Making Ciénaga: Amphibious Entanglements in a Body of Water in Colombia

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Abstract

This dissertation, based on research done in Colombia’s Middle Magdalena Valley, explores the conditions and factors that have allowed for the continued existence of a body of water, a so-called *ciénaga*, and its human inhabitants, in a context marked by decades of crude oil contamination, agricultural encroachment and violence.

The fieldwork in Colombia was conducted between 2014 and 2015 and lasted for eleven months. During this time, the author carried out participant observation and interviews, organized workshops, did archival work and analyzed public and private documents. This was done in order to answer the research question: How have the *ciénaga* and its inhabitants, the fisherfolk-colonos, persisted in spite of adverse circumstances in the geographical area of study, and what is the character of this persistence? The researcher asks why this *ciénaga* has survived while similar bodies of water, located in the surrounding areas, have disappeared.

This research is an exploration of resilient thinking, approached from the perspectives of both decoloniality and political ontology, and of the understanding of ecological collectives composed of human and non-human agents. When exploring the persistence of this body of water, the author studies the different knowledge practices that intervene materially and semiotically in making *ciénaga*, such as those of the fisherfolk-colonos. She delves into their history, interacts with families and community organizations, examines their livelihood strategies and how these intertwine with oil extraction practices in one of the oldest oil fields in Colombia.

The author then looks at the formation of right-wing paramilitary structures in this region, their practices of spatialization in the *ciénaga* and the political ecology they display. She also analyzes how paramilitary practices are interwoven with those of the fisherfolk-colonos and the oil company. Another group that converges in the ciénaga, and to which attention is paid in the study, are
biologists, who are active in the region for different reasons. Some are working for the oil company while others are doing academic research or are engaged in the implementation of environmental policies. Just like the other groups, these biologists participate in the making of ciénaga and also in its transformation into a humedal (a wetland) or some other conceptualization, transformations that have semiotic, material and assemblage effects.

While some practices undermine the very existence of the ciénaga such as those related to oil extractión and paramilitarism as well as some biological practices, the fisherfolk-colonos have managed to articulate artfully with these different practices to keep the ciénaga and themselves alive. The author has crafted the term ‘amphibian disposition’ to describe the inhabitants’ willingness and ability to articulate with, and adapt to, different practices and to navigate difficulties, a disposition that characterizes the situated resilience of this biosocial assemblage.

Key words: Ciénaga, Colombia, Paramilitarism, Amphibious ontology, biosocial resilience
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**Introduction**

*Macondo was a village lost in the drowsiness of the swamp.*

(Gabriel García Márquez, One Hundred Years of Solitude, 1982, p. 11)

26% of Colombian territory is covered by water - that is, 30,781,149 hectares of land overflowing with water. Colombia is an amphibious country, a country of wetlands.

(Institute von Humboldt, my translation, 2015)

This thesis explores the persistence of the people of the Ciénaga Palagua, a body of water located in the centre of Colombia, in the middle of the Magdalena Valley. This dissertation was written from my experience living with this community of fisherfolk, people who also are oil workers, empirical biologists and, in some cases, demobilized paramilitaries. In their heterogeneity of practices and identities they make ciénaga, and with it, they persist. The thesis is an ethnographic contribution to understand the living conditions, persistence and resilience of the inhabitants of the ciénaga. My research also aims to enrich the connections between the ontological turn and decolonial thinking by ethnographically demonstrating the existence of a situated conceptualization and practice of nature – the ciénaga – which, while exceeding the practices of the Colombian state, the oil company and the biologists working on the ecosystems of ciénagas, also interlaces with them.

This ability to intertwine with them and also separate itself from them, is what I argue has allowed the ciénaga – and its people – to persist resiliently, something which, in the conclusion of the thesis, I have termed an amphibious disposition. The region where we find the ciénaga is characterized by a state of exception, rooted in the formation of an oil enclave. This process was initiated by the US oil corporation Texaco in the 1940s, followed by the emergence of paramilitarism in the 1980s. The area has over the past decades seen an intense transformation of the landscape generated by oil extraction, cattle ranching and the expansion of pasture related to land speculation. All these processes have surrounded, and intervened in, this body of water. Studying the ciénaga has led me to explore the political ecology produced through oil extraction, drug trafficking and
paramilitary control in the area. However, in this thesis I also elaborate on the idea that this place manifests a political ontology of heterogeneous entanglements between the inhabitants and the ciénaga.

The history of this body of water can be traced all the way back to colonial times. The shores of the Magdalena river, the most important river in Colombia, have hosted a series of unexpected encounters, mixes, and connections between resistance and re-emergence. In this part of the Middle Magdalena Valley, black slaves and maroons, indigenous people, and 'the freedom of all colors' actively held back the arrival and territorial occupation of the Spanish conquerors and, later, the representatives of the independent republic up until the nineteenth century despite fierce efforts to civilize nature and the people here (Aprile-Gnise, 1992). In the 1940s, settlers arrived from the mountains in the South and fisherfolk came in from the northern Caribbean Coast to escape violence (Gúzman & Fals Borda, 2005). Wealthy landowners from the North of the country also expanded into the region (Fals Borda, Historia Doble de la Costa, 1984), including occupying territory in the Carare jungle. All these factors converged in this body of water, transforming peoples who took new forms through the socio-political process as well as by means of substances elicited from this body of water.

The Ciénaga Palagua is located in the municipality of Puerto Boyacá in the Colombian department of Boyacá. The people of this hot, riparian municipality do not, however, identify with the rest of the department of Boyacá, which is part of the highlands and has a colder climate. The municipality ended up being handed over to the highland department of Boyacá due to the arbitrary attachment of Puerto Boyacá to this department by central government in the first half of the twentieth century. By doing this, the government wanted to provide the rest of the department with access to the Magdalena river which has been traditionally the economic backbone of the country, as for centuries, in the absence of roads and railroads, it was the main trade route between the ports on the coast and the interior of Colombia.

Puerto Boyacá has been shaped by the forced internal displacements that have taken place in Colombia since the first half of the twentieth century due to recurrent waves of violence. The municipality has also seen a steady inward migration of workers from the 1940s onwards, people coming from other parts of the country to work inside Texaco’s emerging oil enclave in the municipality. Puerto Boyacá is geographically located fairly
close to Bogotá, however the state’s presence was at first non-existent, and later weak and sporadic. Puerto Boyacá, as a town, emerged from the territorialisation of the oil corporation Texaco as it unfolded in a region under the para-sovereignty of the oil company in collusion with local landlords, drug traffickers and the army (Medina, 1990).

Michael Taussig claims that Colombia has been shaped by a moral topography (Taussig, 1987, p. 253), and I would add that this has been enacted by the coloniality of power (Quijano & Ennis, 2000). Moral topography suggests that peoples and natures are tied to each other, and that this in Colombia took the shape of two polarised and complex collectives that had an asymmetrical relationship between them; one that was distributed across the highlands (as a civilized people) and a second found in the lowlands (barbarians). This colonial projection thus organizes the national territory by dividing it into two conflicting worlds: the lowlands and the highlands.

The people living in the hot and humid Colombian lowlands were mainly indigenous, blacks, zambos, mulattos and mestizos of different colors. According to this organizational divide, they were defined as morally inferior, savage, violent people. Another expression of the same story, which continues to burden the inhabitants of the lowlands with colonial stigmatization, is that many of the inhabitants of the northern lowlands were descendants of indigenous Karibe groups who during the conquest and colonization were depicted as cannibals and therefore contrary to Christian morality. Opposed to these savage lowlanders were those living in the highlands, up in the mountains with its colder climate, mainly Spanish conquerors, the criollos, and the white-skinned mestizos, indigenous and other mestizos. The narrative of a ‘civilized’ highland people was constructed by the Spanish conquerors, who projected the idea that the highlands were quickly neutralized during the conquest through negotiations with the Muisca chiefs (an indigenous group which in colonial historiography was seen as being more civilized than the Muzos and Panches in the lowlands). In the cold lands, therefore, a “peaceful and civilized” miscegenation could develop, a condition that facilitated Christian evangelization. However, the ethnohistorian Jorge Gamboa has unpacked this narrative by showing that the very concept of Muisca was a colonial creation to refer to the heterogeneous human groups that lived in the highlands and that here the process of colonization was also marked by conflict (Gamboa, 2015).
In the chapters that follow, I present the moral topography that is enacted in the Middle Magdalena Valley as the context in which entanglements and detachments between inhabitants and the body of water – the ciénaga – occur. Taussig's notion helps me to understand how biophysical processes are tied to situated meanings accumulated over time (i.e. environments) produced through power relations, and that such environments elicit horizons of possibility. The reader will in the following chapters see how the elicitations within which the inhabitants of this body of water – the ciénaga – interact to live, endure and persist, not only reproduce the moral topography of Colombia, but exceed it, while mimetically or strategically making use of it.

In the Middle Magdalena, the Colombian state has reinforced this moral topography through the application of the laws and decrees of a state of exception that has permitted military occupation while interrupting the applicability of the laws of a democratic state. It is important to mention that the definition Middle Magdalena itself is a term of military origin that delimits an area where the governments of Colombia in the second half of the twentieth century considered that it was necessary to repress and eliminate civil rights in order to re-establish the order required for economic enterprises such as the generation of rents and royalties from oil extraction.

Social science researchers who have dealt with the history of armed conflict in the Middle Magdalena region see Puerto Boyacá as the cradle of Colombian paramilitarism. These studies focus precisely on the historical processes and concepts that the moral topography speaks of, and, in a paradoxical manner, these studies actively participate in the moral topography that has shaped this territory. This can be observed in the historical studies of Medina (1990) and (Paramo, 1999). For example, Medina's work, which is a description of the formation of paramilitary armies in Puerto Boyaca, uses the term Cradle of Paramilitarism to analyze the process. At the end of his study, he gives the impression that all social life in the area was subsumed or co-opted by paramilitarism without presenting nuances and differences. Paramo's work, a more anthropological work, argues that the culture of violence-paramilitaries in Puerto Boyaca may originate in the violence and cannibalism of the Muzo Indians who inhabited this territory, which, from a decolonial perspective, requires a revision that considers the coloniality reproduced in this analysis. After living for 11 months in the ciénaga
with its inhabitants, my research seeks to be much more attentive to the heterogeneities that have remained unseen, hidden by the shadow of this moral topography in its different forms.

I will first, however, elaborate on the term *ciénaga* as it is used in biology and geography. A ciénaga is a continental body of water that has been defined by Colombian limnologists as a hydrological-topographic formation located within the flood valley of a river. Its formation is variable, due to alternations in terms of precipitation and supply of water. It is composed of concentric rings of different substances - water, mud, sand, plants – and has variable water levels that at some moments can rise so much that they overflow into surrounding areas.

A number of scientists and environmentalists have in recent years become more interested in the nature and geographies that during the war were off-limits in the Middle Magdalena Valley, such as the Ciénaga Palagua and the Quinchas mountain range. This has been prompted by different developments and events, such as Colombia’s ratification and implementation of the UN Ramsar Convention,\(^1\) the approval and implementation of legislation and regulations to mitigate the impact of intensive oil exploitation, the territory’s experience of transition to peace after the paramilitary demobilization in 2006, and the peace agreement with the FARC-EP guerrilla movement in 2016.

During my fieldwork in the *ciénaga*, I found out that the von Humboldt Institute\(^2\) was interested in doing research on the socioenvironmental conflicts in the Ciénaga Palagua. I therefore contacted a biologist from the institute who participated in the development of a methodology for the identification of wetlands in Colombia, a methodology that supports the implementation of the UN Ramsar Convention in the country. The biologist I contacted was an expert in the analysis of satellite images of continental bodies of water. She helped me download satellite images of the ciénaga from 1989, 1998, and 2015 in order to trace its size and changes over

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1 The Convention on Wetlands of International Importance especially as Waterfowl Habitat, known in abbreviated form as the Ramsar Convention, was signed in Iran at a United Nations convention on Tuesday, February 2, 1971 and entered into force on December 21, 1975. Its main objective is "the conservation and wise use of wetlands through local, regional and national actions and thanks to international cooperation, as a contribution to achieving sustainable development throughout the world".

2 A Colombian research institute attached to the Ministry of Environment in charge of producing biodiversity inventories and advising the Colombian government on nature conservation.
the time. After studying the satellite images, we discovered that the ciénaga has indeed changed considerably in terms of its scope, shape and depth over the last 30 years. To our surprise, and contrary to what we had expected, the main, open body of water had expanded and deepened. The biologist was impressed and puzzled by this discovery. She said, “This is the only ciénaga that has survived in this part of the Magdalena valley, and in fact it seems as if it is in better shape than before. All the others have disappeared. This is very strange, considering it is laden with oil infrastructure”.

The images and this conversation, together with my insights into the history of this region, prompted the question that propels this research: why and how has the ciénaga and its four generations of inhabitants made life there possible despite the severe social and environmental degradation caused by war and extractivism, the state of exception and the limited presence of the Colombian state?

In the book *Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet: Ghosts and Monsters of the Anthropocene* (2017), Tsing et al explored the creative, paradoxical, dramatic, and unexpected entanglements between humans and nonhumans that demonstrate the arts that have made life liveable on this planet even in the most harmed places. The authors also point out that the task of noticing these arts requires us to move away from urgency, slowing down enough to understand how life (in human and other-than-human interactions) is made possible through seemingly contradictory factors. This is a perspective that overcomes not only the nature-culture dichotomy, but that also highlights symbiotic processes of contamination and invasion that drive mutual becomings. Tsing's analysis helped me to approach the complexity of persistence in a situation of deep contamination and harm.

**The Ciénaga from the Pluriverse**

Discussion of the ontological turn in anthropology has been both prolific and contested as it challenges much of what we have considered anthropology to be up until now; that is, to study the cultures of others. However, among those who subscribe to the ontological turn, or who use some of its terms, there are various versions that arise out of different concerns and problems that researchers find in their fieldwork. For example, research in Latin America related to extractivism and on what happens between people in the midst of environmental conflicts, has generated a particular way to approach the ontological turn, as can be seen in the
elaborations of de la Cadena (2015) and Blaser (2010). This is an approach that also considers local conceptualizations of what is at stake, expanding political ecology to new dimensions of interpretation and thought, unpacking worlds while contesting extraction and simplification.

Political ecology is a theoretical field that took shape in the 1980s based on contributions from different disciplines; aimed to form an interdisciplinary study of conflicts over access, dispossession, use and usufruct of territories in terms of the resources and social capacities that territories contain.³ Political ecology accounts for the colonization of nature and people and the socioeconomic metabolism by appropriation, transformation, distribution, and consumption of energy and materials, and the consequent generation of waste.

The Colombian anthropologist Arturo Escobar has elaborated on the expansion of the analytical reach of political ecology. Escobar has argued that political ecology has moved from a debate on epistemologies to ontologies (2010). Thus, it is not only about perspectives or knowledge as hierarchized by science, but also about the socio-environmental conflicts as indicators of disputes among different ways of practicing the world. According to Escobar, the task of political ecology is to delimit and characterize – with historical memory – various components and their articulations by considering: social, political, economic and knowledge relations, ways of using space, biophysical conditions, and variations in perceptions and experiences of the social fabric. Political ecology, according to Escobar, would then be "the study of the multiple articulations of history and biology, and the inevitable cultural mediations through which such mediations are established through practices in which the biophysical and the historical are mutually involved" (Escobar, 1999,p. 284-286).

In Latin America, political ecology and decoloniality approaches are immersed in discussions about oil extraction, mining and environmental conservation. Other conceptualizations and practices involving the 'environment' have, in response to these conflicts, emerged powerfully, for example, the notion of earth beings (de la Cadena, 2015) or the notion of Yrmo of the Yshiro people (Blaser, 2010). For these authors,

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³ Paul Robbins was perhaps the first scholar to use the concept of political ecology as we understand it today. However, already in 1972 Eric Wolf in his work Ownership and Political Ecology introduced a series of works of anthropology and ecology cultural related to the Andes of Latin America where two important elements developed: 1. Access to ownership-land tenure; and 2. The management of territories with a long-term vision and disputes between collective nature and private property, individual actions and short-term management.
environmental and extractivist conflicts must be understood as being conflicts related to conceptualizing the right of being and continuing to exist in these places. As to de la Cadena’s work, it is of particular relevance to my research as it bridges two groups of thinkers: the Latin American decolonialists and the post-ANT thinkers.

My interest in the ontological turn emerged from my fieldwork, which was more heterogeneous and intricate than I had anticipated, a reality that was enacted by more than the ‘moral topography’, as identified by Taussig (1987), and in that sense my fieldwork interpellated my assumptions. In this situation, I found that the term ‘excess’ (de la Cadena, 2015) helps me to articulate what was beyond the “normal” understanding of the environmental conflict in the ciénaga, namely that is it exclusively caused by oil extraction.

Marisol de la Cadena elaborates on the idea of 'excess' (2015) – which resonates with notions of the 'otherwise' as discussed by decolonial thinkers like Catherine Walsh– to refer to the space of relationality that partially escapes the modern-developmentalist-capitalist framing (2015, p. 34). De la Cadena explains excess by referring to Guha, stating that this is 'the first thing outside which there is nothing to be found and the first thing inside which everything is to be found’ (2015, p. 14). According to de la Cadena, excess is performed at the limit, and that limit is ontological although partially connected to what is visible. That is to say, other ways of being in the ciénaga, different from violence and paramilitarism, and which my preconceptions did not permit me to believe were possible there. Arturo Escobar’s approach was very productive in my analytical journey, as the notion of ‘pluriverse’ offered a complex base on which to display this relationality and to notice the difference and the excess (2007).

The sense of excess as a way to consider the possibility of the pluriverse is an analytical sensibility which allows for doubt, and this doubt gives us the opportunity to notice how other logics-cosmologies-interactions-relationships are operating in other registers different from – but also related to – the conception of linear time and the separation of nature-culture within which developmental-modern thinking manifests itself.

My analytical approach from the pluriverse and decoloniality is partially connected to material semiotics – an approach that provides me with more concrete examples of how to consider distributed agency in more-than-human relations. Methodologically, material semiotics made me notice how fisherfolk, oil field extraction and paramilitary forces converge in the ciénaga, and how each participates materially differently in its making.
Material semiotics\(^4\) offers an understanding of agency that is not only limited to humans, but is rather distributed in a web of relationality in which both humans and materiality participate. A central aspect of material semiotics is the appreciation of practices (discursive and material) as observable dynamics that unfold, forming identities, bodies or territories, in their fragility and obduracy (Law & Mol, 2002; Mol, 2003; Law, 2007). It draws attention to the fragility of the temporary condensations we call communities, collectives, territories and even identities, and stimulates the analysis about what enables continuity and interruption, rupture or suspension of these condensations. I have, through this approach, tried to analyze the ciénaga in its situated historical trajectory of intersections of practices,\(^5\) in its entanglements and detachments that have nourished its persistence over time.

Understanding the matter in this way means taking the situatedness of material and discursive interactions as part of constant open-ended processes. Hence, it is a kind of choreography that is composed of what one might at first sight perceive as unity, identity, and territory. However, as I shall show, this is rather a temporary and fragile assemblage.

The body of water which is the object of my study has, at different junctures, become – or been called – 'ciénaga', 'laguna' or 'humedal' ('wetland'). These various ways of labelling the water body also participate in the shaping of the materiality of this body of water. In this dissertation I point out the prevalent presence of the term ‘ciénaga’, which however articulates with the terms 'laguna' and 'humedal' ('wetland') as there is a fluid relation with these other forms of conceptualizing this body of water. I noticed during my fieldwork how the body of water took different forms depending on the variety of interventions that I registered, forms that I realized that contribute to its persistence.

\(^4\) The genealogy of material semiotics can be found in Donna Haraway’s (1991) work, in discussions about actor network theory by Latour (2005), Law (2004), and in Annemarie Mol’s (2002) praxiography.

\(^5\) In an exploratory sense, my ethnographic observation pursues the methodological-analytical proposal of Annemarie Mol of following practices in the sense that they are performed by actors in situated compositions or collectives (humans and more-than-humans) that get condensed in a particular place-time: the ciénaga in specific entanglements with fishermen, or oil extraction or the paramilitary would produce a specific collective.
Thinking Through Water

Living in the ciénaga one notices that it changes along with the direction of the water flow. Depending on the season, the water either flows out of the ciénaga and into the Magdalena River, or from the river into the ciénaga. Three times a year, between the two annual periods of rain and drought, water flows both in and out of the ciénaga.

During the periods of torrential rain in April and May, the ciénaga receives huge amounts of water from the Magdalena river and hundreds or even thousands of bocachico fish. The ciénaga, in this period, looks like a lake and its waters tend to flood pastures, houses, and other infrastructure. When this happens, the inhabitants head to the water to fish, knowing that there is bocachico there from the river, something which boosts the local economy. The pollution from oil spills and the discharge of contaminated water seem, due to the inflow of water from the river, to partly diminish. The swelling of the ciénaga and its waterways also makes it easier to navigate, and locals are able, in theory, to go by boat all the way from the ciénaga to the Caribbean. These are water routes that until recently were used by the narco-paramilitaries to transport cocaine, arms and mercenaries, and that since pre-Hispanic times have connected the Caribbean coast to a more extensive watery territory inside Colombia.

From July onwards, when the dry season starts, the direction of the water flow changes, and water starts flowing from the ciénaga into the river. The bocachico fish migrate as the ciénaga drains, and organic decomposition is accelerated. The continued oil spills become more noticeable, and the ciénaga starts to smell of rotting aquatic plants. The water hyacinth invasion increases. The inhabitants then become more reliant on work offered by the oil company, or seek legal or illegal work opportunities provided by individuals that used to belong to the local demobilized paramilitary groups. Some even travel to Barrancabermeja, San Fernando, and Otanche to earn their living, working in the oil industry, as bodyguards and as drop-by-drop credit collectors. Some also seek employment as miners in the gold and coal mines in La Sierra or Yarumal-Antioquia or in the emerald mines of Muzo-Boyacá. Thus, as seen above, the biophysical processes of the ciénaga and its inhabitants reach a high degree of geographical expansion during this season.
In October it starts raining again. But the water keeps flowing towards the river. So, to prevent the fish in the ciénaga from escaping into the Magdalena river, the inhabitants block the escape route using fishing nets in the estuaries. This is also one of the two periods of the year when locals are hired by the oil company to cut the tarulla (water hyacinth) manually. This fast-growing aquatic plant threatens to completely suffocate the ciénaga if not controlled. There is a shortage of fish during these months and the inhabitants desperately cling on to their kin-community by exchanging food and lending money; they struggle while they wait for the season to change.

To diversify their income, the inhabitants dream of implementing an environmental tourism project that would generate an income they could more autonomously control while at the same time protecting the ciénaga. This, however, is still a dream. The future of this entrepreneurial project is also unclear. While they continue dreaming, the direction of the water soon changes again, and the inhabitants must continue their fluctuation between the work opportunities offered by the oil company, the neo-paramilitary economy and the opportunities offered by the fisherfolk association, all converging in the ciénaga.

The materiality and seasonality of the ciénaga has helped me to think about the character of the relationality that makes it in this body of water. By thinking with its rhythm and keeping in mind the interlaced substances-practices we find in the water body, I have sought to devise a novel and resourceful strategy through which I elaborate my intervention in this dissertation: a resourceful heuristic that couples biophysical practices with human practices, forming a collective agency that elicits the amphibiousness of their drive for life.

Recent anthropological studies have elaborated on the heuristics of water (Strang, 2014) and on how water participates in the formation of worlds, of waterworlds (Hastrup, 2009) Water is explored through human responses to it, interpretations of its meanings, and how it can facilitate, transform, or challenge human life. Frida Hastrup’s work is particularly relevant in this regard. So is the research carried out by (Gagné & Rasmussen, 2016). For these authors, humans and water belong to separate dimensions, but interact in relationships that take the shape of, for example, river management (Orlove, 2016) infrastructure transformations (Willow, 2016) or cultural interpretations of water (Khan, 2016). Similarly, the geographers
Linton & Budds (2014) and Swyngedouw offer an approach to water worldings in dialectical relationality through the notion of the hydrosocial, a historical and geographical assemblage that gives rise to a specific kind of water within particular socio-political configurations (2006). Likewise, Veronica Strang and Franz Krause see 'water (as) a generative and agentive co-constituent of relationships and meanings in society' (2016, p. 633). Here, the materiality of social relations with water and the sociality of water manifest an ontological fluidity6 that connects humans and other entities at different scales (Strang, 2014).

I am inspired by these approaches that stimulate the heuristics of water, that is, water as an analytical category that displays the analysis. I propose to think with water as substance, as a specific element, located geographically, historically and with meanings and its own practices. I find that thinking through the forms that water takes is productive and relevant because water here abounds, shapes people's lives and is itself shaped by the practices and knowledges that inhabit it. Water is thus the substance that shapes and permeates thought; it is expansive and oscillating and the muddy water mixes with land, plants, animals, people and chemicals. In this context, I have found it useful to think about water through three different concepts: 1. Body of water. 2. Watery territory and 3. Ciénaga.

The concept body of water is not intended to explain the thing in itself since the thing cannot be understood without its enunciative relations and mediations. It is rather a concept that contains history, experiences and knowledge and that highlights the fluid (watery) character in the articulation that forms a body. So, by using the concept body of water, I can display the becoming of a ciénaga, a lake and a humedal-wetland.

I use the term watery territory in two senses: On the one hand to identify the spatialization of the biophysical and human practices of the ciénaga by expanding and connecting it to an ampler territory that includes the rest of the Middle Magdalena Region, reaching all the way to the Colombian Caribbean Coast. And on the other hand, watery territory also amplifies the discussion in Alejandro Camargo’s work on the

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6 The socio-material agency of water that Strang, Krause and Swyngedow refer to is also explored by Ashley Carsten when discussing infrastructural water management in Panama (2012) and in Nikhil Anand’s notion of water pressure politics in India (2011). This is also the case in Jessica Barnes’s dialectic shaping of water technologies and description of Egyptian societies as water cultures (2012).
floodplains of Northern Colombia (2017) where he reflects on how land is considered static while it also fluctuates. He states that both land and water are fluctuating, and that land is born from the water and water from the land. He continues by arguing that the separation water-land has contributed to the conflictive nature of property laws and to land appropriation on the banks of floodplains: landowners have been reducing the extension of the water through land appropriation and subsequent expansion of pastures to stabilize the separation of water-land and to give stability to their properties. For Camargo, what is at stake is a collision of mutually exclusive conceptions of land and water through which the meanings of wetlands, rivers, and water in general are understood (2017). The concept Watery Territories proposes an understanding of water with land – that water and land are entangled and detached in a non-oppositional sense.

I want to move the framework of understanding of the ciénaga beyond a land-water opposition, and rather think through its fluctuations. I want to harness the story of fluidity based on my ethnographic experience: fluidity in the transformability of water and land, but also of the diverse consistencies or muddiness observed in the ciénaga. The fluidity of dendritic connections resonates with the rhizomatic assemblage, the trope that Laura Ogden uses to explore the Gladesmen (humans) in their entanglement with swamp life (2011). I found a similar experience in the ciénaga, a rhizomatically dynamic experience, a network in which different practices, materialities, and conceptions are interlaced. However, as I will demonstrate in this thesis, the ciénaga made up of different practices is an open-ended entity, and this has allowed for its persistence.

As discussed by anthropologist Diana Bocarejo with respect to water governance, rivers and wetlands along the Magdalena river in Colombia, she underlines the importance of understanding waters in the plural instead of singular form, as H2O (2018). Bocarejo insists that understanding the local contexts that configure waters may reveal unrecognized politics of care/harm (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017) which are not included either in institutional frameworks of environmental conservation or in development schemes.

This dissertation includes contributions from natural sciences, particularly limnology and biology, and tries to understand biophysical processes in dynamic exchanges with human practices, that is, as a biosocial dynamic. However, I do not only analyze with the terms of science, nor do I consider that there is a single scientific practice. From the fieldwork, I have found a diversity of biologies that participate in the multiplicity
that shapes the body of water, as well as of local conceptualizations of this body of water that join in the making of the ciénaga. So, I mobilize the contributions of material semiotics towards a decolonial sensitivity that destabilizes concepts and symmetrically integrates local conceptualizations in the analysis.

_Ciénaga_ is a situated conceptualization of nature (of the body of water) that implies specific relationships and practices and a particular materiality that give life to some actors that constitute it (plants, animals, inhabitants), but also to subjects-practices that relate to it differently, namely the inhabitants – the fishermen-settlers – on the one hand, and on the other, the oil extraction and paramilitaries. The ciénaga elicits the resilient capacity that I have termed ‘amphibian disposition’, and I argue that a _ciénaga_ in this biophysical practice displays transformational entangling capacities that I believe allow the inhabitants of this nature to persist.

**Biosocial Infrastructure**

One of the most salient issues that I deal with in this dissertation, is the interconnected dynamic entanglements and detachments that the inhabitants display in order to persist while living in the _ciénaga_ and that make possible its persistence. Infrastructure is therefore an important concept in this dissertation since the oil infrastructure for more than fifty years has substantially moulded the _ciénaga_ and also the practices of the inhabitants. As they told me, “We were born and grew up among canoes and machines.” The locals can hardly imagine the place without the oil infrastructure and the practices of oil extraction as they literally live their lives surrounded by oil wells, pipelines, pumpjacks, batteries for the collection of crude, tanks, rigs and heavy machinery.

The anthropology of infrastructure is underpinned by the founding work of Susan Star, who proposed that in order to analyze the infrastructure one has to do inverse infrastructure, to unveil its unfolded faces. Inspired by the pivotal work of Star (Star & Ruhleder, 1996), the anthropology of infrastructure in the work of Anand (2011), Harvey & Knox (2015) and Elyachar (2010) decompresses infrastructure by observing in detail the parts that constitute it (the obvious and the hidden ones) and the processes that circulate, allowing its maintenance and continuity. What has characterized the anthropology of infrastructure is to see what is inside the infrastructure and could be deployed from it – as in the work of Humphrey (2005), von Schitzer (2008),
Carse (2012), AbdouMaliq (2004). This decompression displays ontologies and confirms how multiple ontologies co-habit.

Even if the inhabitants get tangled up with the oil infrastructure and its practices, they do not abandon their relationship with the ciénaga through fishing and their sense of belongingness to this nature, to their home. As they occasionally disentangle from oil extraction through denouncing pollution in the ciénaga and through legal processes, stoppages and protests against the oil company, such as blocking roads and the oil collection stations and truncating the oil infrastructure, they reconnect with the ciénaga. But at the same time, and in a particular manner, the ciénaga gets connected to the oil infrastructure and its so-called corporate social responsibility and its environmental division.

However, while the inhabitants fluctuate between being entangled and detangled from the oil infrastructure, the company manages to fulfil its purpose of extracting oil and sustaining production. Michel Watts has analyzed the destruction and social and environmental degradation brought about by the formation of oil complexes, which in African countries is strongly tied to the continuity of colonial practices (2008). The economy and sovereignty of these enclaves have generated the creation of armed groups of paramilitaries, guerrillas and private security squads that participate in the neopatrimonialism rule. Hannah Appel has developed an analysis of the forms of sovereignty deployed by oil enclaves in central Africa through operations of detachment, forming enclosed resource extraction sites by means of demarcation and militarization (2012).

In the watery territory of the Middle Magdalena Valley of Colombia, the infrastructural operations of oil extraction have, in order to make possible the oil extraction, shaped the ciénaga both through practices of detachment and by entangling the people living there. One main type of what we could call a detachment operation was the attempt by the oil company to prevent settlers from settling inside the ciénaga and its oil enclave. Through murder and terror, armed individuals, arguably contracted by the oil company or actors benefitting from its presence, generated forced displacement and submission. They also used control operations and sought to disrupt daily fishing practices and undermine the family-community organization, thus making it more difficult for the inhabitants to circumnavigate the oil company's control while hardening the enclaving territorialisation. Via entanglements with the infrastructure, the inhabitants have integrated oil extraction
facilities into their forms of subsistence, appropriating the materiality of this machinery as part of their identity and patrimony. Displaying an in-depth knowledge of the machines and the oil enclave operation, they have appropriated the enclave in a particular manner, similar to what the invasive aquatic plant, the *tarulla*, does, a plant that paradoxically enough flourishes in the heavily contaminated waters of the *ciénaga*. This happens even if the oil corporation has increasingly implemented actions to undermine or cut off these kinds of entanglements between the *ciénaga*, the inhabitants and the oil extraction operation. The inhabitants thus continue to display an entangler disposition, a disposition that the oil company has made many attempts to weaken.

The inhabitants of the *ciénaga* take advantage of the oil extraction facilities and also participate actively in the new forms of state intervention. These include labor laws and environmental mitigation policies that articulate oxymoronically, but productively, with the oil extraction, in particular with the Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) activities promoted by the oil company. Here, the work of Elena Shever (2012) is relevant to understand how oil companies in their areas of operation, refineries and oil fields, develop practices and aesthetics that try to connect-absorb the inhabitants through CSR. However, these ties are weak, elusive and ambiguous, and they exist in order to provide extraction with continuity. In my case study, they also constitute an important part of the livelihood strategies that sustain the inhabitants and the *ciénaga*.

Another dimension of the entanglement of the *ciénaga* with the oil infrastructure is explored from the perspective of the materialities of oil extraction, since the machinery of the oil field has intervened for the last fifty years and continues to intervene through its everyday practices. This does, for example, happen when polluted waters are discharged into the *ciénaga* or when the water is used for well injection. It also happens when the oil company implements corporate social responsibility projects and environmental mitigation activities. In order to obtain or not to lose environmental licenses, a number of such activities and projects have been implemented, such as repopulation of fish stocks and the periodic extraction of the invasive plant *tarulla* which may suffocate the *ciénaga* if its expansion is not controlled. The *ciénaga* is not natural, pristine or un-
intervened in, as it is a biosocial\textsuperscript{7} infrastructure whose edges, depth, water components, animals, plants and water currents have been and continue to be modified to support the infrastructure of oil extraction.

\textbf{Amphibian Resilience}

This dissertation suggests that the character of the relationships established by the inhabitants (peasants, fishers, settlers) with the ciénaga, and with the other entities connected to the ciénaga (paramilitaries and oil company), has a resilient capacity which is characterized by amphibiousness. This character is elicited by the environment and displays the ability to flow and articulate between different situations to persist.

The inhabitants' entanglement in, and detachment from different practices – even if some could be considered to be harming them – was a dynamic that I observed in different moments. I felt that few or none of the practices of the locals were entirely opposed to other practices, and no single practice or livelihood activity occupied the entire space of their sense of identity. In the ciénaga the inhabitants were used to taking advantage of or benefitting from specific practices depending on the changing context, and they were also aware of when and how to escape or distance themselves from particular practices or identifications. The practices were temporary, but recurrent, and that has sustained how they have endured and persisted in the ciénaga.

While living in the community, I had the chance to closely observe the oscillatory nature of the muddy waters, the multiple practices converging in the ciénaga, and how the inhabitants responded to these variations through temporary entanglements and detachments. I spoke with inhabitants, who told me that due to their periodically shifting practices, they identified with animals that moved between water and land, with beings that contained more than one condition, like turtles, lizards or frogs in the changing waters of the ciénaga.

\textsuperscript{7} The concept of biosociality was first proposed in 1996 by Paul Rabinow, who, when using a case study of the advances of science in genetics, noticed that when studying genetics, it was impossible to understand whether a sharp separation between nature and culture was made. Based on this concept, Palsson and Ingold developed the term biosocial becomings (Palsson, 1990: 28) by observing and recognizing that beings are not islands of stability, but rather of change within a flow of biophysical processes and social relations. Discussions by biologists such as Lewontin (Ontogeny), Oyama (Developmental Biology or Constructivist Interaction), Maturana and Varela (Autopoiesis) and Gilbert (Ecological Developmental Biology) allow the observation of the porous edges between the bio and the social through the lens of biosocial becoming (Palsson and Ingold, 2001)
Multiple times I heard them say that they lived between canoes and oil machines, that is to say between worlds. I concluded that the character of these human-material relationships that make the ciénaga is of an amphibious disposition, one of moving between environments in order to persist.

The notion of amphibiousness has been discussed in Anglo-Saxon anthropology. René ten Bos published an article dealing with the reflections of philosopher Peter Sloterdijk (2009) in which he elaborates on the theory of transitions, proposing amphibiousness as the most useful concept for tracing elements and situations in movement (ten Bos, 2009, p. 74). Following Sloterdijk, he presses for the formulation of amphibious anthropology, as he claims that humans are ontologically amphibious. This implies that humans never stay or live in a single environment. Instead, humans move between different environments, or more precisely between umwelts or milieus, a concept he takes from biologist Jacob von Uexküll (ten Bos, 2009, p. 76).

According to Sloterdijk amphibiousness consists in moving between worlds.

Casper Brun-Jensen has proposed an amphibious anthropological approach similar to the work of Swyngedow, Strang and Krause. However, he relates this more explicitly to the ontological opening of relational becoming, instead of to discrete 'ontologies' or worlds (Jensen & Morita, 2017). This perspective understands onto-epistemic processes as a becoming through practices that flow. Anthropologist Annet P. Pauwelussen (Pauwelussen & Verschoor, 2017) analyzes amphibious practices by exploring the different understandings and practices of the Bajau people in Indonesia as they navigate the NGO’s different attempts to impose its own understandings on their local understandings. The Bajau people’s amphibious response consists of displaying ambiguity. Different to what Pauwelussen explores in her fieldwork, in my case amphibiousness displays the interlacing by entangling and detachment while moving from one world to another.

Amphibiousness thereby manifests itself as a strategy and ontological disposition towards persistence in the challenges of living in a world made by the worlds of paramilitaries and oil extraction, but also fishing and peasant practices.

Amphibiousness came to me in my reading of decolonial studies and in my rediscovery of the work of the Colombian sociologist Orlando Fals Borda. In the 1980s, he was already making use of this notion to describe the way of life that unfolded on the Mompox Floodplains (Depresión Momposina) and in the Magdalena...
Valley. In his book *Historia Doble de la Costa* (1984), Fals Borda elaborated a sociological ethnography and a historical reconstruction of the inhabitants of the Colombian 'Caribbean interior' in his quest to explain how these people, over time, resisted colonialism and the expansion of the capitalist-landlord production system. According to this author, despite the hardships brought upon them by landlords, the peasants (he placed them in this category) have not disappeared, been defeated or become totally proletarized (Fals Borda, 1984, p. 19B), which he argues is connected to the continuation of an ethos of amphibious culture. Being inspired by the work of Fals Borda, I mobilized his observations in the Ciénaga Palagua in order to explore its persistent capacity as situated resilience.

Resilience is another word that invokes the idea of persistence. The current environmental crisis generates a sense of urgency and at the same time of impossibility, almost of defeat, when facing the inability to recover from and discontinue the disturbances of both environments and peoples that suffer from pollution. The anthropocene has brought to the forefront the complementary ideas of mitigation and adaptation as the route to recovery, ideas that have acquired more space in policy making. Mitigation and adaptation policies have transformed the discourse of sustainability towards that of resilience, so that resilience is becoming a strategy to guarantee and promote the capacity of people-organisms and environments to preserve themselves.

In recent years, the anthropologists Hatsrup (2009), Rival (2009), and Bian (2017) have approached sustainability through the notion of resilience, referring to this as the positive response of people and environments to adaption to changes or disturbances, while maintaining a sense of unity or common identity. The idea of resilience\(^8\) comes from the natural sciences (physics) and was appropriated by the ecologist Holling

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8 The notion of resilience was first used in English by Francis Bacon in 1626, and it was formally defined in 1656 as meaning 'a leaping or skipping back, a rebounding; a going from one’s word.' From 1824 onwards, physicists used the word to refer to 'the physical property of a material that can return to its original shape or position after deformation that does not exceed its elastic limit' (Rival, 2009). However, there are conceptual differences within the natural sciences as to what resilience refers to. Holling (1996) argues that in physics or engineering, resilience makes reference to the ability of an entity to return to its state of equilibrium or initial state after having suffered an impact – that is to say it refers to re-cohesion of the original state. He continues by saying that from an ecological perspective, resilience refers to the ability of this entity to address or incorporate this impact and to continue existing without modifying the essence of its structure. Others refer to adaptive capacity while conserving identity (Adger, 2003).
(1996) in his description of ecological systems. It has subsequently been deployed to describe and prescribe sociocultural process.

For Holling, resilience is 'the capacity of a system to absorb, reuse or even benefit from the perturbations and changes that happen, and also to persist without a qualitative change in the systems’ structures' (in Rival, Young et al., 2006, p. 305). Within the natural environmental sciences, this definition has developed and become consolidated into 'the capacity of a system to absorb disturbance and reorganize while undergoing change so as to still retain the same function, structure, identity' (Folke, 2006, p. 259). The process is accumulative, displaying complexity, absorption, and reorganization through feedback loops (Berkes, 2003, p. 18) that may orient future responses (Walker & Salt, 2006) and depends on structural reorganization in order for the system to persist.

