled – at least in part – the practices and aspirations of a great number of the colonized peoples into the task of reproducing colonial hierarchies.<sup>30</sup>

In this chapter, I have argued that one cannot deduce the mechanisms of urban expansion in the northern Amazon from universalizing theories of capital accumulation. Moreover, urban aspirations in Playas are not a simple function of contemporary development discourse – i.e., new ideas in people’s heads. Rather, over several generations, these aspirations have consolidated as a strategy to mitigate ethnic subordination for current and future generations. In this dissertation, I do not embark on an analysis of the ‘bad sense’ of a community, duped by white society; instead, I examine the broader forces that have structured these urban aspirations in the northern Amazon. I hope to partially recover the memory of colonial capitalism in this

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<sup>27</sup> *Indigenismo* refers to cultural and political movements of 20th century Latin America that valorized indigenous cultures and pre-Hispanic civilization.

<sup>28</sup> André Gunder Frank (1969) ridiculed notions that pre-Hispanic cultural difference persisted, as a “dual society hypothesis,” an ideology that obscured the transformation of indigenous territories and cultures under colonial capitalism.

<sup>29</sup> Similarly, in the Ecuadorian Andes, anthropologist Rudi Colloredo-Mansfeld (1998) has documented the lived contradictions between racist discrimination and ethnic pride, coexisting in perception and practice, and geographer Gabriela Valdivia (2009) has documented contradictory forms of consciousness and perception in the northern.

<sup>30</sup> We can further break-down Rivera Cusicanqui’s binary model of subjectification to consider many more scales (e.g., the forces of individual desires, communal expectations, and a broader social ‘gaze’). Yet, her point remains. Despite the persistent cultural diversity of indigenous nationalities in the Americas, they have not been impervious to the influence of colonial culture.

region and shed some light on the symbolic terrain on which new urban geographies are emerging there today.

### *A Method to Study the Non-Contemporaneous Present*

My research began in 2014 as an examination of changing compensation strategies on Ecuadorian oil frontiers. I reviewed institutional documents and conducted a few dozen interviews with state and industry actors<sup>31</sup>. I then spent two and a half months in Playas to see what new forms of compensation processes and results looked like. I developed rapport with residents by volunteering to teach English in the High School. I spent time with the local government and worked on farms and on community maintenance projects. And I participated in community assemblies and social events. The everyday life I observed through this participant observation, which I detail in Chapter 2, included remarkable struggles to secure food, income, and maintenance. In 2015, I conducted interviews for comparative perspective in two other Millennium Cities,<sup>32</sup> where residents similarly struggled. In material terms, it made little sense to me for residents to remain in these places, but their creative efforts seemed to suggest that urban space held some significance that I could not yet grasp. Oil politics in this region seemed inexplicable. Ultimately, as the Indian sociologist Amita Baviskar (2003) writes, “the political economy of a natural resource is meaningful only through the wider networks of cultural politics

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<sup>31</sup> I interviewed lobbyists, former union representatives, and representatives of state oil companies and their contractors, as well as former officials at the planning ministry (SENPLADES); entities charged with building infrastructures in “strategic territories” (i.e., ECORAE and Strategic Ecuador); the Ministry of Finances; and the Ministry of Non-Renewable Resources and its contractors.

<sup>32</sup> I conducted complementary research in the Kichwa community of Pañacocha on the Napo River and the Montubio community of Tablada de Sánchez on the coast. I also conducted a handful of interviews in the Cofán community of Dureno on the Upper Aguarico River, just prior to the construction of its Millennium City.

in which it is embedded” (5051), and culture is nothing other than the social reproduction of historical events and relationships.

Thus, the bulk of my research between 2014 and 2020 was focused on exploring the origins of urban aspirations in Playas in history and memory. This was an iterative process, as I moved between historical archives, oral histories, and ethnographic research on contemporary social dynamics. As Henri Lefebvre wrote, “[i]f space is a product, our knowledge of it must be expected to reproduce and expound the process of production... moving continually back and forth between past and present. The historical and its consequences...” (1991[1974], 36-37). Numerous theorists have inspired me to reflect on how to study spaces and subjectivities as if they were ‘non-contemporaneous’ – i.e., the products of multiple, entangled historical moments, relationships, and traumas (e.g., Mauss, Merleau-Ponty, Bourdieu<sup>33</sup>, Gramsci<sup>34</sup>, Fanon, Rivera Cusicanqui<sup>35</sup>).<sup>36</sup> In a sense, I wanted to take seriously the words of James Baldwin: “History is not the past. It is the present.” I studied several government and missionary archives in the cities of Quito and Tena, as well as the community archive in Playas and the Ministry of Environment archive in Tarapoa,<sup>37</sup> and I conducted oral histories. Through the archives, I examined relations

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<sup>33</sup> Bourdieu (1990) argued that “the present is necessarily insignificant when compared with the long period of the past [from] which we have emerged” (56).

<sup>34</sup> The appearance of temporal unity in the present, he posited, was a political construct (see Thomas 2017a; 2017b). Gramscian scholar Peter Thomas (2009) has noted that influential appropriations of Gramsci today mistakenly characterize his writings as historical presentism. Thomas’ (2009; 2017a; 2017b) work has sparked some interest in recent years in Gramsci’s theorization of the “non-contemporaneity of the present” (282) (see Antonini 2019; Doucette 2019; Frosini 2014; Sućeska 2019).

<sup>35</sup> Rivera Cusicanqui (2010) conceives of internal colonialism as a “collection of diachronic contradictions of varying profoundness that emerge to the surface in the present and, therefore, cross contemporary modes of production, state political systems, and ideologies rooted in cultural homogeneity” (36, *translation mine*).

<sup>36</sup> In my research in the Andes, I explored the role of history in contemporary politics of land and labor (Lyll 2009; 2010b; 2013; 2014; 2015; Lyll and Havice 2019), theorizing memory as both a selective interpretation of the past and a residue that persists in political practice and relations (also, see Guerrero 1991). That is, there is a complex interplay between memory as a selective, active, and perhaps strategic interpretation and memory as an enduring, less-than-conscious practice.

between indigenous groups, the state, missionaries, and other key actors in the northern Amazon to trace the (non)contemporaneous production of urbanizing subjects. Admittedly, archival history is partial and selective (Stoler 2010), as is memory itself (Halbwachs 1980; Lyall 2010; Olick et al 2011), but I was not interested in recovering the past as-it-really-was. I was interested in the effects of what is (selectively) remembered on contemporary perceptions, practices, and values.

I used two specific mechanisms to invite research participants to articulate what were often latent memories. First, I digitized relevant documents from historical archives and brought them into the Amazon to spark discussions among 105 women and men or three-quarters of the adult population in Playas.<sup>38</sup> Second, I conducted video ethnography, recording and editing short films based on oral histories with approximately three dozen residents. I showed those films to still more residents to recover and build collective – though, at times, contested – memories.

In 2018, I expanded this research to include five neighboring communities of indigenous Cofán, Shuar, Secoya, Siona, and Kichwa populations in the Cuyabeno Wildlife Reserve, conducting focus groups and sharing videos. It is commonly-held among ethnographers in Cuyabeno that other indigenous nationalities “differentiate themselves from the Kichwa individuals who live alongside them” (Cepek 2019, 677).<sup>39</sup> The Kichwa are often considered ‘more Westernized.’ However, despite this perception, I was able to appreciate through these

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<sup>37</sup> I conducted archival research in the National Archives of Ecuador, the Napo Governorship, the Jesuit Archives, the Capuchin Archives, and the National Assembly, as well as the considerable community archive in Playas and the Ministry of Environment archive in Tarapoa.

<sup>38</sup> I conducted annual or bi-annual interviews with two dozen of these interviewees over six years.

<sup>39</sup> Anthropologist Michael Cepek (2019) argues that Cofán aspirations are quite distinct from Kichwa aspirations; yet, the Cofán people have also demanded and obtained a Millennium City on the Aguarico River. While Cepek sustains that Cofán residents of their Millennium City are ambivalent about oil-driven development, I would argue that ‘ambivalence’ is a concept that does not correspond to what it takes to struggle for such a massive development project.

focus groups that in each community there existed broadly-shared intentions to leverage territorial rights over oil-rich lands to propel the nucleation of disperse settlements into urban-like centers with modern schools.

Through this iterative process of archival and ethnographic work, I came to focus attention on three influential historical moments or “horizons” (Rivera Cusicanqui 2010, 28) in the formation of urban aspirations in Playas – i.e., the rubber boom of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and early 20<sup>th</sup> century (Chapter 3); the spread of formal education from the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century (Chapter 4); and the rise of urban outmigration towards the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Chapter 5). In the memories of Playas residents, each of these moments was experienced as an opportunity to secure social recognition that, paradoxically, reproduced white authority and indigenous subordination.

Chapters 3, 4, and 5 take on a narrative structure that reflect my methodological approach. The first half of each chapter examines histories and memories and the second half examines how those histories and memories have shaped or influenced Playas’ struggles to obtain and sustain the Millennium City. In Chapter 3, I document memories in Playas of ancestors who sought to secure modern or ‘civilized’ identities through the acquisition of market goods. Rubber merchants simultaneously offered access to these goods and abused and deceived Playas’ ancestors to keep them in indebted servitude. In the second half of that chapter, I discuss how these memories influenced Playas’ leadership in the 2010s, as they demanded an urban-like resettlement that would resemble oil workers’ encampments, thereby diminishing the possibility of being duped again. In Chapter 4, I document struggles among Playas’ ancestors to secure access to formal education in the wake of indebted servitude, a strategy to deal with white market actors and continue to access market goods and civilized identities. In the second half of

that chapter, I detail continuities in these struggles, as residents remain in the Millennium City largely to secure access to education. In Chapter 5, I address recent struggles among Playas residents to free themselves from the racialized ‘toil’ of farm work by integrating into urban centers as migrants. In the second half of the chapter, I show how memories of discrimination faced during past migrations into cities spur contemporary aspirations to bring urban spaces and non-agrarian work into the Amazon. In each historical moment in these chapters, white subjects and spaces seemed to offer inclusion, respect, or recognition to the Kichwa through Western goods (Chapter 3), formal education (Chapter 4), and urban migration and labor (Chapter 5), but in the process reproduced white authority and experiences of ethnic subordination through violence and debt; uneven access to schools; and everyday discrimination in cities. In Chapter 6, I re-examine the emotions of rage and catharsis that Playas residents experienced during their uprising against the state oil company in 2008. Perceptions of the company and its deceptive tactics were embedded in shared memories of ethnic subordination. And the uprising is largely remembered as a cathartic – albeit momentary, rupture from the colonial present. Thus, methodologically, I echo recent calls from geographers for a “renewed attention to historical geographies of, and for, the present” (Van Sant et al 2018, 2).

## CHAPTER 2. THE MILLENNIUM CITY: EXPERIENCES AND STRUGGLES

...[E]ven though we gather together and look in the same direction at the same instant, we will not – we cannot – see the same landscape. We may certainly agree that we will see many of the same elements – houses, roads, trees, hills... but such facts take on meaning only through association... any landscape is composed not only of what lies before our eyes but what lies within our heads. – cultural geographer D.W. Meinig, *The Beholding Eye* (1979, 1).

### *Introduction*

Playas has about 500 inhabitants – largely subsistence hunters, farmers, and fisher-people, living 3 hours downriver via motorboat from where the nearest road ends. In 2008, the community rose up against the state oil firm, Petroamazonas, seizing a pair of barges that were loaded with equipment to build an oil platform in their territory. In subsequent negotiations with state actors, community members demanded houses with public services and a modern school, among other infrastructures. In 2013, the government completed an urban-like settlement in Playas. It featured houses of cement and synthetic materials, arranged uniformly around eight blocks with sidewalks and streetlamps; a complex of classrooms, laboratories, library, and administrative buildings; a medical and dental clinic; and a police and fire station. Rafael Correa traveled there to inaugurate the project before a television audience, declaring that a renewed Playas represented “the new Amazon.” He argued that this modern landscape, against the backdrop of dense rainforest, served as evidence of the government’s commitment to isolated, “forgotten” sectors. Environmentalists, commentators, and critical academics denounced this intervention as a cultural imposition on a traditional community. Public debates about Playas between government officials and critics effectively reproduced erroneous notions that the



northern Amazon has only recently come into contact with Western society, obscuring the histories and legacies of colonial capitalism in the region.

The goal of this brief chapter is twofold: to describe diverse experiences of the Millennium City and to document the shared struggle to sustain it. In the first half, I describe my arrival in Playas in 2014 and the varied experiences (both positive and negative) of urban settlement among its residents. Now, there is no scholarly consensus regarding what urban space refers to – whether it is a way of life, a physical distribution of people and things, or the materialization of capital relations of production – and, in any of these cases, much of the northern Amazon might more properly be defined as peripheral to urban life, particularly the Millennium Cities, which are no more than a dozen square blocks occupied by subsistence farmers, hunters, and fishers. Yet, the urban is always a socially-constituted abstraction of an ideal type. In this dissertation, I refer to urbanization principally in terms of the experiences of people living in Cuyabeno of networked infrastructure and housing development *as urban*.

In the second half of the chapter, I describe subsequent visits, during which I observed the remarkable, collective struggle of residents to sustain and expand the Millennium City. Despite diverse experiences of urbanism, as a “way of life” (Wirth 1938), this space holds a shared social significance, as reflected in the residents’ organization and persistence. To-date, dozens of researchers and analysts have ridiculed this Millennium City – its design, intentions, and effects, but they have entirely overlooked the fact of its social significance and, from there, its historical origins.

### *Entering the City: Diverse Experiences of Urban Life*

In late October, 2013, I was in Quito watching Rafael Correa’s television show. Every Saturday morning, I watched his show, in which he discussed policy, lambasted political

opponents, sang and joked, and shared clips of himself inaugurating public works. On this particular morning, Correa was narrating scenes of a ribbon-cutting ceremony in the northern Amazon. Drone footage panned over the first “Millennium City.” A promotional voice described the project, “... complete with green areas for recreation.” To me, it seemed reminiscent of what James Scott (1998) refers to as “failed state schemes” – i.e., a myopic imposition by state planners that was destined to be a fantastic fiasco.

In the following months, television propaganda featured the new Playas as evidence of spectacular, oil-funded development. At that time, I joined a team of ethnographers at the Latin American Faculty of Social Sciences (FLACSO) to design a multi-sited study on the social impacts of oil production in the Amazon under Correa. I suggested we include Playas among the study’s sites. ‘What could be more representative of socio-cultural and ecological impacts,’ I imagined, ‘than what state propaganda celebrated as a ‘modern city in the middle of the forest’?’

My partner, Nancy Carrión Sarzosa, and I travelled six hours by bus down the Andean foothills into the humid lowlands of Sucumbíos province. We changed buses in Lago Agrio and continued for three hours on roads that snaked through the rainforest, alongside rusty pipelines. We changed buses again in Tarapoa, a small municipal center. Dust hung in the air, as construction crews paved a secondary road into town and lay sewage pipe. From there, our bus jostled along a dirt road for an hour until the road ended at the edge of the Aguarico, a broad, muddy river with dense foliage on either shore. We waved down a Petroamazonas motorboat. Another 45 minutes downriver we arrived at Petroamazonas’ dock, where we hitched another ride with a worker, headed home to Playas at the end his shift. He carved wide arches from one side of the river to the other, around sandbars otherwise invisible to inexperienced eyes. Every

kilometer or so, a modest wood house on stilts appeared on the shoreline among banana groves or patches of cocoa or coffee trees.

As the sun faded, our surroundings blurred into the shadows. Our eyes could not quite adjust to the intense darkness on either shore, but stars lit up the sky. And, quite suddenly, the motorist called our attention to a glow above the tree line that shown brighter as we advanced. From around a wide bend, a lamppost appeared in a clearing on the horizon. A row of streetlamps then paraded around the bend, lighting dozens of identical white houses, perched on red beams. As the motorist eased on the throttle, electronic dance music echoed across the water.

When we landed, I scrambled up an embankment onto a sidewalk of grey and red bricks, a sidewalk design that municipal governments use in tourist areas throughout Ecuador. Groups of three or four people were gathered on street corners, chatting. Others jogged or rode bikes in pairs. We advanced down the street to a corner house, where the motorist knocked on one of the red beams. Edwin Noteno, a reserved, but cordial schoolteacher, appeared in the window above. Edwin invited us to spend the night in the High School's boarding house. In the school lobby, teenagers in T-shirts, tennis shoes, and baseball caps gathered around a flat screen, watching an action movie in English, with Spanish-language subtitles.

We had seen photos and video of the Millennium City, but nonetheless the scenes we were observing shocked the senses, conflicting with my preconceptions about what Amazonian spaces ought to be. In particular, they contrasted with my recent experience of flying into the southern Amazon just a month earlier, where I had stayed with indigenous Zápara families in active resistance to oil companies in their territories. There, I had slept in a wooden shack, amid fruit trees, with no running water or electricity. How did this place become so dramatically different?

In the morning, Nancy and I were startled awake by a swarm of engines outside our window. A band of women, men, and teenagers worked with weed-whackers, trimming a hundred meters of grass between the school and a chain-linked fence that held out the rainforest. The community was beginning its monthly *minga* or community workdays. We asked for machetes and joined the *minga*. Women passed around bowls of *chicha*, a homemade, yucca-based liquor, and in my enthusiasm to ingratiate myself, I drank too much. It was much stronger than the corn *chicha* I was accustomed to in the Andes. I ended up back in bed by mid-morning.

Later in the day, we introduced ourselves to the community president, Bercelino Noteno. He stood as an imposing, self-assured figure with skeptical, probing eyes. But he warmed up when he understood that we were interested in the history of the community. He later introduced us at the community meeting or “assembly,” where he asked families to receive us cordially and share their stories.

In the afternoon and into the night, women and men congregated on street corners to drink beer and gossip. Like any commodity, beer was much more expensive in Playas than it was in urban centers, due to high transportation costs, but in 2014 beer had largely replaced *chicha*. At that time, cash was pumping through Playas’ economy from sizable, one-time compensation payments from Petroamazonas to individual families, which ranged from several hundred to 50,000 USD, depending on the location of family farms relative to oil extraction activities. Money also trickled in through the occasional sale of cocoa and coffee in Lago Agrio and Shushufindi, in addition to a few jobs with tourism agencies upriver and a handful of laborers and boat operators with Petroamazonas. Ten families had built make-shift, wooden storefronts under their homes to sell school supplies, clothing, beer, rice, vegetables from the Andes, canned foods, and a few other goods.

While we had received a warm welcome during the *minga*, over the following weeks, most people were visibly circumspect to speak with us. We ambled from door-to-door to talk about the impacts of oil and oil-funded development, but many withdrew into their homes as we approached or did not answer their doors when we knocked. We received a few pointed questions about why we were there. *What would we do with the information? How did we stand to profit from their stories?*



*Figure 4. Playas del Cuyabeno, 2015*  
*Source: Angus Lyall*

Our task got remarkably easier after Edwin asked us to fill an English-teacher vacancy in the High School. Parents began approaching us on the street to chat about their children or to request private lessons. Education, it seemed, was of paramount importance. Ultimately, we were able to interview most of the population between the ages of 16 and 80, interviewing on average between four and six people per day over two and a half months. We worked from morning well into the night, assuming that this would be our only opportunity to work in Playas.

Edwin Noteno proved to be a helpful correspondent. As one of few adults to have finished High School, Edwin had been working as a teacher elsewhere in the mid-2000s, when his brothers called him home to help with impending negotiations with oil companies. He remembered that when planning ministry representatives came to Playas, “we began to generate other proposals, saying what we wanted to improve; how they should let us improve.” The arrival of oil companies, he had imagined, was an opening to level demands on a largely-absent state apparatus. “So, as they take oil from here,” remembered Edwin, “we want to see something for us too.”

In 2013, community members relocated into the centralized settlement from farms that were dispersed along 15 kilometers of riverfront. Former migrants also returned to the Amazon from regional cities in order to claim a house in the Millennium City. The parish population quickly doubled in size to 352 residents.

“We don’t live like we used to,” reflected Rita Yumbo, a loquacious woman in her forties who worked occasionally as a tourism guide, “...and that’s why I say that we are modernizing.” Rita viewed material changes in her daily life as generally positive: “For me, it’s good... to have a nice house, like this one, having light; before, we didn’t have light or anything, not even a telephone.” Rita ran a small store out of her house, where she sold canned foods; gasoline and motor lubricants; and, from time-to-time popsicles and bread made by her husband, an older *mestizo* man from the Andes. Rita preferred salaried work and commerce to harvesting food on her farm and she harbored high hopes for the future of her grandkids in the Millennium City school. Women frequently rejoiced that young people no longer had to travel far afield to study and they celebrated the ease of storing bushmeat in refrigerators, replacing the toil of preparing meat for storage in the earth. Pilar Vásquez, a young mother, added, “thanks to the [oil]

company, we have some good houses, basic services; before, this was a mud [pit] in which you could not walk around; the kids went around dirty.”

But experiences of the Millennium City – also referred to in Playas as “the Millennium” or “the City” – were quite varied. Older men often complained about the noise of the generator, as well as boredom and a lack of privacy. A few men in their sixties, like Silverio Grefa and José Chávez, admitted that they spent much of their time on their farms, several kilometers upriver. Bercelino Noteno, who was the only remaining shaman in the community, complained that he was growing weaker and felt more vulnerable to attacks from shamans in neighboring communities because he spent so much of his time in the town center, isolated from the rainforest. Nancy observed similar patterns in her interviews, as women frequently complained of feelings of boredom and isolation. Rocío Chávez was an amiable mother of four who invited us to her farm, where she kept pigs, chickens, and ducks, as well as cocoa and a range of fruit trees. Rocío complained, “I don’t like it [in the Millennium City] because you get up in the morning, you cook the food, [you] have breakfast... From there, [you] sweep the house, arrange everything, and that’s it. You have nothing to do.” Similarly, a grandmother named Bertilda Correa said, “I don’t like the city. If I go to the city, what am I going to do?... I like to be over there [on her farm], walking on the earth, watching my little animals, watching my chickens.” Yet another woman in her early sixties named Fabiola Tangoy explained that she did not have any children in school, and so she only visited the settlement occasionally for assemblies and to visit the medical clinic. Otherwise, her house in the Millennium was empty.

Yet, children and teenagers tended to celebrate the resettlement for a few reasons, including the proximity and quality of the school, social life, modern aesthetics, and technological comforts. They no longer had to travel far each day to get to school or leave their

families behind to go to boarding schools elsewhere. Although the Millennium school lacked teachers – only twelve of eighteen positions were filled in 2014 – and teacher turnover was high, the school was much better staffed and equipped than anything this region had seen. Teenagers also celebrated their new social lives. A wiry 19-year-old, Carlos Plúas, remembered that prior to the city there had been no place or time to play and have fun with friends. On his farm, he explained, “It’s like having four walls... you can’t move anywhere.” By contrast, in the Millennium, children took to the jungle gyms every day after class, and its four soccer fields hosted matches, as people of all ages crowded the sidelines, watching or waiting their turn. They fielded games into the night, under the coliseum lights. Some young residents also valued the infrastructures of the Millennium for the modern aesthetic they projected. In 2014, Edwin’s son, 13-year-old Marco, explained that Playas was “elegant,” as opposed to the “ugly” swampland that had existed there before. And the technologies and layout of the settlement afforded comforts and freed up time for young people. For example, faucets with running water liberated them from the chore of lugging pots of water up from the river; limitless electricity facilitated cooking on electric stoves and studying at night; and some families purchased washing machines and extra refrigerators to store bushmeat. In 2014, an urbanized Playas seemed to be a place of play and leisure.

In some ways, the Millennium was also a place of relative safety. On farms, people are wary of snakes and attacks from jaguars and other animals. The ‘*selva*’ or jungle is also full of angry souls and malevolent spirits. For example, it is said that the ‘black horse’ or devil lives in the jungle, along with ravens and snakes that embody goblins, tigers and alligators with tusks.



Goblin-ravens take girls to raise them and turn them into their wives. But animals and spirits alike are less apt to enter the City, due to its bright lights and loud noises<sup>40</sup>.

Yet, many women also experienced new forms of gender violence in the settlement. “He knows how to leave black and blue, my trunk broken,” one woman told Nancy of her husband. More than forty women related to her similar accounts of regular violence, despite a few failed attempts by women to force the two police officers in Playas to intervene. One police officer explained that men in the community had threatened his colleagues when they intervened, explaining to them, “here, we have our own law.” Prior to the Millennium City, women recall that men often migrated to work in cities and, during their brief visits to Playas, they also exercised violence against women, including forced pregnancies, “so that they cannot leave with another [woman],” as one woman explained.<sup>41</sup> But male attempts to control women have transformed in the Millennium City. As Nancy and her co-authors have detailed in their writings, men in Playas returned to stay; they largely kept compensation payments and occasional work with Petroamazonas for themselves; and they demanded that women fulfill urban notions of domestic work (i.e., cooking and cleaning the home), but without providing the necessary money or food (Carrión 2016; Cielo and Carrión 2018; Cielo and Vega 2015). “...All the men work and are macho,” complained one woman, “they say ‘well, this is my money and I will know what I do with this.’ And there are many women who live so abandoned, the husband does not worry about buying the food...” Consequently, the same woman added, “I sometimes say to my husband ‘I prefer a thousand times to work on the farm, both of us ... the farm itself provides

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<sup>40</sup> Many young men had used their compensation funds to buy large sound systems and tended to position speakers in their windows, facing outwards to announce their purchasing power. On most mornings, Nancy and I jumped out of bed to the screech of electronic music next door. The chorus seemed to speak ironically to our surprise at such urban trappings in the Amazon: “Johnny, *¡la gente está muy loca!*” [Johnny, the people are very crazy!].

<sup>41</sup> Without the backing of patriarchal institutions to sustain their control of women, Fanon wrote in *A Dying Colonialism* (1959), colonized men often resorted to violence.

enough to survive.”” Monetarized, urban life became the context of new forms of gender domination – the reduction of the productive autonomy of women and their freedom of movement,<sup>42</sup> as well as the renewal of physical violence.

Nancy and I tried to talk about oil in our interviews, but oil was not a topic of everyday discussion. The oil company drilled far upriver. Any communications with Petroamazonas were limited to demands for maintenance in the Millennium or jobs. On July 3, 2014, a significant oil spill briefly forced the issue of oil into everyday conversation. On that morning, I stepped outside and the rainforest air smelled like diesel. As the mists rose off of the river, glossy patches of black-brown sludge appeared on the surface, floating downriver and washing up on the opposite shoreline. That afternoon, Petroamazonas officials arrived by motorboat to explain that 2,000 barrels had spilled from an old pipeline, damaged in a landslide. The mayor and prefect flew in by helicopter. Community members, many of whom had worked for oil companies, complained that the dimensions of the spill were closer to 20,000 barrels. Nonetheless, they expressed gratitude to company and government officials for taking the time to inform them about what was going on, which previous governments had not done. And they expressed eagerness to develop a clean-up plan that might include jobs for Playas’ residents. Over the following days, life seemed to return to normal, as families took to their canoes out to fish amid oil slick.

That moment marked the close of my initial stay in Playas. I was still perplexed by the seemingly voluntary occupation of this urban neighborhood by subsistence farmers, who reported mixed reviews of their experiences. I was also unsettled by the lack of politicization we witnessed in relation to oil and oil contamination. While I had long been exposed to popular

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<sup>42</sup> Feminist Silvia Federici (2010) refers to this characteristic of modern patriarchy, which excluded women from wages, as the “socio-salary patriarchy” (148-152) (also, see Mies 1986).

images and imaginaries of indigenous resistance to oil, the lack of active resistance we found in Playas further challenged what I had thought I understood about the lives and aspirations of indigenous peoples in the Amazon. If I were to get any closer to an understanding of this place, I would have to return.

*Ruins and Persistence: Shared Struggles to Sustain Urban Life*

A year later, in 2015, I made the journey to Playas once more, this time from the United States. I had just finished my first year as a graduate student. During my absence, international oil prices had collapsed. In Playas, jobs with Petroamazonas had all but disappeared and most families were fully dependent once more on fishing and hunting. They tried to travel more frequently to their farms to clean and harvest yucca, banana, and other fruits for consumption, but money for gasoline – and gasoline itself – had grown scarce, complicating travel. The rainforest was gradually overtaking many farms. Petroamazonas was threatening to pass the maintenance of public services on to the municipal government, deepening concerns that they would soon be forced pay taxes to sustain their lights, electric stoves, refrigerators, and running water. “City living,” Bertilda Correa told me, “[is] for those who have money... We don’t have money now. [If] we have to pay that electricity [and] water, where are we going to get money?” During local elections of 2014, a total of seventy-two adults ran for office, jockeying for just five paid positions in the parish government.

