Article

Society and Space

EPD: Society and Space
2022, Vol. 40(5) 824–842

DOI: 10.1177/02637758221116894
journals.sagepub.com/home/epd
SAGE

Like harvesting tarulla: The decolonization of being from a petrolized swamp

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Abstract

The Palagua swamp in the Middle Magdalena region of Colombia is a territory governed by nearly a century of petro-development and armed conflict. This toxic reality, along with the disappointment of temporary legal victories and demands for environmental compensation, have left deep marks on individuals' psyche, eroding the self-confidence and spirit of communities. Drawing on archival research, secondary regional sources, and 13 semi-structured interviews with former oil workers, fishers, farmers, and women activists, we delve into the meaning, implications, and transformation of petro-development and internal colonialism. We suggest that the decolonization of being in a petrolized environment implies challenging imposed imaginaries of development and perceiving forces of internal colonialism. This should be recognized as a long-term process, a painful incubation of possibilities, marked by persistent and transformative day-to-day actions.

Keywords

Decolonization of being, Colombia, petro-development, internal colonialism

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Once a week, Lina[1] embarks on her canoe ride through the *ciénaga* de Palagua, a wetland in the heart of Colombia near the banks of the Magdalena River (Figure 1), determined to harvest as much of the invasive water hyacinths (*Eichhornia crassipes*) as possible with her own hands. The weeds, locally known as *tarulla*, were brought in the 1980s by Texas Petroleum Company to bioremediate crude oil that had spilled into the wetlands from ruptures in the submerged pipelines. The invasive vegetation proliferated, depriving the waters of sunlight and depleting stores of dissolved oxygen. Tarulla is tenacious, and even after large-scale mechanical removal, even the tiniest fragment can grow back and reproduce rapidly, with a single plant producing 3000 others in 50 days. Lina is concerned that the dense mass that is clogging Caño Agualinda, the wetland's main tributary, is preventing fish from spawning and interfering with the swamp's hydraulic regime. Although Lina is aware that she alone cannot overcome the infestation, she still shows up every week, ready to resume the fight. "Yesterday it rained hard and today the sun came out, so I know this will get better," she says. Lina's weekly clean-ups are a healing ritual, a dignified and therapeutic way to reclaim both the swamp and her own sense of identity.

This article is an attempt to situate the present-day resistance to petro-development in the ciénaga de Palagua as a long-term process of decolonizing being. The article draws on archival research, including a database of news articles, environmental licenses, technical reports, and legal documents, as well as secondary regional history sources. These are complemented by 13 semi-structured interviews with former oil workers, fishers, farmers, and women activists. We begin by expounding a theoretical framework for understanding the operation of internal colonialism brought on by petro-development. We then offer a narrative of the socio-ecological injustices and a temporary legal victory in the 1990s, a time of hope coinciding with Colombia's renewed constitution that demanded complete rehabilitation and a return to pre-petroleum conditions. We explore the implications of restoring the swamp to an original state, illustrating the extent and complexity of changes to both human and nonhuman actors. We thus analyze the failure of the legal victory to affect

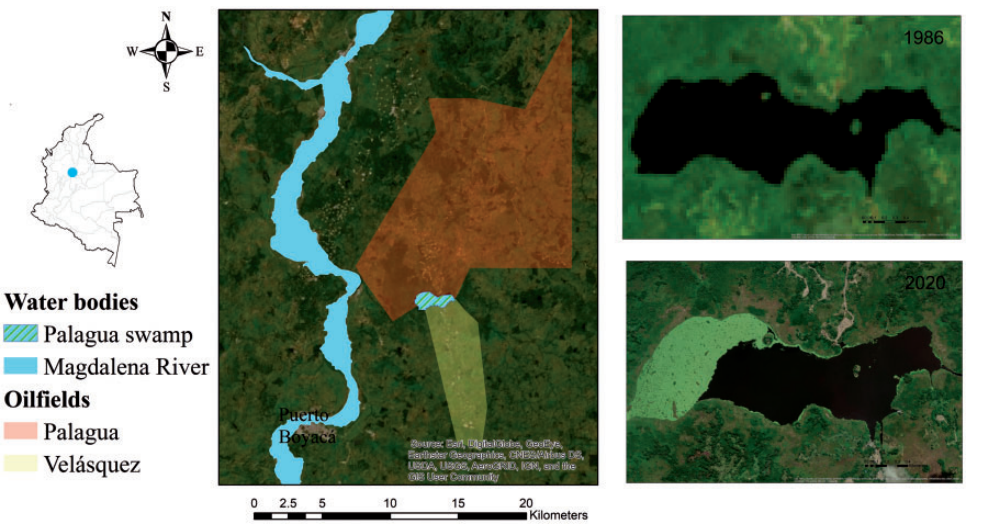

Figure 1. The Palagua swamp and the town of Puerto Boyacá at the banks of the Magdalena River. Images of the swamp from 1986 and 2020 demonstrate the extent of the tarulla (water hyacinth) invasion.

changes in the environmental practices of multinational corporations and highlight the challenges brought on by a climate of fear and silence perpetuated by the Colombian armed conflict. Against this backdrop, we present the nascent resistance and community organizing of a group of women who have begun to question their own reality and dedicate to long-term change. Through everyday commitments to place, they are engaged in decolonizing being, slowly nurturing the faculties of imagination that seek to release an entrenched petroleum territory from its dependence on extraction.

We speak of the decolonization of being because petro-development not only transforms the physical environment, but also alters identities, values, and social dynamics. At the individual level, petro-development colonizes being in the sense of creating imaginaries of progress for people to desire, and imaginaries of exclusion and guilt for people to fear. This form of structural violence, or internal colonialism, transforms the psychological structures of the oppressed by making values, tastes, symbols and affections as similar as possible to those of the power that oppresses them (Fanon, 1990). In extractive territories, internal colonialism is exercised by a permanent sense of lack for those who are unable to access employment, and its economic and symbolic benefits (Rivera, 2010). The self-recognition of internal colonialism is experienced as an identity conflict, in which people perceive themselves as victims of a long-term process that cannot be resolved in the short term, but which simultaneously mobilizes them in acts of everyday resistance, such as pulling up tarulla. The decolonization of being in a petrolized swamp implies challenging imposed imaginaries of development and being aware of the forces of internal colonialism. This should be recognized as a long-term process, a painful incubation of possibilities, marked by persistent and transformative day-to-day actions. We propose a recognition of internal colonialism, along with a commitment to the dignity of the tangible and the everyday, as essential germinations in the healing and decolonizing process. Writing this article is part of that journey. As a woman brought up in the oil town of Puerto Boyacá, Estefany Grajales (co-author) has interrogated her own conflicting identities through the making of this text. The interviews she conducted, particularly with the women she has worked with and traveled alongside, invited reflections deepened by conversations not only academic, but also spiritual and emotional. The result is a story that is still living, the opening of a chapter that invites both action and reflection.

