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## Decolonizing the Anti-Extractive Struggle: Amazonian Women's Practices of Forest-Making in Ecuador

By Andrea Sempértegui<sup>1</sup>

### Abstract

In October 2013, a group of indigenous women from the southeastern Ecuadorian Amazon started the “March of Life”. This 250-km long march – organized and led entirely by female representatives from the Achuar, Shuar, Zapara, Kichwa, Shiwiari, Andoa, and Waorani indigenous organizations – proceeded from the Amazonian city of Puyo to the capital city of Quito and was a response to the 11th oil licensing round in their territories. After this symbolic and arduous march, Amazonian women have continued to organize as a network and as active members of their indigenous organizations against renewed attempts by the government of licensing their territories to extractive companies, making their voices heard in the national media and their proposals more visible within the broader spectrum of environmental, anti-extractive and popular feminist struggles in Ecuador. This is the case of their proposal to declare the Amazon a “Living Forest,” publicly presented to the Ecuadorian National Assembly in 2013. Departing from my collaborator ethnography with five leaders and members from this network – Elvia Dagua, Zoila Castillo, Rosa Gualinga, Nancy Santi, and Salomé Aranda –, and decolonial, feminist and Latin American indigenous thought, this paper reflects about the role of Amazonian women's concrete practices that make the Amazon a “living forest” and that sustain their territorial struggle. Practices like cultivating the land, weaving clay pottery, sharing dreams in the mornings, or singing “with a purpose” are practices that not only build affective relations between the human and non-human, but that constantly recognize, relate to and even make the forest into a living entity. At the same time, these practices of forest-making nurture Amazonian women's organizational strategies – e.g. when they sing at meetings with representatives from the government – and political discourse when confronting the state and oil companies. With this analysis, I hope to shed light on how Amazonian women's territorial struggle is decolonizing environmental imaginaries about the Amazon as an untouched territory to be preserved, makes evident the continuum between resistance strategies and the reproduction of human and non-human life in the rainforest, and is transforming the anti-extractive struggle at large.

*Keywords:* Indigenous women, indigenous movement, Amazon, extractivism, territorial struggles, Ecuador

### Introduction

On October 4, 2013, Ecuador's National Assembly declared that oil exploitation in the Yasuní National Park was in the national interest (Colectivo Miradas Críticas del Territorio desde el Feminismo 2014, 77). The park, internationally praised as one of the world's biodiversity “hotspots,” had become the symbol of a state-led attempt to combat climate change. In 2007,

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former president Rafael Correa adopted the Yasuní ITT Initiative and proposed keeping the oil in the Ishpingo-Tambococha-Tiputini (ITT) area under the ground — if Ecuador received international compensation. By 2013, just 0.37% of the donations' target set by the government was provided by international donors.<sup>2</sup>

For many supporters of the government and environmentalists outside Ecuador, the initiative represented a fair proposal for international “co-responsibility” in the battle against climate change.<sup>3</sup> For anti-extractive social movements in Ecuador, the initiative became a smokescreen that obscured the government's neo-extractive<sup>4</sup> agenda. In fact, the government had already expanded its oil extractive frontier and adopted new mining legislation favoring transnational companies in 2009 (Bayón and Wilson 2017, 158). Furthermore, this neo-extractive agenda was also characterized by the criminalization and state repression of anti-extractive protests (Svampa 2015, 77). For opponents of these measures, the vote in the National Assembly and the termination of the Yasuní ITT initiative thus represented the end of this smokescreen and the start of a more direct confrontation with the government, who could now legitimize its pro-extractive agenda by blaming the international community for its lack of support.

Today, the question of whether the Yasuní initiative was a smokescreen or not seems irrelevant. Oil extraction entered its second phase in the ITT area in 2018.<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, Ecuador's current president, Lenin Moreno, has recently adopted a set of neoliberal reforms – widespread layoffs in the public sector, cuts to subsidies on gas prices, and other measures that favor national and multinational corporations.<sup>6</sup> These reforms are the product of the government's agreement with the International Monetary Fund (IMF) in October 2019, which unleashed one of the biggest nation-wide strikes in Ecuador's recent history.<sup>7</sup> The rapid concession of oil blocks and mega-mining deposits is crucial to compliance with the IMF's neoliberal prescription of “reducing state deficit” and attracting international investors (Vallejo and Bravo 2019). To meet these objectives, the Ecuadorian government is trying to push forward with plans to extract oil from at least two more platforms located in the buffer zone for the Tagaeri-Taromenane peoples living in voluntary isolation (Intangible Zone) in the Yasuní National Park.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>2</sup>Data based on: <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2016/oct/26/oil-drilling-underway-beneath-ecuadors-yasuni-national-park> (14.02.2020)

<sup>3</sup> Data based on: <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/poverty-matters/2013/sep/19/world-failed-ecuador-yasuni-initiative> (14.02.2020)

<sup>4</sup> In spite of the arrival of left-oriented “progressive” governments in countries like Argentina, Brazil, Bolivia, Venezuela and Ecuador by the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century – each of which promised to put an end to past economic and political practices – the dependence on an economic growth based on the appropriation of natural resources grew in Latin America. More, a new form of extractivism – referred to as “neo-extractivism” by scholars – emerged as a development path to solve the lingering problems of the neoliberal period. The term neo-extractivism refers to an expansion of the state's role in the extractive sector which allowed it to increase the portion of revenue allotted to social programs and development projects (Burchardt et al. 2013, 182). The most important feature of neo-extractive policies is thus their link to a development model and to discourses foregrounding the idea of the “nation” (Gudynas 2010, 7). In the Ecuadorian case, although the initial leadership of President Rafael Correa was rooted in a powerful network of social movements, his government's series of legislation favorable to extractive industries sparked a conflict with and a subsequent campaign against indigenous and environmental movements critical of the negative social and ecological impacts of extractivism (Bebbington 2011, 6).