In addition, infrastructural failures and design problems had emerged. The Millennium had been built too close to the river and flooded every July. The retaining wall had already sunk into the river bank twice, requiring major re-constructions. As the wall began to sink again, Petroamazonas officials had grown unresponsive. Petroamazonas had also removed the

generator, replacing it with an older model that overheated frequently, particularly during the dry season, giving way to power outages. The water pumps had broken several times. Plastic sewer pipes under the streets occasionally collapsed, spewing sewage onto the surface. Miscellaneous household appliances and structures had begun to break – e.g., electric stoves, faucets, sliding windows, door hinges, and computer drives. As floors began to warp and manifest lumps, some residents attributed this to the fact that houses were still settling into the sandy fill on which the settlement was hastily set. Others speculated that these deformations were the effects of cleaning supplies they had begun to use on the synthetic floors. Some of the metal staircases leading up to front doors were also rusting out because the construction firm had not invested in galvanized metal, as residents had originally demanded. And many residents complained that the 3-bedroom, cement homes were hotter, smaller, and higher off the ground than what people were used to on their farms. Finally, the school was still facing difficulties retaining teachers.



*Figure 5. Playas del Cuyabeno During Annual Floods, 2017*  
*Source: Marcelo Ramirez*

Economic concerns and design problems in Playas reflected similar experiences in two other Millennium Cities that I visited that year, one in the Amazon called Pañacocha and another on the coast called Tablada de Sanchez. During my travels, I read about the track records of government and multilateral resettlement programs across the globe. In a book entitled

*Displaced: The Human Cost of Development and Resettlement*, I read that impoverishment was “the dominant outcome” of resettlement in the global South (Bennett and McDowell 2012, 13; also, see Cernea 1997; Vandergeest et al. 2010). Sure enough, it seemed that Playas would inevitably devolve into a failed scheme, like the modern town of Fordlandia that Henry Ford had built and then abandoned in the Brazilian Amazon (see Grandin 2009).

In 2015 and 2016, a host of researchers took up the Millennium Cities as case studies of the contradiction of urbanization in the Amazon – i.e., as “emblematic” (Lang 2017, 91) or “iconic spatial symbols” (Wilson and Bayón 2018, 234) of oil-driven development on a “microscale” (Valladares and Boelens 2017, 1023). Some documented in great detail incomplete or broken infrastructures and overgrown streets (Espinosa Andrade 2017; Lang 2017; Wilson and Bayón 2018). They highlighted ruin and poor planning (Arsel et al. 2019, 219; Aulestia et al. 2016, 216; Cielo et al. 2016, 313; Goldaráz 2017; Cielo et al. 2018; Moser and Shebell 2019, 9; Ospina 2016; Valladares and Boelens 2017). Characterizations seemed to reflect what philosopher Michel Foucault (1973[1966]; 1986) referred to as a “heterotopia,” a contained space (e.g., prisons, ships, fairs) designed to mirror the outside, but that inevitably fails to do so. A consensus emerged among critics that Millennium Cities were anything but the modern petro-miracles Correa had described.

In turn, publications in newspapers, articles, and books denounced these projects for having dispossessed unwilling or unwitting communities of their material and cultural resources. Miriam Lang (2017, 97), member of the international “Permanent Working Group on Alternatives to Development,” concluded that Millennium Cities were imposed on residents against their wills. Public intellectual Pablo Ospina (2015) argued in the popular leftist platform *Linea de Fuego* [Line of Fire] that Millennium Cities represented a “violent” form of

modernization, imposed “from above” (also, see Walsh 2014). Pablo Dávalos (2014), an economist and adviser to the national indigenous movement, characterized them as spaces of control and discipline akin to “concentration camps” (351). José Miguel Goldaráz, a well-known leftist missionary, made a call to action in his blog: “Citizens, this is a people for whom we have to fight for their freedom to be respected!” (42). The president of the Front for the Defense of the Amazon, Wilmer Meneses, communicated similar sentiments to me in a 2014 interview: “For the native or settled populations in these zones, development is not about the availability of modern infrastructure, but rather the development of agriculture; the sustainability of their environment, of their natural space, of their livelihoods, of all that has to do with their cosmovision.” Graduate student researchers described these projects in similar terms, as having been “imposed” by planners (e.g., Lamina Luguana 2017, vii). Critics implicitly or explicitly characterized a profound contradiction between urban and indigenous spaces. The broad consensus among external critics was that the Millennium Cities were designed to “empty territory” (Lagos 2017, 99) of cultural content or, in other words, “eliminate ways of life outside capitalist production relations” (Bento et al 2018, 8) to render indigenous peoples and territories governable by the state.

These commentators neglected to mention that residents of Millennium Cities in Playas and Pañacocha had requested resettlement and were under no obligation to remain. A few critics accounted for residents’ demands by proposing that Correa had not imposed resettlement *per se*, but he had imposed unnatural desires for urban space (e.g., Espinosa Andrade 2017, 322).

Anthropologists associated with FLACSO, with whom I had begun my research, denounced the “disciplining of ethnic subjectivities” by urban development discourses that erased “the most profound ontological differences” (Vallejo, Duhalde, and Valdivieso 2019, 64). In other words,

wrote other FLACSO researchers, residents had been “seduced” (Cielo et al. 2016, 284). Researchers at the Wageningen University of Holland wrote that indigenous peoples had been interpellated by state discourse and transformed into “obedient citizens” (Valladares and Boelens 2017, 1018). Similarly, Wilson and Bayón (2018), members of David Harvey’s research team, argued that Millennium Cities were ideological spaces that helped residents to repress their dispossession. They added that resettlements would soon be abandoned, as residents were disabused of their “fantasy” (239). Academics and popular media took Wilson and Bayón’s account at face value, writing that Playas had, in fact, been “largely abandoned” (Hollender 2018, 135; also, see *Ciudades del Milenio: Oro negro por ‘baratijas’* 2017).

However, when I returned to Playas for a third time in the summer of 2016, it was not abandoned. Residents were busy building half a dozen new houses. They were splicing electrical wires overhead to link the new houses into the grid. Reports that Playas’ residents had abandoned the community proved quite surprising to residents themselves – to say the least, as they had been working hard to repair or sustain decaying infrastructures, respond to planning failures, and expand the settlement. Residents had dug canals to drain streets; jerry-rigged sewage pumps; and wrapped blown fuses in foil or cigarette papers to complete blown circuits. They used gasoline and oil to flush rust off of nuts and bolts, as they mixed and matched engine parts to keep well water pumping. They had collected compost from the sewer system to build up soil around homes. The local government and a pair of Petroamazonas boat operators from Playas were skimming gasoline from their allotted supplies and circulating it through the community in a black market of money, favors, bush meat, and goodwill. The population had also organized to lobby Petroamazonas for material support to sustain or replace the generator. Residents had created three new tourism associations, building new cabins for tourism upriver on

the Cuyabeno, and they were lobbying the Ministry of Environment for operating permits to fill these cabins with paying tourists. The community was buzzing with activity – not the same leisure-based activity we had witnessed before the oil price collapse, but rather activity focused narrowly on sustaining the City. Residents were not living up to the expectations of critics.

During a subsequent visit, I came across two young residents in their early twenties, Roney Noteno and Carlos Plúas, talking about their frustrations with critics. They had seen representations of Playas on TV – in particular, a segment on Youtube produced by a primetime magazine called *Visión 360*. They complained that the reporter and camera crew had visited Playas on a weekend, when most families were on their farms. They had wandered quiet streets, filming vacant houses and signs of decay, concluding that the settlement was a government failure. Roney said this narrative mischaracterized his community's achievement. He was also mad about a book he had found in his dad's house entitled *La selva de los elefantes blancos: Megaproyectos y extractivismos en la Amazonia ecuatoriana* [The Jungle of White Elephants: Megaprojects and Extractivisms in the Ecuadorian Amazon] by Japhy Wilson and Manuel Bayón (2017)<sup>43</sup>. In effect, the book featured a chapter on Playas that ridiculed the Millennium City as a cheap imitation of modernity. Roney later expounded on his frustrations with journalists and academics:

*I think that those people wrote that because they had a school and a High School near their houses; they didn't have to go far, be far from their family, alone... Our grandparents, when they built the first school [in the 1960s] already thought that our relationship with the jungle needed to change, that we needed to become professionals, go out, have a job...*

Today, Roney is proud of the Millennium; his only regret is that it came too late for him to study there.

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<sup>43</sup> The authors of this book had asked me to give a copy to Roney's father, Bercelino Noteno, the year before because it featured a chapter on Playas.



Certainly, there was more to the story of Playas than what critics offered. This was not the archetypal story of state hubris and imposition on a hapless, traditional community. There was more work to be done to understand the social-historical significance of the Millennium.

### *Thinking Beyond Resistance and Ambivalence*

The vast majority of literature on Playas has been written with political purpose and commitment to indigenous territorial rights and environmental justice. Perhaps characterizations of Playas have ‘strategically’ lacked nuance in the interest of political expedience in a broader context of indigenous dispossession and environmental degradation. In the most detailed account of any Millennium City to-date, anthropologist Michael Cepek (2018) takes a different tack. He describes the experiences of indigenous Cofán residents of a Millennium City upriver from Playas in a book-length account that portrays the Cofán of Dureno both as victims of territorial encroachment and oil contamination and as perseverant, joyful survivors, who do not always oppose the oil industry or the development it offers. In a sense, his nuanced ethnography seems more genuine than other writings about Millennium Cities. By highlighting the diversity of experiences in Dureno, Cepek humanizes the subjects of his study. Cepek concludes that residents of Dureno enjoy certain material benefits in the Millennium City, but that they are profoundly ambivalent<sup>44</sup> about their conditions. He does not mean to suggest the Cofán are

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<sup>44</sup> Highlighting this ambivalence, Cepek (2018) cites the words of one elder: “I really wanted to prohibit the compañía from our land. My heart still wants that, but we decided to let the compañía in” (216). *Life in Oil* suggests that readers primed for Manichean representations of extractivism and indigenous resistance have to learn to “live with ambivalence,” to paraphrase Zygmunt Bauman (1993). Elsewhere, anthropologists have called for embracing ambivalence (Jovanović 2016; Kierans and Bell 2017) by documenting moral complexities and nuances of social experience, in contrast to explicitly political ethnographic work that, according to Kierans and Bell, merely affirms an author’s convictions. Kierans and Bell criticize the “moral turn” of the last three decades, as manifested in public, feminist, and other “militant” (Scheper-Hughes 1995) approaches. These authors suggest that moral research is less rigorous, anchored to “fixed positions” and incapable of accepting that “things are not readily clear” (37). Here, by

docile – after all, few other communities in Ecuador have received any compensation whatsoever from oil companies or the state; rather, he highlights mixed feelings about the opportunities and losses that characterize ‘life in oil’.

I am sympathetic to such fine-grained, empirical research that captures complexity; however, I am not convinced that complexity leads to ‘ambivalence.’ Ambivalence is the coexistence of contradictory emotions or attitudes towards an object or condition. It is a state in which individuals harbor disparate desires that resolve into indecision or resignation, often manifesting as inaction (Lyll 2019). In Playas, residents clearly harbor distinct perspectives on the settlement, but ‘ambivalence’ or resignation does not seem to account for their remarkable persistence. In sites of resource extraction like Playas, processes of rapid investment and divestment have often produced stark landscapes of disrepair and ruin<sup>45</sup> (what dependency theorists referred to as “ultra-underdevelopment” (Frank 1969)), but in Playas, even as material challenges pile up and adults complain and express nostalgia, they remain nonetheless. Despite the myriad problems residents have confronted, they have not abandoned this space for their farms. They are engaged in creative struggles and political negotiations to respond to design failures, filling-in the gaps of broken machines and faulty policies. They have established forms of collective work to sustain infrastructures – what urban sociologist AbdouMaliq Simone (2004) calls “people-as-infrastructure” – in the absence of planning and budgeting. “This is a foundation that they have given us,” says Edwin Noteno, striking an optimistic note in the face of tremendous challenges, “We have to continue working so that this goes improving bit by bit.”

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contrast, I argue that complexity does not necessarily lead to ambivalence, if we examine the colonial structure of aspirations in this context.

<sup>45</sup> The ruination of infrastructure underscores the paradox of infrastructure’s dual temporality: its promise to materialize a different future and its inevitable decay and conversion into a material representation of decay or of the past (Howe et al. 2016). Ethnographic attention to ruination in recent years has explored the physical processes of entropy through which new social realities come into existence (Dawdy et al 2010; Gordillo 2014; Stoler 2008).

Residents like Edwin express pride about the city they wrangled from the government. But what nurtures this pride, despite their own complaints of urban life?

In Playas as in Dureno, we see at once pride and regret, a sense of progress and loss; however, these contradictions do not resolve into resignation or acceptance. More often, they translate into the experience of an unresolved tension between individual inclinations and social necessity. That is, there is often a gap in human experience between subjective desires and socially-structured aspirations. In this gap, we might see people in the northern Amazon who resent oil companies and criticize oil-funded development, but who, at the same time, encourage oil production and struggle to bring about that development. Regardless of personal desires, social expectation – i.e., the ‘social gaze’ – can powerfully shape that which people are *supposed to* aspire towards, including in their negotiations with oil companies. It is towards the origins and legacies of a dominant, white gaze in the northern Amazon that I turn my critical attention in the following chapters.

As a final note, Cepek (2018) argues that the Cofán were essentially moved to accept the Millennium City by the possibility of “wealth,” “better livelihoods,” and “dreams of advancement” (241). These characterizations are haunted by notions of economic-maximizing individuals, driven in the last instance by material concerns or an innate “will to improve” (Li 2007). Material *ends* are always a *means* for producing or reshaping social relations. In order to understand the impetus of material pursuits, we must ask about how they shift human relations. Conversely, we must also ask about human relationships in terms of pursuits that seem to make no material sense. While some Playas residents continue to migrate to cities despite the fact that, as regional studies have shown, urban migrants from the northern Amazon face significant economic hardships (Davis et al. 2017, 1816), this confounding situation cannot be explained in

terms of material interests. Perhaps it confirms Žižek's (1994) notion of ideology – i.e., *they know that what they do contradicts their class interests, but they do it anyway?* As I argue over the next three chapters, urban aspirations, better yet, are structured by historical relationships of ethnic subordination that have defined strategies for securing recognition and evading subordination.

### CHAPTER 3. THE RUBBER BOOM: VIOLENCE AND DECEIT IN THE AMAZON

*Mundupuma... is the originating and apocalyptic Great Jaguar of much Amazonian mythology. Since the civilizing heroes took his power... he lives confined underground and his efforts make the earth shake... Some say that each year, around Easter, Mundupuma can be heard... Others say that for a long time now, since many whites arrived in the jungle, he is heard no more.*  
– anthropologist Alessandra Foletti-Castegnaro, *Oral Tradition of the Amazonian Kichwas of Aguarico and San Miguel* (1985, 88)

#### *Introduction*

In the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, merchants terrorized and deceived indigenous families in the northern Amazon in their diverse strategies to generate a labor supply for finding and tapping rubber trees. In this region, enduring perceptions of ‘white’ market actors as potentially violent and essentially deceptive still shape strategies to negotiate with ‘white’ market actors today. In this chapter, I begin to explore in concrete terms the relationships between memories of ethnic subordination in distinct moments and why Playas’ leadership ultimately demanded a Millennium City of the state oil company.<sup>46</sup> In the first two sections of this chapter, I document memories of the renewal of ethnic subordination during the rubber boom and its immediate aftermath. In the second two sections, I discuss the ways in which perceptions of oil companies have been filtered through those memories.<sup>47</sup> I place in conversation historical

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<sup>46</sup> As Danish anthropologist Søren Hvalkof (2000) writes, “...it seems to be forgotten that a regime of terror with the character of a holocaust was taking place all over the Upper Amazon of Ecuador and Peru only two generations ago” (83).

<sup>47</sup> Psychoanalyst Carl Jung (1959) might define such a filter as a “shadow,” the unconscious that the subject projects onto reality to interpret it. Frantz Fanon (2008[1952]) explicitly rejected psychoanalysis with the argument that, insofar as the subject is the internalization of its social conditions, colonization prevented any meaningful identification with the self by reducing identities to mere stereotypes.

archives, secondary literature, and the memories of Playas' residents to show how violence and deceit from a previous era influence their relations with the state oil company. Certainly, the lives of the rubber workers depicted in this chapter were much richer and more complex than this labor history conveys. For example, older residents of Playas share nostalgic memories, humorous anecdotes, and prideful stories of their parents and grandparents, many of whom were shamans.<sup>48</sup> However, I narrow my focus on key historical relationships that shaped demands for the Millennium City. Similarly, rubber merchants and other market actors were also diverse. Some were more violent and deceptive than others; they came from the Andes and the coast, as well as Europe and North America. However, I am interested in the social life of binaries that were renewed during this period – i.e., the forces that shaped the *experience* of a world divided in two, materially and symbolically, between 'white' and non-white.

### *The Renewal of Ethnic Hierarchies During the Rubber Boom*

In this section, I highlight the violent and deceptive measures of white merchants to secure workers during the rubber boom. In effect, merchants offered Kichwa families access to Western goods and to cultural identities as so-called 'civilized Indians,' as opposed to other 'savage' indigenous groups, but the violence and deception exercised against the Kichwa workers renewed ethnic hierarchies in everyday experience.

When Spanish *conquistadores* entered the northern Amazon through the Napo River in the early 16<sup>th</sup> century, colonial authorities granted them power over economic-administrative

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<sup>48</sup> This generation of rubber workers included dozens of renowned river and jungle shamans, whose experiences, exploits, and achievements are the subject of countless anecdotes among Playas residents today. "Pure shamans," remembers Andrea Jipa, as she lists their names, "Agustín Papa, Fidel Andi, Eloy Siquihua, Jorge and Carlos Guatatoaca..." Bercelino Noteno's paternal grandparents wielded knowledge of the forests and his maternal grandparents concentrated on river knowledge. "Knowledge" refers literally to knowing about river creatures or anticipating when the river is going to shift its course, for example; it refers to physical abilities, such as superhuman swimming; and, importantly, it also refers to capacities to relate to spirits and direct them for good or evil.

territorial units called “*encomiendas*” near the Napo headwaters and dominion over the lives and labor of indigenous populations (Muratorio 1991, Vickers 1989). Early colonizers and missionaries insisted on preserving a clear distinction between themselves and native Amazonians, as a fixed, biological, or racialized difference; however, they found it useful to define a fluid hierarchy among native ethno-linguistic groups<sup>49</sup>. They defined distinctions between ‘civilized’ or ‘semi-civilized’ indigenous peoples, on the one hand, and the ‘savage,’ ‘*infiel*’ (‘faithless’), on the other hand (Goldaráz 2004, 171), projecting this hierarchy into material relations through uneven distributions of violence and of symbolic forms of distinction, such as Western commodities and proximity to Western actors (i.e., spatial proximity or non-nomadic land occupation and social proximity, including communication, ritual, work, and trade). Labor was seen as a key civilizing practice that might enable some to approximate civilization, as consecrated through the consumption of Western goods, particularly cotton clothing.

In the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, Jesuit and Franciscan missionaries established their territorial presence by creating ‘reductions’ or settlements of indigenous groups to facilitate acculturation and Christian conversion (Muratorio 1982, 43-69). Although reductions witnessed frequent uprisings, as residents suffered epidemics and physical abuse<sup>50</sup>; nonetheless, missionaries persisted and reductions proliferated up and down the Napo and Aguarico rivers. A 1740 map indicates that one was located precisely where the Millennium City in Playas is today, at the confluence of the Aguarico and Cuyabeno rivers (Cabodevilla 1997, 52), though, at that

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<sup>49</sup> Early Spanish colonizers had distinguished the Christianized, Kichwa-speaking highland indigenous peoples, who were relatively well-integrated into labor relations, from Amazonian indigenous peoples, who were not yet “available” as potential laborers (Muratorio 1991, 108).

<sup>50</sup> According to Steward (1963, 512), residents also resented living among distinct indigenous groups with different customs and languages.

time, Aguarico was occupied by ancestors of Siona and Secoya nationalities (Cabodevilla 1989, 14). In reductions, missionaries promoted the Kichwa language – a derivative of Inkan Quechua used among indigenous groups in Ecuador for trade – to facilitate communication and Christian conversion. By the time the government expelled the Jesuits in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, the Kichwas of the northern Amazon had consolidated as a distinct ethno-linguistic group (Goldáraz 2004, 176; Oberem 1980, 314; Whitten and Whitten 1988, 14).

Ecuador became an independent republic in 1830, but the Amazon or *el Oriente* (“the East”) was not incorporated as a province until 1879 and many in the Andes still conceived of it as a frontier, marginal to national imaginaries and law (Esvertit Cobes 2008). The Jesuits returned to the Upper Napo in the late 1860s to set up reductions once more. They anticipated a population of 200,000 indigenous people; however, measles, smallpox, yellow fever, and other epidemics had ravaged the region, leaving a population of only about 15,000 (Gómez Díez 2002). The Jesuits tried to force families into reductions and place their children in schools, but were met with fear, rebellion, and flight, as well as new hostilities from merchants who depended on the availability of indigenous labor.

In the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, fortune hunters from the Andes and coast, as well as Western Europe and North America, pursued indigenous labor and forest knowledge during a minor boom in quinine extraction, followed by a dramatic rubber boom. Competition over indigenous labor was intense among Jesuits, state authorities, and quinine and rubber merchants or *caucheros* (‘rubber men’). Archives in the Napo Government contain numerous reports of rubber merchants who captured ‘too many’ laborers, especially Peruvian or Colombian merchants, who were accused of ‘stealing’ laborers from Ecuador. Muratorio (1991, 107) observes that the scarcity of potential laborers was compounded by a lack of interest among some ethnic groups



and fear among others of the diseased and violent ‘*blanco-cuna*’ (a Spanish-Kichwa term for ‘white people’). This scarcity presented a dilemma to merchants, who engaged in a variety of tactics to capture and discipline indigenous workers, from contract labor to enslavement.

In the 1980s and 1990s, a number of historians and anthropologists examined the forces of coercion and consent<sup>51</sup> that pursued indigenous labor during the rubber boom, documenting how merchants enslaved some (Taussig 1984; 1987) and lured others into indebted servitude (Foletti-Castegnaro 1985; MacDonald 1984; Muratorio 1991; Tamaríz and Villaverde 1997; Barral 1978; Hudelson 1981; Oberem 1971; Reeve 1988).<sup>52</sup> Rather than distinguish between enslavement and debt relations, many historians have characterized rubber collection as a “continuum of coercion and debt” (Wasserstrom 2014, 528) or a “grey area between peonage and slavery” (Ford 2017, 67).<sup>53</sup> Even those working under contract were subject to actual violence: beatings, rape, and murder, and so fine-grained accounts frequently characterize the “*gente de patrón*” [people of the *patrón*] (Cabodevilla 1989, 17)<sup>54</sup> or indebted workers as “semi-enslaved” (Goldáráz 2004, 176), unable to escape either white violence or hereditary debts.

That said, while ecological zones in southern Colombia enabled plantation-style<sup>55</sup> production associated with chattel slavery, merchants in Ecuador depended on groups of 20 to

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<sup>51</sup> The legitimacy of any exchange, according to contract theory, is founded on some notion of consent between the parties involved, but such liberal notions of contracts fail to consider social-historical inequalities and forms of institutional or inter-personal coercion that mediate or restrict consent (e.g., Brown 1995). For many critical theorists, “consent” is not a useful category for understanding social orders founded on violence or the threat of violence (Sayer 1994; Scott 2008) or where “civil society” – that imaginary space of dialogue and consent – is either exclusive or illusory (Fraser 1990; Hardt 1994; Wilderson 2003).

<sup>52</sup> Interest in labor histories in this region has reemerged in recent years among researchers and students associated with FLACSO-Ecuador (Calderón 2018; Tamaríz 2017; Wasserstrom and Bustamante 2015; Wasserstrom 2014; 2017).

<sup>53</sup> For similar accounts in Peru, see Brown and Fernandez (1992) or Varese (2004[1968]).

<sup>54</sup> Similarly, in his 1920s travel diary, Emilio Giannotti (1997) writes that “from Napo to Marañon, there is not a single free family” (121).

100 indigenous workers to search for rubber trees in dense forests (Wasserstrom 2014) and, consequently, often preferred contract laborers. In particular, they preferred Kichwas, Zaparo, Cofán, Secoya, and Siona, many of whom had experience working for missionaries and quinine traders. Argentinian anthropologist Blanca Muratorio (1991) and U.S. anthropologist Robert Wasserstrom (2014; 2017; also, see Wasserstrom and Bustamante 2015) have argued that the Kichwa of the Upper Napo River were not forced to work during the rubber boom; rather, they had long been accustomed to working for Western commodities with the Jesuits and quinine merchants. Muratorio (1991) explains that some Western tools increased efficiency in subsistence production, but salt, textiles, and other purely symbolic goods<sup>56</sup> had long been “socially indispensable for Christianized Indians” (107). The Kichwa working in the rubber boom had already incorporated commodities into ritualized forms of reciprocity and other practices essential to the reproduction of their social fabric, such as providing clothing for one’s children or gifts to parents-in-law (MacDonald 1984).<sup>57</sup> During the rubber boom, commercial houses or “*aviadores*” (many in Iquitos, Peru) provided the cotton clothing, salt, liquor, cookware, machetes, fishing hooks, and other Western commodities that merchants could pay these families, generally in advance, to secure their labor<sup>58</sup>.

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<sup>55</sup> The *jebe* rubber of southern Colombia, used for making high-quality rubber for tires, could be produced on plantations (Stanfield 1998).

<sup>56</sup> As anthropologist Peter Stallybrass (1998) observes, the fetishization of objects is a very human practice – objects, especially those that we wear, are meaningful. But the pursuit of Western commodities among workers in the Amazon resulted from a violent accumulation by white society of the symbolic authority to define value (rather than the accumulation of means of production, as Marx (2019[1867]) details in the final chapters of the first volume of *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*).

<sup>57</sup> While Karl Marx (1992[1867]) famously detailed how an incipient capitalist class in an industrializing England used the state apparatus to establish legal and material conditions in which the poor were left with no legal alternative and with “nothing to sell except their own skins” (837), the historical development of capitalism in the northern Amazon was different.

<sup>58</sup> A worker could request more goods from the *patrón* during the course of a contract (often between one and three years), effectively increasing debt obligations and extending contracts. Due to the scarcity of workers, competing

Kichwa rubber workers were born into a symbolic world in which dominant norms and practices for attaining personhood and for fulfilling social obligations involved the acquisition and circulation of Western goods<sup>59</sup>, but rubber merchants actively renewed the importance of labor and access to Western goods through brutal violence. Merchants captured and sold indigenous families considered as ‘savage’ into slavery with “impunity” (Muratorio 1991, 107-108), whereas ‘civilized Indians’ worked under the legal – albeit abused – system of debt peonage. The very limited historiography on this so-called ‘other slavery’ of the greater Amazon basin details experiences of just a handful of ethnic groups (Ford, 2017, Reséndez 2016; Wasserstrom 2014, 530), particularly those of the Wuitotos of southern Colombia (Borroughs 2010; Casement 1911; Hardenburg et al. 1913; Maccamond 1912, Thomson 1914). U.S. anthropologist Michael Taussig (1984; 1987) explored how rubber barons used terror, torture, and killings to discipline Wuitotos into submitting to work on rubber plantations.<sup>60</sup> In Ecuador, the groups that faced enslavement, like the Wuitotos, had had limited contact with Westerners and were resistant to working for them. The Waorani, Aushir’i, Tetete, the so-called “jívaros” or Shuar and Achuar, and other “unacculturated Indians” (Muratorio 1991, 107) were subjected to raids, capture, and enslavement (Hudelson 1987, 14; Wasserstrom 2014). The further indigenous groups were located from administrative centers the more exposed they were to enslavement.

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merchants sometimes bought the laborers’ debts or “seduced” workers already under contract by advancing them goods (MacDonald 1984). After the Special Law of the Oriente of 1900 prohibited any form of forced labor, merchants were obligated to pay wages, in addition to compensation for rubber collected; however, these payments were often, in practice, simply discounted from workers’ debts (Muratorio 1991, 109).

<sup>59</sup> “From the moment the [colonized] accepts the split imposed by the Europeans,” wrote Frantz Fanon (2008[1952]), “there is no longer any respite; and ‘from that moment on, isn’t it understandable that he will try to elevate himself to the white man’s level? To elevate himself into the range of colors to which he has attributed a kind of hierarchy?’” (63).

<sup>60</sup> There are also documented cases of rubber boom slavery in the Madre de Dios of Peru and parts of Bolivia (Fifer 1970; Wasserstrom 2014).