Internal colonialism, the coloniality of being, and petro-development

Internal colonialism is broadly referred to state policies replicating the repression of European colonizers within a nation's peripheral regions (González Casanova, 1963). However, for our purposes, we define internal colonialism as a cognitive and spiritual phenomenon which surfaces through the domination and mental subordination of thoughts, ideas, and emotions, operating at both the individual and collective levels. We draw on the analyses of Frantz Fanon and Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui, who recognize the close relationship between colonialism as material exploitation, and mental, emotional, and spiritual colonialism. For Fanon and Rivera, internal colonialism is not only suffered by the colonized, but also by the colonizers. For Rivera, those most affected by internal colonialism are the mestizos, because of the tension they embody by carrying in themselves the oppressed indigenous identity and the oppressive white identity. Rivera also describes how internal colonialism operates through the colonization of ways of knowing. The science of oral transmission practiced by colonized peoples, based on the millenary observation of nature, was denigrated and despised by the colonizer, because European rationality was incapable of understanding it (Quintin Lame, 1971). Other ways of knowing the world,

through the senses, emotions, spirit, intuition, and artistic inspiration were replaced by anthropocentric, androcentric, and logocentric sciences constructed and validated by experts (Rivera et al., 2016).

We also draw on the concept of the coloniality of being (*colonialidad del ser*) developed by Latin American scholars from the modernity/coloniality research program (Maldonado-Torres, 2007). Decolonial scholars define coloniality as separate from the political and economic phenomenon of colonialism, of which it is a product. Rather, it is an ontological oppression that outlives colonialism, operating through a capitalist world-system and the notion of race, and shaping all facets of being: from work, knowledge, and authority to intersubjective relationships (Maldonado-Torres, 2007). For Rivera, coloniality implies a permanent state, whereas colonialism is an active process. Therefore, she prefers to refer to internal colonialism to emphasize its operation as an active force. However, we have chosen to use both terms interchangeably, to refer to processes which occur at multiple scales and temporalities, but which share a common counter-process, that of decolonizing being.

Internal colonialism operates on both identity and emotions. Fanon described how the trauma of hunger, violence, and shame in colonized black populations surfaced as a self-destructive form of identity. The colonized subject suffered from an inferiority complex that rejected inwardly all that was deemed savage, backward, or primitive by the colonizer (Fanon, 1986). Rivera has written on the Latin American experience of indigenous peoples and peasants, as well as on the inner reality of the mestizo, who carries both the colonizer and the colonized within. Her work, spanning multiple historical horizons, describes internal colonialism as the alteration of mental structures and worldviews brought on by structural violence. One of the most basic forms of violence is that which is exercised through the destruction of identity. This destruction is initially reflected in what Rivera calls "the denial of the indigenous soul," and, over time, in the formation of citizens shaped by ideas of progress and civilization, who are promised inclusion through work, property, school, production, consumption, and the whitening of skin as well as thought and behavior (Rivera, 2010). Fanon claimed that the colonized subject represses or disguises emotions of hatred, anger, and resentment to survive amid colonial oppression. For Rivera, both the indigenous and the mestizos suffer from "alienation and personal and mental derangement" when faced with low-intensity violence, neoliberalism, and the loss of language and a sense of belonging (2010: 61).

Decolonization requires the oppressed to recognize and shake off imposed ideas and behaviors. But it also requires the colonizers to recognize and abandon "illegitimate, spurious and violent" power relations (Rivera, 2016: para. 3). Internal colonialism ends if it is understood as "one of the pendulum movements in the cyclical and renewable course of history" (Rivera 2010: 52). The pendulum swing of history implies a process of deep accumulation, which culminates in a moment of awakening, turning a dead past into an emancipatory and clarifying force (Rivera in Cacopardo, 2018). For Fanon, decolonization emerges when the colonized discovers that his life is worth no less than that of the settler (1990: 22). For Rivera, decolonizing actions or practices are framed by a deep human awareness that, as a species, we have the responsibility to take care of the Earth (Rivera, 2006). Rivera draws attention to women's collectives who synthesize their actions around a relationality with the non-human that allows "thinking with the heart" (Millán, 2011), networks of spiritual reciprocity (Ulloa, 2021), and a reclaiming of attentiveness, the tangible and the everyday (Rivera in Cacopardo, 2018). These women, operating in micro-spaces in Abya Yala and around the world, base their work on the feminine utopia of a depatriarchalized society, a "dignified and respectful vision of human coexistence" (Rivera, 2010: 199). Decolonizing practices can also occur at the level of social science, when spaces

of theory are spaces of practice, where science "does not divorce the brain from the body, ethics from politics, doing from thinking" (Rivera et al., 2016).

Internal colonialism has also been related to the destruction of nature caused by an oppressive economic system. For Fanon, the domination of an indocile nature and the political and economic annihilation of native populations "are actually one and the same thing" (Fanon, 1990: 125). The destruction of the land is deeply indignant for the colonized peoples, given its essential value (Fanon, 1990: 135). But the double annihilation of both nature and natives as economic and political subjects implies a negation of culture and even humanity (Rivera, 2010: 168). Colonizers considered the relationship of respect and ritual reciprocity with nature to be heretical and ungodly (Galeano, 2013).