<sup>5</sup> Data based on: <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2018/jan/10/new-round-of-oil-drilling-goes-deeper-into-ecuadors-yasuni-national-park> (14.02.2020)

<sup>6</sup>Data based on: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/10/ecuador-unrest-led-mass-protests-191010193825529.html> (14.02.2020)

<sup>7</sup> Data based on: <http://mutantia.ch/es/la-violencia-de-la-cual-no-se-habla/> (14.02.2020)

<sup>8</sup>Data based on: <https://www.elcomercio.com/actualidad/jose-agusto-briones-concesiones-activos.html> (14.02.2020)

Even though state-led initiatives to battle climate change seem extremely necessary in the face of an increase of ecological disasters, especially if they are based on a concept of co-responsibility that makes more powerful countries accountable for keeping fossil fuel resources unexploited, Yasuní and its peoples have become a territory to be sacrificed for the “national interest.” The nationwide environmentalist consciousness inspired by the adoption of the Yasuní initiative a decade ago could not prevent the expansion and intensification of extractive interests in this part of the Amazon. Furthermore, the government and mainstream national media sees Yasuní's oil deposits as a replacement for dying extraction wells in the northern rainforest.<sup>9</sup> The question that remains now is: how could Yasuní's territory go from being a symbol for global conservation to becoming a strategic site for the perpetuation of Ecuador's extractive economy so quickly?

Yasuní has historically been an internal colony for its resources – whether cinnamon, rubber, or oil– and remains a sacrifice zone for the nation-state today, even though fossil fuel extraction in the park is unconstitutional<sup>10</sup> and its oil deposits are of poor quality.<sup>11</sup> The initiative's legal and ecological terms for protecting the park are easily undone when it becomes “inevitable” for the government to reestablish the region as a sacrifice zone. In fact, it is precisely the environmental terms praising Yasuní's biodiversity that have been used by governmental representatives in the most cynical way to acclaim their “care for the environment,”<sup>12</sup> while oil drilling continued in this part of the Amazon.

This is why a different framework, a different way of speaking about and relating to these territories, becomes a political necessity in Ecuador and everywhere else. A different framework that, if taken seriously, could open up the possibility of decolonizing our imaginaries about certain territories, while challenging the current capitalist world order that makes it almost impossible for Global South countries to undertake any meaningful action to battle climate change.<sup>13</sup> Interestingly, a different framework was offered by a variety of voices that made themselves heard the same day that Yasuní's initiative was terminated. One of them was the Waorani leader Alicia Cahuilla.

Cahuilla, vice-president of the Waorani National Organization NAWA in 2013, was invited to speak about the benefits of oil extraction in her territory the same day the National Assembly was voting to declare that oil exploitation in Yasuní was in the national interest. While two other indigenous guests spoke about a new era of progress with Correa's government, she refused to

<sup>9</sup> Data based on: <https://www.eluniverso.com/noticias/2020/01/04/nota/7674834/petroleo-precio-crisis-medio-oriente-iran-estados-unidos> (14.02.2020)

<sup>10</sup> “It also contradicts Ecuador's constitution, which recognizes the rights of nature and seeks to protect sensitive ecosystems from ‘activities that could lead to species extinction, the destruction of ecosystems, or the permanent alteration of natural cycles’.” Data based on: <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2018/jan/10/new-round-of-oil-drilling-goes-deeper-into-ecuadors-yasuni-national-park> (14.02.2020)

<sup>11</sup>Data based on: [https://elpais.com/elpais/2016/06/02/planeta\\_futuro/1464880726\\_920455.html](https://elpais.com/elpais/2016/06/02/planeta_futuro/1464880726_920455.html) (14.02.2020)

<sup>12</sup> Former vice-president Jorge Glas, who has been sentenced to six years in jail in connection with corruption, declared in 2018: “This is the start of a new era for Ecuadorean oil. In this new era, first comes care for the environment and second responsibility for the communities and the economy, for the Ecuadorean people.” (Data based on: <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2016/oct/26/oil-drilling-underway-beneath-ecuadors-yasuni-national-park> (14.02.2020))

<sup>13</sup> Major evidence of this is how despite the increase of climate change-fueled environmental disasters, fossil fuel corporations and Global North countries keep taking over any meaningful international attempt to battle climate change. (Data based on: [https://www.democracynow.org/2019/12/11/cop25\\_walkout\\_indigenous\\_leaders\\_global\\_south](https://www.democracynow.org/2019/12/11/cop25_walkout_indigenous_leaders_global_south) (14.02.2020))

read a speech given to her by the governmental party *Alianza País* (interview with Alicia Cahuilla, October 17<sup>th</sup>, 2018, Quito). Instead she spoke out openly against extractivism:

“I am a woman who was born in Yasuní. Nowadays people are talking a lot about Yasuní, but we as Waorani don't agree with exploiting it. Because we are women, who have been in the struggle, taking care of our forest, our rivers, our trees.” (Fragment from Alicia Cahuilla's speech transcribed by the Colectivo Miradas Críticas del Territorio desde el Feminismo 2014, 77-80)

Shortly after her speech, a group of indigenous women from the southeastern Ecuadorian Amazon organized the 219 km ‘March for Life’ against the extraction of oil in Yasuní and the XI Oil Licensing Round. Like Alicia, they arrived in Quito aiming to “speak out with our own voice” and meet president Rafael Correa. They attracted the attention of the national and international media, academics, and urban activists.<sup>14</sup> When Correa avoided meeting with them in Quito, the marching women opted to request an audience with the National Assembly in order to submit their demands in writing (*Pronunciamiento de Mujeres en Resistencia*, October 2013). Finally, on October 23, the National Assembly received the Amazonian women, who publicly presented their proposal to declare the rainforest “*Kawsak Sacha*” [Living Forest in Kichwa language] (*Declaratoria del Kawsak Sacha*, October 2013). Since 2013, Amazonian women have continued to organize as a network and as active members of their indigenous organizations against renewed governmental attempts to grant their territories to extractive companies.