Accounts exist of merchants going out along tributaries during the height of the rubber boom to hunt for indigenous families (Trujillo 2001). That said, some raids had government authorization, as ‘retaliation’ against indigenous groups that had entered into conflict with merchants or officials. In the case of the indigenous Záparo, we see a group that was divided between those who worked for merchants and wore Western clothing and those who did not and were subjected to enslavement (ibid., 108; also, see Reeve 1985; Wasserstrom et al 2011). In such a context, the Kichwa were compelled to defend their favored position in the binary of ‘civilized’ and ‘savage’ or ‘*auca*,’ the Kichwa word for savage.<sup>61</sup> By the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, the Capuchin missionaries arrived into the northern Amazon in a social context defined by a categorization of more-to-less civilized groups (Cabodevilla 1989, 20-27; Iriarte de Aspurz 1980 33-5; 93): “yumbos” (Kichwas); “cushmas” (Siona, Secoya, Cofán); and “aucas”<sup>62</sup> (Waorani, Tetetes). Even the “yumbos” and “cushmas” of that time frequently referred to the Waorani as “savage” (Cabodevilla 1997, 137) or “animal”<sup>63</sup> (ibid. 1989, 73; also, see Muratorio 1991, 194) to mark social distances.<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> As missionaries continued to introduce devastating epidemics and *caucheros* captured indigenous families, some *aucas* grew defensive and developed a reputation for being violent (Wasserstrom 2016). Rubber merchants used the threat of attacks from Waorani to keep Kichwas under their control and used ‘less civilized’ shamans to scare and capture runaway Kichwas (Muratorio 1991, 48).

<sup>62</sup> A book entitled *The Naked Aucas* (1957) details the travels of a Swedish man who set out in 1947 to find Waorani. He writes that the Waorani were, by that time, widely-known to be “primitive and warlike” (9).

<sup>63</sup> In my fieldwork, I continue heard people in Playas compare Záparo and Waorani to animals. Rocío Chávez, for example, says that her great-grandmother was either Záparo or Waorani. She did not like living among “the civilized,” says Rocío, but she was captured by her great-grandfather, a mestizo merchant. Eventually, her great-grandmother escaped back into the jungle “like an animal,” she says. For a study on the tense relations between lowland Kichwa and Waorani, see Reeve and High (2012).

<sup>64</sup> Cabodevilla (1997) wrote, “the category of ‘savage’ is not applied only by whites, immediately each contacted indigenous group tries to mark distances with neighbors, the very Sionas rush to distance themselves from family members of such a poor image” (137, *translation mine*). In a 1954 travel diary, another Capuchin missionary writes of the *aucas* as “*savage Indians who live in the most primitive state and use the expressions of their neighbors from the other side of the river, like animals*” (Cabodevilla 1989, 73, *translation mine*). He adds, “*they do not have the*

In the following section, I turn to the specific experiences of Playas' ancestors, before I examine how memories of white violence and deceit during the rubber boom have shaped negotiations with Petroamazonas. In the memories documented in the next section, we can appreciate that the distinction between 'civilized' and 'uncivilized' was not experienced as a mere discursive abstraction. It impacted people's most intimate relationships and obligations towards one another and towards their own bodies.

### *Playas' Ancestors Under Debt Peonage*

My archival research suggests that Playas' ancestors – approximately 40 families – left their homes on the Upper Napo and travelled downriver with a rubber merchant by the name of Daniel Peñafiel in 1892.<sup>65</sup> What happened to these 40 families following the most intense decades of rubber bonanza has not been documented previously.<sup>66</sup> In the 1950s, a series of merchants relied their labor to pan for gold, search for rubber trees, and form agricultural estates and cattle farms. Only in the 1960s did these families settle independently at the contemporary site of Playas del Cuyabeno on the Aguarico River. Their experiences differ considerably from those of Kichwa who populated the Napo River to the south, where missionaries concentrated efforts to free indigenous peoples from debt (e.g., Cabodevilla 1998; González and Ortiz de

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*least contact with civilization and are so savage that they kill without compassion any stranger that enters into their domains"* (ibid., translation mine).

<sup>65</sup> Many young people in Playas often locate their family origins on the San Miguel River, where their parents were born. Their parents tend to recall that prior to living on the San Miguel, their families had lived and worked for rubber merchants along the Aguarico and Napo Rivers. Some locate their family roots in Peru. When I told Edwin Noteno that I had archival documents locating his grandparents in the Upper Napo, he was incredulous. Edwin Noteno and some of his brothers and cousins have been to Peru, where they encountered people named Noteno, Machoa, and Coquinche – names that are uncommon on the Ecuadorian side of the Napo today. But Edwin also remembered talking to a missionary who also said the Notenos were from the Upper Napo.

<sup>66</sup> These exceptions include a brief oral history (Foletti-Castegnaro 1985), a chapter from a volume on the Carmelite missionaries (Luis Luis 1994), and scattered references in works about the Napo River (Cabodevilla 1989; Muratorio 1991; Santos Macanilla 2009).

Villalba 1985; Hudelson 1987; Knipper 1999; Milagros 2006; Muratorio 1991; Ortiz de Villalba 1990; Uzendoski 2005).

When the Jesuits returned to the Amazon in 1869, they expelled some merchants and attempted to force indigenous populations into reductions, generating tensions that culminated in a merchant-supported indigenous uprising in Loreto in 1892, documented in a series of communiqués in the Ministry of the Interior archives (Provincial Government of Archidona 1893)<sup>67</sup>. The Kichwa beat and nearly drowned Jesuit priests and fled downriver with Daniel Peñafiel before soldiers arrived. In a published testimony of Bercelino Noteno's great uncle (Foletti-Castegnaro 1985), Bartolo Noteno states that he was three or four years old when families from his village on the Upper Napo left with Peñafiel, who reportedly told them, ““We are going down[river], men, to work looking for rubber, washing gold, for one year, maximum two years, from there you will return to your land, I myself will probably return you here” (165). These families had recently suffered a pair of epidemics and Peñafiel insisted, ““There's no reason for you to live poor, sick; the plague is going to do away with all of you.”” (ibid., 165).<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> Archival correspondences suggest that a large portion of the indigenous population left Loreto downriver to collect rubber in Tiputini – large enough to spark concerns about a labor shortage and lack of attendance at mass on the Upper Napo (Provincial Government of Archidona 1893).

<sup>68</sup> German archaeologist Udo Oberem (1971, 97-98) confirms that in the 1890s rubber merchants took at least 1,000 Kichwa families from communities to the northeast of Tena-Archidona. Other sources indicate that these communities included Loreto, Concepción, Payamino, Cotapino, San José, and Ávila. An 1892 missionary census suggests less than 1,000 families lived in this region (Loreto: 400, Concepcion: 200, Avila: 150, San Jose: 125: Payamino: 34, Cotapino: 22 (José Jouanen. 2003. *Historia de la Compañía de Jesús en La República del Ecuador: 1850-1950*. Quito). The major population and administrative centers – both then and now – of Archidona and Tena had just 458 and 200 families, respectively. Yet, Oberem (1980, 171) recorded testimonies from Loreto in the 1950s that 1,000 families were taken and sold in Peru, Brazil, and Bolivia. Elsewhere, Oberem (1971, 97) writes that only forty families ever returned. Regardless of the numbers, Oberem's sources certainly refer to the vast majority of the population leaving and never coming back. His description is expounded upon in ethnographic work (Hudelson 1981, Foletti-Castegnaro 1985, Cabodevilla 1994) and archival research (Esvertit Cobes 2008, 145; Muratorio 1991, Wasserstrom 2014).

Bartolo reportedly said that they left willingly, “thinking they would return with money; they didn’t know” (Foletti-Castegnaro 1985, 165).

I took Bartolo Noteno’s published account to Playas and read it in Kichwa to Andrea Jipa, one of the few remaining residents in Playas to remember the rubber era. Andrea told me that her father, Juan Jipa, also worked for Daniel Peñafiel, but only after working for Samuel Roggeroni and Mauricio Leví, after his parents died in an epidemic. In an autobiography of a Kichwa man from the Napo, Leví is described as a relatively “good *patrón*” (Santos Macanilla 2009, 16), despite the fact that he frequently raped indigenous women and locked small children in his house to prevent their parents from escaping (ibid, 27). When people did escape, he beat those who remained (ibid, 16). Thus, gratuitous violence entered the most intimate aspects of social life, as a component of symbolic domination. Attempts among merchants to normalize the abduction and rape of indigenous girls – the erasure of their humanity – were claims to absolute control over the territory.<sup>69</sup> In Playas today, multiple families can identify family members going back at least three generations who were the product of rapes. “The brother-in-law of my grandmother, for example,” recalls one woman, “they say he was very bad – he raped young girls and they didn’t say anything because he was the *patrón*... he was from the outside...”

Consequently, Andrea Jipa told me, families consistently fled from one *patrón* to the next in search of better treatment. Juan Jipa came to work alongside Bartolo Noteno for a time, under Peñafiel. They worked for twelve hours a day, with a brief respite at noon. In the evenings, they turned to household tasks, such as hunting, fishing, and weaving.<sup>70</sup> Peñafiel died two years later,

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<sup>69</sup> Feminist philosopher María Lugones (2012) has demonstrated that sexual violence has had the purpose of reinforcing racial hierarchies. Feminist theorist Rita Segato (2003) characterizes rape as a form of communication to the broader society, as the ultimate affirmation of male sovereignty over a social space.

<sup>70</sup> They traveled as far north as San Miguel, returning to Napo to send rubber on to Iquitos. Some workers participated in the 12-day journeys to Iquitos, for which they could earn a pair of pants, a shirt, a dress, and hooks

and they then worked under his son, Oscar, before moving to the Aguarico River to work with Notenos, Coquiches, Guatatocas, Jipas, and Machoas – all ancestors of Playas residents – under a *patrón* named Barregas<sup>71</sup>. Bartolo reportedly said of Barregas that he “got mad and hit us... I still remember one time the *patrón* killed a Luis Andi, suspecting that the man wanted to escape...” (Foletti-Castegnaro 1985, 167). Barregas beat them “like animals” (ibid.) until they escaped.<sup>72</sup> Within a month, another *patrón* made them an offer. This was a familiar cycle, Andrea explained, in relations between indigenous families and white merchants: courting, deception, abuse, and flight. Under yet another *patrón*, Bartolo recalled that “the bosses controlled us a lot, we could not move from our places even to pee, the *patrón* was afraid that we would hide a bit of gold...” (Foletti-Castegnaro 1985, 168). Many died under that *patrón*, for lack of time to farm and hunt and sickness: “...we lived like monkeys, only eating jungle seeds (ibid.).

I asked Andrea why they sought out *patrones*, whom they did not depend on for material subsistence. Andrea replied simply, “to work.” I asked further, *why was it so important to work?* She responded, “Because we were civilized.”<sup>73</sup> Other interviewees, such as Alonso Guatatoaca, repeated this explanation as if it were self-evident: “*We were civilized.*” In a 2018 interview, 29-

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(Foletti-Castegnaro 1985, 166). That said, each family collected 200 pounds of rubber a week, worth 20,000 Peruvian *soles*; a pair of pants was worth 2 *soles* (ibid.).

<sup>71</sup> They worked under Barregas – sometimes referred to as “Barriga” (Cabodevilla 1997) – for a set of adult clothing and kitchenware per family, and for every bottle of gold nugget they collected, they could earn a pair of pants, a shirt, and some grain (Foletti-Castegnaro 1985, 168). Carmelite missionary Luis Luis (1994) describes Barregas as a former navy officer, who took them to sift sand for gold on the Aguarico and San Miguel headwaters for five years.

<sup>72</sup> Barregas denounced their escape to the authorities or the “*apu*.” Andrea told me that her family presented to the *apu* the worn goods they had received for their labor – damaged tools and tattered clothing – and they were freed of their obligations.

<sup>73</sup> To be without a *patrón* entailed some risks too. Barolo says that other Kichwas who fled from *patrones* “died hidden in the jungle, without food, without medicines for the sick.” He added, “they escaped already exhausted and out of fear did not approach anyone, perhaps a group of *Aucas* killed them or maybe it was the *patrón*’s men killing them” (Foletti-Castegnaro 1985, 169).



year-old Yessica Noteno offered her grandparents' reasons for working day and night in exchange for cotton clothing:

*Since they were already civilized, they knew about the parts of their bodies... So, for them it was bad to be naked, like the Waorani. They felt terrible seeing themselves naked... 'others with clothing and me naked'... Everybody seeing their intimate parts; even worse with the young women, when they menstruated... They couldn't go anywhere because the people who went around with clothing were going to make fun of them... So, they had to work for those patrones, so that they would buy a dress, a slip... So, that was their obligation to keep working... to not be naked in front of people... The mom of my mom talked to me about that, because of that she said in their times there was no underwear, only a dress, a slip... And later in time, there was underwear. Then, she washed gold so that they would give her underwear and if she had more daughters, she had to wash more gold... Because they say that sometimes if they didn't have [underwear]... Blood dripped down the leg and that was ugly.*

If a person had no clothing, they would be subject to ridicule. This social gaze had become self-evident. When Bartolo Noteno remembered the Sionas, Secoyas, and Cofán who “lived free, without *patrón*,” he recalled asking himself, “why did they live like that and we, by contrast, [lived] under a *patrón*?” (Foletti-Castegnaro 1985, 168). He replied, “I don’t know, but it was like that” (ibid.). Bartolo discussed his condition as a worker as a matter of fact, and Andre remarked laconically that they worked “to work.” But there was a logic to this work that was rooted in historical forms of domination.

The historiography of the rubber boom often marks the end of rubber extraction in 1920 (e.g., Barham and Coomes 1994; del Pilar Gamarra 1996).<sup>74</sup> By the 1920s, merchants were increasingly competing with state functionaries and missionaries for indigenous labor (Tamaríz 2014, 1; Taylor 1994, 42)<sup>75</sup>, and the Great Depression suppressed international demand for

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<sup>74</sup> Some former rubber merchants converted trading posts into small agrarian estates or *haciendas* and retained laborers, who produced rice, sugarcane, wheat, cotton, and corn and continued to collect rubber and gold (Reeve 1988, 22-24; Tamaríz and Villaverde 1997, 23). By 1925, there were more than one hundred estates, largely on the Napo (del Pilar Gamarra 1996, 47; Moreno Tejada 2015). By 1932, many *haciendas* had relocated from Napo to Aguarico, due to growing obstacles to selling in Peru and territorial conflicts with the *aucas* (Cabodevilla 1989, 19).

rubber. Over the following decades, some ethnic groups established degrees of economic and cultural autonomy from white merchants (Borman 1996, Wasserstrom 2014). Thus, historians say little or nothing of the rubber extraction that persisted after the fall of rubber prices, obscuring experiences of Playas' ancestors, who labored in indebted servitude into the mid-1950s. In 2018, I spoke with Roque Noteno, a Playas resident in his late fifties, who recounted the stories of his parents and uncles. By the 1930s, they had escaped from Barregas to seek out a prominent Colombian merchant named Alejandro Londoño. Andrea also recalled that her parents sought out Londoño, after a series of *patrones* had deceived them, paying them only once every three or four years – or never, under the pretense that they were too indebted.

Londoño had woven wide commercial networks on a reputation for paying well and on-time. He purchased the debts of Playas' ancestors and invited them rest for a year on Aguarico, where they set up household farms.<sup>76</sup> In 1941, Peru invaded and burned down *haciendas* along the Aguarico, including Londoño's home, while workers hid in tributaries<sup>77</sup>. Londoño fled<sup>78</sup> with forty Kichwa families north along the Aguarico to a location just downriver from Playas' current center<sup>79</sup>. They settled there for five years, cultivating rice, corn, beans, cotton, and wheat. For several months at a time, Andrea would leave with her parents to collect rubber and sift for gold

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<sup>75</sup> State functionaries and missionaries relied on indigenous labor for agriculture; the transportation of goods, people, and mail; and the construction of roads and government buildings (Tamariz 2014, 1; Taylor 1994, 42).

<sup>76</sup> I interviewed a Siona leader on the Aguarico who explained that in the 1930s, Londoño first brought groups of Kichwas together with Secoyas, Sionas, and Cofán to collect rubber along the Cocaya River. Andrea confirmed that account. She was born on the Cocaya and lived there until she was approximately 7 years-old.

<sup>77</sup> Some workers were taken prisoner. Bercelino Noteno's grandfather fell prisoner and was made to shuttle supplies to them, until he escaped.

<sup>78</sup> Most *hacendados* (estate owners) fled south to the Napo (Iriarte de Aspurz 1980, 101).

<sup>79</sup> In this location, called Puerto Colombia, Andrea Jipa worked with Bartolo Noteno, as well as Eliseo Machoa, Eloy Machoa, Víctor Noteno, Federico Noteno, Adolfo Coquinche, and Juan Jipa. Groups with the Guatatoca and Andi families joined them later.

near the headwaters. However, merchants on the Aguarico struggled after the war because they could no longer sell in Peru (Cabodevilla 1989, 26). Londoño, a Colombian citizen<sup>80</sup>, was also the object of nationalist threats from his competitors and their allies in the military. In 1946, he decided to travel with the workers towards the Colombian border to set up an estate with cattle, pig, and corn production along the San Miguel River. Ten years later, aging and under pressure from the Ecuadorian state and military, Londoño released workers from their obligations (Foletti-Castegnaro 1985).

In retrospect, Bartolo Noteno and Reinaldo Machoa reportedly qualified Londoño as a “good *patrón*” (Luis Luis 1994). Andrea also remembers that Londoño was widely viewed as a quintessential “good *patrón*.” Every New Year’s Eve Londoño had a big party and gave workers tools, such as axes, shotguns, and Nylon<sup>81</sup> string for fishing, as well as clothing and kitchenware, like pots – more than they had received previously. These items did not only serve to establish personal status, but also enabled people to better respond to their social and family obligations. He was “good, good, good,” Andrea recalls, “he cared for the people... he was very honorable.” This image of moral rectitude and caring had fortified his capacity to retain workers.<sup>82</sup>

By the same token, Bartolo Noteno reportedly stated that “the *patrón* had us with deception; for however little he gave us, we always owed him, from the pots, from the clothing, from the hooks” (Foletti-Castegnaro 1985, 166). Former workers and their children remembered that they had been deceived in terms of both the balance of their debts and the value of their

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<sup>80</sup> Alejandro Londoño was from Puerto Asís.

<sup>81</sup> While other *patrones* had expected them to fish with *chimbiro* fiber, for example, Londoño provided nylon string and a bent nail.

<sup>82</sup> Affective relations and emotions, such as gratitude, often play a role in stabilizing relations of domination (see Ahmed 2013; Grossberg and Behrenshausen 2016; Kim and Bianco 2007).

work. Even the “good *patrón*,” Bartolo said, “became rich with our sweat, with our torment” (ibid.).<sup>83</sup> We see in stories of discontent and flight among Playas’ ancestors or in Muratorio’s (1991) writings on the humor, theft, and other everyday forms of resistance that Kichwas often entered into labor relations not as willing, but begrudged workers, dependent on deceitful actors to access Western goods. In fact, missionary journals feature countless tales of specific acts of merchant deceit. For example, one unpublished missionary journal in the Capuchin archives in Quito details cases of white deceit in the northern Amazon in the 1940s. In a typical case, a *patrón* had tricked an indigenous man into thinking that he owed the *patrón* 2,000 pesos; when the missionary read the accounting books, it turned out that the *patrón* owed the indigenous man 1,000 pesos (54). “They had many modes of defrauding...” (55), wrote the missionary.

Today, characterizations of white market actors as deceptive also appear in Kichwa tales and folklore in the northern Amazon. In a compilation of Kichwa stories from Napo, Ortiz de Villalba (1988) published one story entitled “The Liars,” in which a wise subject named Sumac Quimba warned “the people” about the whites. Sumac Quimba advised the people (i.e., the Kichwas) to mark out territories because the whites would begin to enter the rainforest to claim lands. The people marked out boundaries, but the whites who subsequently arrived did not respect those boundaries. The people went to “the bosses of the whites,” who responded that they would take care of the problem, but Sumac Quimba warned them that the whites had “two tongues” (19). The whites continued taking land, and Sumac Quimba pleaded with the people that they open their eyes to what was happening: “they are laughing at us, saying that we are Indians, not anything” (ibid.). But the whites continued tricking the people, paying some and claiming that Sumac Quimba was insane. Sumac Quimba embodies retrospect and a deep

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<sup>83</sup> Bartolo bitterly recalled, “we – like idiots – put up with everything” (Foletti-Castegnaro 1985, 167).

frustration with past events.

We can see similar frustrations in the memories of Playas' residents who recall the labor histories of their ancestors. Bercelino Noteno related the following interpretation, laced with rage and regret:

*And the anger that we have had for the mistreatment of our grandparents by mestizo people. They were slaves. They didn't have freedom. They made them work inside the jungle [for] years, in the middle of the jungle to get liquids out of the trees, skins, fruits, to hand in to the patron and the patron was who sold it. For what? A bit of clothing, a work tool, that's it. A machete that we carry here, that took years to work off. To pay it off, they would say that it is worth so much. Having already worked so much, they were broke, and they were still in debt.*

In this account, Bercelino does not differentiate between consent and coercion. His parents and grandparents had lost their freedom.

Bercelino's older brother Roque Noteno has described to me on multiple occasions the "rabia" or "rage" that he and his brothers harbor for the mistreatment of their grandparents, parents, and extended family by white society. Their uncle Bartolo used to tell them about the rubber and gold era and Roque has told his own kids about the "robbery" their ancestors suffered.

A critical consciousness has emerged among Playas' ancestors that associates the origins of inequality today with histories of white deception. After the close of the *hacienda* era in the 1960s, many newly-freed Kichwas on the San Miguel and later the Aguarico turned to hunting animal skins for cash, and the primary skins trader in the northern Amazon was a son of Londoño named Bolívar. Some of Londoño's descendants, who grew up as friends of their father's former workers, visit Playas on occasion, and they include wealthy merchants and government officials, at least one mayor, and an extravagantly-wealthy drug trafficker, who reportedly parks his airplane on top of his underground home. The descendants of rubber

merchants enjoy recognition and easy lives, 60-year-old Carlos Noteno once explained to me.

Carlos' daughter, Yessica Noteno, described the Londoño family in the following terms:

*What I know is that even today they have money. They are sort of millionaires... They have coca, they have a cattle hacienda, they have the biggest hacienda. People still go to [Londoño's son]; he lends them money; he gives them work; whatever work that you want, [go] to him and get work. If you want to work with pigs, cattle, plant coca, harvest coca; he has it all.*

Yessica and others have seen the wealth of the *patrones'* children. Carlos added that, while they were bureaucrats and businesspeople, their children were positioned to follow suit. In fact, the archives of the Napo Governorship in Tena tell the story of a remarkably seamless transition of prominent *patrones* like Londoño, Crespo Pando, Hidalgo, and others into the public administration of Amazonian municipal and provincial governments in the 1960s and 1970s and through the end of the century.<sup>84</sup>

Older members of the Jipa, Noteno, Machoa, and Guatatoca families in Playas wonder if things could have been different. They ponder the value of the many boxes their ancestors had filled with gold in exchange for clothing and pots. "If only I had kept *one* box of gold," Andrea says. Roque Noteno echoes this sentiment. If only his ancestors had known the value of gold, they might be living comfortably in a city somewhere, in the place of Barrega's or Londoño's descendants. This historical consciousness engenders a deep mistrust of white market actors today, who might scheme to trick Playas residents and reinforce ethnic hierarchies. "To this very day," Bercelino Noteno explains, "the *mestizo* people still want to be the bosses."

Not everyone in Playas remembers the rubber boom or knows the labor histories of their ancestors. Children now watch television before bed instead of listening to stories from their elders. Yet, memory is not only an active re-imagining and interpretation of the past. It also

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<sup>84</sup> The current mayor of Putumayo is Segundo Londoño, although I have not yet investigated the kinship relation.

constitutes perceptual frameworks and common sense that becomes passed along to future generations. In 2018, I walked into Edwin Noteno's corner store and spotted a poster board he had hung on the wall as a concise reminder to younger generations: "*No confiar en los ricos, andan engañando a la gente*" [Don't trust the rich, they go about tricking the people].

In this section, we have explored the violence and deception that characterized labor relations during the rubber boom. Playas' ancestors were compelled to work in order to reproduce themselves as civilized subjects, even despite their critical awareness of merchants' violent and deceptive practices. In the remainder of the chapter, we see how these practices have circled back through shared memories to shape contemporary politics of oil and urbanization. In the next section, I discuss ways in which historical antecedents of white violence, particularly against indigenous women, shaped how Playas' leadership responded the entrance of the state oil company into the parish in 2008.

#### *An Indigenous Oil Company: Anticipating White Violence*

In August, 2007, the state claimed oil block 12 from Occidental – newly designated as block 15 – for exploitation by the state oil company “UB15.” Soon thereafter, the state oil company Petroproducción arrived in Playas to inform the population about impending oil production in the parish. Bercelino Noteno tells me that company representatives offered him a job and money to support the project – first \$5,000, then \$10,000, and finally \$21,000, enough to “buy a car.” Wary of these oilmen, Bercelino contacted a regional indigenous leader, Rafael Alvarado. Alvarado had been involved in several failed projects to form indigenous oil and gas companies (e.g., Amazonía

Gas, Amazonía Link, Amazon Energy)<sup>85</sup> and Bercelino was interested in pursuing such a model for Playas.

Several factors had opened opportunities for the formation of indigenous oil and gas companies in Ecuador at the time (as well as Bolivia and Peru, see Perafan and Moyer 2006). Latin America was witnessing a shift in territorial governance or a so-called “territorial turn” (Offen 2003; Erazo 2013), whereby governments increasingly recognized certain indigenous territorial rights and autonomies. Amid this turn, the Playas community assembly voted officially to seek institutional recognition as an *indigenous* community in 2006. In addition, a strengthening or “thickening” of civil society networks (Fox 1996), including social movements and NGOs, accompanied and amplified protests in contested indigenous territories of resource extraction (Valdivia 2008; Perreault and Valdivia 2010). In Playas, community members were gaining knowledge of their territorial rights from conservationist and human rights NGOs and regional indigenous organizations. Third, some indigenous groups had already successfully tapped into the hydrocarbon value chain through indigenous service companies that offered transportation, catering services, cleaning and other auxiliary services. Finally, during the height of Latin American neoliberalism in the 1990s and early 2000s, indigenous-oriented development programs in Latin America had aimed to address indigenous poverty by encouraging entrepreneurialism, a paradigm referred to as “development with identity” in institutional contexts or “multicultural neoliberalism” among critical scholars (Laurie et al. 2003; McNeish 2008).

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<sup>85</sup>Thus, for example, from 2000 to 2003, members of the Ecuadorian Amazonian indigenous movement CONFENAIE worked towards forming a natural gas company (*El Hoy* 24 July, 2004, Fontaine and Le Calvez 2009). In a meeting with other indigenous oil and gas companies in Calgary, Canada, they developed a joint proposal to form *Amazonía Gas*, which obtained a \$250,000 USD grant from the Inter-American Development Bank and was endorsed by both Ecuadorian President Gustavo Noboa (2000-2003) and the national indigenous movement CONAIE (Fontaine and Le Calvez 2009). This project did not advance for reasons I explore elsewhere (Lyll 2018).



In this context, Rafael Alvarado put Bercelino in contact with a small group of elite businessmen and diplomats in Quito that were trying to develop indigenous-owned corporations in extractive industries.<sup>86</sup> In a series of interviews with these men, they explained to me that their business model would curb local resistance to extractive activities and secure favourable terms for foreign investors. In a context of heightened oil prices, growing conflict in indigenous territories, and commitments by the new regime to redistribute wealth, they hoped to convince indigenous leaders and government officials to support the model and then sell their services as intermediaries to foreign companies.

Bercelino and other leaders in Playas hoped that such a project would keep foreign and white oil workers out of Playas, in large part to protect the women. In the words of Andrea Jipa's son Eladio Machoa, they worried about companies "coming in and abusing the women." He commented further that "[t]here were anecdotes that the oil companies generally come and, you

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<sup>86</sup> I have detailed the background to this history elsewhere (Lyll 2018). In short, the Indigenous Business Corporation of Ecuador (CEIE) formed in 2005 with funding from USAid and the US National Endowment for Democracy (NED). Raúl Gangotena, former director of the Quito Chamber of Commerce and Ecuadorian ambassador to the US, joined with Fernando Navarro, a businessman and director of the Chamber of Commerce, along with three indigenous prominent leaders from the Andes, Ángel Medina, Mariano Curicama, and Lourdes Tibán. In 2006, the group secured a \$67,955 grant from NED to draft a business model for indigenous companies in large-scale and extractive industries. The group held a 3-day workshop with 40 Ecuadorian indigenous leaders, leaders of indigenous-held oil and gas corporations based in Alaska, and several Ecuadorian businessmen. They developed a business model to bring together foreign companies, national and foreign investors, and thousands of indigenous families as investors. Each indigenous family would invest \$1,000 into a trust, in monthly payments of \$16.70, and the poorest families would have access to private credit and support from multilateral institutions to meet their payments. Although the largest share of revenues would be paid to the state, indigenous investors would receive dividends and, in the long-term, indigenous people would also be trained to manage these companies. In 2017, I interviewed Gangotena over the phone (he was the Ecuadorian ambassador in Australia at the time). He argued that such indigenous participation in the nation's key economic sectors was the only way to resolve ethnic inequalities. Navarro explained to me in an interview on his estate to the north of Quito that foreign investors would be interested in the model as a strategy for entering Ecuador on favourable terms with the state and indigenous communities, ensuring stable regulatory conditions, contracts, and social relations. Navarro and Gangotena envisioned brokering deals between indigenous groups, private capital, and the state in oil, mining and hydroelectric projects. Navarro enlisted the help of a family member with experience lobbying for oil and mining companies to gain audience with Correa in 2007. Navarro argued in this and other meetings with officials that the origin of poverty in Ecuador was the limited number of property owners, citing Peruvian theorist Hernando De Soto (2000). Navarro and Gangotena tried to form an indigenous oil company to develop an oil field called "Pungarayacu." This initiative failed to gain traction, due to geological and organizational challenges, but word spread about their model.

know, a lot of people come, only men... and here there are many girls just growing up... and anything could happen, at least that's what the people thought." (Likewise, Eladio observed that many people were on edge about the presence of workers who built the Millennium City: Reportedly, to everyone's relief, "there wasn't a single rape"). As we saw in the first half of this chapter, these anxieties were rooted in historical experiences of gender violence that had been used to control indigenous populations and territories. As Fanon detailed in *A Dying Colonialism* (1994[1959]), women's bodies become key sites of contestation over sovereignty among colonizing and colonized men. In effect, according to some women, the men of Playas were less concerned about violence against women *per se* than they were that women would be 'taken' by foreign or *mestizo* oil workers and become (incorporated into) the white world (Lyall and Valdivia 2019a).

