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### Toxic tropics

*Gender, nature and capitalist transformations in the southern coast of Ecuador*

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## Conclusions

Starting with the life stories of Amada and Sulma as illustrations of the resilience of women living in toxic landscapes in difficult social and economic circumstances, this dissertation draws attention to the wide range of responses that emerge in the interstices of large-scale capitalist production. In the face of multiple capital and state interventions, these women were able to provide means of subsistence for themselves and their families in ways considered socially meaningful. In doing so, they contributed to the transformation of their communities and barrios and the defense of a certain degree of autonomy almost despite capitalist dispossessions. At the same time, their stories draw attention to the deep social and environmental degradations produced by the ongoing expansion of capitalist relations and their encroachment on rural territories and ways of life. They asked questions about the heterogeneity in which capitalism expresses itself and also revealed how diverse capitalisms are contributing to the reorganization of society and nature in fundamental ways.

Using an ethnographic approach, I was able to demonstrate that despite the many difficulties created by the encroachment of state and capital interests, rural people such as Amada and Sulma continue to carve out spaces for themselves, their families and their communities. Capitalist development has not stopped their search and struggle to create opportunities and reproduce diverse ways of their life in ways that they consider dignified. In this sense, rural people are more than mere victims of capitalist destructions. We can concur with Gago (2018: 3), who has noted that those most affected by neoliberal capitalist developments show a “vital perseverance” through the deployment of a “strategic rationality” that enables them to adapt to, but also derail, dominant forms of social and economic organization. As this dissertation demonstrates, such a strategic rationality is shaped by people’s changing circumstances, drawing significant power from collective memories and knowledge accumulated by rural communities over the course of many years of creative resilience. Moving between *la memoria larga* of anti-colonial and anti-capitalist resistance and *la memoria corta* of capitalist exploitation and labor struggles (Cusicanqui 1984), rural people have learned to assess the kinds of political actions that may be undertaken at particular moments in time. My fieldwork demonstrates that it is not easy for researchers to understand the emergence and effects of capitalist expansion in rural environments unless they also consider the existence and strength of ever-changing popular pragmatics that have historically shaped important changes from below.

This research has attempted to show that non-human landscapes play an equally important role in the making of rural worlds (Striffler 2002, Soluri 2005, Tsing 2015, Haraway 2016). While human actions have crucially determined the natural world, the actions of nonhumans such as fungi, parasites, manglar trees, shrimp and bananas have also shaped capitalist manifestations and the ways that people have engaged with them. Rural identities have also been significantly influenced by the particularities of surrounding landscapes and nonhuman life forms. For example, the cholo population of the coastal Archipelago of Jambelí developed as a particular kind of small fisher society in the context of the manglares, which provided a variety of fish, mollusks and crustaceans. Similarly, the montubio population along the coastal lowlands developed their

identity as a proud campesino folk through their occupation of tierras baldías and their production of food crops and small farm animals in a biodiverse agro-forested landscape.

At the same time, nature also creates obstacles and constraints for the development of particular human activities. In some places, such as the foothills of the cordillera, geographical barriers have prevented the further expansion of capitalist production and enabled rural communities to pursue their more or less autonomous ways of life. In other places, such as the coastal lowlands and manglar islands, pre-existing geographic and climatic conditions have facilitated the spread of capitalist relations, thus leading to the ongoing destruction of biodiverse landscapes. The spread of plagues and diseases, such as the black sigatoka or the Taura Syndrome, can be interpreted as particular manifestations of nature's resistance to ongoing capitalist exploitation. Nevertheless, in response to these outbreaks, banana and shrimp growers invested in new technologies that have temporarily solved these problems specific to capitalist forms of production. In the long term, these technological fixes caused additional problems as they have contributed to new forms of contamination and ecological destruction. In El Oro, the introduction of disease-resistant varieties of bananas and shrimp have gone hand in hand with the use of increasingly toxic pesticides to try and control the spread of plagues.