Building off of my doctoral research in the Ecuadorian Amazon and collaborative ethnography with five leaders and members from this network – Elvia Dagua, Zoila Castillo, Rosa Gualinga, Nancy Santi, and Salomé Aranda<sup>15</sup> –, this paper reflects on Amazonian women's political struggle.<sup>16</sup> I use decolonial, feminist and indigenous thinking in order to show how the *Kawsak Sacha* declaration and Amazonian women's political efforts are sustained by a variety of relations and concrete practices that make the Amazon a living forest. Practices like cultivating the land, sharing dreams in the mornings, or singing with a purpose to build affective relations between the human and non-human world, but also constantly recognize, relate to and even make the forest into a living entity. At the same time, these practices nourish Amazonian women's organizational strategies and political discourse when confronting the state and oil companies.

<sup>14</sup>Data based on: <http://www.lamarea.com/2014/02/17/ecuador-extractivismo-mujeres/> (14.02.2020)

<sup>15</sup> My doctoral research took place in March 2016, July – September 2017, and July 2018- March 2019. In 2016 and 2017, I mostly conducted semi-structured interviews (twenty) with the leading figures of the Amazonian women's network. Between 2018 and 2019, my doctoral research turned into a collaborative project with five members of the network and we organized five workshops on territorial defense and handicrafts in their communities of origin. Besides these workshops, Zoila Castillo, Rosa Gualinga and I also organized a panel on the role of handicrafts in the political organizing of indigenous women at the conference “Cuerpos, Despojos y Territorios: La Vida Amenazada” at Universidad Andina Simón Bolívar in Quito, Ecuador.

<sup>16</sup> It is important to mention that neither Amazonian women nor I understand their struggle as separated from the indigenous struggle in Ecuador. Rather, this analysis understands Amazonian women's activism as an active part of the indigenous movement in Ecuador. My reason for focusing on their network departs from the historical fact that Amazonian women stepped in as visible faces of the indigenous antiextractive struggle in 2013, a period when the indigenous movement was debilitated by the constant governmental attempts to divide indigenous organizations and to exclude the voices of the community bases (Vallejo and García-Torres 2017, 13). After their “March for Life,” Amazonian women have continued to negotiate their particular demands as indigenous women within their organizations and outside of them. Even though this negotiation is not absent of tensions, Amazonian women are making their voices heard without separating themselves from their indigenous organizations and communities.

I start by focusing on how the *Kawsak Sacha* proposal weaves together a variety of “discourses” – the discourse of indigenous autonomy and territoriality with environmentalist and ecofeminist discourses, among others – in order to challenge the state’s colonial and neo-extractive agenda in the Ecuadorian Amazon. Secondly, this analysis moves beyond understanding the *Kawsak Sacha* declaration as a discursive artifact only and examines those practices that the document itself wants to make visible. I call practices that reproduce human and non-human life in the Amazon, “practices of forest-making.” In the third and last section of the article, I focus on one practice of forest-making, singing with a purpose, that is important in the lives of some members of the Amazonian women’s network. By connecting different ethnographic moments, I show how this practice travels from the forest to the city and nourishes Amazonian women’s diverse political activities and interventions.

With this analysis, I want to shed light on how Amazonian women are decolonizing Western divisions between nature and the human that still mark contemporary imaginaries about the Amazon as an untouched territory to be preserved and are thus decolonizing the anti-extractive struggle at large. Similar to Gladys Tzul Tzul’s critique of certain academic depictions of indigenous politics, the reflections contained in this article, a product of my own learning process from working with Amazonian women, run against an attempt to reconstruct a “local history” about how indigenous women, as an “ethnic” and “female” minority, resist oil projects (Tzul Tzul 2018, 34). Rather, Amazonian women’s anti-extractive struggle establishes them as crucial contemporary political actors against extractive occupation and makes evident the continuum between resistance strategies and the reproduction of human and non-human life in the rainforest.

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

Amazonian women from seven different indigenous nationalities – Achuar, Shuar, Zapara, Kichwa, Shiwiar, Andoa and Waorani – adopted the *Kawsak Sacha* or Living Forest declaration in October 2013. While the proposal to declare the rainforest as *Kawsak Sacha* was initiated by the Kichwa Peoples of Sarayaku, Amazonian women unanimously adopted this Kichwa concept by “adapting it to the reality and particularities of each indigenous community” (*Declaratoria del Kawsak Sacha*, October 2013). After several conversations I had with various members of the Amazonian women’s network, it became clear that the adoption of this proposal is an important achievement, signifying unity among Amazonian women who come from different indigenous nationalities, with different languages, histories, and organizational forms.

As Kati Betancourt, a former representative for women and family issues at the Confederation of Ecuadorian Indigenous Nationalities (CONAIE), mentions, the adoption of this proposal does not change the fact that the political agenda of the Amazonian women’s network is “composed by many other proposals” (interview, July 25<sup>th</sup> 2017, Quito). According to Betancourt, each indigenous nationality has its particular proposal – like the Achuar *Sapa-Entza* plan of life or the *Sham Nua* [Forest Woman] proposal of the Shiwiar women. However, the adoption of *Kawsak Sacha* was meant to express Amazonian women’s resistance against extractive occupation as a unified voice. As the Shiwiar leader and former spokeswoman for family and women’s issues at the Shiwiar Organization NASHE Rosa Gualinga shared during our interview, the handing-in of the *Kawsak Sacha* proposal to the government was Amazonian women’s way of saying “no” to oil extraction:

“This is what we are proposing, the Living Forest, because as women we do not want the oil people to enter our territory.” (Interview, August 8<sup>th</sup>, 2017, Puyo)

The *Kawsak Sacha* proposal should thus be understood as the alternative frame that weaves together Amazonian women’s different proposals and voices, or what Donna Haraway calls the “thousand names of something else” (Haraway 2016, 52) — a “something else” that challenges the lack of alternatives to endless capitalist accumulation and, in the particular case of Ecuador, the sense of inevitability in the government’s decision to extract oil from territories like Yasuní. And a “something else” that speaks in the name of life in its more radical sense: in the name of the Living Forest that the modern division between nature and culture has historically made unthinkable.

