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“NOSOTRAS COMO MUJERES”: THE ENVIRONMENTAL ACTIVISM OF
INDIGENOUS WOMEN OF THE ECUADORIAN AMAZON

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A thesis presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements for completion of the
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Abstract

Across Latin America, indigenous organizations have mobilized against environmental destruction inflicted upon their communities. Environmental destruction brought about by climate change and extractive industries has been especially devastating in the Western Amazon—the most biologically diverse region of the Amazon and home to a diversity of indigenous populations. The efforts of indigenous organizations in the Western Amazon, notably the Ecuadorian Amazon, have been successful in affecting progressive environmental policies as a means to protect their natural environments and standards of living. Indigenous women specifically have played a significant role in addressing the climate injustices affecting their communities and have employed rhetoric that distinguish themselves as indigenous women living in the Amazon as a means to advocate for environmental justice. Through the use of symbolic boundaries and collective consciousness raising, the subjects in question advocate for political and social change by employing the stereotypes associated with indigenous women of the Two-Thirds World. Their intersectionality plays a role in their disproportional subjection to environmental destruction in relation to dominant social groups, but is also employed as a means to assert their connection to their natural environment and authority in protecting it from exploitation.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

The Western Amazon is the most biologically diverse region of the world (Finer 2008). It hosts not only a great number of plants, insects, amphibians, and wildlife of all kinds, but also a diversity of indigenous populations, including groups living in voluntary isolation, who have inhabited these territories for generations. Also home to the Amazon, however, are hundreds of thousands of square kilometers of oil reserves sought after by a booming industry. This industry, propelled by record prices and high global demand, has led to devastating environmental and social impacts that have disproportionately affected the indigenous groups living in or around land occupied by multinational oil corporations' industry sites (Finer, 2008).

Second only to Peru with 72% of their Amazonian territory apportioned into oil blocks, the Ecuadorian government has allocated approximately 65% (~52,300 km²) of its Amazonian territory for extractive activities (Finer 2008). These blocks overlap with the ancestral or titled lands of ten indigenous groups, but it is primarily the national government, not the indigenous groups that live on this land, that allows corporations to establish their oil sites. The groups affected, however, have organized in response to the environmental injustices that have been disproportionately felt by vulnerable populations (Cuomo 2011). Across Latin America, there have been a series of indigenous mobilizations centered around the environmental destruction brought by extractive activities, but the indigenous organizations in Ecuador have played a significant role in the nation's progressive, environmental policies.

This thesis examines the strategies used by indigenous environmental activist networks facilitated by women living in the Ecuadorian Amazon. I pose the questions: what strategies were employed by the activists, and what do these strategies reveal about global gender, racial, and economic inequality? In answering this question, I first provide explanations of the underlying theoretical framework of this thesis. By outlining an explanation of intersectional feminism (MacCormack 1979; Crenshaw 1990), especially the feminism apparent in the Two-Thirds World (Mohanty 2003), I hope to display the value of studying a particular case as a means to understand the universal. Then, I contextualize and explain the stereotypes that have been associated with indigenous peoples in order to pursue a non-essentializing, cross-cultural critical analysis. I explore how the women, an especially vulnerable social group following the theory of intersectionality, have employed collective consciousness-raising using the framework of symbolic boundaries as an activism strategy. By performing identities founded in colonial stereotypes, the activists create a collective identity while emphasizing the differences between themselves and their oppressors as a means to create social and political change (Cherry 2010; Polletta 2001; Ulloa 2005; Ulloa 2008; Valivia 2007).

Indigenous women specifically have mobilized to address climate injustices affecting their communities and have adopted rhetoric that appeal to their identity as indigenous women living in the Amazon as a means to advocate for environmental justice. The intersectional identities of indigenous women of the Ecuadorian Amazon have left them exceptionally vulnerable to political disenfranchisement and exploitation by dominant groups. These women, however, have utilized their identities and the stereotypes that have been historically associated with them as a means to enact social and political change relating to their natural environments. Through the use of symbolic boundary work and collective identity formation, the subjects in

question advocate for political, social, and cultural change by employing the stereotypes associated with indigenous women of the Two/ Thirds World (Mohanty 2003; Cherry 2010; Arora-Jonsson 2011). By using a specific case to study environmental activism lead by Amazonian indigenous women, this thesis hopes to pursue a more inclusive form of feminist scholarship that highlights feminist activism of indigenous groups across the globe.

In the third chapter, I provide a more empirical explanation of environmental degradation and environmental movements in the Ecuadorian Amazon. In the third, I outline environmental activism in Ecuador, and the role indigenous organizations played in the country's progressive environmental policies. Lastly, in examining these cases, I employ a content analysis of first-hand reports of indigenous environmental advocacy groups in the Ecuadorian Amazon. In analyzing blog posts, short video documentaries, and sustainable development proposals, I have noticed the emergence of a few key themes relating to multinational corporations/capitalism, resource extraction, climate change, gender roles, and communal relations. In their advocacy, the activists have targeted multinational oil corporations and the government institutions that allow their extractive activities as the primary contributors to the environmental destruction facing their communities. While some groups consider climate change to be the biggest threat to their ways of life, they all consider extractive activities and the government institutions that permit them to be the underlying cause of their environmental woes.

In their activism, they establish symbolic boundaries (i.e. reaffirming the distinctions between themselves and the other) as a means to distinguish themselves as a collective identity (Cherry 2010; Arora-Jonsson 2011). In raising the collective consciousness as women living in the rural Ecuadorian Amazon, the women perform the characteristics/qualities imposed upon them post-Conquest to establish their authority over their natural environment and the foundation

of their advocacy (Ulloa 2005). In maintaining the Eurocentric nature|culture divide and their inherent connection with their natural environment as indigenous women, the activists use their identities as a tool to network, mobilize, and form a platform with which to create social and political change.

Chapter 2

Two-Thirds World Feminism and Indigenous Social Movements

Intersectional Feminism

Over the past 150 years, resource extraction and industrialization “powered by exploitation, colonialism, and nearly limitless instrumental use of ‘nature’” have led to the unprecedented influx of carbon emissions released into the Earth’s atmosphere (Cuomo 2001, p. 693). This change in the atmosphere has led to increased global temperatures which has catalyzed a flood of negative ecological, social, and economic effects. The impacts of climate change have/ will continue to affect nearly every social sphere across the globe. To name a few, increased global temperatures affect biodiversity, the spread of disease, agricultural production, and food/ water security (McNall 2011). Despite the fact that climate change is accredited to the industrialized nations of the Global North, it is the world’s most vulnerable populations, those who are least responsible for the effects of climate change, who are most severely affected by its impacts (Cuomo, 2001). Nations of the Global North have operated under a system that has exploited both the people and natural resources of the rest of the world, and this system of exploitation has garnered exponential increases in wealth for the colonizers at the expense of the colonized and their natural environments (Cochrane, 2014).

Historical social, political, and economic inequality is often the foundational cause of environmental injustices; wealthy nations built their fortunes by exploiting the natural resources and wrecking the environments of more vulnerable, developing countries. These politically

disenfranchised and economically unstable populations are more susceptible to the impacts of environmental disasters (Cuomo 2011; Ulloa 2008; Hanna 2016). Among these populations, women are especially vulnerable due to existing social roles and divisions of labor (Cuomo 2011, p. 694). Global South NGOs and activists have attributed their environmental woes (i.e. climate change, food security, peak oil) to the current global consumerist/ capitalist system. Chandra Mohanty gives the examples of the Chipko movement in India that mobilized against mass deforestation and indigenous movements against uranium mining (Mohanty 2003). Cochrane adds that women of color are not only leading environmental movements, but urges that “their gendered and racialized bodies are the key to demystifying and combating the processes of recolonization put in place by corporate control of the environment” (Mohanty 2003, p. 529).

Among Latin American indigenous mobilizations specifically, the principles and practices of *sumak kawsay*¹ and similar cosmovisions have served as alternatives to Western civilizational paradigms (Cochrane 2014). *Sumak kawsay* can be translated to Spanish as *buen vivir* and into English as “good living.” Indigenous advocates of *buen vivir* typically “call for the rejection of Western values” and emphasize their connections to their natural environments and communal ties (Cochrane 2014, p. 578). These groups have called Western modernity into question and have offered their own conceptualizations of development as a solution to the climate crisis disproportionately affecting their communities. Maria Eugenia Choque, an Aymara sociologist, posits that political reforms based on “Indianist theology” are a “response to five centuries of extreme racism and marginalization, [and] seek to recover indigenous identity and self-esteem by reconstructing indigenous communal authorities” (Cochrane 2014, p. 578).

¹ Quechua for “good living”

However, Latin American feminist scholars have pointed to the dangers inherent in essentializing indigenous communities and perpetuating colonialist ideologies.

The global power axes that have led to the formulation of these processes must be understood in analyzing the environmental struggles of Amazonian indigenous women. Following the discourse of Chandra Talpade Mohanty in *“Under Western Eyes” Revisited: Feminist Solidarity through Anticapitalist Struggles (2003)*, Mohanty criticizes the essentializing nature of Western feminism when applied to cross-cultural analysis. She posits that Western/ White feminist scholarship in postcolonial nations operate under a Eurocentric, colonizing, and universalizing methodology. In order to avoid employing colonialist ideas in undertaking cross-cultural analysis, she explains that “cross-cultural feminist work must be attentive to the micropolitics of context, subjectivity, and struggle, as well as to the macropolitics of global economic and political systems and processes” (Mohanty 2003, p. 501).