Petro-development has been compared with colonialism, because of the oppressive force of its impact on space and society. Oil functions as "the most fundamental building block of . . . hydrocarbon capitalism" (Watts, 2001: 190–191). The "oil-curse" describes the relationship between oil's surplus revenue and government corruption (Ross, 2012), as well as a global dependence on oil to fuel material and technical needs (Mitchell, 2011). Petro-development promises modern civilization and restructures society, tying together the fate and profit of oil with communities and the state (Watts, 2004: 76). When promises of petro-development are left unfulfilled, the idea of euphoric wealth without effort, "petro-fetichism" is met with the shock of petro-modernity (Watts, 2001). These promises become essential ingredients in "identity-making" at all levels (Watts, 2001: 208). Petro-development shapes individual and collective identities through a reorganization of the social and cultural order (LeMenager, 2013; Rogers, 2015), built on "deeply felt visions of freedom and individualism" (Huber, 2013: xi).

Petro-fetichism, pervasive ecological destruction and toxic living conditions have led to documented psychological effects. In an oil town in southern Patagonia, a wave of youth suicides chronicled by Argentine journalist Leila Guerriero illustrates how young people in a petrolized society see no future beyond petroleum and no resolution beyond death (Guerriero, 2006). Other accounts have narrated a sense of determination and daily struggle but have problematized the psychological effects of hopeful submissions (Auyero and Swistun, 2009) and cruel optimisms (Valdivia, 2018). The residents of the Argentine shantytown Flammable experience hopeful submission to degraded living conditions, a resignation, passivity, and lack of collective action produced by the "symbolic violence" of social domination (Auyero and Swistun, 2009). Others, such as the residents of Esmeraldas, home to Ecuador's most important oil-refinery, are acute to the "slow death" they face by inhaling refinery chemicals. Despite the emotional distress of living in a toxic city, *Esmeraldeños* engage in wagering life ("jugarse la vida") by surviving precariously through a range of resourceful economic activities, "weigh[ing] in on the promise of a dignified life tied to oil capital's circulation" (Valdivia, 2018: 552). The residents whose daily lives are richly described in Valdivia's work do not see themselves as agents of social change. Rather, they engage in a "politics of dignity," maneuvering within toxicity, wagering bodies and futures through affective quests for a life worth living (2018: 556).

Oil spills and tarulla: The psychology of contamination and deceit

Texas Petroleum Company (Texaco) first arrived on the land surrounding the swamp almost a century ago, in 1927. The company spent the first 20 years acquiring lands and extracting timber. With the discovery of oil, profits expanded, the town of Puerto Boyacá was built, settlers poured in, and the landscape was transformed. By the 1970s, some had already become aware of the contamination caused by precarious operations.

Early practices such as pouring oily production waters on the streets of Puerto Boyacá and in the areas surrounding the ciénaga were not questioned. Later, Texaco dug pools nearby the wells to deposit production waters. Sludge would overflow every time there was a heavy rain, creating greasy trails throughout the fields. Fishers began witnessing massive fish kills, which they associated with the visible pools of oil on the water surface. By the next decade, frequent oil spills were widely recognized.

Texaco's response to forestall the ecological crises was to introduce the water hyacinth as a natural bioremediation strategy for crude oil contamination. This tactic, enacted in the 1980s, created additional challenges for the ciénaga's inhabitants, and certain advantages for the oil companies. Many locals were suspicious of the intrusive vegetation from the start. In their opinion, Texaco had planted tarulla to cover up the spills, so that they could continue to discharge untreated wastewater into the swamp. The macrophyte spread to a large expanse of the water's surface (see Figure 1), blocking out sunlight and shading underwater plants. These, in turn, began to rot and decay, depleting the amount of dissolved oxygen in the water. Although fishers point out that massive fish kills had been occurring since as early as 1964, the first reported event was attributed to the oxygen-depleting tarulla (Inderena, 1987). In the following years, massive fish kills continued to occur routinely, but no one was sure what was causing them.

Guillermo, a *campesino*, is sure that the tarulla was planted intentionally to cover up the persistent oil spills:

> They . . . realized that they indeed had a very serious pollution problem. They began to sow that tarulla, the whole story – and they told the people that with the tarulla, there was going to be a natural process of biodegradation . . . Over time . . . I realized that the petroleum was more concentrated than ever, because when we would lose our cows and go to find them, we would find them inside the tarulla, but in immense pools of oil. Then I discovered . . . that the tarulla was covering the oil but not bioremediating it, as they claimed.

The tarulla became a useful pest, since it grew rapidly, covering pools of oil and delaying complaints regarding Texaco's precarious operations. The fish kills, which had been occurring as a direct result of frequent oil spills, could now be attributed to the oxygen-depleting tarulla, which, after all, were planted for the right intentions and propagated due to natural causes outside of the company's control. In other petrolized regions, such as lake Maracaibo, Venezuela, tarulla was also planted for bioremediation purposes. The invasive species has suffocated the aquatic ecosystem and increased sedimentation, so much so that it has been indicated as the cause of livelihood loss and mass outmigration (Rodríguez Ríos and Brudermann, 2021). In Palagua, tarulla infestations clogging the swamp's water influx led to a permanent sense of mistrust, helplessness, and indignation. Parallel to the ecological devastation and asphyxiating hydro-ecological conditions, the deceit associated with planting tarulla had concocted asphyxiating social and emotional conditions. Despite these conditions, not long after the introduction of the invasive plant, voices were raised in defense of the swamp, in favor of its peoples and against Texaco, a company that had long outgrown its welcome.

A temporary legal victory: Inaction and the erosion of community spirit

Fishers, campesinos and biologists were not the only ones noticing the contamination caused by the oil companies. In the 1980s, the Colombian environmental government

agency, Inderena,[2] visited the oilfields and called for the immediate suspension of two point-sources of production water discharge, and reparations to the submerged pipeline. Nevertheless, discharges persisted, and in 1990, thousands of barrels of oily sludge were discovered in floodplains and tributaries (Avellaneda Cusaría, 2003) and a second fish kill was registered (La República, 1993). At the global level, an emphasis on environmental law was on the rise, and communities located in sacrifice zones (Lerner, 2012) for the expansion of global capital, were beginning to organize and demand legal compensation. However, in retrospect, scholars have pointed out that these litigations generally "looked good on paper" (Rodgers, 2011) but were characterized by a gap between ambition and implementation (Bankes et al., 2014). Because they were not addressing the root causes of environmental injustices, they made it possible for companies to continue exploiting nature under legal terms. In Niger, a Bill of Rights aimed at self-determination was met with military occupation (Watts, 2001). In Ecuador, a lawsuit was filed against Texaco for decades of precarious operations and toxic spills in the Amazon. The lawsuit continues to be unresolved and enmeshed in controversy to the present day (Sawyer, 2022). In these cases, both of which experienced violent colonial histories, "powerful companies [could] act without local or global accountability—the state ensure[d] this unaccountability in-country and the lack of a body of international law at the level of global responsibilities" (Watts, 2001: 9).