Another important aspect of the *Kawsak Sacha* document is how it combines a variety of different discourses to form a politics that defends life against extractive occupation: the discourses of indigenous autonomy, knowledge, territoriality and the *Sumak Kawsay* [Good Living] project, with the hegemonic discourses of environmental conservation, ecofeminism, the constitutional rights of nature, and international human rights. It reads,

“Our main objective is to ensure the continuity of Amazonian peoples’ life, to preserve and conserve the biological richness of our territories, nature, biodiversity and cultural and natural heritage, according to the concept of *Sumak Kawsay* (Good Living) and *Kawsak Sacha* (Living Forest) that our peoples have maintained since the beginning of their existence until today, thanks to their close relationship and coexistence with nature. [...] Extractive activities in our territories are aimed at fragmenting our communities, and also generate *machismo* and socio-cultural problems such as alcoholism and domestic violence. [...] Considering: That, in full exercise of our right to SELF-DETERMINATION, and calling on the Ecuadorian government’s obligation to comply with the Constitution, we make the following statement, based on Amazonian men and women’s knowledge - *Sacha Runa Yachay*. [...] That article 71 of the Constitution establishes that Nature or *Pachamama*, where life is reproduced, has the right to be fully respected in terms of its existence as a living being and in terms of the maintenance and regeneration of its life cycles. That articles 56 and 57 of the Constitution guarantee the rights of indigenous peoples over their territory, culture and life. [...] In exercise of the rights enshrined in international pacts, treaties and conventions that protect indigenous peoples, we make public the true proposal of conservation, preservation and coexistence with the Ecuadorian Amazon forest: the declaration of the -KAWSAK SACHA- (LIVING FOREST) OF THE INDIGENOUS PEOPLES as a new category of preservation that takes into account Amazonian peoples’ philosophy and worldview that recognizes the interrelationship between human beings and nature.” (*Declaratoria del Kawsak Sacha*, October 2013)

As this abstract of the *Kawsak Sacha* declaration shows, there are a variety of words – such as “preserving,” “biodiversity,” “*machismo*,” “self-determination,” “Amazonian people’s knowledge,” “indigenous people’s rights,” “international pacts,” among others – deployed in the proposal that refer to the different discourses woven together in the document. The usage of these words, interestingly, does not conceal Amazonian women’s particular demands by legitimizing

their struggle in hegemonic terms only. Instead, the combination of these languages makes their own proposal for conservation visible. Indeed, as the document reveals later on, Amazonian women demand *Kawsak Sacha* to be recognized as the “real proposal for conservation,” which takes into consideration “Amazonian peoples’ philosophy and worldview” (ibid.). This exposes the political outcome of “partially connecting” different languages (Haraway 1991; Strathern 2004): presenting the idea of a Living Forest not as a mere “indigenous belief” (de la Cadena 2010, 335), but as a necessary political recognition in order to change our relations to a territory we have learnt to see as an internal colony.

Contrary to our tendency to find contradictions in indigenous peoples’ political strategies that include dominant and hegemonic discourses (e.g. state, human rights or environmental discourses), the web of discourses offered by the *Kawsak Sacha* proposal discloses the complexity of indigenous political practices and challenges an understanding of indigenous identities as simple or closed units. Rather, indigenous peoples and Amazonian women are not only partly constituted by national and transnational hegemonic discourses (de la Cadena 2010 and 2015, also Tsing 2005), but they also incorporate the same discourses with the purpose of generating their own ways of speaking to the state and the society at large. As Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui rightly notes, Amazonian women’s proposal to declare the Amazon as *Kawsak Sacha* is their “*encuadre propio*,” i.e. their own framing and their own design, which allows for the appropriation and modification of concepts in order for the women to talk with their own voices (Rivera Cusicanqui 2015, 25).

### Amazonian Women’s Practices of Forest-Making

“*Kawsak Sacha* is the living space of all beings in the forest, from the most infinitesimal beings to the largest and supreme ones, including the animal, vegetable, mineral, cosmic and human worlds. It is a transcendental territorial space destined to elevate different emotional, psychological, physical and spiritual facets vital to the energy and health of indigenous peoples.” (*Declaratoria del Kawsak Sacha*, October 2013)

The *Kawsak Sacha* proposal, as an alternative frame that offers a different way of speaking about and relating to the rainforest, is not just a discursive artifact. According to the written document itself, the Living Forest is a “transcendental and territorial space,” in which a multiplicity of beings live. These beings belong to the human but also the non-human worlds as well: “the animal, vegetable, mineral,” and the “cosmic worlds.” In fact, the purpose of presenting the rainforest as a space of life consists in highlighting the importance of continuing those particular practices that reproduce human and non-human life in the Amazon.

In this and next section, I offer a link between the *Kawsak Sacha* proposal and the concrete practices that some Amazonian female leaders have shared as important territorial practices that reproduce human and non-human life. Highlighting this link not only recognizes how the Living Forest is nurtured by practices that are “anchored to the organization of everyday life” (Tzul Tzul 2018, 22). It also opens our eyes to existing alternative ways of inhabiting the rainforest as a zone of life beyond the nature-human divide.

The Amazon, also called *oriente* [orient] in Ecuadorian parlance, has been mostly presented in the nation’s official historiography either as a mystical space of uncivilized pre-history or as an invisible, allegedly empty area (Taylor 1994; Melo, Ortiz, Lopez 2002; Sawyer



2004). This framing has persisted to our days even though this “forgotten” region has had constant interactions with the rest of the country and other actors since colonial times (Esvertit 2005, 90). These connections were comprised of periodic violent interventions from colonial powers and later from the Ecuadorian nation-state, missionaries and oil companies, which created conflicted and complex relations with Amazonian inhabitants.