In addition, Bercelino and other organizers hoped to channel oil rents towards providing income for participating families, as well as urban development for Amazonian territories. Adopting the new name Alian Petrol (referring to "*Alianza Indígena*" or "Indigenous Alliance"), they branded the company as a cooperative to appeal to Correa's leftist discourse.<sup>87</sup> Rents would be redistributed through dividend payments and a committee that would invest in modern housing, schools, and basic services for indigenous communities. According to a business proposal draft, they aimed gradually including all 150,000 indigenous households that comprised the CONFENIAE and invest a portion of oil rents into education, housing, basic services, employment, and other projects throughout the Amazon. Finally, organizers also believed that indigenous oversight would minimize environmental contamination. In fact, the project's chief technical designer told me that he met with the international president of the World Wildlife Fund (WWF)

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<sup>87</sup> The new proposal defined a distribution of oil revenues favouring the state (56.3 per cent), but that designated 22.2 per cent to the trust fund and 21.5 per cent to non-indigenous partners and investors.

to develop an environmental certification for the company (the WWF president is a sister of one of the organizers).

These elite businessmen and diplomats recruited communities in oil block 15, including Playas, Pañacocha, and Puka Peña,<sup>88</sup> to join a company they called Sacha Petrol, incorporated in 2005, under the auspices of the Amazonian indigenous confederation CONFENIAE. Bercelino took on an active role, helping to recruit three more indigenous Kichwa and Shuar communities on the Aguarico: Taikwa, Charap, and Chontaduro. In 2008, the businessmen brought the proposal to the attention of Vice-President Lenín Moreno and then to Rafael Correa himself.<sup>89</sup> One organizer observed that Correa seemed enthusiastic, convinced that this model was “the only way [open-pit] mining is going to be possible.” However, the general manager of Petroamazonas, Wilson Pástor, intervened to ensure that block 15 would be auctioned through normal channels and that no “indigenous person be the head of any oil company,” as a top-level political adviser involved in Alian Petrol discussions told me. This advisor confided that Pástor was “the guy through whom they passed all of the decision about energy issues in that time, and [issues] related to oil and mines as well.” Pástor warned that such renunciation of state control would set a dangerous precedent. Subsequently, Petroamazonas expanded its operations into the oil block that overlapped Playas’ territory. Later that year, Playas residents rose up and seized Petroamazonas barges – either to defend Alian Petrol or receive adequate compensation.

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<sup>88</sup> These indigenous groups did not conceive of oil as their heritage (e.g., Adunbi 2015), but as state property.

<sup>89</sup> The lawyer, Judith Vallejo, went to the constitutional assembly to pitch it to leftist politician César Rodríguez, a longtime proponent of savings cooperatives. Rodríguez’ advisor, Alfredo Espinosa, told me that Vallejo wanted to gain approval for the proposal at the highest levels of government before Ecuador’s scheduled 9th international oil auction, when rights to oil block 15 would be up for grabs. Espinosa understood Alian Petrol to be a progressive proposal for a mixed-investor cooperative. In a subsequent interview with Rodríguez, the national assemblyman described to me bringing the proposal directly to Vice-President Lenín Moreno.

*The Millennium City: Anticipating White Deceit*

In this final section, I discuss ways in which historical antecedents of white exploitation and *deceit* shaped how and why Playas' leadership negotiated with the state oil company. Namely, they demanded exactly the same houses and infrastructure that oil workers had in their encampment. In the wake of the rubber boom, when oil companies moved into the region and Texaco began operations in Putumayo, oil encampments popped up that were "equipped with all sorts of urban amenities in the middle of the Colombian Amazon, where the company's technicians and administrative staff resided" (Torres Bustamante 2012, 28). Indigenous laborers were excluded from these encampments, re-inscribing a binary ethnic hierarchy into the landscape. On the one hand, portable houses and offices, complete with bathrooms and potable water, were installed for engineers and other petroleum professionals; on the other hand, indigenous workers had to build their own houses of palm trees and wood and on the outside of the metal fence that encircled the encampment (see Domínguez, 1969 108-109; Devia 2004, 123; Londoño Botero 2015, 105). When Petroamazonas distributed a survey in Playas to ask what style of house they wanted, the response was nearly unanimous: They wanted the same style houses as oil workers had in their encampments. It was the community's strategy to secure what was just and to avoid being tricked into accepting a design valued less than what the oil workers themselves would deem adequate.

Héctor Noteno, Edgar Noteno, Berclino Noteno, and Karen Chávez each explained this process to me independently. During negotiations, Petroamazonas officials had originally proposed providing Playas residents with cement houses that corresponded to a standard design for public housing projects in the Ministry of Public Housing and Urban Development. Playas' leaders responded by demanding the same synthetic materials used for houses in oil workers'

encampments. Bercelino's son Edgar recalls that leaders said to Petroamazonas officials, "Do not use blocks [of cement]; use some mesh with – I don't know... *Spuma-flex*, and the cement goes on top..." At first, Petroamazonas denied the request, arguing that workers from the Andes needed a cooler dwelling, unlike Amazonian peoples: "They said, 'no, what's happening is that over there [in the encampment] it is hot. You are from here; the people over there are not because they are from the Andes.'" Playas' leaders responded in anger, recalls Edgar, "No, here you [will] build the same."

Héctor Noteno, community president in the 1990s, remembers that Petroamazonas officials then presented three designs that more closely resembled traditional houses than the houses in the encampment. Again, Playas residents rejected each of these options. Héctor recalls,

*[T]hey presented us several models: 'How do you want it? Like this or like this?' [The] first we rejected; [the] second we rejected; then they brought us the third. 'OK, do you want this, this, or this?'... We said that it should be like this, like what we saw in Petroamazonas... 'We saw how you built [the encampment of] Petroamazonas. The houses must be like those. Why are they going to be different? They must be like those... exactly as they are in Petroamazonas, we have to have here too.'*

They did not want the cement houses from the Andes, nor did they want traditional houses from the Amazon. They wanted the same as the workers.

In the 2000s, Héctor Noteno was living in Lago Agrio at the time of these negotiations, and so he would later express gratitude to the families that were living in Playas. Otherwise, he pondered, "Maybe we would have been left as we were before... They would have made us a rustic classroom, maybe, a little well... a little pot, a little jar... Maybe we would have been left with that..." Playas' residents essentially received what they demanded. (The construction firm did trick Playas' residents regarding some

important details: For example, leaders had demanded a bathroom on the second floor and galvanized metal, but today, people have to go outside and down a set of rusting stairs to the bathroom below).

Following the inauguration of the Millennium City, residents have continued to demand the same infrastructures featured in Petroamazonas' encampment. For example, when Rafael Correa visited Playas in 2013 to give his speech, the resettlement fed off of a 6,000-gallon diesel electric generator.<sup>90</sup> The generator was old and vibrated day and night, droning out the songs of birds and buzzing of insects. It would overheat for four or five hours at a time. Soon after the inauguration, the town assembly designated a 'commission' – or a group of ten to twenty residents – to travel periodically to Petroamazonas' headquarters upriver to demand the same generator found in the encampment, which they ultimately received. After oil prices collapsed in 2014, Petroamazonas returned the old generator and stopped providing maintenance and coolant. Residents filled the generator with water, but it overheated frequently and they had to set bonfires to cook, while they it cooled off. And they figured out how to hasten this process by running a hose down from the water tower to spray it. But they also organized commissions to demand that they return the prior generator. In discussions about the generator in assemblies, residents expressed worries that Petroamazonas was lying or deceiving them. The oil company

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<sup>90</sup> Ethnographers have suggested that by studying infrastructure or, in other words, “boring things” (Star 1999, 377) researchers can ground their analyses of state power and shed light on the logics of collective action and engagement with the state. Much ethnographic research on infrastructure has centered on the materiality of state power as the “governmentality of infrastructure” (Rankin 2009). Larkin (2008) observes the capacity of infrastructures to represent state dominion in colonial contexts. Chalfin (2014) observes state practices to hierarchize social groups through the unequal distribution of public infrastructures. Starosielski (2015) measures the limits of state power by infrastructural vulnerabilities. In the words of anthropologist Ara Wilson (2016), close analyses of human relations with infrastructures can help illuminate “the concrete force of abstract fields of power” (248). Harvey and Knox (2012) identify the power of roads to enchant subjects – what Larkin refers to as “the infrastructural sublime” (2008) or “the poetics of infrastructure” (2013, 329). Amin (2014) observes that accessing formal infrastructures may have a “cost” (151), as community organizing dissolves and the government asserts control. Other authors respond to critical theory of infrastructure by wondering if such critiques are not aligned with neoliberal projects (Elychar 2012; Robbins 2007).

was *not* to be trusted until Playas' infrastructures were exactly the same as those in the encampment. It was a question of material equality, but, above all, respect. Carlos and Ramón Noteno separately explained to me why people tended to couch concerns about the generator in terms of deception, both referring to Petroamazonas as “the new *patrón*” in the region: The *patrón* is never to be trusted.<sup>91</sup>

Thus, whereas critics have characterized the Millennium City houses, streets, and generators as manifestations of an abstract modernity, they take on concrete social and historical meanings in the northern Amazon. Bercelino has been cited in another study, explaining, ““they have to build us a good infrastructure, a health center so we can die in a quality bed, otherwise only they can die in a good bed, not like us, dropped somewhere with some disease”” (Espinosa Andrade 2017, 311-312). Bercelino describes the symbolic significance of these infrastructures in so far as they mediate or structure a hierarchical relationship with white society. Bercelino has described this symbolic significance infrastructure to me in the following terms: “[T]he pride that I have is that I made the government sit down. We argued. We’ve sat at the table. We’ve had a dialogue. That’s the pride. I have this for history because otherwise we are left with nothing – all of the wealth goes from here, from the heels of our feet and we die here as if we weren’t of any value.” In this narrative, “value” does not refer to compensation funds or the market value of houses, but rather the recognition and respect of white society, materialized through the very human act of sitting at the table and entering into a dialogue. In his negotiations with Petroamazonas, Bercelino was concerned with securing that respect for Playas and his ancestors, albeit on the terms of white society.

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<sup>91</sup> Geographer Fredy Grefa (2020) refers to how Kichwa peoples on the Napo River compare oil companies to the boa, which is known to “subtly trick the animal or person by attraction and seduction” (117) to capture its prey.

In this chapter, I have detailed memories of the rubber boom to understand why Playas residents tried to form an indigenous oil company and, in turn, demanded urban-like houses and infrastructures as compensation for oil extraction in their parish. The struggle for equality with white society and the threat of subordination through white violence and deceit has continued to shape negotiations with white market actors into the 21<sup>st</sup> century.<sup>92</sup> In historical archives and oral histories and in the stories of Playas residents, white violence against indigenous peoples appears to have been commonplace, including the enslavement of indigenous families considered ‘savage’ and the frequent rape and abduction of indigenous girls, including Kichwa girls. In 2008, one of the main concerns about the beginning of oil production in Playas was that white workers would rape Kichwa women. Also commonplace in historical records and in the memories of Playas residents are stories of *engaño* or deceptive practices among white market actors, who lied regarding the debts of indigenous workers to retain them and diminish their compensation. When demands for an indigenous oil company were rejected through military force, community leaders sought a form of compensation that anticipated and prevented deception – namely, they demanded the same houses, generator, and other infrastructures that white oil workers used and occupied in their encampments.

In the following two chapters, I explore other historical moments in Playas of inclusion and subordination in relation to white society to understand why residents continue struggling to

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<sup>92</sup> Playas’ generator broke down entirely in 2018 and Petroamazonas replaced it with a generator that functioned 24-hours; however, oil company officials explained that the provincial government would need to replace the generator as soon as possible. The community demanded that the provincial government use an annual investment budget designated to Playas to buy the U.S.-built, 250 kW hour Caterpillar generator – the same brand and model used in Petroamazonas’ encampments. They found a unit for sale at 95,000 USD. The provincial government agreed, but then bought a cheaper Chinese brand. This deception triggered the ire of Playas’ residents, but, in an assembly in July, 2018, residents considered accepting the Chinese generator from the provincial government and hiding it from the view of Petroamazonas, so that Petroamazonas would not withdraw their current generator and with it the gasoline and filters that Petroamazonas continued to provide. It went without saying that they would need to respond to and anticipate white deception.



sustain the Millennium City. In the next chapter, I turn specifically to the spread of missionary education in the region in the wake of indebted servitude, as key moment that helps us to understand the persistence of Millennium City residents today.

## CHAPTER 4. EDUCATION: RENEWING GEOGRAPHIC AND ETHNIC DISTANCES

*They mistreated our grandparents... They said that the mestizos were better than the indigenous [people]... that ‘you, for being indigenous, cannot study’... Those people who were able to survive... escaped to find a place to have families... They slowly grew, but with those thoughts... that the indigenous were lesser than the mestizos, than the whites... Only recently are we rising, so that the world can see who we are in reality... that we are intelligent people... - 14-year-old Playas resident Marco Noteno, 2015*

### *Introduction*

The previous chapter noted that, by the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, Western goods (e.g., cotton clothing, tools, salt, kitchenware) were widely recognized among the Kichwa of the northern Amazon as markers of personhood, respect, ‘civilization.’ The northern Amazon has long been shaped by colonial capitalism and culture and, by the time of the rubber boom, the category of civilization was not a mere ‘idea’ in people’s heads; it was inscribed in material, spatial, and social relations, incorporated into Kichwa self-conception and cultural reproduction. The fetishization of objects is a very human practice. Objects, especially those that we wear, are meaningful (Stallybrass 1998). But the value<sup>93</sup> of Western commodities in the Amazon had resulted from the violent accumulation of the symbolic authority by white society since Spanish colonization – what U.S. geographer Alvaro Reyes and anthropologist Mara Kaufman (2011) refer to as the “primitive accumulation of ‘social force’” (508). The rubber boom renewed

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<sup>93</sup> Anthropological approaches to value have characterized it as the importance that a social order attributes to human activities (see Bigger and Robertson 2017; Graeber 2001, Munn 1992, Rayner 2019, Turner 2008). Material scarcity (as opposed to biological need) is also a social-historical production. In the words of economic historian Carl Wennerlind, “scarcity is not transhistorical or immutable... [rather] it is a constructed condition dependent for its existence upon certain historically specific institutions” (1999, 6).

colonial hierarchies, as white merchants acted as gatekeepers to civilized society, but simultaneously reinforced ethnic difference by abusing and deceiving indigenous workers. A lingering anger and distrust of white market actors shapes how Playas residents perceive and negotiate with the state oil company today.

This chapter documents another historical moment of inclusion that simultaneously renewed of ethnic difference. And, similarly, I trace its legacies into the Millennium City. In the 1950s, Capuchin missionaries began to establish schools in the northern Amazon. Their mandate from the state was to secure Amazonian territories for the nation by ‘civilizing’ indigenous families. Historians have qualified Eurocentric education in the Amazon as a key factor in the assimilation or elimination of indigenous groups (Needell 1999; Pagnotta 2019) – that is, as a key factor in the propagation of “white values and beliefs” (Muratorio 1991, 164). However, in Playas, it was precisely the *lack* of school access that motivated people to associate themselves ever more closely with national-white society. Families already distinguished themselves from their ‘savage’ neighbors, viewing education as a tool for sustaining that distinction through market relations, but as administrative-educational centers proliferated on the Napo River to the south, young people struggled to access them. Consequently, distance took on a greater symbolic significance, re-inscribing ethnic subordination in spatial imaginaries of the emerging nation.<sup>94</sup>

Thus, Playas’ founders came together to form the community in the mid-1960s in order to create their own primary school. That is, despite stereotypical conceptions of indigenous communities as timeless entities united by kinship or ancestral culture, Playas came together

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<sup>94</sup> Anthropologist Pierre Bourdieu (2008, 70) once noted that the value-neutral experience of “spatial dispersion” contrasts with the experience of “distance,” a distinction between non-hierarchical societies and societies with clear, dominant authorities (also, see Savage (2011) for an analysis of Bourdieu’s seldom noted urban sociology). Henri Lefebvre (1974[1991]) similarly documented the emergence of *symbolic* “distance” (i.e., centers) with the rise of towns in the Medieval Europe. In Playas, we can track the consolidation of notions of geographic and social distance from administrative centers back to the 1960s.

largely as a strategy to access inclusion into dominant society through education. It consolidated as a social sphere and a territorial-political unit through struggles to attract recognition from missionaries and the state and secure resources and teachers. In 1981, the parents' committee wrote a letter to the Ministry of Education lamenting that they still could not retain qualified teachers from the Andes because Playas and its "mode of life" was too far from "society."<sup>95</sup> The concentration of education in white towns located Playas on a geographic and social periphery.

By the end of the century, coveted educational credentials themselves began to serve as markers of national belonging, self-worth, and status. And today, access to Western education has become a question not only of personal status, but a familial and communal obligation. Memories of difficult and frustrated struggles to access education over prior decades motivate current residents of the Millennium City to confront the settlement's myriad problems for the sake of sustaining its school and High School. We must understand this historical trajectory to understand the persistence of residents today.

This chapter is divided into three sections. In the first section, I briefly sketch the growth of missionary education in the region. In the second section, I document the founding of Playas as a community through collective struggles to build and sustain a schoolhouse. In the final section, I trace the legacies of that struggle into the present day, as parents struggle to sustain the Millennium school. While the contemporary challenges of sustaining these schools are difficult, they are also familiar and, to many residents, seem less daunting than what prior generations faced.

My analysis draws from the Capuchin missionaries' private archive in Quito and their published and unpublished manuscripts, as well as from testimonies from among Playas'

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<sup>95</sup> The letter from the parents' committee to the Provincial Direction of Education was dated October 19, 1981 (Parent's committee of Boca Cuyabeno 1981).

residents and retired Capuchin and Carmelite teachers in Lago Agrio and Quito. The vast majority of the Capuchin archive from the 1950s through the 1980s focuses on schools and communities on the Napo River. That is, Playas – known at that time as ‘Boca Cuyabeno’ – is conspicuous for its absence, reflecting its marginal position in emerging regional administration.

### *The Capuchin Schools of Aguarico County*

After the expulsion of the missions during the Liberal Revolution of the 1890s, the government in Quito welcomed Josephine, Carmelite, and Capuchin missionaries back to the northern Amazon in 1922 to improve the administration of populations and territories. The government in Quito was concerned with securing its Amazonian territory, as it signed its first contracts to with oil firms to explore the region. Josephine missionaries set up agrarian estates and boarding schools on the Napo River (Cabodevilla 1989, 19). The Carmelite missionaries established administrative posts, schools, and medical dispensaries to the north, along the Colombian border (Luis Luis 1994). In the years following the 1941 Peruvian invasion, the government delegated the newly-formed Aguarico county to the Capuchin mission. Aguarico county extended from its capital in Nuevo Rocafuerte on the Lower Napo, near Peru, to the Aguarico River to the north. In 1955, four Capuchins set up their administrative base in Nuevo Rocafuerte, where they built a boarding school and planned their expansion up the Napo River.

The state provided the Capuchins with partial funding and required that the Capuchins “work intensely for the colonization and civilization of the Ecuadorian *Oriente*... taking charge especially of civilizing and evangelizing the savage tribes...” (cited in Iriarte de Aspurz 1980, 21, *translation mine*). Specifically, they were charged with “founding colonies of whites and of indigenous people, especially in proximity to the border... opening primary and agricultural

schools and workshops for professional training... promoting and supporting the opening of new roads that provide access to unexplored zones... [and] promoting the moral and economic progress of the *Oriente*” (ibid.). The Capuchins were tasked with bringing into the nation a territory vulnerable to invasion and sparsely populated by ‘savages,’ whose national allegiances were dubious. The education they promoted would include Spanish and arithmetic, as well as skills like agriculture and carpentry that the missionaries and state needed to facilitate the colonization of the Amazon. Expanding from Nuevo Rocafuerte up the Napo, the Capuchins oversaw the construction of schools, medical dispensaries, and enterprises, such as carpentry workshops, cattle ranches, rice processors, sawmills, and community stores. Stores provided indigenous families with new sources of Western goods at lower prices. In some cases, missionaries directly paid-off debts and hired indigenous people from the *haciendas* of former rubber merchants.

On the Upper Napo, they founded the town of Coca in 1958 to establish another nucleus of education, work, and commerce. That year, the legal representative of the mission wrote to the Minister of Education to request funds to build a boarding school in Coca because “throughout the Coca, Napo, Payamino rivers, there are 250 children, quechuas, who do not receive any education and run the risk of remaining uncivilized their whole lives” (Prefect of Aguarico 1958a). In a subsequent letter, the representative insisted on the necessity of this boarding school to “civilize so many children, as they still live in the jungle without knowing about literature or civilization” (Prefect of Aguarico 1958b). State and church actors were shifting the terms of civilization, as they sought to intervene in and assert their authority over indigenous populations. No longer was the consumption of Western goods sufficient. And many indigenous families did resist submitting to this authority. In fact, many were accustomed to hiding children when

missionaries approached. Bercelino Noteno explains that “before, the *patrones* didn’t want anyone to study... they used to say that the missionaries would steal the children.” Andrea Jipa hid her own children in the rainforest when she spotted missionaries on the river. As we saw in the previous chapter, the risk of white people stealing indigenous children was not beyond the lived experience of families in the northern Amazon.

In addition, what an institutional education had to offer was not readily apparent to populations that learned how to farm, hunt, and fish through familial, inter-generational relationships.<sup>96</sup> Learning was embedded in the social and practical activities of everyday life. Moral and spiritual lessons were passed through nighttime storytelling, and shaman knowledge was passed through apprenticeship-like relationships between shamans and young children, generally in isolation in nature.<sup>97</sup> That is, the deep knowledges of shamans were also gained through familial relationships and sustained, practical interactions with material surroundings (coupled with the consumption of hallucinogenic ayahuasca and interactions with spirits). It was an altogether different form of study from institutional education.

In the 1960s and 1970s, missionaries also struggled to attract students due to growth of oil companies, which offered much higher salaries than the regional labor force had previously seen, drawing young indigenous men away from schools.<sup>98</sup> Capuchin correspondences with the

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<sup>96</sup> In the words of middle-aged Playas resident Benito Chávez, “[m]y father taught me that from very young: He took me hunting very early; he did and I watched. He did his hunting or he did his fishing and I walked next to him, so I knew... When I was older, I imitated all of that that he did when I was a kid.”

<sup>97</sup> The most important or valuable form of knowledge was shaman knowledge, also passed between generations. At the age of three, Bercelino Noteno’s parents sent him from San Miguel to Cuyabeno to live with his grandfather on his mother’s side, Adolfo Coquinche. Adolfo had intimate knowledge of the rivers and could transform into a river dolphin. He taught Bercelino to train to become a forest shaman, which involved spending extended periods in solitude in the jungle.

<sup>98</sup> Texaco began operations in Putumayo in 1963 (see Torres Bustamante 2012, 28). In 1967, the Texaco-Gulf consortium discovered large reserves in Lago Agrio, Sacha, and Shushufindi (Cabodevilla 1989, 27).

Ministry of Education in the early 1970s attribute a recent dip in enrollment and decline in agricultural production to growth in the oil labor market.<sup>99</sup>

Yet, by 1967, the Capuchins had successfully established more than a dozen schools on the Napo River,<sup>100</sup> offering liberal arts and technical education, with an emphasis on Spanish language and literacy (Iriarte de Aspurz 1980, 97-100). Some indigenous families were convinced that learning Spanish and mathematics could help them in this new labor market, in their commercial relations with white merchants, and in their interactions with white society, more broadly. A dozen Kichwa families came together in the mid-1960s at the confluence of the Aguarico and Cuyabeno rivers for these very reasons in order to form a school and a community.

### *The Founding of Boca Cuyabeno*

The confluence of the Aguarico and Cuyabeno rivers was peripheral to missionary activity. Capuchins referred to this point simply as *Boca Cuyabeno* or ‘the mouth of the Cuyabeno.’ It was also known as ‘*la avanzada*’ or ‘the point of advancement’ because it was the furthest point upriver that the Peruvian army had reached in 1941, before withdrawing (Añazco 2000, 79). After the war, a military outpost was built there – a house for one or two officers. In the 1950s and 1960s, the military and Carmelite and Capuchin missionaries characterized the mouth of the Cuyabeno as a mid-point between Nuevo Rocafuerte and the Carmelite mission to the north, based out of Puerto El Carmen (Cabodevilla 1989, 32, 84). That is, on the emerging

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<sup>99</sup> By 1977, CGG and CEPE had begun exploring for oil in Pañacocha (Iriarte 1980, 147), located on the Napo, just a day’s hike from Boca Cuyabeno.

<sup>100</sup> These schools included Pañacocha (1960), Pompeya (1961), and Puerto el Quinche (1962), each important settlements today.



map of regional administration, Boca Cuyabeno marked the northern margins of the Capuchin administration and southern margins of the Carmelite administration.

In 1958, Capuchins began yearly expeditions into the northern reaches of their administrative unit, visiting families along the Aguarico and Cuyabeno rivers.<sup>101</sup> Along the way, they gave away coffee, cigarettes, and dynamite for fishing to cultivate relationships, and they overnighted with a few scattered *mestizo* homesteaders and merchants or ‘*ribereños*’ (river people) and in nine military outposts that had been established between Nuevo Rocafuerte and Cuyabeno post-1941 (Cabodevilla 1989). Part of the Capuchins’ objective was to counter the expanding influence of protestants, associated with the Summer Linguistic Institute, which set up operations on the Lower Napo in 1956 and built a satellite residence on the Cuyabeno, among Siona and Secoya. A Playas resident named Fabiola Tangoy Vargas recalls travelling with her parents from their home on the Lower Aguarico to visit the protestant school on the Cuyabeno.<sup>102</sup> “They civilized the Sionas,” she recalls with amazement, “That is to say, they taught them to live like whites. They taught them to read, write; they even made a teacher out of a Siona...”<sup>103</sup> In 1959, the Capuchins opened their own residence next to the protestants. A Capuchin missionary wrote to the Ministry of Education that he found the Sionas’ customs to be “very primitive, as you know quite well” (Prefect of Aguarico 1961).<sup>104</sup> But the school of 24 students only lasted two years, due largely to its distance from Nuevo Rocafuerte. This failed experiment in

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<sup>101</sup> Missionary Miguel Cabodevilla (1989) compiled and published accounts of some of these journeys.

<sup>102</sup> Fabiola recalls that in the 1950s she travelled by canoe with her parents for three days from their home on the Lower Aguarico in order to visit a brother who was stationed in the outpost at Boca Cuyabeno.

<sup>103</sup> Fabiola’s parents wanted her to study, but she was turned away because classes were not taught in Kichwa.

<sup>104</sup> In the same letter, the missionaries requested that the Inspector provide wire for a fence to prevent “savage animals” from entering the school.

Cuyabeno was followed by a period of sustained concentration of Capuchin efforts and resources along the Napo River.

In subsequent years, Kichwa families that wanted Western education for their children began to settle at Boca Cuyabeno. In most accounts of Playas' founders, Alicia Coquinche and Marcial Noteno left Putumayo and arrived at Boca Cuyabeno in the mid-1960s, with three small children in tow.<sup>105</sup> One of Marcial's cousins followed<sup>106</sup>; then, the Yumbo and Coquinche families. A 1964 Capuchin census indicates that eight young Kichwa families with 35 people lived in proximity to the mouth of the Cuyabeno.<sup>107</sup> These families lived from subsistence agriculture, hunting, and fishing, but they also sold produce and, above all, animal skins to merchants for Western goods.<sup>108</sup> Education could be useful in those market relations. And some also viewed education as important token of civilization in-and-of-itself. Marcial's mother, Lola Machoa, insisted that all of her grandchildren study for that reason.