The concept has also been extended into the social sciences to analyze individuals’ and communities’ capacity for agency as they cope with unrest while conserving a sense of unity Adger (2000), Hastrup (2009) and Marshall and Marshall (2007). Kirsten Hastrup defines resilience as the agency of 'a social or ecological system to absorb disturbances while retaining the same basic structure and ways of functioning, the capacity for self-organization, and the capacity to adapt to stress and change.' However, Hornborg argued that this does not consider power relations, politics and culture in the context of programs for environmental conservation (2009, p. 253).

Laura Rival and Kirsten Hastrup are, however, aware that resilience has been captured by developmentality. They therefore consider the term to be important in finding other ways to respond to, and redefine, environmental crises from the communities’ point of view. They believe that the term could transform socioenvironmental policies in developmentalism by displaying alternative development responses that could reorient horizons of expectation and senses of being in the world (Hastrup, 2009, p. 28). Resilience, for Rival and Hastrup, is an open concept that can be used to explore different responses and adaptive processes when facing environmental challenges. In line with Cote and Nightingale (2012).
I consider that exploring resilience with situated experiences could open up the possibility of noticing other dispositions when coping with harmful activities and destruction, noticing its persistence in decolonial sensibility and through interchanges between humans and other than humans.

In the course of my research, I have seen this situated resilience as the capacity to tentacularly articulate with different forces and substances, displaying these articulations through practices of care/harm. Therefore, resilience is, in the ciénaga, a capacity to articulate, to entangle, even though it implies absorbing harm and transforming its structure and sense of stability. This encouraged me to consider persistence through amphibious disposition as a situated resilience, beyond the implicit connotations of maintenance of a basic structure (in 'normal' resilience) as a preference over which conservation has been conceived, but also not as an adaptive capacity adjudicated by, or subjected to, biological and sociocultural entities. I propose the notion of amphibiousness to understand this situated resilience through a web of practices that interlace and overcome the division water-land, that move between consistencies and that simultaneously navigate between difficulty, harm and care. The practices are artfully entangled with the infrastructures of oil extraction and paramilitaries, with the inhabitants of the ciénaga – just like the aquatic plant tarulla – and with the new livelihood opportunities that have emerged after paramilitary demobilization, and they are part of the re-emergence of the kin-community with the ciénaga. In this way, situated resilience, or perhaps resilience otherwise, manifests as an amphibious disposition. It is a disposition of entanglements in an intense experience between the ciénaga and its inhabitants.

The sensation of amphibiousness manifested itself during my fieldwork as a phenomenological encounter with water, mud, soil, plants, fish, amphibians, lizards, mammals and birds, as well as with the humidity and heat of the ciénaga and, of course, with its human inhabitants. By observing the variations that the ciénaga experienced during the year of my fieldwork, I saw how human practices became immersed in the muddy waters of the ciénaga. I also arrived at amphibiousness through metaphors and examples provided by the inhabitants when telling me about war and pollution and how they have persisted living between the canoes and oil machines, between the paramilitary organization and the family organization, entangling and detaching
themselves, navigating through difficulty to continue to exist – just as the armadillo, the turtle and the toad persist while moving between water and land and between wet and dry seasons.

The inhabitants have shaped the ciénaga. But the ciénaga has also shaped the inhabitants, as they are exposed to it in their daily life. Thus, a mutual shaping of bodies, in the material sense, has taken place, following the rhythm of the changing seasons. Amphibiousness appeals to the articulation – and to the capacity to move – between different milieus in couplings, with flexibility producing the body’s metamorphosis.

**Chapter Outline**

This dissertation has been organized into eight chapters. The first chapter outlines the methodology, describing the context in which I develop my anthropology from a position situated between Colombian anthropology, Norwegian anthropology and international anthropology, as well as my positionality in the web of relations among humans and other than humans. The conceptualizations and notions derived from it are used to share and expand the ethnographic experience to other publics in order to evoke these situated conceptualizations in ways that intersect and conflict with authorized formal (natural and social science knowledge practices) conceptualizations about this place.

Chapter 2, 'The Pasts of the Ciénaga,' forms a basis for understanding the histories that have sedimented in the ciénaga, and has been crafted through the incorporation of narratives told by historians, documents from the national archive and the memories of the inhabitants. This chapter shows the forms taken by the coloniality of power and the continuation of colonial practices after independence, and substantiates the moral topography that has been actualized in the ciénaga. This chapter is a historical reconstruction of the ciénaga beyond paramilitaries. The histories of the ciénaga in this reconstruction begin with the Magdalena river bogas (rowers) and the formation of a Palenque of maroons in the seventeenth century, and ends with the formation of oil enclaves along the Magdalena River the first half of the twentieth century and the profound landscape transformations that then took place in the ciénaga.

Chapters 3 to 6 form the centre of ethnographic analysis. In these chapters I describe the practices with which the inhabitants navigate their lives and I explore their dilemmas and the creative solutions they generate to continue being with the ciénaga. Chapters 3 addresses the ciénaga as a biological entity, showing how
biologists with different adscriptions-perspectives-practices represent the ciénaga differently by using different methods, and how these different approaches transform the figurations of the biosocial web relationships in this body of water. Chapter 4’s title is 'Making Seasonality,' and presents an initial exploration of how their amphibiousness could be grasped as a disposition that is open to change, a situated resilience that circumvents difficulty but also produces it, and one that is creative and caring when taking opportunities to continue living. Chapter 5 addresses the inhabitants’ expanded kin settling around the ciénaga in practices of sharing food, eating and fishing, drinking its water and by being permeated by the sun, mosquitoes and mud. The ciénaga is absorbed into their bodies to form a collective body with them, both permeating materially and providing a sense of belonging, a kinship relation constituted by humans and other-than-human beings. And Chapter 6, whose title is 'Biosocial Infrastructure,' explains how oil is extracted from below the ciénaga and the role that the ciénaga plays in providing affordances and resources for the oil extraction. The ciénaga is subject to environmental mitigation by company-financed cutting of the introduced species tarulla (water hyacinth), which constitutes another partial convergence of entanglement-detachment between contamination and environmental mitigation.

The last two chapters, 7 and 8, move the reader to the dense difficulty with which people and ciénaga continue living. By describing the history of paramilitaries in the aftermath of the paramilitary demobilization, the chapters elaborate on the emergences and continuities of practices in a period of transition that is still in its initial stages. Chapter 7 is a reconstruction of history based on the relates and stories of the inhabitants and on historical studies. This chapter aims to destabilize the idea that Puerto Boyacá and the ciénaga were nothing else than oil-permeated cradles of paramilitaries and a theater of military and paramilitary operations by arguing that the ciénaga was rather a place of resistance in non-antagonistic ways. Chapter 8 explores the transition and re-accommodation, while also connecting the transitional present with the inhabitants’ memories of paramilitary control during the regimes of the paramilitary commanders Gonzalo Pérez and Botalón between the 1980s and 2006.
In this methodological introduction, I will look at the specific complex conditions, entanglements, commitments, institutional context and my loci of enunciation to determine my anthropological practice when doing fieldwork and analysis. This reflection is relevant in this dissertation, considering that I am from Colombia, have received my academic training in both a Colombian and a Norwegian anthropological environment and have worked on my research and this dissertation travelling between Colombia and Norway. This made me think about my research experience as a particular case of anthropology at home, while also mobilizing me to reflect on the anthropologies of the world, their differentiated locations in the distribution of the world system of anthropology, and the correlative and particular ways of understanding fieldwork and the field/s of anthropology/ies (Gupta & Ferguson, 1997). My methodological contribution attempts to expand the discussion by using a decolonial perspective to expand the field-fieldwork relation.

My fieldwork approach was fundamentally ethnographic, i.e. the result of an intense and prolonged coexistence (eleven months) with the different humans and more-than-human inhabitants in the Ciénaga de Palagua, a watery territory inhabited by an oil field infrastructure, practices of oil extraction, a paramilitary group, fisherfolk-colonos and temporary oil workers.

Initially, my research project focused on studying community and oil company relations in Puerto Boyacá, an oil-dependent Colombian municipality until recently controlled by right-wing paramilitary organizations. However, I found that the particularity of this case of oil extraction and war rested on the fact that recently an Asian joint venture company (Sinopec-China and ONGC-India) had taken over the oil extraction operations originally owned by the international corporation Texaco. The arrival of the Asian operators occurred simultaneously with the process of demobilization of the local armed paramilitary group. These two processes were promising to transform the region. My initial research interest did not change during the fieldwork. In fact, it expanded when I discovered that not only were humans participating in the transformations shaped by war and peace, extractivism and environmentalism. The ciénaga itself, as an
agential part of these processes, as well as a vernacular political environmental awareness was pushing the transformations.

Back in Oslo I noticed that the agency of the ciénaga, plants and the fish inundated my field notes as much as oil, the toxicity of the waters and the presence of infrastructure. Also, in the transitional period after demobilization, rumors were mobilizing memories from the past, possibilities in the present and imaginations of the future. Thus, I realized that while doing the ethnography I needed to find an analytical approach that would allow me to include not only humans, but also these other actors that were converging on this body of water, entangling the place, and configuring this biosocial life.

My ethnographic approach consisted of tracing of the diverse practices that constituted the place and that I noticed converged in the ciénaga. I followed biologists, oil company employees, paramilitary personnel and the local inhabitants (fisherfolk-colonos and oil workers). Two aspects became central to the observation. The first of these were the diverse knowledge practices that inhabited the ciénaga. My approach gradually came to involve unpacking the conceptions about this territory, which I have renamed as a watery territory. And second, my analysis focused on understanding the practices and the intersections between them, unpacking knowledge practices by exploring local ways of conceptualizing persistence in the ciénaga, while being very aware of my particular presence in the formulation of this research and my presence in the fieldwork.

1.1 Entering the Field

In August 2013 I flew from Oslo to New Delhi during the height of the monsoon. I had an appointment with the Indian state-owned oil company ONGC’s division responsible for overseas exploration projects. As I entered the ONGC building near the famous Connaught Place, I could not avoid comparing it to the headquarters of the Colombian state-owned oil company in Bogotá: Ecopetrol. While the latter was modern, clean and beautifully decorated, giving the visitor a foretaste of the company’s wealth and power, ONGC’s building was, like most public buildings in India, quite dilapidated and with little security, people constantly coming and going, and chai vendors taking the elevator to bring tea to the different offices. The air-conditioning system did not work and this created a suffocating atmosphere in the building. At the reception I introduced myself and was accompanied to the third floor, where I was led to a group of male Hindu and Sikh
officials who were waiting for me. It was a very open and friendly meeting. They gave me a detailed briefing about their operations in Colombia, using a PowerPoint presentation full of pictures, maps and graphs in English. The images transported me from India’s densely populated capital to the lush Magdalena River Valley on the other side of the world. In our conversation, the engineers told me about the advantages of the operation in Colombia compared to other operations (as, for example, in Brazil, where according to them the environmental legislation was more rigid and the fines higher). However, at the same time, the officials (engineers) were worried about corruption in Colombia. It was intriguing to be asked this question, knowing that corruption was not an unfamiliar phenomenon in India (Gupta, 1995). Months later, I remembered that question and realized that what they had probably really wanted from me was to understand the complex network of social and biophysical relations in this particular para-statist area, a network they had inadvertently become part of when they bought the oil field in Puerto Boyacá-Colombia.

For anthropologists, it is a challenge to enter some places and do ethnography. A laboratory, a corporation, an oilfield are examples of places where the social sciences and their observations could generate suspicion and resentment. My experience of contacting the company’s managers in Colombia had been difficult, which is why I took the risk of talking directly with the Indian oil corporation ONGC that held a 50 % stake in the company. However, during the fieldwork I realized that the difficulty had not disappeared. It was different, because although the Colombian managers could not prevent my entry into the oil field, I felt they maintained a tense relationship with me, as some of them believed that I was an informant for their Chinese (that controlled the remaining shares) and Indian bosses. This was a situation I had to cope with by explicitly expressing my discretion, and maintaining formality and clarity in my interactions with managers and Colombian engineers during my entire fieldwork.

In 1997, Gupta and Ferguson debated the notion of field in anthropology. They claimed that the conceptualization of the field was connected to what was considered good fieldwork. Good fieldwork was a place and an experience of living to analyze the other, the radically different people living far away from the place of the white western researcher. This idea reified the separation between other and self, and reinstalled the self-perceptions of westerners in the colonial order. In this way, the relevant study or the relevant
anthropological problematisation (the field) emerged from the reproduction of this already established idea of good fieldwork. They argued that the connection was a result of colonialism and that it reproduced the asymmetric relations bequeathed to us and the subsequent political-economic forms of territorial organization after independence, thus the colonial and postcolonial process influenced what is considered to be a relevant inquiry in anthropology and a good fieldwork.

Along with Michel-Rolph Trouillot (2004), Restrepo and Escobar (2005), I have experienced in my anthropological practice that the fieldwork-field relation is not so direct. Because of my loci of enunciation, unlike a white western researcher I was not going there to understand the other in distant lands, but instead wanted to understand the heterogeneity within my own country. When understanding the relation field-fieldwork by incorporating our loci of enunciation within this relationship, we are able to see the diversity of anthropological practices made from situated histories. Particular practices such those from the global south could consider that good fieldwork, and therefore also the field, could have other connotations. Therefore, it is worth asking how the field-fieldwork relationship in those places and anthropologies, not located in the global north (geographical and abstract), could unfold.9

Fieldwork is determined partly by a research interest and partly by random circumstances. This was also the case for me. From 2009 to 2012 I lived in India, working as a Spanish teacher at the Cervantes Institute. One Saturday after class a Spanish colleague asked me if I would be interested in making voice recordings of educational material in Spanish. I began recording the different texts. As I became familiar with the materials, I discovered that they were about oil extraction, enhancing oil recovery and steam injection. The material was used in training sessions for engineers in Colombia. My short assignment awakened my curiosity: Indians

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9 The notions of global south and global north refer to the geographical imagination produced by the cartography of colonialism, which creates the north as the place of the metropolis and south as of the colonies, Michel-Rolph Trouillot has claimed that south-north were imagined oppositions in the abstract sense of colonial domination but also in the material of the administration (2004) forming the geographies and geopolitical relations that we know today. To recognize such asymmetry (imagined and practical and dispersed at different scales) in which the production of anthropological knowledge is also equally immersed is a step toward its destabilization, a decolonial step toward the pluriversity of epistemologies.
extracting oil in Colombia? In those days, the BRICS\textsuperscript{10} phenomenon was being widely discussed in the media and there was a focus on business ventures abroad from these countries. I soon discovered that the state-owned oil company ONGC was developing activities in Colombia. After further research, I discovered that this company did not operate on its own in Colombia but was in a joint venture with the Chinese state-owned oil company Sinopec. It was a strange commercial setup. During the three years I lived in India, China was always portrayed as the major threat to national security, together with Pakistan and Muslim terrorism. In Colombia, however, far from the Himalayas, border conflicts with China and that regional rivalry did not exist, and so the Chinese and the Indians had joined forces to extract oil in Colombia and in Latin America in general.

1.2 Conducting Fieldwork in a Dangerous Place

Having secured permission to do fieldwork inside the company’s oil enclave, I began my fieldwork living in the oil company compound for a total of four months. I presented myself to the people in the company and to the inhabitants of the villages as an independent researcher. As a way of reciprocating the generosity of the oil company for letting me live in the oil field, I participated in the application of a social and environmental census that the environmental consultancy firm Antea led in the municipality.

Being part of the design and application of the census allowed me to observe the company’s practice of sovereignty over the watery territory of which the ciénaga was part. The Colombian state had not done a census there for over a decade, and the state presence in general of precarious, not schools, hospitals, roads, security and justice system were present. The oil company operated the oil field and the village around similar to a state. The inhabitants recognized the census developed by the oil company was an act of governance. Working on the census with the outsourced environmental consultancy firm made it possible for me to visit, house by house, the people located inside the oil field and in the ciénaga. I was therefore able to gather qualitative and quantitative information about the characteristics of the inhabitants, map out their livelihood

\textsuperscript{10} According to Wikipedia: “BRIC is an acronym that refers to the economic association of five major emerging national economies: Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa to strengthen their voice in the face of the economic power of the United States.”
strategies and more importantly, gain recognition and trust from these locals, who told me their stories, the unfolding their day to day lives and allowed me to be part of their lives for a few months.

Living in the compound, I was able to learn about the concrete practices involved in extracting oil, the interactions with different types of infrastructure and the affordances that the ciénaga offered in the extraction. I learned about the different positions and expertise needed in the oil extraction process. After a while, I was invited by the oil engineers to accompany them on their visits to the oil rigs, and when doing so I had a chance to gather their professional and personal opinions of their work and learn about the intricacies of the operation and the vernacular dynamics of how to get the oil out in this particular oil field. This is privileged information that it would be difficult to receive without living for months with this community of oil engineers.

Doing fieldwork in the ciénaga was dangerous. I lived in an oil field that used to be controlled by paramilitaries and where the paramilitary legacy still is very much present, a good example of a place where dominant militarized masculinity permeates relationships. How could I, as a young middleclass Colombian woman, be invited, taken seriously, manage to be heard and not be abused during my fieldwork? I must say that the support of the Indian corporation and then of the Sinopec engineers in the field, particularly of the Taiwanese Mandarin-Spanish translator, Katia Chao, who became my friend, was fundamental for my position in the field. My relationships with the few women in the oil company opened doors, as did the empathy I created with the women of the ciénaga. They were grandmothers, mothers, young women, who, unexpectedly, identified with me because, as they told me many times, they saw me as an equal and as a woman of the people who had managed to develop professionally. They were Colombian like me; they could read my provenance. For them, I qualified in the category verraca (strong person), a category highly valued by the people of the Middle Magdalena region. I was not studying the other in distant lands, but studying something of which I am also a part. My challenge was to make the familiar unfamiliar and to discover the hidden practices by defamiliarizing myself from my Colombian common sense.

After my stay in the oil compound, I lived among the inhabitants of the ciénaga for six months, in the house of Luz Montaña. A great friend and a very interesting thinker, who opened her world to me, and introduced me to her extensive kin in the ciénaga. Living in the ciénaga affected my body: the heat, the smells
and the mosquitoes. Yet I felt that little by little I became one more in this kin, going fishing, eating the fish, and having long conversations at night. In those long talks, they told me about the atrocities and paradoxes of the paramilitary war and how they circumnavigated these atrocities. In many cases, I felt that once I had gained their trust, the conversations were like therapy for the locals who had been demobilized from paramilitary life and for the victims of the paramilitary who never received psychological help from the Colombian state after the peace process.

In the transition which was taking place when I did my fieldwork, people wanted to talk, remember, register their experiences, which they had previously not been able to do. I must say that this also protected me, because I did not have to ask much. They seemed not to be afraid to speak with me about the past as I was not from the oil company or representing the state. I was an independent listener.

My ethnography was multi-sited (Marcuse, 1995), as information and experiences were coming from different places and on different scales, leading me to the ciénaga. Today I see my fieldwork first and foremost as the result of my constant digging and delving into the world of oil extraction in Colombia, paramilitarism, the biologies of ciénagas, and into the life of the inhabitants of this watery territory. The fieldwork ranged from India to Colombia, moved inside Colombia and into the different practices in the ciénaga. I interacted with actors of different nationalities (Indians, Chinese and Colombians) and groups with different relations to the state and the law (civilians, ex-paramilitaries, demobilized paramilitaries, trade union leaders, fisherfolk and oil workers). I also met people living in different economic conditions and with varying amounts of knowledge and education; Colombian and expat company managers, engineers, biologists, oil workers, demobilized paramilitaries and fisherfolk-colonos. Moreover, during my fieldwork I was also compelled to understand biophysical processes, the biology of this water body, the fish and invasive plants, as well as learning about oil extraction and infrastructure, while visiting ruins, searching in archives and following rumors. As Doreen Massey (1994) would say, actors and things that were related to each other in my fieldwork, strands coming from different rolls tangled in a knot, formed a place in which I was also interlaced.

In 2014, the demobilization of paramilitary troops provided a tense sense of peace. The former paramilitary commanders seemed to be invisible: either they were in jail or they simply remained silent while
engaging in oil extraction activities. It was easy to sense that the place was in transformation. In the town, the Mayor’s office was practically empty with no permanent staff. The Mayor himself was under investigation for having stolen from the public budget and from oil royalties. The Sino-Indian oil company had, after heavy investment, reactivated the oil field and become the main source of labor, social services and entertainment. The oil company had become the main structure of authority in the region. Thus, I could enter the field only with the explicit permission of the oil company.

Doing ethnography in a place as dangerous as this, dominated by relationships determined by oil, rife with suspicion and outlawed practices, was challenging. I aimed at being very attentive and sensitive, reflexively finding the way to enter, and creating relationships in order to be able to stay safe.

1.3 The Researcher’s Loci of Enunciation

My first meeting with the company administration in Bogotá was formal and took place in the main conference room. All the men – and yes there were only men receiving me – were very well-dressed. Also they, just as their colleagues in New Delhi, had a PowerPoint presentation prepared for me. It became clear to me that the managers had been very curious about this special request from India. So, when I entered the conference room it was evident to me that they did not expect to receive a short dark-skinned mestizo Colombian women, but rather a blonde Norwegian or an Indian researcher living in Norway. However, because in Latin America education ‘whitens’ (de la Cadena, 2015), my position as a PhD researcher from Norway helped me in this meeting and in conducting a conversation with these men. Most of the managers were not directly involved in the daily activities of oil extraction on the ground, but rather in controlling the conditions for doing the extraction. They worked on government contacts and on social, security and labor issues. The majority of them had previously worked for coal companies in Colombia, such as Drummond and El Cerrejón, mining companies that had been accused of collaborating with right-wing paramilitaries, undermining trade unions and polluting rivers and the ocean.

A few days later, I travelled to the field on the company’s airplane, together with engineers and managers. After a 30-minute flight from Bogotá we landed at the company airport, two kilometres from the Velásquez oil field. The heat and humidity of the Magdalena valley enveloped my body as I got out of the plane. About 10
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white SUVs awaited us next to the runway and as we approached the vehicles the drivers started shouting, “oilfield Moriche! oilfield Jazmín! oilfield Velásquez!” so the engineers would know which vehicle would take them to their respective oilfield. I noticed that the men (and the few women) who were working in the oil field wore shirts of different colors. I was told that each color indicated a position and place in the company hierarchy. Khaki was for directly contracted personnel, pale blue was mainly used by contractors or company staff working in social or administrative areas and the dark blue t-shirts and jeans were for the unskilled workers. Men in red overalls were workers from the Chinese company Sinopec, which, in addition to being one of the owners of the project, also conducted drilling operations through a specialized subsidiary.

I got a ride in one of the white SUVs along with the CSR manager, the security chief (a retired police official) and the driver, John, an inhabitant of the ciénaga, a company worker and also, I would soon learn, a demobilized paramilitary. That trip from the airport to the compound was intense. On our way, the head of security, who was called Mayor (which is how the people in the company addressed the security chief, in reference to the high-ranking position he held before leaving the police) asked my opinion of paramilitarism, about my current political views and possible political activities during the time that I had been a student at the National University of Colombia. He asked me about my life in Norway (a country that, he told me, was helping the Colombian guerrillas), and about my personal life. It was difficult for me to hide my thoughts from this intense questioning. They were Colombians like me, so they could deduce my provenance. I knew that my skin color, social origin, political opinions and gender/age would strongly influence my interactions with people in the ciénaga, both those working for the oil company and the inhabitants.

In order for readers to better understand where I stand in the race and class-oriented society of Colombia I should share some information about my background. I was born in Chiquinquirá-Boyacá. My father is a truck driver who grew up in the mountain town of Chiquinquirá in the highland peasant interior of the country. My mother is a housewife from the Oriental Plains region of the country, a region that most Colombians simply call the Llanos. However, I spent most of my childhood on the Caribbean Coast in the city of Barranquilla, because my father transported goods to and from that city’s port. In Colombia, the Caribbean is considered to be the opposite of the interior, not only in terms of climate and vegetation, but also in terms of behaviour,
preferences and even phenotypes. I thus grew up with the complication of not being entirely from a specific region, or rather being simultaneously from two ‘opposed regions’. In a regionalist country such as Colombia, where identity and even personality correlate strongly with region of origin, regionalism must be understood as an expression of the moral topography (Taussig, 1987) that has emerged since colonialism: a moral topography that I consider continues to unfold as a coloniality of power (Quijano, 1992), which organizes the geography of sociocultural differences in my country.

Colombia is a fragmented country with a number of small countries inside its borders. However, attaching importance to belonging to a specific region might seem odd in a country that has suffered from an internal armed conflict for over sixty years (a conflict that has produced the massive forced internal displacement of as many as seven million people, most of them moving from one region to another in an internal exodus). It is nevertheless interesting that when you enter a conversation with a Colombian, this person will behave as if they are from one particular region. But soon you will discover her or his heterogeneous life experience, precisely because of this internal exodus. For me, it was challenging to grow up in the Caribbean with a family from the interior. However, I think this personal experience shaped in me a disposition to understand that people do not have fixed identities but life trajectories, and that most of us experience, in the course of our lifetimes, uncanny situations of in-between-ness.

When I turned 17, I left the Caribbean and moved back to the interior to pursue studies in anthropology at the National University of Colombia in Bogotá. A few months after beginning my studies I joined a leftist party, motivated to participate in the political struggle for social justice. Studying anthropology was for me motivated not just by intellectual curiosity, but also by political commitment because anthropology was, and still is, perceived to be placed firmly on the left of the country’s political spectrum.

The Anthropology Department of the National University opened in the 1960s, at a time when social, political and guerrilla movements, and not least the indigenismo movement, were influencing debates about culture, identity and the construction of the Colombian nation-state. Anthropology in Colombia was part of a major and broader project to explore the heterogeneity of the country and the people of Colombia. Fieldwork was always situated inside Colombia, and during my four years at the university I never heard of anybody
going abroad to do anthropological research (only when reading the classics). Good fieldwork was exploring deep Colombia: La Colombia profunda.

Colombian anthropology was shaped by the influence of the ethnologist Paul Rivet, who moved to Colombia to escape the fascist Vichy regime in France during the Second World War. Rivet established the Museum of Anthropology in Colombia with the purpose of creating an inventory of indigenous groups under threat of extinction (Román, 1986). In the 1980s, the emphasis on indigenous groups was predominant although it did not mean that other social groups were not also studied, albeit from an indigenous perspective (that is to say: as if they- other social groups- were indigenous) (Restrepo, 2014). The focus was, however, on 'oppressed groups', a Marxist influence in Colombian anthropology Arocha and Friedmann (1984), Jimeno (1999) and Correa (2006).

In the 1990s, Colombian anthropology experienced a transformation triggered by the Colombian Institute of Anthropology, which oriented the discipline toward what was termed 'The Anthropology of Colombian Modernity' (Uribe & Restrepo, 1997). This was an approach influenced by anthropologists with an academic background in the US and Europe who introduced post-structuralism to the Colombian anthropological community. Perhaps the most prominent of these scholars were Arturo Escobar, Peter Wade and Joanne Rappaport (Restrepo, 2014, p. 65). In these years, an eclectic combination of indigenismo, vernacular Marxism and post-structuralism transformed the anthropological foundations of Rivet, or what Eduardo Restrepo has termed the 'indiology', and of 'manual Marxism'. Debates moved toward exploring a varied spectrum of social groups and identity groups in dynamic transformations, with notions and practices unfolding from ideas of what modernity is such as in Colombia.

Colombian anthropology has been profoundly involved in debates on ethnicity and identity politics. Anthropologists contributed academic input, participated in demonstrations and influenced the preparation and enactment of laws.¹¹ By contributing committed ethnographic and anthropological analysis, they have for the last four decades worked closely with social and political movements to achieve political goals. This is the for

¹¹ One case in point was the anthropological community’s contribution to the elaboration and promulgation of Law 70 of 1993 that gave territorial rights to Afro-Colombian communities.
example the case of Vasco (2007), Rappaport (2007) and Fals Borda (1981). The latter devised the research methodology called Observation Action Participation. In that sense, anthropology in Colombia has been politically active and has developed theoretically alongside social movements and organizations. This anthropological practice is known far beyond the academic community, making it particularly risky for anthropologists to do research in areas dominated by movements linked to the far right, such as paramilitary groups. Thus, to do critical social science research at a public university of Colombia in the 1990s and the first decade of the 21st century sometimes had fatal consequences for researchers. During my time at the university, three professors of social sciences were assassinated inside the university, attacked by paramilitaries for their academic and political commitment to social change and justice: Hernán Henao (anthropologist, assassinated in 1999), Jesús Antonio Bejarano (economist, assassinated in 1999) and Alfredo Correa de Andrés (sociologist, assassinated in 2004).

Students as well as professors of a public university such as the National University of Colombia were back then considered to be potential subversives and guerrilla sympathizers, and therefore considered legitimate military targets by the right-wing armed groups. I learned to do ethnography by travelling across the country with our professors. Our means of transportation was the university bus. During one of these trips, I recall that 30 students travelled with one professor along the road Troncal del Magdalena through what was then the dangerous and paramilitary-dominated Middle Magdalena Region, and even traversed the municipality of Puerto Boyacá, the self-proclaimed anti-subversive capital of Colombia where I later did my fieldwork for this doctoral dissertation.

As an undergraduate, I took compulsory classes in the indigenous Uitoto language taught by an indigenous ethno-linguist, Prof. Eudocio Becerra. I also took classes in the language of the indigenous group Embera. These language studies were considered to be an integral part of the study of anthropology. We also had classes in biological anthropology: primatology, anatomy, forensic osteology and archaeology. The way the academic program was built was strongly inspired by the Boasian model of anthropology, a model stating that the discipline of anthropology is constituted by four different areas: Biology, Archaeology, Linguistics and Ethnology. I had the good fortune to become the assistant (monitora) of the Colombian anthropologist Jaime
Caycedo, who was also a prominent leftist political leader. Caycedo lectured on anthropological theory: Marxism and Colombia in the era of Globalization, mainly to undergraduate students. During his classes, an armed bodyguard was present inside the classroom. Another stood guard in the corridor, a third waited on the first floor and a fourth bodyguard sat inside the armoured Toyota-SUV parked right outside the faculty building. This was the socioeconomic, political and institutional context in which I learned anthropology - one that shaped my commitment, my sensibilities, my loci of enunciation, and the way I entangled with my fieldwork experiences for this dissertation. These experiences have shaped my awareness regarding the social life of the ciénaga, the world of oil extraction and the paramilitary phenomenon, and also the inhabitants: fisherfolk-colonos and demobilized paramilitaries living there, and beyond the violence and pollution.

'Loci of enunciation' refers to the historical, epistemological and bodily place from which an enunciation is expressed. That is to say, from where a claim or assertion is made. To do research and arrive at an analytical conclusion is to make a claim. The claim is profoundly shaped by the method, the material, the theoretical framework, and the concepts through which the empirical material was elaborated. But it is also shaped by the trajectory of the researcher, which will guide her/his emphases, choices and capacity to notice or not notice what is presented during the course of the investigation. To be explicit, my loci of enunciation – considering my personal and academic trajectory – is in this research in line with the decolonial perspective: an attempt to dismantle the monolithic concept of 'knowledge subject' crafted by modern reason (Mignolo, 2005) and conceive the diversity of knowledge practices that may shape research claims, which have emerged from my sensitivity in dialogue with the diverse inhabitants of the ciénaga and the oil field.

Gupta and Fergusson’s critique inspired me to reflect on my own anthropological experience, and to think about how to do fieldwork and field in my own country. As an ex-colony, like my own geographical field, Colombia has been the source of my personal inquiries and motivations, and of those I have acquired by being part of Colombian anthropology, like my encounters with fieldwork in Puerto Boyacá – in the ciénaga - and my life in Norway. Considering all this, how similar and different to what Gupta and Fergusson argued did the field-fieldwork relation become to me?
1.4 The Layers of the Field

The usual way to enter the compound from the town of Puerto Boyacá, was to drive South on the national highway, the Troncal del Magdalena, take a left after a couple of kilometres and drive down a dirt road until reaching the compound. I did the same my first time and many times after. At the entry to the compound there was a checkpoint with armed and uniformed private security personnel. The site was popularly called la vara, and was where the trade unions and inhabitants usually held their protests against the company. Inside the compound the road was paved and smooth, very different from the outside. On the left side of the road, there was a site where infrastructure waste was being dumped, while spare pipeline sections were carefully stacked on the right. On this side of the road there was also a workshop for heavy equipment. Spare parts were stored in front of the workshop in what looked to be an old North American barn, a building that John told me had been set up by the former oil field operator Texaco over 70 years ago. The scorching sun, the suffocating humidity and the intense tropical rains had damaged the building. It was now a dilapidated remnant of the once-dominant North American presence in this enclave.

As we drove further down the road from the checkpoint, I also spotted an enormous storage site where two drill towers with the Sinopec logo had been erected. I could also see other types of Chinese equipment. Next to the storage site the containers housing the Chinese workers had been set up. These workers were engineers from three different Chinese companies (Sinopec, Antanoil and Kerui), and during my fieldwork I learned that most of them had previously worked on similar projects in Central Africa, Equatorial Guinea, Kazakhstan and Ecuador. They came from different provinces in China: Hubei, Hunan, Guangdong, Guizhou and even Taiwan. But the locals and the Colombian engineers working for the company simply called them los Chinos, the Chinese. Their presence was also a signal of a change in global hegemony or at least of its diversity. It was also a sign of transition, and even more significant was to see how the Chinese and Indians had decided to recover the American architecture inside the compound, to inhabit it in their takeover of the Texaco enclave.

After passing the housing containers, we reached a bridge built over Caño Velásquez, the stream that gives the oil field its name. We then drove into what seemed to be a jungle. On both sides of the road one can
observe exuberant teaks and African palms. These foreign trees, planted decades ago by Texaco, had mixed with the endemic trees of the once impenetrable Carare jungle, forming a hybrid 'Jurassic Park' landscape with colorful heliconias, toucans and howler monkeys. I later observed that this forest existed only inside the compound indicating that the remains of the Carare jungle have paradoxically enough been protected by the walls of the oil company’s compound. Outside the compound only a few trees are left, most of the land has been turned into a pasture landscape around the ciénaga.

Inside the compound, especially the area next to the canteen, there were sites where mango, mandarin, guava and lemon trees had been planted. There was plenty of fruit in salads, juices and desserts in the company restaurant. Not much fruit, however, was eaten by the residents. So the fruit that the monkeys, birds and other animals did not eat simply fell to the ground, where it rotted to nourish the green grass inside the compound. Distributing this fruit to the inhabitants outside was prohibited. The compound canteen was decorated with three murals; one of the Taj Mahal, another of the Forbidden City in Beijing with the stern face of Chairman Mao Zedong, and a third one that depicted the so-called Lost City of the indigenous Tayrona people in the mountains of Santa Marta in the North of Colombia. From the ceiling hung a big red embroidered Chinese good luck knot.

The corporate offices were located two kilometres from the canteen, and we made a brief visit to the building before continuing our tour. The offices smelled of recently-made coffee and 25 people (engineers and secretaries) from Bogotá, Medellín, Santander and Puerto Boyacá were working there in what seemed to be a relaxed environment. A few metres from the offices we found the engineers’ housing area. They stayed in these bungalows a minimum of 5 days and seldom more than a month. These houses had been built by Texaco decades ago and preserved a distinct American style. At the far end of the housing complex there was a two-story house where Texaco’s American managers used to stay. It had now been taken over by the Chinese and Indian managers. I spent many nights in the bungalows, and always felt that I was being observed. My paranoia increased when I learned, talking with one of the secretaries, that the mayor had hidden cameras in different parts of the field, to prevent robberies. As the rumor spread, company employees started joking about
the perils of doing anything improper in the compound as the mayor might be observing the illicit behaviour. To me, seeing and experiencing it from the inside, the compound reminded me of Foucault’s Panopticon.

The company compound was 14 kilometres from the body of water of the ciénaga. Between the two places, the ciénaga and the compound, the oil infrastructure unfolded: roads, trucks, pipelines, production batteries, tanks, pumps, oil and water wells, pump jacks, rigs and electrical towers. Along the road there were also houses, huts, grocery stores, brothels, schools, churches, soccer fields, pastures and farms. Nonetheless, the ciénaga also extended toward the compound, overflowing during heavy rainy seasons. The ciénaga was a live actor in the oil extraction operation, because its water was injected into wells; in turn, it was polluted by the waste water of production that ended up in the water body and in the subterranean streams. The ciénaga’s fisherfolk-colonos had also spread all over the oil infrastructure, as the inhabitants were employed to operate machines, construct and maintain infrastructure, also securing sites and cleaning installations, but most importantly living inside the infrastructure.

The ciénaga and its people penetrated the company also through environmental conflict. The fisherfolk-colonos unleashed regular waves of anger against the oil company. The ciénaga was a constant matter of concern for the managers inside the compound because they were worried that the operation could be shut down by environmental authorities due to the dire environmental situation. We might have been 14 kilometres away from the body of water, but the ciénaga was, in practice, inside the oil company’s compound itself.

At the end of my tour with the driver, John, he suggested we should go to the farthest part of the compound so that he could show me something important. As we approached the site, he wanted to show me, I saw a number of decaying houses that were kind of Victorian in style, with gabled ceilings. Trees and other plants were taking over the place, even growing inside the ruins. As we stepped out of the car and walked toward the ruins, I felt I was entering another time and place. The air became denser, humid and full of dust. Being there, I suddenly remembered that I was alone not just with an inhabitant of the ciénaga, a worker of the company, but someone who had been a paramilitary. He directed my gaze, pointing with his finger and told me, "look at this house, the one with the graffiti, it used to be the guesthouse for the military commanders from the Bárbula Batallion, and also of the paramilitary commanders.” I took a picture of the house and,
simultaneously, John took a picture of me taking the picture. The situation frightened me, and so did the layering of time, place and persons that had inhabited this enclave. It all mixed in my mind and suddenly I felt that it was the ethnographer that was the one who was being observed. At that moment, I felt that John was not just one person but different persons at the same time. I felt the uncertainty of not knowing which of these Johns could emerge at this very moment of condensation and exposure. I asked the ‘hims’ to return the ‘mes’ to the main gate of this layered place, a compound-oil field inside a ciénaga in Puerto Boyacá in the Middle Magdalena of Colombia.

My loci of enunciation has been formed by the heterogeneity of the layers of which my life is made up, and has shaped my way of thinking, my sensibilities, the knowledge and the techniques that I have learned. My ‘mes’ in the loci intertwined in our encounter with the various ‘hims’ of John, some of which I felt were threatening to me. I also intertwined with the histories, the materialities, the infrastructures and the forces of nature in this place, forces that affected my ‘mes’. Ethnography as experience is particular to those moments. My ethnography is precisely that, the result of my research determination, and the randomness and heterogeneous entanglements that made that a place, through me, through my fieldwork. My fieldwork was different from anyone else’s. It was heterogeneous ‘mes’ and ‘theirs’ entangled. Together we formed this network that was my fieldwork.

Gupta and Fergusson destabilized anthropology when they raised the issue that the field have consisted of concerns related to the savage, the other, the peasants, the correlative places at the peripheries and mainly ex-colonies, the third world, the rural areas to which the fieldwork was oriented. According to Gupta and Ferguson, fieldwork and field relations in this interpretation seem to reproduce existing conceptions rather than opening up diverse concerns and a diversity of locations (1997). I feel identified and inspired by this analysis. But what I wanted to claim, at the end of this methodological chapter, that in addition to this important criticism that these authors made, there are other anthropologies that in their practice and trajectories do not fit into this type of direct field-fieldwork relationship. This means that we have to think about how field-fieldwork is constituted in other relationships, without ignoring colonial-modernity legacies in anthropology, but displaying precisely the complex forms that they could take from different locations. I suggest that the field in
my research is made of many layers, networks that overlap and in which I am entangled (differently, but in more or less symmetrical ways), as my enunciation loci is involved in each layer (oil company, the village, Puerto Boyacá) so my fieldwork practices vary according to the layer of the field I am interacting with.

In my experience, I found that considering my loci of enunciation, the doing of anthropology in my country of origin, Colombia, while writing in Norway resonated with the notion of the anthropology of the south developed by Esteban Krotz, a condition that implies being immersed in asymmetric relations, and which unfolded from the colonial-modern world system after the conquest of America (Krotz, 1993). But at the same time, the anthropology of the South has the potential to see from the subaltern side while creatively coping with asymmetry, providing opportunities for empathy and more symmetrical encounters with those people living in our fieldwork. As I have mentioned, the people in my fieldwork were not a distant other to me, but were those whom I encountered and became entangled with in my heterogeneity, and I with their heterogeneity by my close encounters with them in fieldwork.