In the midst of these global lawsuits and local evidence of contamination, residents continued to file complaints, and in 1993, Inderena returned for another technical visit to the Palagua field. They took note of further unlicensed discharges, oil leaks, and elevated concentrations of lead, barium, and cadmium in the waters of the ciénaga. Inderena called for further sanctions to both Ecopetrol[3] and Texaco and declared a state of environmental emergency, requiring the Ministry of Health to take security measures, including the suspension of discharges, due to high health risks. The state of emergency caused mixed reactions. Texaco denied all charges, claiming that production water "that reaches the... Magdalena River is almost pure, with only low concentrations of salt" (La República, 1993). Local politicians called the sanitary measures "inopportune" and "excessive" and denied that there was a contamination problem (El Nuevo Siglo, 1993). Even those who recognized the pollution, claimed that the measure would cause considerable economic hardship. This sentiment, the painful acknowledgment of toxicity and an unbreakable economic dependence on oil, has been documented in a growing body of scholarship (Auyero and Swistun, 2009; Valdivia, 2018, 2019). In Puerto Boyacá, just as in Esmeraldas, the "cruel optimisms" of oil capital kept people from resisting the oil industry, since the promise of a dignified life was tied to the oil hegemony (Valdivia, 2018).

It is no wonder, then, that the decision was not welcomed by all. Already, less than three weeks after the visit, Ecopetrol had laid off 56 workers, and Texaco had suspended 24 contractors and removed the pumps off almost 100 oil wells. The mayor asked that the measure be reconsidered "since most of the 50,000 inhabitants of this port live off of petroleum extraction, either directly or indirectly" (El Tiempo, 1993). The workers union organized a strike demanding the suspension of the state of emergency, concerned that more well closures would lead to even more layoffs within the two companies. These pressures led to the Ministry of Health itself recommending that the environmental emergency be suspended.

Despite these conditions, in 1993, a group of fishers and campesinos, along with a local congressman, filed a class action lawsuit against Texaco and won. The court ordered the complete remediation and ecological restoration of the ciénaga de Palagua (Inderena, 1993). This was initially perceived as a remarkable victory, just two years after the approval of a new national constitution, underlining the importance of local communities and the

environment. The constitution and the court ruling gave hope for a new beginning, for the upholding of justice and local autonomy. The terms of the ruling required Texaco to reestablish the ciénaga's previous conditions or to restore the environment as closely as possible to how things used to be. Texaco was asked to execute a hydraulic and water quality study, determine alternatives that would increase dissolved oxygen levels, reforest the surrounding land, remediate lake-bottom sediments, and remove the tarulla from the swamp's surface.

Although the terms of the class lawsuit were remarkable, winning became a fresh experience of deceit. The terms were never met, and the emotional and mental manipulation of empty promises eroded the spirit of the individuals involved, as well as those who watched the events unravel. When Inderena checked in a year after the litigations and discovered that the plans had been disregarded, their response was to impose a financial penalty on Texaco, that the company was more than willing to pay, to continue business as usual. The legal victory lost its value, and along with it, the drive to resist, to answer the existential question "why go on?" (Gordon cited in Maldonado-Torres, 2007). By rendering the swamp and its people as credulous and exploitable, the lawsuit of 1993 nurtured an atmosphere of submission and passivity, adding to the forces shaping the coloniality of being in Palagua.

The inhabitants of Palagua express their astonishment and disbelief at the impudence of the companies that, one after another,[4] engage in the same practices of negligence and damage, with the consent and support of the state. From 1993 on, every oil company that did not advance satisfactorily with the environmental recovery plan established in the class action lawsuit would be sanctioned. The company would pay the sanction and move on, since at the same time, they would receive authorizations to open new wells. This pattern of sanctioning and authorizing is a common industry tactic and has disoriented and deepened mistrust within locals. As one resident states:

> How is it possible that they [environmental authorities] are sanctioning and authorizing at the same time? I don't understand, it sounds like something under the table. It's clear that the monetary [benefits] weigh more to them than the environmental and social [costs].

In recent years, the National Agency for Environmental Licensing (ANLA) has been approving both the modification and expansion of oilfield operations, while simultaneously opening retrospective sanctioning procedures for poor environmental management. The same year that the ANLA approved a modification for Ecopetrol, the company was sanctioned for multiple breaches and a failure to report on water hyacinth removal and soil and water monitoring. The same occurred with Mansarovar, and the company was sanctioned only three months after a modification had been approved. Both companies' modifications practically implied the opening of whole new operations, larger than the existing oilfields.[5] Modifying an old license instead of licensing a new field allows companies to follow lower environmental standards, since new fields must adhere to stricter regulations. Most residents have no way to know what has been approved, since information is often shared selectively. When asked if she knew about these modifications and their extent, Lina expressed her feeling of being deceived:

> The company's breaches are like everyday bread . . . They never told us about that number of perforations. They always distract us . . . They are not sincere with the socializations. They say they are going to do one thing and they end up doing another.

The most recent remediation project promises to "de-petrolize" the economy. In 2019, the companies signed an agreement to redirect compensation resources towards financing new infrastructures aimed at converting the swamp into the next world-class tourist destination. A floating dock near the Palagua oilfield, which redirected about 220,000 dollars from Ecopetrol's reforestation budget, was the first part of the plan. Other projects will include a dock on the side of the Velásquez oilfield, trails along Agualinda and an observation tower at the Isla de la Fantasía. At the community scale, many are skeptical that the opportunities will extend to a large portion of the population. Others view the new plan as a means for the oil companies to escape their responsibilities, since remediation tasks are now distributed between the companies, the municipal government and Corpoboyacá, the regional environmental authority. But more importantly, there is a clear awareness of the plan's intention to simply appease the local community after years of accumulated liabilities:

> How can they fool communities with an ecotourism management plan when . . . the ciénaga is polluted? . . .ANLA itself passed a report that says that these waters are not suitable even for contact with the skin! . . . By their magic, the ciénaga de Palagua was decontaminated . . . it is an incredible manipulation of the communities . . . From the floating dock, [visitors observe] a seemingly beautiful body of water. But if we had the chance to flip the swamp . . . we would realize that the contamination continues. It is a smoke screen . . . that they are using to cover up all that environmental damage and divert people and make them look the other way.