Writing to challenge the universalizing Eurocentricity of White/Western feminism, Mohanty uses materialist analysis that uses the local as a means to understand the universal. She argues that by examining specific cases on a local level through a contextualized, multi-layered analysis, conclusions regarding “the larger, trans-national political and economic structures and ideologies of capitalism” can be drawn (Mohanty 2003, p. 504). Rather than using universal, blanket assertions to understand situated knowledges, Mohanty’s approach uses particular cases to better understand the universal (Mohanty 2003, p. 501). This understanding leaves space for more inclusive feminist scholarship.

The terminology used to distinguish White/ Western feminism from Non-White/ Western feminism is varied and imprecise. In her article, Mohanty outlines three commonly referred to paradigms when discussing global power dynamics (i.e. the First World/ Third World, Global

North/ Global South, and One-Third/ Two-Thirds World). I will primarily refer to Mohanty's definition of the Two-Thirds World while analyzing the feminist activism of the indigenous women living in the Ecuadorian Amazon.

She defines One-Third/ Two-Thirds as follows:

One-Third/ Two-Thirds: "social minorities and social majorities—categories based on the quality of life led by peoples and communities in both the North and the South...One-Third/Two-Thirds is a non-essentialist categorization, but it incorporates an analysis of power and agency that is crucial. Yet what it misses is a history of colonization that the terms Western/Third World draw attention to" (Mohanty 2003).

Indigenous women and their activism are not adequately categorized under the more conventional First World/ Third World and Global North/ Global South paradigms. Because indigenous women's struggles fall outside of global capitalist, racist, heterosexist trajectories, they are more aptly to be understood through the One-Third World / Two-Thirds World lens. Even within Ecuador, upper class, mestizo and white populations subscribe themselves to Western ways of life nestled in the country's formal sectors. The social majorities living in the Two-Thirds world do not have access to the same standards of living as those living in the One-Third world and find their quality of life is not founded in the same institutions, goods, and services (Mohanty 2003).

Following the theory of intersectionality and intersectional oppression, indigenous women are considered more vulnerable than other social/ ethnic/ racial populations due to the stacked power-axes to which they are subjected. Their marginalized racial, social, and economic positions in society leave them vulnerable to multiple discriminatory systems (Crenshaw 1990). While their natural environments, territories, and knowledges have been exploited, feminist scholars of the Global South and Two/ Thirds World run the risk of essentializing and idealizing these communities through their scholarship (Cochrane 2014). In this sense, indigenous women's

vulnerability and perceived reliance upon and connection to nature must be contextualized and closely studied. The allegedly universal male|female and subsequent culture|nature contrast is not perpetuated across all cultures and societies, and the socially constructed connections between women and nature are not universally upheld (MacCormack 1979).

Generally, women, especially women of the Global South, experience climate issues differently from men of the same region. Gender is a “set of complex and intersecting power relations,” and the vulnerability that women experience at the hands of climate issues extend beyond binary, socially constructed understandings of gender and must be analyzed in conjunction with the other power axes in which these women find themselves (Arora-Jonsson 2011, p. 750). For example, the experiences of Ecuadorian indigenous women cannot be equated with those of mestiza women. In Ecuador, across ethnic groups and geographical boundaries, 90% of all indigenous women work, 80% of indigenous women are involved in agricultural work, but only 10% participate in paid work. More than half of all indigenous women are illiterate, and few possess the means to pursue education or work outside of their residence (Radcliffe 2004). In this sense, vulnerabilities vary contextually, and this paper seeks to examine how indigenous women of the Ecuadorian Amazon have uniquely experienced the climate crisis facing their communities, and what factors prompted their environmental activism (Arora-Jonsson 2011).

Indigenous Social Movements

"Los pueblos indígenas habitamos los ecosistemas más frágiles del planeta, como: bosques húmedos tropicales, desiertos, páramos, montañas e islas, entre otros, constituyendo los grupos más vulnerables frente a los efectos del calentamiento global. Los impactos que genera el cambio climático ponen en peligro nuestra Madre Tierra, cultura, medio ambiente, y sustento. Estos cambios son el resultado de un modelo de desarrollo occidental, basado en un capitalismo voraz que no contempla el respeto por la Madre Tierra.

(Declaración de Qollasuyo, La Paz, Bolivia 17 de marzo de 2008).²

From the 1970s and onwards, indigenous rights have found their voice in national and transnational political discourse, but was not until the 1990s that indigenous movements began to advocate against environmental injustices (Ulloa 2005). As seen in the declaration above, indigenous environmental activists invoke their cultural relationship and respect for nature as an essential actor in their mobilization and a political strategy in asserting their rights (Ulloa 2005). While indigenous groups are affected most by environmental destruction, they have had little presence in international climate discussions; their political disenfranchisement has left them little decision making ability and has threatened their autonomy over their own territories (Ulloa 2008).

In contrast to Western environmental justice movements, indigenous environmental justice movements go beyond the maldistribution of environmental degradation and claim that environmental destruction threatens the preservation of their cultures and functioning of their communities (i.e. their ability to continue and reproduce the traditions, practices, cosmologies,

² Indigenous populations inhabit the planet's most fragile ecosystems, for example: humid tropical forests, deserts, páramos, mountains, and islands, among others, constituting the groups most vulnerable to the effects of global climate change. The impacts that generate climate change put out Mother Earth, culture, environment and sustenance in danger. These changes are the result of a Western development model, based in a capitalist voracity that does not respect Mother Earth.

and “the relationships with nature that tie native peoples to their ancestral lands”)” (Cuomo 2011, p. 694). While negative, orientalizing images representing indigeneity are presented in the media, it has been shown that performative actions, fulfilled by indigenous protesters as a means to leverage Western media and establish a collective identity, are greatly effective in enacting change (Hanna 2016). Through sit-ins, blockades, rallies, and marches that incorporate performative actions and images, activists are able to “seek the attention of a broader audience, establish dialogue with authorities and companies, and to achieve respect for the individual and collective human rights” (Hanna 2016, p. 490). For centuries, representations and projections of indigeneity of the social majority and indigenous performativity have been continuously interacting with each other. In understanding how indigenous groups have defined themselves and “the other,” the centuries-long history of colonization and conquest must be understood.

European colonizers imposed the Western medieval idea that culture cannot flourish in nature onto indigenous populations; this nature|culture binary came to be used as a means to justify the conquest and dehumanization of indigenous peoples (Ulloa 2005, p. 92). By associating the colonized with the exotic, extravagance of the tropics, they were subjected as primitive, culturally inferior, and uncivilized. This method of othering as a means to distinguish oneself from another group is not exclusive to the colonizers; indigenous groups and mobilizers have utilized this in their activism. By strategically deploying colonial stereotypes, the activists are able to construct a collective identity founded in shared experiences with other indigenous activists as well as symbolic boundaries between themselves and their oppressors.

Social movements, in order to either solidify or tear down symbolic boundaries, undergo collective consciousness raising. Typically blocked from more traditional means of enacting social change, groups elect instead to form a distinguished identity from that of their oppressor;

in doing this, they are more able to bring out the cultural or structural changes they would like to see made in their communities (Cherry 2010). In reference to the use of collective consciousness raising in activism, Elizabeth Cherry states, “Developing a collective identity, especially for previously ignored or devalued identities, is one way activists enact the cultural changes they wish to see in the world” (Cherry 2010, p. 451). Indigenous rights activists have adopted this method. In overcoming limitations and disenfranchisement, indigenous groups have projected their identities onto the world through transnational networks as a means to distinguish themselves and establish decision making authority (Andolina 2004, p. 2). In the formation of a collective identity, they have engaged in performative acts (e.g. reinforcing colonial stereotypes like their inherent connection to nature), as means to establish an ethos in their activism, all the while working to other the entities that have inhibited the change they are working to make.

In defining collective identity, Polletta and Jasper explain that a group’s collective identity does not encompass the complexity of an individual’s identity, but reflects an “individual’s cognitive, moral, and emotional connection with a broader community, category, practice, or institution” (Polletta 2001, pg. 285). The collective identity may form part of an individual’s identity, but not all, and is oftentimes founded on perceived connections between individuals that can be either imagined or experienced directly. Polletta and Jasper also explain that collective identities may have been initially constructed and maintained by an outside power, but have been accepted by the group in question. It is expressed through “cultural materials- names, narratives, symbols, verbal styles, rituals, clothing, and so on- but not all cultural materials express collective identities” (Polletta 2001).

Collective identity is a method of understanding how activists understand stratification and their position in society relative to the dominant group. In social movements, those that

move for ethnic or racial justice, for example, collective consciousness raising is seen as more effective than more traditional means of social/ cultural change. Groups who are excluded from political channels of change like litigation or lobbying are able to secure more resources through collectivist protest movements. In celebrating cultural diversity, their voice is given a platform. The success of a mobilization attempt to form a collective identity affects their ability to recruit supporters of the cause, achieve a public hearing, build networks with other groups, and dismantle opposition (Pelotta 2001).

For the purposes of this thesis, the opposition determined by the activists in question has been established as multinational corporations and the government institutions that allow their presence in the Amazon. In Ecuador, Amazonian regions were transnationalized earlier and in a more discrete manner than the Sierra and Costa regions. From Spanish colonialists to multinational corporations, the Amazon has been targeted and colonized for its untapped natural resources. Along with actors looking to exploit its oil and gas reserves, the Amazon has been targeted by “environmentalists for ecological protection, and by cultural rights advocates for highly distinct (or “exotic”) indigenous cultures” (Andolina 2009, p. 4). The Ecuadorian Sierra has fewer extractable raw materials, is markedly less ecologically diverse and fragile, and its indigenous groups have been perceived as being more integrated into Ecuadorian society than indigenous groups of the Amazon (Andolina 2009, p. 4). In the Amazon, these activists seem to be appealing to their identities as indigenous women as a way to advocate against the multinational corporations that have pervaded their territories and threatened their autonomy.