The anthropology of the South – part of the Latin American decolonial scholarship – allowed me to feel close to the inhabitants of the ciénaga, for whom originally I had no sympathy and with whom I felt it would be hard to develop rapport, as I had considered, prior to my fieldwork, that they were paramilitary followers. The decolonial perspective allowed me to locate myself on the side where the asymmetry of power relationships in this region had a greater impact. It was with the disarmed inhabitants. Thus, when doing my fieldwork, my field of inquiry was transformed. Rather than reproducing conceptions about the place, as 'the paramilitary territory', its heterogeneity opened other dimensions to me (and of me), including of other-than-human agencies.

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12 Restrepo and Escobar (2005) organized the way in which a series of authors framed the differences between doing anthropology from ex-colonies and doing international anthropology as follows: central versus peripheral anthropologies (Cardoso de Oliveira, 1999-2000); international versus national anthropologies, anthropologies of nation-building and anthropologies of empire-building (Stocking, 1982, Archetti, 2006), hegemonic and non-hegemonic anthropologies (Ribeiro and Escobar, 2002), ‘indigenous’ or ‘native’ anthropologies (Fahim and Helmer, 1980; Jones, (1970) 1988; Narayan, 1993), ‘anthropology with an accent’ (Caldeira, 2000) and, finally, anthropologies of the South (Krotz, 1997). These framings touch on different critical aspects of situated anthropological knowledge practices and the enactments of international anthropology within.
1.5 Writing Ethnography: Translations and Decoloniality

Back in Norway, during the frozen spring of 2015, I began writing up my fieldwork experiences in English. I soon found myself facing the challenge of translating Spanish words describing beings, things and feelings that I realized did not have equivalents in English. Evocations that, to be accurate, needed other words in English to evoke what I felt in Spanish. The most difficult word to translate was *ciénaga*, the specific biophysical, social process and territory where I did my fieldwork. The challenge of translating *ciénaga* for the English reader, and for the Scandinavian listener, without betraying the inhabitants and the *ciénaga* itself, pushed me into the tri-border area between the two anthropologies, Colombian and Norwegian, while also trying to work with the inhabitants’ local conceptualizations.

Methodologically, the ontological turn in anthropology offered me tools to explore the multiplicity of *ciénaga*, and mobilized my anthropological endeavours to reflect on translations and how to be evocative when writing ethnography; how to unpack words, concepts and practices in the attempt to evoke the experiences and things that I was involved in during my fieldwork. 'Ciénaga' was a particular case of translation, as this body of water was referred to differently in different situations: lake, swamp, wetland, humedal and marsh, revealing to me not just its multiplicity in enunciative practices, but also the material effects of these enunciations.

I had to write for different publics in Colombia and in Norway, places where the weight of my ethnography had different relevance. Between these two anthropologies, my sensibility of epistemic disconcertment awakened, thanks to reading Helen Verran (2013), who made it possible for me to understand this. However, my awareness of the different locations of anthropologies, and myself in the middle, was inspired by Gloria Anzaldúa's thinking as an immigrant from the border (1987). In this dissertation you will find an effort to translate *ciénaga* for the international public as well as for the Colombian public, for the first trying to make the unfamiliar familiar, and for the latter to destabilize their common sense.

John Law starts his book *After Method* (2004) by saying that he is not against method, but that he finds it complicated for science to sustain the non-explicit limitations of method. So, assuming method without complications prevents us from taking into account other textures of reality: textures that are not so clear; textures that are messy. His book is an attempt to imagine how it would be to embark on social sciences better
equipped to handle confusion, chaos and ambiguity, anchored in material semiotics. After Method is about neutralizing pre-conceptions and navigating the messiness by following the semiotics of the materialities and focusing on the concrete practices that take place during fieldwork.

I crafted the methodological design of this research, inspired by decoloniality and material semiotics and while living between anthropological worlds, by following this messiness by describing concrete activities that people performed in their environments, and this analytical practice questioned predetermined conceptions about the places of my fieldwork: the conceptions of Puerto Boyacá and the ciénaga. And my involvement with them. This awareness prevented me from foreclosing a more heterogeneous setting. As I mentioned in the introduction, I found in my fieldwork that different but also paradoxically complementary practices converged in the ciénaga, a situation that invited analysis that overcame its stigma as a paramilitary cradle and invited me to trace other practices in making this place.

Decoloniality requires finding means of mutual understanding and reciprocity. One of the thinkers of the ciénaga, who made an important contribution to enabling this project, was Don Milagros, the oldest Afro-Colombian fisherman. He died of natural causes a few months after my fieldwork. But in one of our conversations, he asked me to translate into Spanish the historical chapter of this dissertation and distribute copies to the inhabitants. He wanted to have a written history told by the locals, such as him, about this place. I cherish my encounter with Don Milagros, for the things he taught me about the ciénaga, about Puerto Boyacá, about the Colombian state, about his life. Don Milagros and other friends and informants changed my relationship with the place as heterogeneous.

After this cohabitation, friendships and mutual collaboration in the ciénaga, I feel that my major decolonial intervention in this research has been unpacking the heterogeneity of the place. But also allowing myself to be affected by it, and making of this influence an opportunity for reflection by explaining my loci of enunciation. I noticed that I was also part of my fieldwork, and that I was therefore not something other or separate from them and from me, in my relations with fieldwork-field. I was also there, produced in these particular encounters.
Taking into account what I have raised, the ethics that transpire in this research came from the experience of mutual affection. Mutual affection, after the years of working on this research, has generated in me an enormous respect for the inhabitants of the ciénaga, while understanding the complexity of their situations, in which they had to make difficult decisions and also to create opportunities. This dissertation describes the harm, the difficulty the violence, and underlying persistence, for which I will claim an amphibian disposition.

I decided to change the original names of my informants - the inhabitants, scientists, officials, engineers and friends - for their security. I have also re-grouped some of the stories and anecdotes described, so that their identities cannot be traced. This research refers to a very small and easily identifiable community, that until very recently was under paramilitary control and isolated from visitors, which is why the majority of photos that illustrate the dissertation are presented without focus on faces to anonymize people. It is my responsibility to protect those who generously opened their lives and thoughts during my fieldwork, and who helped make this research relevant in presenting – from the ground up – versions of paramilitary history, the oil enclave formation and the role of the Colombian state in the atrocities that have occurred in this place. However, I do not want to revictimise the inhabitants. On the contrary, I want to highlight their disposition for persistence and re-existence.

It is important to mention that, during the course of my research, I made explicit my affiliation to the University of Oslo and also my role as a PhD researcher independently funded by Colciencias – the Ministry of Education of Colombia. The independence and respect that I always showed in the different conversations and encounters that I had, made me deserving of reciprocal respect on the part of the engineers of the company and the state’s civil servants, as well as the scientists. Primarily, however, it produced a bridge of trust between

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13 The information that makes up this dissertation, audio recordings, files, notebooks, digital files with transcripts of interviews, photographs, videos, institutional documents, and other documents and maps that the inhabitants shared with me, were archived on the hard drive of the University of Oslo computer. Other parts of the documentation were secured in my personal library. Information at the University of Oslo is codified. Information in my archives is treated with discretion. I intend to delete these archives after the publication of this dissertation. This research has not been developed using the cooperation of children, nor with people without full possession of their mental faculties or those who are disabled. I have not been required to take biological samples, or perform activities involving the use of archaeological material. Access to the different sites both within the oil company and in the homes of the inhabitants has been made with the full permission of the oil company, of managers in the headquarters in India and Colombia, and at the invitation and with the permission of the inhabitants.
myself and the inhabitants, particularly the demobilized paramilitary personnel and the women. Independence and respect allowed me to approach this complex place and its difficult stories, and to see the other practices that made life in the ciénaga.

The volume of information, situations and impressions after one year of fieldwork are enormous and deeply complex to handle. I have therefore chosen, for this publication, the stories and anecdotes that help me to evoke and explain the difficulties and beauties of the ciénaga. Other more difficult stories were not used, partly out of respect for the territory and the people who lived them. It has not been my purpose to continue the stigmatization of this place. The stories that are written here have the approval of the narrators or of those with whom I lived these moments. During the fieldwork, I developed a form for informed consent, which is attached at the end of the dissertation. I also sent e-mails to inform the people who were included in my chapters. In the case of scientists, I sent them preliminary copies of the chapters in which I mention them. For those who do not read English, I had conversations in which I explained to them that I was using their story or our anecdotes in chapters. I also explained to them how I was considering conveying that story. Fortunately, my informants gave me their approval and took the opportunity in these conversations, to help me elaborate my analysis much better. They also requested copies of my dissertation translated into Spanish, a process I will start in a couple of months after the Viva is completed. My methodology has experimented with decoloniality, and interpreted it through reciprocity and analysis together. I was with the people in the fieldwork, and have therefore included myself among them, entangled with them and a part of the network that formed this research.
Chapter 2

The Pasts of the Ciénaga

This chapter explores the historical layers sedimented in the *ciénaga* by diverse peoples and practices, in the heterogeneous and paradoxical present of its persistence. This is the central argument of this dissertation. The historical approach I propose understands the place and their inhabitants through the many layers of which they are made. This is an approach inspired by material semiotics and the ontological turn, one that resonates with decolonial thinking, in the sense of unpacking the trajectories that have led ontologies-epistemologies to temporarily stabilise and manifest in practices.

Luz is the daughter of Luis Montaña, one of the first fisherfolk-*colonos* who came to the *ciénaga* in the 1940s after Texaco opened up the jungle with the road and the oil infrastructure. Luz was still a fairly young woman, had two children and had recently married the father of her second son. A couple of years prior to this she had set up a small restaurant on the dock of the village Muelle Palagua in the *ciénaga*. Luz was born in the *ciénaga* and had lived the majority of her life there. In 1997, however, she left the *ciénaga* to work as a cleaner in Bogotá, leaving behind the violence of the Middle Magdalena Valley. After some time, she again packed her bags and left for Leticia-Amazonas where she ran a motorcycle business until 2003. Luz is a strong and independent woman, and she was at the time of my fieldwork working hard on a project that she believed had the potential to heal the *ciénaga* by cleaning its waters and attracting more animals.

Shortly before I finished my fieldwork, Luz asked me to write the history of the *ciénaga* – as Don Milagros had also done. She believed that by doing this, I could help change how the *ciénaga* was perceived, making its past seem less negative to the outside world and contribute to the creation of a positive narrative for the inhabitants. Luz’s initiative was seen by some in the *ciénaga* as an opportunity beyond paramilitarism and oil extractivism.

Paramilitary demobilization and the arrival of the Sino-Indian company in 2014 created the conditions for the emergence of initiatives such as that of Luz. This chapter is partly an attempt to write a history of the *ciénaga* for her. But it also took me further and submerged me in archives, history books and in conversations.
about the past. In this chapter, I want to present the history of the ciénaga, based on a history that is made up of different layers of simultaneous and intermingled versions of the past, which were able to surface during my fieldwork.

Michel Trouillot has shown us how the past is not monolithic, and that many silences conceal experiences and social processes that continue to resonate in the present (1995). The Bolivian thinker Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui has claimed, referring to Maurice Bloch’s concept of ‘diachronic contradictions’, that these ignored pasts and unresolved contradictions persist and manifest their existence through simultaneous articulations in the present (Rivera-Cusicanqui, 2010). I want to say that different pasts have sedimented in the ciénaga and that they temporarily overflow and are decanted, manifesting a sense of irresolution, different versions of the past affecting the present. Don Milagros was a local thinker who generously shared with me many of his memories of the past. He was a fisherman of Afro-Colombian descent who passed away in January 2017 at the age of 95. I hope that in this dissertation, his memories and reflections can continue to live through parts of these texts, as translated and shared with the inhabitants of the ciénaga (his descendants), as this was my promise to him. During our conversations about how the ciénaga was populated, how the oil enclave was formed and how the paramilitary emerged, speaking in a retrospective tone and very aware of his advanced age, it was with a certain satisfaction that he told me that to die of old age was indeed a privilege, having lived in a place like the ciénaga. He had survived paramilitary violence and contamination. I also felt this was a way to honour and remember the relatives and neighbours who had died or left during these decades of paramilitary terror. It was also a way to accuse the paramilitary of such atrocities, while distancing oneself from them.

Through conversing with Don Milagros, I understood that not all the inhabitants of Puerto Boyacá were or are supporters of this armed group and ideology. On the contrary, many have resisted and endured them, and have today persisted. While Don Milagros was telling me this, his daughter shouts from the kitchen: Papá Callese la Boca! (“Dad shut your mouth!”). He replied, “I’m so old, I’m going to die soon, I’m not afraid of the paracos, I can say what I think.”
Picture 1 Don Milagros, image shared by his relatives on Facebook as part of an invitation for the community and family to come his funeral the 27 of January of 2017. The picture is reproduced with the permission of the family.

The ciénaga is part of the municipality of Puerto Boyacá and of the region of the Middle Magdalena. It is a territorial formation that can be portrayed through the history of Colombia’s continuous state of exception and paramilitarism, as elaborated by the Colombian historians and anthropologists Carlos Medina Gallego (1990), Alejo Vargas (1992), Alfredo Molano (2009) and Maria Victoria Uribe (2001). However, in these important accounts, the history of paramilitarism as experienced by the ciénaga’s inhabitants has been unknown. This chapter is therefore inspired by the desire to bring back these memories, while acknowledging that it has been only possible due to the conditions existing at the moment I carried out my fieldwork, a period of transition after paramilitary demobilization. In this transition, the inhabitants felt some kind of peace, that allowed them to talk about the past. I felt that the emergence of memories about the paramilitary was not only a manifestation of that past, but that they were also, through this manifestation, an exploration of other possibilities in the present and about the future.
This chapter is divided into four sections: 1. Zambos-Bogas, 2. Texaco Enclave, 3. Company Town formation, and 4. Agrarian Reform: four chronological and historical processes that took place in the ciénaga, that were vividly remembered by the inhabitants and oil engineers, and that were collated in newspapers and history books. These four processes had shaped the social and ecological relationships in this body of water; by teasing them out, I was able to provide an account of the trajectory and constitution of the biosocial relationships of this body of water, which I argue was created by the intersection and entanglement of these social trajectories and biophysical processes.

2.1 Zambos-Bogas in Palagua

‘On January 24 (Saturday) 1761 we arrived at the estate of Hilario Bonilla, in Palagua. There, I saw a plant of which I have a description. I also saw a little bird, called Sangre (blood). It was like a zorzal from Spain, its color was similar to the color of fire, but it had a fineness akin to that of the chupaflor (hummingbird). (...) I collected the following plants: A *Polyandria, Solanum forsan novissima*, *Caulis aculeatus, Mentzelia* (...) that day we had a strong storm and then more heavy rain.’ (Jose Celestino Mutis in Anibal Noguera, El Rio Grande de la Magdalena)

This is a fragment from the diary of Jose Celestino Mutis, a Spanish priest, doctor, botanist and mathematician who led the Royal Botanical Expedition to the New Kingdom of Granada in 1783. These notes are from a trip he made prior to that expedition and this fragment was written whilst travelling from Cartagena to Santa Fe de Bogotá, the capital of the Viceroyalty of New Granada, which was the Spanish colonial administrative district corresponding to the combined territories of modern day Colombia, Venezuela, Ecuador and Panamá. Santa Fé was located in the deep interior of the viceroyalty, at 2,600 meters above sea level in the cold highlands of the Andes mountain range. Here, the Spanish could enjoy good weather and were far enough away from the ‘aggressive’ Indians of the lowlands. The only way to reach the capital from Spain was to enter from the Caribbean Coast, then take a boat up the Magdalena River to the town of Honda, the first town in the lowlands and a village near the ciénaga. From there travellers headed up into the mountains, the indigenous people carrying both people and goods up the steep slopes. This was a trip that, at the time, took almost three
months. The means of river transport were crucial, the *bogas* (rowers) piloting boats using canoes or *champans*.\(^{14}\)

![Image](image.png)

**Picture 2 "Navegation sur la Magdalena" Alcide d’Orbigny, from the room of rare books and manuscripts at the Luis Angel Arango Library-Colombia**

To be a *boga* was a practice and a type of work during Spanish colonialism in Colombia in which the indigenous people, forced by the Spanish colonisers, rowed goods from Europe up the river, and gold and silver downstream from the continent’s interior. The slave condition resulted in the decimation of the indigenous people, and the initiation in the sixteenth century of the slave trade\(^ {15}\) from Africa. The first documented shipment of slaves to Cartagena de Indias dates back to 1533. At the time, Cartagena de Indias was the principal maritime trade hub in South America (Arocha, 1999; 2000). The indigenous *bogas* that had survived slavery were gradually replaced by African slaves (Peñas, 1988, p. 11). In this transition period, the

\(^{14}\) A type of boat invented in 1560 by Alfonso de Olalla and Hernando Alcocer (Lamus, 2014, p. 105)  
\(^{15}\) The exploration of the Magdalena River began with the Spanish conquistador Rodrigo de Bastidas in the Sixteenth Century, and this marked the beginning of an exploitative relationship where indigenous peoples were forced to navigate canoes up and down the river. Violence and harsh labor conditions soon led to a sharp reduction in the number of the indigenous. The Spanish Dominican friar Bartolome De Las Casa reacted to this abusive practice by proposing legislation that would prohibit mistreatment of indigenous that were used as *bogas* on the Magdalena River. For some time, the conquest of the Magdalena River was slowed down due to the discovery and exploitation of gold in the indigenous Zenu territory, but it was reactivated when Jimenez de Quesada heard about the abundance of emeralds in the Chibcha territories in the interior (Pena Galindo, 1988).
knowledge practices of the indigenous rowers were transferred to the Africans, so avoiding the disruption of profitable trade routes (Peñas, 1988, p. 155).

Some African slaves managed, throughout the following centuries of Spanish colonial rule, to escape and find refuge in the dense jungles inside Colombia and along the rivers. There, in relative safety, these *cimarrones* (marrons) people from different groups and places in Africa recreated their heterogeneous practices in new settlements, called *palenques*. Deep inside the floodable jungles, they encountered indigenous people who were also fighting or hiding from the Spaniards. Such unexpected encounters between African *cimarrones* and indigenous people generated friction (Tsing, 2005), but also coupling and complementarity, forming new ecologies of practices and knowledge (Stengers, 2005), (de Soussa Santos, 2016) through experimenting with ways to inhabit together the floodable jungles.

This clandestine life inside the dense jungles of Carare-Opón, jungles that used to envelop the Magdalena Valley, gave birth to the notion of the *zambo*. This designation was given by the Spanish to persons of African-Amerindian ancestry, a type of union that was not only forbidden by the Spanish, but was also despised (Peña, 1988). These *zambos* were in theory free people, as based on the debate of Fray Bartolome De las Casas and Juan Ginés de Sepulveda with regard to the ‘New laws in the Indias’. Those born of indigenous people were considered to have a soul and were convertible to the Catholic religion. The *zambos*, due to being born from the womb of indigenous women (mainly) (Ibarra, 2007), were considered, unlike blacks, free from slavery. In this context of the emergence of notions, interpretations and forms of organising the emerging social groups during Spanish colonialism, the *zambos*, became workers. They were paid to row on the Magdalena River for the colonial economy. In this way, being a *boga* became synonymous with *zambo* and the hiring of free workers for transport of goods on the Magdalena river.

Alexander von Humboldt referred to this mixture of people, talking explicitly about the *zambos* and placing significant emphasis on the sexual urges of their parents and their closeness to nature. This also speaks about the mentality of the scientific observers of that time and their moral concerns about the inhabitants of the Carare-Opón. In his notebook he wrote the following:
“Nowhere in the American world are there as many zambos as here (in the Valley of the Magdalena River) because the Indian women, tired of the cold Indian men, search voluptuously for the negroes.” (Alexander von Humboldt in Aníbal Noguera, Sin el privilegio del Don).

During colonialism, the number of zambos steadily increased. By the beginning of the seventeenth century, they were considered to be a separate social group in the Magdalena River Valley (Riaño, 2010). The zambos were associated with practices of navigation and inhabitation along the river, having the ability to live in the floodable jungles. There were historical references to the zambo presence all the way from the Caribbean Coast, the floodplains of Mompox to the colonial town of Honda at the centre of Colombia. In the ciénaga I found, in historical archives of the nation of Colombia, that a marron palenque was formed there and a settlement of zambos (Sánches & Santos, 2010).

The zambos and the palenques soon became an integral part of the lush jungles that embraced the Magdalena River. These places were described by travellers as inhospitable ‘deserts’ (Villegas, 2014, p. 155) full of alligators, snakes and mosquitoes, of scorching heat, suffocating humidity, turbulent waters, aggressive indigenous people16 and palenque warriors - factors that reduced the pace of the Spanish colonization of Colombia. Paradoxically with this resistance, the colony developed a relation with the zambos, in which they became a bridge between the colonial regime and the indomitable jungles, through transporting people and goods. A relation of transaction, dependency and conflict. In this relation, the Spanish conquerors and Criollos (Spaniards born in America) were frustrated by the indomitability of the zambos. Chroniclers referred to them as animals, as barbarians without whom it would have been impossible to travel on the river and through the jungles, and as a necessary evil. Interwoven in the texts of the European chroniclers are descriptions of a wild

16 Along the river the Spanish encountered a number of different indigenous groups, and the names of some of these tribes continue to live on as geographical names or references. The upper part of the Magdalena River was inhabited by the indigenous guasanebucans, the chimilas, the turbacos, the calamaries, the guriguanes, the pantagoras, the scimitarras, the muzos, the yareguies, the carates, the opones, the corpses and the carare and these indigenous groups called the river Caripuna. In the Middle Magdalena, the Karibe riverine tribes called the river Karakali. The Karib tribes, such as the guales, the guarinoes, the panches and the sutagaos gave the river the name Yuma, while for the yanaconas, the pijaos and their ancestors the river was known as Hauncayo or the River of the Tombs as it overflowed the tropical jungles where the pre-Columbian megalithic funerary monuments in San Augustin, in the department of Huila, are to be found (Río Grande de la Magdalena, coleccion Ecologica, Banco de Occidente, 2003)
and hostile landscape and vegetation and of physical and moral representations of the *zambos* (Riaño, 2010, p. 40). The chroniclers notably referred to the shouts, animal screams, insults and songs that the *zambos* rhythmically used to coordinate when driving heavy boats through the turbulent waters (Ochoa, 2014). The Colombian historian German Arciniegas referred to Palagua as a place of resistance controlled by black marrons, and in these terms:

“Por otra parte, el Magdalena era navegable hasta Honda, pero solo cuarenta años después de Quesada vino a fundarse allí el puerto que diera pie para el camino que llevara a Santafé. Y eso, por los negros cimarrones. Los esclavos traídos por los negreros a Cartagena y Santa Marta, fugándose, se habían hecho fuertes en Palagua. Si el camino por el Opón o el Carare era un infierno verde por la tierra caliente, los zancudos, alacranes, arañas y culebras, los negros cimarrones del palenque de Palagua resultaron más temibles que todas las alimañas del trópico reunidas. Estos esclavos, escapaban del Africa chiquita que les había preparado la corona española y al construír su república independiente en la selva tropical la defendían como diablos. No dejaban pasar carga española. Que se pagara el pecado cometido al haberles quitado su albedrío. Para escapar de ellos, los españoles decidieron seguir sacándoles el cuerpo, y hacerse fuertes en Honda.

Honda había sido la puerta de salida de Quesada, Federman y Belalcázar cuando dejaron a Santafé fundada y de un tirón navegaron todo el Bajo Magdalena desde los raudales de Guataquí hasta las Bocas en el Caribe. Irían a que el Rey decidiera para quién sería la conquista del Nuevo Reino. Honda quedó como el ombligo del Reino. Para defenderla de los negros del Palenque la hicieron fuerte. Fue una Cartagenita, cabeza del camino real, hasta que vino el ferrocarril.” (Arciniegas, G. Camino Real: Caminos del Mar, Caminos en Tierra, The Great Royal Road in Nueva Granada: the Magdalena River)

In historical references such as the one above, Ciénaga de Palagua appeared to be a place where fugitive black marrons and their descendants stood up and rebelled against the Spaniards. This place was perceived as an impenetrable border, not only because of the almost impassable vegetation, but also due to the indomitable fury of the escaped black slaves who were embedded in and protected by the jungle. According to Arciniegas, it was the desire for revenge that made the black marrons try to prevent the passage of Spanish goods along the
Magdalena River, so forming a frontier in Palagua. The *ciénaga* was at the heart of the Carare-Opón jungle, which even until the eighteenth century obstructed the Spaniards’ attempts to take effective possession of this territory. This led to the people living in these jungles not being conquered for three centuries after the conquest of América (Aprile-Gnise, 1992, p. 362).

The inability of the Spaniards, who had come from arid Mediterranean lands, to advance could partly be explained by their lack of knowledge of how to deal with floodable jungles. However, instead of retreating, they triggered a fierce confrontation during which most of the Amerindian inhabitants were exterminated or assimilated into the nascent villages that were established along the river.

The advancement of the Spanish was slow and unstable. By the mid-eighteenth century, Palagua had become known as a place where traders and travellers could stay and rest, especially after crossing the turbulent waters of the Angostura of Nare, a part of the river where today we find the village of Puerto Zambito and Puerto Nare. Merchants and other people passing through the region described the *ciénaga* as a calm place to rest, local criollos such as Hilario Bonilla and the *zambos* providing travellers with food and shelter. Celestino Mutis’ reference to Palagua confirmed this.
The map above was made in 1737 and can be found in the National Archives of Colombia. Different tributaries and riparian settlements are drawn on the map, which represents the course of the Magdalena River from Honda to the mouth of the River Caráre. On the right-hand side there are geographic references, such as the Warehouse of Port of Nare (11) and a nearby ciénaga (17). The ciénaga did not have a name. However, the proximity to the river and its location in relation to other geographic reference points makes it likely that this ciénaga was Ciénaga Palagua.

When searching for the ciénaga’s past, I found in Colombia’s General Archive of the Nation the following remarkable reference to African slavery. This testimony was echoed in the many places along the river that have references to the African diaspora, such as Puerto Zambito, Barrio Chambacu, Vereda Palenque, Base Militar Palenquero to mention few. The reference below dates back to 1782:

“Juan Gregorio and Maria Victoria, slaves of Pedro Bravo, inhabitant of Honda, reminded (…..) of their request for freedom, buying it from their master by selling the cocoa and banana plots they had in the hacienda of Palagua, the master intended to send them to Antioquia, to sell them and to ignore the fruit of their work.”

(AGN, Sección Colonia, Fondo Negros y Esclavos, Tolima, Tomo 02 Folios 24-87, Año 1782, my translation, from ancient Spanish to English)

The above is a denunciation made in the town of Honda, by two black slaves making accusations against their owner, the hacendado Pedro Bravo. According to the slaves, Bravo had promised them their freedom in exchange for their crops of cocoa and bananas. The slaves, however, had discovered that they would be secretly sold to someone living in the Department of Antioquia, a department on the other side of the river in another jurisdiction, Bravo then planning to steal their cocoa and banana crops. Their indignation and the degree of injustice they must have felt reverberates in the text, not least considering that they, as slaves, decided to make such a public accusation against the hacendado. I have not been able to find any document or reference that described how the story ended, but I did find out that Pedro Bravo had been named and shamed.
by the bishop of the Villa of Honda in the late 1770s for not paying taxes to the church. Bravo was later accused of homicide. These references give us an idea of the practices of some of the owners, the Spanish descendants: criollos, in the lands around the ciénaga in the eighteen century.

In Europe, the Enlightenment and the rights of man were declared. In the colonies, however, Europe’s wealth was won through the barbarisation of other humans. Latin American decolonial thinkers have proposed that one way of understanding the re-organization of the world after the conquering of America, is through the form of a Colonial-Modern World System (Mignolo, 2012) in which Europe’s modernity was the other side of constituted by colonialism in other parts of the world. Colonialism and modernity are therefore not two subsequent processes, but mutually constitutive.

At the beginning of the nineteenth century, the jungles of the Caráre-Opón were consolidated for the exploitation of quinina and tagua. These products were extracted to sell to British merchants, who also traded them illegally to advance the colonization of India and other parts of Asia. The trafficking of quinina and tagua and the zambo-boga notions contributed to shaping frontier imaginations, so inscribing a moral topography on the territory (Taussig, 1987).

The moral topography that emerged contrasts the cold highlands with the hot lowlands of Colombia, the majority of educated Europeans and the descendants of Europeans residing in the highlands, the lowlands being inhabited by “uncivilised” peoples, and those considered racially inferior - indigenous, blacks, mulatos and zambos (Villegas, 2014, p. 155). In this moral topography of oppositional difference between the highlands and the lowlands, landscape and inhabitants were entangled, endorsed identities and in opposition to one another.

The impressions of travellers and businessmen from different parts of Europe, such as France, England, Sweden and Spain of the zambos and bogas were recompiled in the works of Martin Camacho’s La Boga de los Indios (1596), Rufino Jose Cuervo’s El Boga (1840), Manuel Maria Madiedo’s El boga del Magdalena (1866) and Jose Maria Samper’s book De Honda a Cartagena (1866). These accounts refer to the bogas’ experiences of despair and abandonment, to bogas abandoning their cargo and their passengers on playones or islands in the middle of the river, to rowers who simply left the boat to participate in festivities and stories of
bogas who, tired of being treated badly by their passengers, simply decided to get revenge by torturing them with an excruciating journey or leaving them on the river bank far away from the closest village (Riaño, 2010, p. 48).

In the social pyramid of mestizaje, the zambos were entangled with the jungle, the unwanted result of carnal union between African slaves and indios, representing an obstacle on the path towards civilization, especially with regard to the development of a mercantile economy. Reliable transportation on the Magdalena river was crucial to reaching these goals. The allegedly undisciplined zambos and bogas therefore complicated the economic plans of the colonial elites and their descendants, who depended on the zambos and boga workforce, until the introduction of the steamboat at the beginning of the twentieth century.

Taking into consideration Anibla Quijano’s concept of ‘Coloniality of power’ (1992), I suggest that zambos and bogas were notions that emerged from the race and work matrix created by the modernity-colonial dynamic, a matrix that produced a scale according to which particular bodies could be assigned to different types of exploitative work. Considering Grasfoguel (2007), the colonial-modern system produced different forms of work and labor, which configured different types of body: slavery to black Africans, encomienda and mita to indigenous people, surveillance or semi-serfdom to dark mestizos such as zambos, mulatos, and petty-commodity production to whiter mestizos, wages and rent being exclusive income for the conquerors and their descendants. The coloniality of power unfolded from the race and work matrix still lives in the present by affecting different dimensions of social life, subjectivity and gender dynamics. It configures the order we

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17 Unlike the zambo, the mestizaje arises in Latin America as a metaphor that contributes to hierarchical social cohesion for the formation of national states. De la Cadena and Rivera Cusicanqui in different texts argue that miscegenation is inscribed in a long-term project of modernization and progress (Rivera Cusicanqui, 2010, p. 39) in which the indigenous-mestizos (de la Cadena, 2004) – as cultural manifestations of what it means to be mestizo, or a kind of modern, and not only a biological mix – and the zambo are invisibilized under mestizaje. In particular, the zambo and the indigenous-mestizos participate in modernization and progress as unseen protagonists, for example, in the agrarian reform in Cuzco-Peru, or in the creation of vernacular trade unions in the Colombian Middle Magdalena region. Another important aspect that Cusicanqui highlights is about those forms of mixture that are not welcome. That is to say, the degraded mestizaje (2010, p. 46) does not exist in the visible structure of mestizaje. However, in practical terms these other excessive forms of mestizaje – cholas, birlochas, and zambos – enter into the various forms of exploitative work of colonialism and continued to do so in the republic.
experience today (Lugones, 2008; Grosfoguel, 2007), in which conceptions about nature are also entangled with people, by enacting the moral topography of Colombia.

Towards the end of the nineteenth century, the oppositional discourse of highlands and lowlands took a new form, namely a form of productivity. This was what the author German Palacios has called ‘the liberalization of nature’ (Palacios, 2015), a reference to the economic potential that intellectuals from the highlands saw in the ‘tropical’ lowlands, as regions that could bring progress to Colombia if put into productive use. However, in order to do this, the strength of the zambos and bogas had to be domesticated to serve this economic model. In the eyes of Colombian intellectuals, the despicable rudeness and obdurate attitudes of the bogas were paradoxically also an asset in dominating the fierce river and surviving the harsh climatic conditions (Nieto, 2011, p. 87; Riaño, 2010). The bogas became a fascinating subject, who aroused both admiration and disdain and were seen as a strong force that would carry progress up the river. They emerged as subjected and subjects of the colonial-modernity economy.\(^{18}\)

At the end of the nineteenth century, many settlements and properties along the Magdalena River were destroyed by a flood, including what had been the Palaguan estates of Hilario Bonilla and Pedro Bravo. The flood was the result of an environmental phenomenon (which would happen again in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries) caused by periodic changes in the course of the river, marking cycles of isolation and resurgence of these villages. This flood once again isolated the region for decades, an isolation that would be disrupted at the beginning of the twentieth century by the formation of the oil enclave.

2.2 The Formation of Texaco’s Oil Enclave

The oil enclave formation was produced when the soil and subsoil was appropriated privately by a foreign corporation: Texaco. In this part of Colombia, the state does not enforce total sovereignty. The enclave’s soil

and subsoil is private. As I explain below, this has contributed to experimentation with para-state sovereignties like those that unfolded under paramilitary control.

At the beginning of the twentieth century Colombia had hardly any road infrastructure. Only 1500 km of railway line had been built in a country of 1,141,748 km² (Archila, 1988, p. 1). Travel was therefore very challenging. Since colonialism, the Magdalena River had continued to be the most reliable route of communication and mercantile transport. According to Victor Manuel Moncayo, twentieth century Colombia had a simple mercantile economy based on ‘non-capitalist’ development. Consumer goods were manufactured by independent artisans (Moncayo, 2009, p. 93) who exported simple raw materials. Most of the lowland and highland regions of the country were still covered by almost impenetrable jungles and mountains.

However, inside the floodable jungles of the Carare-Opón, crude oil poured up from springs. This oil was used by the indigenous for domestic and medical purposes. When the Spaniards discovered these springs, they called it betún (tar). Their most significant site was in the territory of the combative indigenous Yariguies, at a place named La Tora (today Barrancabermeja), three hours from the ciénaga.

The Velásquez oil field, located over the ciénaga, was one of the first three oil enclaves created in Colombia. Only two such enclaves are older than Velásquez, namely the banana enclave of the United Fruit Company in Ciénaga-Magdalena and the oil enclave of the Tropical Oil Company in Barrancabermeja. The three oil enclaves were located along the Magdalena River, partly to discover oil depositories, but also because the river guaranteed a fluvial connection from the interior to the ports on the Atlantic coast.

Plans to colonise the jungle on both sides of the Magdalena River were devised at the beginning of the twentieth century by private international actors. The Colombian state had been too weakened by the armed internal disputes of the entire nineteenth century after independence and the formation of the Republic, to lead the extraction initiatives. As a result, the government ceded the rights to develop and control major economic projects to mainly private foreign actors.

In 1899, in the middle of one of the country’s civil wars, the United Fruit Company (UFCO) set up a banana plantation in the municipality of Ciénaga and Aracataca in the Magdalena Department, even though the climatic conditions in the region were not ideal for bananas (Rojas, 2009, p. 41). Minor C. Keith, the owner of
UFCO, decided to carry out the project here because transportation and land were available. The fruit was sent to the USA, and foremen from the Caribbean islands were imported to Colombia, where they had been laboring on company plantations in Central America and on the Caribbean islands of Jamaica and Curazao (Legrand, 2009). The Colombian central government granted a concession to UFCO to construct a railroad from the plantation to the port of Santa Marta, as well as water usage rights (Rojas, 2009). Similar procedures were granted in the other enclaves. UFCO could soon expand the size of its plantation by taking over what seemed to be unused state owned land, the so-called *baldías* lands.

Peasants and *colonos* protested against land grabbing in the formation of enclaves along the Magdalena River, but it was tacitly accepted by local landlords, who benefited from the move, as did the central state apparatus which received rents from the concessions (Botero & Gúzman, 1977) (Legrand, 1998; Rojas, 2009). The sporadic interventions of the central government took two forms: the enactment of laws that attempted to regulate tensions over land, water resources and labor, such as Laws nos. 78 and 21 of 1919 and 1920 respectively (Archila, 1988; Moncayo, 2009). These were not enforced at local level however.\(^{19}\) Force and violence were then used to contain social protests. The Colombian army itself intervened on behalf of UFCO, something that had dramatic consequences.

In 1924, four years before the Bananeras Massacre in the UFCO enclave, a strike against the Tropical Oil Company, the ‘Troco’, had been organized in Barrancabermeja. This strike was similar to the one against UFCO and had a similar outcome, as the army opened fire on the protesting multitude. Catherine Legrand has argued that this kind of violent response to social protest in these enclaves had its origins in contradictory conceptions of politics inside the nascent Colombian state. The ambivalent state was partly controlled by the elites of the Liberal Party, who wanted to implement laws to improve the conditions of workers. At the same

\(^{19}\) The laws prohibited ‘strikes in activities linked to means of transportation, public aqueducts, public lighting, hygiene and cleanliness of the cities and mining of the nation, ordering that the conflicts should be subject to compulsory arbitration’ (Moncayo, 2009: 99) and that the strike must pass through all possible instances of dialogue with the employer and once the strike was allowed by the commission of arbitration of the State, it should not develop into any act of violence or so it would be outlawed and referred to the penal system. In sum, laws limited the strikes, and when they still took place, a law made them illegal.
time, the army had enough power to eliminate liberal political expressions within the state, which was infused by catholic-conservative ideology. As Taussig has described, the legalist liberals, and the doctrinaire conservative army were two faces of the same fragile configuration of a state that conveniently alternated, stimulating the nervous system of this society though contradictory contractions (Legrand, 2009).

These confrontations in the formation of the first enclaves in Colombia were much the same as those experienced in Latin America, including in México, Guatemala, Ecuador and Chile. Latin American colonial history was marked by extractivism and practices that continued after the end of colonial institutions through organizations such as the *hacienda* and the plantation systems (Wolf & Mintz, 1977; Polanyi, 1998), and which contributed to enclave economies that actualised coloniality.

From Dependency Theory, Cardoso and Falleto (1977) argued that enclaves in Latin America emerged after the rupture of the colonial pact in the mid-nineteenth century. In this context, the rise of nascent nation states implied the reconfiguration of external and internal political and economic alliances. On the one hand, relations were becoming reoriented towards new centres of power in the world, such as the USA, UK and France. On the other, the internal re-organisation of coalitions between national oligarchies kept hold of resources, the means of production and the workforce. Some elites were more successful in making these alliances than others. Enclaves were therefore different in character depending on the situation. According to Cardoso and Falleto, there were two types of enclave in Latin America: agricultural enclaves and mineral extraction enclaves.

The categorization elaborated by Cardoso and Falleto is useful in obtaining an overview of enclave formation in Latin America. However, there are still vernacular stories of enclaves and entanglements to relate. I therefore attempt to dig into the vernacularities of the Velásquez oil enclave, substantiation helping us to understand precisely what made it possible, not only through the realignment of the elite with the international economy, but also via the situated heterogeneity that specifically produced this enclave. In the following, I explore how the *hacienda* and the plantation economies participate in the Velásquez enclave formation. First, however, I look at how the terms *hacienda* and plantation are defined.
For Wolf and Mintz (1957), haciendas and plantations were different production systems that could exist simultaneously, linked to global capitalism and anchored in patron-servant relationships. According to these authors, the hacienda\textsuperscript{20} was an agricultural production system that, besides generating wealth for the owner, also focused on generating prestige. The hacienda was a production system which became a node of sponsorship-type clientelist relationships. The hacienda, in addition to producing bananas, cacao, rice, cotton or sugar cane, was used to cultivate power that produced gamonales;\textsuperscript{21} patrones\textsuperscript{22} and regional political caciques.\textsuperscript{23} These political and economic actors emerged from Latin America in the transition from colonialism to independent republics (Das & Poole, 2008; Vargas, 1992), so constituting today’s local political and economic actors.

These regional political patrons established their prestige through economic and coercive power and social-kinship relationships, which gave them the authority to hold sway over the regional government and to interact directly with the central government. Benedict Anderson, when discussing the strong influence of such leaders in The Philippines (another former Spanish colony), coined the term cacique democracy to describe political systems in which local patrons combined kinship and economic exploitative relationships to enact democracy (Anderson, 1988).