As representatives of the Modernity/Coloniality research program have exposed, it is the “coloniality of nature” that has contributed to Latin American nation-states’ incorporation of territories like the Amazon into a condition of inferiority (Alimonda 2019). This condition of inferiority, on the one hand, has configured the Amazonian region as a subaltern space to be exploited, as a resource to be extracted, or as wasteland to be “developed” by processes of exploitation, spoilage and thus destruction of these territories’ ecological and cultural mechanisms of reproduction (Coronil 2000). On the other hand, this condition of inferiority has systematically negated indigenous people’s presence and claim to this territory and contributed to the subordination of Amazonian people’s complex systems of knowledge (Leff 2006).

Many anthropological studies in Ecuador have challenged the Amazon’s image as an uncivilized space or as an empty area. Ethnographies ranging from Phillipe Descola’s work with the Achuar (1989), Norman Whitten’s (1976) and María Guzmán-Gallegos’ (1976) work with the Kichwa Canelos, Eduardo Kohn’s work with the Kichwa Runa of Ecuador’s Upper Amazon (2013), and Laura Rival’s work with the Waorani people (2015) have showed the rainforest’s cultural and social “nature.” All of these ethnographies share the observation that the Amazonian forest, far from being an uncontrolled or “savage” universe of “natural spontaneity” (Descola 1989, 434), is deeply influenced by both intentional and unintentional human practices of forest management (Rival 2015, 46ff.), and by the constant interactions and mutual transformations between humans, plants, animals and other kinds of beings (Guzmán-Gallegos 1997, 9; Kohn 2013, 19). These studies have thus contributed to the vast critique of Western ways of conceptualizing “human,” “cultural,” and “social” practices as separated from nature.

Amazonian women’s proposal to declare their rainforest as *Kawsak Sacha* confronts the human-nature separation in their own terms. Furthermore, several conversations I had with Amazonian female leaders have revealed not only that they challenge the “idea” of the Amazon as an empty space or as an untouched territory to be preserved, but also that *Kawsak Sacha* is rooted in particular practices with very concrete implications:

“We are trying to go beyond the creation of a concept that is understandable to ordinary people. [...] Rather, it is a new way of relating to nature. This is the Living Forest, a new form of relationship, which does not imply a strict conservation of trees or forests. Rather, it explicitly recognizes that nature exists, because someone works for it.” (Patricia Gualinga, interview, August 8<sup>th</sup>, 2017, Puyo)

As Sarayaku leader Patricia Gualinga explains, the *Kawsak Sacha* proposal goes beyond offering a theoretical concept of conservation. It wants to inspire a new form of relationship with nature that recognizes that “nature exists because someone works for it” and “regenerates it.” Who works for it? According to Gualinga herself, “it is not necessarily indigenous peoples, but other forces that act to make it exist” (ibid.).

According to a younger Amazonian female leader from Sarayaku, despite the fact that it is difficult to explain in words what makes *Kawsak Sacha* a living entity, this awareness is felt in

everyday interactions between indigenous peoples and the forest, like cultivating the *chakra* [garden in Kichwa] or hunting:

“*Kawsak Sacha*, I think young people who live there can feel it, but they cannot interpret or explain it in words. However, we have the same idea that it is true that everything is alive. We have *chakra*, where our food comes from, and if we don't do the *chakra*, we don't get anything in return. We do the *chakra*, they give us, nature gives us. So I think *Kawsak Sacha* is alive, we are connected. Because you see, you feel the reaction of the forest. I personally didn't understand that they have an owner, I thought it was something that happened before, that these were stories or myths. In Sarayaku we have the *Sisa Ñambi* [flowers' path]. My father took me there and he told me that you are not allowed to pee or poop close to the lagoons, because it reacts, it could start raining. I never believed him, that lesson didn't do anything to me, until we went to the limit [*Sisa Ñambi*]. I could hear that my dad had killed a *sajino* [peccary], I heard the shot, it took less than five minutes and it started raining. Branches started to fall. It reacted. It didn't like that someone shot there. After fifteen minutes the reaction was over. Then I realized that it's true that it reacts. It has an owner.” (Abigail Gualinga, interview, August 31<sup>st</sup> 2018, Puyo)

Abigail Gualinga's description of how she learned that *Kawsak Sacha* is alive is similar to what the Amazonian women I worked with shared. Different conversations, trips together, and other moments I shared with these Amazonian leaders taught me that the recognition of their territory as a living entity is not easy to explain in abstract words or as a conceptual metaphor. Rather, as I will argue in the next section, the *experience* of the rainforest as a living being is embedded in concrete, affective practices carried out in their daily lives. These practices include cultivating *yuca* [manioc] in their *chakra*, producing and sharing *chicha* [manioc beer], dreaming and sharing dreams while drinking *guayusa* [caffeinated tree leaf], molding visions in clay pottery, and singing with a purpose.

What all of these practices share in common is that they do not just materially enable indigenous peoples' lives in the Amazon. These practices also imply an experience of interconnectedness and interdependence with the forest, exemplified in how Abigail Gualinga and her family cultivate their *chakra* and the forest gives them nourishment in return. Furthermore, they also transform the person who performs the practice and the being, the animal, or the plant the practice is directed to, exemplified in how the lagoon protectors reacted to the shooting of a *sajino* and how this experience had the power to change Gualinga. The relation between humans to the forest is thus not one of material or utilitarian correspondence, but rather one of affective recognition and co-constitution. Practices that draw on affective recognition and interaction with the rainforest as a living entity, and on “mutual becomings” between Amazonian women and the rainforest's living beings (Guzmán-Gallegos 2019) are what I call “practices of forest-making.” As the words “forest-making” describe, the acknowledgement and enactment of these practices make the forest, in one way or another, into a living entity inhabited by a multiplicity of life forms.

Practices of forest-making thus entail extremely affective connections that position Amazonian women not as “guardians” of an imagined and mythical space, but as reproducers of human and non-human relations and defenders of a territory that is crucial for their lives. While the affective dimensions of these practices inspired their *Kawsak Sacha* declaration, they are also a source for Amazonian women's ongoing organizational strategies and political discourse when

bringing their voices and proposals to the city. This means that these practices not only take place in the rainforest but are also “brought” by members of the Amazonian women’s network into cities.