Perhaps one of the most notable examples of environmental activism organized by indigenous populations is the billion dollar, class action lawsuit filed by eastern Amazon groups FEINCE, OISE, and FOISE against Chevron Texaco in US Federal Court that lasted over a

decade. These groups appealed to their indigeneity and presentations thereof throughout their case against the human rights violations and environmental injustices of a foreign company. A coalition of indigenous leaders representing multiple Amazonian groups accused the company of “knowingly conducting negligent environmental practices (such as dumping highly toxic water and crude petroleum into the surrounding ecosystem), wrecking traditional ways of life, and increasing health risks for local peoples” (Valdivia 2007). Representatives of the plaintiffs would stand outside the courthouse proudly displaying “traditional red face paint and feathered headdresses” while condemning the actions of multinational oil corporations. As the media captured these images, certain ideas of indigenous peoples of the Ecuadorian Amazon circled the globe. The activists projected themselves as “local peoples, marginalized by capitalist enterprises and environmental irresponsibility, who are seeking to maintain an environmentalist ethic for cultural survival” (Valdivia 2007, p. 42).

Valdivia conceptualizes indigeneity “not as ‘truths’ about a people’s authentic practices and beliefs that are then ‘taken up’ by representative organizations, but as practices and relationships of identification and recognition of difference that are produced, inhabited, and contested through networks of social interaction” (Valdivia 2007, p. 45). The activists collectively performed their indigeneity as a means to reaffirm the boundaries between themselves and the other, Texaco. However, as Valdivia explains, their indigeneity is not essential to their identities and is not comprehensive to each individual represented by the organization. Because they are blocked from more traditional means of enacting political and social change, the activists utilize these performances to leverage Western media and achieve a political response “a political response among indigenous and nonindigenous actors alike” (Valdivia 2007, p. 45).

In many cases, erasing symbolic boundaries and emphasizing inherent similarities between groups work to maintain social distinctions. Cherry gives the example of sexists assuming that all women are inherently more nurturing than men because of their gender. In contrast, intersectional feminists have worked to build symbolic boundaries as a means to emphasize the need for “contextualized, historical studies of third-world women” (Cherry 2010, p. 455). The experience of these women cannot be equated with those of first world or One-Third world women, and the preservation of boundaries between them work to combat social problems.

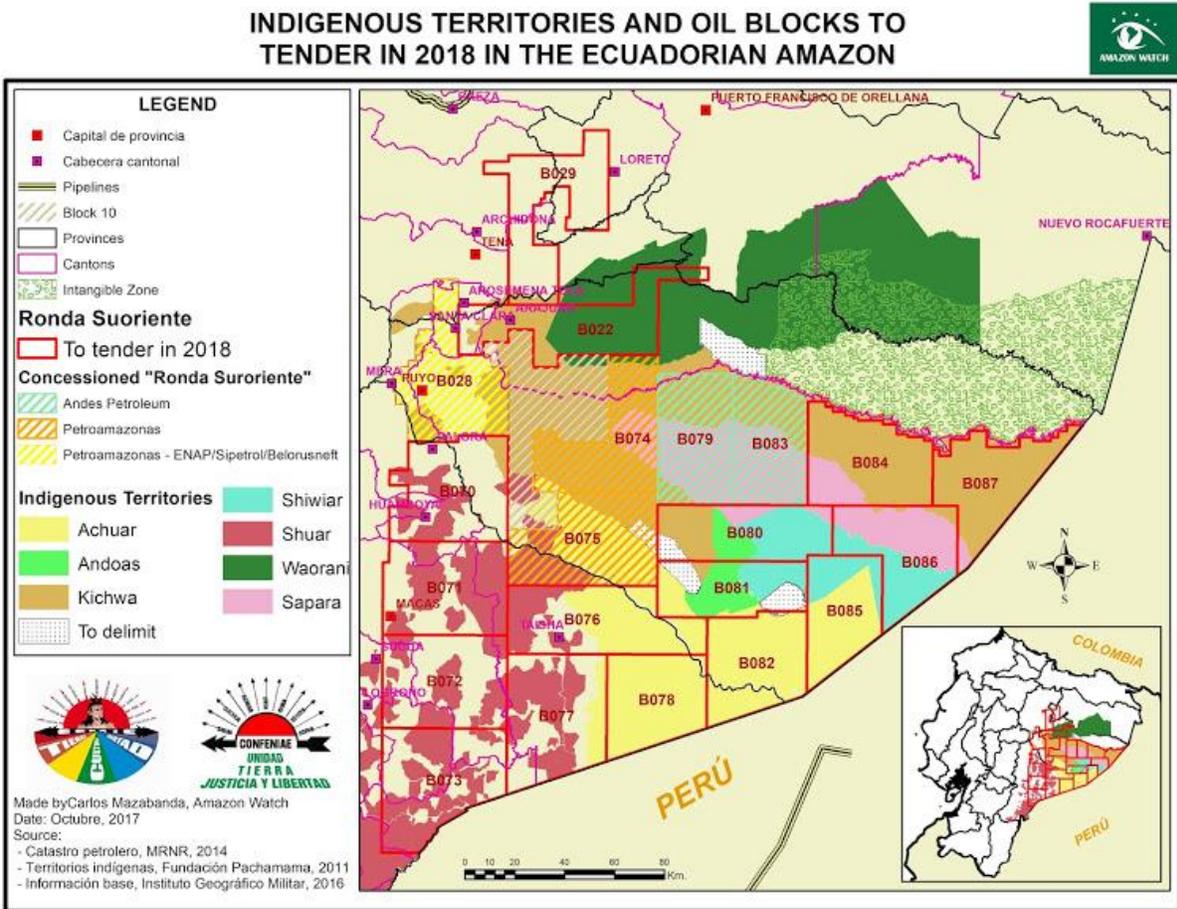
Looking through the lens of environmental justice, the inequity of capitalism can be understood using cases of the marginalized and vulnerable (Mohanty 2003). Chandra Mohanty points out that it is “no coincidence” that women of color, the group left most vulnerable to environmental degradation, are the ones pushing against environmental racism caused by corporate pollution. As they reflect on their everyday lives as poor women of color, they are driven to question the existing power structures that generate cases of environmental injustice (Mohanty 2003, p. 511).

Chapter 3

Environmental Degradation and Environmentalist Movements in the Ecuadorian Amazon

Ecuador's indigenous populations comprise fourteen groups with approximately 1.1 million people identifying as indigenous. Ten of these groups are situated in the Amazon, representing 24.1% of the nation's indigenous population (IWGIA 2018). The Shuar are made up of over 100,000 people spread across the three geographical regions of Ecuador (the Amazon, Sierra, and Costa regions). The Cofan have 1,485 inhabitants, the Sapara have 559 inhabitants, Shiwiar have 1,198 inhabitants, the Siekopai have 689 inhabitants, and the Siona have 611 inhabitants; these are the smaller populations living in the Amazon (IWGIA 2018). Within Ecuador, it was the Amazonian region, rather than the Sierra or Costa regions, that was the first to be trans-nationalized and fetishized for its "exotic" indigenous groups and fragile ecological systems. Throughout the twentieth century, Amazonian territories were increasingly colonized (with government approval) by primarily multinational corporations seeking oil exploration and excavation. Indigenous environmental activists of this region are addressing this crisis by advocating against multinational corporations' extractive activities (e.g. oil, lumber, mining) in their ancestral or titled territories (Andolina 2009, p. 4).

I retrieved this map of indigenous territories and oil blocks from Amazon Watch, an indigenous rights advocacy group. (Amazon Watch 2017).



Upon the ratification of Ecuador’s 2008 Constitution, the country became the first in the world to grant legal rights to nature. Suddenly, nature had the same legal protection as people; the constitutional law motioned that nature had “the right to exist, to maintain and regenerate its vital cycles, and to be restored if damaged, as well as establishing the rights of individuals and communities to bring cases on behalf of nature to public authorities” (Akchurin 2015, p. 938). These ideas are contrary to traditional Western understandings of nature and human superiority over nature. Indigenous organizations call for Ecuador to be recognized “as a ‘plurinational’ polity, a form of multiculturalism that, along with demanding respect for indigenous territories

and ways of life, incorporates politicized versions of indigenous beliefs about the environment played a significant role in the passing of that legislation” (Akchurin 2015, p. 939).

Concepts founded in *sumak kawsay*, a Quechua cosmovision, inspire much of the rhetoric surrounding this new policy. Indigenous cosmologies have become increasingly present in national politics; the president whose administration ratified this constitution ran a campaign that evoked the phrase *sumak kawsay* when advocating for a less exploitative relationship between nature and people (Akchurin 2015). While the rights of nature were not at the forefront of environmentalists’ activism, it was their efforts that catalyzed change at the federal level. However, despite the new laws that suggest the nation’s esteem for nature and its intrinsic value, Ecuador’s economic development models have historically been and currently are highly contingent upon extractive activities.

From the beginning of the Spanish conquest, the native peoples of the Amazon rainforest have been historically subjected to environmental destruction and exploitation at the hands of the colonizer, especially in the form of resource extraction. From gold, to rubber, to oil, the Amazon has been a cornucopia of wealth ripe for the taking. While the riches found in the Ecuadorian Amazon were plundered, the rights of the region’s native people groups were squandered (Larrea 2010).