According to Mintz and Hobsbawm the plantation was a productive system for increasing profits through the most efficient productive scheme. Prestige could also be important here, but was not key, the plantation was emulating a factory in a rural setting. Anna Tsing (2012) offered insight into the logic of plantation production when she claimed that plantations are machines for replication, comprising eagerness for expansion with further scaling-up. A plantation was a scalable model that was sustainable as long as it expanded, which it generally achieved through the idea of a standard model. This standard logic was however, for Tsing, only

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui elaborates a definition of Hacendado and Hacienda, defining them as large estates with servile labor with the help of the army and mercenary forces recruited in rural towns, using the letter of the law to hide the brutal nature of their forced confiscation of Indian land. Description of the conditions in 1874 in Bolivia (2010, p. 34)
\item Authoritarian local leaders with excessive political or administrative power
\item A semi-feudal employer or leader of a group, a kingpin.
\item Local political strongmen or bosses
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
achievable by foreclosing the heterogeneity in which it was anchored. This meant that the entanglements that
made it possible to expand, including the prestige relationships of the *hacienda*, kinship, gender issues,
conflicts and interaction with nature were concealed behind the appearance of the model. In that way, the
model enactment was just a fraction of a wider process of foreclosing relationships. The *hacienda* and
plantation were not separated in the formation of the Velásquez enclave, it was the result of vernacularly
entangled processes.

In my fieldwork, when I asked the managers of the oil company why the enclave of Texaco was called
Velásquez, no one could give me an answer. However, in historical records, I found that Velásquez was the
name of a *quebrada* (stream) near the *ciénaga* where a peasant settlement was located. At the beginning of the
twentieth century, there was no productive *hacienda* or plantation system around Velásquez. It was a place
made by a stream and a tiny sunken *caserio* in the jungle, where people participated in subsistence fishing and
quinine and tagua extraction.

In 1926, Texaco was registered in Colombia. The geologist John D. Bower built the company’s first camp
near the *ciénaga*, next to the *quebrada* Velásquez, which still exists as a brown-green stream that crosses the
oil company’s compound. Having completed the building of the camp, Bower led the first oil exploration in the
Caráre-Opón jungle. The Texaco engineer is still remembered as someone who was admired by the Bogotá
elite, an audacious adventurer and a popular gentleman among the city’s high society and women (Marquie,
2012). For seven years, John Bower explored the jungles of Colombia in his search for oil. He travelled from
the Carare-Opón to Caquetá, Putumayo and Tolima, areas that today are still important oil producing regions.
The story goes that he always carried large doses of quinine in his luggage, which he administered to himself
and a number of the indigenous people and peasants who accompanied him on his quest. His camp could be
identified by the yellowish color of the eyes and skin of the people there, produced by their high consumption
of quinine. Bower produced the first geological maps of these areas of Colombia. When he settled around the
*ciénaga*, the peasants were displaced and the body of water in practice became part of Texaco’s property.
In 1929, Bower advised Texaco to buy the Guaguaqui-Teran Hacienda, a vast area of 163,108 hectares of land in the Caráre-Opón jungle (Marquie, 2012, p. 6). However, it would take Texaco 29 years to find oil there. The first oil well was opened in November 1946 in the *ciénaga*.

![Picture 4. John D. Bower in the first camp in the Vélasquez oil field in 1926, source: Texaco: History of an epic in Colombia](image)

At the time of purchase, the Hacienda belonged to the brothers Jorge and Ernesto Salcedo Salgar.24 According to its public deeds, and different to Mintz and Wolf’s definition, it did not produce any agricultural products. So what kind of *hacienda* was Guaguaqui-Teran in 1929? Its owners had not lived there during the 63 years the property had belonged to the family. This was an absentee owner property (Lamus, 2014).

Jorge and Ernesto Salcedo’s great-grandfather, General Lucrecio Salcedo, had bought the two adjacent plots of land, Guaguaqui and Teran, in 1866. In the same year, President General Tomas Cipriano de Mosquera declared that all Colombian land categorised as *tierras de manos muertas* (mortmain lands) would be sold at a public auction, to incorporate it into the Colombian land market. Mortmain lands were lands expropriated by

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24 Mr. Samuel Haskell, representative of Texaco in Bogota. Public title 369 of 1929 given at the Notaria Quinta del Circuito of Bogota.
the Catholic Church, in particular from the Jesuits when they were expelled from Colombia in 1850 under the presidency of the liberal general José Hilario López (Gutierrez, 2016). General Lucrecio Salcedo therefore managed to purchase the land at an auction in Bogotá. After buying the land, General Lucrecio Salcedo registered the land titles in the jurisdiction of Yacopí in the district of La Palma, a border district between the department of Cundinamarca and the department of Boyacá. The boundaries of the plots were delimited using natural reference points, the number of hectares however not being specified in the register. This would later lead to conflicts with other landowners (Medina, 1990; Pérez, 1994).

In December 1866, President General Mosquera issued a decree to adjust the boundaries between Boyacá and Cundinamarca. The decree stated that 100,000 hectares of baldías, unused state-owned land, in Territorio Vásquez would be given to the department of Boyacá to provide it with access to the Magdalena River. It was soon discovered, by both politicians in Boyacá and other farmers in the region, that 100,000 hectares of the baldías lands granted to Boyacá had been included into General Salcedo’s hacienda, most likely due to unclear border limits. President Mosquera himself was soon made aware of this matter, and the government concluded that state owned land had been illegally labelled mortmain land and had been appropriated by Salcedo. Another decree was then issued, this time to review the adjudication and registration of mortmain lands. However, this presidential order led to unease among buyers of mortmain land, influential and powerful people from the military, bureaucracy and national elite, and generated fissures in the fragile coalition around the president. On 20 August the following year, the National Congress approved Law 51 of 1887, a law that reversed the presidential decree of General Mosquera and ratified the adjudications of mortmain lands, easing the concerns of the new landowners, among them General Salcedo (Median, 1990). As

25 Salcedo bought Teran for 400 Colombian pesos with the state contractor Jose Maria Peralta, who bought Guaguaqui for 700 pesos (Public deed 754 of the 6 of April 1866).
26 Mortmain is land that at some point in history was granted to, or purchased by, a private entity. In this specific case, the land in question used to belong to the Jesuits, and was expropriated from them. The second type of land, baldías, was state-owned or public land, which the government decided to grant to Boyacá to guarantee the department access to the Magdalena River and to provide land to landless peasants.
27 The donation of this land is made expeditious in law 10 of 1872 and law 62 of 1890, law 96 of 1896 and the Resolution of the Ministry of Finance of the Baldias lands with the resolution of the 4th of July, 1894 (Medina, 1990, p. 33).
a result, the *hacienda* was titled and appropriated by private owners from Bogotá, who never made it productive. This is the vernacular history of a *hacienda* in the middle Magdalena valley of Colombia, from where the oil enclave emerged.

This would not, however, be the last dispute over the Guaguaqui-Teran Hacienda. In 1907, Mr. David Buitrago filed a complaint with the Supreme Court of Colombia alleging that General Lucrecio Salcedo had illegally extended the boundaries of the Guaguaqui plot by 50,000 hectares. These lands that now were part of Guaguaqui were in reality *baldías* lands that belonged to the department of Boyacá. And, importantly, these were lands that had petroleum potential. In 1930 a lawyer representing farmer Eusebio Alvarez, Heliodoro Linares, announced that Texaco had illegally occupied land that was part of his property. In the same year the lawyer and journalist Octavio Quiñones Pardo announced that Texaco had continued to take over *baldías* land from the state (Medina; 1990, p. 49). Five years later, in 1935, another lawyer, Roberto Moreno, took General Lucrecio Salcedo’s illegal appropriation of *baldías* land to the Supreme Court of Justice and also to the Governor of Boyacá, arguing that this illegal act was now benefiting Texaco. The latter two court cases took place in the aftermath of the sale of the *hacienda* by Lucrecio Salcedo’s great grandchildren to Texaco in 1929. He had bought it 63 years earlier for $1100 Colombian pesos, which had expanded to 163,108 hectares and sold for 800,000 US dollars.

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28 Since the end of the nineteenth century, experts had been searching for oil in the middle Magdalena Valley. Prospecting for oil deposits in Cira-Infantas in Barrancabermeja (today a three hour drive north of Puerto Boyacá) began in 1905. In 1917, the De Mares concession stated that the Tropical Oil Company (‘TROCO’- owned by Standard Oil) could start extraction of oil in the Cira-Infantas oil fields and by 1918 the two fields were already producing 2,048 barrels per day (Medina; Vega Cantor).

29 Moreno claimed that after studying the purchase documents, he had discovered an intriguing clause, clause number 8, in which the parties (Salcedo brothers and Texaco) agreed that if any of the hacienda’s hectares proved to have been illegally appropriated, then the Salcedo brothers would have to pay Texaco a fine of only ten dollars per hectare. Moreno argued, with reference to the above, that by including this wording in the property title, the Salcedo brothers were confessing to their great grandfather’s illegal act. He also underlined that Texaco apparently had considered that it was likely that the company would lose land in future legal processes, and had therefore forced the Salcedo brothers to include a compensation clause for such land. Bernardo J. Caycedo, the Colombian lawyer defending Texaco in the Court, argued that it was standard company procedure to include this type of clause.

30 Texaco was established in Colombia on 9 December 1926 when it was registered in the fifth notary of Bogotá by attorney Mr. Eduardo Rodriguez Piñeres, confirmed the issue of public deed number 1689 which formally confirmed the establishment of the company.
This *hacienda* did not align with the definitions provided by Wolf and Mintz (1977). The most likely explanation for this is that in Colombia it was – and arguably still is – prestigious for those living in the capital and in other main cities, to own large amounts of land in the lowlands, even if the land is not used. Land was purchased speculatively with a view to selling it for a much higher price in the future, often to foreign commercial interests.

After the Texaco enclave had been established, the landowners who owned surrounding properties found that it made economic sense to invest in *haciendas*, as they would benefit from the habilitation of the terrain by the oil company, the construction of roads and the sense of sovereignty that the enclave provided. The pattern described above seems to have been present not only in and around the Velásquez/Guaguaqui-Teran oil field, but also at UFCO in Ciénaga (Legrand, 2009) and in Troco’s investments in Barrancabermeja (Archila, 1988; Vega, Nuñez, & Pereira, 2009; Rojas, 2009). This meant that in Colombia, the establishment of *haciendas* and plantations in enclave areas was a phenomenon that occurred simultaneously with the setting up of the enclaves. For Guaguaqui-Teran, maintaining the label *hacienda* on the land title protected the Salcedo family from potential expropriations, allowing them later to sell to foreigners.

In 1939, to sanitise the legal disputes about the definition of the boundaries over Guaguaqui-Teran, the Colombian Constitutional Court issued a decree that legalised the current boundaries of Guaguaqui-Teran to the benefit of Texaco. The resolution also certified that their property rights included both the soil and subsoil, as these lands were granted by a Royal Certificate issued by the Kingdom of Nueva Granada during the period in which the Jesuits owned the property. During my fieldwork, I searched the General Archive of the Nation, the archive of the Ministry of Mines and Energy and the archive of the current owner of the field, the Sino-

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31 A similar situation is that of the so-called De Mares concession in Barrancabermeja. Here, Roberto De Mares had, in 1906, obtained the right from his father-in-law the Colombian President Rafael Reyes, to exploit hydrocarbons. De Mares however failed to carry out the promise to exploit and extract oil as he did not have the capital or the technological knowledge, and he was not able to find any investors. De Mares managed to postpone the expiration of the rights until 1919 when he was able to transfer (sell) his rights to the Tropical Oil Company, a subsidiary of Standard Oil (April: 1992: 391; Vega, 2009). For those who have studied the case, De Mares was an intermediary, a deceiver and a land and concession rights speculator. He himself was not a capitalist or an entrepreneur. This type of accumulation for speculation purposes is similar to the case of the Guaguaqui-Teran Hacienda which was ultimately bought by Texaco.
Indian oil company, to find a copy of the Royal Certificate. But I never found the document even though this is the document that justifies the oil company’s property rights over both the soil and the subsoil. This makes it a unique case in Colombia as, according to the Constitution of 1991, the subsoil of the country belongs to the nation-state.32

The law in Colombia is dynamic. New laws are constantly emerging, changing and modifying previous ones. The Court Resolution of 1939 stabilised the dispute in favour of Texaco. This was, however, temporary. New laws could reverse this, and additional measures therefore had to be taken. This is why Texaco, in subsequent years, implemented other measures to protect its exceptional property rights over the subsoil.

Understanding Colombian oil politics at the beginning of the twentieth century requires an understanding of the dispute over the Panama Canal. Jacques Aprile, who carried out extensive research on the history of the Tropical Oil Company, argued that the first oil enclaves in Colombia were strongly linked to the Colombia-US relations and the bilateral tensions surrounding the control over the Panama Canal. According to Aprile, the compensation of 25 million dollars given by the United States to Colombia after the latter lost Panama was turned into an object of blackmail. Not only did Colombia have to fulfil certain conditions before any money would be transferred, but the amount was also split into five instalments of five million dollars. The United States also demanded that the money was invested in certain areas and managed to tailor the legislation to benefit US investment in Colombia, particularly American oil companies such as Standard Oil and Texaco (Aprile-Gnise, 1992, p. 398). For Aprile, the Colombian state could in this context be described as a truculent opportunist who sold the national patrimony to the highest bidder for the benefit of the segment of the elite that controlled the central bureaucracy. These practices are similar to those that have been described as neo-patrimonialism in African countries, countries that also have ex-colonial extractive economies.

32 The Colombian lawyer Edgar Francisco Paris is a specialist in Colombian petroleum law and defended the Colombian State in 1991 in a challenge brought by a private oil company to the State’s ownership of the subsoil of the Caño-Limon Coveñas oil field. The existence of a Royal Certificate was also referred to in this case, a case called the Santiago de las Atalayas. Mr. Paris explained to me that in the Velásquez case, as soon as the Justice Court had issued a verdict on the limits of the property, the case was closed, even though the documents that justified the verdict were not to be found.
Cardoso and Falleto (1977) argued that the character of the enclaves in Latin America varied according to the state’s capacity to intervene in the production process. It also varied with the state’s capacity to be a political intermediary between corporations and the citizens of the country. Enclaves in which the state was able to become an intermediary or to intervene at any point in the production process, in addition to receiving rent, tended to be small in size and often ended up being nationalised. The case of the oil enclaves in the Venezuelan oil rentist state, which was studied by Fernando Coronil (1997), is a good example of this. In Countries where the state and the elites were unwilling or unable to intervene in the production chain or become political intermediaries in conflicts, the enclaves tended to become permanent and to be co-governed by the corporation. Corporate co-governing seems to resonate well with what happened in terms of sovereignty in the Velásquez enclave. 33

Don Milagros, one of the first fishermen-colonos34 to move to the ciénaga, told me that there were no agricultural fields or farms when he arrived there, only some peasants, the fisherfolk and a handful of Texaco employees. The oil workers lived in Puerto Niño, the main Texaco Camp at the time. It was, however, difficult to attract workers to this flood-prone and malaria infested jungle. The company therefore had to provide incentives to convince them to come. They were given tents and quinine to prevent malaria, free meals and new clothes. Don Milagros recalled, however, that the working conditions continued to be deplorable.35

In 1930 the Liberal Party was back in power. The new government, as a response to the so-called banana massacre of 1929 and to counterbalance the conservative hegemony, sought to reconcile the enclave economy

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33 Dependence theory in Latin America, as described in the studies of Cardoso, Falleto and Dos Santos, offered a perspective on the analysis of the enclaves in Latin America through the lens of the macro economy, keeping in mind that the territories granted by the state to foreign corporations were handed over to the companies in order to develop extractive economies. However, this approach lost sight of the details of the formation of enclaves. The plantation economy perspective developed by Kari Polanyi Levitt (1998) offered a different angle in which the colonial past, the hacienda and the plantation in late capitalism were elements employed to understand the formation of enclaves in Colombia.

34 Colonos is a term in Spanish that refers to the landless peasants who, due to expulsion, poverty or violence, must migrate inside the country looking for new lands to cultivate and settle to recreate their life. They are usually expelled again by landowners in the process of expanding their holdings, who grab the land that colonos have improved.

35 Even if the state had promulgated Law 4, Resolution 172 of 1922, where it was established that the oil corporations had to provide hygienic conditions in the oil fields, the workers still suffered from malaria and uncinariasis (Luna-Garcia, 2010).
with progressive labor policies. A Labor Office was created and a new labor code was drafted (Archila, 1988, p. 12). In 1931, laws 83 and 129 were enacted, laws that recognized the legal existence of trade unionism and proposed 8 hour working days.\(^{36}\)

Don Milagros told me that the fishermen at the time did not want to work for Texaco. He recalled: “It was not profitable to work the whole day for the oil company for 19 pesos, separated from my family just to earn half of what I did fishing for three hours in the ciénaga”.

Don Clementino, another old fisherman who arrived in the ciénaga soon after Don Milagros, told me that they did not know anything about oil, but that they knew everything about fishing and hunting. So he preferred to continue to be a fisherman. Texaco prohibited its workers from living near the oil infrastructure. This gave the fishermen another reason for not working for Texaco. Don Clementino added that they preferred to use their time as they wanted instead of a boss deciding what they do. And although laws that protected workers had been propitiated by the liberal government, these had still not trickled down to the Magdalena River. So to work for the oil company was, for the fisherfolk-colonos, equal to submission.

The old fisherfolk-colonos told me that a number of farmers from Manizales and Bogotá came to the oil field to buy or lease plots of land on Texaco’s property during the first decades of its reign. These farmers produced rice and sorghum. The plantations were relatively small and only existed for a few decades. Texaco divided the territory under its control into three areas: the town for the workers, the ciénaga for fisherfolk, and the areas of cultivation were disputed between hacendados and colonos.

The old inhabitants of the ciénaga remembered Texaco with ambivalence, while the retired oil workers who lived in the town in Puerto Boyacá recalled ‘La Texas’ with pleasant nostalgia. It may be useful, when trying to explain these different perceptions of the presence of Texaco, to see them in the light of Legrand’s observation of the UFCO enclave. According to Legrand (2009), UFCO took different forms in each place it set up banana plantations.\(^{37}\) For the Texaco enclave, which was not fully constituted until the 1950’s, the

\(^{36}\) Legrand explained that in Santa Marta, UFCO had an office with North American representatives who had a lot of contact with the local elite. In the town of Ciénaga-Magdalena, where the company produced bananas, UFCO was also present in the daily life of the locals, but its officials scarcely had any contact with the settlers and their
corporation developed different modes of territorialisation within the enclave, treating *hacendados*, workers and fisherfolk-*colones* differently.

Don Clementino recalls: I moved to the *ciénaga* in the 1950s because it was a good place to fish. My wife and I built a hut where we could live with our three small children. As the days passed, I could watch how the construction of the oil field progressed. First, they dredged the *ciénaga* to make it deeper in the centre. Then the company strengthened parts of the river banks to make the ground more solid before submerging an oil pipeline below the *ciénaga* to transport the crude from the wells and stations located in the Palagua field (on the northern bank of the *ciénaga*) to the stations of Velásquez 26. They also established a ferry service between the two sides of the *ciénaga* to mobilize heavy equipment and workers. To drill wells on more stable plots of land, they also filled almost all the *bajos* surrounding the *ciénaga* with soil. The *finqueros* cultivated grass to extend their farms and the lowlands became dry.

Puerto Niño was initially set up as a workers’ camp, and the majority of workers were single men. Puerto Niño expanded rapidly as increasing numbers of *colones* and migrant workers arrived looking for work. The Colombian state, at the time, had no physical presence there. The years 1929 to 1936 were crucial for local oil exploration, and Texaco governed the terrain unhindered.

Then in 1936, the Governor of Boyacá, Dr. Hernan Salamanca appointed a local tax collector, Mr. Hector Escobar Motta. He was sent to Puerto Niño with two police inspectors, Mr. Jose Prudencio Montejo and Lelio Motta, to open an office in the Puerto Niño camp (Medina, 1990, p. 75). On arriving, they were prevented from entering the camp in Puerto Niño by the Superintendent of Texaco, Mr. Kjellesvig, a man of Norwegian descent, who expelled them from the eastern bank of the river. The atmosphere between the governor’s officials and Texaco’s superintendent was tense. Despite this, the envoys of the governor of Boyacá managed to buy a plot of land a few kilometres north of Puerto Niño, a place they named Puerto Servies. This was where the tax collectors’ office was established (Medina, 1990, p. 76).

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association with the town was limited. In Aracataca-Magdalena, UFCO practices were yet again different. Here, UFCO also produced bananas, but did not relate to its inhabitants, and the operations were managed by an intermediary. UFCO resisted forming something like a company town in any of the three places.
Puerto Perales was an island, and another potential source of tax income. Valerio, a retired oil worker and former trade union leader, told me that there were numerous brothels, bars and canteens that catered for travellers and locals on this island-town in the middle of the river, where neither the state nor Texaco ruled. There were also some homes on the island where relatives of some of the oil workers in Puerto Niño lived. The tax officials in Puerto Servies, wanting to reach as many citizens as possible, ordered the construction of a boat-bar that travelled between Puerto Servies, Perales Island and the port of Puerto Niño. On the boat, the state officials sold tobacco and alcohol. This form of floating state presence, with its combined income generating activities and rent collection, was soon coined the ‘the ethyl colonization’ (Medina, 1990).

The intermittent floods and the movements of the course of the river began to wash away parts of the already overpopulated island. This convinced Texaco engineers of the necessity of moving the camp away from the river, and setting it up inside the jungle near the ciénaga. Here they built the compound to protect the engineers, both Colombians and Americans. On the 26 November 1946 oil was discovered. This was a period of extreme violence in the history of Colombia and of a continuous flow of colonos (landless peasants) into Puerto Niño and other parts of the Middle Magdalena Valley. The displacement of people as a result of the violence reinforced the moral topography of the internal frontier in which the enclave was constructed, populated by people looking for a new start.

In 1956, the Island of Puerto Perales was completely razed by the torrential waters of the Magdalena River. The inhabitants remembered this episode as almost biblical, as a natural disaster in which God himself was involved. According to Valerio, the overpopulated island was ‘all swept away by the flood, like in the diluvio universal (the Great Flood in Genesis)’. This disaster speeded up the already-in-progress transfer of the camp to a location far away from the river and close to the ciénaga, where it would be protected from floods, a move which would separate the oil extraction operation from the housing facilities of the workers. After the natural disaster, Texaco was under pressure from local state officials, inhabitants, workers and the army to contribute to helping flood victims. Texaco agreed to finance the building of an entire new neighbourhood in Puerto Niño. The natural disaster therefore prompted what had been resisted in the enclave, namely the construction of a company town in what is today Puerto Boyacá.
2.3 A Company Town in the Middle Magdalena

The notion of enclave that I elaborate here refers to territorialisation by a foreign corporation for the purpose of economic extraction within the space of a national state. The enclave constitutes a sovereignty of its own in parallel with the sovereignty of the nation-state. The case of Campo Velásquez also implies private ownership by the foreign company of the soil and the subsoil of the territory.

Company towns are defined as residential areas built by companies, where workers and their families live. These areas were built to retain the labor force of factories or of oil or mineral extraction sites, and they were mostly set up in isolated areas. The term company town did, however, have a particular history in the industrialization processes in Europe and the USA in the middle of the nineteenth century. It reflected a specific production process, in which the labor force was articulated around the factory or the mine. The company played different roles in the company town. It was not only the landowner and the landlord responsible for the construction and maintenance of the town, but it also provided services, labor and intervened in or regulated social life (Torres & Borges, 2012).

Sometimes, but not always, a company town started out as a simple workers’ camp which, through infrastructure investments and the delivery of improved services, became a company town. Where an extractive enterprise was located near an already established small human settlement, then the human settlement often turned into a company town in line with the dynamic growth of the company, although not necessarily governed directly by the company. However, the relationship between the company and the town (and inhabitants) would be constituted depending on the needs of the company, and the capacity of the inhabitants to hold the company responsible for labor conditions and the effects that production had on their lives in the town.

I should clarify that enclaves and company towns are two different analytical and empirical notions. Empirically, an enclave is a place occupied and formed by a foreign corporation in an extractive operation (mostly), a site which is more or less disconnected from its surroundings and from the dynamic of the national economy (Ferguson, 2005; Gudynas, 2014). It is an enclosed space surrounded by walls or fences, running in parallel with and not touched by local problematics. Analytically, an enclave refers to the practices of
disconnection and abdication by extractive corporations and states through abandoning sovereignties (Appel, 2012; Appel, Mason, & Watts, 2015; Coronil, 1997; Watts, 2008; Mitchell, 2013).

Analytically, a company town emphasises entanglement, labor relations and social life in the extractive area. Empirically it registers the multiple characters of the corporation as landowner, employer and de facto ruler. To understand the territorialisation of the enclave in Puerto Niño (today’s Puerto Boyacá) it is important to look at the different relations of disconnection that the company established in this place. A company town analysis would therefore elucidate entanglements and vernacular stories, as well as the enclave’s detachment in deploying its mode of sovereignty.

In Puerto Niño, Texaco not only built homes, but also roads, a hospital, a school, the port dock, a town square and a social club. It also provided an intermittent electricity and water supply. As a gesture to the government, the building that housed its local representatives was constructed on Texaco’s land (titles of transfer of ownership of land from Texaco to the Municipality).

A modern company compound was built equidistant from the company town and the ciénaga. In 1955, the American William C. Benton was the first engineer to move there with his family. Other American engineers such as John P. Downey, followed in his footsteps. The arrival of American families in the 1950s even led to the construction of a bilingual school for the children of the American staff. As a token of appreciation for what the company did in Puerto Niño, the Governor of Boyacá gave William C. Benton the title of Honorary Mayor of Puerto Niño (Marquie, 2012).

In Puerto Niño, the company also promised to provide the children of the workers with free primary school services. This was a basic infrastructure, and cannot be compared with the services or ‘welfare conditions’ of company towns in Europe and the USA (Torres & Borges, 2012). However, this was the closest to a welfare state that the workers and colonos in Puerto Niño would get, most of them being victims of armed displacement and natural disasters or having arrived in the area to escape deprivation in other parts of the country.

On the other hand, Texaco had a different relationship with the fisherfolk-colonos in the ciénaga, who lived inside the oil infrastructure, and tried to evict as many of them as possible. The life of the people inside
the oil field was difficult. At night they diligently built simple *ranchitos*, which were burned and destroyed the next day by Texaco’s private guards. Don Luis Montes recalled that he and other fishermen returned every night to re-build their huts, made of trunks, sticks and leaves: “For a long time, we had to rebuild our ranchos every single night, just for Texaco to destroy them again the following morning. This went on until one day La Texas gave up and allowed us to stay here. But it was a terrible struggle.” Fisherfolk- *colonos*, who showed their strength and determination by being able to begin from scratch over and over again, had to exhibit this characteristic innumerable times inside Texaco’s oil field until, through their persistence, they finally succeeded. In this context, the superintendent of Texaco decided to force the fisherfolk- *colonos* to sign leasing contracts to protect its property. It set a very low rent, though interestingly the fisherfolk- *colonos* hardly ever bothered to pay. Some inhabitants, such as Don Luis Montes, refused to sign the contract and stated that they were *colonos* and therefore had the right to own *baldia* lands and to not pay rent to Texaco. It has been argued by the Colombian historian Carlos Medina that the practice of making the locals sign leasing contracts had been part of Texaco’s policy of seeking ways to legalise its possession of the soil and also to defend its property rights over the subsoil (1990).

In social studies literature, the *colonos* of the 1940s and 1950s have been depicted as hardworking people, willing to adapt and display creativity in spite of all their difficulties. The *colono*(a)s had the strength to start from scratch every time. Their narratives are those of a humble peasant coming from the mountains to cut down the jungle, and then investing time and effort in cultivating land and nurturing cattle, only to be displaced again by a land accumulator that legally or extra legally and/or violently ejected him/her. The *colono/-a* then escaped this new injustice, moving further into the jungle where he/she cleared the land again, settled down and cultivated the soil until another land accumulator arrived (Fajardo, 2005; Legrand, 1988; Molano, 2009; Sanchez & Meertens, 1984). I will use the term *colono*, which might, however, not necessarily be representative of the unfolding practices of the human groups that live in the *ciénaga* today. However, I will stay with this notion, as not only did the older inhabitants identify with this figure, but the young also referred to it to explain their origins. Through this term they continue to demand the legal title to the lands they have improved and lived on for decades.
A socialist movement led by Maria Cano and Raul E. Mahecha had as early as 1928 started strikes and protests against the United Fruit Company’s banana enclave of Ciénaga in the Department of Magdalena. A similar movement had also organized numerous strikes against the Tropical Oil Company, commonly known as ‘Troco’, in Barrancabermeja. The most famous of these were those that took place in 1924, 1927 and 1935 (Vega et al, 2009). In the 1920s and 1930s socialist activists moving up and down the Magdalena River organized trade unions of artisans, rowers, oil workers and colonos, who fought for both property rights to land and improved labor conditions. The fisherfolk-colonos in the ciénaga and the workers in Puerto Niño were also seized by this wave of vernacular socialism and trade unionism, an important process that improved labor conditions in Colombia, and that included struggles in which historical social groups were entangled, such as zambos, bogueros, fisherfolk, colonos - people beyond the factory identity of the European labor class.

Don Milagros recalled with fervour in his voice that many of the colonos and workers who arrived in Puerto Niño and the ciénaga at the end of the 1940s sympathised with Jorge Eliecer Gaitan, a radical Liberal who was referred to by the Bogotá elite as ‘El Indio’ or ‘El Negro’ for his dark mestizo skin. His speeches connected with the people in rural and urban areas. Don Milagros himself had become a gaitanista, and the assassination of the populist liberal leader on the 9 April 1948 struck the Magdalena Valley as a seismic event. The first time Don Milagros listened to politics was when socialist activists had read aloud newspaper articles to hundreds of workers and peasants on the outskirts of Shell’s oil field in Cantagallo-Bolívar, near the ciénaga of Ayapel. This was long before Don Milagros moved from Cantagallo to the ciénaga of Palagua. He and others learnt politics in these assemblies, and developed Gaitanist sympathies.

After Gaitán’s assassination in 1948, the conservative politician Laureano Gómez won the presidential elections, as he was the only candidate running for the presidency. The liberals were persecuted without mercy by ‘the Chulavitas’, the secret police force that Gómez had established. The ‘Chulavitas’, who were the predecessors of the current paramilitary structures, were created to eliminate liberal sympathisers, accusing

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38 Gómez learnt about these practices from the fascist government of Franco in Spain, which Gómez very much admired.
them of crimes and atheism. Liberals were forcibly expelled from their farms (Sanchez and Meertens, 1984).

Some of those who escaped hid in the jungles of the Middle Magdalena Valley (Molano, 2009; Vargas, 1992).

Chulavitas’ or Pájaros (the conservative secret police) and ‘cachiporros’ (armed supporters of the liberals) were the protagonists in a period of Colombian’s history known as The Violence, from 1948 to 1958 (Gúzman & Fals Borda, 2005). Texaco responded to the situation by offering full support to the army and to the ‘Chulavitas’. However, on 13 June 1953 General Gustavo Rojas Pinilla led an unexpected military coup against President Laureano Gómez. Then, during the first year of this dictatorship (1953-1954), Rojas Pinilla proposed an amnesty for the liberal guerrillas and expressed his support for the colonos.

In Puerto Niño, Gustavo Rojas Pinilla ordered his troops not to attack the rebellious colonos who were struggling against Texaco, forcing the company to negotiate with them and with the local liberal guerrillas over the redistribution of the land property of Texaco. Rodolfo Peña was the leader of the liberal guerrillas operating in the Puerto Niño area at the time. Miguel Guzmán was the manager of the land cadastre of Texaco, and Captain Pedro Pinto was the local Army commander. These men reached an agreement in order to prevent attacks against the company. Hostilities thus ceased in exchange for the peaceful settlement of colonos on Texaco’s land. Partly as a result of all this, Puerto Niño changed its name to Puerto Gustavo in honour of General Gustavo Rojas Pinilla who supported the colonos.

As many as 49,411 barrels of crude were produced each day in the Velásquez oil field in December 1958. The national and international demand for oil therefore generated both a Fordist effect and a type of vernacular Keynesianism in the region. This helped maintain production levels and secure the functioning of downstream oil installations and plants that had been built in Colombia by Texaco at the end of the Second World War stimulated by import substitution policies (Londoño, 2009; Pizarro & Bejarano, 1994; Corredor, 1992).

During these years Texaco switched to a more collaborative, but not frictionless, approach to the fisherfolk and colonos. However, Don Clementino Jiménez attributed this change in attitude by Texaco to the

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39 Medina Gallego presented data showing that 40,000 barrels of crude were produced each day in the Velasquez oil field by 1959
arrival of a new field superintendent, a Colombian national who was friendlier with them than the previous foreign superintendents. Sebastian Vargas, the current leader of the Communal Council in the ciénaga, was a little boy at the time. He recalled the good relation between Texaco and the fisherfolk-colonos. After school, he used to hang around the company food trucks that delivered food to the workers. He said “The company used to give us the rest of the ‘lonche’ that the workers did not eat. They gave us meat, chicken, rice and desserts. We, the fisherfolk, enjoyed these lunches, we had a place to live, food and we could fish in the ciénaga. We did not need to work for the company.”

Some retired workers, when looking back at 1957, remembered the foundation of Sintratexas trade union as a triumph. Others saw it as a ‘yellow’ trade union kowtowing to Texaco, and instrumental in the enactment of the laws developed by the Liberal Presidencies. However, one retired trade union leader, Valerio Gonzalez, saw the creation and legalization of this trade union, despite its failure to remain independent of Texaco’s managers, as significant for the achievement of benefits and the continued construction and expansion of the town.

In 1963, Sintratexas organized a strike which lasted for 14 days in support of a strike by the oil workers and inhabitants of Barrancabermeja organized by USO (Union Sindical Obrera – the National Oil Workers’ Trade Union). Unfortunately, Sintratexas lost its legal status (personería jurídica) after this strike. Curiously, however, this did not reduce the strength of local social and workers’ organizations. This was a period of intense trade union activism, with trade unionists celebrating important triumphs for the workers and inhabitants of Texaco’s enclave. However, trade unionism or the struggles of the inhabitants and workers against the oil company were made possible by political articulation and the mobilization of the different political actors: peasants, fisherfolk and colonos.

After the end of the regime of Gustavo Rojas Pinilla, Texaco’s attitude towards the fisherfolk-colonos returned to the way it had been years before; one of indifference, disgust and contempt. Ramón, an old fisherman, remembered this period of tension between Texaco and the fisherfolk when telling me about how he lost a finger on his right hand as a child. He lost it in an accident when fishing with his father, but believed that it might have been saved if he had arrived sooner at hospital in Puerto Boyacá. The town was about nine hours’
walk from the *ciénaga* and he recalled that his father had begged Texaco engineers to transport him, a child, in one of their vehicles. But Texaco had refused, as the transport of inhabitants in any of their vehicles was explicitly forbidden. Texaco’s superintendent had re-implemented a policy of rejection of the fisherfolk–*colonos* to pressure them to move to the town of Puerto Boyacá, away from the oil infrastructure.

Puerto Boyacá’s economy was dynamic. Teachers at the Texaco schools were directly employed by Texaco, as were the workers in the *comodato* (company shop). Texaco continued to expand the workers’ housing scheme. Almost 100% of the workers living in Puerto Boyacá were affiliated to one of Texaco’s three Trade Unions: Sintratexas (originally created by Texaco, but which later managed to eliminate the company’s control), Sinaltracontex (the trade union of contractors) and Sinaltratexas, which ended up becoming affiliated with the national trade union federation Fedepetrol, and it is today part of the USO trade union.

In the *ciénaga*, however, the fisherfolks’ livelihoods were not only based on fishing, but also on cultivating *yuca*, *ahuyama*, maize, tomatoes and chilli on the islands of the *ciénaga*. They combined this with occasional seasonal laboring on the agricultural *haciendas* during the rice, cotton or sorghum seasons. The *hacendados*, however, paid very little, and in some cases the day laborers did not even get paid in cash or they were killed by the *hacendados* who refused to pay them. As Don Milagros told me, he only labored on the *haciendas* when he was in a desperate financial situation.

In this period of hostility, the inhabitants of the *ciénaga* remember with bitterness the company’s decision to end the distribution of ‘lonche’ (lunch) to the locals. Other benefits were also cut, including the provision of free basic health services in the town’s hospital and free education in the schools administered directly by Texaco. These benefits were gradually eliminated by the company in the late 1970s. Don Milagros told me – a claim that was confirmed by Sebastián Vargas – that the loss of benefits was a result of the corrupt leadership of the main trade union at the time, leaders from the workers’ town sacrificing collective gains for personal benefit. Medina Gallego has argued that the leader of Sinaltratexas, Antonio Torres Flórez, signed an

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40 Workers bought houses that they paid for in monthly installments to a Texaco-sponsored fund for company employees, thereby avoiding the mediation of regular banks.
agreement with Texaco to close the canteen, the hospital and the schools for personal gain (1990). By 1975, the company town of Texaco had initiated a transition, becoming more similar to the type of oil enclave\textsuperscript{41} that has been described in countries such as Niger, Ecuador, Equatorial Guinea or Mexico, where corporations have territorialised their extraction activities by means of detachment, securing land possession and enclosing infrastructure (Appel, 2012; Sawyer, 2006; Watts, 2008). The company town was melting.

\textbf{2.4 From Agrarian Reform to the Anti-subversive Capital of Colombia}

In this part I present another layer in the history of the ciénaga, the transformation from a company town to the cradle of paramilitarism in Colombia, and the incomplete attempt of implementing the agrarian reform programme in the region.

In 1963, the Texas Petroleum Company decided to donate 35,280 hectares and 8,500 square meters to The Colombian Institute for Agrarian Reform (INCORA), to contribute to the ongoing national agrarian reform. This was the size of the area called Lower Guaguaqui 1, where oil extraction was currently ongoing and which was adjacent to the ciénaga. In total, the company donated 116,870 hectares to INCORA. At the time of its first donation to INCORA, Texaco had already sold to private individuals as many as 17,230 hectares of its original property. A number of haciendas had been established around the enclave, not least due to these sales. However, in all the notarial deeds in which the transfer of property rights was documented, the company introduced a special clause. This clause said that Texaco yielded the soil surface area to the new owner, but retained the ownership of the subsoil and the right to exploit oil. In this way, Texaco found a way to manage conflict over land, while at the same time maintaining its property rights to the subsoil, which was its main interest.

\textsuperscript{41} Texaco’s relationships with the inhabitants of Puerto Boyacá and the ciénaga seemed to be similar to those which Elena Shever found in Patagonia-Argentina, where YPF (at the time a state-owned oil company) created a company town for the inhabitants and workers, something that continued even after YPF was privatised. The difference between the two is that in Puerto Boyacá, a privately owned foreign corporation, namely Texaco, established a company town relationship that made a difference. During the company town period Texaco practiced a vernacular Keynesianism led by a foreign private company that developed sovereignty and government within the Colombian state.
According to the INCORA report Boyacá 2, the Puerto Boyacá municipality consisted of 154,831 hectares in 1963, of which 114,944 were occupied by colonos without formal land titles (Medina, 1990: 89); that is to say, 74% of the municipality. The agrarian reform was an opportunity for the company to legalise its de facto occupation of baldías lands and guarantee its ownership of the subsoil, while also redistributing the soil surface land that Texaco had, with difficulty, managed to lease to colonos.

Taussig has explained the phenomenon of peasants without land titles in Colombia in this way: ‘The peasants rarely held title to the land they farmed and if bought out by the rich it was not the land but the so-called mejoras or improvements that were sold. You have to, first, ask yourself why the peasants did not acquire the title, and, second, see in this not merely neglect, ignorance, or lack of means to deal with bureaucracy or pay a lawyer, but also a clash of civilizations; one based on writing and the state, the other based on knowing the land and claiming it through working it’ (Taussig, 2012, p. 503).

The inhabitants living close to the ciénaga never got titles, but were often in possession of carta-venta contracts, unorthodox and non-binding documents that they presented when having to prove that they had lived on the land for decades. This means that they were not sceptical of the bureaucracy or that they did not want property titles. They attributed importance to the possession of documents as much as to the legitimacy provided by the work invested in the improvement of the land or the place of subsistence and habitation. During my fieldwork, I noticed how they cherish these documents, even without legal recognition, documents that they themselves notarised in the town in order to prove their historical occupation. The colonos and particularly fisherfolk were prevented from getting formal certificates by the company’s negligence in not recognising the colonization and by the Colombian state’s failure to recognize the laws that it had written and adopted, as well as their particular way of living between land and water, as the agrarian reforms exclusively recognized and legalised titles to land that was not close to water. However, social discontent was reduced in some sectors during the Agrarian Reform of Alberto Lleras Camargo (1958-1962). Some colonos received

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42 During the National Front, the liberal president Alberto Lleras Camargo (1958-1962) focused on reducing communist influence in the country, actively cooperating – as did many other presidents in Latin America – with the government of the United States under the presidency of John F. Kennedy in developing a scheme called The Alliance for Progress. This initiative aimed to prevent communist expansion in Latin America and undermine the
land titles thanks to the agrarian reforms and the workers improved their working conditions as it became legal to belong to a union. The fisherfolk were in general not included in the agrarian reforms, but since the pollution in the ciénaga had not yet reached critical levels, they could still survive by fishing.