From swamp to oilfield, from campesino to petrolero: Place, memory, and identity

The terms of the lawsuit of 1993 were to restore the swamp to its original conditions, which presupposes an understanding of what the ciénaga was like before the oil spills. This implies not only restoring the memory of the swamp's ecological conditions, but also the social memory of place bound to people's being with the ciénaga, that original individual and collective identity that preceded the forces of internal colonialism. Quijano drew attention to the loss of memory and the distortion of identity brought on by the coloniality of being, writing that "because of it, we can never catch our real problems, much less solve them, except in only a partial and distorted way"(2000: 222). Fanon wrote of the debilitating impact of racism and how it effectively erases the black past, thus leading to damage on the level of identity (1986). Coulthard took Fanon's analysis one step further, claiming that a revaluation of the past should be at the center of "efforts to secure a noncolonial present and future" (2014: 149).

But holding the very memory of the swamp's pre-petroleum days is also endangered by the effects of petro-development. Settlers who have passed down the memory of those days describe lush vegetation replete with wildlife, streams bursting with freshwater fish of all kinds, fresh air, the songs of birds, and a broad, expansive lake. Before the oil companies began their precarious operations, the place was a paradise. The area was home to the white-lipped peccary and several species of large rodents. The skies were home to the blue-billed currasow, the Northern screamer, the crested guan, and the heron. The air was thick with insects and butterflies, as plentiful as in Gabriel García Márquez's Macondo. And the waters were home to several species of large and abundant native fish, including the notorious *bocachico* (*Prochilodus magdalenae*).

Lina expresses nostalgia when recounting the ecological transformations that have occurred. She remembers fondly how, as a child, she loved to go to a place called El Peñón next to the mouth of the Magdalena River. She recalls how she would go there to swim and could easily put her hand in the river and pull out a *cucho* (common pleco, *Hypostomus plecostomus*), or *cocheja* (*Caquetaia kraussii*). She can no longer catch either species in or near the ciénaga. Near the Isla de la Fantasía, she recalls, you could easily catch a sack full of wild cochejas. Lina remembers how delicious those fish were because they were natural. They were not introduced, aquaculture species like the *mojarra roja* (red tilapia, *Oreochromis* sp.) or *cachama* (pacu, *Colossoma macropomum*). As she recounts the loss of senses such as the way the fish used to taste, or the way it used to feel to plunge your hand in the river and pull out a fish, Lina also expresses pain at the recognition of loss. This feeling of homesickness while still at home has been referred to as solastagia, "the 'lived experience' of the loss of the present," the pain that occurs at the realization that one's home can no longer be a source of comfort or solace (Albrecht, 2005: 45).

But not all inhabitants hold the memory of being with the ciénaga pre-petroleum and therefore, not all experience solastalgia. Petro-development not only erased the physical signs of the past (abundant fish, the bush, the birds, the butterflies) – it also erased ways of being with the ciénaga. Paola, a young woman who grew up near the Palagua oil field, speaks of a loss of ancestral knowledge:

> One of the changes that I have noticed . . . is that people had a ritual of going out at dawn to fish in their canoes. They even made offerings . . . That was lost and that generation did not transmit their knowledge. They began to abandon their canoes to enter the oil company . . . we lost all ancestral knowledge.

Paola recounts how the oil company began to represent progress, and old values grew to be expendable. Money began to pour into Puerto Boyacá, and people became obsessed with material possessions. She relates:

> We got used to functioning within non-normality. It was part of the petroleum culture . . . If you have a daycare and you never allow the children to eat sweets, and then someone comes with a bag of candies – they go crazy! That's how it happened in Puerto Boyacá with the oil company – they went crazy with the idea of progress.

Ways of being with the ciénaga were also tied with campesino ways of being. The abundance of fish was central to the ciénaga's economy, but so was the cultivation of rice, sesame, bush lime, and other products that would be exported from the ciénaga to all parts of Colombia. As oil became the dominant form of production, the promises of insertion within the capitalist labor economy led to transformations in campesino identity, shaping a new sense of self-worth (Rivera, 2010). Whereas initially, the oil industry gave stable employment, benefits, pension plans, and scholarships for children of employees, little by little, these benefits fell off. Working conditions were no longer glamorous, petroleum became equated with material progress and holding a job with the oil companies became a high priority. Being campesino was colonized by being *petrolero* (an oil worker). The shift towards a petrolero identity led also to apathy, as workers grew unconcerned by socio-environmental changes in the ciénaga. Loyalty shift away from the land, towards employment, as demonstrated by the following quotes:

> We've talked to people who tell us, yes, 90% of these oilfields are contaminated, but I won't say where because if I do, I'll lose my job.

> The [real] issue is work, hunger, quality of life, a more stable life . . . that is why people do not think whether the perforations will degrade the environment. If there is work and enough to eat, they don't care.

Whereas the region had previously produced a variety of crops and grains, these economies eventually died out, largely due to the ease and relative luxury of wage work. Watts describes this phenomenon as the "Dutch Disease" or "petrolization of society" which "produces depressive effects . . . in other non-oil sectors, such as the collapse of agriculture . . ." (2001: 206). As a result of this "monoeconomy" (Watts, 2001), it became common to work for only two or three months a year, and to spend the rest of the year idle, since temporary jobs with the oil company were so profitable. The flow of money into oil-producing territories has transformed local imaginaries by feeding a desire for quick cash with little effort (Watts, 2001). This idea has led to a convenient alignment of the will of the people to the will of the companies, a situation in which agriculture and other alternatives are no longer part of the imaginary. Guillermo summarizes this psychology through a description of what he terms "mental castration":

> The oil industry has brought about psychological damage. No one is thinking about growing food anymore. The locals only think about oil . . . They would rather go hungry and wait around for a small job than work the land. They have been mentally castrated; I don't see any other explanation.