In the Ecuadorian Amazon, the oil industry established itself in 1922 through Leonard Oil, an American company linked with Standard Oil of New Jersey (Larrea 2010). In 1929, the Ecuadorian government allowed the company to construct Ambato-Mera for purposes of oil exploration, possibly the first major highway into the Amazon. Continuing on into the 1930s, the oil company continued to build connecting roads that would branch farther out into future oil blocks. In 1937 after breaking their contract with Leonard oil, the Ecuadorian government signed

a concession contract with Shell, giving the company access to 100,000 *cuadrados* (blocks) of rainforest, almost all of the country's current Amazonian territory. Shell would continue to build highways until terminating their exploration in 1948 (Larrea 2010).

After losing nearly half of its Amazonian territory in the 1941 border war with Peru, the Ecuadorian government launched a new national campaign that emphasized national security and development. This reactionary discourse, the establishment of military bases along the Peruvian border, as well as the later agrarian and colonization reforms in 1964 and 1973, would go on to colonize and develop the Amazon even further. In 1964, the government signed a concession contract in the northern Amazon with Texaco-Gulf, which would go on to build the country's first oil well in Lago Agrio in 1967. By 1972, oil corporations finally began exporting oil out of Ecuador, now the country's principal export (Larrea 2010).

Currently, Ecuador is one of two Latin American countries that belong to OPEC, and oil production is the country's most significant export, situating itself at 29% of total exports. According to the *Reporte del Sector Petrolero* (Banco Central del Ecuador 2018), the nation had produced 48.22 million barrels by the third trimester of 2018 at a daily rate of 524.11 thousand barrels, an increase from the previous two trimesters of 2018 and the final trimester of 2017. It reached its most recent peak in 2011 in which oil represented "38.7% of government revenues, 58% of exports, and 11.3% of the Gross Domestic Product." There are currently 35 blocks reserved for oil extraction in the Ecuadorian Amazon. Each block accounts for 52,300 km² of land, some of which overlaps with protected areas and titled and ancestral lands of indigenous groups (Lessmann 2016).

Operative oil blocks occupy more Ecuadorian territory than any other country in the Western Amazon Basin, which covers 32% of its Amazonian rainforest. Some of these oil blocks

overlap with titled indigenous territory, and extractive industry and poor environmental oversight/ obsolete technology has led to devastating environmental impacts (Lessmann 2016). The oil industry has significantly affected the daily lives of indigenous groups native to the Amazon. Between 1994 and 2000, 29,000 barrels of oil were spilled across the Amazon, of which 7,000 barrels were never cleaned, that would pollute soil and rivers and lead to the displacement of indigenous communities (Lessmann 2016). For example, oil extraction is what lead to the displacement of Cofan and Huaoroni groups due to the pollution emitted from the Lago Agrio site (Akchurin 2015).

Extractive activities (e.g. oil extraction, mining, and deforestation) have all had significant social impacts on local populations. A strong positive correlation has been drawn between oil drilling and deforestation, a process that transformed the Napo region and its landscape “into one of the largest deforestation frontiers of the Amazon region” (Lessman 2016, p. 4498). Sickneses and damages to public health have resulted from the toxic waste left in the environment. Colonization per the construction of highways (necessary for oil exploration) lead to increased deforestation and agricultural production (Lessmann 2016).

While the Ecuadorian Amazon has been historically targeted for its rich natural resources, due to its geographical location on the equator and its hyperdiverse topography, Ecuador and other equatorial nations are especially vulnerable to the impacts of rapid climate change. According to the World Bank, the most pressing impacts the region might face are increases in extreme weather, deforestation of the Amazon for new uses of land, loss of biodiversity, an increase in tropical diseases, and vulnerability in energy sources (Ulloa 2008). Following the UN Development Programme’s 2018 report, Ecuador’s ecological systems are projected to undergo rapid changes that will affect agricultural production, public health

indicators, food/water security, tourism, and many other factors crucial for Ecuadorians' "rural livelihoods and urban welfare" (United Nations Development Programme 2018).

The Inter-American Commission on Human Rights and the U.N. Human Rights Committee have acknowledged indigenous peoples' autonomous rights to their territories and the importance their lands and resources have over the survival and integrity of their cultures (Anaya 2004). It is widely accepted in international law that indigenous groups ought to have oversight into the use of their lands, namely in terms of resource extraction projects (Anaya 2005). This controversy surrounding the level of autonomy indigenous groups should be granted over their ancestral lands is exemplified in the United Nations Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Degradation (REDD) program, a program that seeks to compensate rural dwellers who leave their lands untouched by extractive industries. REDD is highly contested even among indigenous populations across the Andes and the Global South with the argument settling between indigenous advocates who hope to conserve the land and those who hope to profit off of natural resources (Todd Eisenstadt 2017) (see, e.g., Di Gregorio et al. 2015; Kashwan 2015; REDD-Monitor 2015). While many indigenous organizations speak for individuals who oppose extractive activities and environmental destruction, they do not speak for all. It must be noted that many indigenous groups remain supportive of extractive activity due to the potential employment opportunities and aid distribution that come with it (Larrea 2010).

Efforts have been made to conserve the Amazon and protect native peoples. Starting in the 1970s, the government established a national park department that would release an ecological preservation strategy and eventually establish twenty-four protected areas. In 1999 per an executive decree, all extractive activity and development was prohibited in lands awarded to groups like Huaorani, Tagaeri, and Taromenane (Larrea 2010). In 2008, Ecuador ratified a

progressive constitution that emphasized environmental sustainability and indigenous principles founded in *sumak kawsay*, Kichwa for “living well,” a phrase “articulated in contrast to exploitative relationships between people and nature” (Akchurin 2015, p. 943). The phrase is a fluid concept that emphasizes the connections between “humanity, nature, spirituality, and a responsibility for maintaining this bond for future generations,” (Todd Eisenstadt 2017, p. 44), and prioritizes collective identities over the individual. In Ecuador, the phrase has been utilized to contrast developmentalism, “which—in contrast— emphasizes wealth, poverty, and the hierarchical location of individuals and their economies with respect to global centers of production” (Todd Eisenstadt 2017, pp. 44-45).

Ecuador became the first country in the world that formally established the rights of nature and moved that all people respect its rights to exist and maintain its ecological processes (Larrea 2010). This rhetoric, however, has not been carried out in the Amazon. Parque Nacional Yasuni, for example, was opened up to drilling and highway construction by Rafael Correa, the same president that ratified the 2008 constitution and utilized ideology founded in *sumak kawsay* in his 2006 presidential campaign. Until 2008 little had been done to restrict illegal deforestation and poaching (Larrea 2010). On top of this, indigenous groups remain “at an enormous disadvantage when interacting with oil companies and allied state bodies” (Bozigar 2016).

Within the Global South, Ecuador is an especially relevant case to study attitudes surrounding climate change, geographically as well as politically. Along with the REDD debate, Ecuador has led the way in progressive environmental policies. In conjunction with the 2008 constitution’s recognition of the rights of “Mother Earth”, climate issues are heavily publicized in the Ecuadorian media, and the public generally holds progressive views on environmental topics. Ecuadorian presidents have adopted “indigenous cosmivision rhetoric” that valorize

connection to nature to legitimize climate policies (Todd Eisenstadt 2017). However, It is up for debate what intentions lied behind the usage of *sumak kawsay* and its principles in policy making.

Chapter 4

Analysis

In this section I apply the ideas discussed earlier to the strategies of indigenous environmental activist groups based in the Ecuadorian Amazon. Due to the intersectionality of their identities as women, rural, and indigenous, the climate crisis at hand has affected them more so than other groups, and the experiences of these women cannot be equated with the activism of white feminists living in the One-Third World. The activists studied in this thesis, cognizant of their position in the Two-Thirds World, have participated in performative acts consonant with the Spanish conquest as a means to advocate for social and political change. Looking at interviews, short documentaries, blog posts, and sustainable development proposals, I am able to examine how these women have used collective consciousness raising to distinguish themselves as being more susceptible to environmental destruction caused by extractive activities and climate change while at the same time having more authority in addressing said issues. In examining a singular case of environmental activism, this thesis works to emphasize the importance of considering intersectionality in cross-cultural feminist scholarship.

Data and Methodology

I have analyzed three blog posts, four videos, and one climate change resolution proposal published by women of the Ecuadorian Amazon that employ rhetoric defining themselves, the other, and how they have uniquely suffered from the effects of extractive industries and climate change. I have strictly qualitative data that reveal their reasoning behind and methods in

mobilizing against environmental destruction. I have looked at data published by multiple indigenous activist networks located within the Ecuadorian Amazon, but they are all interrelated and most tie back to Chaski Warmi, a multinational indigenous environmental activist coalition. The coalitions include Saramanta Warmikuna (also referred to as Hijas del Maiz), YakuChaski WarmiKuna, Yapankam, and Huarmi Chasqui.

Employing a content analysis, I decided to focus on the following themes: 1) multinational corporations/ capitalism, 2) environmental destruction, 3) femininity, and 4) their ethnicity. After I determined these themes, I looked for and categorized phrases/ terms that referred to said themes as a way to organize my data. I coded the sources for terms relating to these major themes and organized the codes in a spreadsheet. For example, when a source would use a term that referred to gender roles socially assigned to women, *alimentación* (sustenance, feeding) for example, I would code for it under the theme of femininity.