Texaco established a subsidiary company responsible for managing the granting or selling of plots of land, as well as leasing land to colonos. The new company, which was set up in 1931, just two years after Texaco bought the Guaguaqui-Teran Hacienda, was called the Tolima Petroleum Company. Its first transaction took place shortly after it was established, with Texaco selling 160,000 hectares of surface soil plots, the entire oil field, for 260,000 Colombian pesos to its own subsidiary. This was much lower than the price Texaco had paid for the property when it had bought it two years earlier, namely 800,000 US Dollars. Seven years later, in 1949, the Tolima Petroleum Company sold the same 160,000 hectares to a new company, the Mompox Petroleum Company, which was also a subsidiary of Texaco. This time the price was 259,966.70 Colombian pesos, meaning that even after six years, the price of the land had not increased. The plaintiffs that had accused Texaco of appropriation of baldías land or usurping private property were entangled in a legal battle with Texaco’s two subsidiaries, thereby shielding the parent company from any direct legal implications. A similar practice of creating different subsidiaries of a matriz corporation in order to evade national laws could be found in the case of Chevron-Texaco in Ecuador, studied by Suzana Sawyer (2006).

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‘Cuba effect’ in the region, namely guerrilla warfare and revolution. The initiative consisted of providing economic support and social aid to poor rural and urban populations in Colombia, while cooperating militarily to confront the emerging communist guerrillas.
In the municipality of Puerto Boyacá, the agrarian reform resulted in the issuing of 6,554 land titles to settlers (Medina, 1990, p. 89). However, soon after the titling process was completed, ownership of landed property soon began to be concentrated again. The reasons for this seem to have been the increased indebtedness of the colonos to moneylenders and merchants that ventured into the region from the wealthy coffee producing regions of Colombia. When local peasants were not able to repay their debts to these businessmen, they were forced to pay their debts by transferring property titles to the creditors. These creditors, who were from the departments of Quindío, Caldas and Antioquia, had a keen interest in accumulating land in the Middle Magdalena Valley to do extensive cattle ranching, transforming the landscape from cultivation of sorgum and rice to the expansion of pastures (Medina, 1990, p. 90; Interview with Mrs. Raquel, wife of the former manager of the Agrarian Bank in Puerto Boyacá). The colonos were thus, due to indebtedness, losing the land that they had been awarded in the land reform process. They had few alternatives other than to start
from scratch and head into the remaining jungle in the region or to colonise baldías lands in other parts of the country. This second process of land accumulation in the lower Middle Magdalena – the mortmain land auctions in the nineteenth century had also led to increasing land concentration – took place after Texaco’s donation of land to a flawed land reform scheme. In the 1970s, the haciendas were converted into cattle ranches, a transformation partly driven by governmental institutions such as The Institute for the Adequacy of Lands (INAT) and the INCORA in a drive to expand the internal agricultural frontier of Colombia (Molano, 2009). The lack of sufficient labor to keep the agricultural farms up and running, was another argument for shifting into cattle ranching. The Inter-American Development Bank, the Cattle-Ranching Bank, the Rotatory Fund for Agricultural Credit, and the National Institute for Land Adaptation all started providing financial support schemes to farmers wanting to do cattle ranching in the Middle Magdalena Valley. This contributed to a transformation of the landscape through the building of infrastructure for flood prevention, and the desiccation of ciénagas to expand pastures. It also led to the introduction of new types of grasses for cattle pasture, such as Puntero (hyparrehenia rufa), Gordura (melinis minutiflora) and Guinea (panicum maximum). Also of importance was the arrival of new types of cattle, such as Cebu, Holstein and Pardo Suizo, and the leading ranchers switched from the transhumance techniques that had characterised cattle ranches in the north of the Magdalena Valley in the nineteenth century to extensive stationary cattle ranching. In 1967, the Ganaderos (Cattle ranchers’) Committee of Puerto Boyacá was established, and by 1975 as many as 46 cattle ranching haciendas had been established in the municipality (Medina, 1990).

However, during this transition, Puerto Boyacá continued to be a company town in which the presence of peasants and trade union organizations was important. It was heavily influenced by ANAPO, a political party created by General Rojas Pinilla, and by a radical sector of the Liberal Party called MIR during the 1960s and 1970s. Led by politicians from these and even more radical parties, the municipality of Puerto Boyacá behaved almost as an independent mini-republic, and this strongly contrasted with the conservative tendencies in the rest of the Department of Boyacá, high up in the cold mountains. In Puerto Boyacá, some farmers even contributed economically to the guerrillas in order for them to stop the theft of livestock and fight against
crime. In these years, the FARC guerrillas managed to considerably increase the number of combatants and units in the region and ended up expanding their territorial control in the municipality (Pérez, 1994, p.14).

Colombia had been under a permanent state of exception since 1952 – originally declared by the government of President Laureano Gómez – which was only lifted in 1994 (Garcia & Uprimmy, 2005; Londoño, 2009). Under this security regime, all political expressions other than those related to the Liberal and Conservative parties – the parties that were in power – were being repressed. A number of repressive legal instruments were put in place, such as the Organic Statute of National Defence (1965), The National Security Statute (1978) and the Special Public Order Jurisdiction (1978). Under the latter it was determined that Puerto Boyacá would become a Zone of Special Control as it was influenced by communist guerrillas. The proclamation of Puerto Boyacá as a Zone of Special Control in 1978 would mark a dramatic change in the rules of the political game in the region. Leaders of ANAPO were being displaced and members of the left-wing Patriotic Union were assassinated. The leaders of the Liberal Party changed their discourse and practices and started expressing more conservative views and the FARC guerrillas were eliminated. Puerto Boyacá soon became a laboratory of military operations that would mark the beginning of the paramilitary era in Colombia – the development of what was called the Puerto Boyacá Model.

May 2014. Today we went off to fish with Rafa, a fisherman from the ciénaga. It has been raining for the last few weeks. The sun shines bright, the temperature rises rapidly and by 10 am it has already reached 29 °C. This, however, does not mean that the weather cannot suddenly change. Rafa tells me that next week the first season of tarulla cutting will begin, when the water rises and the flow makes the currents so strong that they sweep away the tarulla (Eichhornia crassipes or water hyacinth, an invasive aquatic plant).

July 2014. I met Juan Gómez, who is both a fisherman and an oil worker, at 5 pm on the ciénaga dock. He advised me to bring insect repellent because the ongoing mosquito invasion was causing a health emergency. The Colombian government had issued a red alert as the chikungunya epidemic was spreading in many regions of the country. When I reached the ciénaga, I noticed a cloud of mosquitoes swarming all over the dock, a putrid smell and dozens of large and snow-white egrets flying in circles over the ciénaga. The birds were making their last rounds before settling in for the night in the big tree on the so-called Fantasy Island, where the Israeli mercenary Jair Klein had trained the local paramilitary back in the nineties. Fishing had been bad for the last few days. The heat and the lack of rain made it easier to extract oil from the ground, but did not make fishing easier.

September 2014. The tarulla had been expanding rapidly in the ciénaga, gradually reducing the open water area. For the last two months, fishing had not been good. It may have been due to the lack of oxygen in the water caused by the water hyacinth invasion. Andrés thinks they should start cutting the tarulla earlier than November, which was what had been agreed with the oil company. I went out with Andrés to see the portion of Caño Palagua invaded by plants. It was very difficult to go upstream, so we had to get out of the canoe and carry it until we reached navigable waters.

November 2014. It rained day and night. But for short periods a vibrant sun appeared in the sky. The rain caused the river to burst its banks. Don Luis Montaña, one of the first settlers of the ciénaga, told me that five years ago the same thing happened. The flood forced the inhabitants to leave their homes and to live in
makeshift huts on the esplanade close to oil wells 168 and 250. The oil company was forced to help those most affected by the natural disaster. In a few days, the second season of tarulla cutting would start. The company will again sponsor the repopulation of bocachico fish (Prochilodus magdalenae). If they do, then there will most likely be a good fishing season in some months’ time.

These excerpts were taken from my field notes, disconnected pieces of my experience in the ciénaga. Some were written in my notebook, others on loose papers, and some taken from my own memories, from the images in my mind and the feelings in my body. I remember the heat, the sounds, the humidity after the rainfall and the odors exuding from the ciénaga. I have made a careful effort to evoke the variability and tangled connections between the ciénaga’s biophysical processes and the social life of its inhabitants, the oil company, the paramilitaries and the biologists.

This chapter will introduce you to the ciénaga as conceptualized by biologists from different ascriptions and by the local biological conceptualizations of the inhabitants. In this chapter I will explain where the ciénaga is located and describe its affordances by exploring biological practices. I will also describe and explain how the biological insights of the fisherfolk-colonos intermingles with formal biological knowledges.
This chapter is inspired by the praxiographic method of John Law and Annemarie Mol (2002). Its focus is on what people do, detailing the texture of materiality and the dynamics of practice, as well as how people describe what they do and how their practices become temporarily stabilised ways of enacting specific material forms. I will focus specifically on how biologists enacted the ciénaga through the situated practices that I observed and participated in. The chapter explores divergent knowledge practices that enunciate, conceptualize and represent the ciénaga and which, while feeding into formal biology, also exceed it. From this intermingling I noticed another biology; one produced in encounters between inhabitants and biologists. The emergent conceptualization from the local biology is based on dwelling experiences.

3.1 Enunciating the Ciénaga

I refer to the body of water using the term ciénaga, which is the word most commonly used by the people I came across in my fieldwork. I have decided to use this word in this dissertation instead of adopting an English translation of the word, thereby underscoring the difference it makes to call this body of water something else. I could have used words like for example a lake, a lagoon, a swamp, a humedal, or a wetland. All of these could be applied to the ciénaga. They do, however, make it into a different form, as I will explain in this chapter.

During my first meetings with the oil operation engineers and the village community leaders, they referred to the body of water either as a lake or a lagoon. Later, once I was brought into the daily life of the oil field and the village, I noted that people generally used the Spanish word ciénaga. The locals called themselves cienagueros. However, at the compound they were referred to as ‘the people of the ciénaga’. Ciénaga was therefore the word that prevailed in encounters between locals and the oil company representatives.

The ciénaga took the form of a lake and was called a lake in meetings between locals, government officials from Bogotá and NGOs. The formality of the institutional meetings made me aware of the aesthetic and practical connotations of naming this body of water a lake or a ciénaga. It was a lake or lagoon when they spoke about tourism, in particular water sports, recreational fishing, and accommodation, activities which the inhabitants tried to promote in order to foster economic development in this isolated place. Lake seemed to be more attractive to the representatives of the state, companies and NGOs. The word lake therefore temporarily
submerged ciénaga in these meetings and workshops. But in the daily dynamic, ciénaga emerged again, particularly strongly so in the confrontations with the oil company, confrontations in which they demanded contamination mitigation and preservation of fish stocks. Changes in the way this body of water was referred to across different contexts, implied changes in the conception of, and in the material practices that made up, this body of water. Other names used to refer to the ciénaga were humedal and wetland. I will later analyze the material and socio-political implications of using these words to refer to the ciénaga.

Returning to Oslo to write my ethnography, I found that the conversations and situations that filled pages of my field notes were about the ciénaga. When I searched for the English translation of ciénaga, the term I found was swamp. However, as I started detailing the biophysical processes and structures of the ciénaga and the practices of the fisherfolk, I realized that this translation was inaccurate. So, using a biological dictionary, I attempted a more appropriate translation into English of ciénaga.

There were three possible translations of ciénaga in the biological dictionary: swamp, bog, or marsh. All managed, to a certain extent, to describe features of the ciénaga. None, however, fitted perfectly. The ciénaga looks like a bog in certain areas and at certain moments of the year. It does, however, have better drainage than a bog. It could behave like a marsh, with incoming and outgoing flows of water. But there is no salt water or tide in the ciénaga. It is like a swamp in that it is flooded for much of the year. But this ciénaga is also different from swamps such as the Everglades in North America as described by Laura Ogden (2011) or the North American swamps of Ann Vileisis (1997). Unlike these, the ciénaga does not have permanently semi-inundated trees, it does not have mangroves, and the crocodiles disappeared long ago. These terms therefore, instead of facilitating a translation, resulted in greater disconcertment (Verran, 2013).

In my quest to find the most accurate translation of ciénaga, I found an intriguing text in the Oxford University Dictionary of Environment and Conservation. The dictionary states that a North American swamp is equivalent to a European marsh. It appeared as if biologists, in this making of equivalences, were referring to the same thing but naming it differently. Or perhaps were they referring to different things that produced similar experience in people? I, however, found that ciénaga, swamp, marsh, and bog were not equivalents. They were related and had similarities but were not direct equivalents. In the body of water in which I did my
fieldwork, *ciénaga*, lake, *humedal* and wetland were related to each other but were different and have different interconnected spaces.

To explore these intriguing translations and making of equivalences, I began to consult my anthropologist colleagues. I shared with them parts of my ethnography and noticed that for my American and Scandinavian colleagues, the English term swamp evoked ugliness, muddiness, and floodability. I was surprised, because as I returned to my notes and my memories, I remembered that for the inhabitants and for me, the *ciénaga* did not evoke such things. In my day-to-day fieldwork, the *ciénaga* was a cherished body of water that the locals considered to be a beautiful entity that was profoundly a part of their life. The *ciénaga* was their home and their enterprise, as was explained to me a number of times by the inhabitants.

To accurately convey the experience that I had and that the inhabitants communicated to me about this body of water, I had to be faithful to its evocation rather than to a literal idiomatic translation. A direct translation could contain simplifications and misunderstandings. In order to communicate aesthetics, phenomenological experience and knowledge practices as forms of conceptualizing this body of water and its relations, I decided to stay with the term *ciénaga*.

My hope is that by the end of this chapter, the reader will have a better idea of the *ciénaga* without striving for an idiomatic translation. I am aware that in writing this chapter, I am translating. But this is an attempt to translate-by-difference (de la Cadena, 2015). Translating in this way makes sense within the equivocation. Viveiros de Castro posits the notion of ‘equivocation’ as a way of exploring translations as a constitutive dimension of the project of doing cultural translations. What he proposes is not to cease doing translation, but recognizing the equivocations when doing translations, by exploring its dimensions, and acknowledging that there are different perspectives that gaze upon and make up realities differently. It is about taking seriously other perspectives, and unpacking the anthropologist’s perspective. This is what he calls a ‘controlled equivocation,’ a way of controlling the possibility of invisibilizing other ontologies while doing anthropology. The *ciénaga*, to paraphrase Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, could then be configured as a conceptual subject rather than as an observable (objectivized) object (Viveiros, 2004, p. 4). As a subject that participates in the circulation of social life and biophysical process, the *ciénaga* is a manner of naming the
world made with this body of water through diverse practices. The ciénaga is more than an accumulation of water, it is also oscillation with land, as well as with human practices that are involved differently with this body of water depending on the season.

3.2 Locating the Ciénaga

Palagua is, when looking at the map of Colombia, the first ciénaga to be seen on the map when letting one’s gaze run along the Magdalena River from the interior towards the Caribbean coast. The ciénaga is, to be precise, located on the Eastern side of the first section of the Magdalena River basin. After passing Ciénaga Palagua, a number of other ciénagas flank each side of the river until it reaches the Momposina Depression and the Caribbean Coastline.

Residents of Palagua say that this ciénaga is connected to other ciénagas all the way downstream the river to the coast. They know this from navigating up and down the Magdalena River and from short stays in the bodies of water that spread out alongside it. For Don Clementino, an Afro-Colombian fisherman who came to Palagua in the 1950s from Sucre-Sucre in the Colombian Caribbean region, the ciénaga is part of an expansive territory, as he told me when discussing the old days when he was travelling the floodplains of the river as a crocodile hunter. Don Clementino said ‘el límite lo pone el agua’ - the boundary is determined by the water. He was the son of Bonifacio Molina, a boguero from the Momposina Depression who taught Clementino how to navigate the Magdalena and its ciénagas. He also taught Don Clementino how to craft a canoe, a paddle and an atarraya43. Don Clementino remembered with nostalgia the crocodile hunts when he spent weeks with his father sailing upriver in fast and turbulent brown waters, navigating through the meanders, the madreviejas (old mothers),44 the mucks and bogs, sleeping near the river on beaches (playones). Palagua and the other ciénagas along the river were, to Clementino, a single watery territory. The Colombian sociologist Orlando Fals Borda also claimed this whilst thinking with the residents of the river during his fieldwork. According to

43 Fishing net
44 Ancient channels with seasonal flows
Fals Borda, the Magdalena River should have been a region of its own (1979). This extensive area of connected waterways, is however divided between twelve departments.45

In Don Clementino’s account, the ciénaga was part of a larger aquatic system of water flows, of viscous blends of water and sand, of animals in migration, and of places to stay, all remembered with affection. Don Clementino experienced this watery territory in a canoe. How did navigation on the ciénagas and on the river by canoe shape his perception of the environment? According to Don Clementino, it is better to navigate the Magdalena River in a canoe than in boat or a champan, as the river depth changes across the different sections, and a canoe moves well through both low and high waters. The canoe is also easier to carry across the playones in the dry season. For Don Clementino, the floodplains and the ciénaga were united in constant change, conditions that led the fisherfolk-colonos to develop unique practices of sailing, building, and subsistence that engaged with the rhythms of the water flow.

Fals Borda referred to the Momposina Depression as a large aquatic territory that was part of the Colombian region of the Magdalena River. He called it the Mesopotamia of the new world (1984) where itinerant amphibian people, as he called them, navigated its muddy waters. He was referring to various human groups – indigenous, maroons, zambos and bogas (canoe rowers) – from whom people like Don Clementino are descended, both by kin and by amphibious practices of living between water and land.

One day when we were chatting at the entrance of his house close to the ciénaga’s dock, I asked Don Clementino, "What is the Ciénaga Palagua to you?" He replied, "Palagua is the area between the river and the Serranía las Quinchas, and between the two oil fields, Palagua and Velásquez. By road, the ciénaga is 45 minutes away from the town of Puerto Boyacá."

Don Clementino situated the ciénaga by using geographical landmarks, providing a context that gave a shape to the body of water. He mentioned entities such as the river, the mountains, the oil infrastructure, and the road. These were relevant markers and in his account, markers that formed the ciénaga’s dynamic boundaries made up of materialities and relations, such as the main Troncal del Magdalena road and the oil

45 Atlántico, Bolívar, Magdalena, César, Antioquia, Santander, Boyacá, Cundinamarca, Caldas, Tolima, Huila y Cauca.
infrastructure. The way the inhabitants organized the ciénaga presented me with a composition in which biophysical processes of water, plants, animals, mountains, oil infrastructures, roads and their settlements made up its life.

A dwelling perspective refers to a phenomenological conceptualization based on a life path which highlights the relations implicated within this body of water. In Ingold’s terms, a dwelling perspective (Ingold, 2000) refers to interaction between human activities and biophysical processes, which over time sediment, producing a trajectory, a temporal process. According to Enrique Leff, the interactivity between humans and their surroundings configures ‘an ensemble of habitus and practices embodied in biocultural heritage’ (Leff, 2002). For these authors, each from from a different tradition of understanding environmental configurations, the notions of interactivity and ensembles over time constitute bodies and environments.

The location of the ciénaga that Don Clementino expresses, challenges the separation between nature and culture as enacted by modern science and which has represented the environment since the sixteenth century as something separate from humans (for critiques see Shapin & Shaffer, 1985; Latour, 2004). However, during my fieldwork, I observed how biologists in the ciénaga made efforts to differentiate between the ciénaga as a natural entity and the various human activities as affecting the ciénaga, a notion that was very different from the inhabitants’ conceptualization of the ciénaga.

In Colombian biology, ciénagas are studied by the sub-discipline of limnology, a branch of biology and ecology that studies continental bodies of water - lakes, lagoons, rivers, ponds, marshes, and estuaries. In Colombian academic articles on limnology, ciénagas are described as biological entities belonging to a floodplain, formed by the pulsations of water flows from rivers and by precipitation (Hernández et al, 2013; Duque et al, 2014).

The Ciénaga Palagua has been the object of several bachelor’s theses in biology. These studies locate the ciénaga at 135 meters above sea level. It is described as being connected to the Magdalena River through alluvial plains with low hills forming a hilly landscape around the basin (or water mirror, as the inhabitants called it). The ciénaga has a perimeter of 9.2 km, with a maximum depth of approximately three meters during the rainy season, and a minimum depth of one meter during the dry season. The Caño Palagua, the stream
through which water from the *ciénaga* flows into the river Magdalena, is a long stream of 20 kilometres. The stream’s length is the reason the *ciénaga* is considered to be an isolated body of water, one that at times might look like a lake. This makes it different from other *ciénagas* along the Magdalena River that are closer to the river. According to the biologists’ theses, the landscape of hills and alluvial plains here favours erosion, sedimentation, and drainage, which could shorten the life of this *ciénaga* through isolation and a high rate of erosion (Barragan & Janett, 1994).

Scientific biology articles, when locating the *ciénaga*, do not consider human constructions as Don Clementino did. These articles do not mention the oil infrastructure, roads or villages. Instead the *ciénaga* is defined by biologists in terms of other natural features such as rivers and mountains, in particular the floodplain complex. Human infrastructure and pastures are seen as disturbing nature, for example in the diagnosis of delimitation of the wetlands in the department of Bolivar elaborated by the von Humboldt Institute. In presenting the *ciénaga* as part of the floodplain the *ciénaga* is organized dynamically, producing an area between the river and the mountains that is affected by the pulsating variations driven by rains and the water flow. This area is called an ecotone. It is the transitional zone around the *ciénaga* towards the dry land, where the hydrological and soil conditions, topographical gradients, and vegetation of the bogs and lowlands (*bajos*) gradually change. Ecotones can cover extensive areas - in Colombia ecotones can be as broad as the Magdalena, the Amazon and the Orinoco river basins (von Humboldt Institute, 2016).

Biologists identify the ecotone using transects. These start on the banks of the *ciénaga* and end where the land is not prone to flooding. The transects should be sampled as many times as possible throughout the year to get a good understanding of the oscillation of water. It was, however, logistically difficult in the *ciénaga* to sample transects weekly or daily, partly because of the armed conflict, but also for economic and logistical reasons. Biologists therefore sampled the transects twice a year in different rainfall periods (winter and summer seasons). Calculating the difference in the numbers for the two periods allowed average variability, maximum expansion and the contraction of the waters to be determined. However, this analysis is a simplified measurement of a highly variable environment.
Biologists argue that the poor accuracy of the calculated difference could be mitigated by integrating information provided by local residents into the analysis. Biologists are always accompanied on their fieldwork by locals who indicate the maximum and minimum water levels and provide information about the behaviour of the water, plants, animals, and inorganic material.

When carrying out fieldwork in the ciénaga, biologists working for the oil company were usually accompanied by Julio, Rafa, Sebastian, and Diana, who were paid for their services and who liked to display their knowledge of the ciénaga to experts. I several times observed how biologists hired locals to help them produce environmental impact studies for environmental licences to continue oil extraction.

Julio told me about this undocumented knowledge exchange, saying, "We know what the biologists are looking for and that’s why they hire us." Fisherfolk therefore share and present their knowledge in terms that biologists can understand, while biologists strengthen the legitimacy of their studies by incorporating the inhabitants’ knowledge. However, the names of the inhabitants are never mentioned in the reports, and their insights are integrated into a predetermined framework of categories and conceptualizations made by formal biology.

This exchange, however, for the inhabitants, promises recognition of their knowledge and the possibility of learning more about the ciénaga. The inhabitants did not see the exchange with the biologists as instrumental, in the way a foreign gaze like mine might view it. I noticed in the conversations I had with the inhabitants about the encounters with biologists, as well as in my direct observations of the visits of the biologists, how the inhabitants enjoyed, entertained, and asked the biologists. The inhabitants acquired new knowledge, and received a small economic compensation for helping the biologists. The biologists, however, also asked them for advice or opinions and through this gesture they endowed the inhabitants with authoritative knowledge about the ciénaga. Nevertheless, the concealment of the fisherfolks’ knowledge is manifest in their absence from the reports, documents, and articles produced by academic biologists and consultancy firms, and this displays an epistemological difference between disciplinary and professional knowledge with regard to the experiential knowledge. This difference is asymmetrical, as the biologists are nourished by the experience of the fisherfolk, extracting information while obliterating the process, concealing the dwelling conceptualisation
through an operation of reduction of observations and explanations of the biophysical process into the categories pre-established by the biological sciences.

Biologists in academic texts organize the *ciénaga* by emphasizing the ecotone, the intermediary zones, and its connection to the floodplain and rains. This conceptualization focuses on the behaviour of the fluid, representing it almost as a living organism. Despite the restrictions of their technologies and practices (transects and averaging), they incorporate qualitative information provided by the fisherfolk, packaged, however, into their predetermined biological categories. It is important to notice from this biological knowledge practice that following the fluid and delimiting the *ciénaga* as an aquatic complex opens up the possibility of thinking in terms of variability and oscillation, and incorporating the inhabitants’ knowledge manifests a collaborative exchange.

Chilean biologists Maturana and Varela have explored the processuality of the biophysical, which they argue is the result of dynamic interactions that constitute the individualization of the biological entities we know and identify as such; that is to say, of organisms and environments. For Maturana & Varela (1994) the interactions are made by exchanges in which the border between organism-environment is dynamic. The authors refer to this process as autopoiesis, defining the origin of life as residing in the capacity for structural coupling and persistence in self-production, which is only possible in interactions. Organisms and environments as such are therefore not separated but emerge from a process (interaction) that composes them both. For these biologists, a viable coupling forms a biological entity, which is the result of learning from previous interactions and of a biophysical process with social relations, including those that conceptualize nature by scientists (1994, p. 64).

Donna Haraway (2016) has also elaborated on the self-production of life as a symbiotic process. She developed a particular way of reading of Maturana and Varela. However, what I find relevant for my understanding of the *ciénaga*, in the intellectual conversation (imaginary conversation) between these authors is the understanding of life (nature’s formation and persistence) as a composition or, paraphrasing Haraway’s term, a compost-sition, including the ways of naming and conceptualizing, which also participate in the making of nature.
When trying to understand the ciénaga, I found it interesting that Maturana and Varela’s biological thinking partly resonates with the Colombian limnology approach to ciénagas as the oscillatory processes of an aquatic complex; that is to say that the ciénaga-floodplain interactions make possible the existence of both entities: the ciénaga and the floodplain. Susan Oyama, for example, understands developmental biology as a phenomenological and constructivist process, a biological approach that overcomes the organism-environment division and focuses instead on interactions (2000). So, within biological knowledge practices there is heterogeneity in the approaches and ways of conceptualizing the formation of organisms-environments, approaches that take into consideration biosocial dynamics.

There were also biologists in the ciénaga working for the oil company. They produced reports, diagnoses, and impact studies to send to the Ministry of Environment to obtain environmental licences for oil extraction. According to these documents, the ciénaga is located in the trans-Andean valley, more specifically in the Middle Magdalena Valley, which lies between the western and eastern foothills of the eastern and central Cordilleras of Colombia. The landscape of the ciénaga contains low drainage areas such as the lowlands that run along the Magdalena River. The ciénaga is located under the great humid tropical biome, a tropical humid forest combined with open floodplain forest adjacent to the river, the largest biome in Colombia (Informe Ciénaga de Palagua, 2004).

3.3 Representing the Ciénaga

In this section I will present efforts made by different biologists to visually represent the characteristics of the ciénaga, and what these representations imply.

The documents produced by the oil company’s biologists were based on previous studies on which the issue of environmental licences have been based. These previous studies developed by environmental consultancy firms like Antea and Prodycom formed the base on which the biologists founded the legitimacy of the knowledge developed by the biologist working on the current studies of the oil company. I had the opportunity to accompany the environmental consultancy firm’s fieldwork team, contracted by the oil company.

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46 Document produced by the environmental consultancy firm Antea which had been hired by the oil company – and where the company quotes the regional environmental agency Corpoboyacá.
company. The biologists walked around the ciénaga, took pictures, collected water samples, and talked to the fisherfolk. This information was added to previous maps, diagnoses and documents that constituted a precedent for new environmental licences. I was told by these biologists that they did not have the budget to carry out original studies, and that they were not allowed to do so. They were obliged to base their study on prior ‘winning’ studies, studies that had previously led to licences being issued and that guaranteed that licences would be granted again.

The consultancy firm presented a map with land units at a scale of 1:100,000, which was a collage of colors ranging from the deep blue of open water to the intense green of the forest and the turquoise blue of bogs. The bogs of the ciénaga bordered, but did not touch, the oil infrastructure, creating an invisible sharp line along the oil production road, the production batteries, the oil station, and the oil wells (see map below).

Map 3. Delimitation of the ciénaga according to environmental consultancy firm-Antea by request of the oil company

The consultancy firm delimited the ciénaga in relation to biomes predetermined by the Ministry of the Environment and Colombia’s National System of Protected Areas, superimposing the Colombian National

47 Corine Land Cover methodology at scale 1: 100,000.
Parks map onto the map of the *ciénaga* previously produced by other environmental consultancy firms that had worked for oil companies that had operated the oil field. The National Parks’ map traced the limits of various biomes, and was therefore a very important reference document for the consultancy firm.\(^\text{48}\) The limits and location of the *ciénaga* were partly juxtaposed with the protected biomes and separated from the oil field infrastructure. This practice of juxtaposing maps and representing the *ciénaga* as having fixed edges that end abruptly before reaching the oil infrastructure is thus a representation different from those of the inhabitants and academic biologists when they describe the *ciénaga*. For oil company biologists, the *ciénaga* could be delimited according to units of land cover. The table below, prepared by the consultancy firm ANTEA Environmental Consultant (2016), presents the *ciénaga* according to divisions between different land cover categories.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Land Cover Category</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. <em>Ciénaga</em> forest (371.17 hectares)</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Hydrocarbon extraction (104.40 ha)</td>
<td>1.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Lakes, lagoons, and natural <em>ciénagas</em> (190.90 ha)</td>
<td>3.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Wooded pasture (750.60 ha)</td>
<td>14.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Weed-dominated pastures (195.63 ha)</td>
<td>3.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Clean pastures (1,292.64 ha)</td>
<td>24.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Rivers (10.56 ha)</td>
<td>0.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. High secondary vegetation (755.24 ha)</td>
<td>14.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Low secondary vegetation (744.17 ha)</td>
<td>14.125%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Marshlands (853.09 ha)</td>
<td>16.19%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total <em>ciénaga</em> area (5,268.40 ha)</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 1. Land Cover Units in the Ciénaga and the Oil Field**

\(^{48}\) In their report, the consultancy firm mentions that the locations are based on a previous diagnosis made by Corpoboyacá in 2015, considering the guidelines of CAR Resolution No. 196-2006, whose objective was to establish the guidelines for the delimitation of continental wetlands.
It is evident from this table that human intervention in the *ciénaga* is extensive. Pastures for cattle ranching represent 42.4% of the land cover units, whereas hydrocarbon extraction areas represent 1.9%. The company biologists indicate that human intervention in the *ciénaga* has more to do with cattle ranching and less to do with oil extraction. Nevertheless, as I presented in Chapter 2, landowner expansion developed alongside oil extraction and both are connected to the affordances of the body of water. Presenting separate data for cattle ranching and oil field reduces the interconnected impact of both infrastructures and their scope and influence on the environment. It endorses the attribution of environmental disturbances primarily to cattle ranching, which benefits the oil company when it comes to obtaining environmental licences.


Delimitation of the *ciénaga* according to the consultancy firm, having as its axis the oil block (the polygon in purple, contrasted with the variations of the *ciénaga* according to quantity of water, High (orange) Low (grey), Moderate (yellow) and Very low (green).

The UN Ramsar Convention\(^{49}\) to protect wetlands was signed and came into force in Colombia in 1998. It has, however, only been more actively applied since 2015, thanks largely to the initiative and research of the

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\(^{49}\) The Convention on Wetlands of International Importance especially as Waterfowl Habitat, is known in its abbreviated form as the Ramsar Convention and was signed in Iran at a United Nations convention on February 2, 1971 and entered into force on December 21, 1975. Its main objective is "the conservation and wise use
von Humboldt Institute. The convention defines the *humedal* (wetland) as an important habitat for the protection of biodiversity. Because of Ramsar, the *ciénaga* became an organism that extractive industries should not be close to or establish a relation with, fearing that it could prevent future extractivism. As seen on the map, the *ciénaga* is not touched by the oil infrastructure.

There are differences in the representation of the *ciénaga* by academic biologists and by biologists working for the oil company. Academic biologists conceive the *ciénaga* as a complex of transitional zones. Oil company biologists represent the *ciénaga* as an enclosed body of water. The different practices of representation reflect the existence of differences within biological studies and their engagements with other entities, like sponsors, schools and specific academic interest from the researchers, which inform different ways of engaging the environment. This also shows us how the relationships that these biologists have with universities or with oil companies affects the freedom they have in the production of knowledge. Those who receive financial support or payments from oil companies could end up producing representations of the *ciénaga* that satisfy the requirements of the commercial entity that pays for the study. Importantly, these different approaches also make different *ciénagas*, epistemologically and materially, and therefore ontologically.

The von Humboldt Institute is a prestigious state institution dedicated to environmental research, communication, and habitat-species conservation in Colombia. It is staffed by biologists, geographers, ecologists, forest engineers, and social scientists. It has been pivotal in making inventories of species and habitats. In 2015, it published a report that showed that almost 26% of Colombian territory was covered by different types of bodies of water which they referred to as *humedales*-wetlands under the framework of the UN Ramsar Convention (von Humboldt Institute, 2015).

According to the von Humboldt Institute, 30,781,149 hectares of the country are covered by water in rivers, floodplains, and depressions (2015). The majority of Colombians have settled in these areas and as of wetlands through local, regional and national actions and thanks to international cooperation, as a contribution to achieving sustainable development throughout the world". 
much as 80% of the population lives along the Magdalena River basin. This indicates that life for the majority of Colombians takes place in the pulsating variations between water and land. The von Humboldt Institute maintains that the inclusion of areas as humedales, that is to say Ramsar sites, would therefore protect and preserve these habitats through mechanisms of delimitation and mitigation. This is also achieved by demanding economic compensation – for example from the extractive industries that contaminate them – applying protocols to identify ecosystem services and/or requesting payments for environmental services.

During my research I was fortunate to have the support of a biologist who in addition to having worked on the 2015 Humboldt report on wetlands in Colombia, also worked as an independent consultant using satellite images for environmental research. According to her, studies of continental bodies of water such as rivers, ciénagas, estuaries, swamps and floodplains in Colombia have been improved by capturing, editing, and analyzing satellite images, and for this reason she has specialized in this set of techniques. In recent years, more accurate statistics on wetlands and forest have become available through these methods and through identifying and monitoring extra-terrestrial images from satellites such as MODIS and Landsat-NASA satellite.

![Picture 7. Multiannual analysis of the ciénaga. Image developed by Lina Estupiñan. Source: Landsat](image)
This method consists of downloading images, usually from the Landsat satellite, and subjecting them to editing, pixelation, scaling, and clarification using contrasting colors and shadows. This is done to identify depths and protuberances, mountains, plains, lows or concavities where water might accumulate. The images are compared throughout the year, or historically, as Landsat has archived images back to the 1980s. This allows for historical monitoring of the changes in a body of water over a period of time. Limitations of satellite images include their failure to capture bogs, as depth cannot be seen, and optical clouds in these images distort subtle variations. Satellite images cannot, therefore, indicate the variability of bodies of water in any detail. Biologists such as the one who collaborated in this research, therefore carry out complementary fieldwork, take samples of water and soil, compile descriptions of fauna and flora, use transects, and gather information from local residents. This information is then organized into biological categories of geoform, soil, hydrology, vegetation and fauna, frameworks through which the bodies of water are defined and delimited.

The power of the representation conveyed by the satellite images has become so authoritative in Colombia that a great deal of monitoring of deforestation and forest degradation is carried out using satellite imagery. Satellite images provide a sense of wholeness, but also an aesthetic picture of the meandering currents portrayed in a range of contrasting colors. The images also allow computer programs to be used to zoom in and out. They are fast becoming the most important basis for political decisions about environmental conservation and are shaping our mental images of the nature and behaviour of the environment.

Satellite images offer scalability and pixelation (consider the critical reflection on scalability elaborated by Anna Tsing, 2012), which allows images to travel and adapt to the biologist’s interventions. Images therefore cease to be a readymade representation and become raw material for transformation, without losing authority. On the contrary, forests and wetlands like the ciénaga gain authority as they emerge from such authoritative sources as the NASA satellites.

However, as my biologist collaborator explained to me, fieldwork continues to be important in her mapping. But in a country like Colombia, where the internal armed conflict prevents mobility, she still maintains that satellite images offer the best solution for making inventories of habitats.
The satellite image lends an authority that makes this representation of the ciénaga particularly powerful. The satellite image enacts what we might think of as the ‘eye of God’, an extra-terrestrial view of the land from above. In spite of the fact that the satellite image lacks resolution and granularity, it is still the most technologically advanced form of mapping. This has been underlined by Tor Benjaminsen et al (2015) in a similar case about the misreading of the Arctic Landscape in Norway through satellite images. In recent years satellite images have become the most precise form of representation produced by science, but their lack of accuracy is effectively concealed.

Before my doctoral research, the Palagua Ciénaga had not been analyzed using satellite images. The majority of studies of the ciénaga had been financed by the oil company for the purpose of obtaining environmental licences and had used pre-existing studies. To our surprise, the images from the first satellite images showed that the body of water in recent years had grown – that the area covered by water had expanded. It had thus not reduced in size, which is the trend we generally see when studying wetlands in Colombia. This surprising discovery transformed slightly the focus of my research. The question now became one of understanding the processes and actors that have intervened in reversing the trend of desiccation common in most ciénagas of the Middle Magdalena Valley, and of understanding the persistence of this particular ciénaga.

According to inhabitants, the lowlands and bogs of the ciénaga, which are not visible on satellite images, flood periodically. This seasonality means that the locals are dynamically entangled with the body of water, a condition substantiated from a dwelling experience that informs their ways of knowing the ciénaga. The prevalence of the fascination with satellite images at the expense of other forms of experiencing bodies of water could reduce environments to that which satellite images can capture and represent. Bogs and lowlands, substantial parts of the ciénaga, are then made invisible, and with them the oscillatory processes and viscosities to which humans and their activities, animals, plants, and materialities (such as infrastructures) are connected also disappear.

Based on satellite images, the von Humboldt Institute report stated that 26% of the country was covered by humedales (wetlands) (2015). But the coverage could be more than 26% if images fail to show bogs and
MAKING CIÉNAGA, AMPHIBIOUS ENTANGLEMENT

lowlands. The way the ciénaga is organized by this technology also transforms it by omitting its bogs and
lowlands, and the human and other-than-human lives that also constitute it. In this way, the environmental
protection agencies’ use of satellite images may simplify (conceptually) and reduce (materially) the size of
bodies of water such as ciénagas.

3.4 Identifying Ciénaga

For some inhabitants, the ciénaga was ‘our home’ or ‘our heritage’, while for others it was ‘a body of
water connected to the Magdalena River.’ One of the villagers I spoke with said that ‘the ciénaga is our
enterprise.’ By saying this, he explained, the villager tried to make the administrators of the oil company
understand that just as the oil company was important to them, the ciénaga was important to its inhabitants –
but not only for economic reasons.

The locals were born and raised in the ciénaga. They derive their food, housing, and subsistence from it,
and have made their kin community unfold from this body of water. The intensity of the sense of belonging
and care for these two enterprises was different, although partially interconnected: the ciénaga and the oil
company. Inhabitants expressed their experience of living there as “We were born and raised among canoes
and machines,” thus making reference to oil extraction and fishing, the practices that converge in the ciénaga.
However, while the ciénaga encompasses the oil field, the ciénaga can not be encompassed by the oil
extraction.