Specifically, this dissertation has attempted to draw attention to the interrelation between human and nonhuman causalities in two sectors, and the importance of this idea for understanding capitalist transformations and socio-environmental change. In observing the different ways that humans and nonhumans engage with each other and how these relations influence and shape events and outcomes, we are forced to critically reassess the persistence of a society-nature divide or a human-environment binary in the social and natural sciences. As Tsing and others have observed, the false division between society and nature has continually been reasserted at the heart of the capitalist myth of endless growth despite the existence of social and ecological limits to capital accumulation. Rethinking society and nature in terms of relationality questions the existence of a hierarchal binary that places some humans over nature and enables the ongoing destruction of biodiverse landscapes with lethal consequences for the continuity of all forms of life.

This dissertation has also attempted to understand these processes and their effects on the living conditions of those most directly affected by them. It has done so using ethnographic research conducted in two different, but connected, areas of export-oriented production. The interrelations between these areas are expressed in the context of state intervention and entrepreneurial decision-making, and in the flows of goods and people as well. Particularly dramatic is the way these interrelations are expressed in the toxic flows that are the negative side effects of specific agrarian sectors. These effects reach far beyond the areas where production takes place, thus extending the impact of toxicity to other regions and populations.

Such has been the case on the southern coast of Ecuador where banana and shrimp production occupy an extensive territory, from the coastal lowlands to the manglar islands at sea. While each sector was shaped by its own history and trajectory, they were both affected by processes of capitalist expansion that transformed the lives of rural residents and the places where they lived. Due to the heterogeneity of capitalist processes, connecting these two very different production activities and understanding their interrelations in what remains a largely invisibilized region of southern Ecuador was a complex challenge. In chapter 5, I demonstrated that, on many levels, the emergence of shrimp farms in the Archipelago of Jambelí and the spread of bananas plantations

along the coastal lowlands produced toxic flows between the two regions that not only created problems for both fisher gatherers and rural workers throughout the region, but also for capitalist producers whose enterprises were affected by the environmental destruction they had themselves created. By conducting an analysis of these two regions, my research was able to shed light on the different ways in which capitalist relations emerge in particular contexts and how they create similar patterns of social and environmental destruction. It also requires us to ask questions about the kinds of connections such as the toxic flows generated by capitalist developments that extend across territories and distinct geographies, and how they contribute to the transformation of human and nonhuman life forms into commercial resources for distinct projects of production throughout the southern coast's zona bananera and camaronera.

## **Exploitation and agency**

Traditional accounts of the country's banana boom describe the sweeping success of bananeras as a symbol of progress and development. However, those who were directly affected by this productive activity emphasize the struggles they waged and the exploitation they suffered on plantations. They especially stress the deteriorating health conditions that affected their quality of life as a result of their exposure to agrochemicals. At the same time, their accounts reveal that despite the imposition of brutal forms of capitalism, they have managed to carve out a good living according to their own standards. In this way, they have been able to remain in the places where they were born and made their livelihoods. Instead of succumbing to alienation and exploitation, banana workers engaged in new forms of solidarity in their barrios and communities. As chapter 4 demonstrates, in overcoming the most negative effects of capitalist processes, the residents of the zona bananera have engaged in social networks, beautified their barrios, participated in communal fiestas and occupied social and economic spaces outside the realm of banana production. In some places, this has led to the emergence of parallel solidarity economies rooted in communal banking systems and credit associations that have partially allowed for the redistribution of wealth obtained from plantation labor.

Women play a central role in the maintenance and reproduction of these social networks of solidarity and confianza that ensure the well-being of their families and communities. My ethnographic work demonstrates that while this often translates into an additional burden and can lead to the reinforcement of patriarchal gender roles, it also creates opportunities for women to occupy public spaces where their presence is differently valued. As a result, women are central actors in the weaving of a social fabric that acts as a shield against certain capitalist destructions. As Michiel Baud (2018) and others argue, social relations of confianza and solidarity maintained mostly by women help people to build attachments to their barrios and communities in difficult social and economic circumstances marked by the lack of public services, harsh working conditions, poor wages and exposure to toxicity. This partly explains the absence of collective action in these places despite the persistence of unsustainable and unequal social and ecological relations. Javier Auyero and Débora Swistun (2009) have argued that collective inaction should not be seen as a lack of agency on behalf of the residents of impoverished and contaminated barrios but rather as an effect of the confusion, longing and resignation generated by external interventions in these places. In a related manner, Jaffe's (2017) ethnography of urban pollution in Jamaica and Curaçao demonstrates that beyond confusion and resignation, at the micro level of social interactions, people are engaging in small acts of 'beautification' that instill a sense of

dignity and pride in their lives while they learn to assess the kinds of political actions that may be undertaken at particular moments in time. Similarly, this research demonstrates that in the zona bananera, people invest their time and creative energy in the beautification of their homes and barrios and the organization of communal fiestas that strengthen the image of their barrios as safe spaces. Although these types of collective action may not have led to direct protests against the banana industry's toxic practices, they do lead to small but meaningful changes in people's experience of everyday life.