The three blog posts I chose came from Saramanta Warmikuna, a website used by indigenous women of the Ecuadorian Amazon to post blogs and share ideas. Two blogs were posted within the last three months, and one was posted in October of 2014. I chose to diversify the timeline to demonstrate how long the activists have been utilizing collective consciousness raising as an activist strategy. The older post also most clearly outlined their concerns with resource extraction and climate change as indigenous women. The blogs have ten references to corporations/ government institutions, fifteen references to their ethnicity, fifteen references to their gender, thirteen references to environmental degradation caused by extraction and/or climate change. I chose these blogs because the writers clearly express the mission behind their activism, the specific environmental problems facing their community, and contribute to

collective consciousness raising while simultaneously distancing themselves from the actors bringing about their environmental struggles.

The four videos come from three different activist groups: Chaski Warmi, YakuChaski WarmiKuna, and Yapankam. I found the first three groups, all based in the Ecuadorian Amazon, through Chaski Warmi's website, which is no longer accessible. Yapankam, also based in the Ecuadorian Amazon, I found separately while searching for other activist organizations. These four videos also have direct references to the major themes; they use pointed language that distinguish themselves from multinational corporations and the Ecuadorian government while simultaneously leveraging socially assigned gender roles and essentializing, colonialist stereotypes. Two videos are published by Chaski Warmi and feature singular women expressing their environmental concerns to the Ecuadorian government at the same strike in Quito, Ecuador's capital city. *La palabra de las mujeres del Levantamiento, Catalina Chumpi*³ has three references to gender, three references to the speaker's ethnicity, and two references to government institutions/ multinational corporations. *La palabra de las mujeres del Levantamiento, Hauneka Ushigua* has three references to gender, two references to her ethnicity, one reference to environmental degradation, and three references to government institutions/ multinational corporations. *Denuncia fuera petroleras de la cuenca del río Bobonaza* has six references to gender, two references to ethnicity, two references to environmental degradation, and three references to government institutions/ multinational corporations. *Ii pujutairi* has six references to their ethnicity, three references to environmental degradation, and four references to government institutions/ multinational corporations.

³ The word of the women of the Uprising

The sustainable development proposal that I analyze in depth was published by Huarmi Chaski of Ecuador. The proposal was accessed through chaskiwarmi.org, the official website of Chaski Warmi which is no longer accessible. I was unable to find what results came about after the proposals publication. The proposal is 27 pages long and has 52 references to gender, 41 references to their ethnicity, 35 references to environmental degradation, and 26 references to government institutions/ multinational corporations.

As an activism strategy, the women have defined multinational corporations and government institutions as the other. In establishing this boundary, the women work to enact social change and leverage their authority over environmental decisions. When villainizing government institutions, it is often in reference to their allowance of extractive activities and the squandering of indigenous political rights. They have identified various environmental problems facing their communities, and while they acknowledge that many of their struggles come from the effects of rapid climate change, they maintain their opposition to multinational corporations by asserting that it is their industry's prioritization of capital over human life that is causing these effects. The groups environmental concerns rest in both the effects of climate change and extractive industries. In addressing climate change and proposing their solutions to it, they target the exploitative activities of multinational corporations and the human rights violations of the federal government.

The activists work to create change in their communities by emphasizing the inherent qualities that maintain their authority in presenting solutions to the environmental destruction facing their communities. The activists raise a collective identity as a means to reimagine Western ideas of economic development and their personal experiences with environmental injustice as Indigenous women in the Amazon. The activists describe themselves using precise,

collectivizing language that differentiate them from the other while establishing their connection to environmental protection.

I have divided this chapter into three sections separating each kind of primary source: blog posts, videos, and proposals.

Table 1. Blog posts

Title	Published by	Length	Date Published
<i>Mujeres Amazónicas</i> ⁴	Saramanta Warmikuna	529 Words	2/20/2019
<i>Saparas: Lucharemos hasta el último</i> ⁵	Saramanta Warmikuna	636 Words	12/21/2018
<i>Declaración del encuentro de mujeres frente al extractivismo y al Cambio Climático</i> ⁶	Saramanta Warmikuna	1089	10/20/2014

Table 2. Videos

Title	Published by	Number of People Present	Length	Date Published
<i>La palabra de las mujeres del Levantamiento. Catalina Chumpi.</i> ⁷	Chasqui Warmi	1 retired aged, Shuar woman; speaking into the camera	1:37	8/28/2015
<i>La palabra de las mujeres del Levantamiento.</i>	Chasqui Warmi	1 middle aged, Sapara woman speaking into the	0:57	8/28/2015

⁴ Amazonian Women

⁵ Saparas: We Fight Till the End

⁶ Women's Meeting Declaration Against Extraction and Climate Change

⁷ The Word of the Women of the Uprising. Catalina Chumpi.

<i>Hauneka Ushigua.</i> ⁸		camera		
<i>Denuncia fuera petroleras de la cuenca del río Bobonaza</i> ⁹	Yaku Chaski Warmi Kuna	16 people standing in a row (9 are women); an older woman is the only one speaking into the camera	1:14	8/28/2015
<i>Ii pujutairi.</i>	Yápankam	8 Shuar children speaking into a camera	2:52	9/31/2018

Table 3. Proposals

Title	Published by	Length	Date Published
<i>Propuesta nacional: Soluciones de las mujeres indígenas frente al cambio climático - agua, agricultura y deforestación</i> ¹⁰	Huarmi Chasqui Ecuador	6,359 words	2006

⁸ The Word of the Women of the Uprising. Hauneka Ushiga.

⁹ Denunciation of Oil from the Bobonaza River Basin

¹⁰ National Proposal: Indigenous Women's Solutions Against Climate Change- Water, Agriculture, and Deforestation

Blog Posts

Somos mujeres del campo y la ciudad defensoras de la naturaleza, guardianas de la agricultura familiar, críticas al capitalismo extractivista y patriarcal. (Saramanta Warmikuna).

The blog posts analyzed in this thesis were found directly from the websites of the activist networks and serve as the most regularly updated and abundant form of data. *Saramanta Warmikuna*, for example, runs a website in which several different authors regularly post blog updates that cover a multitude of topics related to Amazonian women's environmental activism. Along with these blog posts, there are also high-quality photos posted of indigenous women wearing clothing characteristic of the social groups participating in activist measures. The posts are not authored by one singular people group, but rather a diversity of groups that are connected by their Two-Thirds World, agricultural lifestyles in the Ecuadorian Amazon. This forum is used as an opportunity for activists from groups all across the Amazon to meet women from other territories, find support systems, and share experiences.

In analyzing the most recent blog posts published on www.saramanta.org, it is clear to see how the women present themselves and the values most important to them. The first sentence of a 2/19/19 post titled *Mujeres Amazónicas* reads, “*Incansables, aguerridas y luchadoras, así son las mujeres amazónicas, siempre con sus hijos o nietos en brazos vienen peleando hace décadas en la selva, en medio del inmenso mar verde que es su casa.*”¹¹ As women of the Amazon, they are veteran warriors; they are unstoppable and have not stopped fighting to protect their family for the past several decades. Already, they have established themselves, Amazonian women, as leaders in the fight to protect their communities. As explained by Cherry 2010,

¹¹ Tireless, hardened and fighters, this is how Amazonian women are, always with their children or grandchildren in their arms, they come fighting for decades in the forest, among the vast green sea that is their home.

Arora-Jonsson 2011, and Ulloa 2005, the women are establishing a collective identity founded in their shared experiences while also performing the characteristics/qualities imposed upon them post-Conquest. While partaking in collective consciousness raising, this quote points to their use of symbolic boundaries in distinguishing themselves from their oppressor (Cherry 2010). The writer emphasizes both their inherent connection to nature as well as their prioritization of life over capital.

The writer of *Mujeres Amazónicas* is one of many that emphasizes the importance of family and pits extractive industries as a hindrance to living out this value. This writer goes on to explain that women, who have historically been left in the shadows of men, are the ones confronting the oil companies who have come into their territory. She explains that they as women, the ones who have suffered the most from its pollution, are the ones shouting “*basta!*” (Saramanta 2/20/19).¹² Consonant with the Cuomo 2011, Cochrane 2014, and Ulloa 2005 articles, these women are more vulnerable than men and more dominant social groups and have contributed the least to the impacts of climate change and environmental degradation at large, but are nonetheless presenting their own solutions in addressing these issues.

The blog post *Lucharemos hasta el último* expresses their concern over the “*ocupación, explotación, y colonización de su territorio ancestral*”¹³ and clearly establishes which entities the women are working to distinguish themselves from through their symbolic boundary work (Samanta 12/21/18). The women explain that their territory and communal well being is threatened by “*el petróleo y el Gobierno.*”¹⁴ The writer calls out government institutions and multinational oil corporations for pitting indigenous groups against each other, she blames them

¹² Enough!

¹³ Occupation, exploitation, and colonization of their ancestral territory.

¹⁴ The oil company and the government

for the “*genocidio*”¹⁵ of the Sapara people, and she asserts that it is the presence of these groups that is contaminating their territory and bringing sicknesses from environmental contamination (Samanta 21/12/18). Throughout the posts, indigenous women polarize themselves against their oppressors (multinational corporations and government institutions) as a part of their collective consciousness raising (Cherry 2010).