Diana Vargas worked as a security guard in the oil company. I was staying at her house near the ciénaga.
One day she asked me whether I could take Daniel, her 2-year-old son, to her mother Malva’s house, down the
street, so she could give the child lunch. I was getting Daniel ready when Diana arrived, having run home after
finishing her shift. All three of us went to Doña Malva’s house at the edge of the ciénaga. Daniel sat down to
have his soup. Diana took off her uniform and put on a sweatshirt. She then grabbed a paddle that stood next to
the door and said, "I’m going down to the ciénaga to get dinner. Do you want to join me, Monica?" I nodded
and together we walked down to her father’s canoe to do some fishing. The ciénaga was as important to her as
her work as a security guard for the oil company. It was also, however, more than an enterprise to be exploited
for profit. It was a place that provided her and her family with food and that had also nourished their ancestors.
One day, while talking to the old fisherman Rafa, we both realized that a number of things converge, end up in, and sprout in the ciénaga. Here there are fish stocks, invasive aquatic plants, oil spills and chemicals from the oil extraction, runoff from the cattle ranches of the landholders, chemicals from the cocaine laboratories in the Serranía de las Quinchas and sewage and waste from the surrounding villages. It was, however, also a place where things emerge. He explained with admiration that the ciénaga provided home, fish, and employment, and he argued strongly that the field’s main oil reserve is in fact beneath the ciénaga. The ciénaga was therefore the most valuable area in the region. We ended up concluding that this could explain its importance, the presence of different practices, and its persistence.

Tim Ingold has explained that the interaction of tasks and the environment in a rhythmic and cumulative resonance over time transforms a landscape into a taskscape (2000). Escobar has suggested that Ingold, Oyama, Maturana, Varela, and Haraway are authors with complementary analytical perspectives for understanding socio-environmental relationality (Escobar, 2008), and that their approach overcomes the nature-culture dichotomy, situating relations among humans, other-than-humans and environments as phenomenon-configuring agents of interactive practices.

My argument is similar to those of Lock and Nguyen. I suggest that the ciénaga is a local biology. That is to say that ‘the biological (is) leveraged by social, historical, political, and economic relationships locally’ unfolded (2010). However I would add that the situated biology of the ciénaga is also the result of the intersection and interaction of different knowledge practices that constitute it. The body of water is multiple in the practices that make it – the knowledge-activities that intervene in its materiality. Even though these practices are separated by both economic and knowledge relationships of power, that only partially overlap, they also maintain communicating vessels that have, so far, allowed life in the ciénaga to continue.

Reading articles in English about Colombian limnology, I found that the word ciénaga was translated as floodplain-swamp (see for example Junk & P.B. Bayley, 1989; Montoya & al., 2011). This translation of ciénaga as floodplain-swamp visibilizes the interconnectedness of these entities and suggests that a ciénaga is also a network of dendritic ramifications (Kern & Junk, 1996; Plata-Diaz & Pimienta-Rueda, 2011) which swells when there is rainfall and temporarily expands, mobilizing organic and inorganic matter into transitional
zones. It is part of an extended network of multiple influences in which two important biological processes take place, namely primary production and the hydrological cycle.

In these articles, I regularly found descriptions relating to fieldwork experiences in which the authors tried to convince the reader that their research results were unique to the sites where they had carried out their research. In their analyses, these Colombian biologists stated that a ciénaga was always unique in relation to other ciénagas, and itself unique at different points in the year. Claims of this type allowed for the following statements: ‘Each ciénaga is different, unique unto itself, and it is difficult to make a comparison among ciénagas because of the high degree of variability among them’ (Montoya, 2011); ‘The ciénaga is governed by a non-equilibrium system’ (Ramírez, 2005); ‘The size of the ciénaga varies significantly, as they are considered pulsating systems; a ciénaga is a highly dynamic system in which small changes can represent important changes on the surface’ (Bravo & Windevoxhel, 1997); ‘The ciénaga has different water compositions that change according to weather conditions’ (Hernández, 2013); ‘Its tributaries can be of various types, but these bodies of water are continuous systems that do not end abruptly, so their borders fade’ (Hernández, 2013); ‘A ciénaga seems to be connected to more ciénagas in a dynamic flow, but during dry periods they may appear isolated’ (Hernández, 2013). Colombian limnologists have suggested that it is necessary to carry out more studies of ciénagas to consolidate the study of limnology and to gain a better understanding of the behaviour of these bodies of water. Further studies are also necessary in order to produce definitions of these environments, which are adapted to Colombian conditions, without importing concepts belonging to other landscapes (Montoya, 2011).

This disposition probably has something to do with the fact that this area of biology in Colombia is still very much under construction (Montoya, 2011; Rios, 2009). Furthermore, the process of consolidation allows for exploration before standardization. However, as I have mentioned, the ciénaga is undergoing conceptual transformations resulting from different biological knowledge practices that dispute its definition, a dispute that has not yet concluded. As I have already explained, inspired by different interests and motivations, biologists are pushing for the transformation of ciénaga into lake, humedal or wetland. But these other forms of conceptualizing-enunciating would imply a change in the ecologies of practice that sustain the ciénaga, which
are different from the frames of international conservation that sustain *humedales*-wetlands or the economic development projects that sustains lakes.

I visited the Department of Biology at the National University of Colombia several times during my research. A professor explained to me that a *ciénaga* is a footprint that the river leaves behind and which accidentally coincides with a geomorphological concavity. A *ciénaga*, in his words, is ‘the testimony of the lateral movements of a river’. This concavity will persist for a period of time, but the action of erosion and sedimentation will fill up the depression and the vessel will disappear. According to the professor, a *ciénaga* is a coincidental result of the river disappearing over time. The temporality of this account refers to thousands of centuries, the lifespan of a *ciénaga*. In this version, however, its end seems inevitable.

The idea of the finiteness of the *ciénaga* made me reach out to another expert, the biology professor G. Pinilla. According to him, a *ciénaga*, as compared to a mountain or most other geomorphological formations, is one of short duration. This echoed what the other biologist at the National University had told me. Professor Pinilla also indicated that a *ciénaga* could last for hundreds of years, but that sediments would eventually fill its basin and cause it to disappear. These two conversations made me think about the inevitable end of the *ciénaga* and of the worlds that inhabit it. How then might it be possible to preserve this habitat and its biodiversity, if due its own ‘natural dynamic’ it is likely to disappear?

Both the biologist with whom I developed the satellite images and the von Humboldt Institute explain that a *ciénaga* is an important habitat for biodiversity, making it valuable for conservation. This interest in conservation mobilizes their studies and commitments, and its representation through satellite images. According to Arturo Escobar, the discourse of biodiversity in conservation unfolds a genocentric vision of the process of biological life (Escobar, 1998, p. 159). This, he argues, is based on a neo-Darwinist perspective, in which habitats matter to the genes that inhabit them, reducing their value while making the heterogeneous

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50 Anonymity requested by the source.
51 His academic work with lentic water bodies ranges from the study of ciénagas to Amazonian lakes, wetlands in the Cundiboyancense Plateau, coves on the Pacific Colombian Coast, and on their different water compositions. He has published articles both in Colombia and abroad and he made a compilation of biological indicators of continental aquatic ecosystems in Colombia which was released in 1998. For more information visit the academic webpage of UNAL Bogota: http://www.docentes.unal.edu.co/gapinillaa/
processes that are not represented by this knowledge practice invisible for the sake of conserving it – as in the satellite images.

Through its wetland conservation discourses, the UN Ramsar Convention\textsuperscript{52} separates nature from culture, but integrates them in a socioecological perspective in which the sociocultural is subsumed into the biologic.

If a body of water like a ciénaga is destined to disappear, as claimed by Professors Gómez and Pinilla, then how can biologists at environmental institutions appeal for its conservation? University biologists and professionals at environmental conservation institutions conceptualize the persistence of the ciénaga in different ways. In interviews with university professors, the ciénaga took on a different lifespan as temporary and arbitrary, while remaining part of an aquatic-complex. Conservation institutions seem to imagine the ciénaga as eternal, a thing to conserve as a habitat and because of the biodiversity and genes it contains.

The concept of wetlands expressed by the Ramsar Convention includes ciénagas, bogs, marshes, floodplains, and fens. The Ramsar Convention defines wetlands as ‘areas of marsh, fen, peatland, or water-covered surfaces, whether natural or artificial, permanent or temporary, with water that is static or flowing, fresh, brackish, or salt, including areas of marine water whose depth in low tide does not exceed six meters’ (Fide & Carbonell, 1986). The concept of wetland entered into the biology lexicon in 1971 (Huijbens & Palsson, 2009), offering a wide term that covers similar, different, and unique bodies of water for purposes of international nature conservation.

Veronica Strang (2014) and Huijbens & Palsson (2009) point out that human experiences of water, as manifested in places, historical moments, and cultural situations, have shown that there are phenomenological continuities and similarities from which it is possible to weave ‘common undercurrents of meaning’ about water that account for the opportunities and challenges it poses, beyond specificity. Understanding Palsson’s suggestion, the word-concept wetland could be a communicating vessel among these similar, but not identical,

\textsuperscript{52} In 1998, five years after the creation of the Ministry of Environment, the Ramsar Convention on wetlands came into force in Colombia. The convention has recognized six sites of international importance. In recent years, as a response to the obligations that the country assumed by signing the Ramsar Convention, the Ministry of Environment has been promoting scientific identification of wetlands all over the country. For this purpose, it has begun a collaboration with the Humboldt Institute, which in turn has brought a wide network of researchers, scientists, state officials, and communities into the identification process.
Phenomenological experiences of bodies of water. However, Palsson also critiques the way wetland is used in the Ramsar logic, arguing that Ramsar is an economically oriented vision of these bodies of water as biological supermarkets or functional kidneys. Under Ramsar’s rationality, wetlands are priced at US$12.790 trillion in annual value, an economic estimate produced by pricing the productive services offered by these entities, a framework that sees wetlands as resources (Constanza et al 1997 cited in Huijbens & Palsson, 2009). Therefore, if as Palsson has argued, ecosystem services express a conceptualization (knowledge practice) of bodies of water that uses a capitalist logic, could wetlands be understood as environments beyond capitalist modernity?

The satellite image from which the wetland emerges already cuts off parts of the ciénaga and it is now quantified according to the services or resources it can lend to economic production. The ciénaga-as-wetland is then transformed into an ecosystem service with a disposition towards economic extraction.

Wetlands in Colombia are known as humedales, which indicates another difference in translation. When wetland is expressed as humedal in Spanish, two interesting things change. One is that in the Spanish term humedal, the ‘land’ is absent. This is quite different from the English term wetland (which would translate literally as tierra mojada in Spanish). The second consideration is that the term humed-al in Spanish takes an adjectival form meaning relative to humidity. This is similar to other words with the -al suffix, such as the Spanish words cultur-al (relative to culture), or tropic-al (relative to tropics). As a noun, however, the suffix -al means related to an abundance of the thing that it is describing (in this case: humidity). This is similar to the Spanish words diner-al (abundance of money) or arroz-al (abundance of rice). So a wetland in Spanish translation literally means related to an abundance of humidity, not a land that is wet as in the literal composition of the word wetland in English. This has implications for representation of the object, the relations that constitute it, and how it is identified.

The concept of ‘wetland’ has, according to the project leader for the Ramsar Convention at the von Humboldt Institute, whom I had the opportunity to interview, been applied in Colombia in a rather problematic way. If applied directly, it could cause economic and political conflict with extractive industries, landowners, and communities.
In the ciénaga, the word wetland (humedal) has not yet arrived in full force. It is, however, on its way. The inhabitants of the ciénaga do not call it humedal, because to call the ciénaga a humedal would evoke the coldness of the bodies of water that are located in the highlands of the Andes. For historical and local reasons, this is something the people of Puerto Boyacá would strongly resist, just as they resisted their abrupt assignment to the Department of Boyacá at the beginning of last century. The warm, lowland territory along the Magdalena River became incorporated into the cold, highland territory with its capital in Tunja, a tension related to the distribution of the moral topography in Colombia that I have explained in the previous chapters - cold highlands opposing hot lowlands.

The characteristics of the landscape and climate in Puerto Boyacá are different from those in the rest of the Department of Boyacá. The inhabitants of Puerto Boyacá consider the people of Boyacá to be reserved, introverted, religious, and boring – characteristics that they consider opposite to their own. When I occasionally made comments linking the ciénaga to the Department of Boyacá, the inhabitants typically reacted by expressing rejection, arguing that they had nothing in common with the people of the highlands. Interestingly, they often expressed feelings of greater proximity to the practices, preferences, and customs of people from the Departments of Antioquia, Santander, or the Caribbean region, some arguing that they share a sense of bravery, charisma, and phenotypical features. The word ciénaga is thus associated with heat and humidity and a dendritic connection to the Magdalena River and the Caribbean Coast. Locals often referred to themselves as cienagueros or costeños de agua dulce (freshwater coastal dwellers). Humedal, on the other hand, is associated with bodies of water at a high altitude in the cold, mountainous regions, which resonates with the moral topography between high and lowlands of Colombia.

Luz gave me an explanation of the distinction between humedal (wetland) and ciénaga. She said, "The humedales (wetlands) sustain the ciénaga, and because the humedales are drying up, the ciénaga is also affected." Luz keeps herself informed and is in contact with the representatives of the various institutions that have come to the area to study the ciénaga. Unlike many of the ciénaga’s inhabitants, she has heard of the concept of humedal (wetland) used by visiting biologists. However, the vision of humedales she has developed, and the distinction she makes with the ciénaga, resonates with an image of humedales as a water body found at
other altitudes but connected to the *ciénaga*. Her conceptualization is based on materialities and historical entanglements - oppositions between the highlands and the lowlands.

The formula of ecosystem services\(^{53}\) or payments for environmental services, which predisposes the *ciénaga* to be wetland (*humedal*), calculates the limit between profitability and the destruction-continuity of the habitat-biodiversity. It is about a capacity positively valued, the capacity of a habitat to continue its life without structural changes, and this has a more specific term: resilience. But can an organism-environment maintain its structure, unchanged under the pressure of the extraction of its ‘services’? And, if so, for how long? For eternity?

The developmental biology of Susan Oyama (2000) and the autopoiesis of Maturana and Varela (1994) claim that what we call evolution is the result of interactions at different levels that have been able to transform the profound structures of genes, bodies, and environments, allowing a coupling among organisms-environment for them to persist. Different from the persistence of organism-environment in Oyama, Maturana and Varela, the idea of resilience in environmental conservation through ecosystem services seems to be limiting this capacity for structural dynamism, stimulating an essentialist understanding of organisms and environments to conserve as discrete units without experiencing structural changes.

As shown by the satellite images, the *ciénaga* has visibly transformed at distinct moments over the last thirty years. Contamination and the expansion of pastures have caused damage, and at times water contamination has triggered massive fish death. The inhabitants have coped with these transformations, and through practices of care, habitation, and fish cultivation have also persisted in their relationship with the *ciénaga*. Both agents are involved in profound transformations of their structures and identities, through which they still continue to live. Together they are resilient in a more ample framework of understanding the persistence of life as situated resilience (Cote and Nightingale, 2011).

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\(^{53}\) According to FAO, ecosystem services consist of the multiple benefits that nature brings to society. FAO estimates that the goods provided by ecosystems have a value of US$125 billion, and FAO considers that more efforts are needed to protect and order these ecosystems. Ecosystem services are divided into four groups of services: supply services (supply of materials and resources), regulation (regulation of ecosystem processes), support (the basis, space, or foundation upon which the ecosystem operates), and cultural (immaterial benefits as inspiration for culture, engineering, and spiritual well-being).
In my quest to understand the biological conceptualization of the ciénaga in the Middle Magdalena Valley of Colombia and the persistence of this ciénaga in particular, another interpretation, this time from geology, came into the conversation. As I have mentioned before, important oil infrastructure has been built over the ciénaga for more than sixty years. An oil company geologist explained to me that it was very likely that after thousands of years, high pressure and heat would decompose the organic material sediment in the ciénaga to create chemical substances such as crude oil. In saying this, he also wanted to explain to me why Colombia’s most important oil reserves have concentrated along the Magdalena River floodplains. Following this line of thinking, the Guaduas Formation, a formation two kilometres below the ciénaga over which Campo Velásquez was built, could have been a ciénaga in the geological past.

The company geologist stated that the Guaduas Formation (where the crude oil is deposited) could have been an active ciénaga, something which was confirmed by the university biologists. This probably occurred in the late Cretaceous Period in the Maastrichtian age, approximately 72 million years ago. The ciénaga could have been formed in the Paleogene period in the Eocene era, about 55 to 32 million years ago. Two ciénagas, 17 million years or two kilometres apart, are today again connected and the distance between them reduced. Distances that took centuries to be produced have been reduced by the practices of oil extraction. Two ciénagas enmeshed by the operation of rigs, pipelines, and ditches.

This conceptualization of the ciénaga by the geologist suggested that it could later become oil, in the same way as the Guaduas Formation. Implicitly it creates the idea that the relation between ciénaga and hydrocarbons is natural. This idea resonated with the claims made by the oil company’s engineers and other environmental engineers I spoke with, who saw the ciénaga as a degraded environment, difficult to recover, best turned into pastures and placed at the service of intensified oil extraction for the good of its inhabitants and of Colombians in general.

The wetland biology enacted by environmental institutions and the extractivist biology of the oil company both understand nature and culture as being separate. And both naturalize the processes of the ciénaga: the conservation programs emphasize the need for its conservation as an entity that must not change, while the oil company focuses on its tendency to become oil. Both, from different vantage points, naturalize the ciénaga
with their specific biologies. In this way, the biodiversity conservation discourse converges with the discourse of the oil company. Each mutually validates the other’s discourse as its legitimate opposite; they both conflict and agree as they communicate along the same lines: Nature and culture are separated, and explanations of the ciénaga drawn from their scientific biologists.

3.5 Biology Otherwise

I propose an understanding of the ciénaga that is different, but not one that excludes extractivist biology and wetland biology. I propose to understand the ciénaga as the intricate convergences and divergences of the biological knowledge practices that make it. This will help make the reader aware of this complex biosocial being in constant adjustment. This particular body of water that, to paraphrase Bonelli, is “many natures of water” (2016) is enacted in practices that simultaneously exceed and reduce it.

The body of water is shaped by epistemic practices - by practical ontologies (Jensen, 2014). And the persistence of the ciénaga could be measured by its capacity for situated resilience to entangle and to detach these epistemic practices. Its persistence could be observed by exploring its structural couplings, its ruptures and transformations, or as an amphibian disposition of inhabiting or navigating between wetland, extractive and academic biology: biology otherwise.

Picture 8. In the ciénaga at 5 a.m. Picture taken by the author in November 2014
One day in October 2014, two biologists working for a consultancy firm contracted by the oil company came to the ciénaga asking for fisherfolk to accompany them to take water samples at different points. The biologists were dressed all in white, in special suits that covered their shoes, body, hands, neck, head, and sides of the head. Rafa and Oved remarked that they looked like astronauts. The biologists, from Bogotá, hired Oved and Rafa to be their guides in the ciénaga, and I was allowed to join them. When we arrived at the north side of the ciénaga and got out of the canoe, the biologists took out sterile jars to collect water samples. While preparing the jars, they asked Oved and Rafa if the people drank the water. Oved answered, "Yes, although we prefer not to because it contains parasites and gives us diarrhoea. So therefore we boil it or put chlorine in it. Although it depends where you take the water from."

Once the five samples were collected at the site, in different bottles marked with different numbers, we went to another site. Rafa and Oved already knew the biologists’ procedure, as they visited the ciénaga at least twice per semester. They knew that the water of the ciénaga was not the same everywhere and all the time. Rafa said, "Some places are more polluted than others. Different waters reach the ciénaga, and when it rains the pollution is dispersed. In the dry season, pollution concentrates more in some parts than others." That comment drew my attention. One of the biologists answered, "Yes, the señor is right. During the rains the chemical components in the water dissolve." Oved replied, "But they do not disappear. The chemicals disperse occupying more space in the ciénaga." The biologist replied to Oved, "But it lowers the concentration of chemicals and bacteria in the water." Oved smiled sarcastically and said, "So, that’s why you take the samples in the rainy season?" Rafa was uncomfortable with the conversation, and tried to reconcile Oved with the biologists by saying, "But Oved, what is the point of collecting samples when there is no rain. It wouldn’t be fair to them either. You know that the ciénaga rots by itself and not only because of the discharges (from oil extraction)." The experts from the laboratory, Prodycom, reacted with surprise and admiration to Rafa’s remark, and they made it clear that they wholeheartedly agreed with him. The tension was reduced and they continued working.

Latin American decolonial thinkers have defined the otherwise as a thing that has been exploited and obliterated at the same time, but that – entangled with these forms of concealment – has nourished those on the
side of the hegemony, while creatively persisting the otherwise (the non-hegemonic manifestations) through the entanglement. Catherine Walsh writes, “I have come to recognize and comprehend it, the otherwise is that which exists in the borders, edges, fissures, and cracks of the modern/colonial order that continues to be (re)molded, (re)constituted, and (re)shaped both against and despite coloniality” (2015, p. 12).

I have come back to this moment many times since my fieldwork, to this dialogue; a dialogue that took place between the fisherfolk and the Prodycom laboratory microbiologists while we were navigating the ciénaga; an entanglement of biological understandings of the ciénaga that benefits Prodycom – at the same time as Prodycom conceals the biological insights of the locals. I am going to suggest that this was a moment when the otherwise emerged, when the knowledge of the inhabitants of the ciénaga emerged with authority. But it also appeared to sustain the oil extraction biology. The otherwise tried to build common ground, to maintain an interweaving with the Prodycom microbiologists, but that also shifted the ground of their monopoly on scientific authority, and by doing this it made a difference.

The force of the amphibian disposition shows me how the fisherfolk-colonos nourish and are nourished by biological knowledge practices while having the capacity to challenge them. However, this form of "resistance" is not entirely antagonistic. Sometimes it can be seen as an accomplice. Still, this "complicity" allows endurance produced by entanglement in detachment.
Chapter 4
Making Seasonality

According to the inhabitants, the ciénaga experiences variations throughout the year. They taught me about the connection between the bocachico fish migration, cultivation and breeding, and about trimming water hyacinth according to the directionality and volume of water flowing towards the ciénaga or towards the river. Together, these participate in the seasonality of this body of water. However, there are several human practices and substances that can also affect seasonality. Examples of this include substances produced through oil extraction and the mitigation of oil pollution. The expansion of pastures, which is a phenomenon related to the political ecology of paramilitary drug trafficking, is also a factor in seasonality. Seasons in the ciénaga result from both biophysical phenomena and the complications of these other practices and factors. This chapter will delve more deeply into seasonality in this body of water, as a fragile combination of the different activities inhabitants practice to subsist and live with the ciénaga. I call their ability to employ such varied practices an amphibious disposition.

The passage of time in the ciénaga is divided among different activities. The manifestation of environmental time includes variations in temperature and precipitation and biophysical processes, while chronological time refers to the intervals that give order to day and night, weeks and months. Activities are distributed on a year-round basis and are interconnected to the hydrological cycle, the growth of aquatic plants and fish, and the metabolic process of the ciénaga. The repetition of each cycle of activities is the result of the coordination between human determination and nature’s affordances. Seasonality is therefore both strenuous and fragile.

This chapter ethnographically presents how the activities related to work, labor, livelihood and reciprocity are developed by the inhabitants and articulated around the seasonal changes of the ciénaga. The exploration of seasonality will contribute to the understanding of the amphibian disposition in this place: elicitations occur according to season changes, and these display the character of the persistence of this human and more-than-human collective.
Seasons are thought of as divisions within a year that mark climatic and environmental changes. Annual seasons are evident in regions located above the Tropic of Cancer and below the Tropic of Capricorn. In these parts of the world, the seasons are named winter, spring, summer and autumn. Near the equator, however, the notion of seasons is different. The ciénaga is located only 1,000 kilometres from the equator. In regions near the equator there are no dramatic differences in temperature and light at different times of year. However, this does not mean that there are no seasons at all. I will argue that seasonality in the ciénaga conveys particular conceptions and forms of practicing biophysical processes. Seasonality is therefore not a given, but rather a converging interaction between biophysical processes and human practices.

According to Ingold, human actions participate in an interactive way with the material world. These actions and the world are in mutual transformation, creating environments, which for Ingold consist of the human disposition to move along in the world with it, rather than acting against it. Ingold referred to this range of interrelated activities in the world as ‘taskscapes’, which can be traced by exploring the dwelling of activities (2000:200).

In the ciénaga, the inhabitants do not impose on their material world, but literally navigate and live within it. The ciénaga is part of their bodies. They live on its shores, navigate its waters, and think of this body of water as the reason their lives are possible. Following Ingold’s notion of environment as interactive, transformative, and temporary, the ciénaga emerges in a choreographic, fragile system that has experienced both continuity and occasional ruptures. Its persistence could be seen through the entanglements and detachments produced through seasonality.

In anthropology, the analysis of human relations with environmental change has been a central topic. One of the preliminary works was Marcel Mauss’ essay Seasonal Variations of the Eskimo (1979). In this

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54 The human response to seasonal variations has been studied in archeology and ethno-archaeology as a way of interpreting the organization of settlements in societies that have already disappeared. They propose to contrast archaeological vestiges with ethnographies of populations that inhabit the same territory or inhabit similar environmental conditions, as for example in the work of Donald Ferguson Thompson (1936) on the Wik Monkan Tribe in Australia. Thompson participated in the current of the New Archeology, a trend in archeology inspired by the cultural ecology of Julian Steward to show how seasonality can determine different structural social compositions within a same cultural system.
essay, Mauss argues that Eskimo society adopted a social morphology according to its geographic area. According to Mauss, social morphology refers to the way the Eskimo are distributed topographically and the socio-cultural institutions they developed to accommodate to this place or environment. Based on ethnography among Inuits (Eskimo), Mauss proposed a general law to understand the process of distension (during the summer) and of concentration (during the winter). The oscillatory process of distention and concentration, he said, regulates the endogenous rhythms of humans shaping the environment (1979, p. 402). Humans project their internal oscillations in their adjustment to the environment and these projections can be observed in rituals, activities, and social dynamics (1979, p. 428). Mauss’ theory conceives of humans and the environment as separate entities, while making their activities and their significance for the environment the central protagonist.

Evans-Pritchard explained that for the Nuer, ecological time was the result of the interpretation of environmental manifestations such as the movement of stars, the moon and the sun, rainfall, drought, floods, fish, and the growth of pastures, which were organized into activities to meet social needs (Evans-Pritchard, 1977, p. 114). He believed that the Nuer’s ecological time involved a wider structure of generational systems, generations encompassed by environmental changes. Unlike Mauss, for Evans-Pritchard ecological time is produced by social structures, and therefore not a projection of human internal rhythms.

A more contemporary anthropologist, Ignacio Terradas claims that the relation between social time, understood as the human distribution of activities over environmental change to satisfy human needs, and environmental time, meaning recurring biophysical processes beyond human control, is mutually constitutive, although it implies efforts to synchronize (Terradas, 1998). His anthropological approach, inspired by Boas and Evans-Pritchard, resonates with the idea of taskscapes (Ingold, 2000). I suggest understanding seasonality as a taskscape in synchronization, in coupling, co-constitution and collective creation among humans and more-than-humans. In this taskscape, socioenvironmental time is neither exact nor given, and various actors and forces are involved in producing the rhythms of the seasons.
4.1 Tarulla trimming season

Tarulla is known botanically as *Eichhomia Crassipes*. It is an exogenous plant that does not have any predators in the *ciénaga*. Its interesting capacity to reproduce rhizomatically means that it flourishes rapidly in new environments. *Tarulla* reproduces by stolons that are connected horizontally, with chunks of new life growing up again from these shoots. It is a perennial plant, and its seeds can survive for up to 28 years. The plant cover can, when exposed to ideal conditions, expand at a fast pace and could easily cover an area of 600 square kilometres in a year. *Eichhomia Crassipes* is therefore classified as one of the 100 most dangerous invasive species in the world. But because it is considered to have the ability to absorb heavy metals, it has been researched and trialled in different industries, like the hydrocarbons industry. The FAO has conducted extensive research into how to control its reproduction and invasive tendencies.

The manual trimming of the aquatic plant *tarulla* (water hyacinth), takes place during two seasons of the year - between May and June and November and December. In these periods, members of the fisherfolks’ association are hired by the oil company as a way to compensate the local community for environmental damages, a legal obligation established in a lawsuit that the fisherfolk had filed and won against Texaco in 1994, that holds the company accountable for the contamination of the *ciénaga*. 
Picture 9. Elena navigating the ciénaga at a moment when the tarulla had expanded over much of the water’s surface. Picture taken by the author in October 2014

The reason *tarulla* is cut during these months is related to the annual periods of rainfall. The fisherfolk recommend trimming at these times for two reasons: 1) because the preceding months of strong periods of sun and no wind allow the tarulla to grow exponentially, and 2) because the rain and the resulting strong currents running toward the river Magdalena during these months help facilitate the removal process as the currents flush biological material out of the ciénaga. The company negotiated these periods with the fisherfolk, validating their knowledge as well as data on rainfall in the middle Magdalena valley, rates of eutrophication of the water, the intensity of the sun and the dynamics of the plant’s growth. The Sino-Indian administration of the oil company approved the two trimming seasons, recognizing what had previously been undermined by Texaco and Omimex, namely the relevance of inhabitants’ local knowledge of environmental mitigation as part of oil extraction. The company’s environmental engineer explained the new oil operator’s decision to me saying “No one knows the ciénaga better than the locals.” The environmental obligation, the obligation of social compensation for contamination, and the recognition of fisherfolks’ knowledge has transformed into two seasonal periods of paid work for the fisherfolks’ association.

The lawsuit and the new agreement between the Sino-Indian company and the inhabitants required the company to pay them $13 per person per day during the season for their work. The fisherfolks’ association also has exclusive rights to rent out motor-boats, canoes, oars, bows, machetes, and other tools used to trim the aquatic plant. This equipment belongs to members of the fisherfolks’ association who are no longer able to work, such as Nicolas Velasquez, who is disabled, Tomas Trujillo, who is one of the oldest fisherman, or Nubia Vargas, who cannot participate in the *tarulla* trimming as she has two small children, one with psychomotor problems. Internally, the association has stipulated that all members should receive payment during these cutting seasons, either by working or by renting out equipment. That means that the 158 members of the association receive direct payments, and that another 339 people, including their dependants and

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55 The names of the people mentioned in this chapter do not correspond to the real names, this to guarantee the anonymity of the people.
children under 18 years of age, indirectly receive benefits. That is to say that almost everyone in the kin-community of the ciénaga benefits from the trimming of tarulla.

In November 2014, I participated in the year’s second tarulla trimming season. The workday started as early as 4:30 a.m. when we all met at the dock. A meeting was held with the fisherfolk and the company’s environmental engineers to plan the day’s work. At the meeting, the engineers spent quite a lot of time explaining the use of the equipment and detailing the division of work during the day. The engineers were young and urban, and the fisherfolk were visibly irritated by the engineers’ patronizing tone; they already knew all about the work dynamic as they had done it many times before. But on this occasion, the fisherfolk were particularly annoyed because the season was two weeks behind the schedule agreed with the company. Due to this delay, the tarulla now covered large parts of the body of water and most of the streams were blocked, which had caused water stagnation and curtailed the mobility of the fish. Months before, the fisherfolk had worked hard releasing bocachico fingerlings into the water, in the hope of considerably increasing their chance to catch fish. But the oil company’s delay in cutting the tarulla was affecting the bocachico fingerlings’ environment, and producing a terrible rot. Seasonality is formed in these disputes, in the production of
taskscapes, which contain power relations. The environment is this moulding of biophysical processes and the social dynamics associated with them, manifesting a texture, density, smell and flavour of the place.

For cutting *tarulla*, the fisherfolk wore standard uniforms provided by the oil company: blue denim overalls, helmets, and gloves. In practical terms, the fisherfolk and the engineers looked as if they were all oil workers. The fisherfolk, according to the above-mentioned verdict, were, however, receiving environmental compensation for pollution caused by oil extraction by being hired by the company to do this task. One thing that the company did not provide, but that became a successful sales item, was a cloth mask that covered the head, face, neck and ears to protect them from the scorching sun and the aggressive *brinquibrinqui*, small, grey grasshoppers that live among the *tarulla*. According to the fisherfolk, the massive proliferation of *brinquibrinqui* was directly connected to the invasion of the plant that had been introduced into the cienaga to mitigate pollution caused by the oil operation. Oil pollution, the *tarulla* and the *brinquibrinqui* have transformed the *ciénaga*’s ecosystem. The cycles in the *ciénaga* are now structured around the rhythms of cutting the *tarulla* and around negotiations with the oil company which is under a legal obligation to provide seasonal paid work.

Esteban Trujillo, Andres Trujillo, and Juana Santana were in charge of organizing the *tarulla* cutting teams on November 12. The three teams consisted of a total of 42 people and 9 canoes. My group was led by the president of the association. Our team went to a part of the *ciénaga* where massive trunks were blocking the flow of water into the streams. A second group went to cut *tarulla* in the western part of the *ciénaga*, and a third was assigned to removing plants that had already been cut, pushing them into the Magdalena River via a connecting stream.

In the northern part of the *ciénaga*, close to a mansion that used to belong to the former paramilitary commander Botalón, the oil company had rented a plot of land to store pieces of removed *tarulla*. Some of the locals hoped that in the future this organic material could be processed and sold as fertilizer. On land, two backhoes mechanically remove the plant from the water, inevitably also removing sediment from the bottom of the body of water. This indirectly dredged the *ciénaga*, which over time was becoming more like a lake due to its depth. This is one effect of the mitigation of biopollution – the transformation of the *ciénaga* into a lake.
Andres was in our canoe with six others. We paddled down towards the Agualinda stream, the cienaga’s main artery. As we moved along, they were keen to show me different birds, insects, and trees that we passed and also to make me aware of a family of red howler monkeys that observed us from the shore. After a while, we reached an area that had been deforested by finqueros (farmers), and torrential rain had torn down trees that were weakly rooted in the soil. These trees fell into the stream blocking the water flow, causing an unusual accumulation of organic material that blocked the currents. Andres and the other men jumped into the water and tried to remove the heavy logs with the almost useless tools they had at their disposal. Andres said, as he wiped sweat from his forehead, “Having a chainsaw would have made it much easier to remove the trunks, cutting it into pieces.” One of the other team members heard his comment and said ironically with a grin on his face, “Well, Andres, you know very well that the chainsaw around here is used for something else” (referring to paramilitary massacres). Nobody made any further comments, and there was a strange silence in the air as the team continued its work. Days later, I would learn that the paramilitaries had used a chainsaw to murder Andres’s older brother more than a decade ago, and that his body had been found in a pump jack for oil extraction.

After three hours of hard work, the workers managed to remove one of the trees. The next day they would bring more people and more equipment to remove the other one. It was already 10:00 a.m. and time for an early break, before we broke for lunch at 2:00 p.m. The sun was infernal and the heat, the mosquitoes, and the brinquibrinquís were unbearable. Angel wanted to see how the tarulla cutting was progressing in the open water, so we took one of the canoes and started paddling slowly up the stream.

On our way to the other teams, Andres, with his keen ability to find fish, saw that a botada (temporary abundance of fish) was about to happen. He concluded that the rains that had somehow accelerated the growth of the fingerlings they had introduced almost four months earlier, and that some of the fish were now concentrated in this part of the ciénaga. We passed the other two teams. Some of the fisherfolk were diligently cutting aquatic plants, while others were taking a break, sitting in the shade chatting, eating, or just resting.

According to Ingold’s concept of taskscapes, the seasons are relentlessly made through interaction between humans and the environment such as tarulla trimming. This encompasses an array of different factors,
including water currents, the sun, the *tarulla*’s circadian rhythm, the fisherfolks’ participation, the oil company’s decisions and the enforcement of Colombian laws. They are like ‘polyrhythmic composition[s]’ (David Reason in Ingold, 2000, p. 201) that make seasons as long as they converge.

Juana Santana, seeing what was happening, started scolding the lazy ones, pointing out the importance of finishing the cutting planned for the day. Andres, however, was completely absorbed by the number of fish he could see in the water around him. I could not see them with my untrained eye. Andres, sitting next to me, got more and more eager and decided to let his fellow fisherfolk know what was happening by yelling, “Botada!...Botada!” The enthusiasm was contagious, because very few fish had been caught in the ciénaga in recent weeks. Upon hearing this almost magic word, the men and women in the other canoes stopped cutting the *tarulla* and paddled quickly towards us. Andres swiftly dispatched a canoe to the village dock to inform the rest of the fisherfolk about the *botada* and to bring back cast nets, ice buckets and other tools for fishing.

It was now noon. With an improvised bucket made from big tree leaves and using knives as harpoons, the fishermen, who had been converted into oil company workers to remove organic pollution, suddenly again became fisherfolk. Even without nets, the people in my canoe caught 5 fish (1 *zarta* - 5 kilos of fish - that could be sold for USD 9 in the town market). The members of the association were euphoric. They almost forgot that they were in the *ciénaga* to cut *tarulla*. They instantly changed their priorities and started fishing as if the fishing season had already started. The fish, emerging unexpectedly, led to the sudden discontinuation of *tarulla* trimming and the fisherfolk rapidly adjusted to the new circumstances.

While living in the ciénaga, I realized that the *tarulla* trimming season is not fixed. It depends on the biophysical process of the aquatic plant and the results of the inhabitants’ negotiations or struggles with the oil company. The company’s postponement of *tarulla* cutting had triggered eutrophication, but so had the continued discharge into the *ciénaga* of nutrient-rich surface runoff from farm fields and pastures. The water’s stagnation and the high nutrient level together led to the eutrophication that suffocated the fish in the *ciénaga*, thereby affecting the fishing season to which the fisherfolk feel profoundly connected. Importantly, this is a practice that substantiates their sense of identity, although the practice of fishing is temporal.
The making of seasons speaks about the fragility of work and livelihoods in the *ciénaga*. The inhabitants must mobilize actions and attitudes that make these seasons possible. Seasonality is therefore not taken for granted by them. They understand that everything is fragile in the *ciénaga*. They therefore have to invest much effort in preparing and producing the season, which again allows for their subsistence and therefore their persistence.

### 4.2 Working for the Oil Company

*Picture 11. Local Oil workers on the oil rig of the Chinese oil company SINOPEC. Picture taken by the author in September 2014.*

The local population has been working for the company on a regular basis for over a decade. This has been made possible by the reactivation of the oil field by the Sino-Indian company in 2004 as well as by paramilitary demobilization. The oil company replaced the power of the paramilitary commander and became the generator of employment and economic growth.
In Colombia, the oil boom started around the year 2000. Simultaneously, a legal framework was constructed to regulate the hiring of workers (Decree 3115 of 1997, Law 1636 of 2003, Decree 722 of 2013, Decree 2852 of 2013). This legal framework made it mandatory to hire people directly affected by oil extraction operations and those who suffered from competition with migrant workers who moved into oil producing regions. Those who lived near the oil infrastructure in the municipality of Puerto Boyacá thus benefitted from these new regulations, regulations which also helped organizing the territory around the field, referred to as the Area of Influence of the Operation.

In recent decades, to maintain access to these opportunities, the inhabitants have created vernacular protocols and internal processes to retain and distribute the vacancies among them. The practice of internal ad hoc distribution of job opportunities has also been observed in other oil producing regions of Colombia, generating two paradoxical dynamics: vernacular social organization of workers in their territories, but also the mushrooming of local job intermediation mafias.

The first time I visited the ciénaga was in April 2013. Upon my arrival, I noticed two lists written in red and black markers tacked to the walls of Dona Nieves’s kiosk. One list consisted of only male names and the other of only female names.

I approached Sebastian Vargas, the leader of the Communal Board, and asked him, “What is that?” He told me, “These are the lists of workers.” He continued by explaining that they contained the names of those who appeared on the top of a far longer waiting list and who were available to do temporary work for the company, vacancies that would be announced at the oil company’s socializations. He added that the lists were on public display to avoid misunderstandings among the villagers. According to Sebastian, those on the list had priority when the company informed the community of job opportunities. This was the first and the last time I saw these lists exposed in public. A few weeks later, the central government, in coordination with the oil companies and the trade unions, declared them illegal. However, in the ciénaga, the lists of workers and the process around their elaboration continued throughout my fieldwork in spite of their prohibition.

Manuel Trujillo was the person in charge of keeping the lists of workers. Manuel was a member of the Community Board, and a descendant of the Trujillo brothers, pioneers in this village. The lists included the
names of 150 people, divided between men (110) and women (40). Inclusion on the lists was by rotation and only for members of the community, a form of democracy based on rotation, kinship and residence in the ciénaga. The list operates as follows: Any local inhabitant of at least 18 years old who has resided there for more than 6 months is eligible to be on the list, and is assigned a position (a number). As job vacancies arrive and people leave, the others move up. When a temporary contract with local contractors or the oil company finishes, the person is added back at the bottom of the list. Waiting time on the list is approximately 3 months, and temporary jobs last from 15 days to 3 months.