Lola had been smuggled to Spain in her youth under the skirt of a *patrón*'s wife. One historian of slavery in the Amazon refers to the smuggling of indigenous youth to Spain as the “reverse Middle Passage” (Reséndez 2016, 50). When Lola returned to the Amazon as a young

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<sup>105</sup> After Alejandro Londoño sold his cattle and retired to his home in Puerto Ospina in 1956 (Luis Luis 1994), former workers settled along the San Miguel and continued selling agricultural goods to Londoño. Espíritu Noteno founded the community of Singue and Bartolo Noteno formed Tacé, with Machoa and Guatatoca families. Still other Machoa and Guatatoca families formed the community Silvayacu. Today, their descendants continue to live in these communities. Bartolo Noteno sent his son Lorenzo to enter a Carmelite school in San Miguel to learn how to add. Young men were recruited to go to the military barracks and obtain a ‘military ticket’ that would be required of them if they were ever to seek out formal employment. However, after his year in the barracks, Marcial Noteno married Alicia Coquinche and the young couple decided to travel down the Cuyabeno to be closer to her parents and access good hunting for animal skins they could sell to Londoño.

<sup>106</sup> Juanciano Machoa and his wife, Andrea Jipa.

<sup>107</sup> These families likely also included the Yori, Andi, Ponce, and Shiguango families, according to several testimonies of Playas residents.

<sup>108</sup> They sold jaguar, neotropical otters, the collard peccary, and caiman skins to travelling merchants. In subsequent decades, Londoño's son Bolívar became the main skins trader. He paid with money, outboard motors, canoes, shotguns, and munitions.

woman, she was reportedly the only Kichwa among her peers who spoke Spanish. Bercelino remembers, “she was not afraid to speak with the priests, *patrones*, and people from the outside.” The story of Lola is appears in an autobiography of one of Marcial’s distant cousins, who says Lola tried to distance herself from the Kichwa, “despising people from her own race” (Santos Macanilla 2009, 16). Speaking Spanish was one way to achieve that distance. Lola had eight children with Acallo Noteno, in addition to ten children that Acallo had with a previous wife. They learned to speak and to value Spanish, rather than Kichwa. Consequently, in his youth, Marcial worked in the *patrón*’s store, where he learned to add and subtract, skills that later enabled him to engage white merchants on a better footing. Once in Boca Cuyabeno, he negotiated with a merchant every month, as he passed through to buy rubber, corn, and chickens in exchange for salt, soap, sugar, clothes, shotguns, and ammunition. For Marcial, education had a symbolic importance in-and-of-itself, but it helped him to secure market goods for practical and symbolic purposes.

Yet, the young parents at Boca Cuyabeno confronted immense geographic distances and social barriers to accessing education for their children at boarding schools on the Napo River. Fabiola Tangoy recalls that it was “very sad to take children to Nuevo Rocafuerte – *so far* – to a boarding school...” In addition, social boundaries re-emerged within schools. Fabiola herself had attended a boarding school with the children of *mestizo* military officers, where her peers and teachers ridiculed the Kichwa students. In terms of Kichwa families, she says, “we were only the Tangoyes and Siquiguas, and some Gualingas. Otherwise, it was people – classy people, to be sure! Sons of officers, like that. So, I saw that disdain... even though we Kichwas were very intelligent – we occupied first place in the school, but despite that, we weren’t valued by anyone.” Fabiola says she studied with “*gente buena*” (a colloquialism that translates to “good

people,” but refers to cultural or economic elites). These “*gente buena*” discriminated against her: ““Look, they speak Kichwa! How embarrassing! They drink *chicha!*’...” Due to such geographic and social barriers, parents at Boca Cuyabeno hesitated to send children to study elsewhere.

In the mid-1960s, a *ribereño* couple interested in organizing a school for their six young children settled near Boca Cuyabeno. María Cuenca and Breslín Chávez<sup>109</sup> began organizing families and traveling to Nuevo Rocafuerte to lobby for a salaried teacher and material support for a schoolhouse. Capuchin Alejandro Labaca, who was famously killed by Waorani in the 1980s, gave Breslín 500 *sucres* for a schoolhouse. Fabiola remembers the school fondly as a “little house [made] of leaves, of wood.” Labaca agreed to pay for a teacher from the Andes, and he participated in the school’s inauguration in early 1967 (Prefect of Aguarico 1967).<sup>110</sup> Labaca wrote to the Ministry of Education, indicating that they officially opened the school in 1969, in the “new parish of Cuyabeno.” That is, by this time, Boca Cuyabeno was no longer considered a “*caserío*” or an informal hamlet within the Nuevo Rocafuerte parish of Aguarico county, but rather the mission had recognized it as a parish in its own right in response to visits from

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<sup>109</sup> María Fredez Cuenca Anturi and Humberto Breslín Chávez Benalcazar were known for their good-humor and generosity as hosts to soldiers, missionaries, and other travelers. Breslín was a well-known small merchant who bought and sold animal skins. He was the first in the area to acquire an outboard motor. We cannot know the precise origins of Breslín, as there exist several hotly-contested versions of how he arrived in Cuyabeno and why he and the Coquinche family referred to one another as cousins. At play in this debate is the ethnic hierarchy within Playas. We know that Breslín’s father, Agustín Chávez, was from Yaruquí, near Quito. Some argue that Breslín was an adolescent when he left with his father to work on an *hacienda* in Peru. Karen Chávez thinks that Breslín was born in the Amazon to Agustín and one of his indigenous servants, who, after Agustín died, married a man of the Coquinche family. Rommel Chávez argues that it was Agustín’s second son who was born to the servant who later married a Coquinche. In those accounts, Breslín was of *mestizo* descent. By contrast, Andrea Jipa says that Breslín was the son of Baristo Coquinche, brother of Adolfo Coquinche (paternal grandfather of the Notenos), who cuckolded Agustín with his Zápara wife while Agustín was in Quito. Andrea says that Agustín returned one year and three months later to find his wife pregnant. She told him that his son was growing slowly because “it lacked its father’s warmth.” In any case, it is clear that Breslín later went to Colombia, along the Putumayo River, where he met María Cuenca, the daughter of a Wuitoto woman and a *mestizo* colonist.

<sup>110</sup> Interestingly, this letter was written to squash rumors that Labaca had overseen medical attention to Peruvians during his journey, which would have been a major insult to the Ecuadorians).

“numerous school committee parents.” The Capuchins designated Breslín as the parish authority or *teniente político*. He had leveraged his importance as a fulcrum for education and his capacity to organize families to become *the* political authority between Cuyabeno and Nuevo Rocafuerte.<sup>111</sup>

This moment is remembered as a major achievement. The families of Boca Cuyabeno had secured a school for their children and, in the process, redrawn the regional map.<sup>112</sup> Roque and Bercelino Noteno are proud to remember that they were among the first 25-30 students.<sup>113</sup> If there had been any doubt that Marcial would put them in school, Lola insisted: “My grandmother then obligated my father,” remembers Bercelino, “that we study, that we learn to read, to speak, to add...” This moment also marked the beginning of new struggles for education. On the one hand, family farms were quite dispersed. Students walked at least forty minutes from the nearest farm downriver. María and Breslín took many children into their home. Grateful parents gave them fruits, vegetables, and bush meat.<sup>114</sup> As the student body quickly grew to upwards of 80

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<sup>111</sup> Breslín Chávez set up a parish office near the school and sustained demographic and legal records and communications with the municipal government in Nuevo Rocafuerte for nearly two decades, until his death in 1985.

<sup>112</sup> It is important to highlight that the missionaries did not wheeled new or complete power in the region. Rather, missionaries derived their influence among indigenous groups by offering to mediate a set of unequal power relations between merchants and indigenous people. In turn, indigenous people selectively leveraged missionary power to access education and often remained skeptical of missionary proselytizing. In 2014, an evangelical missionary arrived in Playas on the same day we did. He was a repentant former member of the FARC. His aim was to build a church. The community welcomed him, but, ultimately, it took him three years to complete his church because every time he shipped wood to Playas to build, the wood disappeared... and reappeared on people’s farm houses up-and-down the Aguarico River. When, in 2015, he had organized a regional conference with hundreds of evangelicals, community members forced these visitors out of the community coliseum in order to hold a soccer match. His preaching has attracted a few curious observers and a handful of adherents, but he remains marginal in community life. Thus, to the present day, missionaries often sustain a contested, limited power in the region that communities leverage strategically when they can.

<sup>113</sup> A report from Jesús Langarica to the Minister of Education on August 12, 1970, announced the official creation of the Boca Cuyabeno school with about 25-30 students.

<sup>114</sup> Some of these children recall the couple’s generosity, while others also note that food and chores were unfairly distributed between his own children and the Kichwa children.

students, mothers took turns cooking at the school each week. And parents periodically organized to clean and maintain the schoolhouse and grounds, cutting back the dense rainforest. Fabiola remembers that the parents worked together enthusiastically to fill the swampy land around the school with sand. “We were very united and responsible...” she recalls.

The main challenge they faced was maintaining teachers or replacing teachers when they abandoned the school – or never arrived. A Capuchin correspondence with the government suggests that it was not uncommon for teachers throughout the northern Amazon suddenly to abandon such “distant places” either under questionable pretenses or no pretense whatsoever (Prefect of Aguarico 1970a). In some cases, teachers never arrived. These problems were particularly dogged at Boca Cuyabeno. Many former students remember a teacher, Rafael Guacán<sup>115</sup>, who spent four years in Boca Cuyabeno, but other teachers did not spend enough time to have been memorable. Fabiola recalls, “they would pass several months; they would leave...” In effect, she reflects, “we did not have teachers...”

In 1972, the families named the school after a *mestizo* war hero from 1941, “V́ctor Dávalos,” communicating their national loyalties in the hope of calling greater attention from the state.<sup>116</sup> That is, it was not educational indoctrination, but rather a lack of access to education that motivated people in Playas to associate themselves more closely with national society. A 1974 missionary report to the Ministry suggested sending a Kichwa teacher to Boca Cuyabeno in the hope that they might “resolve the problem that for years this school is suffering due to teachers not adapted to the environment.” Yet, another report from December, 1975, indicates that

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<sup>115</sup> In 1970, the Prefect wrote to the Supervisor of the Orient and Galapagos to nominate Rafael Guacán for the “school of Cuyabeno” (Prefect of Aguarico 1970b).

<sup>116</sup> As of 1972, the school still had no name (Azcona 1972a). By November, 1972, V́ctor Dávalos was recognized as the seventeenth Capuchin school in the cantons of Orellana and Aguarico (Azcona 1972b).

teachers “have not shown up to-date, consequently classes have not begun” (*Letter from P. Jesús Langarica to Guillermo Bracero C., the provincial director of education in Napo, December, 1975*). Boca Cuyabeno had secured a schoolhouse and, along with it, the promise of greater inclusion into dominant society, but, at the same time, distance became an excuse for institutional neglect, effectively naturalizing Playas’ subordination in the social structure as a function of geography.

The population at Boca Cuyabeno continued to grow, nonetheless. The Grefa family arrived. They were from the Upper Napo, but had lived for decades on the Lower Aguarico. The Vásquez family arrived from the Lower Aguarico. Other families came from San Miguel to the north, fleeing paramilitary violence.<sup>117</sup> For example, the Machoa and Guatatocha were pushed out by the killings of family members that had resulted from land disputes linked to the coca trade or pressures on young men to join armed groups. The growing population in Boca Cuyabeno built seven wooden schoolhouses and about twenty homes next to the school. Families hired an elderly woman to care for students and prepare food. While the school struggled to retain teachers, older students were put in charge of teaching younger students. Ultimately, the parents’ committee requested the Ministry of Education recognize Breslín’s son, Aníbal,<sup>118</sup> as the official teacher. In a letter to the Provincial Direction of Education on October 19, 1981, the committee wrote,

*... [W]ith the due respect and consideration that you deserve, and as a knower of your great spirit of collaboration for this distant sector, we have decided to make this request, – in which we ask as a special favor that Aníbal Chávez Cuenca, son of this Parish, a graduate of the Eleventh Grade, who has already begun working*

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<sup>117</sup> The coca boom in Putumayo began in 1978 and incorporated former Londoño workers as producers and laborers, but by the 1980s the coca trade was dominated by the FARC and paramilitary groups (Londoño Botero 2015; Torres Bustamante 2012).

<sup>118</sup> Aníbal later left the school to become president of the community and then a representative of FONAKISE. In the 1990s, he was murdered in Esmeraldas, under unclear circumstances.

*due to the lack of a teacher and at the request of the parents' committee... be granted the position of auxiliary teacher. We know the reasons for denying the granting of this position – given that there are many High School graduates, but the fact is that no graduated teacher adjusts to the mode of life, for being so far from a society, [and] our children are falling behind in their studies... (translation mine).*

In this letter, the parents' committee write that teachers did not stay in Boca Cuyabeno because “this distant sector” and its “mode of life” are so far from “society.” The letter speaks of the perception that Boca Cuyabeno was peripheral, both geographically and socially.

The community had to manage school operations independently. In 1981, the parents' committee even wrote to the Ministry, which had failed to inspect the school, to report that they had inspected it themselves, finding it to be “functioning with complete regularity.”<sup>119</sup> They requested that the Ministry recognize Anibal's wife<sup>120</sup> as a second teacher. Yet, their efforts to sustain the school had clear limitations. In particular, they could not offer High School education.

In the 1970s, a handful of students finished the sixth grade in Cuyabeno and continued in boarding schools<sup>121</sup>. But large distances and high costs of rent, transport, and school supplies meant that few families considered sending young men away,<sup>122</sup> whereas fathers denied young women any opportunity to continue studying.<sup>123</sup> Marcial Noteno's first grandson, Ernesto, remembers

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<sup>119</sup> Letter dated May, 1982, from the parents' committee to the provincial director of education of Napo.

<sup>120</sup> Marlene Salazar de Chávez

<sup>121</sup> Students boarded in schools in Puerto El Carmen, Nuevo Rocafuerte, and Limoncocha.

<sup>122</sup> The eldest of the Noteno brothers, Héctor, went to Limoncocha, but after he got married and dropped out in the 11<sup>th</sup> grade, Marcial was embittered and refused to send any of his next eight children away to study.

<sup>123</sup> Fathers told their daughters that only men might access jobs or women in boarding schools would end up married and pregnant – in either case, they argued, they would lose their investments. Elba Yumbo says she studied in Playas until the fourth grade, when her parents told her, “that we [were] going to grow accustomed to bad [behavior], going around like crazy, and then we would get pregnant.” There are many cases of teen pregnancy in schools. Rocío Chávez explains that pregnancy is often viewed as one socially legitimate form of escaping from abusive relations within one's own household to form a new household. On the other hand, for many young girls, such as Yessica Noteno, their parents' anxieties about pregnancy seemed feigned or exaggerated and were a source of tremendous frustration.



facing many of the same challenges as recently as the 1990s: “I studied primary school here in Víctor Dávalos. From there, I went to the Limoncocha Institute. There I was able to study for two years and, due to money issues – economic support, we could not continue because in our times conditions were critical...” Thus, the struggle for education in Playas continued into the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

In this section, I have detailed the successes and setbacks of attempts by Kichwa families in Boca Cuyabeno to educate their children. These families viewed education as an important marker of civilization and a tool for interacting with white market actors. As administrative-educational centers proliferated on the Napo River, however, young people struggled to access them. In the face of a renewed geographic and social marginalization, residents decided to bring education to Boca Cuyabeno.

### *Education and Persistence in The Millennium City*

The Millennium today is a bustling town on weekdays and it empties out on Friday afternoons and during the summer months, as parents motor off to the farm to catch up on work.<sup>124</sup> Parents face the considerable challenge of moving students back-and-forth between the school and their farms, as a mother of four small daughters, Marisabel Gualinga relates: “It’s complicated with the kids because one time we tried to go away for one month. And in the month, they missed class more than four times. Why? Because there are weeks when there is gasoline and there are weeks when there isn’t.” Marisabel Gualinga’s partner, Benito Chávez, concurs that they feel torn between the City and the farm: “We’ve had to go to the farm... to

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<sup>124</sup> Mobility to-and-from the farm also entails health risks for babies, whose bodies are weak and tend to leave their spirits behind wherever they rest. If a baby cries at night, parents call out to their spirits to guide them back from the farm or the City.

spend a week... 15 days... 8 days... And we can't abandon the Millennium Community either because we have our kids studying..." Families struggle to maintain their farms. "Our worry is the farm because it has been a bit abandoned," reiterates Domingo Tapuy, a father of eight, "but we definitely have to live in the Millennium City for the kids' studies." Education is the central motivation for adults to persist with one foot in the City.

In this section, I highlight how memories of prior struggles for education, as a meaningful source of dignity, shape the persistence of residents today. Many admit that the many challenges they face seem less daunting in relation to obstacles their parents and grandparents faced. It is essential to consider that historical trajectory to understand persistence in the Millennium.

As I briefly mentioned in Chapter 2, on my second trip to Playas in 2015, I found residents digging canals to drain flooded streets that had been placed too close to the river. After it rained and the streets filled up like bathtubs, women and children would go out with brooms to plow water towards the edge of the city and into canals. As the City continued to settle into its loose, sandy fill, water pipes were cracking and braking, and so people captured rainwater in washing basins. When the electricity failed or electric stovetops broke, they built fires next to their homes. At that time, Petroamazonas had stopped paying for technicians to maintain the potable water, sewage, and garbage collection and the municipal government also refused to pay maintenance personnel or send supplies because too few residents were willing to pay municipal taxes. In response, a wiry pig farmer named Líder Jaramillo developed an intimate understanding of the pumps, electrical circuits, and pipes in the City. He discovered techniques by trial and error to jerry-rig them, for example, wrapping blown fuses with foil or cigarette papers to complete circuits in the potable water system; scrubbing rusty parts in pumps clean with a mixture of gasoline and oil; and changing out broken nuts and bolts for parts from old boat

engines. “This city is maintained by struggle,” declared the garbage collector, who continued pedaling his collection bike from house-to-house morning and evening. Networks of clientelism had also formed around members of the local government and people who still worked for the oil company and could access and redistribute gasoline and engine oil in exchange for money, favors, food, or goodwill. Gasoline is expensive and scarce in this region, in part due to the costs of transporting it and in large part because the government enforces individual quotas, requiring permits to buy it, due to the black market of subsidized gasoline that traffics it into Colombia. The mini-black market that had emerged within Playas enabled people to travel regularly to their farms and bring food back. Thus, residents engaged in creative, collective struggles to respond to structural and design failures, filling-in gaps and jerry-rigging broken materials and machines.

They also direct considerable organizing efforts directly towards sustaining the school, even though legally it belongs to the Ministry of Education now.<sup>125</sup> As I also mentioned in Chapter 2, on our first morning in Playas, the community was conducting a *minga* on school grounds, cleaning, trimming the grass, and cutting back the rainforest, much as they had before the Millennium. Parents have also lobbied the state to secure a full teaching staff, as they did in the 1960s and 1970s. Hilda Chávez, the school rector, explains that in Playas an ‘education commission’ refers to a group of half a dozen parents, tasked by the community assembly with traveling to district or zonal offices of the Ministry of Education to present demands and complaints directly. She says that only due to that direct pressure over the course of two years were they able to finally secure a stable teaching staff in 2016. In addition, parents continue to

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<sup>125</sup> In 1991, Playas became incorporated under central state administration, as part of the Cuyabeno Wildlife Reserve, but the community maintained an agreement with the Ministry of Agriculture and later the Ministry of Environment to occupy certain lands for family agriculture and other lands for autonomous communal use, including the school. Since 2013, the Ministry of Education claims the school grounds as its own, though that jurisdiction is occasionally questioned by community members.

act as supervisors of the teaching staff, as they had in prior decades. When a fence was erected around the school and High School in 2013, it represented an obstacle to community supervision, and so parents mobilized commissions until the Ministry removed it. Not understanding the history of militant parents' committees, such demands were inexplicable to school administrators.<sup>126</sup> After the fence was removed, parents descended on the school to monitor closely, until another controversy emerged. The Ministry had begun sending students to board in Playas from elsewhere in the province, including students from the 'emo' subculture, who, in this context, were characterized by black clothing, elaborate hairstyles, marijuana smoking, and self-mutilation. "If they want to cut their arms," declared an indignant Edwin Noteno before the assembly, "they can go harvest a hectare of corn, like we had to do!" Parents worried that the emos might distract their kids from their studies. They reacted by mobilizing commissions to Quito to have the 'emos' and the school director removed and a community member appointed as the new director. The Ministry ceded to their demands and, in exchange, the community let the fence be reinstalled. Still, if parents perceive a lack of punctuality or professionalism (e.g., poor dress) among teachers, gossip spreads and hostilities are expressed in the assembly, which calls on teachers and administrators to explain their behavior and intentions.<sup>127</sup>

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<sup>126</sup> It is easy to misread the meanings of such features in a landscape. Cielo et al. (2016) ridiculed the Millennium City fence between the community and the jungle, asserting that "[b]efore oil activities, families walked their territory more," but residents actually tend to value that fence for the security it offers. The jungle is not only a space of resources, but also of danger. (During one of my visits in 2017, a teenager nearly bled to death on his farm after a jaguar attack).

<sup>127</sup> One major complaint that parents often express is that the teachers from the Andes do not punish students physically. Adults often celebrate the teachers they had who taught them discipline through beatings or by putting tobacco in their noses and lament that students today are coddled.



*Figure 6. School Entry in Playas del Cuyabeno, 2015  
Source: Angus Lyall*

Residents are determined to ensure that the schools in the Millennium fulfill its potential. The challenges they face are considerable, but they seem less daunting, as residents place them in historical context. One of the first students in Playas in the 1960s, Rommel Chávez marvels at his parents' resolve: "Our parents saw the need that there ought to be a school. So, the idea grew in them to put a school here, form a village, and they did it!" He reminds his two young children that the old schoolhouse in Boca Cuyabeno had no running water and was full of mud; exams were oral because paper and pencils were scarce; rainwater damaged books due to holes and cracks in the roofs; and bats used to get in. Moreover, when he went to High School in the 1970s, he traveled two days, mostly by foot, to get to the Colombian border. Olga Grefa, a farmer who also runs a small store in Playas, grew up closer to a school in a town upriver, but she tells similar stories to her own two children of when she carried her shoes in her hands on her daily trek to school through the mud and rain:

*I said, ‘... why do I have to suffer?’ So, my mom told me, ‘First you have to suffer to be better later... If you don’t study, you are going to be with machete [on the farm].’ That’s what she said, ‘if you study, then you will be a little better... [Y]ou’ll know how to manage money...’ My husband also discusses these things... He suffered to study. Sometimes without eating... [W]e have suffered to study.*

Lingering memories of hardships and migrations for education recall traumas and feelings of isolation and loneliness, far from family and social ties. Norma Jipa, like many of the mothers I cited in Chapter 2, explains that she suffers from boredom in the Millennium, but appreciates living close to the schoolhouse. After decades of struggle with missionaries and state officials for resources and hardships in boarding schools, parents celebrate their ability to provide education close to home and within networks of care. “I used to say, ‘I want to have a High School here,’” says Bercelino, “so that the young people could prepare themselves, could study without leaving for far away.”

In this chapter, we have seen that during second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the renewal and institutionalization of ethnic hierarchies through the uneven distribution of education in the northern Amazon marked a major shift in the history of Playas’ founders. They re-organized their social, territorial, economic, and political lives to pursue education for their children. Roney Noteno, Bercelino’s last son, describes the significance of the Millennium City in those terms: “Our grandparents, when they built the first school [in the 1960s] already thought that our relationship with the jungle needed to change, that we needed to become professionals, go out, have a job...” Accessing education proved to be a remarkable challenge. Accessing a job on the outside, as I discuss in the next chapter, would also prove to be a challenge, as most young graduates return to subsistence activities on their farms. Still, educational credentials in-and-of-themselves are highly-coveted tokens of personhood and respect.<sup>128</sup> In 2016, I witnessed an

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<sup>128</sup> In a conversation with Edwin Noteno’s son Marco, he asked me if he could get a PhD in tourism. He was interested in studying tourism in university, but wanted to make sure that he would be able to get a higher degree

induction ceremony for 4-year-olds in Playas who were about to enter kindergarten. As the national anthem played over the loud speaker, a dozen children in dresses and shirts and ties marched out to the center of the coliseum. Local authorities gave motivational speeches for the children and parents and Edwin Noteno called on parents to ensure that these toddlers finish High School, so that “they won’t be those people of least importance in life.” I was stunned by the harshness of his words and gravity of his tone, particularly in relation to such small children. As I looked around me, I saw parents clapping enthusiastically who had not studied beyond primary school. They seemed to know something about the social importance of educational credentials that I did not grasp.<sup>129</sup> <sup>130</sup> Today, the Millennium largely represents a place where their children might access the education they had not.

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after that. He explained further that his father was getting an undergraduate degree online and Marco wanted make sure to accumulate more degrees than his dad, in the spirit of competition.

<sup>129</sup> The pride of having a school has led some Kichwa youth to assert ethnic superiority over other ethnic groups that lack a school of their own. Kichwa students have expressed superiority over a handful of indigenous Cofán students who travel upriver to study there, bullying and taunting them as primitive “*cushmas*” or “*tunics*.” In one incident, Kichwa boys shoved a Cofán boy head-first into the toilet. 19-year-old Olimpo Casanova says, “the young people here discriminate them, make fun of them.” A parent of a Cofán student in the neighboring community of Zábalo laments, “They think they are white.”

<sup>130</sup> Since the 19<sup>th</sup> century, modern states have increasingly relied on non-coercive forms of rule through institutions of education to extract surplus labor more efficiently. Max Weber (1919) argued that the modern state is defined by its monopoly on the *legitimate* use of force. In that tradition, Pierre Bourdieu (2014) argued that state authority operates in and through people’s commitments to struggle over social recognition – at least societies structured in hierarchies. In that sense, he argued, education was a key institution for producing state legitimacy. “The state operates in and through us,” he added (2014, 183), “state thinking penetrates the minutest aspects of our everyday...” Diverse critical literatures have also posited that the state is no more or less than a claim to legitimate authority (Abrams 1988; Das and Poole 2004; Joseph and Nugent 1994; Krupa and Nugent 2015; Mitchell 1991).

## CHAPTER 5. MIGRATIONS: MARKET VOLATILITY AND URBAN ASPIRATIONS

*Our grandparents, when they built the first school, already thought that our relationship with the jungle ought to change, that we ought to become professionals, leave, have a job... – 19-year-old Playas resident Roney Noteno, 2018.*

### *Introduction*

In this chapter, I track the consolidation of urban aspirations<sup>131</sup> in Playas during the final decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The rise of missionary education and authority in the northern Amazon was accompanied and facilitated by the expansion of the military, colonists from the Andes, and oil companies, which together began to introduce motorized fluvial transportation, roads, telecommunications, and electrical networks, extending transportation and communication links. These territorial changes drew market networks closer to Playas during the last three decades of the century. A series of economic booms and busts drew families in this marginal or “pericapitalist”<sup>132</sup> space further into market relations and subsequently pushed them out. For example, men participated in a boom in animal skins trading, but over-hunting, territorial pressures, and regulation brought it to an end. They worked in oil explorations, but that boom subsided. They planted new cash crops, like cocoa, but international prices grew volatile. A boom in tourism drew the entire community into labor relations, but tourism collapsed. In large part, this instability translated from global and national contexts of neoliberal reform. And so, in

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<sup>131</sup> In the words of anthropologist Gina Crivello (2015), “‘aspirations’ are about much more than abstract ‘futures’; they orient actions in the present” (39) (also, see Aguilar-Støen 2019; Appadurai 2007[2004]; Holloway *et al* 2009; Smith and Gergan 2015).

<sup>132</sup> U.S. anthropologist Anna Tsing (2015) describes pericapitalist spaces in terms of those that are “simultaneously inside and outside capitalism” (63). Playas may fit this description well. Moreover, in Playas “pericapitalist” must also refer to a space that is *at times* inside and at others outside of capitalist relations of production.



the face of unstable market relations, men migrated to urban centers to try to better secure access to market goods, as well as education – while families continued to rely on subsistence activities of the women who remained. However, urban migrants faced isolation and discrimination that shaped evolving aspirations to bring urban space and non-agrarian work back to Playas. As in prior chapters, I once more find that the incomplete inclusion of Playas residents into dominant society had the effect of provoking them to engage in new strategies. And, once more, the strategies for accessing market goods (i.e., education, urban migration) took on symbolic value in-and-of-themselves. In turn, the very act of aspiring towards greater integration takes on social importance, perhaps even despite the prospects of achieving it. I close the chapter with regional perspectives on urban aspirations in Cuyabeno from the five other major communities in the Cuyabeno Wildlife Reserve.