In building the boundaries between themselves and these entities, as explained in the 2010 Cherry article, the women establish both qualities inherent in themselves as rural, indigenous women and qualities inherent in the other. In the post, *Declaración del encuentro de mujeres frente al extractivismo y al Cambio Climático*, the writer pits herself against the extractive industry while simultaneously establishing her authority in protecting her natural environment. She condemns the exploitation of nature through mining and oil extraction and explains how the chemicals and toxins emitted wastes water and cause sickness. She asserts that the arrival of extractive companies threaten the very “*tejido comunitario*”¹⁶ by breaking up families within the community (admin 10/20/14). The arrival of the other has threatened the collective identity of Saramanta Warmikuna. These corporations threaten “*la vida,*” and when life is threatened it is the women, “*las mujeres que parecían marginadas,*”¹⁷ who rise up to its defense (admin 10/20/14). In this statement, the speaker alludes to women’s inherent authority over life/ creation and their responsibility in preserving it.

As explained by both Cochrane and Mohanty, it is important to understand these women’s problems as being a result of Western modernity and the global power axes at play. Their intersectional identities have left them more vulnerable than women belonging to more

¹⁵ Genocide

¹⁶ Fabric of their community

¹⁷ The women who appeared marginalized

dominant social groups. In establishing boundaries between herself and the other, Patricia Gualinga, “*la lideresa del pueblo Kichwa de Sarayaku*,”¹⁸ goes on to explain how women’s bodies are impaired by extractive processes. She notes an increase in gastrointestinal, skin, and respiratory illnesses and cancers in themselves and their families. She is quoted as saying that women are wise in believing “*no queremos alcoholismo, no queremos que haya prostitución, no queremos que los hombres nos golpeen. No queremos esta vida que, por más que nos ofrezcan escuelas, letrinas o casas de zinc, no nos haga sentir dignas.*”¹⁹ Women are already held as inferior and subordinate, and Gualinga expresses that the negative effects brought by extractive companies are causing even more pain in their lives (admin 10/20/14).

In establishing their authority in environmental protection, the activists often refer to the importance of maintaining their socially assigned gender roles. One communal and familial responsibility that the women frequently mention is *alimentación*, a responsibility that is threatened by environmental destruction. Contamination of agricultural products, the death of livestock, and a loss of farming land have all affected the “*fuerza de sustento de las familias y la comunidad*” (admin 10/20/14) and the capacity the women have in feeding their families.²⁰ She uses her identity as a woman as leverage in denouncing the acts of these companies. She equates the exploitation of land to the exploitation of women. As explained by Ulloa 2005 and Hanna 2016, this writer employs essentializing images and eloquently reaffirms the boundary that she and women like her have built that distinguish themselves from their oppressor and advocate for social and political change. They condemn the development model that valorizes the accumulation of capital over life, and pit this valorization as the antithesis to their own; these

¹⁸ The leader of the village *Kichwa de Sarayaku*

¹⁹ We do not want alcoholism, we do not want there to be prostitution, we do not want men to hit us. We do not want this life that, As much as we are offered schools, latrines or zinc houses, do not make us feel dignified

²⁰ Family and community’s source of sustenance

extractive policies counter the values she and other indigenous women like the writer (“*mujeres en estas comunidades rurales*”) ²¹ have practiced for centuries (i.e. “*el trabajo de conservación y cuidado de la vida y del patrimonio natural*”) (admin 10/20/14). ²²

Similarly to other indigenous activists across the Two-Thirds world described by Mohanty, the writer reiterates how the true root of the issue lies in the capitalist ideals held by multinational corporations and other Western institutions. The writer explains that these institutions “*son injusto, ignora a las mujeres, prioriza la reproducción del capital por encima de la reproducción de la vida.*” ²³ She and other women, unlike the corporations occupying their territories and the government institutions that allow them, defend “*la vida, el agua, el territorio, velamos por la salud de la familias, por la soberanía alimentaria, por los derechos y la defensa de la madre tierra.*” ²⁴ In these claims, her words support the theories found in Cuomo 2011 and Ulloa 2005. In order to build a platform on which to create change, the women invoke their cultural ties and reliance on nature in maintaining the functions of their communities.

The activists frequently express how they as women have suffered from these extractive industries more so than other groups. The writer of *Declaración del encuentro de mujeres frente al extractivismo y al Cambio Climático* continuously returns to her assertion that women (grouped together with “*niños y niñas*” and senior citizens) are more vulnerable than other groups because of their disproportionate exposure to contaminants related to extraction while being simultaneously less aware of the risks at hand. Despite their vulnerability, they refer to their femininity as a source of strength. Nema Grefa, the president of the aforementioned Sapara

²¹ Women in these rural communities

²² The work of conserving and caring for live and our natural heritage

²³ Are unjust, ignore women, prioritize the reproduction of capital over the reproduction of life

²⁴ Live, water, territory, we watch over the health of our families, food sovereignty, the rights and defense of mother earth.

group, is quoted as saying, “*Soy mujer, madre, y tengo a mis padres adentro (en el territorio), pero no voy a dejarlo.*”²⁵ She appeals to her gender as leverage in asserting her authority and determination in leading this organization. This serves as another example of the activists utilizing their identity as indigenous women and mothers as agency in bringing about political change. The ethos they carry gives them authority to provide solutions to climate change and other environmental injustices.

Indigenous activists, in forming a collective identity, have sought to vilify government institutions and extractive multinational corporations as the perceived other. Petroleum and mining companies “*rompen el tejido comunitario y lo reemplazan con conflictos en las familias, la división de comunidades, la confrontación entre unos y otros*” (admin 10/20/19).²⁶ They have placed blame for their hardships on the government institutions’ negligence and prejudices that further disenfranchise and endanger indigenous communities. Despite their social, political, and economic marginalization that disproportionately subjects them to environmental degradation, they have offered their own solutions to these issues founded in anti-Western/ capitalist paradigms.

Videos

Linked to Saramanta Warmikuna’s website is another activist group, Yaku Chaski Warmikuna. Yaku Chaski, meaning “messengers of the river” in Kichwa, is made up of Kichwa and Waorani women who traveled for eight days along the mouth of the Bobonaza river. Their method of activism was to connect with as many people like them (rural, indigenous, Amazonian

²⁵ I am a woman, a mother, and I have my parents inside (in the territory), but I am not going to leave it

²⁶ Break the fabric of our community and replace it with familial conflicts, communal division, and confrontation between each other

woman), and share their experiences so as encourage them to join their cause. Through this tour, they were able to discuss their concerns with extractive activities, the environmental destruction that it brings, their livelihoods, and their activism.

Linked to their website under the tab “*Documentales*” is a short, one-minute video of a group of people standing near a river. The video starts with the black screen and the text, “*El Yaku Chaski avanza por el Río Bobonaza, la estrategia es dejar el petróleo bajo la tierra para enfrentar el cambio climático*” (Yaku Chaski Warmi Kuna 2015).²⁷ For most of the video, the speaker talks in her native language rather than Spanish. In the video, she explains the purposes of the tour: to share ideas, garner the support of other indigenous women, and defend their territory from oil companies. These activist methods constitute exactly what is described in the 2010 Cherry article and 2008 Ulloa article. The women, excluded from more traditional means of enacting political and social change, turn to their shared experiences and collective identities to build a platform and garner attention to their cause.

Two videos published by Chaski Warmi depict two indigenous women from the Ecuadorian Amazon speaking directly to the Ecuadorian government at the 2015 *Levantamiento Indígena*,²⁸ a national strike. As explained in the Ulloa 2005, Cherry 2010, and Hanna 2016 articles, the women strategically employ essentializing images to establish a collective identity among other indigenous women of the Ecuadorian Amazon while simultaneously constructed symbolic boundaries between themselves and the other. Both women refer back to their gender as justification for their resistance efforts, emphasize the importance of nature and communal ties as Shuar/ Sapara women, and, similarly to the indigenous activists who filed the lawsuit against

²⁷ The Yaku Chaski advance through the Bobonaza River, the strategy is to leave oil under the ground to face climate change

²⁸ Indigenous uprising

Texaco (Valdivia 2007), proudly wear face paint and other garb typical to their respective social groups. Both walked from their territories in the Ecuadorian Amazon to the capital city to denounce the actions of the government and extractive industry, the other to their collective identity.

The concerns of these women emphasize the necessity to understand their intersectionality and how the stacked power-axes to which they are subjected are playing out in their communities and natural environments. These women's gender, nationality, and position in the Two-Thirds world leave them more vulnerable to outside forces than more dominant social groups. Catalina Chumpi, one of the women featured in the two Chaski Warmi videos, is an older Shuar woman from the Amazonian Pastaza province who accuses the government of disrespecting women, pregnant women, elderly women, and other vulnerable groups through its maltreatment of their natural environments. The second woman, Hauneka Ushigua, a Zapara woman, emphasizes the harms they face at the hands of resource extraction. They both understand the vulnerability inherent in their identities, and express their experiences to garner the attention of their oppressor.

The women both fear for the safety and wellbeing of their families and assert that they, as women, have the right to defend their territories. Chumpi demands that, "*se eschuche la voz de la mujer, porque nosotras como mujeres somos los dueños absolutos que hemos guiado la tierra*" (AgenciaTegantai 2015).²⁹ Ushigua passionately declares that, "*las mujeres si existimos,*"³⁰ and fears that her children will not have the same quality of life that she had (AgenciaTegantai 2015). The women make their positions as an indigenous women living in the Ecuadorian Amazon, a region exploited by actors across the globe, clear to their oppressor (in this case the

²⁹ Listen to the voice of the woman, because we as women are the absolute owners that have guided the land.

³⁰ We as women exist

Ecuadorian government) and whoever might watch their video as an activist method. As indigenous environmental activists, excluded from traditional channels of political change, they strategically deploy gender roles and oftentimes orienting images of their indigeneity as a tool to mobilize and assert their rights (Ulloa 2005).