Vernacular forms of democracy like the Ayllu democracy described by Rivera Cusicanqui (1990) or the Ayllu politics described by De la Cadena (2015), resemble my experience in the ciénaga with regard to job distribution and the local expression of democracy. Here, however, democracy implied that access to jobs or livelihood would be a consequence of living in the ciénaga and participating in assemblies which were led by the kin-community organizations. These conditions have to converge.

The rotation of job vacancies was generally discussed in open meetings organized by the Community Board. But there was also some suspicion of Manuel and his administration of the list, as he had the book with the list of workers at his house. People said that he changed the order of the list. The members of the Community Board were descendants of the pioneer families, part of the kin. As part of the kin, they also had layers of history, tensions and collaborations, suspicions, rumors, and gossip, which also permeated the workers list.

The Community Board (Junta de Acción Comunal) is the social organization that organizes the community and serves as an intermediary between the community and the oil company and the state institutions. Elections for this organization were every four years, the election process being anonymous and involving a closed box. I was told the families chose new members of the Community Board by taking into account charisma, commitment, and family size and influence. These elected members managed the workers list.

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56 Law 743 of 2002 mandates that the election of new dignitaries of the Community Boards be carried out every 4 years.
In October 2014, Decree 2089 was issued, which prohibited job intermediation and the collation of workers lists produced by communities. The Community Board decided to avoid legal problems by no longer publishing the lists. But they continue to use the list. The difference now is that the list is less open and therefore less transparent, increasing tensions within the community.

The reason given by the state, the oil companies and the trade unions for making workers lists illegal was that the Community Boards were infiltrated by paramilitary-mafia known as ‘bacrims’, and that the communities were allowing the mafia to control them. Company representatives and trade unions state that communities gave in to mafia power because the mafia was simply coercing communities, and because they had the ability to extort contractors and oil companies. The defenceless communities therefore prefer that the mafia uses them, so that they gain at least some benefits. However, the justification behind the decree reinforces the stigmatization of the communities and criminalizes the Community Boards without presenting a solution or dismantling of the mafia. At the same time, the decree reduced their organizational autonomy. In relation to the decree, Sebastián said, “the state never gets involved, and when it gets involved it’s to accuse people.”

The decree thus proposed the formation of a public-private entity to administer the pool of open vacancies, dismantling the workers’ lists and the communities’ vernacular organization. The Ministry of Labor, in collaboration with the oil company, decided that in Puerto Boyacá, the intermediation of this pool would be assumed by a local contractor. Once again, therefore, the inhabitants of the ciénaga were in the hands of ex-paramilitary middle range commanders, who were now entrepreneurs, regional investors, or businessmen in the Colombian oil industry and, according to rumors, managing local contractor firms like this one.

More interestingly, the workers’ lists did not disappear even if the decree was formalized and enforced with the support of the oil company. The paradox was that the oil company locally continued “negotiating” job vacancies with the Community Board according to the workers list. How is it possible that the oil company first promoted the decree and then made negotiations with the communities?

In mid-September 2014 a meeting was scheduled at 7:00 a.m. at the compound, to discuss the new decree with professionals from the oil company. A labor law expert came all the way from Bogotá to explain the
situation and develop a strategy to mitigate potential local discontent. The expert was a young lawyer who was a graduate from the most prestigious Colombian private university. He gave a PowerPoint presentation about the laws that regulated the hydrocarbon industry in Colombia, and how over time the industry has changed from foreign enclaves to nationalization and then to back to privatization.

Based on my conversations with different professionals at the oil company, I found that 80% of the oil field work force was outsourced through local contractors. And one local contractor in particular would, when the Community Boards were no longer in charge of the selection of local personnel, monopolize the selection and administration of personnel.

The workers’ list was part of the social compensation for contamination after the 1994 lawsuit, enforced by legislation derived from the hydrocarbon boom and part of the struggle for livelihood and for the recuperation of the ciénaga. The job intermediation decree therefore ignores and dismantles this environmental struggle, making it equivalent to a labor struggle while it hands over the labor contracting to a local contractor company that manages workers in conditions of outsourcing and is surrounded by rumors of paramilitarism.

This local company was created after the demobilization of the paramilitaries in Puerto Boyacá, and according to some inhabitants and engineers of the oil company, it is related to a former paramilitary mid-level commander. Some suggested that through this firm the paramilitaries were legalizing money from the illegal economy. This is something that I cannot verify, but that is part of the rumors surrounding local companies like this one, which was created in the context of paramilitary demobilization. The rumors cover them with a mantle of force, authority and fear, making it unlikely that temporary oil workers will initiate strikes against them.

Community Board leaders, however, went to the compound when the locals found out about the decree, and they threatened to strike and block the company’s operation, as they did in December 2013, if the company fully abided by the decree. It was also rumored that this time the wealthy ranchers and the local Bacrims supported the strike.

After the workshop with the labor lawyer, the company decided to continue receiving the workers’ list to avoid another strike. I witnessed the company offering the village leaders a pact to circumvent the decree. At
the same time, in an internal meeting, it was communicated that the company was planning to implement the decree gradually in steps, first reducing the extent to which vacancies were disclosed and then hiring more people from outside the village.

Despite the company’s promises, the locals were sceptical – and for good reasons. I was invited to a meeting that had been called to inform them about future job opportunities for the village people. The meeting was full of women, elders, children and community leaders. The meeting was heated, villagers arguing loudly with engineers, accusing them of hiding job quotas and then outsourcing them. The engineer answered by saying that the inhabitants were illegally managing job opportunities in their communities. In spite of the tension, they did manage to reach an agreement during this socialization of job vacancies (a public meeting of mandatory compliance, regulated by the Colombian hydrocarbons legislation, in which oil companies and their contractors must publish information about job vacancies for temporary workers and low-skilled personnel in the communities affected, environmentally and socially, by oil operations). In total, 14 positions were advertised at this socialization: 1 cuñero, 2 encuelladores, 6 patieros, 2 paletteras, 2 electricians and 2 welders.

Through confrontation, during the socialization of these job vacancies, the villagers managed to increase the number of jobs available from 14 to 18. Thus social compensation, consisting of offering job vacancies to locals, has become an important space for negotiation. Yet the aim of the aforementioned decree, was to shut down such room for negotiation and give the administration of jobs to local contractors.

After hours of deliberation the meeting finished and I went back to the ciénaga with Sebastián. On the way, Sebastián stopped to talk with Manuel to inform the people about the jobs available and that they should gather copies of their IDs and CVs as soon as possible. This process is repeated after every socialization. They contact the people at the top of the list who then go to Luz to get help to print copies of their CVs and IDs, which she has saved on her computer. Each person pays her 2,000 pesos for a copy of the documents that they have to give to the oil company each time they accept a job as a temporary worker. This happens even though they are regularly rehired, which means that the oil company should already have copies of their CVs in its files.
A national trade union leader in Bogotá told me in an interview that the decree was an important step in reducing the mafia’s influence and could strengthen the unions as the workers lists were not unionized and simply caused a ‘rotation of misery’ as nobody was hired on a long-term basis. He then pointed out the oil companies’ obligation to hire workers according to Law 0284 of 1957 as permanent direct workers. The union leader stated that the issue regarding jobs in the areas of influence has moved from being a union topic to a community topic, which has created more and new problems. The companies now have to deal with a ‘monster of seven heads’, he said: unexpected situations, mafias, and local protests that may lead to blockages and strikes. The national trade union leader stated that these negotiations should be managed by the trade union and not by communities directly.

Franci Vargas, a mother and member of the fisherfolks’ association and a temporary oil worker, had a different view than the national trade union leader. For her, the rotation was a way to distribute job opportunities among the inhabitants so that each family could have an income from oil extraction, an income that is complemented by other incomes from water hyacinth trimming or fishing, and that is part of sharing with their extended kin-community.

According to Franci, the practice of rotating job opportunities encourages sharing instead of selfishness, and prevents envy that could divide her community. For her, the list of workers is not a rotation of misery, but a way to rotate and distribute benefits among this kin-community. Although temporary rather than permanent positions are distributed, the rotation of job vacancies could, when the history of this kin-community and their relationship with the ciénaga is taken into consideration, transform the notion of precarity into something else.

Precarity is a concept that has been used in anthropology to explain the human condition in contemporary capitalism in the aftermath of post-Fordism, deindustrialization and the dismantling of the welfare state, as well as the deepening of neoliberal politics and mentalities, particularly in Europe, the United States and Japan (Allison, 2012; Lazzarato, 2004 and Standing, 2011). Precarity explains how neoliberalism created communities and individuals that live their day-to-day lives based on temporary contracts, without access to social services, without promotions and without a clear perspective for planning their future. The uncertainty of poverty is, according to this conceptualization, a condition that causes depression, anxiety, frustration, and
anger (Standing, 2011). The emotions of precarity can be difficult to channel politically and these are feelings which can also send workers into a state of resignation and docility.

Precarity explains the experience of living in uncertainty caused by neoliberal conditions related to labor instability. The people of the ciénaga do not consider themselves to live under precarity. Nevertheless, they express the fragility of their lives under paramilitary control, state abandonment and the oil company's attempts to detach them from the ciénaga (as nature and as people who live there). However, the sense of uncertainty that mobilizes seasonality in the ciénaga is not the same as the uncertainty that is displayed by precarity in the context of the dismantling of the welfare state and the strengthening of neoliberalism in the global north. The uncertainty in the ciénaga is different as it contains more elements of instability than those produced by neoliberalism, but at the same time these are people who have lived with vulnerability and temporality since long before the arrival of neoliberal politics. Vulnerability and temporality are also elicited by seasonal variability. Uncertainty has become a drive for life that manifests a deep awareness that in life everything is temporary and constantly changing. Consequently, the inhabitants of the ciénaga must adapt and develop new skills collectively, including interactions with more-than-human actors, so their world-making can be explained through their entanglement with the ciénaga, and in the ways they cope with adversity.

Precarity is expressed through deepening fractures in the bonds and relationships that support the life of this community in the ciénaga, and through the possible extermination of the world of the fisherfolk-colonos by pollution, violence and exploitation, factors that sediment over and threaten to eliminate other worlds, such as those of the indigenous, the marrons and the bogas.

Precarity is a concept tied particularly to the history of capitalism and its geographical locations. It concentrates on the study of the reduction of labor rights, initially in Europe and the United States, and on the strengthening of neoliberalism. However, outside the world of labor, in the ciénaga, other forms of work and subsistence exist. They existed before capitalism and simultaneously challenge, while also reinforcing, their capacity to expand. The concept of coloniality of power (Quijano & Ennis, 2000) would be useful for understanding the simultaneous emergence and articulation of the different forms of subsistence and exploitation that proliferate in the economically productive dynamics of the colonial-modern world system that
emerged during the conquest of America, but that continue today, even after the end of colonial institutions, in the context of neoliberal capitalism.

4.3 Fishing in the Ciénaga

There is no stipulated time for fishing in the ciénaga, because this body of water is a site for the migratory passage of fish as well as a fish breeding site. So, ideally, there should be fish almost all year round. Nevertheless, the inhabitants no longer fish at night because of restrictions that were put in place during paramilitary control and because the quantity of fish has reduced considerably since the 1980s due to spikes of decomposition (eutrophication). The fisherfolk therefore go fishing many times during the day, but most of the time they find it difficult to catch fish.

![Inhabitants of the ciénaga fishing. Picture taken by the author in August 2014.](image)

To determine the presence of fish, the fisherfolk focus on changes in the currents and the amount of water in the ciénaga. There is normally an abundance of bocachico fish between December and February and between June and August, either when the water level is half its average or when water flows towards the ciénaga from the Magdalena River. However, during my fieldwork (February 2014 - January 2015), I did not
see an abundance of *bocachico*, again highlighting the disjunction between the rhythm of biophysical processes, the migration of fish, and human expectations.

*Bocachico* (*prochilodus magdalenae*) is, due to its size, flavour and marketability, the most important fish in the *ciénaga*. But when the water flows towards the Magdalena River, the *bocachico* migrates out. The fisherfolk then have to rely on *petenia kraussii*, or dorado, which is a smaller, golden yellow fish commonly fried and eaten for breakfast. This fish, however, is not as marketable as *bocachico*. However, *petenia kraussii* has become a reliable source of protein. In order to increase the number of *bocachico*, the fisherfolk have tried to boost the stock of this fish in the *ciénaga* by introducing fingerlings provided by the oil company as part of their obligatory environmental compensation. The Sino-Indian company now does this activity once per year. The inhabitants complement this activity by collecting money and requesting funds from state entities57 to buy more fish and start to increase the stock of bocachico in the *ciénaga* themselves.

An expert at UMATA, the state entity responsible for providing technical assistance to peasants and fisherfolk in Colombia, explained to me during fieldwork that probably only 20% of the fingerlings would survive and grow into adult fish weighing at least 1 kilo, which is a profitable, marketable size. The introduction of fingerlings is a practice that is slowly transforming the *ciénaga* into something different. Thanks to this method there is still fish in the *ciénaga*, and that makes it possible for the fisherfolk to continue fishing and living in the *ciénaga*. But by contrast with past circumstances, the fish they now catch in these dark waters are not the result of normal reproduction processes, but fish that have been introduced.

When no *tarulla* is being cut, the fisherfolk often place a mesh net to retain fish at points where the water exits the *ciénaga*, either into the Palagua or the Agualinda stream. When trimming *tarulla*, they remove the mesh net so that the plants that have been cut can follow the river current. They position the nets to prevent the fish from leaving this body of water, making it more difficult for the fish to migrate downstream. The fisherfolk try to control fish migration as if the fish were their property, temporarily confining them. The body of water thus becomes, in some seasons, a kind of huge fish pond.

57 Fish Repopulation is regulated by Colombian Law 13/90 and Regulatory Decree 2256/91, INPA regulated the repopulation of water bodies for public use through Resolution 000531/95, in which the conditions were established.
However, it is difficult to differentiate between those fish which have been introduced and those that arrive with the current. This situation has created conflicts between the fisherfolk in the ciénaga and the fisherfolk living along the streams. Observing this situation, the oil company’s environmental engineer claimed that the people of the ciénaga are false environmentalists, since although they are protesting against the contamination of the ciénaga, they truncate the natural migratory processes of the fish.

According to a report provided by the environmental firm hired by the oil company, four species of fish can be identified in the ciénaga at present: bocachico (prochilodus magdalenae), blanquillo (surubim lima), petenia kraussii (dorado), and doncella (ageneiosus pardales) (Antea, 2014). Bocachico is the predominant species. Don Milagros told me that before the contamination started about three decades ago, there was an abundance of fish and a number of different species in these waters such as bagre, dorada, mueluda, blanquillo, and bocachico. Contamination has impacted the number and diversity of fish and increased aggressive fishing practices.

According to a report from AUNAP (the National Fishing and Aquaculture Authority of Colombia), trammel nets are still in use today in the ciénagas and rivers of Colombia, and fishing methods such as zangarreo (which consists of stirring the water of the swamps, marshes, bogs and rivers on its banks or under the aquatic vegetation, where the fish seek refuge, followed by strikes on the open water space in such a way that the fish is forced out and then trapped in the extended nets), barbasco (a plant whose roots have an active component that blocks the breath of fish when diluted in water, and which is used by fisherfolk in rivers, floodplains and backwaters) and tapadas (which consists of blocking the connecting streams between the swamps and the rivers with nets blocking the movement of the fish and other animals from the swamp to the river), are practiced in the ciénaga, all practices that can be harmful to this ecosystem. They are, however, practices that have become more common in recent decades. Fishing practices have changed and in the process they changed the ciénaga. The fish stocks are exploited more intensely by the inhabitants as the fish have

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58 La Pesca Artesanal En La Cuenca Del Río Magdalena. Pedro Julián Contreras. Marine Biologist. Consultant in Fishing and Aquaculture. contrerascastro@gmail.com
decreased in number, and the sense of scarcity intensifies in the context of pollution and the continuation of other legal and illegal extractivist practices, like oil extraction and paramilitary extortion.

Picture 13. A dead fish floating with the tarulla. Picture taken by the author in October 2014.

4.3.1 The Moino.

Luz Montaña’s father, Don Luis is the Moino in the ciénaga. A Moino is the person within the fishing community that buys the fish from the fisherfolk. Each zarta of fish has a price of 25,000 pesos (9 US Dollars). A zarta is 5 kilos of fish, and generally it means 5 fish. Sebastián Vargas arrived with a zarta of fish, and quickly received his 25,000 pesos in cash. “This is our ATM, the ciénaga is our company”, he said. The Moino is the person among the fisherfolk in charge of collecting the fish caught and selling them in the town market. The Moino receives a percentage of the sale, normally 15%. Don Luis continues this practice although the fisherfolks’ association does not officially recognize this role anymore. But the Moino has continued as one of the most important figures in the ciénaga’s fishing economy, as this person is trusted and authorises the circulation of both fish and money.

One afternoon, while I was chatting at the dock with Juana Santana, Andres Trujillo, and Diego Velásquez (the young leaders of the fisherfolks’ association), they told me how their grandparents had had
rules to control the fishing seasons (for example, to avoid catching small fish), about the Moino, and about the actions taken to avoid destructive fishing techniques such as zarrangeo and barbasco. But they do not know what happened to these rules. Over time, the contamination of the ciénaga, the connection of the fisherfolk with the oil company, and recruitment by the paramilitary with its militaristic and extractive ethos, has influenced the fishing practices that the fisherfolks’ organization had developed.

The intersection of practices in this body of water has enhanced, interrupted, and transformed aspects of each practice. As the locals themselves said, they lived ‘between canoes and machines’. This is their own conceptualization of their lives. The joining of their worlds in the ciénaga displays their disposition to create seasonality and navigate difficulty. The intensification of oil extraction in recent decades tends to transform not only the ciénaga and the fish stocks, but also fishing practices.

4.4 Holidays (Vacaciones)

I met Nancy at the dock and after some smalltalk, I asked her about her husband as I wanted him to help with an interview. But she told me that her husband Jorge, taking advantage of “being on vacation”, was in the town visiting the doctor. The same day I spoke with Nancy, I also had a conversation with the social worker of the oil company. When she left, she said goodbye to me affectionately as she was travelling to the department of Santander to visit her family. She was going on "forced holidays" as her temporary contract with the oil company had expired. Now she had to wait for at least one month before the company could re-hire her.

A couple of days later, I accompanied Catalina Jiménez (a villager of the ciénaga and a cook at the oil company restaurant) to the office of the PetroCasinos contractor. She was carrying her letter of voluntary resignation, as it was an obligatory and standard bureaucratic procedure to renounce and remain outside of any contractual relation with the contractor for at least a month before she could be re-hired.

Holidays or vacations in the ciénaga are different from those of workers who are permanently employed by the company – or who are on long-term contracts. The term is simply used to refer to the period of time each individual has to wait to get back to the top of the workers’ list. The terms ‘vacation’ is a euphemism produced by labor instability due to the prevalence of outsourced jobs and temporary contracts. For local workers, a vacation starts a few weeks before a contract ends. They have to sign a letter of ‘voluntary’
withdrawal, so that they can later be rehired without creating legal problems for the oil company’s main contractors: Empleos Temporales, Petrocasinos, or JMG. However, vacation is more than instability. It is also time for themselves and time to do activities that keep them tied to the kin and to the ciénaga.

One day in July 2014, Rocio Vargas stopped by Marcos’s house while I was visiting him. Rocio is Mario’s partner’s sister. Mario and his partner, Diana Vargas, have a son, Carlos, who is 12 years old. They live in separate houses just a few metres away from each other. Rocio asked Marcos, “Marcos, do you have beans?” He replied, “Yes, I could exchange it for soap. Is that ok?” Rocio then said, “I’ll see if my mom has soap.” When Rocio left, I asked Marcos, “What was that?” He said, “It is lending food. We do it so that the fresh food rotates among the community, and we always have a variety of things... even if we sometimes run out of money.” This practice provided the locals with a variety of fresh products, something which is important as they do not have refrigerators to preserve food, and they do not have land to cultivate vegetables. Because of this, food, with the exception of fish, was regularly exchanged among members of the kin-community.

In Marcos’s kitchen there were red beans, lentils, a bottle of oil, 3 kilos of rice, a bag of salt, 5 pounds of brown sugar, a bag of coffee and a pack of spaghetti. He bought non-perishable items in the town. Doña Miriam, Rocio’s mother had rice, pasta, salt, condiments and some vegetables she had recently bought (tomato, onion, yucca) from a vendor that comes to the village twice a week selling fruit and vegetables, using a truck pulled by a donkey as means of transportation. The seller, Don Joaquin ‘fia’: sells his products on informal credit, noting the name of the buyer and the value of the product in a note book. He sells tomatoes, bananas, yucca and potatoes, in small portions at a low price so people can buy just what is necessary to prepare a meal without spending all their money. Don Joaquin lives in the town of Puerto Boyacá but has been coming to the ciénaga for years to sell fruit and vegetables and also to buy fish.

Lending food and fiar were vernacular subsistence practices that promoted reciprocity among the ciénaga’s kin-community, and were important mechanisms to secure the wellbeing of the locals. These practices were combined with different forms of production, such as salaried labor in tarulla trimming, outsourced work in oil extraction activities, fishing in the ciénaga or – in some cases – working for criminal and neo-paramilitary organizations.
Holidays or vacations are a kind of forced unemployment in which the community is generally unproductive in terms of income, but in which they are productive in terms of nourishing their relatedness. When on vacation, the inhabitants take advantage of their free time to develop their private and communal lives. Vacation is productive as long as it is part of livelihood strategies that allow them to be part of networks of reciprocity and relationality, which is the basis of autonomy within the kin-community of the ciénaga.

Vacation thus not only represents labor instability, but also a time to nourish relationships specific to their dwelling activities. I have mentioned the exchange of food, not because it is only during vacations that food is exchanged or provided, but because it is during the vacations that the practices that strengthen the social relations of affection and reciprocity become more important in the inhabitants’ lives. When they are on vacation, people have no fixed or secure income, so during these periods bartering, or the exchange of products and favours, takes the place of money.

In the ciénaga there is a pervasive fragility that is shared by all actors and practices. At the same time, this demonstrates an obduracy in its relationships, as it is through making seasonality that they overcome precariousness. By saying this I do not want to make violence, exploitation and neoliberal forms of exploitation – like outsourcing – invisible or irrelevant. On the contrary, what I would like to claim is that this violence should be traced back to colonialism and to the emergence of modernity and development; and that therefore violence and exploitation in the ciénaga take a deeper historical dimension than, perhaps, the type of exploitation revealed only by neoliberalism.

In this chapter I have attempted to show how the inhabitants of the ciénaga creatively articulate different practices, even practices contradictory to the continuity of the ciénaga. Persistence has been possible through the articulation of these practices with biophysical processes. The people of the ciénaga have persisted because the body of water has persisted. However, if the ciénaga is turned into grass, they would no longer be ciénaga and fisherfolk-colonos and a kin with the ciénaga. Creativity, however, has allowed them to keep the ciénaga expansive and active, even if the ciénaga is becoming a lake, a fish pond or an integral part of the oil extraction industry.
Chapter 5

Making Kin with the Ciénaga

5.1 Kin Formation: Between Nurturing and Healing

The inhabitants of the ciénaga living in the village of Muelle Velásquez consider each other to be relatives. This had also been noticed by the managers and professionals at the oil company with a certain curiosity, as I was told by the social worker who suggested to me that I should concentrate my research on this village because, according to her appreciation of anthropology, I could make a good study of kinship among the people of Muelle Velásquez. She was not wrong. Kinship has been a central topic in anthropology, at some points in time more intensely than at others. In this chapter, I will explore kinship in the ciénaga through practices of dwelling, consuming, harming, sharing and living together within and with this body of water. My purpose is to understand how kinship unfolds in the ciénaga and which processes have substantiated this form of becoming one extended body of kin together.

I will argue that the formation of bonds of relatedness in the ciénaga is a process created through interactions between humans and biophysical processes of the environment of the ciénaga. I want to demonstrate how an understanding of kinship can be enriched by incorporating analysis of the ecological relations that sustain and thus help to constitute relatedness.

Relatedness is the conceptual contour I use for evoking kinship relations for the particularities of the ciénaga. The anthropologist Janet Carsten coined this concept (1995). She was inspired by the anthropology of David Schneider, but instead of asking Schneider’s question: ‘Given this definition of kinship, do these particular people have it or do they not?’ (1984, p. 220 in Carsten 1995, p. 224), she proposed a notion more flexible than kinship to build on the category based on local experiences. For Carsten, relatedness is not only about genealogy and descent, but also refers to the processes of formation of ‘enduring bonds of solidarity and care’ that involved kinning. The concept of relatedness helps me to explore kinship by considering diverse

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59 Signe Howell’s work on adoption in Norway elaborates on the notion of kinning by explaining the process in which a child who does not share a biogenetic link with its new parents ‘is brought into a significant and permanent
assemblages of biophysical and social processes in the production of enduring bonds. In terms of Carsten’s
work, ‘relatedness makes possible comparisons between the Inupiat in Alaska and the English or Nuer ways of
being related without relying on an arbitrary distinction between biology and culture, and without presupposing
what constitutes kinship’ (Carsten, 2000, p. 5).

Julio’s house was built on the edge of the ciénaga’s open water mirror. During the rainy seasons, the
house was almost inundated. Most of the time it was, however, at a safe distance from the water. On the left
side of Julio’s house I found the green and guava-colored house of Don Tilo, built on poles and literally
surrounded by water. On the balcony of Tilo’s house I could spot his daughters sitting on a hammock and their
white dog taking a nap in the shade. It was nearly 2pm and the sun was scorching hot. We were returning to the
dock after a morning’s fishing with Rafa. The experienced fisherman rowed slowly towards his village. As we
approached the dock, we slid past the row of pile-dwelling houses with their backs turned to the body of water,
as is generally the pattern of construction, with the kitchens and toilets near the water. These houses were
located between water, mud and dry land. Right in front of the houses, black pump jacks vigorously swung
their ‘horseheads’ up and down, steadily extracting crude oil from under the ciénaga.

The village, which in Colombia is a territorial unit named vereda, is situated at the end of a dusty road,
the road that Texaco had opened back in the 1940s. This was the road that the colonos and the fisherfolk had
taken to reach the ciénaga. On both sides of the road, small wooden houses were surreptitiously built - houses
that were later reinforced with bricks, tin roofs and walls, the oil company years ago having ceased to persecute
them as invaders. At that time there were several constructions in the ciénaga, some spanning two floors.
Along the road there were in total 53 houses. These were inhabited by 497 persons (ANTEA Environmental
Consultant, 2016). An important number of the people living here were descendants of those who first arrived
and went on to mix with newcomers who unfolded, expanded and consolidated into a kin-community.

relationship that is expressed in a kin idiom’ (2006). The process consists of overlapping the history and life
trajectories of the adoptive parents and grandparents with those of the child to build a mutual history that would
change the essence of the child. The transubstantiation in kinning is about transforming the essence (the self) of the
child. So even if the child does not display ‘ethnic Norwegian’ features, the adoptive parents and the child would
share the substance of essence, and in this way they make kin, but do not destabilize the body or make a common
flesh.
In the *vereda*, which literally means path, there was no square or plaza, nor any streets or blocks. The dock was the place where people gathered and canoes were moored, right by the beer kiosk of Doña Nieves and Luz’s restaurant. The dock has been the meeting place of the inhabitants since the 1970s, when the fisherfolks’ association built a club house, something that has considerably increased the importance of the site as the main social gathering point. The association’s clubhouse was collectively constructed and is collectively owned.

**Picture 14. Picture of a Map made with the inhabitants of the ciénaga. Workshop on Social Cartography. On the map you can observe the entanglement of the ciénaga with the road, houses, infrastructure, animals and people.**

On this map, elaborated by the inhabitants of the Muelle Velázquez, you can see the road that connects the compound of the oil company with the *ciénaga*, and along the road are houses, oil infrastructure (pipelines, batteries of productions, trucks and pumpjacks), but also animals, plants, crops, the school, and inhabitants
(adults and children). Next to the dock of the *ciénaga*, we can see villagers fishing. This is the mapping of the socio-material world of the *ciénaga*, the village and the oil field.

Of the 53 houses in the village, 8 were larger than the others. These houses were, without exception, the oldest houses in the *vereda*. The first settlers lived here with their closest relatives, their families. The other houses were built on subdivisions of plots of land appropriated by descendants of the first settlers. New family members of the original settlers have expanded the village, while newcomers, mainly migrant workers or people arriving in the oil field looking for work in the oil extraction activities, have, at least in the beginning, rented rooms in existing houses.

The eight big houses were mainly run by grandmothers, as most of their husbands were no longer alive, not only due to disease and old age, but also due to the armed conflict that focused on men both in terms of recruitment and in terms of being the target of assassinations. These old women protected the property titles, the *cartas-venta* (non-legal property certificates), which certified their occupation of the plot and the house. These documents were protected vigorously, the grandmothers trusting no-one to share them. These papers had a lot of value, both to them and in the community. Although they were not legally valid, they were the only proof they had to prevent expulsion from the oil field and the *ciénaga*. The documents contained descriptions of the years of occupation and the transformation of the size and shape of the plot. There were also records of expansion and of how the kin was growing. New couples formed, new community members arrived, children were born, while some left the *ciénaga* or died. Families grew; the density of the *ciénaga* increased over the same plots.

Access to land in the *ciénaga* is limited, and over time people have been reduced to living on small plots, as I could verify from the oil company’s cadastral survey and the *Agustin Codazzi Cadaster*. But there is also a relatively small group of landlords. The landlords in the Puerto Boyacá municipality own medium-sized farms of between 100 and 500 hectares (of which there were 45 in the *vereda*), and farms of 500 and more hectares (of which there were 13 in the *vereda*). The fisherfolks-*colonos* live their lives on plots of between 1 and 10 hectares, of which there were 494 in the *vereda*. There were 606 plots registered by the institute *Agustin*
Codazzi, and 81% of these were inferior to what INCODER, the Colombian Rural Development Institute, defines as the minimum UAF (Family Farm Unit) for the region of Magdalena Medio.

According to INCODER, the UAF (the size necessary for a family farm unit in Magdalena Medio to be productive and financially sustainable), should be between 53 and 72 hectares. This gives us a map of land distribution in which 81% of landowners control only 9% of the land and where 2% of the landowners own more than 91% of the 17,509 hectares in the vereda around the ciénaga.\(^{60}\) It is important to mention that in the municipality of Puerto Boyacá, land is distributed quite differently from the general trend in the Andean part of the Department of Boyacá, a department that is characterized by minifundios.\(^{61}\) Landlords and the oil company, however, control the majority of land in the ciénaga, while fisherfolk-colonos live in between the infrastructure with little land to cultivate or inhabit.

Doña Nieves had eight children and fifteen grandchildren. All continued to live in the ciénaga, except one, who went to live on the other side of the river, in another municipality. Doña Nieves told me that there was now only a small area left of the lands that they had cultivated and improved when she and her husband arrived in the 1950s. The only part of the plot that she still owned was ten square meters at the dock, where she lives with one of her sons, but she doesn’t have a property title, only carta-venta.

Doña Nieves wanted to maintain the family property, which she has seen reduced over time by landlord expansion and an alcoholic husband. By protecting the property she wished to maintain the cohesion of her family in the ciénaga. She feared that another family member would sell the plot to, or be deceived or blackmailed by, a testaferro or a paraco. Doña Nieves’s stubbornness is surprising and encouraging. Her granddaughters, Diana and Julia, said proudly that Doña Nieves is a very strong character, and that they have

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\(^{60}\) The tiny plots of land mentioned above are inferior in size to what legally is considered to be a "basic enterprise of agricultural, livestock, aquaculture or forestry production, whose extension allows for, with its proper productive project and technology, generation of at least two legal minimum monthly salaries at the time, and allows the family to receive remuneration for their work and to have a capital that contributes to the formation of a patrimony' (INCODER, 2014).

inherited some of it. This has helped them, they said with some pride, to deal with their partners, ex-partners or fathers of their children.

The gender relations involved in this kinship formation share similarities with the tendency in Colombian rural areas for women to be subordinated to men through patriarchal forms of coercion. Manifestations of masculinity here are violent, particularly in areas where there are minerals and oil extraction and in areas where armed groups have territorial control. However, the women from the ciénaga have developed strategies to protect themselves and the family unit from the immediate, individualistic or avaricious actions of some male relatives, actions that could undermine the kin composition. The women’s strategies include protecting property titles and being an example to their daughters by confronting the men, something which shows that in spite of the patriarchy, vernacular forms of resistance to such violence – in entanglements with the ciénaga – have allowed for the formation of this kin-community. The women of the ciénaga, especially the grandmothers, have made a huge effort to tie their families together around their houses, maintaining bonds and protecting the property documents. The papers (legal, illegal, formal or informal) epitomized this cohesion and reminded them of their arrival in the ciénaga, a place of kin origin and belonging. The struggles and creativity with which they have navigated difficulties sustain this kin.

Another grandmother of the ciénaga was Doña Nubia, an old woman. Her robust physical condition and strong character, however, gave me the impression that she was younger. Nubia had, at the time of my fieldwork, six grown-up children and her offspring were married to members of other pioneering families in the ciénaga. Her husband had died of a liver disease years ago, due to high consumption of alcohol. She was therefore in charge of the family. Nubia spent much of her time taking care of her grandchildren, the children of her daughters and sons. One of them was living in the city of Medellín, another in another village, and one daughter in Puerto Boyacá, she told me. One of her sons had lost his life in a violent encounter with paramilitaries. Another son, Gustavo, had joined the paramilitary outfit in Puerto Boyacá. Now Gustavo had returned after demobilization and was working at the oil company as a temporary worker. Her grandchild John, who also had been a paramilitary, was now working as temporary worker in the oil company. Doña Nubia looked after the young children of her children and grandchildren. Doña Nubia was also looking after a young
woman, the partner of John. This was Greysi, who was completing a post-delivery diet (40 days of rest and care after the delivery of a baby). Doña Nubia was looking after both the baby boy and the girl.

Nubia told me how hard it was for her to accept that her son and grandson voluntarily wanted to join the ranks of the paramilitary. She said that she had tried to convince them not to go. The money and the guns were, however, more powerful than her pleading. Her son and grandson had come back to the ciénaga after demobilization which, she told me with optimism, meant a new opportunity to do things right. After their arrival, however, they had created new problems in the ciénaga. Greysi was too young to become pregnant, which was criticized by her fellow villagers. They considered taking advantage of young girls to be a paramilitary practice. The reaction of people in the ciénaga, her extended kin, led Nubia to feel obliged to offer them a place in her house and to protect the baby boy, the girl and her grandson.

The day at the Battery Number 3 primary school finished at 12.30 pm. I was spending the day with Nubia at her house. Greysi and I were helping to prepare a lunch of rice with beans. While we were in the kitchen, Nubia could hear that her granddaughters were getting off the school bus, a service that the inhabitants had struggled to get financed by the oil company. The bus was important in the ciénaga, as the school was more than 4 kilometres away along a dusty unpaved road, and due to the heavy traffic, mainly oil company trucks, it was dangerous for the children to walk along the road. As the girls entered the house, I asked if her granddaughters were twins. They looked of the same age. Nubia responded with a smile saying that they were both the children of her son Gustavo, but with two different women. Nubia took care of both girls in her house.

Nubia gave both girls a hug after they arrived. They sat down at the table to eat their lunch. Nubia mentioned that in this region it was difficult to protect girls because the paracos wanted to ‘comer’ them (which could be translated as to eat them, to appropriate them or to sexually abuse them). She therefore monitored her grandchildren closely. When she was saying that, I remembered that her grandson was one of these demobilized paracos accused of ‘eating’ young girls. I asked her about this. She explained to me that her grandson had not been a paraco in the ciénaga, that he operated in another village. This comment made me think that once back in the ciénaga, the members of this kin-community – no matter what they had done – were sheltered by their relatives, and entered this network of reciprocity in which they were valued differently.
According to Nubia, John's relationship with Greysi was not the coercive relationship of a paramilitary. In this manner Nubia tried to tell me that the relationship between John and Greysi was different from the crimes of sexual violence committed by the paramilitaries. This sounded a bit forced to me. However, it made me see how para-militarization exacerbated violence against women and children, and brought it back to the ciénaga even after the paramilitary demobilization. Still, mothers and the ciénaga were part of the healing forces that tried to re-establish mutual care and the resolution of these forms of violence.

Many children have been born in Colombia as a result of these crimes, whole families formed out of rape, abuse, deceit and mistreatment. Was Nubia complicit with the violence of her grandson? Or was she trying to turn the page and believe that her grandson had stopped being a paramilitary after demobilization and his return to the ciénaga? What is the character that sustains these bonds of kinship formed out of violence?

While we were having lunch, Doña Martha, a neighbor and friend of Doña Nubia, arrived, Doña Martha noticed we were talking about family relationships and “problems”. Doña Martha mentioned that she had a daughter to whom she wanted to introduce me. She commented that the girl was 12 years old and had been adopted by her. I asked her, “formally adopted?” She said, “No, I had to ask the paramilitary commander if I could keep her, and he approved it.” Martha took the girl when she was only a couple of months old. The baby, according to Martha, was given the name Ángela. She was the daughter of a prostitute in Puerto Boyacá at a time when the town was still a paramilitary fortress. Martha knew about the situation with the baby and talked with the paramilitary commander, saying that she wanted to take care of her. Martha recalled, “the mother was a drug addict; when I took the baby, the baby did not even cry, maybe she had suffered so much that she had no tears left to cry.” When she was telling me this, Angela suddenly entered the room looking for her mother. She instantly understood that Martha was telling me the story. The girl was embarrassed, but with a fine smile said, “Mummy are you telling the story again? Martha replied, saying: “Don’t be ashamed. She is a doctor, a very polite person.”

There were traces of violence as well as practices of care and nurturing in these stories of kinship formation. In this context, the idea of care can be understood to imply both harm and healing – both good and
bad things, as Puig de la Bellacasa elaborates (2017). In these stories care is constituted out of harm, both embraced and abated by the grandmothers.

Kinship relations formed in the context of paramilitary violence and oil extractivism affected the life of the ciénaga, manifesting a violent masculinity concomitant to sexual exploitation, abuse, drug trafficking and addiction, and a parastate authority endorsed by paramilitaries. The grandmother took the broken pieces and re-assembled them in their houses, into the daily routine of feeding, providing a roof, education and affection. In the period of transition after paramilitary demobilization, this produced a sensation of anticipating healing, a new opportunity to make family after the page of violence had been turned.

5.2 Encountering Fisherfolk and Colonos: Mixing Practices

Texaco constructed the road to establish the oil enclave in the 1940s. A considerable number of colonos and fisherfolk hailing from the southern and northern flanks of the Magdalena River soon made use of the road to enter and settle around the body of water (see Chapter 2). The colonos that came from the South wanted to occupy the baldias land (unused land owned by the state). The fisherfolk from the North were in search of bodies of water with exploitable fish stocks. There, in the ciénaga, these two different groups of people met.

Don Milagros was one of the first fishermen to arrive in the 1950s, coming from Cantagallo-Bolivar in the Momposina Depression. He arrived with his woman and three little children, Luis, Antonio and Maria. Shortly afterwards came Don Clementino and his companion Yolanda from Sucre-Sucre, which like Cantagallo is part of the Colombian Caribbean region. Clementino, a skilled hunter and fisherman, came to the ciénaga looking for caimans, hicoteas (turtles) and babillas (spectacled caiman). He settled in the ciénaga with his children, Yolanda Jr. and his stepson Marcos, Yolanda’s son from a previous relationship. Leonor, Martha, Manuela, Elisabeth and Eunice were born later in the ciénaga.

Antonio Vargas and his partner Doña Nieves came from the department of Tolima at the southern tip of the Magdalena River, looking for baldias lands and a place where they could open a bar. They had left Venadillo-Tolima to escape from the violence haunting that department in the 1950s. On their way to Puerto Boyacá, they passed through the towns of Mariquita, Honda and Dorada. Doña Nieves recalled that these were central crossing points for the internal migration that swept across the country during La Violencia. The Vargas
family arrived with their daughter Maria and Julio Sebastian, Diego, Manuela and Antonio Jr. were born in the 
ciénaga. They were all fair-skinned and had blue eyes. The people in the ciénaga therefore called them the 
monos. Luis Montaña arrived later, also coming from the south, from Villavieja-Huila. He had white-mestizo 
features. Luis arrived alone, but was soon joined by Carmen Mejia. Together they had three children there, 
Magda, Luz and Alfonso. These were the first pioneering families, “people of all colors”, who still live in the 
ciénaga.