While the transformations undergone in the zona bananera as a result of capitalist expansion have been the subject of numerous studies, the no less dramatic changes produced by the shrimp industry in the manglares of El Oro have been far less documented. Chapter 6 embarks on a historical reconstruction of small fisher communities in the manglar and how they were affected by the early construction of shrimp ponds in the 1960s. During this period, fisher communities in the archipelago experienced widespread deforestation, the depletion of estuarine fisheries and the loss of important living and working grounds. As chapter 5 demonstrated, this situation was aggravated by rising levels of toxicity stemming from cross-contamination produced by the presence of agrochemicals used by the banana industry in the estuaries and the release of toxic effluents from the shrimp ponds directly into the water. The destruction and contamination of the manglar ecosystem deprived fisher gatherers of their main source of subsistence and was responsible for the appearance of intra-communal conflicts and rising levels of violence involving the shrimp sector, small fisher associations and independent fisher gatherers. This led to the formation of new networks and the articulation of local leaderships. The resulting social and political demands led to widespread protests and the emergence of a movement to defend the manglar in the late 1980s.

Women played a central role in the fight to defend the manglar; however, they were initially denied official participation in fisher gatherer associations where they could only figure as adjuncts of their spouses or sons. Partially as a result of this and the continuation of traditional gender relations in the family, women from the islands often migrated with their children to the mainland in larger numbers than men. In the small port towns that line the coast, they became a cheap source of labor for the shrimp industry where they were temporarily hired to work in packaging plants, peeling and cleaning shrimp for export. Women, such as Sulma, who remained on the islands, continued to participate with their work and ideas to find solutions to the problems that the shrimp industry had created for their communities. They have fought to increase their presence in male-dominated fisher gatherer associations, and some women are now occupying important leadership roles.

In the year 2000, following several years of protests by the artisanal fishing sector, the state decided to intervene in the manglar and granted fisher gatherers territorial concessions in the area. Yet, as chapter 7 demonstrates, the creation of these so-called *custodias* was highly controversial. Although it was perceived by many as an important step towards the recognition of their struggles, the creation of *custodias* also caused tensions among fisher gatherers and led to new forms of exclusion. Beitzl et al. (2019) show that some communities in the archipelago were able to draw on their collective memories of resistance against the shrimp industry as they continued their defense of the manglar. Yet, at the same time, through the *custodias*, they were faced with a whole set of bureaucratic and organizational challenges. My fieldwork draws attention to the fragmentation of fisher communities, the emergence of new conflicts and exclusions as well as the out-migration of large numbers of artisanal fishers to the mainland. It

also shows how shrimp farmers in the region have learned to take advantage of these divides to advance their own interests in the wake of a new shrimp rush. Overall, the ambiguity of state and capital interventions contributed to the fragmentation of resistance against the shrimp industry in the manglar and the proliferation of responses to the encroachment of shrimp farmers on the islands. Hale's (2005) concept of neoliberal multiculturalism is useful to explain these contradictions. His work demonstrates how, under neoliberalism, government interventions to extend the rights of historically marginalized groups are used to enable the maintenance of the status quo and the oppression of other impoverished groups. So-called benevolent government reforms are never intended to really change power relations. I found evidence of this in both of my case studies. However, my ethnographic research also demonstrates that while different state interventions produce new conflicts and forms of exclusion, they also lead to the emergence of different society-nature relations and new solidarities within heterogeneous barrios and communities.