I develop this analysis in several stages. First, I discuss the accelerated territorial integration of the northern Amazon in the 1970s and 1980s. Second, I examine experiences of a precarious market integration in Playas. Third, I describe the deepening stigmatization of farm and forest spaces in this turbulent period, as men preferred to migrate into cities than return to subsistence activities. Fourth, I explore how memories of isolation and discrimination among urban migrants shaped aspirations<sup>133</sup> for urban development and non-agrarian jobs in Playas' territories. Fifth, I discuss ongoing attempts to organize non-agrarian work within the City, as another process that keeps residents in place. Finally, I discuss perspectives on Playas and territorial aspirations in the other Kichwa, Siona, Secoya, Shuar, and Cofán communities in Cuyabeno. This chapter is based on the community archive in Playas, the Ministry of

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<sup>133</sup> While research in youth geographies has explored relations between aspiration and outmigration towards urban centers (Bunnell 2019; Bunnell *et al* 2018; Gale and Parker 2015), this chapter speaks to emerging aspirations for reintegrated homes and communities within an urbanizing Amazon (Lyall et al., 2019).

Environment archive in Tarapoa, and interviews with Playas residents, as well as a series of focus groups throughout the reserve.

### *Territorial Integration Under Neoliberalism*

In the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the emerging political economy of oil, coupled with the agrarian reforms of a modernizing state (Fischer 2015), greatly expanded territorial linkages and commodity flows in the northern Amazon (Valdivia 2005). Integration exposed farmers and laborers in Playas to increasingly volatile markets that ultimately encouraged migration into urban labor markets. In this section, I describe a series of economic, political, demographic, and infrastructural changes that spurred that integration.

Regional integration had been incremental in prior decades. In the 1950s, missionaries built runways for small planes and, in 1962, they introduced the first motorized canoes to the region (Iriarte de Aspurz 1980, 88). The state also began to develop legal frameworks to facilitate the demographic growth of non-indigenous actors, as a strategy to secure oil-rich territories for the nation. In 1957, the National Institute of Colonization of the Ecuadorian Amazonian Region (INCRAE)<sup>134</sup> was formed and offered land titles to immigrants, mostly from the Andes, and farmer cooperatives. But the national agrarian reforms of 1964 and 1973 and the boom in oil prices of the 1970s drove a much more rapid, dramatic regional integration.

Agrarian reforms responded to demands from organized peasants (Guerrero 1983; Velasco 1979) and modernizing agrarian elites (Barsky 1978; 1980), as well as urban industrialists (Chiriboga 1988), to break up idle estates in the Andes and on the coast. Reforms effectively broke up estates, but did not effectively facilitate peasant ownership. They failed to

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<sup>134</sup> INCRAE was later renamed the Ecuadorian Institute of Agrarian Reform and Colonization (IERAC).

ensure support for peasant production and market access (Bretón 1997) and ultimately witnessed the re-concentration of land and water resources among modernizing elites (Chiriboga 1988; Murmis 1986). In the 1980s, the state faced rising sovereign debt (Acosta 2001) and, by the 1990s, neoliberal administrations were enacting severe austerity measures that stalled agrarian development (Kay 1995; Martínez Novo 2004; North 2003). The 1994 Law of Agrarian Development (Whitaker 1998) consolidated neoliberal financial and legal regimes that accelerated the re-concentration of fertile lands under export-oriented agro-industries (Brassel *et al* 2005; Lyall 2010; Martínez Valle 2017) and enabled re-concentration within Andean communities (Martínez Valle and Martínez Godoy 2019). Across the global South in this period, agrarian modernization witnessed the expulsion of unprecedented numbers of rural-urban migrants into cities that lacked industrial labor markets (Gugler 1982; Davis 2006). It is in this context that the neoliberal state encouraged thousands of landless and land poor farmers to migrate into the Amazon as an alternative, offering them land titles in indigenous-occupied territories that was widely-considered “empty space” (Añazco 2000, 7), as one former colonist wrote in his memoir. At the time, droughts in the southern Andes also contributed to a large migration of farmers towards the Amazon. However, it was oil that ultimately made possible the expansion of labor markets, infrastructure, and towns.<sup>135</sup>

The boom in oil prices of the 1970s was spurred by OPEC’s 1973-1974 embargo on Western nations. Oil companies built highways into the northern Amazon, opening up dense rainforest for farmer-settlers to occupy roadsides in territories that indigenous families had once used for hunting (Cepek 2018). By 1971, a highway was completed to Coca (Iriarte de Aspuz 1980, 91). Soon thereafter, Texaco began pumping oil from a point in the rainforest called Lago

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<sup>135</sup> By the early 1980s, the new settlement of Lago Agrio already had a population of over 7,000 (Cabodevilla 1989, 27).

Agrio to Esmeraldas on the coast and completed roads between Quito, Lago Agrio, and Coca, tearing a path for demographic change and territorial integration in the northern Amazon.

The government framed the oil boom and *mestizo* colonization in terms of the patriotic expansion of Ecuadorian sovereignty over empty territories and idle resources, a sentiment frequently echoed by colonists. One colonist named Jorge Añazco (2000), who would later become a regional politician, celebrated the work that oil infrastructures did by opening up the rainforest “so that the poor of Ecuador might drive the great process of colonization of the virgin jungles of the North-East” (8). Some indigenous families also sought land titles, forming farmer cooperatives to gain institutional recognition and land rights (Erazo 2013), but *mestizo* settlers were often able to take advantage of institutional biases and cultural and language barriers in the INCRAE to control fertile lands and have land conflicts resolved in their favor (Iriarte de Aspuz 1980). Through the 1970s, agrarian reforms, droughts, and the oil industry’s expanding labor market and infrastructures drove a primarily *mestizo* colonization (some indigenous families from the southern Amazon, especially Shuar, also migrated northward).

Colonization spurred a political reaction from indigenous communities, which formed regional organizations<sup>136</sup> that later fed into a national movement. In 1980, Playas and twenty-nine other Kichwa communities of the northern Amazon formed *Jatun Comuna Aguarico* (later FONAKISE<sup>137</sup>). This process of articulation proceeded across the Amazon and, in 1986, organizations from the Amazon and Andes formed the Confederation of Indigenous Nationalities

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<sup>136</sup> In 1961, the Shuar had organized the first modern indigenous political organization (Becker 2010). Located in the southern Amazon, it was called the Local Association of Jivaro Centers. Three years later, it became the Federation of Shuar Centers. In 1975, the first northern Amazonian indigenous meeting was held in a Shuar community a few kilometers upriver from Playas, leading to the formation of the Union of Natives of the Ecuadorian Amazon (UNAE) in 1978 (later FCUNAE) (Iriarte de Aspuz 1980, 134).

<sup>137</sup> These thirty communities later articulated into the broader, provincial Kichwa organisation *Federación de Organizaciones de la Nacionalidad Kichwa de Sucumbíos del Ecuador* (FONAKISE).

of Ecuador (CONAIE), demanding cultural respect, bilingual education, agrarian resources, and territorial autonomy (Becker 2010; Colloredo-Mansfeld 2009; García 2003; Pallares 2002). CONAIE rapidly gained nationwide political visibility and clout in the 1990s.<sup>138</sup> However, along with the rise of CONAIE, indigenous demands for structural agrarian transformation and land redistribution subsided. Analysts have explained this decline as a result of CONAIE's entrance in electoral politics and its alignment with NGOs (Hidalgo 2013; Bretón 2015; Martínez Novo 2014); some also cite the subsequent sway of Correa's discourse and clientelist cooptation of peasant and indigenous organizations (Cerbino *et al* 2017; de la Torre 2013; Ninahualpa 2018).<sup>139</sup> My co-authors and I have argued that these prominent analyses obscure other factors contributing to a decline in agrarian politics, particularly the widely-shared experience of increasing agrarian market volatility, the spread of education, and the subsequent rise of non-agrarian aspirations in rural Ecuador (Lyall *et al* 2019). That is, the conspicuous, widely-documented growth of the indigenous movement in the 1990s was paralleled by dramatic commodity price volatility on a global scale (Patel 2013) and unprecedented rates of rural-urban migration for work and education in the Andes and Amazon (Bilsborrow *et al* 1987; Chiriboga 1988; Davis *et al* 2017). Thus, the failures of agrarian reforms, coupled with trade and land market liberalization, propelled reactions from communities to articulate a powerful, nationwide indigenous movement (Becker 2010), but it also contributed to the fragmentation of peasant and agrarian politics (Kay 1995; Zamosc 2003). As I detail in the following section, in Playas,

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<sup>138</sup> CONAIE led nationwide strikes in 1990 and 1994, forming the political party Pachakutic in 1996, and led the ouster of governments in 1997 and 2000. By the 2000s, Pachakutic had achieved electoral successes and top positions within governments (Martínez Novo 2004).

<sup>139</sup> For example, the National Federation of Peasant, Indigenous, and Black Organizations (FENOCIN) supported Correa.

experiences of market volatility also contributed to the search for urban futures among Playas' male residents towards the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

### *Precarious Market Integration in Playas*

Anthropologists have documented a particular economic 'duality' throughout the Cuyabeno region, whereby Kichwa, Cofã, Secoya, Siona, and Shuar communities engage in subsistence activities and market exchange (Lu and Sorensen 2013). Expanding transportation networks in the oil era have not reached into Cuyabeno, where residents continue to depend on subsistence-level hunting, fishing, and farming. They do not lack farmland (Davis et al 2017), though the nutrient-poor, swampy soils of Cuyabeno are less than ideal. In addition to organizing around education, families in Playas and other sites in the region create a sense of community by helping one another on their farms. In Playas, individual families call *mingas* or work parties every three to eight weeks to clear away rainforest or harvest rice, corn, or other labor-intensive crops (hosts can attract more volunteers, the better *chicha* and food they provide).<sup>140</sup> Nonetheless, since the founding of Playas, farmers have also sought out links to market networks in order to continue accessing Western goods. During a series of commodity booms towards the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, residents appropriated new tokens of status from market networks,

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<sup>140</sup> On the eve of a work party at Yessica Noteno's farm in 2017, Armando Noteno explained to me that it is a practice of reciprocity – "I help you, but 'heads up', you will have to help me," but it is much easier to recruit people if you "attend to them better." That is, lunch and *chicha* must be provided and some people also provide cigarettes and liquor. Yessica provides good lunches and *chicha* and she can usually gather a small group of 6 or 7 people on a regular basis. Likewise, each *barrio* is expected to keep its streets clean and free of weeds, but people help one another between barrios when they have free time, often at night. In some ways, the consolidation of the population into the Millennium City facilitated practices of reciprocity, as neighbors help load and unload canoes, fill sacks of dry cocoa or rice, or weed around their homes.

whereas each bust, in turn, curtailed access. In this section, I explore booms and busts in Playas and their consequences in terms of urban migration.<sup>141</sup>

The first Kichwa families to settle at Boca Cuyabeno in the 1960s hunted tiger skins for sale to small intermediaries like Breslín Chávez or to intermediaries with broader geographic reach, like Alejandro Londoño's son, Bolívar. The skins eventually ended up in European markets. When Marcial Noteno arrived in Boca Cuyabeno, he and his father-in-law, the shaman Adolfo Coquinche, worked on their farms, fished, and hunted for subsistence, but they also traveled to Colombia and Peru to sell skins. Adolfo and Marcial – the renowned shaman and the born merchant – were dedicated farmers and forest-dwellers, as well as forward-looking, market-oriented entrepreneurs. They were both what anthropologists Dorothea and Norman Whitten have referred to as the *Sacha Runa*, “the person of the forest, of the spirit-filled sentient universe” and the *Alli Runa*, “the native person of the hamlet, of ‘civilization’...” (2008, 53).<sup>142</sup> Marcial worked rice and corn on his farm, but, when he had capital, he invested in his small store, where he sold Coca-Colas, sweets, and liquors. He also sold extra rice and corn to travelling merchants or exchanged for shotguns, pots, salt, and clothing.

Marcial had learned to value the mental labor of doing business – the work of merchants – and to despise the physical labor of farming – the toil of indigenous families. Yet, Boca Cuyabeno remained marginal to market society. Like most other families on the Aguarico, Marcial depended on subsistence activities. His family's diet depended on birds, wild boar, and

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<sup>141</sup> Anthropologist Anna Tsing (2015) suggests that we might gain useful insights into capitalism in its gaps, in what she calls pericapitalist relations – “simultaneously inside and outside capitalism” (63). By contrast, here we see a place where pericapitalist relations are *periodically* inside and periodically outside. Farmers on this frontier have collectively entered into – and retreated from – market relations on numerous occasions over the last century.

<sup>142</sup> Regarding Kichwas in Pastaza province to the south, Whitten and Whitten (2008) write of *Alli Runa*, who were “of the world of Christian conquest and state domination,” and of *Sacha Runa*, who were “of the world of spirit control of life-giving and life-taking powers: the garden, the forest, the waterpower system” (53). They also note these subjects were, in social practice, “one and the same” (ibid.).

other small game; yuca and bananas from the farm; and fruits collected from the forest, like guayaba, guaya, caimito, and zapote. Rita Yumbo remembers that in the late 1970s her family only purchased salt and matches, whenever they sold corn to a merchant who passed downriver from Lago Agrio. From time to time, her family sold a pig to buy clothing or to save up for a motor. Otherwise, she says, they even derived their cooking oil from animal fat, instead of buying it.

In the late 1970s, the state began to turn to conservationist NGOs like Natura (Lewis 2016) to bar and manage delimited areas of the countryside and rainforest from increased market integration. NGO-sponsored conservationism would become the preferred form among neoliberal states to sidestep growing critiques of pervasive ecological degradation (Castree and Henderson 2014).

In 1979, the Ministry of Agriculture formed the Cuyabeno Wildlife Reserve<sup>143</sup> to manage the impacts of colonization, in turn placing restrictions on the agriculture, hunting, fishing, and logging of indigenous families along the Cuyabeno River and the forests to the north of Boca Cuyabeno.<sup>144</sup> The skins trade entered into decline. In previous eras, many indigenous groups had occupied territories for limited periods, in part to avoid over-hunting (Macdonald 1984, 33), but colonization and limited conservation areas ended mobility and increased pressure on animal populations. In an interview in 2015, middle-aged Playas resident Humberto Yumbo

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<sup>143</sup> The reserve in Cuyabeno expanded in 1991 to incorporate Boca Cuyabeno (by then called ‘Playas del Cuyabeno’) and a number of communities of Kichwa, Siona, Secoya, Cofán, and Shuar on the Cuyabeno and Aguarico rivers. The Ministry pressured communities to accept boundaries and territorial management plans.

<sup>144</sup> The representative of the reserve for the Ministry of Environment, Luis Borbor, explains today that the park was formed to manage colonization. The NGO Natura began to support the park in 1991, channeling resources through a debt relief program, to confront logging. In 1993, when Borbor discussed developing management accords with the communities, he came up against resistance, but in 1996 Playas signed a management plan. 80% of the reserve is now included in a management agreement with between an indigenous community and the Ministry (the communities of Taikwa, Charap, Zancudo, and Zábalo receive income from their agreements through a conservation program called ‘*socio bosque*’ [forest partner]).



remembered that logging then became the core market-oriented activity (although to get to market, most still depended on a military transport that only passed by once per month). Playas began to enter into occasional territorial conflicts with neighboring communities<sup>145</sup> and frequent conflicts with park guards, who fined residents for over-hunting or for logging (or using dynamite to fish).<sup>146</sup>

Subsequently, markets for coffee and cocoa production mediated access to Western goods and, as education grew in importance, access to money for sending children to study on the ‘outside.’ In the late 1970s, farmers in Playas began to plant coffee and cocoa in the months and years after international prices spiked by 300% and 350%, respectively (Maurice and Davis 2011). In the 1980s, conservation NGOs and multilateral institutions<sup>147</sup> began to support coffee and cocoa cultivation in the region, as alternatives to logging. While farmers throughout Cuyabeno struggled with pests and funguses that attacked these crops (particular genetically-modified versions), high prices made the risk seem worthwhile. However, following the price booms of the late 1970s, trade liberalization (McMichael 2005; Patel 2013) and the financialization of commodities (Schmidt 2015) on a global scale led to price volatility. By the mid-to-late 1980s, coffee prices were *the* most volatile among export crops internationally (FAO 2002). And cocoa was not much more predictable (Maurice and Davis 2011). In 2017, for example, a taxi driver in the nearest major town upriver from Playas explained to me that when his parents arrived in the area in the early 1970s, agricultural prices were relatively predictable, but within a few years, cocoa became like a “lottery... you never knew if the investment was

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<sup>145</sup> To the north, Playas was bordered by the Sionas of Puerto Bolívar and, in 1984, a group of Cofans created a new community called Zábalo to the east.

<sup>146</sup> On many occasions guards were met with resistance or hostility. Rita Yumbo remembers challenging these new actors in the region to either let them hunt in peace or give them food.

<sup>147</sup> The Italian NGO executed a large, European Union-funded project in Cuyabeno in the 2000s.

going to turn out.” That is the reason for which he and his peers looked for non-agrarian work. Moreover, liberalization and the expansion of cocoa and coffee production globally witnessed overall price declines from the late 1970s into the 1990s. In Playas, some men turned back to logging, while others migrated temporarily northward to Putumayo or southward to Napo to seek employment in oil explorations.

In 1991, tourism suddenly and temporarily flourished as an alternative both to agrarian work and to migration. A three-story, floating hotel or “flotel” called Flotel Orellana, associated with the international agency Metropolitan Tours, came to the Aguarico. The primary investor struck a deal with Playas and offered tours up the Cuyabeno in community canoes and overnights or so-called “jungle camps” in community-run cabins that featured cultural shows (e.g., dance) and the sale of artisan goods. In 1992, Humberto Yumbo entered the military barracks and he was shocked when he returned just a year later to discover a vibrant tourism industry. People were working as boat drivers, rowers, guides, cooks, waiters, cleaners, and carpenters. Women were learning to make handicrafts. This boom drew nearly the entire community into labor relations. “They were very fruitful times,” remembers Rommel Chávez.

This work did not produce enough income to feed families, but they did not live from markets. Work was not a vital source of subsistence, but rather of tools, clothing, sumptuary goods, and funds for education. Salaried work was also an identity that distinguished people who could access it from those who could not. When community members began to suspect that the owner of the flotel, like prior *patrones*, was not paying them the value of their work, they demanded pay increases to the point that, in 2001, he stopped working with Playas. Increasing border violence associated with the U.S. military’s anti-drug campaign Plan Colombia also curtailed flows of tourists through other agencies. Only one group of 40 people continued to

work with a separate agency.<sup>148</sup> The community at large was left without reliable work. Rather than return to their farms full-time, many men preferred to take their chances migrating to cities.

### *De-Valuing Agrarian and Jungle Spaces*

Domingo Tapuy is one of Playas' most active proponents of tourism development. He taught himself to play the violin and keyboard in order to put on cultural shows. He estimates that only 10 or 20 families stayed behind in Playas in the early 2000s. Men, in particular, resisted returning to subsistence agriculture. Orlando Chávez, one of Breslín's sons, left to work as a carpenter in Lago Agrio and then near the coast in Guayas and Santo Domingo. Younger generations also left. Jesús Chávez, a grandson of Breslín, went to the southern Andes to work on agro-industrial plantations in Loja. "The people were spoiled [by tourism work]," Jesús recalls, "we had to leave to work elsewhere." Adult males abandoned the community for years at a time to work in tourism near the headwaters of the Cuyabeno; in mines and plantations in the Andes and the coast; and in informal commerce and service sectors in urban centers. They rarely saved up any money or sent money home, but work on the 'outside' was becoming a key component of a dignified male identity.

Conversely, subsistence farming had become widely-discussed among men in pejorative terms, as toil that was socially valueless. A young member of Playas' local government named Sixto Grefa explains, "[i]f you aren't capable of working a real job, then the farm is there waiting for you." Similarly, Olimpo Casanova, a recent High School graduate, describes the farm and the

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<sup>148</sup> Three groups formed in Playas to build their own cabins and offer overnights to other agencies out of Quito. One agency ("Dracaena") in particular contracted a group of 65 community members, who rotated through as staff to manage the so-called San Francisco cabins.

'selva' or jungle that surrounds it as spaces for "adventure," not dignified work.<sup>149</sup> In the case of Playas, Olimpo explains, "you don't go to school to wield a machete forever." Today, Olimpo prefers to work one or two 8-hour shifts per day in mines on the coast than return to his mother's farm.

This perspective of farming as valueless has been reinforced by comparisons of farm commodity prices with non-farm work, as well as perceptions of declining farm and rainforest resources. Rommel Chávez evaluates the value of farms in terms of bananas, which have long been essential to the diet in Playas. He evaluates bananas not in terms of subsistence value, but labor time: "How long does it take me to produce bananas? What here we call a head of bananas? It takes a year cultivating it. And after a year of cultivating it, I sell it at \$1.50, which doesn't represent anything. It's very cheap." Benito Chávez echoes this sentiment, "Here, a bunch of bananas, selling it expensive, expensive, that is at a good price, we're talking about maximum \$1.50. The effort you put into it is not compensated when you sell the product." Rommel expands this analysis to all of agriculture, "...all products that leave here, from the farm, from the farmer's crops are like that. So imagine, the young people seeing this reality, I prefer to go away and work outside with a good job. That will have a monthly pay that fluctuates between \$500, \$600, \$700..." Moreover, men in Playas frequently refer to a gradual but consistent resource decline across generations. Felix Machoa, remembers that in his youth, he could hunt from his farm, but these days he often goes on multi-day hikes into the rainforest to find game. "The animals are disappearing," says Rommel Chávez. From Edwin Noteno's point of view, his generation lived in "stagnation," while the territory faced new pressures on game and fisheries, due to population growth upriver and the contamination of the rivers by colonists

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<sup>149</sup> In U.S. anthropologist Terence Turner's (2008) words, all societies define what "counts as 'productive' and therefore as creating value" (45).

and oil companies. Even Marco Noteno, a teenager, remembers days when partridges would land on the roof of his house without fear. “Before, there were tons of animals,” Marco laments. The circulation of this narrative of loss effectively communicates the impression that the future is not to be found on the farm or in the forests and rivers.

Despite these discourses, however, the family economy has continued to rely on subsistence activities. As more men left in the 2000s, women and children stayed behind on the farm, sustaining household by farming, fishing, and hunting. “Among women we would go into the jungle,” recalls Rocío Chávez, “to hunt with the dogs.” Many women recount nostalgic memories of the early 2000s when they cultivated, fished, and hunted with their children and other women. It was a challenging time, but it also offered the joy of autonomy. In many cases, husbands only returned when they were jobless just long enough to leave their wives pregnant, before migrating again for months or even years. Rocío Chávez’ husband left for so long that she was able to re-marry, as a measure to protect herself from her first husband. (When her first husband returned, visibly aged, she invited him to join her new household. She is known around town as ‘the woman with two husbands’). Fabiola Tangoy recalls this moment of male exodus as a “a pretty tranquil life,” during which she worked with her daughters:

*Here, sometimes we worked, sometimes we didn't work, but we knew that we had [food] to eat. By contrast, in the city, if you don't work, you don't have [food], with what are you going to eat? I like to work a lot. I have my daughter, Tania; she was very hardworking. She helped me to work, plant rice...*

That is, women tended to conceive of work on the farm differently from the men, valuing it in terms of family sustenance and, oftentimes, autonomy from their husbands.

### *Memories of Urban Outmigration*

Some women also migrated to Lago Agrio for a time, but encountered severe difficulties. Fabiola, for example, closed up her house to follow her husband to Lago Agrio, along with her daughters and twenty sacks of rice to sell at market. They found free housing, in exchange for taking care of some pigs. Later, they lived rent-free in exchange for running a rice processor. On that land, on the outskirts of the city, they cultivated bananas, yuca, coffee, and cocoa. Her husband worked as a guide and Fabiola found work in a kitchen. Together, they borrowed money from a loan shark to build a house on the periphery of Lago Agrio.

A few teachers and barge operators also report some successes in their (peri)urban migrations; yet, more often, former migrants describe precarious livelihoods, hunger, exhaustion, and loneliness. Even Fabiola recalls that within three years she decided to leave behind the pressures of city life, along with all of her children, for a more relaxed life in Cuyabeno. Elena, a young mother with two daughters, laments that she had to search for food in trash bins at times when she lived in Lago Agrio. When she did find work, she says, it was overwhelming: “I worked in a restaurant... My work hours were from five in the morning until five in the afternoon... Oh, how I felt dead; I found peace coming back here.”

Still other interviewees characterize experiences of ethnic discrimination and isolation. Yessica Noteno left Playas at age 19 to become a domestic worker in Lago Agrio. She still recalls everyday gestures of disdain from mestizos:

*You don't have anyone to talk to, to get along with; you spend time stuck in the house. If you go outside, they might see that you are different... that I'm not like them, I'm indigenous... They look down on you; they don't express the same friendliness as they do among mestizos. They become friends quickly [among themselves]; ...with the indigenous they have mistrust... It's the treatment, the gazes, or sometimes they just look at you bad... Sometimes they don't even believe that you are worth the dust on their shoes.*

As Yessica's account suggests, ethnic hierarchies are often communicated through subtle gestures, etiquettes, and gazes that nonetheless transfix and subordinate indigenous migrants. Yessica's husband, a *mestizo* man from the southern Amazon, asks rhetorically, "Why would the Indian go to the outside?" These observations reflect countless other ethnographic accounts of indigenous discrimination in town and urban spaces in the Andes (e.g., Babb 2018; Colloredo-Mansfeld 1998; Radcliffe 2015; Seligmann 2004; Valdivia 2009). Since the 1980s, rural-urban migration has contributed to the rapid growth of precarious, informal urban economies across the Andes (e.g., Waters 1997) and to the widespread experience of stark material and symbolic inequalities among indigenous migrants in urban spaces.

Social pressures to seek out urban futures contrast with ongoing dependence on farm production, coupled with social and material exclusions from urban spaces. Experiences of this double-bind help to shed light on emerging struggles to introduce urban spaces into indigenous territories of the Amazon. The accounts in this section are of women who cut short their migrations due to experiences of precarity and discrimination. As we see in the next section, men often resisted returning to Playas, until the prospect of drawing urban space into Cuyabeno became a possibility through negotiations with Petroamazonas. In turn, for young men, the Millennium is often perceived as a platform for getting an education to later enter urban labor markets or, hopefully, create non-agrarian jobs in Cuyabeno.

### *Urban Aspirations in Playas*

After Playas' leadership reached a compensation agreement with Petroamazonas in 2010, male migrants eagerly returned to receive a new house, jobs with Petroamazonas, and training

and infrastructure for tourism development, which had been part of the compensation agreement.<sup>150</sup> As men and some women and students returned, the population more than doubled. The oil company's community relations office soon became a target of dozens of letters from the community, which demanded maintenance and, above all, jobs and overdue compensation payments, as well as overdue payments for services the community had provided Petroamazonas (e.g., fluvial transport, cooking, cleaning). This flow of letters demanding jobs and payments continued until oil prices collapsed in 2014. Local jobs with Petroamazonas all but disappeared and Playas' residents continued to rely almost entirely on farm and forest work for subsistence.

Young men working on their farms and studying in the City generally aspired to enter formal labor markets in regional urban centers.<sup>151</sup> In a survey I conducted with High School students in 2014, nearly all students aspired to graduate and move to a major city like Guayaquil, Quito, or some other urban center in Ecuador, the United States, or Spain. And many parents explained that their primary objective as parents was to ensure that their children finished High School 'to become professionals.'<sup>152</sup> In the words of Maribel Gualinga, "I'll stay here [in the

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<sup>150</sup> Representatives of the provincial Kichwa organisation FONAKISE criticized Playas' leadership for striking this deal. In 2014, in a series of interviews in FONAKISE offices in Lago Agrio, leaders blamed the state for dividing the community and Playas' leadership for carrying favor with Correa to further personal political ambitions. But FONAKISE's youth leader offered a different explanation, rooted in the everyday experiences of young residents: "The youth [in Playas] say that they don't want to be Kichwa... They want to stop being what they are." This aspiration, he argued, was not spontaneous – a pathology, but rather a social imposition. The racism that young people experienced in Lago Agrio conditioned aspirations – that is, what was socially-acceptable to pursue.

<sup>151</sup> Young people also generally prefer urban clothing. One teenaged girl explains that clothing often becomes an object of either claims to status or discrimination. For example, the school uniforms, which are designed to mimic traditional indigenous garb, become the object of ridicule: "...[S]ometimes they say, 'That's really ugly, I don't like it.' You're Kichwa and among Kichwa, one blames the other, 'Look, they're indigenous and others are *mestizos*.' ...[A]ll of them are indigenous... [but] some discriminate against others. And you feel strange." She adds, "the Cofan wears different clothing and the Secoya too... And they treat them badly too..."

<sup>152</sup> Philosopher and anthropologist Pierre Bourdieu (2014) refers to such events as "rites of institution", in which "differences are instituted between the consecrated and the non-consecrated... establishing durable, definitive, indelible divisions..." (168).



