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Toxic tropics

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

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Annex:

Fieldwork process and ethical considerations

Between 2014 and 2017, I spent a total of 20 months in the southern coast of Ecuador, commuting between small towns surrounded by banana plantations on land and shrimp farms at sea. As I explained in chapter 1, I remained in these places for extended periods of time, establishing rapport with my research collaborators and learning about their everyday life experiences. I arrived at Machala, El Oro's capital city, by bus from Quito. Here, I visited the local offices of the Ministry of Agriculture, Livestock and Fishery to gather information on El Oro's banana and shrimp production. The available data was for the most part incomplete, but state officials were helpful and allowed me to accompany them on their field visits to small, medium and large banana and shrimp producers. The information gathered during these visits allowed me to gain a better understanding of the general context, particularly concerning the role of the state in the transformation of the southern coast's socionatural landscapes. In Machala, I also spent time in the municipal library, which preserves a collection of newspapers dating as far back as 1964 when the first edition of *El Nacional* (El Oro's regional newspaper) began to circulate. This allowed me to gain greater insight into the history of banana and shrimp production in the region from the perspective of local media sources.

During the time I spent in Machala, I also gathered information on the small town of Buenaventura, which was a relatively short bus ride away from the city. In this way, I confirmed the importance of this town for banana producers and plantation workers. My initial idea was to rent a room in the town and embark on daily walks to nearby plantations where I could begin to establish rapport with day laborers. Yet my encounter with Amada changed the course of these events. By a stroke of good fortune, when I stepped off the bus I walked down a wide dirt road that happened to pass in front of her house (during the first 8 months that I spent in Buenaventura, this road was being paved and sidewalks were also being built). Amada generously invited me to take a seat by her side and share a tall glass of coca cola. Our conversation was central to my research process. Amada was almost seventy when I met her and had lived the greater part of her life in Buenaventura. This meant that she had experienced first-hand the changes undergone with the spread of bananeras. Amada had also worked on plantations and as a help in the houses of wealthy landowners, and her sons, daughters and grandchildren continued to work on Buenaventura's surrounding plantations. Amada's world and her history were deeply interwoven with the bananeras. Moreover, as one of Buenaventura's eldest residents, she had assembled an extensive network of relations that spanned the town's different *barriadas*.

When she offered me a room in her home I was initially reluctant to accept, afraid that my presence could become an extra burden for Amada and her family. I was also concerned about becoming too close to her and the influence that this could have on my research process. Yet I was also aware that this level of intimacy could allow me to better understand how people learn to live with the bananeras and, at the same time, would enable me to draw attention to the significance of their day-to-day experiences that are so often left out of academic debates. My presence could also become an opportunity for Amada to express herself and tell her side of the story. Amada introduced me to her neighbors and her extended family, and they in turn introduced me to their friends and neighbors. I was thus able to interview more than 100 banana

workers, conduct surveys on their experience of plantation labor and form a focus group with 20 female banana workers in Amada's home. On many occasions, I accompanied banana workers onto the plantations and let them guide me through the difficult territories of the bananeras. These transect walks became an important part of the methodology as I was able to gain first-hand knowledge on the sounds, sights and smells that shaped people's everyday interactions. During these walks I also learned about the different forms of banana production, the unique biology of the banana plant, the different diseases affecting the plantations and the variety of agrochemicals used to control them. I was also introduced to small, medium and large banana producers who offered their different views on the banana trade. Every evening, after helping with dinner and dishes, I tried to organize and process the information gathered during the day. I also spent many evenings talking to Amada, reconstructing her life story and patiently weaving together her changing memories of the past.

When I was in Buenaventura, I was contacted by an Austrian based NGO that was doing research on the impacts of agrochemical use on banana workers' health. I worked as their field assistant and learned about the different diseases that were affecting banana workers as a result of their exposure to dangerous chemicals. Working alongside a medical epidemiologist, I learned about the powerful influence of the environment on human health and the dangers of rising levels of toxicity for the people working and living near the bananeras. This was further confirmed by my interviews in Buenaventura; however, the study of widespread toxicity in people's lives remained an important challenge. This was again confirmed when I travelled to the manglares of the archipelago of Jambelí where very few studies had been conducted on the use of agrochemicals and antibiotics on shrimp farms and their effects on the surrounding environment and human health. Although one could see and smell the contamination produced by the shrimp farms in the manglares, toxicity could only be measured through the experiences and testimonies of the people living in the area, who themselves had different perceptions of the effects of toxicity on their health.