The wide range of responses observed in the field can be linked to the classical concept of social interface developed by Norman Long. He defined an interface "as the critical point at which structural discontinuity is most likely to occur between different social systems, areas or levels of the social order due to variable normative values and social interests" (1993: 217). This observation points at the existence of distinct rationalities that result in heterogeneous and sometimes contradictory developments within capitalist relations of production. His concept places people and their living environments at the center of analysis to better understand the ever-changing outcomes produced in the encounter between different government interventions, capitalist industries and rural societies that continue to negotiate their interests and search for opportunities to advance and defend their objectives and those of their communities. More recently, authors such as Gibson-Graham (1996, 2006), Anna Tsing (2015) and Verónica Gago (2017) have reached similar conclusions through their analysis of the persistence and coexistence of diverse economies and polyphonic assemblages that reject the idea of a hegemonic capitalism. The heterogeneity and ambiguity of capital and state interventions help us to better understand why those who suffer under their grip sometimes have different responses and persist in their desire to remain where they are despite the threats posed by ongoing capitalist expansion on their lives and territories.

People's various responses are also shaped by their memories and past experiences of social and environmental transformations. Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui's (1984) work on the connections between *la memoria larga* and *la memoria corta* has demonstrated how people's different relations to the past influence their present struggles. Thus, for example, whereas banana workers draw on the long-term memory of their existence as rural communities to build new forms of solidarity, artisanal fishers draw on the short-term memory of their struggles against the shrimp sector and their recognition as guardians of the manglar to legitimize their rights to a territory on their own terms. Fisher communities also have a strong and long-term memory linked to the manglar ecosystem and their place in it. Yet, for many, it is not telling or powerful enough to sustain resistance in the face of new external interventions led by seemingly benevolent shrimp farmers. Only in recent times have toxicity and ecological destruction become 'weapons' in social struggles by drawing attention to the disproportionately negative social and environmental costs borne by rural communities. Combining environmental issues with these communities' struggles for social justice can draw much needed attention to the plight of rural

communities in the context of the rapid growth of industrial production, particularly in export-processing zones, and the continuous expansion of extractive frontiers on land and at sea.

## **Ecology and toxicity**

An important aspect that I have attempted to understand is the effect of increasing levels of toxicity on rural people living in highly contaminated and toxic landscapes. While I have rejected an abstract notion of capitalism as a structuring element in people's lives, the negative effects of toxicity produced by the presence of capitalist industries plays a strong and determining role in rural communities located in export-processing zones. As this research demonstrates, people living near large-scale plantations have experienced the gradual deterioration of their health and environment by the indiscriminate use of dangerous chemicals on different monocultures. Residents of the bananera and camaronera zones have repeatedly voiced their concerns about these polluting practices and the government's failure to hold perpetrators accountable for the damages caused. In spite of everything, they have continued to work to improve their living conditions and beautify their homes and *barriadas*.

Auyero and Switstun's investigation in *Flamable* draws attention to people's confusion and doubt in the face of toxicity as a result of external interventions into their lives and neighborhoods. They write: "In the experience of contamination, toxins matter, but so do noxious and puzzling words and actions, even those produced with the best intentions" (Auyero and Switstun 2009: 156). As this research demonstrates, whenever possible, state officials and capitalist investors discursively reframe the impact their interventions have on the environment and human health. As a result of these interventions, residents experience a form of 'toxic uncertainty' that paralyzes their attempts to form organized resistance or claim justice for themselves and their families. This in turn leads to the emergence of another form of inequality, "an inequality that is being created not by wage inequity [...] but by the relationship between environment and health" (Auyero and Switstun 2009: 158). While not all residents share the same perceptions concerning the negative effects of toxicity in their lives, and some have even become accustomed to its presence, the deepening and persistence of social and environmental inequalities disproportionately places the burden of nature's destruction on the bodies of rural people.

To gain a better understanding of toxicity, it is not only crucial to investigate both its concrete effects on the environment and people's health, but also on people's experiences and perceptions of toxicity. Aware of my lack of knowledge of the natural and environmental sciences, I have drawn extensively on available scientific research concerning the effects of pesticide and antibiotic use in the banana and shrimp sectors. However, my research has mostly been informed by people's own experience and knowledge of toxicity as well as their memories of the non-toxic past. This has enabled me to draw attention to the importance of the different meanings that people attribute to toxicity and how they make sense of their own suffering. Their life stories not only teach us about the difficulties of living in toxic and degraded landscapes, but also about the possibility of forging relations of care and support in contexts of rising danger and extreme vulnerability. My research shows that future investigations on rural environments should incorporate this dimension of toxicity in their analyses. We must recognize that rural people's lives are increasingly being shaped in profound and permanent ways by the toxic environments in which they live.