Millennium City] until someday they are someone.” Benito Chávez added that he struggled for his children’s education so that they might “not be like me.” He explained, “My parents said, ‘You have to study; you have to be someone in your life, improve yourself, have more knowledge, be a professional, so that you aren’t someone like me... Someone who always lives working from the farm, the farm, the farm...’”

In 2016, when he was still a student, Olimpo Casanova remarked that most of his classmates in High School wanted to be military or police. He added, “I haven’t heard of anybody who wants to work on the farm. What they want is to work on the outside and make someone else work on their farm.” Carlos Plúas, 19-year-old High School graduate, repeated this sentiment in a separate interview, “My first option would be to study medicine. The other would be engineer in mines and petroleum. Or do the course for police...” He also expressed the aspiration to “pay someone to work [my farm] for me...” Carlos Noteno, another young man finishing High School, said, “My ambition is to graduate, be a professional, and go work, but never leave behind my land... During vacations, swing by here and be with my family.” Carlos wanted to become a bus driver and, eventually, a heavy machine operator to save up for college:

*After graduating, I want to take the course to become a driver, enter the union. The course costs \$1,200 and from there I want to work, without sleeping or eating, to save for the course in heavy machinery. It costs more than \$3,000. There I could work several years and save up to go to university... My mom always said to me: ‘Leave to be someone better.’*

Carlos carried with him his mother’s encouragement to “[l]eave to be someone better,” but since graduating in 2017, Carlos has been working full-time on his farm. He does not have the money for the driver course, yet. Olimpo aspired to become a documentary filmmaker, but has spent recent years working alongside his brother in mines in the Andes and on the coast. The work is

hard and he has already lost two co-workers to cave-ins, but he celebrates that has been able to buy a phone and a television for his mom.

Some young men have also considered joining extended family in the FARC paramilitary group to the north in Putumayo. In 2017, Armando Noteno explained to me that he almost joined when his parents split up, so that he could support his mother. He had cousins in the FARC. He would have been assured an income of \$1,000 per month, two or three times what anyone in Playas might aspire to in most urban jobs. Armando's mom cried.<sup>153</sup> Instead, he went to Quito to study for a semester in a culinary institute, but he did not have the resources to continue. He worked for a time in Playas' medical clinic as an assistant, but that position rotates through the community. Today, he picks up any temporary work he can, cooking for state functionaries and other visitors occasionally and selling bread to school children, in the hope that someday he might be able to return to his studies in Quito. For the most part, however, he works on the farm.

Very few young men have access to housing and other resources necessary to pursue university degrees in urban centers. In 2018, I interviewed Marco Noteno about his aspirations following his High School graduation. "I plan to study, have a good job... If there's a good opportunity, return [to Playas] to live... and if not, go live on the outside..." That year, Marco Noteno moved to Quito as a university student, the only one in his class to move to the capital. He was proud of his achievement. Yet, he faced material and social challenges. He relied on distant and estranged family members to offer him housing in tight quarters on the peripheries of the city. He changed housing three times in his first year. He often had to walk wherever he needed to go and, one night, he was kidnapped and dumped shoeless in a park. He also faced discrimination from classmates who referred to him as "Indian." All but two of his classmates

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<sup>153</sup> FARC recruits commit to six years of training, in which time they have to break all ties with his family, before joining the base and rotating into coca cultivation.

were *mestizos* from Quito. He ultimately withdrew from classes after just two semesters, and he is now logging in the reserve to save up and return to his studies someday.<sup>154</sup>

The very possibility to aspire to an alternative position in society, no matter how unlikely, can be experienced as a claim to dignity. Parents and young people alike are well-aware that almost all graduates end up returning to their subsistence activities full-time, but they aspire nonetheless to positions of greater social recognition and less discrimination. Bercelino explained to me in 2015 that, although he knew the chances of his children becoming professionals on the outside were slim and he preferred life on his farm, nonetheless he aspired for his children or grandchildren to become professionals on the outside. He explained this aspiration by recalling his experiences in the military barracks as a youth – “I didn’t come out of my mother like this,” he said, pointing to scars on his forehead, “they did this to me in the army.” Officers tortured the indigenous recruits by whip and electrocution, supposedly as “practice” for being captured by the Peruvian army. Bercelino expounded that he did not teach his children or grandchildren shamanism or even to speak Kichwa; instead, he wanted them to have the opportunity—albeit fraught with obstacles—to become urban professionals and have “an easier life,” one less marked by anti-indigenous discrimination than he, his parents, and his grandparents could access.

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<sup>154</sup> There is potentially more research to be done on cyclical mobility in the case of subsistence actors in the context of the Amazon. In *The Awkward Class: Political Sociology of Peasantry in a Developing Society, Russia, 1910-1925*, British sociologist Teodor Shanin (1972) famously gave birth to peasant studies by analyzing the cyclical mobility of the peasant class, explaining the specific logics that kept peasants vacillating between collectivization and capitalist modernization (see Friedmann 2019).

*Tourism Development: Organizing for Non-Agrarian Futures in the City*

The stigmatization of agrarian and subsistence livelihoods direct young people towards the outside, but difficult experiences and challenges during urban migrations have simultaneously led people to withdraw to the Amazon. By exploring this particular subject position, we can begin to understand aspirations for particular forms of urban development and post-agrarian futures in the northern Amazon, at the margins of market society.

Given the obstacles to life on the outside, many young men are turning back to tourism organizing and development in the City, as an alternative to the farm work and urban migration. In fact, those who are in universities in Lago Agrio and Cuenca study tourism or related disciplines, like gastronomy or accounting, that might enable them to make a (non-agrarian) living back home. In Playas, despite unfulfilled promises for state-led tourism development,<sup>155</sup> young men who have experience in service industries have gained influence in Playas' assembly, challenging older leaderships, pushing members to embrace conservation measures, and facilitating the formation of three new tourism associations. Young, male former migrants tend to boast foreign language skills or, at least, professional experience in service industries. Some have taken college courses in subjects related to tourism. Their skills may not have generated

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<sup>155</sup> In 2010, the planning ministry proposed a comprehensive plan to compensate Playas for oil production in the parish that included a \$2,661,000 budget for tourism development, over a third of the entire compensation budget. The subsequent agreements signed between Petroamazonas and Playas on November 10, 2010, begin with commitments from the Ministry of Tourism to conduct market studies, create business plans, and provide training. Subsequently, the state has improved highways to the Cuyabeno Wildlife Reserve and intervened in the 20 tourism agencies and multiple community-based tourism initiatives in the reserve. New regulations generated some tensions, as the Ministry of Tourism required that local guides obtain High School degrees and the Ministry of the Environment required that boats use ecological motors; nonetheless, tourism increased more than threefold in Cuyabeno, from 5,439 visitors in 2006 to 17,072 visitors in 2015, according to the Ministry of Tourism's website in 2017, spurring aspirations. Elsewhere, I have explored similar tensions between community aspirations and state initiatives to develop tourism in the Andes (Lyall 2010a).

demonstrable results, but they exercise a new authority based on their ability to articulate visions of a post-agrarian community.<sup>156</sup>

Community meetings are increasingly dedicated to coordinating the rights and obligations for participating in tourism initiatives. Each association coordinates work and access to tourist flows through an oversight committee. The associations only turn to the community assembly to resolve persistent, internal conflicts, but a new public sphere has emerged around tourism development. The oversight committee mediates internal conflicts over jobs and payments, while also coordinating collective action and lobbying efforts towards the Ministry of Environment.

At first, the Ministry denied their request to build new cabins, enforcing a deforestation ban. For a time, the associations offered to build in open fields left behind by oil explorations, but they were denied for “environmental concerns.” Moreover, the Ministry of Environment began to require that all tourism guides have High School diplomas, denying the majority of residents the possibility of working in tourism. However, the Ministry’s park rangers had grown accustomed to sleeping in an extra house in Playas, and so community members evicted the guards to force negotiations. Subsequently, they were granted permission to build new cabins, and the Ministry has funded night classes for adults to obtain High School degrees. Over the last two years, two of the new associations have coordinated the construction of new cabins, a cultural center, and a bird-watching tower just upriver from the City.

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<sup>156</sup> New forms of authority may engender new forms of social stratification. The community has given permission to a few young men to offer independent tours to cabins built by associations by paying the associations a small fee. As these individuals develop direct relationships with agencies in Quito, learn to navigate Booking.com and TripAdvisor, and create their own Facebook sites, there is potential for a few privileged actors to emerge.

Like other men in their late 20s and early 30s, Edgar Noteno offers a vision of a community re-integrated through tourism activities.<sup>157</sup> He has cultivated connections with investors in Quito, enrolled in intensive English-language courses, and developed a website and Facebook page. In the City, Edgar can maintain contacts with former North American and European clients via Facebook and Gmail. He developed ties with a small investor, a Spanish biologist based in Quito known in Playas as “Isaac,” and, in early 2020, he singlehandedly secured a contract to receive multiple groups of tourists from a multinational manufacturing firm based in China.<sup>158</sup>

Confidence in new leaders and in tourism markets dominated by outside actors is fragile. The specter of white deceit hovers over new alliances, as possible government and non-governmental partners are viewed with suspicion. Edgar and others readily criticize conservation NGOs like Fundación Cuyabeno for making money with data about Cuyabeno and not redistributing the wealth.<sup>159</sup> Also, rumors circulated that the Spanish investor was making too much and paying the associations too little, although no one knew how much he was charging tourists. They confronted him in an assembly and forbid him from returning. “Maybe no one likes to work with Playas,” Edgar confided, “because we demand a just payment: 50-50.”

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<sup>157</sup> Playas is the largest community in its parish, but in the 2014 elections, a candidate from a smaller community won the contest in large part because he had lived abroad and articulated a clear vision of how to capture flows of international tourists. One man, explaining why he voted for the victor instead of his own family members, explained, “Being from here, one only knows what one sees,” pointing to the other side of the river, “but he has another vision.”

<sup>158</sup> This contract was placed on hold due to the global coronavirus outbreak in March, 2020.

<sup>159</sup> In 2018, representatives of the Ministry of the Environment, the World Wildlife Fund, and an NGO called *Ecogestión* [Ecomanagement] visited Playas to announce that they had managed to have Cuyabeno added to the list of RAMSAR sites, as one of the world’s most important wetlands. Community leaders voiced demands that this recognition not generate jobs for external actors, but for local communities, particularly in tourism.

Following the departure of their investor, Edgar worried about a subsequent dip in enthusiasm. Market activities continued to seem risky and opaque; footholds in intermediary-dominated market networks still seemed precarious. Edgar pushed ahead with a timely initiative to develop a logo, which sustained enthusiasm. Thus, work goes into creating and sustaining a public for tourism development in the City, including performative work (e.g., the performance of authority, expertise, foresight, an affinity with market actors), but, for the time being, new tourism initiatives center collective efforts in and around the City.

In this chapter, I have detailed experiences of tenuous market integration in Playas since the 1970s that shaped aspirations to access urban labor markets and, in turn, urban spaces. As young men migrated to urban centers to secure social status, they faced a double-bind – either endure ethnic discrimination and exclusion in urban spaces or return to stigmatized agrarian spaces. Common experiences of discrimination in urban centers inspire residents today to remain in the City and seek post-agrarian livelihoods, such as tourism, in Playas’ territory.

In the next chapter, I briefly re-visit the 2008 uprising in Playas in light of the historical events I have documented in these chapters. I highlight the stories of the women who led the uprising and how these incorporated histories became expressed through their anger and experienced as catharsis for past moments of ethnic subordination.

## CHAPTER 6. RAGE AND CATHARSIS: THE UPRISING REVISITED

*...[V]iolence is a cleansing force... It emboldens [the colonized], and restores their self-confidence.* – social theorist and militant Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (2004[1963], 51)

*“How fun it was for us, just laughing, ‘Here comes the bomb!’ BOOM! ‘Throw rocks, throw. How fun! More rocks! How fun! You have the opportunity to disrespect and get even for everything you have suffered...”* – Playas resident Yessica Noteno, remembering the community’s uprising against Petroamazonas

### *Introduction*

Histories of ethnic subordination during labor, education, and migration constitute three horizons of memory in Playas that shape why residents have struggled to obtain, sustain, and expand urban space in the Amazon. In each moment, white actors imposed a specific conception of personhood through symbolic and physical violence, reproducing white authority and indigenous subordination. The traumas of distinct mechanisms of subordination (e.g., violence, rape, discrimination, deception) remain imprinted on the lens through which many perceive white actors in the northern Amazon today. In this brief chapter, I want to revisit the uprising against Petroamazonas to show how and why the oil company’s deceptive practices triggered<sup>160</sup> an emotional response from Playas residents. Petroamazonas staged a misleading consultation process in Playas; made false statements about Alain Petrol in public; secretly negotiated with a subset of Playas residents; and tried to move equipment into the parish by posing as the military.

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<sup>160</sup> In psychology, a “trauma trigger” refers to a stimulus that directly or indirectly recalls a previous traumatic experience.



Numerous Playas residents associated these practices with prior moments of white deceit. When Petroamazonas entered the parish, the community seized its equipment and battled military reinforcements. During this uprising, women in particular exercised protagonism and today recall the experience as a form of collective catharsis or cleansing.<sup>161</sup>

While resource conflicts are often analyzed from an ahistorical lens and in terms of material interests (i.e., territorial rights, environmental politics), in Playas we see that emotions can drive resource politics. Emotions themselves, of course, are not isolated, psychological events, but social-historical products (Ahmed 2004)<sup>162</sup>. In that sense, the uprising in Playas was a cathartic outcry against past and present forms of ethnic domination. This chapter is primarily based on interviews of Playas residents, as well as interviews with oil sector analysts, managers, and former union organizers.

### *Oil and Deceit*

“Oil is deception,” Bercelino Noteno told me succinctly in 2016, reflecting on his experiences with Petroamazonas. In 2010, the general manager of Petroamazonas, Wilson Pástor, leveraged his legitimacy as an internationally-recognized expert in the oil sector to dissuade Rafael Correa from endorsing Alain Petrol. In so doing, Pástor not only prevented the indigenous movement from exercising control over oil reserves, but he also ensured his personal control over oil contracts. Pástor represented a generation of domestic oil elites who had worked in the public-private consortium CEPE-Texaco in the 1970s and 1980s and later occupied mid-

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<sup>161</sup> In psychotherapy, catharsis refers to a cleansing of repressed or ignored events from one’s past. In Greek tragedy, catharsis refers to the cleansing that the protagonist in a tragic situation pursues.

<sup>162</sup> In *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, feminist scholar Sara Ahmed (2014) argues that emotions are cultural products (not psychological) and a material rhetoric that responds to representations, signs, and contexts (whose force may grow with repetition). Emotions, she adds, can engender collective action.

and top-level positions in foreign companies during industry liberalization (Valdivia and Benavides 2012). Several of these engineers and managers later returned to state-operated oil companies under Rafael Correa. In 2010, Pástor became the Minister of Non-Renewable Resources and oversaw the re-writing of the oil sector's legislative framework. Effectively, he empowered himself to negotiate and grant oil contracts directly with individual firms, i.e., *without* the standard process of open bidding among companies. The new legal framework also sidestepped constitutional requirements that the sector have independent oversight.

In turn, Pástor and the Viceminister of Hydrocarbons, Carlos Pareja Yannuzzelli, signed dozens of contracts with inexperienced and unknown companies, many of which were owned by domestic business elites with political ties. Immediately after receiving contracts from Pástor, the company Ivanhoe hired Pástor's brother as its general manager; the company Gente Oil hired Pástor's daughter as a vice-president; and the company Edinpetrol ceded stocks to a law firm where Pástor's nephew soon thereafter became a partner (Lyll 2018).<sup>163</sup> Oil elites and their family members leveraged social ties to win direct contracts, as they shifted between the public sector, oil firms, and consulting firms. Several of Correa's oil managers and ministers, such as Pareja, have since been convicted of kick-backs or other illicit activities. Pástor has not. He has managed to maintain an image in the media and broader public sphere as an apolitical technocrat with postgraduate credentials from France, performing capitalist knowledges and European culture – what Ecuadorian Marxist Bolívar Echeverría (2007; 2010) referred to as the

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<sup>163</sup> Bribery and nepotism characterize the global oil industry (Ades and Di Tella 1999; Humphreys *et al.* 2007). In Latin America, as conservative forces sought to wrest power from left-leaning governments in the 2010s, oil-related corruption came under greater public scrutiny (Gudynas 2017; Lyll 2018; Villavicencio 2017). In 2017 alone, charges were brought against dozens of ministers and managers in the oil sectors of Ecuador, Venezuela, Brazil, Mexico, and Colombia.

“whiteness” (Echeverría 2007, 2010) of domestic elites,<sup>164</sup> in order to secure his moral authority over the oil sector and evade accusations of impropriety.

But for former leaders in Playas, Pástor is quite clearly an underhand figure. In 2008, Petroamazonas employed a number of dishonest tactics to discredit Alian Petrol and trick Playas residents into allowing the company into its parish without a consultation process or agreement. First, in early 2008, Petroamazonas workers visited Playas to “socialize” or inform residents about plans to drill in the parish. They held a meeting with Playas’ leadership, all of whom had worked on oil platforms. These leaders cited holes in the presentation regarding possible impacts on animal habitats and hunting and, in particular, leaders demanded written commitments to compensation, including basic services, education, and housing. Alternatively, Bercelino remembers, they gave them the option of ceding production to Alian Petrol. “They did not have clear answers,” remembers Edwin Noteno, and so Playas leaders told the oil workers to leave.

In turn, Wilson Pástor spearheaded a campaign in the national media and along the Aguarico River to discredit and dismiss Alian Petrol. The bitter irony is not lost on Bercelino and other leaders that Pástor offered interviews to newspapers to characterize the organizers of Alian Petrol as corrupt. *La Hora* cited Pástor denouncing the organizers of Alian Petrol for making “false promises” (12 April 2008) (also, see *El Diario* 12 May 2008). *Ecuador Inmediato* published the headline “Government Denies Any Relation with the ‘Supposed Business Alianpetrol’ that is Tricking Amazonian Communities” (8 April 2008). As one of the elite organizers of Alian Petrol later told me, state oil officials convinced people in the media, the government, and communities in the northern Amazon that indigenous leaders involved in Alian Petrol were “either being used by crooks or [were] themselves crooks.” Such narratives, he

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<sup>164</sup> Echeverría drew from Frantz Fanon’s (2004 [1963], 100) analysis of domestic elites, who consolidated privileged social positions as professional intermediaries in colonial Algeria.

added, drew on stereotypes of indigenous people as “passive and protected.”<sup>165</sup> In his interview for *Ecuador Inmediato*, Pástor disqualified Alian Petrol as a lie, and he sought to legitimate state-managed oil production in terms of his technical knowledge, detailing “the best practices of the modern oil industry” (4 September 2008) (i.e., cutting-edge technologies, efficiency, social responsibility), contrasting the particularity of an indigenous oil company with the universality of technocratic authority. For Bercelino, of course, Pástor was the corrupt actor, deceiving neighbouring communities and the nation to reproduce indigenous subordination. In early 2009, he would complain in a letter to a regional Kichwa organization, FONAKISE, “They have always marked us as manipulative, blackmailing, scrounging Indians” (Noteno 2009a, 3). In another letter to the Minister of Strategic Sectors, Bercelino requested an investigation into Pástor’s dishonest practices, concluding, “we will echo one of the goals of the [government]: Combat corruption in all of its forms; we ask ourselves if in reality we Indians have that right” (Noteno 2009b). Bercelino received no reply.

### *The Uprising*

In 2018, I discussed the uprising with Yessica Noteno at length. Yessica is the 29-year-old daughter of Carlos Noteno, Bercelino’s eldest brother. She has four young children of her own.

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<sup>165</sup> In other contexts, indigenous groups that have claimed subterranean resources have been viewed widely as suspicious. Indigenous peoples, who often are represented (or represent themselves) as “the unsullied moral integrity that modern progress undermines” (Wade 1999, 75), are precluded from legitimizing such claims. Conklin and Graham explain that in the Brazilian Amazon “[w]hen native leaders’ actions failed to meet outsiders’ expectations, each group was left shadowed by public perceptions of hypocrisy and corruption” (706) (also, see Comaroff and Comaroff 2009; Capps 2016; De Alessi 2012; Morris 2016). In particular since the 1990s, indigenous peoples across much of Latin America have had to reproduce essentialized representations (environmental stewardship and ancestral right) to make territorial claims (Yeh and Bryan 2015; Erazo 2013). Some researchers refer to this “performativity” of the “ecologically noble savage” (Redford 1991) as strategic (Tsing 2007; Yeh 2013); others qualify it as self-negation (Rivera Cusicanqui 2013). Leaders of the Alian Petrol proposal even tried to use some of these stereotypes in their claims to oil reserves: “The Indigenous Nationalities... live conserving their primary forests in patrimonial and ancestral territories constituted through their own institutions and traditional forms of social, economic, legal, political, exercise of internal authority, and autonomy” (2008, 6-7).

Everyday Yessica goes to her farm to cultivate yuca and corn, harvest fruits, and tend to their pigs and chickens, and so I can only find Yessica and her husband Líder Jaramillo at their home in the City after dusk. Líder usually invites me in to chat at the living room table, while Yessica stands back in the kitchen area, until I ask a question that piques her interest. In effect, Yessica and I had already spoken of the uprising on several dozen residents since 2014. Yessica was the first person to tell me about Alian Petrol. She was also the first to tell me that the men were nervous about the entrance of oil workers because many expressed worries that they would abuse their wives and daughters. According to many testimonies, the uprising was essentially motivated to secure material compensation. I had already published articles and book chapters that mentioned the uprising in these terms.

However, in their testimonies, several community leaders – Yessica’s father and uncles and a few other residents – had framed the uprising as an expression of their “*rabia*” or “rage” for how white people had treated their parents and grandparents. I had largely interpreted that emotion as contextual, rather than a logic and mode of politics in its own right. For example, in 2015, Bercelino Noteno had discussed the uprising in the following terms:

*...[T]he anger that we have had for the mistreatment of our grandparents by mestizo people... They were slaves. They didn't have freedom. They made them work inside the jungle [for] years, in the middle of the jungle to get liquids out of the trees, skins, fruits, to hand in to the patrón and the patron was who sold it. For what? A bit of clothing, a work tool, that's it. A machete that we carry here, that took years to work off. To pay it off, they would say that it is worth so much. Having already worked so much, they were broke, and they were still in debt... [T]he pride that I have is that I made the government sit down. We argued. We've sat at the table. We've had a dialogue. That's the pride ...*

In my 2018 discussion with Yessica, I came to reinterpret many of my prior conversations about the uprising to appreciate that these emotions of “rage” were not mere background for the conflict that would unfold. They were the driving force that would only later open a space for

negotiations. When historical memories become triggered, they can circle back to generate collective reactions. In Playas, the collective expression of rage directed at Petroamazonas and military reinforcements was not yet a means to an end, but an end unto itself.

Yessica recalls that it was the morning of a community work party when two barges with heavy machinery appeared on the Aguarico River, near the schoolhouse in Playas. She mimics different voices, as she acts out the scene: “‘Look at the barges!’ ‘What are we going to do?’... ‘Let’s go! Let’s go! Stop them! Stop them! Let’s go! Let’s go!’” They took to their motorized canoes and forced the barges ashore. The barge operators said that they were going to build a new military outpost, but residents were suspicious. They insisted that the barge owners come to Playas. Early the next morning, the operators tried to escape upriver. Once more, they were forced ashore. That night the operators again started their engines and, for a third time, were detained. Residents were growing angrier with each attempt to deceive them.

Word spread through the community that Petroamazonas had secretly negotiated a compensation agreement with a small association of *mestizo* families that lived in the parish, several kilometers upriver from the center, in a place called Santa Elena. Petroamazonas had been helping those families to legally transform their association into a separate community. This additional deception angered Playas residents even more. Yessica remembers a collective realization that “‘Bit by bit they are deceiving us. NO, all of that ends now!’”

The next day, boats arrived with military officers, who boarded the barges. Yessica says that at that point relatively few people were aware of the Alian Petrol proposal in Playas itself, which had been primarily Bercelino’s project, but they rose up against the military officers “‘[b]ecause we do not want to be pushed around. We do not want to be ordered. We do not want people to come from elsewhere to be our bosses.’”

*Unsettling the Social Order: 'God is Machista!'*

In an emergency assembly, Bercelino expressed fear that he would be arrested if the military spotted him because he was the community president and, he explained, the general manager of Petroamazonas intended to capture him. A farmer and mother of four by the name of Karen Chávez willingly stepped forward to represent the offensive they would organize against the military. Karen, Hilda Chávez, Rita Yumbo, Yessica Noteno, and other women would be among the first to climb onto the barges to attack the military officers. The potential for women in Playas to rise up in this manner has perhaps long been simmering. As I have suggested, they endure the greatest levels of domination. On the one hand, anti-indigenous racism is learned *within* many households, where husbands accuse their wives of being “Indians.” Peruvian anthropologist Marisol de la Cadena (1996) has written succinctly of this perception in other contexts: “women are more Indian than men” (181). On the other hand, gender hierarchies in Playas are reproduced through a regular, gratuitous violence. There is a consensus among anthropologists in the Amazon that gender domination should be understood as a culturally-specific gender “complementarity.” U.S. anthropologist Michael Uzendoski (2005) writes, “[f]rom the perspective of [the Napo Kichwa] socioculture, a measured amount of masculine violence is viewed as legitimate when it is directed at socializing a young wife” (46). He then differentiates between violence geared towards “teaching” wives from “abusive” violence. However, in Playas, women do not tend to make this distinction or share this perspective. The anecdotes of everyday acts of resistance are numerous, but perhaps two subtler examples are telling. First, in one community assembly, the pastor tried to intervene in domestic violence by explaining to the women that God created man as the head of the family and the woman as the

body. “The body must obey the head,” he concluded. Women in the assembly, otherwise generally quiet, roared in disapproval. One woman, who had recently been pushed to attempt suicide by drinking pesticide, stood and shouted, “¡Dios es machista! [God is a chauvinist]” Another example of this latent rage is the annual Father’s Day celebration. Men organize Mother’s Day, which attracts hundreds of participants to dance, compete in games, eat, and drink. Women are supposed to organize Father’s Day, but the woman who volunteers to lead the organization has difficulties finding support and turns to the local government. In 2014, Nancy and I witnessed the Father’s Day celebration, which took place three weeks late and with few women in attendance. The food was largely prepared by a man and his son. The other women who attended remained seated. They did not dance, drink, or participate in games. Later, several of them explained to Nancy and I that women disdain Father’s Day because their husbands get drunk and beat them. Karen Chávez herself is known for her ‘strong character’ because she periodically questions her social subordination. She famously cut a deep wound in her husband’s leg with a tuna fish can while he had her pinned against the floor. After her husband’s brothers reacted to her defiance by shooting at her house and threatening to kill her with machetes, she took the unusual step of traveling to Lago Agrio to file charges. The uprising against Petroamazonas was a moment of remarkable rupture for women like Karen, although the potential for an explosion of violence on their part was latent.

Women quickly converted their homes into spaces for producing weapons, extracting plant oils that could burn skin and eyes and putting them in bottles and fumigation pumps. “We have to bathe those troops,” Yessica remembers her friends crying with glee, “wherever it should fall – if it hits their skin, it burns; if it falls in their eyes, they go blind; if it fall on their asses...” Women and men ran into the forests to prepare blow guns and chop off and shave



branches from spiny trees, fashioning clubs with 4-inch spikes at the far end. Yessica details how they then attacked the slow-moving barges from their canoes: “We loaded the canoes with rocks. ‘Let’s go, let’s go!’... We were approaching them when ‘boom!’ The military officers shot tear gas... ‘Now, throw rocks, throw rocks’... I think it was from one in the afternoon to six... That was pure fighting...”

The military were well armed, but the canoes approached the barges and Hilda Chávez, a schoolteacher, was the first to climb onto a barge. She grabbed a revolver from the hands of a policeman and cast it to the river. The troops carried live ammunition, but so did Playas residents. “If they killed us,” recalls Yessica, “then we were going to give it to them too.” Although the troops resisted firing bullets, Yessica says that “[w]e almost killed some troops.” One young man shot poisoned darts, while the women “filled glass bottles with gasoline... and as soon as they smash, they explode... A sergeant was burned... His face was disfigured...” Yessica smiled widely, “[y]es, we gave it to them...”

Yessica describes the catharsis that she and her friends experienced in this moment of rupture: “How fun it was for us, just laughing, ‘Here comes the bomb!’ BOOM! ‘Throw the rocks, throw... How fun! More rocks! How fun!’” I asked her to explain further how she could experience such joy in this moment of violence. “You have the opportunity to disrespect and get even for everything you have suffered... ‘Throw, throw, throw’... We spoke so badly to those troops. ‘Throw, throw rocks’...” She laughed out loud, sitting in her living room, as she made throwing gestures.<sup>166</sup>

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<sup>166</sup> Frantz Fanon (1994[1959]) observed how women in the Algerian revolution troubled gender hierarchies: “The men’s words were no longer law. The women were no longer silent... [I]n the fight for liberation... [society] renewed itself and developed new values governing sexual relations. The woman... *forged a new place for herself by her sheer strength*” (106).