In 2018, the group Yápankamon published a video to their Facebook page that clearly outlines the symbolic boundaries built between the activists and the other. Starting as a single event meant to *“facilitar un espacio de encuentro y reflexión académica en el que estudiosos, líderes y otras personas puedan conocer, debatir y discutir lo que científicos sociales escribieron sobre los modos de vida y los saberes que se han desarrollado en la región”*

(<https://yapankam.wordpress.com/ukunam/>),³¹ the group founded in the Ecuadorian Amazon has a regularly updated Facebook page that posts videos, articles, and events that the group is hosting. The tactics used to distinguish the activists from the other in this video are blatant. Shuar children, many of whom are wearing Shuar clothing and facepaint, denounce the capitalist, extractive, exploitative activities of multinational corporations, and explain that their values and ideologies cannot coexist alongside this industry. Some children speak in Spanish while some speak in Shuar. It is glaring when a child speaking Shuar switches to Spanish for words like *“desarrollo,”* something of which the activists and the corporations have polarized conceptualizations: one values life while the other values capital (Yapankam 2018, 0:30).

Calling Western modernity into question and critiquing the ideals held by the institutions exploiting their natural environments, they emphasize that they are not “pobre,” and establish that their understanding of wealth does not stem from money or crude oil. This is seen clearly

³¹ Facilitate a meeting place and academic reflection in which researchers leaders, and others are able to know, debate, and discuss what the social scientists wrote about the modes of life and knowings that have developed in the region.

when a child states, “*No necesito la petrolera. No necesito la minería. No necesito la empresa multinacional. Yo necesito agua. Yo necesito selva. Yo necesito animales. Yo necesito mi territorio*” (Yapankam 2018, 0:51).³² Another child adds that, “*Sí, a veces necesito dinero, pero no en cambio de mi salud, no en cambio de mi autonomía, no en cambio de los ríos*” (Yapankam, 1:08).³³ In saying this, it is clear that economic prosperity is a goal of the activists, but not at the expense of their wellbeing. In advocating against the exploitation of their natural resources, they do so as a means to defend their territories, their communities, and their environment. As explained by Cochrane in her 2014 article, many Global South activists have attributed their environmental woes to global consumerist/ capitalist system and have offered their own cosmovisions as an alternative to existing economic paradigms.

The children speak directly to multinational corporations and corrupt elected officials and explain that they are not afraid to be Shuar. One child asserts, “*Nosotros tomamos tobacco. Nosotros tomamos ayahuasca. Nosotros tomamos floripondio*” (Yapankam 2018, 1:45).³⁴ They explain that there is an alternative to the other’s understanding of “*civilización*”³⁵ and “*desarrollo*”³⁶ (Yapankam 2018, 2:11). This video serves to construct boundaries between themselves and government institutions and multinational corporations while simultaneously forming a collective identity among Shuar and Amazonian peoples. By deploying essentializing images that were constructed post-Conquest, the activists work to form a collective identity as a vulnerable population, in this case children, living in the Ecuadorian Amazon that positions

³² I don’t need the oil company. I don’t need the mine. I don’t need to multinational company. I need water. I need the forest. I need animals. I need my territory.

³³ Yes, sometimes I need money, but not in place of my health, not in place of my autonomy, not in place of the rivers.

³⁴ We take tobacco. We take *ayahuasca*. We take *floripondio*.

³⁵ Civilization

³⁶ Development

themselves as totally separate from the oil companies and government institutions that exploit their territory as a mobilizing and activism strategy (Hanna 2016; Cherry 2010; Ulloa 2005; Cuomo 2011; Cochrane 2014).

Sustainable Development Proposals

Chaski Warmi, meaning women messengers in Kichwa, is a transnational indigenous environmental advocacy group facilitated exclusively by indigenous women that has presented sustainable development models at two United Nations conferences within the past five years. Through this coalition, indigenous women from all over Latin America have come together to discuss and provide solutions to the environmental issues and injustices facing their communities. They explain that while they have no fault in climate change, they nonetheless have contributed solutions to impede the threats facing their natural resources (which are current objects of global economic interest). They oppose policies that negatively affect the autonomy, integrity, and health of indigenous peoples (chaskiwarmi.org).

The majority of the activist networks analyzed in this paper stem from Chaski Warmi. While Chaski Warmi is a global coalition comprised of indigenous women ranging from Guatemala, Bolivia, Chile, Colombia and several other countries across Latin America, I am looking exclusively at indigenous activist organizations of the Ecuadorian Amazon. Their primary platform rests in the understanding that indigenous women are facing social, environmental and political violence at the hands of the State that allows the exploitation of their territory; this violence inhibits their ability to fulfill of their roles in maintaining communal ties and protecting their territories. They are excluded from political decisions regarding their territories, and claim the solutions that are being proposed (when governments choose not to

ignore the effects of climate change) are prejudiced against them. They go on to list specific laws passed in Ecuador, Chile, and Colombia. In response to this negligence, they present their own solutions (chaskiwarmi.org).

For the purposes of this thesis, only one proposal will be analyzed. In 2016, the women of Huarmi Chasqui Ecuador published a proposal (accessed through a blog post posted to chaskiwarmi.org) titled “*Propuesta Nacional: Soluciones de las mujeres indígenas frente al cambio climático - agua, agricultura, y deforestación.*” The writers of this proposal are local to the Pastaza region of the Ecuadorian Amazon, and represent 67 families with 327 inhabitants living in Quechua territory. The proposal is divided into three major sections that critique the Ecuadorian state and its attempts to reduce the impacts of climate change, distinguish indigenous women as both the most vulnerable to environmental destruction while simultaneously the most capable in solving said destruction, and lay out their own sustainable development models that would reduce the impacts of climate change.

The proposal begins by defining the groups most vulnerable to the effects of climate change. The introduction eloquently explains how “*La fragilidad del país ante el cambio climático difiere sustancialmente dependiendo de la región ...a la vulnerabilidad del territorio, del grupo poblacional en relación a su contexto social, económico y cultural, a su sensibilidad y a su capacidad de adaptación.*”³⁷ Following the theory of intersectionality, as women, indigenous, and rural, they are exceptionally vulnerable to climate degradation in comparison with other social groups. The writers of the proposal express this explicitly in saying:

[mujeres] son particularmente dependientes de las condiciones ambientales y de los recursos naturales, y enfrentan con mayor intensidad el problema debido al rol socialmente asignado, en donde la producción, alimentación y cuidado de la familia es

³⁷ The fragility of the country before climate change differs substantially depending on the region... the vulnerability of the territory, the populational group in relation to their social, economic and cultural context, their sensitivity and their ability to adapt.

central y su capacidad de adaptarse a los cambios es limitada debido a que sus activos son restringidos en términos sociales y financieros (Huarmi Chasqui, 2016).³⁸

They give statistics to back up their claims. They specifically mention strong heat waves and cold fronts that provoke infectious diseases; the increase in transmitted pathogens like malaria, dengue, avian flu, and chikungunya; higher vulnerabilities to cancer in Quechua territories; higher abortion risks (150% higher than national standards); and several other health risks that have surfaced due to climate change (Huarmi Chasqui 2016). The writers make clear what is expected of them as indigenous women and the disadvantages they are subject to as women. As explained by Cuomo 2011, indigenous activists' environmental concerns go beyond the environmental contamination at hand, and extend into the functioning of their community and how their socially assigned gender roles are stringent upon the health of their natural environment.

In constructing the symbolic boundaries between themselves and their oppressor, the writers also group government institutions with polluting corporations. They call out the government program REDD as a mechanism used to justify the destruction of their "*territorios ancestrales*"³⁹ and threaten their rights as rural, indigenous peoples and their abilities to enter their "*bosques nativos*"⁴⁰ and cultivate their own food (Huami Chasqui 2016, p. 3). In saying this, they maintain their distinction from these groups while maintaining their own connection and authority over nature. As Cherry explains, these activists are partaking in collective consciousness raising through a framework of symbolic boundaries.

³⁸ [Women] are particularly dependent on their environmental conditions and natural resources, and face the problem with higher intensity due to their socially assigned role, in which the production, feeding, and caring for the family is central and their capacity to adapt to the changes are limited due to their activities being restricted in social and financial terms.

³⁹ Ancestral territory

⁴⁰ Native forests

In regards to their forthright proposal to fight climate change, the women first establish what actions the existing state has already taken. The Ecuadorian government through the Ministerio del Ambiente (MAE) passed a national policy to be enacted from 2014 through 2025 that addresses and hopes to combat climate change. The state's strategy rests in "*adaptación y mitigación del cambio climático*" (Huami Chasqui 2016, p. 4).⁴¹ This phrase is not uncommon, and has been utilized by groups living in capitalist countries across the globe. The idea promotes the adaptation of society and its members' ways of life in a way that would mitigate the amount of greenhouse gases entering the atmosphere. In the proposal, the women go into great detail listing the actions taken by the Ecuadorian government to reduce the impacts of climate change. They point out, however, that while it is still early to determine whether or not the new policies have been successful, there is no data that indicates how the policies have been enacted and enforced in Amazonian regions.