## **The heterogeneity of capitalist relations and gendered local responses**

To better understand, the gradual but dramatic developments undergone in rural areas, it was necessary to apply two lenses. The first is a historical one. It was clear that it is only possible to understand rural transformations as deeply historical processes. The massive displacement of ecological biodiversity can be traced back to the sixteenth century Spanish colonization of the coastal lowlands and the early development of large-scale cacao estates in the region. More recently, since the 1950s, capital and state interests have also pushed forward the colonization of the coastal lowlands and manglar islands, displacing rural people from common lands, estuaries, forests and agro-forested fields. This dissertation has attempted to reconstruct this process by drawing on the memories and lived experiences of those directly affected by these production activities. Reviewing the expansion of two different economic sectors in the southern coast through a historical lens provided by people's lived experiences allowed for a deeper understanding of agency, the heterogeneity of capitalist relations and how they emerged and developed in different areas of rural life. Second, there is no doubt that the social and ecological transformations undergone in these places were deeply gendered. Men and women felt differently about capital and state interventions into their lives and territories, and their relation to each other and to their surrounding environment changed strongly over time. The experience of women thus provides a privileged viewpoint to analyze how capitalist processes, through the creation of class, ethnic and gendered differences, expand their influence over rural territories.

To understand the impact of capital and state encroachments in the lives of diverse women, I drew extensively on Silvia Federici's work concerning the role of the sexual division of labor and the creation of the category of domestic labor for the accumulation of capital. I was also influenced by the work of Latina scholars, in particular Rita Segato (2014, 2016) and Lorena Cabnal (2010), concerning the inextricable relations between capitalism and patriarchy and its role in opening new spaces and territories for extractive industries. However, listening to the stories of rural women also made me more attuned to the nuances in women's lived experiences and in their responses to wider processes of change. Hopefully, this research may inspire others to continue the important work of pursuing a more in-depth discussion into the impact of large-scale developments on gender relations and women's lived experiences in particular.

The main question of this dissertation emerged in the context of recent debates concerning the need to rethink capitalism and its effects on diverse rural worlds. Following feminist thinkers such as Gibson-Graham (1996, 2006), Tsing (2015), Haraway (2016) and Gago (2017), my intention was to understand the myriad effects of capitalist processes on rural worlds as well as the wide range of responses deployed from below. To answer this question, my theoretical chapter 2 attempted to draw on both classical debates in rural studies and new theories that underline the importance of the nonhuman world and the proliferation of diverse ways of life as a result of capitalist processes. By bringing together these different viewpoints, I argued that it was possible to introduce new perspectives into the study of rural worlds and produce new insights to connect complex theoretical debates with the everyday lives and narratives of the residents of Buenaventura and Tres Cruces. In many cases, their lived experiences could not easily be explained by broad theories of social and environmental change. Following, Tsing (2015: 22), this research offers a different approach to the study of these processes rooted in what she calls the 'arts of noticing'. Instead of narrowly focusing on one stream of thought that often leads to teleological explanations of complex historical processes, this dissertation opts "to look around



rather than ahead”, remaining open to indeterminacy and paying greater attention to the kinds of relations that are emerging in the interstices of large-scale developments.

Practicing the arts of noticing in two different sectors allows for greater insight into the heterogeneity of rural capitalist developments and people’s responses to these processes. It also allows for a better understanding of how particular concepts acquire widely different meanings depending on the contexts where they are applied. For example, Tsing’s concept of multispecies assemblages was particularly useful as an analytical tool in the manglares of El Oro, where fisher gatherer groups have long nurtured close ties with the nature surrounding them. Relations of reciprocity between humans and nonhumans enabled the kinds of collaborative forms of survival that Tsing describes in her ethnography of the matsutake mushroom trade. However, this same concept had a very different meaning in the coastal lowlands where banana monoculture displaced biodiverse ecosystems affecting people’s capacity to nurture beneficial relations with their surroundings. What do multispecies entanglements mean for people living in highly toxic environments? What forms of collaborative survival are emerging in these places and how are nonhumans involved? Ultimately, what does the inextricable connection between human and nonhuman worlds mean in different places and what are the consequences for differently positioned people and their particular class, ethnic and gender identities? My dissertation suggests that such questions are fundamental if we want to understand the changes occurring in rural worlds and also point to the need to constantly rethink our concepts in relation to the particular contexts in which we are immersed.