Next, I will focus on one practice of forest-making, singing with a purpose, which is important in the lives of some Amazonian women. By connecting different ethnographic moments, I show how this practice travels from the forest to the city and nurtures Amazonian women’s diverse political activities and interventions. While the effects of reproducing this practice in the rainforest or “bringing” it to the city differ, the politics enacted when these practices appear during protest marches, public interviews and meetings with state authorities are very powerful. The manifestation of these practices in the cities has the potential of generating a variety of transformations at different structural levels, with epistemological and ontological consequences on what we think the forest “is” and how we relate to it.

### **Chants with a Purpose, Chants to “Enchant”**

In March 2018, the Amazonian women’s network came, for a second time, to meet Ecuador’s elected president in Quito, Lenin Moreno. Their goal was to present their *Mandato de las Mujeres Amazónicas Defensoras de la Selva de las Bases frente al Extractivismo* [Mandate of Grassroots’ Amazonian Women Defenders of the Rainforest against Extractivism].<sup>17</sup> Moreno did not receive them right away. As a response, Amazonian women organized a five-day *plantón* [a picket of a government building] in front of the presidential palace in order to pressure the president to meet with them, an action that positioned the Amazonian women’s network in the national and international spotlight again. While they were waiting for the president, some of the women were interviewed by journalists representing the national media.

Janeth Hinostroza, the host of the morning news program *La Mañana de 24 Horas* aired on the *Teleamazonas* channel, spoke with the Amazonian leaders Noemi Gualinga and Catalina Chumpi. Hinostroza’s first question concerned Amazonian women’s demands in their *mandato*. Her last question focused on their proposal to end oil dependency. She asked, “What proposal are you developing in order to replace [...] and make up the money that we would leave with the oil under the ground?” Noemi Gualinga explained that the money coming from oil deposits in the other parts of the Amazon had not reached indigenous communities, that basic services like education and health were lacking, that the soil and rivers close to oil platforms were contaminated, and that communitarian tourism would be a better economic alternative than oil extraction. After this, she finalized her response with the following words: “We have the proposal of the Living Forest, where we have rivers, sacred trees, we have mountains, we have lots of... the forest is alive! Why can't we demonstrate to the world, that these sacred places, these places with life, can be much better for ecotourism? [...] Because they [the government] don't think about that, they just think about the oil that someone else started. Why not starting [sic] something new?”<sup>18</sup>

While Hinostroza’s last question focused on the money that the state “would leave with the oil under the ground,” Gualinga finished her intervention by presenting the Living Forest proposal as an alternative for life and as an opportunity to “start something new.” Without the intention of romanticizing Gualinga’s response, which offers ecotourism as an economic alternative to oil extraction, this dialogue bluntly shows the different terms, the different “languages,” organizing the conversations between Amazonian women and white *mestizo* elites like Hinostroza. Major

<sup>17</sup> Data based on: <https://www.eluniverso.com/noticias/2018/03/16/nota/6669664/mujeres-indigenas-entregaran-mandato-protoger-amazonia> (14.02.2020)

<sup>18</sup> Data based on: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OHhmPbUy2-s> (14.02.2020)

differences exist between these different languages, the language of the Living Forest and the language of “viable economic alternatives.” To paraphrase Marisol de la Cadena, these differences not only relate to these languages’ radical different content, but also to which one of them is acceptable for modern scientific paradigms that have banned ideas – like the one that understands the forest is a living entity – from modern politics (de la Cadena 2010, 343). However, these differences are not an obstacle preventing the Amazonian female voices from expressing their ideas in these contexts. On the contrary, Amazonian female leaders like Noemi Gualinga are skilled interlocutors that know how to navigate the questions and demands formulated in the name of “viable economic alternatives” or “the national interest.” Even more, they not only navigate these questions, but are able to create “openings” during these interactions in order to talk about something else the interviewer or the state-representative was not prepared to hear. The presence of this something else, of the forest as a living entity inhabited by a multiplicity of life forms, is an extremely political moment in these scenarios. Why?

The appearance of the living forest in this type of televised exchange is a moment of “epistemic rupture” of prevalent colonial, rationalistic, and neoliberal formations, which normally exclude indigenous thinking, practices, and political proposals from “real,” “acceptable,” or “viable” political alternatives (ibid, 343). This epistemic rupture consists of Amazonian women taking advantage of the spaces of visibility they achieve through their marches, *plantones* and counter-occupations of state institutions, in order to “disrupt prevalent political formations” and to render illegitimate the exclusion of indigenous practices and proposals from the nation-state discourse (ibid, 336). Amazonian women like Noemi Gualinga thus “bring” the voices and the proposals of their people through their public interventions and challenge the government’s claim that there is no political and economic alternative to extractivism.

There were other moments of “epistemic rupture” taking place during the Amazonian women’s *plantón* in Quito. Interestingly, these moments were not limited to discursive interventions in Spanish, but also included practices of forest-making like singing. In fact, it is very common to see Amazonian women performing their traditional chants during their protests, marches and other interventions in the cities. According to the activist Ivonne Ramos, a member of the environmental organization *Acción Ecológica*, the 2013 Amazonian women’s march was “guided” by Amazonian women’s chants (Colectivo Miradas Críticas del Territorio desde el Feminismo 2014, 82). Their *plantón* in March 2018 was no exception, as Waorani, Kichwa, Shuar, Achuar and Shiwiar filled the *plaza* in front of the presidential palace with their chants.<sup>19</sup>

Rosa Gualinga is very well known by her friends and allies for her ability to sing. This ability entails knowing many *cantos* [songs or chants], which her mother and grandmother taught her throughout her childhood, but also denotes the power to sing with a purpose, or to sing with the power to influence the course of events. During one conversation I had with Rosa Gualinga, she referred to her *cantos* as a power she uses when necessary and that makes you “get” where your purpose is located by performing certain sacrifices, like fasting:

“My grandmother taught me that one, she taught my mother and my mother taught me. I always ask the elders how I should live defending my territory. Singing is sacrificed, but they told me, “that’s how you should sing, you have to have power.” So I sing when I have to, I have to sing until I get there. If I sing, I cannot eat food. I cannot eat food, nor drink water, nor eat chili, nor salt. It’s a bit of a hassle,

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<sup>19</sup> Data based on: <http://www.albatv.org/Mujeres-amazonicas-defienden-en.html> (14.02.2020)

because if you eat chili, especially, you cannot control the power.” (Interview, August 9<sup>th</sup> 2018, Puyo)

Phillip Descola describes in his ethnographic work with the Achuar – closely related to the Shiwiar and Shuar peoples –, that the word *anent* [chant in Achuar, Shiwiar and Shuar] comes from the same root as *inintai*, “the heart,” the organ where thought, memory and emotions reside (Descola 1989, 273). The *anent* are “discourses of the heart” adapted to different circumstances in Achuar’s public and domestic life, like cultivating, hunting, improving relations with relatives or settling a dispute. These supplications are addressed to all kinds of recipients with a “receptive sensitivity,” whom the Achuar want to convince, seduce, or “enchant” by the content of the *anent*. Examples of recipients are entities like *Nunguli*, the goddess of the soil and the source of knowledge about cultivation, but also animals, plants and humans. The *anent* is therefore a magic spell, an “enchantment,” and an intimate plea from the heart used in order to influence the course of things (ibid.).

The ability to sing with the heart is thus a very precious practice of forest-making that connects the person who sings with the beings to whom the chant is directed in a very intimate way. Rosa Gualinga even described how singing with the heart makes her cry very often – “I feel sad, I cry when I sing, really, you cry” (interview, August 9<sup>th</sup> 2018, Puyo). Rosa has used this power for many things and purposes. Examples she shared range from singing in order to “find” meat in the forest (when hunting) or in order to find a partner, to *cantos* that bring unity within indigenous peoples in order to defend their territory – “In the Shiwiar nationality we have to defend our territory. For that we have a different song. It is a song that we dedicate to defend and not to get angry with each other. Without anger between us we can find unity in each nationality” (intervention at our conference panel at Universidad Andina Simón Bolívar, October 16<sup>th</sup> 2018, Quito). Other Amazonian women like the Shuar leaders Dominga Antún and Maria Taant are also very well known for their *anent*, which they bring to their public interventions. Antún, who comes from the Shuar community of San Luis Inimkis very close to the mega-mining project *Mirador*, shared one *anent* with a purpose similar to that of Rosa Gualinga during one event I had the opportunity to attend in the city of Gualaquiza. She explained:

“With this mining that is going to come, we are going to lose our identity, as women, men and children. That is our concern, we don’t want to lose our customs, our traditions. [...] Now we are in danger, now that mining is coming. For those who do not understand Shuar, I, my intervention [song] was for us to be together now. To be together with our peoples, our nationalities. To be always united, not to separate, not to abandon our territory, not to leave our house. All of us have to be united.” (Intervention at the public hearing “*Verdad para la Vida*”<sup>20</sup> against mega-mining projects, September 2<sup>nd</sup> 2017, Gualaquiza)

It is clear for Rosa Gualinga that singing in the forest, surrounded by its powerful beings, has a different effect than singing in public spaces like in front of the presidential palace, surrounded by the chaos of the city. Descola inclusively describes the *anent* as personal treasures for Achuar peoples, which are jealously guarded, shared among close relatives or passed on during secret ceremonies (Descola 1989, 274ff.). However, the recurrent appearance of Amazonian women’s *cantos* during their public interventions certainly challenges the interpretation that the

<sup>20</sup> Data based on: <https://verdadparalavida.org/2017/08/audiencia-de-la-cordillera-del-condor/> (14.02.2020)

forest-making practice of singing can only take place in the forest. Amazonian women's decision to publicly perform their chants in other spaces position their practices of forest-making as contemporary political interventions that disrupt the way governmental or white-*mestizo* "politics as usual" are reproduced (de la Cadena 2015, 37). The politics as usual, reproduced by people like Janeth Hinojosa or by state-representatives who designate zones of extractive sacrifice, are the politics of disenchantment, the politics of no alternative to "more capitalism", more "extractivism" or more "viable economic solutions" for the current state of things. The politics enacted by practices of forest-making like singing, are on the contrary the politics of enchantment, the politics that "chant" a different "world into existence" in order to re-enchant our imaginaries about alternative futures (Linebaugh's preface in Federici 2018, xvii). Amazonian women's politics of enchantment, therefore, do not consist of superstitious magic or beliefs, products of a mystical or archaic way of "being indigenous." Instead, this politics' magic is rooted in its pragmatic power to transform the "habits, or stakes" that characterize our way of approaching current situations (Stengers 2005, 195). By making certain voices that are typically excluded from public debates available to a broader audience, Amazonian women are transforming the stakes that shape hegemonic debates on the Amazon as a territory to be either protected for its biodiversity or exploited for its resources, and make visible the human and non-human lives at stake if extractive expansion continues.