Overcoming the gridlock created by the petro-development paradigm can hardly be achieved by trying to return to a past that no longer exists. However, the memory of the past is a crucial force for the decolonization of being. This is not a nostalgic holding on to the past, but a way of calling it to the present as a vital force. Referring to an Aymara saying, Rivera describes a view of the past–present–future that can be helpful in any attempt at decolonization. She explains that while holding the weight of the future on our backs, the only way to walk in the present is by fixing our gaze on the past before us (Rivera in Cacopardo, 2018). Recognizing the forces of internal colonialism and imposed needs requires this memory of the past, which includes a memory of both the ecological and the social, the interaction of place and identity.

Fear and silence: The scars of a violent past

Watts has described the political ecology of oil using the term "petro-violence," referring to the intersection of ecological and social violence (2001). He explains that oil is defined by "ruthless exploitations and thuggery" (2001: 190). But beyond the "symbolic violence" of environmental suffering and its ties with social domination (Auyero and Swistun, 2009), oil exploitation has also been tied to bloodshed and armed conflict, particularly within the context of the Magdalena Medio region of Colombia. In our case, the violence of petro-development in Palagua shared commonalities with the colonial violence described by Fanon. The impacts on fear and silence could also be compared to the effects of colonialism, which Fanon described as the skillful infection of "millions of men . . . with fear, inferiority complexes, trepidation, servility, despair, debasement" (Césaire, 1972, cited in Fanon, 1986: 14). In this section, we explore the interrelationships between petro-development and violence, and the implications of this intricate web on the fear, silence, and internal colonialism of individuals and the community. We do not seek to equate fear, or the psychological acquiescence it produces, with internal colonization. There are situations in which people

are cognizant of injustice yet find themselves weighing the repercussions of speaking out vs. biding time. This points to nuances in the temporality of fear, silence, and internal colonialism brought about by petro-violence – a theme which could be explored more substantially through further research.

The history of the oilfields has been intimately linked to the saga of violence that has come to mark the identity of the Middle Magdalena region. Since the early colonial days, predation from outside actors has contributed to a culture of fear and silence that continues to enable predation in new forms today. When Texaco first purchased the Guaguaquí-Terán property in 1927, it operated as a timber company for the first 20 years, cutting down extensive areas, which became peppered with early colonos, eager to escape political violence and start a new life in the wilderness. As the colonos arrived, following Texaco's trail of deforestation, they would harvest trees, sell wood, cultivate corn and rice, fall into ruin, sell the land to a merchant or cattle rancher, and move deeper into the jungle. This led to the concentration of land in the hands of politicians, military officials, and well-connected merchants, as well as the large-scale conversion of the region into grasslands and the growing importance of Puerto Boyacá (Medina Gallegos, 1990). In the 1970s, the FARC, with the advantage of grassroots support from colonos who had fled political persecution during La Violencia, had gained influence in Puerto Boyacá. Due to the intensification of the war and the militarization of the region, the guerrillas began to demand more financial assistance from civilians. Kidnappings and extortion also increased, and the FARC began to lose general support.

Rich cattle ranchers and merchants began to abandon the region altogether, and the resentment of those who stayed towards the guerillas eventually turned to fodder for the paramilitary movements born towards the end of the decade.[6] Around 1985, narcotraffickers from the Medellín cartel bought large extensions of land in the Middle Magdalena region. The cartel sponsored several foreign mercenaries, including Israeli mercenary Yair Klein, to instruct paramilitary commanders in combat, defense strategies, and explosives. Paramilitary commanders trained in Klein's school later headed troops in all parts of the country. One of the main training bases was located on an island at the heart of the ciénaga de Palagua, the Isla de la Fantasía[77].

What went on during those narco-paramilitary days has had a profound impact on the psyche of the ciénaga's inhabitants, affecting their ability to defend their own rights as well as those of the swamp. One fisherman who had been hired on several occasions as a boatman for the Isla's visitors recounts how the presence of predatory narcos and paramilitaries shaped a culture of fear and silence:

> Here everyone lived in a state of fear . . . when Pablo Escobar and Gacha would come, they would leave armed men. So, people were afraid. . .. Gonzalo Pérez's sons would see someone, and they would say, no, that one's no good and boom, boom, it would be over. . . . if you would go and start talking *** (criticizing), then right away. If they knew you well, they would say . . . Stay quiet or else you know where we will send you. So, you had to remain silent or else, what else could you do? . . .Everyone knew about the façade . . . the local government as well. But, to not get involved, they would all stay quiet . . . Many presidents of neighborhood councils died because of that.

The narco-paramilitary power co-opted the local state and laid the historical foundation of the ciénaga's climate of fear and silence. This phenomenon was not confined to the swamp. In other parts of the region, multinational companies were also benefiting from the psychological climate promoted by paramilitary violence. Gill (2009) recounts the detailed history

of Barrancabermeja, an oil industry enclave less than 200 km north of Palagua where paramilitaries worked with the armed forces to persecute social leaders, tearing apart social networks and labor unions and creating favorable conditions for multinational corporations. Although paramilitary groups have since given up their arms, their presence has left deep scars on the local psyche. Texaco and all future oil companies benefited from the psychological atmosphere left by the war. People became accustomed to not speaking up for fear of losing their lives, so, when the contamination became increasingly evident, the terror lingered, and few dared to raise their voices.

At present, in a post-peace agreement Colombia, social and environmental leaders have become the ideal targets of violence, particularly within extractive territories. According to Global Witness, at least 577 environmental human rights defenders were killed in Latin America between 2010 and 2015. However, since 2016, more than 400 have been killed in Colombia alone, the highest number in Latin America (HRW, 2021). Female community leaders are more likely to bear the brunt of the violence (Tarnaala, 2019). Beyond officially reported deaths, activists face living with constant verbal and nonverbal threats. In some, the atmosphere of threat leads to "submission, acquiescence, resignation, and passivity" (Auyero and Swistun, 2009), as in the case of government workers at regional environmental corporations:

> The first thing they do is that first the threats come, and that is why the [environmental authorities] do not commit. Because they know that the first thing that comes is the threat, because this is a zone marked by violence, so they stay quiet. This is what has happened to the ciénaga and now . . . they are [attacking] all the leaders (activists).