Listening to rural people helps us to understand the diversity of responses that emerge in the wake of ongoing capital and state encroachments upon rural worlds. It also allows us to reach the humbling conclusion that, at times the issues that occupy scholars, public officials and NGOs may appear irrelevant to people whose bodies are on the frontlines of struggles over life. Their diverse responses are a crucial reminder that rural societies are more complex and layered than what our studies are usually able to understand and demonstrate. For example, what brings people to participate (or not) in relations of solidarity and *confianza* may be very different from place to place. Responses that are mediated by class, ethnic and gender identifications may have different meanings and implications at particular historical and geographic junctures. Together, these particularities give rise to what I have referred to in this dissertation as multiple forms of capitalism, which I therefore used – in the plural – as capitalismS to emphasize the capacity of both the state and entrepreneurial classes to continuously adapt to the diversity of responses that emerge from below, as well as the capacity of the people living under capitalist relations of production to adapt, create and construct forms of adaptation and resilience. As a result of this, in many places, relations of solidarity and *confianza* continue to coexist with brutal forms of exploitation and dispossession.

This research was initiated as a feminist inquiry, which according to Haraway (2003: 7) involves “understanding how things work, who is in the action, what might be possible, and how worldly actors might somehow be accountable to and love each other less violently”. Historically, critical scholars have shown that capitalist processes gain traction through the creation of differences that are hierarchically ordered to produce wealth and benefits to those at the top. This structure is patriarchal as it places women and nonhuman forms of life in the lower strata. As Federici (2004) demonstrates, the process of capital accumulation that originated in fifteenth century Europe was forged on the appropriation of women’s bodies and labor (a model that was later

exported to the colonies where slaves and nonhuman forms of life were put to the service of capitalist production).

In Latin America, preexisting patriarchal structures were exploited by conquistadores followed by capitalist entrepreneurs to assure the reproduction of the labor force needed on their plantations. For many years, women were excluded from wage labor and struggled in different ways to gain recognition for their work. However, as this research shows, their inclusion in the formal economy did not bring about the desired recognition. This is evident among women who work on banana plantations and in shrimp packaging plants where they continue to suffer from an ever-present gender wage gap, arbitrary layoffs in case of pregnancy and different forms of sexual harassment in the work place. To this day, the work assigned to women outside the household responds to traditional gender roles and stereotypical ideas about what constitutes women's and men's work. In every case, work that is 'feminized' is less valued and receives a lower remuneration than masculinized forms of labor.

However, this is not all there is to it. Another part of these issues are revealed through an exploration of the inner workings of rural societies and the social significance of women's almost invisible yet indispensable care work. As explained above, women play a central role in the maintenance of networks of solidarity that mitigate the most negative effects of capitalist expansions and enable the emergence of different social and economic forms. While capitalist modes may benefit from this situation, this dissertation suggests that solidarity, mutual aid and *confianza*, mostly maintained by women, remains crucial for the construction of relations that may gradually challenge dominant forms. Crucially, the pursuit of a feminist inquiry defined my interest in the nonhuman world and the interrelations between nature and society in diverse rural environments. This was partly in response to the challenges posed by feminism to the notion of the bounded autonomous individual and its focus on understanding the interdependent relations that exist between people and the territories in which they create their lives. This involves thinking in terms of a relational multispecies world where humans and nonhumans mutually influence each other and co-produce events and outcomes. This has important consequences in terms of how we think about capitalist processes and alternatives to the dominant form.

Attention to these issues was achieved by placing women's stories at the center of my narrative. This allowed me to explore a perspective that has largely been missing from dominant historical accounts of rural change and unveils the effects of capitalist expansions at the micro level of everyday interactions. A feminist perspective also led me to continuously ask how a gendered analysis would help me to better understand the complexities of processes of capitalist development. It showed how in the midst of change and struggle, patriarchal relations continue to be dominant, not only in the relations with state and entrepreneurs, but also within rural communities and social movements. This has not stopped women from struggling in different ways to achieve a certain balance that allows them to live a dignified life on their own terms. Most importantly, it made me doubt if we can ever understand the diversity of capitalist relations if we continue to ignore the gendered nature of capitalist development and the movements resisting it.