After eight months in the bananeras, I travelled to the port of Jelí where I began my research into the manglar ecosystem. Here, I waited by the edge of the estuary for small fishers to arrive from the islands to sell their products on the mainland. This is how I met Ignacio who introduced me to the president of his community. He initially granted me permission to conduct research on his islands; however, once my work unearthed tensions surrounding land sales and the role of nearby camaroneros in the community, I was asked not to pursue any further work. As a result, I began to travel to different islands in the archipelago, thereby gaining greater insight into the kinds of relations that have developed between fisher communities and camaroneros. I also learned about the myriad fisher gatherer associations that had formed as a result of the appearance of state-granted custodias in the manglar. I was introduced to Sulma by one of her sons who had been an important leader in the movement to defend the manglar. Sulma was born on the islands and had spent her entire life in the same fisher community. With her help I was able to reconstruct what everyday life was like on the islands before and after the encroachment of shrimp farms. Sulma's life story was central to this reconstruction spanning several decades, which included heated struggles over the manglar. During the time I spent on the islands, I also accompanied cockle gatherers in their daily work in the manglar and artisanal fishers in their work at sea. Navigating alongside small fisher gatherers familiarized me with the aquatic space and the different ways that people related to the manglar. I also attended meetings held by fisher gatherer associations to understand the role of custodias and how they shaped the identities of guardians of the

mangrove ecosystem. I travelled back and forth between the islands and the mainland where I conducted research with academics from the University of Machala and learned how they prepared mangrove management plans for fisher gatherer associations that were applying for a custodia.

To protect the identities of my research collaborators, the only real names that were maintained in the manuscript correspond to the names of public officials. Most people’s names were replaced with pseudonyms. Amada and Sulma are not real names and neither can Buenaventura nor Tres Cruces be located on a map. To maintain anonymity, the people in the photographs are not necessarily the ones that appear in the text. People’s consent was crucial for both conducting interviews and taking photographs and I took time with each person to explain the objectives of my work and how the images would be used. Due to the importance of the landscape in my work and the way that people interact with their contaminated surroundings, photography became an important tool in the field. The images presented in this dissertation serve to illustrate the particular context in which this research was conducted and also bring a human face to the situations that are described and analyzed in the text. They also serve the purpose of challenging common assumptions about people living and working in the manglares and bananeras. In particular, the images attempt to draw attention to the significance of everyday life interactions for the maintenance, but also the subversion, of a capitalist way of life. They show how people manage to make a living and construct their own forms of ‘buen-vivir’ in toxic circumstances.

| | ON LAND | AT SEA |
|---------------------|--|--|
| Methods used | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lived with Amada and her extended family in Buenaventura. • Amada’s life story. • Multiple interviews with different members of the extended family and the barriada who worked on nearby plantations and occupied different positions both in the field and on banana processing plants. • Focus group with 20 female banana workers focused on their work experience and daily activities. • Surveys with 100 male and female wage laborers on plantations. • Interviews with 5 different banana producers in the area, small, medium and large, focused on their approach to banana production and labor conditions in the banana sector. • Transect walks through the bananeras with banana producers, administrators and agricultural engineers. • Interview with the members of the local government. • Interviews with state officials working in the Ministry of Agriculture and the Program to Enhance the Productivity of Small Banana Producers. • Archival work in the Municipality of the city of Machala. • Photography. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lived with four different families on the islands. • Sulma’s life story. • Multiple interviews with small fisher gatherers focused on their work in the manglar and their memories of the islands. • Focus group with 50 male and female fisher gatherers across different islands. • Transect walks in the manglar with cockle gatherers and navigation with fisher women. • Interviews with the presidents of 4 different fisher gatherer associations and the president of the Network of Artisanal Fisher Organizations on their struggle to gain access to a custodia and the daily activities of each association. • Interviews with aquaculture engineers on their experiences with camaróneros and fisher communities. • Interview with Eusebio Vera, former official at the Office of the Registrar. • Photography. |

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