There is no better way to show the contrast and confrontation between these two politics than by focusing on how the Amazonian women's visit ended in Quito. Moreno decided to meet with the Amazonian women's network in the presidential palace on March 23, 2018. After Moreno publicly announced he wanted to continue "dialogue and converse,"<sup>21</sup> a delegation of Amazonian women met with the president and other representatives for approximately two hours. The Amazonian leaders called for an end to extractive concessions, denounced the death threats and attacks that leaders like Patricia Gualinga, Alicia Cahuilla and Salomé Aranda have received due to their anti-extractive activism, and debunked claims that affected communities were properly consulted on current and future oil and mining projects.<sup>22</sup> During the meeting, Moreno repeated his openness for dialogue and told the women that he "worries a lot about oil and mining, because we have a future to take care of."<sup>23</sup> After a last round of interventions, the governmental politics of "dialogue" were challenged by Nina Gualinga from Sarayaku, who, after sharing one Kichwa *canto* said the following: "Look at the women's faces, look at them, look at their children, and stop lying! How can you lie to us? You tell us you want to dialogue, you want to consult us for this and that. Lies! We all know that!" (Intervention during the meeting with President Moreno in Quito, March 23<sup>rd</sup> 2018, live-streamed by Comunicación Sápara in Facebook<sup>24</sup>). Nina called out the politics of disenchantment by name, an exceptional and historic moment to remember.

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<sup>21</sup>Data based on: <https://amazonwatch.org/news/2018/0323-amazonian-women-give-president-fifteen-days-to-respond-to-their-demands> (14.02.2020)

<sup>22</sup>Data based on: <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2018/mar/23/keep-off-our-land-indigenous-women-tell-ecuadors-president> (14.02.2020)

<sup>23</sup> Data based on: <https://amazonwatch.org/news/2018/0323-amazonian-women-give-president-fifteen-days-to-respond-to-their-demands> (14.02.2020)

<sup>24</sup> Data based on: <https://www.facebook.com/comunicacionSapara/videos/2103783823240950/?pnref=lhc.unseen> (last accessed March 2019)

### Concluding Thoughts: Amazonian Women Decolonizing the Anti-extractive Struggle

“I, as an Amazonian woman, come in the name of my people, of my nature, of the *supay* [forest protectors]. [...] I come here to speak about the oil blocks that are affecting us, the Shiwiar, Sapara and Kichwa indigenous peoples of the ancestral territory of *Kawsak Sacha*, blocks 86 and 87. I am asking the president and the minister of hydrocarbons, Carlos Pérez, to apologize for not acknowledging that indigenous peoples live in the territories that overlap with oil blocks 87 and 86. He [the minister] must apologize to indigenous peoples for not recognizing that we exist as peoples! [...] We do not speak only for ourselves; we speak for nature’s multiple living beings that exist for us. There are many worlds in the Amazon that Western people do not know about.” (Nancy Santi, testimony during Amazonian women’s protest at the Ecuadorian Ministry of Hydrocarbons, November 2018, Quito)<sup>25</sup>

Amazonian leaders like Alicia Cahuilla, Noemi Gualinga, Rosa Gualinga, Dominga Antún and Nina Gualinga are disrupting politics as usual and making it difficult to ignore their voices and their message. Even if the government or white-*mestizo* elites do not really seem to accept, much less understand, the terms of Amazonian women’s demands and proposals, the public display of their declarations and the presence of their voices and practices of forest-making in the cities are changing the dominant stakes that have shaped confronting narratives and politics about the Amazon. The Amazon is neither an empty place nor a mythical place full of unlimited resources to be exploited nor a natural “Eden” of biodiversity in danger of extinction. Contrary to these governmental and environmentalist narratives, Amazonian women, as active members of their communities and organizations, defend this territory as a living space where human and non-human life is reproduced.

As the testimony of Nancy Santi, first female president of the Kichwa *pueblo* of Kawsak Sacha, shows, Amazonian women are aware that the complex entanglements of life in the Amazon – its “many worlds” – are unknown to Western people. Nevertheless, when Santi expresses that she comes in the name of her people and nature’s multiple “living beings” she is not only challenging how extractive expansion violently renders her people’s lives invisible. She is also expanding the scope of what we think extractive projects occupy. Extractivism, as a continuation of colonial occupation, not only violently erases the actual presence of indigenous communities in the rainforest, as happened in October 2018 when former minister of hydrocarbons Carlos Pérez denied the existence of indigenous communities where oil blocks 86 and 87 are located.<sup>26</sup> Extractive occupation also renders invisible the many worlds that exist in the Amazon as a space of life and that constitute an essential part of indigenous peoples’ affective relations with the forest and their everyday lives.

The way that the Amazonian women’s network, and the indigenous movement at large, are challenging state narratives has certainly transformed the anti-extractive struggle in Ecuador. Ecuadorian environmentalist organizations like *Acción Ecológica*, the *Yasunid@s* collective, or the feminist collective *Miradas Críticas del Territorio desde el Feminismo*, as well as US-based non-governmental organizations (NGOs) like Amazon Watch and WECAN (Women’s Earth and Climate Action Network) have not only actively supported Amazonian women’s struggle, but have

<sup>25</sup> Data based on: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WNN0\\_r7Ohvw&feature=youtu.be](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WNN0_r7Ohvw&feature=youtu.be) (14.02.2020)

<sup>26</sup> Contrary to Perez declaration, who affirmed that “there will be no problems in the blocks because the communities are located in other blocks,” oil blocks 86 and 87 completely overlap with Santi’s territory and the Shiwiar, Sapara and Achuar indigenous territories (Data based on: <https://conaie.org/2018/12/06/gobierno-ecuadoriano-anuncia-la-licitacion-de-bloques-petroleros-en-la-amazonia-y-la-ampliacion-de-operaciones-en-el-parque-nacional-yasuni/> (14.02.2020)

also partially adopted the vocabulary and proposals offered by Amazonian indigenous leaders.<sup>27</sup> Without ignoring the ongoing tensions and asymmetricality of alliances between the Amazonian women's network and environmental activists, these transformations evidence how indigenous voices are transforming the environmental struggle in Ecuador and in the world. These transformations are necessary in order to decolonize our imaginaries about territories like the Amazon and to resist what capitalist extractivism is really trying to occupy: life in its multiple forms.

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<sup>27</sup> I offer an expanded analysis on the historical dynamics underlying the complex solidarity ties and mutual transformations between ecofeminists and Amazonian women in the article "Indigenous Women's Activism, Ecofeminism, and Extractivism: Partial Connections in the Ecuadorian Amazon," in *Politics and Gender* (2019).



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