The women explain that it is the attempts of the state to fight climate change that has encouraged some of them to write this proposal. Early studies of REDD reveal failures in its conceptualization and implementation. The writers draw attention to the breach in rhetoric and practice found in state political initiatives. For example, the *Estrategia Nacional de Cambio Climático en el Ecuador* (National Climate Change Strategy in Ecuador) exhibits no policy that encourages the involvement of women, while the *Política Ambiental Nacional* of the national environmental ministry has publicly stated that it considers the recognition of interculturality, the establishment of a "symbiosis" between culture and nature, and the incorporation of women of all ages as goals to be achieved. The women of Huarmi Chaski point out that in the *Agenda Nacional de Mujeres y de Igualdad de Género* (National Agenda for Women and Gender

⁴¹ Adaptation and mitigation of climate change

Equality), another government publication, the environmental guidelines call for: the preservation of indigenous territories' natural resources and biodiversity; the prevention, reduction, and remediation of environmental damages caused by extractive companies and climate change; and the inclusion of women in decision making related to ecosystems and natural resources. Despite all of the rhetoric that emphasizes the importance of environmental preservation and gender equality, the Ecuadorian government refuses to acknowledge the empirical evidence suggesting that women are affected by environmental changes more than men (Huarmi Chasqui 2016). Despite all of the rhetoric that emphasize the importance of environmental preservation and gender equality, indigenous women have not seen improvements in political representation, and the interplaying axes of power continue to exacerbate these women's vulnerability (Huarmi Chasqui 2016). The writers of this proposal go into equal amount of detail regarding various more shortcomings and contradictions of the state.

After establishing where the state has failed, they transition into describing the actions taken on their end as "*mujeres indigenas...en la Selva Amazonica del Ecuador*" (Huarmi Chasqui 2016, p. 8).⁴² Their solutions to reducing the impacts of climate change do not rely in adaptation or mitigation. The writers express that it is their very "*plan de vida del pueblo quichua*"⁴³ to consider the health of their environment and all that it supports and contains (Huarmi Chasqui 2016, p. 8). They explicitly mention their concern for:

la conservación de los ecosistemas y del manejo de especies locales promisorias, el interés de las familias para realizar actividades de piscicultura, producir balanceados con productos locales, ahumar el pescado de mejor manera, para la protección y cuidado de los huevos de las tortugas charapa y mejorar la producción artesanal que incluyen la elaboración de mocaguas, collares, adornos para mejorar su ingreso económico. (Huarmi Chasqui 2016, p. 8).⁴⁴

⁴² Indigenous women in the Ecuadorian Amazon rainforest

⁴³ Life plan of of the Quichua people

⁴⁴ The conservation of ecosystems and the management of local promissory species, the interest of the families to maintain fish farming activities, produce *balanceados* with local products, smoke fish in a better way, for the

Their concerns rest in the health of their families, their livelihoods, and the living things reliant on the conservation of their environment. They credit the most impactful projects in addressing these concerns to indigenous groups. Sustainable forest management was spearheaded by Quechua indigenous groups living in Parque Yasuni; their projects were adopted by the Ministerio del Ambiente and received recognition on a national scale for its efficiency. In saying this, the writers are establishing their authority and expertise in addressing environmental issues as indigenous peoples. The next group that they highlight, Asociación de Mujeres de la Nacionalidad Waorani AMWAE, implemented “iniciativas diferentes de alternativas económicas”⁴⁵ like the establishment of organic cacao farms (Huarimi Chasqui 2016, p. 9). The chocolate they cultivated would go on to receive international recognition and greatly increased the economic prosperity of the Waorani communities involved. They continue to list examples of alternative, sustainable development models that have proven successful both monetarily and environmentally.

The proposal is intentional in establishing the groups’ connection to their natural environment. In being dependent on their natural resources for survival (both culturally and physically), they emphasize their authority in having a hand in the policies regarding the protection of their territory. When they express their concerns regarding the contamination of the Rio Curaray, they explain:

El río es la vida de las comunidades, se comunican a través de él, y es el medio de transporte principal. En el río pescan y realizan actividades comerciales, se divierten,

protection and care of the eggs of the Charapa turtles and to improve the artisanal production that include the production of *mocaguas*, necklaces, ornaments to improve their economic income

⁴⁵ Different initiatives of alternative economies

extraen de las playas del río barro que son usados en la elaboración de las cerámicas y es sobre todo vital para la reproducción de su cultura. (Huarmi Chasqui 2016, p. 11)⁴⁶

Consonant with the activists studied in the 2011 Cuomo article, the contamination of the river (due to oil extraction and oil spills) affects this group in a manner that extends beyond physical health and this fact is strategically deployed in their activism. Along with their dependency on the river for economic and health purposes, the women continuously emphasize their spiritual and ancestral connection to the land. The women identify two concerns that need to be addressed: 1) “*Manejo del territorio mediante planes de vida, que incluya el acceso, cuidado, control y beneficio de la zona, con la flora la fauna y los espíritus de la selva con enfoque de género,*”⁴⁷ and, 2) “*El cuidado de los lugares sagrados y el mantenimiento de las prácticas espirituales en la relación con la siembra y las cosechas*” (Huarmi Chasqui 2016, p. 18).⁴⁸ By emphasizing their connection to nature as indigenous women, the writers work towards establishing a collective identity founded on shared experiences with other indigenous women. In doing so, they oftentimes employ essentializing colonial stereotypes (Ulloa 2008; Hanna 2016).

Similarly to the river tour of Yakuchaski Warmikuna, the proposal describes the trip of the women of Yaku Huarmi Chasqui. In 2016, A group of 25 traveled for fifteen days by canoe “*desde la cabecera del Río Villano, pasando por la confluencia del Río Curaray.*”⁴⁹ The purpose of the trip was to take advantage of communal spaces as a means to share their message

⁴⁶ The river is the life of the communities, they communicate through it, and it is the principle means of transport. They fish and carry out commercial activities in the river, they have fun, they extract mud from the beaches of the river that is used in ceramic production, and is above all vital for the reproduction of their culture.

⁴⁷ Management of the Territory through life plans, including access, care, control and benefit of the area, with the flora fauna and jungle spirits with a gender approach.

⁴⁸ The care of sacred places and the maintenance of the spiritual practices relating to planting and harvesting.

⁴⁹ From the headwaters of the villain River, passing through the confluence of the Curaray River.

and exchange “*vivencias y conocimientos.*”⁵⁰ In elaborating upon the shared ideals they have with the neighboring communities, they partake in collective consciousness raising. In projecting their similarities, they are better able to incorporate more people into the movement, share ideas, and defend their territories. The writers explain that this method, the linking of neighboring communities for the purposes of territorial defense, was what formed the group Saramanta Warmikuna (Huarmi Chasqui 2016, p. 14).

In sum, this proposal was published after years of networking and establishing a collective identity as indigenous women living in the Ecuadorian Amazon. In raising a collective consciousness to be shared with other indigenous women living in the Ecuadorian Amazon, they have constructed symbolic boundaries that distinguish themselves from the Ecuadorian state and the multinational oil companies that have occupied their territory. The women emphasize the vulnerability due to their intersectional identities, they have nonetheless asserted that it is indigenous women who are leading the resistance in protecting their territories and their families.

⁵⁰ Experiences and knowledge

Chapter 5

Conclusion

The world's vulnerable populations are experiencing climate change and environmental degradation disproportionately more so than the Global North nations responsible for its impacts. Indigenous environmental activists, however, have taken measures to address these environmental injustices through collective consciousness raising, an activist method typically used by vulnerable, politically disenfranchised groups. Within the Ecuadorian Amazon, environmental activist groups have utilized their intersectional identities as women, indigenous, and rural as a means to establish boundaries between themselves and the other while simultaneously defining a collective identity. By participating in performative acts that rely on colonialist stereotypes, the activists work to establish their authority over environmental protection/ environmental policy. They refer to their femininity, indigeneity, and their ancestral ties to the Amazon to reaffirm their connection to nature, their role as the familial/ communal caregiver, and their prioritization of life over capital. In rallying around these components of their identity, they pit themselves against the extractive industries, government institutions, and capitalist ideologies that have brought about the environmental destruction in their communities.

In examining the activism of these particular networks, I hope to shed light on the universalist, essentializing nature of Western feminism and its perpetuation of colonist ideology. The natural environments of indigenous groups across the globe have been exploited for profit by foreign actors for centuries, but native women are creating the means for their voices be heard in a Western dominated global society that systematically works against them. Despite the

stigmatization attached to them, they deploy their intersectionality as a means to develop a collective identity, create a platform on which to speak, and create the political/ and social change they hope to see in their communities. Excluded from more traditional channels of political change, the activists strategically perform colonial stereotypes as a means to leverage Western media, garner the attention of their governmental institutions, and secure resources to which they would otherwise not have access. In celebrating the distinctions between themselves and the others, their voice is given a platform. In future research, I would be interested in analyzing the collective consciousness raising employed by indigenous women living in a different region, the Ecuadorian Highlands for example, and what inherent qualities and shared experiences the activists emphasize to build networks and distinguish themselves as separate from their oppressor.

By examining the activism of these particular women, indigenous women of the Ecuadorian Amazon, I hope to avoid essentializing or glorifying these women from a Eurocentric, White-feminist mindset. As Mohanty says in her 2003 article, it is possible to participate in cross-cultural, feminist scholarship that does not undermine, universalize or exploit women from more vulnerable positions in society than ourselves, but one must consider the varying degrees of vulnerability experienced across the One-Thirds and Two-Thirds world. The experiences of the women activists of the Ecuadorian Amazon cannot be equated with environmental activists living in the United States or any other Western nation. Their experiences, however, can be used to better understand indigenous struggles across the globe and the exploitative and marginalizing nature of the global capitalist/ communist economy powered by the planet's limited natural resources found in the territories of the world's most vulnerable populations.

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