However, others, particularly women, have recently been emboldened despite the threat of violence. They have demonstrated the capacity to "work with their hands at the same time as they work with their minds" in ways that "do not obliterate or silence dissident voices" (Rivera, 2018: 73). This revival of community spirit is slowly removing the shackles of a violent past of war and oil.

The decolonization of being from a petrolized swamp

We opened this paper with a description of Lina on her canoe, harvesting tarulla even though the invasive plant will keep growing back. The act of harvesting tarulla is akin to what Valdivia calls "daily, affective quests for dignity" which allow us to learn about "different forms of knowing justice within the ordinary spaces of life with oil" (Valdivia, 2018: 556). This daily, affective task, in the company of other women, becomes what Valdivia calls the "politics of dignity," and what Rivera has coined the "micropolitics" of collective action, sprouting amid the "most brutal violence," and drawing strength from diversity and smallness of scale (Rivera in Cacopardo, 2018). Rivera speaks to the importance of vindicating an attention to detail and placing faith in the multiplicity and diversity of the tangible – the work that women around the world are doing with their hands and minds (Rivera in Cacopardo, 2018). This work, which has begun in Palagua, offers hope for decolonizing being in all its dimensions.

Since 2012, Lina had been participating in workshops and sharing her experiences with a group of women from Palagua. Marcela, a young woman from Puerto Boyacá, was the first to gather the women. She had gone through her own process of personal transformation and was eager to find others willing to protect the land and waters she held dear. Marcela recounts that during their first workshop, many denied there was anything wrong with

living near the oilfields. Life-with-oil and its cruelties had been internalized along with a worldview and identity dependent on petro-development, and a submission and resignation to conditions of toxicity (Auyero and Swistun, 2009). It was therefore no wonder that the women found it difficult to admit the "slow death" they had all become accustomed to (Valdivia, 2018). After some time, however, as they started to open up one by one, a torrent of trauma and healing was unleashed. Solidarity broke the silence:

> I remember the great surprise of what happened during the first workshop for women in the Palagua vereda . . . with approximately 40 women . . . At the beginning, they told us it was a perfect place to live in, and that they did not have any complaints about what happened there. But after we showed them what happens in other places where they also extract petroleum . . . They decided to talk and tell us all that it meant for them to live in this place. The stories we heard truly gave us goosebumps.

In October of 2018, Lina and seven other women traveled to Lago Agrio, Ecuador, to meet with women from Ecuador, Brazil and Argentina, all of whom had seen their land and water degraded by the Texaco-Chevron oil company. During this gathering, the women connected, told their stories, created art, and reflected on their own past and future during a "toxitour" of Lago Agrio. The women recounted the history of the swamp and shared their grievances: oil spills that had contaminated the soils and waters, the constant pounding of machinery, fumes that led to adverse health effects, the loss of fish and livelihoods, the lack of potable water and the general absence of willpower to remediate the ciénaga. In Lago Agrio, they found that they could speak up about these ills that they had silently suffered. In their encounter with others, they found the strength necessary to recognize their own internal colonialism, allowing "products of spirit and thought to. . .circulat[e] and connect cognitive energy with the pleasure of activism" (Rivera, 2018: 74).

The shared production of a historical narrative led to the formation of a collective identity. Goodling (2021) describes the importance of this process of political subject formation in redressing racialized dispossession in contaminated urban settings in the United States. She draws our attention to the day-to-day labor and dialogue that underpins social change. The group encounter in Ecuador was crucial to the women in this sense, because it had effectively pierced the atmosphere of fear and silence that had colonized their beings, and they returned home hopeful to raise their voices. About a year later, they organized a peaceful protest, during which they were assaulted by the National Police Riot control unit. Pamphlets had also been distributed throughout the area, claiming that the women's actions would lead to the unemployment of about 400 families and the closing of the oilfield. The women knew that the pamphlets were meant to intimidate them, and with the memory of the past failures of environmental litigations, they also knew they would not be heard immediately. They had, however, made a commitment to persist and endure, and set about finding ways to dignify the struggle. As one of the women stated: "To grow up in a place like this, where you are constantly disregarded because you aren't, you can't, you're not capable . . . that's hard." Her words speak to the debilitating psychological effect of living-with-oil, reminiscent of colonialism's consistent de-evaluation of self and culture (Fanon, 1990). Despite these identity effects, the women were determined. Motivated by a sense of place and belonging, they had committed to long-term action and affection, the right to remain in their territory, and (an eventual) liberation from their dependence on

extractive activities. They no longer saw their actions as too small or confined by pace or place. As one of the women stated:

> These processes are extremely slow and can take 8 to 10 years without results . . . I will continue in the struggle. I know that I am now enemies with a multinational corporation, but I continue out of a sense of belonging to the community.

The trip served as a trigger to begin a process of self-recognition as collective victims of internal colonialism, as individuals brutally transformed by the oil culture. Self-recognition of internal colonialism is posed as an indispensable condition for initiating a process of transformation with the potential to reverse the root causes of the systemic socio-ecological crisis. Marcela mentions how her path has not always been straightforward. She has had to question whether her defense of the environment and social organizing has been worth the risks to her own security. She has also had to contend with the fact that, because she has been vocal against the oil companies, there is no employment for her in her own town and she has to travel back and forth to the capital to earn a living. When times are difficult, the lure of steady employment and a so-called normal life on the good side of the multinationals seems too good to give up for an insecure, chaotic and contradictory long-term commitment:

> There were some very intense moments . . . thinking if it was really worth it to sacrifice being with my family, connecting with my loved ones, being in my space . . . displaced from my territory because of the fear that something would happen to me due to those threats. If it really was the right thing to do – if I should have had a normal life.

Just as Marcela recognizes her own internal contradictions and the challenges they bring, she describes how Lina also maneuvers through the complexities of operating on two time scales – her long-term commitment to Palagua and her family's shorter-term sustenance. Marcela tells how Lina's restaurant project and engagement with eco-tourism allows for her to benefit from Mansarovar's corporate responsibility programs, while simultaneously engaging in the patient work of community building and hand-harvesting tarulla:

> . . . right now she has a big project . . . [related to] Mansarovar's 1% compensation project . . . that has brought . . . her sales in the restaurant. So, of course, she knows . . . that she must take advantage while she can . . . she is not about to risk losing it . . . she has been one of the smart ones who has taken money from Mansarovar, but she is aware of what is happening . . . she is not, like, so much [into] demonstrations or anything like that, but she is [about] clean-ups in the swamp. She invests in [harvesting tarulla] and organizing and collecting trash. And she is of the most aware of what happens out there.