By the late afternoon, the canoes were able to force the barges ashore once again. Newspapers reported that community members had been injured by rubber bullets and some military officers were burned by Molotov cocktails. The barges remained moored for the following six weeks, as groups of residents monitored them 24 hours a day. Video obtained from an old cell phone shows dozens of community residents playing in the sand, drinking *chicha*, and joking, with the two barges in the background.

Rafael Correa appeared on television to denounce them: “There are some indigenous communities that have not let the barges through... We are never going to permit are such tantrums.” In the newspaper *El Universo*, representatives of Petroamazonas denounced the “particular interests” of leaders of Alian Petrol (15 October 2008). And they extended their campaign among indigenous and *mestizo* communities of the Aguarico River to frame the indigenous leaders involved in Alian Petrol as ‘corrupt’ and ‘subversive.’ During the subsequent month and a half, authorities including Wilson Pástor arrived in Playas to negotiate.

One Petroamazonas representative, Yessica recalls, grew frustrated before Playas’ assembly and walked out, saying to a companion, “Come on, let’s not pay attention to these Indians.” The reaction from Playas residents was immediate and telling:

*They grabbed him. They were going to leave him in the middle of the jungle. They were going to blindfold him... [Then] they were going to take off the blindfold [and say], ‘Now, flee from the indigenous people.’ They were going to leave him with bananas... with salt... with matches, so that he might eat [and] live in the jungle, so that he might live, might live like us, suffering... to sustain this community...’ That is how we spoke. He said, ‘No, no, please, don’t dump me in the jungle. We are going to negotiate...’*

They threatened him with reversal, that he – a *mestizo* from the outside – occupy their position in the social structure for a moment. The other Petroamazonas representative urged the first not pay any attention and so they reportedly threatened him too:

*'No, you folks are not going... You want chicha? We are not giving you anything. That is how we have suffered to have our territory. Now, you come from the outside... We are going to take you and dump you in the middle of the jungle [to see] if you can get out of there. Then he said 'no, no, don't do that to me!'*

In this moment of rupture, they reacted to such expressions of superiority from the Petroamazonas officials by threatening them with more violence to force them into the social and historical position of Playas residents and their ancestors. “[V]iolence is a cleansing force,” Frantz Fanon (2004[1963], 51) famously wrote of the Algerian Revolution. Fanon did not endorse violence – in fact, he wrote extensively of the traumas that revolutionaries suffered – but he viewed physical violence as a necessary reaction to the everyday dehumanization of structural violence that might make possible the subsequent creation of new social relations.

#### *Order Returns to Cuyabeno*

The uprising had momentarily opened a space of uncertainty, troubling familiar forms of ethnic and gender hierarchies and casting into doubt the authority of the state. However, this opening closed rather suddenly one morning, when hundreds of military reinforcements arrived via helicopters. “We were surprised,” recalls Jesús Chávez, “by the multitude of military officers.” In the words of Lourdes Erazo, a woman who had returned from the outside to support the effort, “[t]he army came against the community.” The barges were able to continue to their destination upriver under threat of overwhelming force.

Government representatives continued to visit Playas over the following weeks and months to finalize negotiations. The male leadership in Playas reasserted itself, as state officials directed themselves towards Bercelino, Jesús Chávez, Sixto Grefa, and other male leaders to negotiate. These leaders were not able to prevent the entrance of

white oil workers or the right to produce oil themselves. The statement of ‘consent’ that Playas leaders signed was forged amidst power inequalities that had been made all too obvious (Lyll 2017b). But largely due to the nationwide attention that Playas residents had attracted through their uprising, they achieved a degree of recognition that prior generations had not in their negotiations with white market actors.

Today, Bercelino proudly remembers, “[w]e made war with them with our own weapons – spears, arrows, dart guns... That’s when they gave us the option of this, some dignified houses, a High School...”<sup>167</sup> Bercelino laments the duplicitous dealings of Wilson Pástor, but he celebrates his community’s ability to challenge this familiar narrative of white deceit to force the state to recognize them: “To this very day, the *mestizo* people still want to be the bosses, but the pride that I have is that I made the government sit down. We argued. We’ve sat at the table. We’ve had a dialogue. That’s the satisfaction I have...” His young nephew, Marco Noteno, was not in Playas for the uprising, but he now has his own proud memory of the event: “I think that our parents didn’t want to return to that old history; that they exploit us. I think for that they stood up so strong.”

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<sup>167</sup> As historian E.P. Thompson (1993) observed, moral economies of uneven distribution are defined, re-defined, and expressed through conflict, in the tense and uneven “balance of class or social forces” (340). ‘Moral economy’ often refers loosely to norms, values, and social obligations that shape economics (e.g., Langegger 2016; Olivier de Sardan 1999; Sayer 2007), gesturing towards Polanyi’s (1944) notion of the ‘embedded’ economy (Bolton et al. 2012; Sanghera and Satybaldieva 2007); however, the specific meaning of moral economy developed by E.P. Thompson (1971, 1993) and James Scott (1976, 2000) refers to the limits of inequality that a social group or class will endure before it revolts against morally-unacceptable conditions (also, see Edelman 2005; 2012; Götz 2015; Karandions et al. 2014; Lyall 2018; Orlove 1997; Palomera and Vetta 2016).

## CONCLUSIONS: PRODUCTIONS OF URBAN SPACE IN CUYABENO

“Every social space is the outcome of a process... every social space has a history...” – sociologist and philosopher Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space* (1991[1974], 110)

### *Manichean Structures of Urban Aspiration*

In these conclusions, I synthesize the main findings of the dissertation, re-tracing key historical relationships that shape the production of urban places in Cuyabeno as sites for accessing social recognition or respect. I also highlight the need to explore further the history of gender and sexual violence in colonial projects in the region and its contemporary legacies. In the second section, I reflect on the politics of representing indigenous demands for urban development ‘strategically’ in a moment of rapid environmental degradation in the Amazon. I discuss the need to recover and confront on a societal level the colonial histories of the region – the so-called ‘other slavery’ and its legacies – in order to recognize not only the historical, but also the contemporary traumas of racialization that shape territorial conflicts and transformations today.

Since the 1970s, the oil industry in Ecuador has expanded across the northern Amazon, requiring new infrastructures for transporting workers, equipment, and oil. The roads built by the oil industry facilitated population growth through the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and the concentration of *mestizo* immigrants in new towns and settlements, where residents demanded telecommunications, electricity, and other networked infrastructures from the state. Beginning in the 1990s, indigenous communities and organizations have also demanded public works and infrastructures from the state and oil companies in their territories.

In this dissertation, I have explored the example of a community of subsistence farmers, fisher people, and hunters of Playas del Cuyabeno, which signed a consent agreement to oil extraction in its parish in exchange for a host of urban-like infrastructures. Once relocated from their farms, residents found themselves isolated from food supplies; they lacked income; and they struggled to sustain unfamiliar, complex material networks. Nonetheless, despite their newfound precarity, residents developed creative forms of organization to maintain and even expand their settlement. Since I began this research in 2014, I have tried to understand the logic of this struggle for urban futures at the margins of market society. I focused my ethnographic and archival research in Playas, though I also conducted focus groups in all of the neighboring communities of Shuar, Cofán, Kichwa, Secoya, and Siona communities in the Cuyabeno Wildlife Reserve. In this region, oil development is largely viewed as inevitable and, potentially, an opportunity to secure particular forms of development for these subsistence communities – i.e., modern housing, public services, and education. Why might the promise of urban development secure consent for oil extraction among these subsistence communities, marginal to urban labor and market networks?

My answers have necessarily been incomplete. I visited Playas and interviewed most adults – many on several occasions – over a span of six years. I taught in the community's High School and spent considerable time with young people as well, making films about the City and working on their farms. Still, the logics of urbanization in this corner of the Amazon remain partially hidden within people's individual and shared histories – either remembered or embodied through perceptions of social space and their place in it.

The most influential critical theories characterize urban expansion in the Amazon as a state-led strategy to facilitate capitalist accumulation. A few researchers acknowledge that at

least some of this expansion has been the product of demands for urban development among communities. These researchers argue that contemporary development discourses are transforming – i.e., modernizing – the subjective desires of otherwise traditional indigenous peoples. They take for granted that the significance of the Millennium City for residents is precisely what state actors have told them. In a word, Correa had not just re-inaugurated a development project but an entire group of people. Thus, researchers criticized Correa for imposing Western conceptions of happiness on a region where indigenous peoples lived happily, according to non-modern values. However, Correa’s audience was Ecuadorian society itself, which does endow urban space with symbolic value, and Playas residents aspired to attract the recognition of that urban-centric society, despite their own diverse desires.

In the northern Amazon, the accumulation of social authority to define the terms of social and spatial value traces back to Spanish colonization and the violent stratification of society among civilized, semi-civilized, and savage groups. Today, Playas residents are not being forced into urban centers due to the primitive accumulation of their means of production,<sup>168</sup> as orthodox Marxist frameworks of an urbanizing Amazon suggest, but rather they are direct inheritors of the “primitive accumulation of ‘social force’” (Reyes and Kaufman 2011, 508) – that is, of the historical process in which a colonial authority materially and symbolically divided the world into a civilized space of commerce, work, and legal norms and an uncivilized space of savages, slaves, and violence. In the northern Amazon, colonizers established authority by force and the manipulation of existing social divisions, amid the chaos of catastrophic epidemics. Some indigenous groups negotiated partial inclusion and recognition, whereas others fled. Such a

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<sup>168</sup> “It would be a mistake,” write Hardt and Negri (2000), “...to take the English experience of becoming-proletarian and becoming-capitalist as representative of all the others” (257).

“compartmentalized world,” as Frantz Fanon wrote, requires ‘stretching’ Marxist analysis to account for “the colonial issue” (2004[1963], 5).

By the 19<sup>th</sup> century, at least some Kichwas of the Upper Napo had come to navigate this imposed division by incorporating Western goods into cultural practices of reciprocity, personhood, and distinction. The parents and grandparents of Playas residents entered into contractual relations with rubber merchants in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century – not because they depended on wages to survive, but rather because these merchants held a monopoly on particular Western commodities. Access to cotton clothing, salt, and Western tools was necessary to distinguish themselves culturally from the indigenous ‘savage.’ These families shifted from one dishonest merchant to another, until they found a relatively ‘good’ *patrón*, though even he deceived them.

While published accounts of the rubber boom highlight sexual violence perpetrated by particular figures, such as the *patrón* Mauricio Leví, oral histories of this era suggest that these figures were enabled by a broader context of white sexual violence against indigenous women and girls, as a form of social control.<sup>169</sup> I found that historical archives in Tena also contain innumerable references of ‘*rpto*’ [rapture] or the stealing of indigenous girls. In Playas itself, the lineages of several families include the rape of indigenous women by white merchants. It is a difficult, sensitive topic to study ethnographically, due to the stigmatization of survivors and of the children born to rape survivors. While regional women’s organizations, such as the Federation of Women of Sucumbíos, have begun to bring attention to ongoing gender violence in the region, the history of sexual violence and its legacies has yet to be confronted and incorporated in critical analyses of social relations in the region.

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<sup>169</sup> As the feminist scholar Rita Segato (2003) has analyzed in-depth, sexual violence is fundamentally a form of social control.



At the end of commodity peonage in the 1950s, subsequent generations settled at the confluence of the Aguarico and Cuyabeno rivers and pursued education as a component of civilized identity and a tool with which to manage relations with white merchants. Missionaries and the state failed to ensure access to teachers on the ‘inside,’ while indigenous students at boarding schools endured a social isolation. Playas residents built and managed their own school, a remarkable achievement. In this context, educational credentials in-and-of themselves became tokens of a dignified identity, though nearly all residents returned to farming, fishing, and hunting. A series of economic booms and busts during the final decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century facilitated access to new commodities and sent men to look for work in cities. Even though few men would accumulate any economic gains, nonetheless non-agrarian work became recognized as yet another symbolic marker of dignity. A claim to urban space became a claim to respect, understood in terms of equality within dominant, white society.

Thus, practices of social recognition have changed over time, but entanglements with Western actors have continued to shape the symbolic economy of social value. In each historical moment – from the rubber boom to the founding of the school to the urban exodus of the male population, some individuals have achieved degrees of social mobility, accumulating more symbolic status than others (albeit, often due to collective struggle), but, at the same time, they have witnessed the renewal of ethnic hierarchies in contractual, institutional, and everyday relations with ‘deceptive’ whites. Commonly-shared memories feature deceptive market actors, absent teachers, bullies in schools, and gestures of disdain in urban centers and labor markets. These layered histories have tended to divide experiences of social space in two, between a white ‘outside’ and an indigenous ‘inside.’ At times, this “concrete abstraction” (Lefebvre 1991[1974], 341-2, 86, 100) or social imaginary that finds material expression translates into conflicts

between Playas residents or in their own homes, whereby claims to being ‘more from the outside’ are claims to power over one’s neighbors or spouse. These are struggles over respect, but a respect defined in terms of white subjects and spaces.<sup>170</sup>

New urban geographies in Cuyabeno are not the product of state imposition on traditional, subsistence communities, nor have state development discourses created new urbanizing subjects *ex nihil*. The capacity of the Ecuadorian state to secure consent to the expansion of oil extraction in this region in exchange for urban development is rooted in colonial norms of civilization that structure aspirations, social obligations, and consent to authority. These perplexing landscapes emerge from a colonial past and present.

### *On Representing Resource Politics in the Amazon*

In this final section, I reflect on the politics of representation in the study of territorial-based resource conflicts in the Amazon. Social and natural scientists, environmentalists, and engaged citizens increasingly express deep, legitimate concerns about the future of the world’s largest rainforest, as well as the future of the indigenous communities and cultures that depend on Amazonian ecosystems. One important action of solidarity researchers and interest groups have undertaken since the 1980s has been to support the demands of Amazonian groups for

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<sup>170</sup> In my analysis, I have drawn inspiration from anthropologist Pierre Bourdieu, who was preoccupied with the central importance of respect, status, or distinction in social relations and the social inequalities that often overlap with economic fields, but also exceeded them. For him, the modern state derived its legitimacy from mediating social struggles over status (see Bourdieu 2014). In the story of Playas, we see that white actors have maintained a monopoly on the terms and tokens of respect (i.e., clothing, education, housing, work), the partial redistribution of which has served to naturalize white authorities (e.g., merchants, missionaries, the state) – what Bourdieu coined “symbolic violence.” Yet, Bourdieu underemphasized the particular violence of colonial authority, explored more fully by Fanon – an authority that divided the social world not only into gradations of status, but also into two fundamental categories: civilized and savage. Bourdieu also overemphasized the degree to which social practice – i.e., striving for distinction – is unconscious. In Playas, social actors have often been quite aware that their aspirations and actions for urban futures may contradict their desires, but nonetheless dominant norms of respect shape their aspirations, in part by shaping affective obligations and relationships towards ancestors and children.

forms of territorial autonomy, including the right to consent to the activities of extractive industries in those territories, under the premise that indigenous peoples will use those rights to defend and reproduce traditional, sustainable livelihoods.

Yet, communities and individuals in them have adopted diverse political postures in relation to extractive industries. For example, in recent years, the Ecuadorian media has documented the struggles of Zápara families to prevent the entrance of oil companies in their territory. Attention has also been placed on non-contacted peoples who persist in voluntary isolation, including about 150-300 Taromenane and 20-30 Tagaeris, though oil companies continue to encroach on them. The Kichwa community of Sarayaku remains steadfast in its decades-long defense of territorial autonomy against oil companies. Yet, in some cases, positions have shifted over time, as political economic conjunctures change and industry actors offer compensation, generating or renewing divisions in communities. The Zápara, Shiwiar, Shuar, and Achuar organizations in Ecuador have witnessed internal divisions regarding how to respond to oil companies (Vallejo 2014). In the early 1990s, Cofán communities became emblematic of indigenous resistance, spearheading a lawsuit against Texaco (now Chevron) for environmental damages (Valdivia 2007) and halting production at an oil well (Cepek 2018), but, more recently, a new generation of Cofán leaders have consented to oil production in exchange for a Millennium City (Cepek 2018; Valladares and Boelens 2017). Such communities use their right to consent to access forms of modern development that dramatically transform territories, livelihoods, and everyday life.

More broadly, the Bi-provincial Assembly of indigenous leaders led oil production strikes and stoppages in the early 2000s not to bring the oil industry to an end, but rather to

demand greater redistribution of oil rents for regional and local infrastructure development.

Arguably, the 2019 Amazonian Law is a direct result of those regional struggles.

I discovered the prevalence of urban aspirations in the Cuyabeno region through a series of focus groups. In a Secoya community upriver from Playas, older residents refer to the “freedom” they enjoy on their farms, but, as one leader states, look forward to having “luxury houses” like the ones in Playas when “the Company” arrives at their shores. Learning from the experience of their friends and family in Playas, however, they will insist on securing jobs along with their houses. A leader named Javier Coquinche from a Kichwa community downriver from Playas complains that indigenous leaders who oppose oil production “want political protagonism.” He asks, “who are they? Are they the people who really need [help]? No.” Javier fears that an urban development like what his cousins have in Playas would destroy customs that he values in his community, but he wants it nonetheless for the sake of his children. I found similar perspectives in Siona, Shuar, and Cofán communities,<sup>171</sup> with whom Bercelino has been sharing insights on how to negotiate with oil companies and, in the meantime, how to gain legal recognition as parishes in order to access public funds for investing in their own development projects and schools.

In other words, the “force of community” (Zalik 2006) that many indigenous groups and organizations have mustered over the last three decades or so of protest and negotiation has been used for distinct ends. Each community and each region has its own dynamics with their own historical trajectories. What is there to do where communities do not act as uncompromising guardians of the Amazon? Should researchers lay blame with the powers of the state and

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<sup>171</sup> In the Cofán community of Zábalo, I came across a U.S. missionary who asked me “do you have much hope for the people here?” He continued, “They listen to pop music that is telling them to come out of the forest and get rich.”

companies for duping them or rendering them docile – or, conversely, should they divert their gaze and seek out resistance and refusal on other frontiers? Imaginaries and ‘strategic’ representations of unified indigenous opposition to oil and extractive industries are commonplace in the public sphere and in academic writings (Kuper et al. 2003). There is certainly much to be learned from the values and practices of people and communities who do resist negotiating with oil companies in the name of territorial autonomy. The lessons these cases offer are not of traditional communities that have remained isolated from white society; rather, each case reflects particular geographies and histories of encounter and response to white society, even among non-contacted peoples.<sup>172</sup>

A major limitation of much contemporary research on resource politics<sup>173</sup> in the Amazon is its presentism. While dense rainforests project an “impression of stasis” (Raffles 2002, 34) and influential research overlooks the historical development of social relations in this place, favoring instead notions of a pristine landscape that has only recently come into contact with the Western world, such narratives create an erroneous divide between modern spaces and traditional places – what Dependency Theorist André Gunder Frank (1969) derided as the “dual society” hypothesis – and, in turn, obscure the histories of how urban “centers” and Amazonian “peripheries” have been produced in material and symbolic terms. As historian Eric Wolf

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<sup>172</sup> Pastaza province has remained peripheral to the extractive campaigns that have centered around the Napo River ever since Spanish colonization. Sarayaku resisted Shell in the 1930s, Western Amoco in 1970, Idela Arco Oriente in 1989, and the Argentinean company CGC in 1996, when they began to leverage alliances with environmentalists to draw international attention to their struggle.

<sup>173</sup> Anthropologist Amita Baviskar (2003) writes that “[a]ppreciating the inseparability of the material and the symbolic dimensions of the conflict, helps us understand that the political economy of a natural resource is meaningful only through the wider networks of cultural politics in which it is embedded.” (5051).

(2010[1982]) argued, there are “no ‘contemporary ancestors,’ no people without history” (385).<sup>174</sup>

Although the West often conceives of the Amazon as timeless, change over time in these ‘jungles’ can be quite rapid, unpredictable, and dramatic. Since the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the confluence of the Aguarico and the Cuyabeno has hosted a Franciscan reduction, a military outpost, a settlement of rubber workers, a school and farming community, and an urban re-settlement. Even the physical landscape has transformed dramatically. In the 1960s, the southside of Aguarico was a beach and there was an island in the middle of the river. The rainforest has since taken the beach and the island is mostly submerged. The southern and northern shores have shifted northward, eating away at the shoreline of Playas’ center. The long-abandoned military outpost of the 1940s is falling into the Aguarico and the Millennium City may eventually follow someday. In a missionary’s collection of stories from the Aguarico called *En la región del olvido* [*In the Region of Forgetting*], Breslín Chávez’ son José is cited as describing this dynamism of the Aguarico in rather poetic terms:

*Like a gambler, the Aguarico lays out with each rise a new hand of cards, which are islands; it moves and shuffles lands in its channel that disappear between foams. You work off your skin to open your farm, your house, to have your yuca, your little banana... One day the river has the urge and it eats everything there... Did you see my little island? By the time I realized it, I already had the cattle swimming in the river. And the house? Now you seen it and now you don’t; she took it from me. You never know what will be the next hand of this great land devourer, deceitful Aguarico. (Cabodevilla 1998, 149)*

Playas residents today are aware that their new homes may end up in the river – ‘now you see it and know you don’t.’ Yet, these moments or historical events have not been fully submerged

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<sup>174</sup> Likewise, geographer Doreen Massey (2005) proposed re-conceptualizing places as ‘place-events’ (28), echoing Levi-Strauss’ (2012[1955]) critique of nostalgic, stagnant conceptions of exotic places that would rob people of their history (also, see Roseberry (1989)).

under the passage of time. They linger in the stories and memories of people who have traveled and lived along these rivers.

The production of any place is an historical process that entails a temporal complexity. The Millennium City is not only the story of Rafael Correa's political moment, but it is more profoundly and precisely the story of the rubber boom, missionary schools, urban outmigration, and post-neoliberal development, among countless other stories and episodes of the past that shape the present.<sup>175</sup> In 2008, distinct historical moments became triggered and relived when Petroamazonas' barges appeared on Playas' shores. Historical modes of thought and practice, writes anthropologist Ann Laura Stoler (2016), "fold back on themselves and, in that refolding, reveal new surfaces" (26) – and new places.

Ahistorical narratives of indigenous resistance obscure precisely how and why colonized peoples have responded to encounters with white society to achieve distinct ends. Non-contacted peoples evade the genocidal encroachments of Western actors and committed struggles for autonomy persist. Cases like that of Playas demonstrate that a willingness to negotiate reflects a distinct strategy to deal with white society, but it does not necessarily reflect desire for integration in white society (or ambivalence). Bercelino Noteno is not an uncritical participant in urban development. He celebrates his shaman ancestors. He misses his own life as a shaman. But he remains in the Millennium City and has decided not to pass on his knowledge to his grandchildren. The personal desires of Bercelino do not correspond to his aspirations and political struggles. Oil rents have enabled Bercelino to pursue the notions of respect, dignity, and

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<sup>175</sup> Attention to the legacies and repetitions of a colonial past does not close off the possibility of change. "The past," wrote Marxist José Mariátegui (1928)," interests us insofar as it serves to explain the present." But, he added, "constructive generations feel the past as a root, as a cause. They never feel it as a program" (cited in Luis Luis 1994, 1). If ahistorical representations of indigenous communities are constitutive of the hierarchical order of the West, then it would seem that any emancipatory impulse towards creating a "new man" (Fanon 2004[1963], 315) might require an awareness of the ways in which the present is the past.

status imposed upon his community by generations of colonial, racist interventions. His own desires for a forest-based life seem irrelevant in this context, as long as he and his children participate in a broader social world divided between civilized and savage, where commodities, education, and urban lifestyles mitigate the dehumanizing gaze of the ‘outside.’

*Postscript: A Note on Stretching Marxism*

I have tried to remain faithful to the stories of Playas residents, situating their experiences at the center of this dissertation. Many theoretical debates relevant to their stories are stored away in footnotes. However, this dissertation has also been a response to planetary urbanization literature, inspired by readings of Frantz Fanon and lectures by Fanonian scholar Alvaro Reyes. To situate Playas within planetary urbanization literature would either necessitate overlooking its residents or singling them out as complicit suckers. For Fanon, however, it is clear that modern society’s suckers are the dominant subjects who live their social position as if they were free. Playas’ residents, by contrast, have lived their pursuit of urban space not as freedom but as a reactive strategy to mitigate racial subordination.

Many scholars have argued that racism has been an “inextricable” component of capitalism (Taylor 2016; also, see Bledsoe and Wright 2019; Gilmore 2002; Melamed 2015; Robinson 2000) – i.e., a necessary, instrumental invention to generate ‘internal colonies’ of capital accumulation across diverse scales and time periods, from the plantation to the prison. Fanon has inspired much work on racial capitalism. But Fanon’s particular approach to the effects of colonialism on subjectification offers further insights into the structure of capitalism and the modern world.



For Fanon, racism has resulted from the reaction or fear of what phenomenologists and existentialists such as Edmund Husserl and Jean-Paul Sartre referred to as “transcendental consciousness” (Sartre 1957; also, see Edie 1993; Gordon 2015, 16) – an innate tendency of subjects to change; a pre-reflexive consciousness; an “impersonal spontaneity” (Stewart 1998, 5). The colonizer, Fanon argued, invented the identity of the colonized as a strategy to fix his own identity and deny the dynamic diversity of human existence. This fixing-in-place was a social production in a broad sense, not just a linguistic one. It divided the world in two through physical and symbolic violence, including segregation, that became internalized in the habits and self-perceptions of colonizers and colonized alike. Authentic recognition could not be possible in a social world mediated by stereotypes. The colonized could accept inferiority; strive to become (more) white; celebrate an inherited identity; or revolt against all of the institutions, segregation, cultural productions, and habits that would fix them in place. Although movements to value black or indigenous identities were necessary reactions against indifference, Fanon argued that there was ultimately no way to fully redeem such identities that had been based on a lie. This is why in *A Dying Colonialism* (1994[1959]), Fanon drew such hope from the women who participated in the Algerian revolution, shaking off their traditional roles. For a time, they troubled patterns of social hierarchy at the national scale (colonizer-colonized) and the family scale (man-woman), making possible the socialization of new relations that might not be fixed and hierarchical. Although inclusion into an order organized around the authority of the white man was not possible; this order was not ontological, but social and political. It could be overturned.

In Playas, we saw in the uprising a moment of possibility, as women similarly reached beyond inherited identities structured in hierarchy. That event gave way under the weight of the

military to a negotiation over terms of recognition within the existing social structure. The fraught search for social inclusion continues among Playas residents, as they struggle to sustain the Millennium City, access university education, and perhaps ‘become someone’ on the outside. In such a world, any potential struggle for emancipation, Fanon argued, cannot be reduced to the redistribution of material wealth or other forms of symbolic status, but must render nonsensical hierarchical<sup>176</sup> identities to restore the capacity of individuals for transformation and their social capacity for mutual recognition.

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<sup>176</sup> Similarly, social ecologist Murray Bookchin argued that critiques of human-environment relations should not focus narrowly on class-centric critiques of value production and distribution, but take into account the underlying problem of social hierarchy – the practices, institutions, and credentials of status that have occupied the center of social critiques by such thinkers as Frantz Fanon, Pierre Bourdieu, Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui, and others cited in this dissertation, or of other critiques of hierarchy out of social movements or the anarchist tradition (e.g., Petr Kropotkin, Élisée Reclus, Emma Goldman). As anarchist and anthropologist David Graeber writes, “the ultimate stake ... of politics ... is not ... the struggle to appropriate value; it is the struggle to establish what value is” (2001, 88, first emphasis added). Money and urban space are formalizations of social status and power. Urban identities, race, class, gender, and other forms of difference only become consequential in societies structured hierarchically, limiting social aspirations, the possibility of other worlds, and the biophysical continuity of this world. Bookchin (1980) wrote the following about the ecological threat of social hierarchy: “*Without changing the most molecular relationships in society – notably, those between men and women, adults and children, whites and other ethnic groups, heterosexuals and gays (the list, in fact, is considerable) – society will be riddled by domination even in a socialistic ‘classless’ and ‘non-exploitative’ form. It would be infused by hierarchy even as it celebrated the dubious virtues of ‘people’s democracies,’ ‘socialism’ and the ‘public ownership’ of ‘natural resources.’ And as long as hierarchy persists, as long as domination organizes humanity around a system of elites, the project of dominating nature will continue to exist...*” (76). But we should give the final words of this dissertation to young Marco Noteno, who worries, “[i]t is going to be difficult to change this world significantly because people want to be better than others; they want to be the best and they want to use others as their small servants, the people who tell them, ‘oh, look at that [person], how grand...’”

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