## Those who remain

Finally, a central aspect of my work has been to draw attention to the life stories and experiences of “those who remain”. I used this term to identify and better understand the people and populations who have continued to carve out their lives in rural and often marginal spaces and defend a certain degree of autonomy to build their own definition of a good life. Such a distinction was not only made for analytical purposes. It also is an emic term and follows perspectives within the population of my study who use this expression to emphasize the particularity of their situation. It can be traced back to the massive out-migration of rural people from the coastal lowlands and manglar islands of Jambelí in the second half of the twentieth century following the social and toxic destruction of these places. Those who left during this period and those who do not belong to these places, including researchers, state bureaucrats, entrepreneurs, activists and NGO staff, are referred to as *los de afuera*. In most cases, the perspectives of these outsiders are critically viewed and are rarely allowed to influence the decision-making of those who remain. The latter’s practices and decisions are rooted in their remembrances of the struggles endured to remain in these places and their historical experiences of everyday life in landscapes shaped by environmental disturbances and ongoing capitalist destruction. Memory thus emerges as an important category of analysis. This dissertation therefore suggests that to understand rural societies and the changes undergone in the wake of ongoing capital and state developments, a focus on those who remain and a profound understanding of their particular histories is required.

To allow the voices and experiences of ‘those who remain’ to be heard and understood in our academic work, we must make a sustained effort on our part to move “out of one’s place” and learn to value knowledge borne out of experience, thereby questioning broad theoretical frameworks. In our search of a deeper understanding of people’s struggles in contexts of precarity, toxicity and insecurity, we must not only pay attention to the pain and suffering caused by dispossession and loss, but also see the courage, strength and creativity borne out of these experiences. As hooks (1989: 206) observes, places known as the margins, both within and outside of capitalist reach, are sites of deprivation and spaces of radical openness as well. Describing a marginality similar to the one experienced by those who remain, hooks notes that it is not something one wishes to lose but rather “a site one stays in, clings to even, because it nourishes one’s capacity to resist. It offers to one the possibility of radical perspective from which to see, and create, to imagine alternatives, new worlds”. Therein lies the importance of revisiting the stories and life experiences of those who remain. In their capacity to improvise new ways of living – even in the face of capitalist degradations – we can find the potential of distinguishing actual solutions for rural people and the problems they continue to encounter. Instead of erasing their voices, our work must include their categories and knowledges as one of the more potent expressions of critical thought in full recognition of their relevance for the reconstitution of rural societies living with the specter of social and ecological calamities.

Faced with the destruction of their socio-natural worlds, rural people sometimes choose to form counter-spaces organized around relations of confianza, mutual aid and solidarity (see chapter 4). Yet others may opt for reproducing neoliberal arrangements rooted in relations of exploitation and competition (see chapter 7). In the final stages of my fieldwork, I also observed that forms of redistribution from below can, in turn, be increasingly conflictive as living conditions become more precarious.

While this research demonstrates that those who remain have not necessarily achieved better living and working conditions, it is clear that they have not abandoned their struggle to build a dignified life for themselves on their own terms. The existence of such a dignified, 'good' life under diverse capitalisms can only be understood as part of the wider relations of confianza, mutual aid and solidarity that enable people to withstand the most negative effects of capital and state interventions. Nevertheless, the expression of such relations varies widely from place to place. As the stories of Amada and Sulma reveal, it takes great courage, creativity and tenacity to persevere with hope intact in contexts of toxicity and oppression. Despite the enormous efforts deployed by rural people to defend spaces of autonomy, their communities and the places where they live continue to be threatened by ongoing state and capital expansion. As a politically and socially engaged researcher, I believe that engaging with those who remain is crucial for deciphering the kinds of thoughts and actions that are needed to provide real solutions for the injustices experienced by rural people. To ignore their diverse realities not only impoverishes our academic work, it also makes us complicit in the gradual destruction of the rural forms of life on which the world ultimately depends.