As Marcela's remarks demonstrate, both she and Lina are enmeshed in the social, cultural and economic reality of a petrolized swamp, and, as a result, experience "pathologies of liberty" – problematized identities split and at war with themselves (Fanon, 1990). They hold the memory of the swamp and its people pre-petroleum and desire its liberation from a dependence on oil. But there are times when both desire the kind of progress that, in their minds, only the oil companies can provide. Marcela has days when she wonders if what she is doing is right, given the risks and sacrifices associated with her activism. Even though her

heart is in her home territory, she has to work in the capital and do what she can when she can. Lina has remained in the ciénaga, and although she takes small steps towards ecological restoration and community building, she cannot fully cut off her economic dependence on the oil companies whose damage she seeks to heal. Even her entrepreneurial project must benefit from oil if it is to be a source of sustenance for her family. Despite these contradictory entanglements, Lina and Marcela seek transformation, even if it is slow, chaotic, messy, and nonlinear. As Rivera states, the present is all-encompassing, with the seeds of the future emerging from the past, re-enacted in everyday actions (Rivera, 2012). Thus, the women's "daily, affective quests" (Valdivia, 2018) contribute to the tangible "micropolitics" of transformation (Rivera in Cacopardo, 2018) that will lead to a collective revival, a reclaiming of life and dignity in Palagua and beyond.

Conclusions

The history of a territory and its people, transformed by a hundred years of oil extraction, could be seen as a history of lost battles, as a spiral of socio-ecological degradation, as a sacrifice zone, or as a petrolized swamp drowned by tarulla. However, a historical look at the rhythms, tensions and contradictions that accompany processes of social transformation, allows us to see that crises engender their own upheaval (Rivera, 2010). We suggest a long-term decolonizing perspective, as a process of revolutionary unfolding. This would allow us to recognize that it will not be possible to return to the conditions of the swamp before oil exploitation, that it will be necessary to acknowledge inconsistencies, moments of synchronic crises and victories of a nonlinear historical process. Within the proposed timeframe, we believe that decolonizing being will require a questioning of the petro-development model and a self-recognition of the psychological impacts of internal colonialism, so that individuals and communities can deal with internal contradictions and persevere in activities that may seem futile, such as pulling up tarulla.

Petro-development has not only polluted the swamp but has also co-opted institutions and benefitted from the unpunished violence that sustains it. The model has reshaped personal values, reduced the idea of autonomy and freedom to temporary employment, and erased the ritual connections to the ciénaga and to food sovereignty. In this context, small day-to-day actions, even if in tension with activities framed in the delusional compensation programs of oil corporations, are transformative in their intention and powerful in their persistence. The women of Palagua, like the workers of Barrancabermeja, the oldest oil enclave on the banks of the Magdalena river, have survived in an environment of extreme violence, have strengthened the battered threads of the social fabric to demand justice on their own terms (Gill, 2009) and have started to imagine life beyond oil.

The decolonization of being requires a recognition of the grips of internal colonialism, a force which produces an identity crisis in both individuals and communities. Oil extraction in Palagua, through its promise of development and affinity to violence, has not only left deep contamination of the swamp's waters, but also psychological scars and mental habits. Imaginaries of progress have led to apathy, as Guillermo recognized in his description of the "mental castration" that has left the peasants of the ciénaga devoid of agricultural production. It has led to exclusion and a sense of lack for those who do not benefit from petro-development, economically or symbolically (Rivera, 2010). Paramilitary violence has planted fear, which has born a landscape of silence – a swamp where contamination, liabilities, and violations can easily disguise themselves under the surface. Internal colonialism in the case of Palagua has led to an acceptance and even praise of the very power that oppresses the swamp and its peoples, through a psychological transformation (Fanon, 1990)

that has been years in the making. Since it has taken generations to establish these internalized habits, recognizing and resisting them will also take time. Narrating and reconstructing the memory of the past is an important step for individuals and communities to recognize internal colonialism and imposed needs. In doing so, the inhabitants of the ciénaga can imagine alternatives and question the development paradigm. The decolonization of being implies much more than the terms of the 1993 class action lawsuit to return the ciénaga to a fictitious original condition. It is an awareness of the human responsibility to take care of the Earth through a persistent commitment to the long-term, the tangible, and the everyday.

Acknowledgments

We would like to thank the residents of the ciénaga *de Palagua* who shared their stories. We also acknowledge the contributions of Fabian Alejandro Velásquez Navas, who helped review legal documents and make sense of the legal liabilities that have accumulated over the years.

Declaration of conflicting interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: This project received financial support from Universidad de los Andes.

Notes

1. Names have been replaced to protect individuals' identity.
2. National Institute of Renewable Natural Resources and Environment.
3. Ecopetrol is Colombia's national petroleum company. It bought the Velásquez oil field in 1986.
4. In 1986, Texaco sold the Palagua oil field to Ecopetrol.
5. In 1998, Texaco sold the Velásquez field to Omimex Resources, who later sold it to Mansarovar Energy. Although Ecopetrol still owns the Palagua oil field, in 2000 it handed over its operations to a consortium called Union Temporal-IJP as well as Parex Resources.
6. At the end of 1982, a gathering of cattle ranchers, members of the armed forces, merchants, local politicians, and representatives of Texaco decided to develop a self-defense group, which came to be known as MAS (*muerte a secuestradores*). This gathering marked the beginning of the structural apparatus of paramilitarism. See Serje and Steiner (2011).
7. The *Isla de la Fantasía* was bought by drug lords Pablo Escobar and Rodríguez Gacha in the 1980s. The island then became a base for trainings offered by foreign mercenaries, marking a new era for paramilitary operations in Colombia. In 1989, drug lords and paramilitaries met at the *Isla de la Fantasía* to plan the details and strategy for the assassination of presidential candidate Luis Carlos Galán.

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