Neither the colonos nor the fisherfolk were, in the beginning, interested in working for the oil company. Their vocation was to cultivate land or to fish, two types of activity that they sought to develop without depending on a patron (a boss). Don Milagros, one of the oldest people in the village, told me that the fishermen earned more money from fishing than from working for the company. The working conditions were also known to be deplorable in Texaco, and the fisherfolk and the colonos did not find it at all attractive to lose their autonomy by being ordered around by the company. Don Milagros stressed that it was fundamental for them to have autonomy over their time and activities.

Fals Borda, in his studies of the inhabitants of the Caribbean ciénagas of Colombia, claimed that their struggles for autonomy galvanised political action among fisherfolk and peasants in these flooded territories that had been defended by indigenous people and by the marrons of the palenques (1979, p. 53B). I take inspiration from Fals Borda in my understanding of their connection with the ciénaga, in their struggle for autonomy and the process of kin formation. I see the continuity of practices, their amphibiousness, in their struggle for subsistence, habitation, reproduction of kin-community and as provider of economic and therefore political autonomy among the inhabitants of ciénaga.

I understand Fals Borda’s notion of amphibian culture to be based on practices, as a disposition towards difficulties in their connections formed in this aqueous environment of oscillatory transformations. In this way an amphibious disposition, which I claim characterizes this human and non-human collective, consists of

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62 Mono: is a term used in Colombia to refer to people with a white phenotype, blonde or light brown hair, and blue or green eyes.
sedimented practices like those described by Fals Borda, which even though they are transformed over time, are part of the elicitations of this watery environment.

I see this disposition through the actualized practices that also permeated bodies, the making of amphibiousness also being a material manifestation with the environment. Jensen and Morita (2015) have explored the notion as socio-materials in webs of relationality. For these authors, water is central when referring to amphibiousness. Fluidity has been the analytical trope. Through it, they propose to overcome terrestrial epistemologies, amphibiousness opening up the possibility to see movement and permeability, the character that I suggest manifests the relatedness in the ciénaga.

For decades, before the oil field became sovereign in the region and before the ciénaga was polluted, the colonos and fisherfolk lived in the ciénaga, improving (mejorando) the occupied baldias land and removing sedimentation from the streams to improve the flow of water and thus the fishing. Colonos and fisherfolk lived inside the oil field without being subject to the production system of oil extraction.

These social groups have been represented in classic social studies of colonos (forcibly displaced people looking for baldias lands, coming from the mountains) and fisherfolk (from the Caribbean coast and riparian regions) in Colombia, as very different – I would even say opposite – types of people. The descriptions and ethos that have transpired from these representations resonate with the highlands-lowlands opposition, which has shaped the imaginary of Colombia’s population distribution, a manifestation of moral topography (Taussig, 1987), as coloniality of power (Quijano & Ennis, 2000).

As I have elaborated in more detail in chapter 2, colonos and fisherfolk are portrayed as opposites. However, beyond this reproduction of the moral topography, I will substantiate the encounter between colonos and fisherfolk in the ciénaga as one of different practices that made kin while interacting in this particular environment.

The families belonging to the first wave of arrivals, in their struggles to occupy portions of land near the ciénaga were defending themselves and their properties in a fairly creative and stubborn manner. Fisherfolk

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63 The work of, for example, Empson, Sangkhamanne, Paulwesssen and Morita (2017) is also relevant in this endeavor to explore the imbrications in waterworlds, places saturated by inter-agentivity (Ingold, 2000:47).
and colonos blended and a sense of collectivity was shaped by the oscillation between water and land, the eating of fish from the ciénaga and fruit and vegetables from the land. Their descendants, through living together, became kin-community in the ciénaga.

Far from the ciénaga, Anna Meigs (1986) analyzed the inhabitants of the Eastern Highlands of Papua New Guinea: the Hau people. She elaborated on the importance of eating and sharing food as the structuring of persons, kin and communities, in a dynamic process of composition in which bodies are in constant flux. It is interesting to note that for the Hau, who live surrounded by it, water is entangled with their livelihoods, strategies and environmental practices. In light of the stories below, this became an indicative case for the study of kin formation in watery territories. I saw continuities in the sense that their aqueous environments influenced their conceptions and practices in the making of bodies and senses of belonging with regard to kin and community formation.

Don Luis Montaña, a colono from Tolima, told me that he learnt to fish by following the instructions of Don Milagros and Don Clementino, two Afro-Colombian fishermen from the Caribbean interior. Don Montaña became a fisherman in the ciénaga, adopting new practices, as did many who came to this place from the mountains. The fisherfolk were also influenced by the colonos, soon expressing a desire to have land titles and to settle down permanently. They became sedentary on the banks of this body of water, and abandoned the practice of navigating long distances on the Magdalena River. Their practices changed, as they were willing to become something new after their encounter, an encounter that I would say was relatively symmetrical as neither held a position (colonos or fisherfolk) that was placed over the other. I would say that there was a flux of practices flooding each other.

Characteristically, social science studies have represented the lifestyle of the Colombian fisherfolk as one of dispersed polygyny along rivers. This lifestyle ended when they settled in the ciénaga. The colono family pattern of the Catholic patriarch described by Virginia Gutiérrez de Pineda (1975) also ended. Family-kin after their encounter was nourished by fisherfolk-colono practices, which were heterogeneous.

In the ciénaga, kinship relations can be analyzed in terms of Janet Carsten’s concept of relatedness (2000), that came from mixing different conceptions of family and gender relations, bodies and subsistence in
practice. I find it particularly relevant to understand the becoming of relatedness through the lenses of Mintz and Price’s critique of ‘the encounter model’\textsuperscript{64} proposed by Herkovits (Restrepo, 2003). The encounter between fisherfolk and \textit{colonos} became relatedness through the emergence that this encounter produced, rather than as a result of the adding of two essential (original) identities. Something new emerged while partly maintaining the particularities of their trajectories.

In the \textit{ciénaga}, \textit{colonos} and fisherfolk encountered each other as they tried to overcome their previous traumatic experiences of forced displacement and extreme hardship. With hope and artfulness, they formed a new community of intersecting practices in a more symmetrical condition. They still today refer to this encounter with optimism. When expressing their origins and identity, they refer to themselves as fisherfolk-\textit{colonos}. The emergence of this identity was made by the situated practices of living in the \textit{ciénaga} and with traces of their particular trajectories still fresh in their memories.

The opposition between highland-lowland people (violent vs peaceful) does not well represent the experience of mutual support and becoming kin-community in the \textit{ciénaga} among \textit{colonos} and fisherfolk. The coupling of practices as disposition to persist seems, however, to be elicited by the muddiness of movements between land and water as in the floodplains, from which have emerged an ecology of adjustable creative practices, and an amphibian disposition.

5.3 Kin and Gender in the Caribbean interior of Colombia

The delimitation of Caribbean societies is controversial, while some argue that to only consider the Caribbean ethos and cultural practices located on the islands and shores of the Caribbean Sea reinforces forms of colonial epistemology and structuring of territories (Trouillot, 1992). As Fals Borda (1984) argues, the

\textsuperscript{64} Based on examples drawn from their observation of the voodoo religion, Mintz and Price argued that the practices of slaves in Africa were not directly replicated in America when African slaves were brought there. A specific black African slave identity-community emerged through their slave experience and not through the transmission of a common-monolithic past. As Mintz and Price show, the diverse social groups of slaves did not have a common identity or place of origin. However, after the traumatic experience of slavery, they formed an underlying ‘cognitive grammar’ (1957) that oriented their subsequent responses in the new context. Culture was not transported. They formed new relationships, institutions, and a sense of community, being new in a new territory. One example offered by Mintz concerned voodoo religious practices. According to Mintz, this practice could not be traced to a previous African culture, but was in itself a new process that emerged from the intricate experience of slavery, settlement and integration into the life and context of America.
Caribbean is heterogeneous, its boundaries are fuzzy, and the Caribbean influences are extensive and reach other territories beyond the Caribbean islands. The Caribbean, in the light of authors like the Haitian anthropologist Trouillot and the Colombian sociologist Fals Borda, therefore takes on another connotation, as a space of emergences through paradoxical encounters, the productive formation of territories through convergence, which occurred in the violent context of the conquest of America, and the trade in slaves from Africa by the Dutch, Spanish, Portuguese, French, Germans, Danish and Britons. It is about the heterogeneous creative responses of inhabitants to these encounters, something that emerged in order to achieve their subsistence by unfolding a kin by mixing, and therefore is a process that could not be circumscribed just to the island in the Caribbean Sea.

Anthropological studies of kin relationships among the inhabitants of the Caribbean have navigated between the search for African roots through the exploration of forms of kinship particular to the islands of the Caribbean sea, and the shaping of these by colonial experience, in particular in slavery and plantation orders. Since the second half of the twentieth century development studies have attempted to understand the relationship between poverty and the heterogeneous forms of subsistence that sustain Afro-Caribbean kinship relations. Both perspectives propose a reading of kinship as a projection of the dynamics of the economy, in slavery and capitalism. The economic system is considered separately, a historically ensuing process with the cumulative capacity to mould the responses of the inhabitants of the islands located in the Caribbean Sea in a way that shapes their social and cultural dynamic.

If we read the Caribbean societies primarily through the impulse of adaptation to economic global process, we could lose sight of emergences that spring from the intersection of life trajectories that in violent situations (but not only violently) have experimented with forming societies and collectives that articulate old and new practices in new ecological contexts.

I suggest that the Caribbean is a place made by the intersection of practices that include those of the slave trade developed by the conquerors and the encounter between indigenous and marron people, which was recreated in particular parts of America, exceeding the islands of the Caribbean, draining into the continent with the flow of marrons and blacks with diverse adscriptions. In Colombia, the Magdalena River, which has
its origin in the Páramo de las Papas in the south-western part of Colombia and stretches to the Caribbean in Barranquilla, constitutes an internal extension of the Caribbean into the hot lowlands of Colombia. This is a watery territory of flow, emergence and overflows, a connection between the interior and exterior of Colombia. The Magdalena River is a watery territory connected to the Caribbean Sea that has poured black people into the continent.

The Colombian anthropologist Virginia Gutiérrez de Pineda, who studied families among the riparian shores of the Magdalena River, argued that these families were the result of *mulatazgo* (sexual intercourse and reproduction between black-white people) and *zambaje* (indigenous-black people), and that these people had been under limited influence of the criollos, white-mestizos and Catholic evangelization, which only arrived in these regions in the eighteenth century (Gutiérrez de Pineda, 1975). Here, the remoteness and difficulty of accessing inhospitable boggy jungles made it difficult for priests and nuns, as well as criollos and white-mestizos from the cold highlands to settle. The riparians and coastal people were represented by Gutiérrez as open and inventive, recreating values and giving shape to family structures by mixing different African and indigenous traditions.

However, for Gutiérrez, the geographic conditions of the floodplain influenced kinship morphology – somehow similar to the idea of social morphology in Marcel Mauss (1979). According to Gutiérrez, kinship was thus geographically distributed by practices of river navigation that followed the fish stocks. So the fishermen, while moving up and down the river, established temporary unions with women and had children with them, before abandoning both women and children and moving to another temporary union in a new place, which configured a dispersed polygyny along the river (Gutierrez de Pineda, 1975).

The abandoned women, on the other hand, went on to form a new relationship with another man. Women thus had children with different men who only temporarily and partially contributed to their subsistence. Gutiérrez' work on fisherfolk kin resonated with studies from the 1960s and ‘70s, which reflected on Caribbean family structure and dynamics, and the role of women and men as the result of these complex situations of temporary union and abandonment. However, I see in the context of the *ciénaga* that Caribbean societies are plural, contradictory, juxtaposed by different oppositional value systems. I would add, in line with decolonial
feminism, (Oyewumi, 1997; Lugones, 2010), that coloniality has exacerbated forms of patriarchy and violence. In this context, however, these communities still hold together in particular practices of care activated by women.

Classic examples of the study of the structure of the family in the Caribbean are developed in Edith Clarke’s book *My Mother Who Fathered Me* and R.T. Smith’s *The Negro Family In British Guiana*. Both describe the women of the Caribbean principally as mothers at the head of a system of abandoning fathers, an approach that resonates in the analysis of Gutiérrez de Pineda in the lowlands of Colombia. What is particular to Gutiérrez is her approach to family formations, which incorporates environmental factors and economic processes that constrain and mould family formations as flexible responses. My argument, while following these theoretical approaches, and their relevance in the study of Afro-descendants and the extension of the Caribbean into Colombia, aims to change the focus of the analysis from one of response, to constraints, to processes of mutual co-constitution which continuously produce the emergence - elicited by environmental processes - of extended and mixed family formation while living along the lowlands of the Magdalena River in watery territories.

Maria Lugones has claimed that in order to understand gender relations in concrete places it is important to explore the male-female relationship before colonialism and the responses of peoples facing colonial/modern Eurocentric impositions (2008, p. 12). Lugones follows the elaborations of Oyeronke Oyewumi (1997), in claiming that neither gender nor a gendered system are universal categories, and that just as the notion of woman can contain a variety of intersected elements (Lugónes, 2008) according to different practices, gender and kinship can also be substantiated differently. Carsten’s term, relatedness (1995; 2000), offers an open understanding of the configuration of kin and gender relations that I consider it useful to mobilize to understand kinship practices in the *ciénaga* as an articulation: from the African diasporas; indigenous; *colonos* and evangelization; landlording and paramilitarism.

However, instead of seeing women in the *ciénaga* as victims, I see their strength through their preponderant practices of sustaining life and community as providers of subsistence, protection, and care. They
have been the guardians of property titles and the weavers of loose and broken ties, maintaining the persistence of this kin-community in biophysical and social permanence with the *ciénaga*.

For Lugones, gender relations are complex formations that cross different processes, including sediments from the past, different gender conceptions and practices that emerge composed in intersectionality (2010). According to Lugónes, intersectionality is not about summing up categories or identities, as for example woman + black + poor, to understand positions in the sex-gender system. Intersectionality appeals to the unpacking of complexity in heterarchical relations. ‘Intersectionality reveals what is not seen when categories such as gender and race are conceptualized as separated from each other. Intersectionality reveals what existed at the intersection’ (2008, p. 4). The women of the *ciénaga* are not passive, and gender relations are not only made by acts of violence, although they are in this context exacerbated by war and oil extraction. The women of the *ciénaga* are strong, united, they are the axis of persistence, the drivers of the situated resilience they have made with this body of water and for their descendants. The intersection made by indigenous and the African past, of people escaping and resisting the colony, an open disposition to environmental adaptation and new sociocultural contexts, women capable of reestablishing affective bonds and incorporating new subjects into their relatives.

Based on his interpretation of archaeological findings, Fals Borda maintains that the gender relations of the inhabitants of the Momposina Depression were transformed into landlordship practices derived from colonialism that continue after independence, describing them in these terms:

“gender asymmetry was exacerbated when the new landowners of the early twentieth century developed individualistic, greedy attitudes, sexist violence, polygamy and the adoption of strange customs, such as the purchase of maidens. Women thus became a commodity in the emerging capitalist market” (Fals Borda, 1984, p. 146B)

According to Fals Borda, women living on these floodplains had articulated different sex-gender arrangements ever since the time of the Zenú-Malibú and the Chimila,⁶⁵ and later in the Palenques. They were

⁶⁵ Fals Borda, quoting Juan Friede’s *Chronicles of the Indies*, described that in 1541 Pedro de Heredia, a Spanish conqueror arrived in the territory of the cacique Guley of the Zenu-Malibu, and the latter, to avoid a military
also under the influence of Catholic ideas about the family, and centuries later, practices of landlordship, oil extraction and paramilitarism entered to constitute the heterogeneous matrix of gender that today inhabits the ciénaga. So, vernacular manifestations entangle with the dominant patriarchal regime, and instead of decreasing, heterogeneity expands where kinship has become an emergent process that is actualized and articulated according to the condition of places, that is to say they take place. This is a similar approach to the analysis of social processes in the Caribbean elaborated by Trouillot (1992).

I want to conclude this part by saying that in the ciénaga, grandmothers built their homes, fished and influenced the upbringing of their children. Grandmothers fought to maintain the unity of their families and lands in the ciénaga, so they did not reflect the passivity of victims, or at least not only. During my fieldwork, I observed that women were active participants in the assemblies, and active in fishing activities and that they had a variety of jobs inside the oil company. Women in the ciénaga express a particular gender and kin configuration of care, navigating difficulty to maintain their kin, which is extended through practices and substances from and towards the ciénaga.

5.4 Eating fish, Drinking Water and Swimming: The Ciénaga in the Body

Early one morning in May 2014 I was at Nubias’s house. We saw Rafa approaching. He was coming back from fishing. He had started fishing very early in the madrugada, when there was no light. Rafa said “Good morning” and kindly asked Doña Nubia if he could prepare a fish in her kitchen. Doña Nubia answered him positively. He entered the kitchen to prepare four fish that he had caught. He put a pan on the stove. We had not yet had breakfast and as Nubia started to prepare more coffee, the smell of the freshly fried fish filled the house. The whole scene surprised me because Rafa and Doña Nubia had no biological ties. They were neighbours. Doña Nubia had, however, known Rafa since he was a child. They had been neighbours in the ciénaga for decades. Rafa was one of the most experienced fishermen and he had taught a number of children
to fish, including Doña Nubias’s children and grandchildren. With a happy grin on her face, Doña Nubia put plates on the table and served us fried fish and generous cups of black coffee. Rafa sat down and we all had breakfast together. Suddenly Doña Nubia’s granddaughter woke up and sat down politely at the table to have breakfast with us. The whole situation developed in a very relaxed atmosphere. I asked Rafa if he stopped by to prepare his meals in other village houses as he had at Nubia’s house. He said, “Yes, they know me, as long as you bring fish or something to share, we are all 'parientes'.”

Everyday situations such as this one, which took place in the house of Doña Nubia, revealed to me that the modes of relationality in the ciénaga were based on reciprocities. The substances of these relationships included the muddy materialities of living together between the water and land and in the sharing of its fish, and transmitting knowledge practices: fishing, for example. In the ciénaga, sharing the place, the knowledge practices and the fish was a repetitive practice that tied the inhabitants together as kin.

From the indigenous group of Zumbagua in Ecuador, who were studied by Mary Weismantel (1995), the author argued that a woman did not automatically become the mother of a child to whom she had given birth. A couple did not, similarly, become the parents of a child simply by procreating the baby through sexual intercourse. The Zumbagua considered that the investment of effort over time through caring, feeding and sharing a home infused the bodies of those who constitute kin. Such an understanding of the body’s constitution presents us with a different form of kinship than the biogenetic model. It shows that particular understandings of biophysical processes are entangled with social relations to produce kinship.

Janet Carsten’s study of kinship among the Malays in Pulua Langkawi (1995) similarly claimed that feeding is an important part of reciprocity and is vital to the formation of persons, kin and community. Carsten argued that kinship for the Malays was a process of becoming that began with conception, pregnancy and childbirth, but that continued with nurturing, nourishment and care, and was also connected to the daily practice of living together. It was about establishing bonds of continuous emotional attention and nourishment with substances that manifested kin among this fishermen community.

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66 Part of the family, but the word in Spanish also evokes the idea of giving birth, as if one was giving birth to the other, or they give birth to each other.
Mary Weismantel’s study of kinship relations between the indigenous Zumbagua in the Ecuadorian Andes (1995) and Carsten’s fieldwork among Malay fisherfolk recaptured and invigorated David Schneider’s criticism of kinship. However, as Stone has claimed, kinship has despite such criticism, not only survived Schneider, but even become revitalized. Thanks to this criticism it has also become less western-centred and more gender sensitive. Weismantel and Carsten belong to this current school of thinking in which kinship as ‘enduring bonds of care and solidarity’ must be empirically substantiated by taking seriously the terms unfolded by the human groups that have been studied. This I have attempted in understanding the making of kin with and in the ciénaga, considering the tensions between practices of care and harm, as well as the substances (materialities) that participate in the process.

Aparecida Vilaça’s account shows, through the notion of consubstantiation, how the Amazonian body among the indigenous Wari is fluid, arguing that the body is not the same conceptual formation in all places, and that bodies among riparian inhabitants are conceptualized-practiced through the elicitations of the river (Vilaca, 2002). In the Amazon, according to Vilaça, the body is continuously defined instead of being something given. Similarly, Costa’s (2017) study of the Kanamari society in the Brazilian Amazon shows how kinships are produced by consubstantiation and consumption. However, different to Howell’s notion of transubstantiation in Norway, consubstantiation among the Wari and the Kanamari recognizes that kinship and bodies are a process of material incorporation, in which kin becoming makes real (concrete and material) kin (Vilaca, 2005, p. 449) through the activities of feeding and the circulation of substances, memory and affection, producing a common soul and common flesh. I suggest that in the ciénaga, bodies and substances participate in the making of kin: substances in circulation, incorporation and becoming that together form this collective body.

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67 Kinship in anthropology, before Schneider, as explained by Stone (2010), Yanagisako and Collier (1987), was about creating models, genealogies and categories without questioning Western paradigms of thought and how these paradigms were embedded in particular scientific notions of biology that were uncritically projected onto other cultures. For Schneider, kinship models in anthropology produced falsehood reflections and kinship was therefore no longer a valid category when making comparisons in anthropology.
One afternoon in October 2014, I met Nelly (28 years old), the granddaughter of Don Milagros and daughter of Hector and Gloria Jiménez, whose partner was Fernando. We met at the soccer field near the dock. She recommended that I bring mosquito repellent as I was not immune to mosquito-borne diseases. Nelly wanted to talk to me about a personal conflict with her partner. She was pregnant, but not sure if Fernando was the father of the child. In fact, she was almost sure that Fernando was not the father of the child. Nelly had had sexual encounters with a young man who had recently arrived at the ciénaga. She said with an enchanted voice, “a blonde young man”. While she was telling me this, I suddenly realized that Fernando did not have fair skin and blue eyes like the rest of the Vargas family. Fernando had brown skin. Fernando’s father was a descendant of colonos while his mother hailed from a fisherfolk family of Afro-Colombian descent. “Fernando looks so much like his mother,” Nelly explained me. She was worried that Fernando would realize her infidelity if the baby was born light-skinned. Nelly wanted to get advice from me on how to handle the situation. I tried to find a solution to this problem, so I returned to my memories of Mendel’s biology. I told her that Fernando’s father was ‘white’, was a Vargas, a mono. So, if she did not want to tell Fernando the truth and if the baby was born white, then she could explain the situation by saying that probably it was because of genetic inheritance from great grandparents of the baby, from the Vargas side, their white skin.

I felt she was relieved at my advice. Then she added that eventually the baby would become dark-skinned. That surprised me. Nelly considered that living in the ciénaga for a long time would change the body physically. Nelly complemented this observation by saying that in the ciénaga everyone tended to become darker and develop hard skin because of the sun, the water and the mud. This comment transported me back to the Lamarckian theory that I had learnt at school. My interpretation of what Nelly said was that the ciénaga’s environment moulded the inhabitants’ bodies, so that over time it made them share a common body in a structural sense, as in Lamarckian theory. In that sense, all inhabitants living together for a prolonged period of time in the ciénaga would develop similar bodies. They would develop a common flesh, becoming an extended kin not only in terms of genetics, mutual support, care, and social organization, but also by biophysical transformation of their bodies.
I was told and shown in the ciénaga not only how the fish, but also the sun, the water, the mud and the insects shaped their bodies as if underpinned by a common biology. For my westernized ears, their explanations sounded like a Lamarckian theory of evolution. The inhabitants, however, never said this. Instead they showed me how the sun made their skin darker and their hair curly and dry, how the mud and water made their skin texture hard, how the mosquitoes made them immune to tropical diseases and how the fish strengthened their muscles and sexual appetite. These interpretations emerged from their particular phenomenological experience of dwelling in the ciénaga, by being exposed to it, consuming and touching these substances together over time. They felt and had reflected on how the ciénaga and its substances had formed their bodies, and had a vernacular biological explanation for a phenomenon observed and experienced in their own bodies and life experience.

Aparecida Vilaça, studying the indigenous Wari group in the Brazilian Amazonía, found that riparian groups were in a constant process of transformation, kin and body experiencing metamorphosis (Vilaça referring to Levy-Bruhl, 2005, p. 445). For Vilaça, the riparian Amerindians of the Amazon were ‘corporeal descent groups, understood as groups of people related by substances, such as blood, semen, and food, that is to say systems of relations between bodies’ (Da Matta & Viveiros de Castro in Vilaça, 2005, p. 446). Viveiros de Castro expressed the process more precisely when he said that Amerindian “indigenous socio-logics are based on physio-logics” (1998, p. 13). In the same riparian environment as in the Amazon floodplains, McCallum showed that the bodies of the caboclo people (riparian inhabitants of the river with mixed indigenous, African and European origin) were continuously fabricated in a ‘constant flow involving nutrition, abstention, medicines, paintings, rituals and training’ (McCallum, 2001, p. 27). Riparian Amazonian bodies were, for Viveiros de Castro and Vilaça, chronically unstable. The floodplains of the Magdalena River and of the Amazon River in Colombia are watery territories that, in interaction with inhabitants and organisms, could elicit practices and conceptualizations of biological processes related to the fluidity of substances in the bodies of persons and collectives. Unstable bodies in oscillation, in movement, with seasonality, and that promote transformation are precisely the sorts of bodies that live within these watery territories.
Gisli Palsson has in a broader sense, and one not situated in watery territories, proposed that an anthropological biosocial perspective should destabilize monolithic conceptions of the body, seen as a flat platform on which culture and the social can be inscribed over a universally stable biology. Human bodies are, for Palsson (2017), territories in which the social and the biological are conflated in continuous processes of relationality - social and biological processes entangling and embodying particular forms in specific situations. For Palsson, biosocial compositions of the body are better understood thinking in terms of ‘body worlds’ (2017, p. 103), that is, “A body world ... encompasses the totality of bodily experiences, practices and representations in a specific place and time, These ... are at the heart of how we understand the world ... for all human beings body worlds are the worlds all of us inhabit all the time, far from being boring, natural or universal, they are in fact fascinating, diverse and culturally specific.” (2017, p. 3).

Palsson’s ‘body worlds’ argument was produced while exploring western biological epistemology, i.e. scientific research. Palsson examined how the human genome was also composed of microbes and bacteria (Turnbaugh et al, 2007 in Palsson, 2017, p. 109) and concluded that human DNA was made of more than humans. Palsson connected epigenetics and the way human genes changed over time to different environmental contexts, producing changes that accumulate and are transferred to the next generation (Palsson, 2017, p. 108). These scientific discoveries trouble the boundaries of the human body and its stability, prompting neo-Lamarckian understandings inside the epistemology of biological science, not unlike some ideas I encountered in the ciénaga.

5.5 Toxic Bodies in the Ciénaga’s Kin

The ciénaga was formed by different substances, materials, infrastructures, organic and inorganic bodies, including the discharges of oil extraction that stimulated decomposition and eutrophication. I asked the inhabitants at the beginning of my fieldwork whether they were afraid that the fish of the ciénaga, which they were consuming and selling, was contaminated by toxins from oil production, cattle ranching and cocaine laboratories in the mountains that ended up in the ciénaga. I received ambivalent responses. Some said that the fish probably were contaminated but that I, in any case, should not be alarmed. Others denied it, saying that this was impossible, and others said that the fish was probably contaminated and that was maybe the reason for
its special flavour that consumers liked so much. The last answer was an ironic response, discrediting my question.

Montaña was involved in oil extraction activities, working as a *paleta*. There she met Fernando, a migrant worker who lived in the nearby town of Puerto Boyacá. They started a relationship, with Fernando eventually moving to Luz’s house in the ciénaga. I could follow the development of this relationship because of my friendship with Luz. Just a few weeks after he had moved there, Fernando was taught to fish by Luz’s neighbours and kin. Fernando received informal training on the rig. After Fernando got onto the workers’ list of the communal board and demonstrated knowledge of the rigs, he got a temporary job as a *cuñero* (roughneck worker). He became an inhabitant of the ciénaga and part of the kin-community by living in the ciénaga, being a fisherman, an oil worker and the husband of Luz.

Luz told me a couple of months later that she was pregnant. She was nearly four months into the pregnancy when a journalist from a regional TV channel came to the village to interview ‘the victims of oil pollution’.

Luz told me that this was something that happened regularly. However, this visit had made Luz particularly worried. She was afraid that the baby could be affected by the pollution. Fernando was also visibly worried, as while working on the rigs he had noticed that sludge from the oil production was discharged straight into the ciénaga by the local contractors.

The fish was the inhabitants’ prime source of protein. Fish was consumed on a daily basis in all families. Knowing that the fish might be poisoned was making people worried about the possible toxification of their bodies. Environmental studies of the ciénaga had increased in recent years due to the Colombian government’s environmental regulations, which required an environmental impact study for each project. But, as I have shown in chapter 3, these studies were partially copied from previous studies. The number of studies

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68 A person who stands on the road giving vehicles and passers-by the signal to stop or go. This is required when there is movement of heavy vehicles that carry large machinery during repair or extraction in wells.

69 Work exclusively for men, they are located on the second floor of a rig. There they are responsible for twisting and loosening the pipes that are introduced during drilling inside the well. For this they use cradles or huge pliers, with which the worker gears the pipe.

70 In April 2016 a journalist from *Caracol Noticias* came to make a report on the same issue, and then again in July of 2017. To see the news, follow this link: https://noticias.caracoltv.com/colombia/explotacion-petrolera-tiene-enjaque-la-fauna-y-flora-de-cienaga-de-palagua
proliferated. They did not provide, however, rigorous or reliable data on the state of pollution in the ciénaga. Frequent visits by environmental experts did not change the situation, but increased anxiety among the inhabitants. They were exposed to and confused by the environmental impact studies (Auyuero & Swistun, 2007). However, the inhabitants did not have any other option than to continue living there and eating the fish.

During my fieldwork I found three cases of children with obvious psychomotor diseases. There was one adult with Down’s Syndrome, two cases of skin cancer and a number of cases of people with visible physical malformations. In Colombia, the average rate of congenital malformations at birth was 4% (Zarante, 2010). In this village of 497 inhabitants (children, women and men) I met more than 30 people with physical malformations, although I could not attribute this to fish consumption as I did not carry out a research analysis of the fish or of the water and its impact on the inhabitants. The issue of physical malformations was not openly discussed among inhabitants. I felt people wanted to avoid it or to not connect it to toxicity. Their silence could have been an affirmation of the profound connection between inhabitants and ciénaga in the making of their bodies-kin-community, of caring for sustaining this community with the body of water while concealing the harm that this connection was causing to their bodies.

Donna Haraway proposed a deeper and more extended understanding of kinship formation among humans and other beings. She claims that kinship is a form of assemblage whose tentacles extend beyond what we humans used to consider as our kin. All the creatures with which we share the world also share with us ‘a common flesh’, a substance that collectively, ‘laterally, semiotically, and genealogically’ overflowed the bonds that had been conceptualized via ancestry or descent in human reproduction. ‘Kin-making was making persons, not necessarily individuals or humans’ (2016, p. 161) through ecological practices between kin, kinds and kindness (kinships in an assemblage of species through practices of care).

In this chapter I have shown the character of relatedness in the ciénaga formed between care born of harm, in the worsening of violent patriarchy by extractivism, drug trafficking and counter-insurgent war, and care as in reciprocity and interactivity between the human inhabitants and the ciénaga. They have become kin-community living in this aqueous place. In terms of de la Bellacasa (2015) ‘posthumanist constituencies’ are profoundly entangled and make kin (Haraway, 2016) by taking care of each other, and interacting in affective,
social and biophysical dimensions, even in severely polluted contexts – which may become even more pronounced in such polluted and conflicted ecologies. The practice of making kin with and within the ciénaga manifest gestures of healing, of mending this ecology. We glimpse the healing potential in the ciénaga through a focus on women and vernacular gender relations, encounters that exceed coloniality of power in the enactment of moral topography, that is to say, practices and ways of life open to entanglement and amphibiously navigating difficulty and harms, becoming together, living elicited by this watery territory.
I imagined that the Velasquez oil field would be a closed off area with high walls, wiring and security cameras. This was not, however, the case. The Velasquez oil field is partially open. The oil field with the machinery and the oil extraction facilities entangles with the village of the fisherfolk-*colonos*, both overlapping the *ciénaga*. Together they form an assemblage, which makes oil extraction possible, as well as the persistence of the *ciénaga*.

Map 5 Oil Field Velasquez, Villages inside the oil field, along the oil infrastructure, and the *ciénaga* located at the top of the polygon

On the official Colombian land use map, which was developed by the National Agency of Hydrocarbons, the Velasquez oil field looked like a polygon. It had the number 2352 and an area of 3,179 hectares or
8,140m². The polygon could be described as a rectangle whose base ended in a tip where the company’s compound was located. The top of the rectangle, 14 km from the base, merged with the ciénaga’s body of water.

As I mentioned in chapter 2, the size of the Velásquez field has changed over time. The ciénaga has, however, ever since the enclave was established, been connected to the oil operation. During my fieldwork in the oil field there were 83 active wells, 41 inactive wells, 149 abandoned wells, 12 water injectors and 10 pressure monitors. There is a total of 289 wells that penetrate up to two kilometres into the subsoil. The active wells were all connected through fluid pipelines to four production batteries, distributed along the polygon. The production batteries pumped their semi-filtered crude to Velásquez station 26, which was located at the centre of the polygon. Here, all the crude produced in the oil field and in the other oil fields of the company in the region was gathered, accounted for and in part pumped through the Velásquez-Galán oil pipeline. A significant amount was transported by trucks to the refinery in Barrancabermeja, a three hour drive north of Puerto Boyacá.

The borders of Campo Velásquez were demarcated by the pasturelands of the livestock ranches surrounding the oil field. Only in some segments did walls, barbed wire and surveillance cameras demarcate the limit between the field and the adjoining properties. The oil field was traversed by a public tertiary road that was connected to the country’s main highway, the so-called Troncal de la Magdalena. There were also, however, other boundary demarcations, such as the human settlements: The veredas inside the oil field. These veredas merged with the oil infrastructure. They were built among the infrastructure of the wells, the pumpjacks (machines), the rigs, the oil station, the production batteries, the workshops, the flow pipelines and the company compound. For example, some pipelines crossed straight through homes, there was a production battery next to the primary school, there were abandoned and sealed wells on the terraces of several houses, the gas lines ran parallel to the main road of the village, and a number of pumpjacks were placed right in front of, or behind, the houses. The houses inside the polygon constitute the village.

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71 In association with Ecopetrol, the Colombian state oil company, the Sino-Indian company operates 7 more oil fields
The infrastructure and the village structure made this oil field appear denser and larger than the rectangle marked on the official map. The edges of the oil field are difficult to distinguish and their entanglement with other bodies, like the village, the ciénaga, and the extensive pastures of cattle ranches, expanded the capacity of the oil operation to extract oil.

This chapter is about the oil infrastructure machinery that shares the territory together with the inhabitants, the oil workers and the ciénaga, and about their entangling and detaching relationships. The chapter was motivated by an inquiry about biosocial agency in this oil extraction setting. I attempted, in view of the above, to follow oil extraction practices between machines, biophysical processes, inhabitants, workers and engineers to understand the dynamic of their interactions, and the scope of the infrastructure.

Infrastructure is more than an artefact, object or human-built structure. It could rather be seen as a circuit in which different kinds of humans and non-humans, material, immaterial, organic and inorganic, articulate (Jensen, 2016; Larkin, 2013) diverse purposes. In this chapter I will explore in greater ethnographic detail how oil extraction is made through infrastructures that exceed the mere machines and technologies. More precisely, I will show how infrastructures are engaged with affordances from the ciénaga and its inhabitants.
Guided by the notion of infrastructure above, I have identified four specific infrastructural oil extraction facilities and processes in the field:

1. The workover (reparation of an oil well) on the oil drilling rig.
2. The oil drilling rig, Sinopec 166;
3. The circulation of fluids between the ciénaga and the production battery,
4. The mitigation of environmental pollution in the ciénaga.

The ethnographic account of these installations provides specific descriptions of oil production in terms of the complementary processes of oil extraction and mitigation of contamination. For an anthropological reader, or for a reader not familiar with petroleum engineering, this chapter could be an introduction to the infrastructures of oil extraction technologies. But it should also allow the reader to see the heterodoxies of these technologies.

6.1 Doing Workover: Repairing an Old Oil Well

In 2005, with the arrival of the Asian companies, the Velásquez field was gradually reactivated through substantial investment in the repair (workover) and maintenance (well service) of the old oil wells that Texaco had installed decades before. Additionally, a drilling campaign aimed at opening 15 new wells near the facilities that were already in production.

It was 1:10 a.m. on a Friday in October 2014. I was on the oil rig Mec 1, which was en route to repair the oil wells at the oil field, together with engineer Oscar Páez, the 'Company Man' of the rig and the person that represented the company coordinating the workover plan. The purpose of the workover campaign was, I was informed, to increase oil production by repairing and maintaining the most productive wells. The housing container of the Colombian engineer Paez was placed next to the container of the Chinese engineers. Engineer Paez and a group of workers were doing the night shift on well 146. The night was hot and humid, and it felt even hotter with the thick uniforms, helmets and drill boots that we had to wear. But it was not raining as it often did at that hour. The sultriness of the air was, however, palpable. It was late, and oil engineer Páez had not yet been able to repair the well. He was struggling to remove the sand that he said was about to clog the oil well. The lights on the rig were powerful and the sandblasting machine was running at full power. The sound
was deafening. The families living in the houses around the well still seemed, however, to be sleeping as I could see no lights on in any of the houses.

Engineer Páez was upset. The operation was taking up too much time and resources. A very good well was not producing the nearly 100 barrels per day that it normally did. The engineer had already given the order to inject one cubic metre of water – water from the ciénaga – into the well. He did this to try to increase the pressure and thereby unclog the well. But the well was not responding as they had hoped. Páez wiped the sweat from his forehead and decided to try to inject even more water. He knew that it was important that the water was injected precisely when the pump was restarted. He glanced at his watch to check the time. The water that had been injected was already drawn into the formation, and the truck with more water had still not arrived. The ideal moment for the injection was passing and it was getting late. Still he wanted to try again. He was, however, worried as all this water could damage the geological formation where the oil is deposited 2 kilometres underground. Then suddenly the water truck arrived and, without hesitating, he gave his men the order to inject 1,000 more litres into the formation. The hole rapidly swallowed all the water, producing a moment in which the pre-historic ciénaga, in which the oil had formed 2 kilometres down, and the current ciénaga, the water on the surface, encountered one another through an act of engineering.

The engineer, after the water had been injected, ran off to his office-container where he looked at the computer screen and checked the reports that had been written by the previous shift. He did this to gather together pieces of information to try to work out what was going on with the oil well. Thinking aloud he said, "It seems that it is not the sand." He tried to explain to me the complexities of the matter, "There are many reasons why a well does not respond, it is difficult for us to be sure about what is happening because we cannot see what is going on down there. What we do is to guess based on our reports and on our experience. For example, a well could be damaged because of sand plugs, malfunction of the mechanism, or damage by a 'pescado' (fish)," which was a term for when a tool had been dropped into and was trapped inside the pipe,

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72 According to oil company’s geologists, the Guaduas formation was a ciénaga where organic material accumulated and decomposed and then after thousands of years, it gradually, through the action of high temperature and pressure, was transformed into crude oil.
causing the mechanism to not work. He looked out of the window, noting that the truck that had brought the water was leaving. He said, "If it is a fish, we will get it out tomorrow morning with the next shift of workers. Héctor Cuadrado will solve it; after all he is a fisherman." The engineer smiled at his own joke, but his comment also clearly showed that he had full confidence in Héctor’s ability to solve this problem. And by using the word fish, he somehow acknowledged how the ciénaga, the wells and the machines (pumpjacks) were tied together in the operation.

The next day, at 7:00 a.m., Héctor Cuadrado arrived. He had been born in the ciénaga, or as the inhabitants told me several times, "between canoes and machines". Héctor was the son of the oldest fisherman in the ciénaga, Don Milagros. He had, after 20 years of hard work in the company, become a foreman on the workover rig Mec1. That morning, Héctor arrived together with the supervisor Don Máximo. Héctor was Don Máximo’s assistant and had been his apprentice and righthand man ever since he was young. Don Máximo had come to Puerto Boyacá 55 years ago. He claimed to know the operation perfectly, the characteristics of the geological formation and the machines. He told me: "I saw this field being born". He mentioned that the machines had deteriorated since Texaco’s operation, but that they still worked. Máximo himself could not read or write. Héctor therefore filled in the forms and wrote the reports on his behalf, documents that Máximo signed with an X.

On seeing that the well was not working properly, Máximo went over to the rig to have a look and commented that the formation could have been damaged due to excessive injection of water. Héctor, Máximo’s assistant, commented on Máximo's statement that the malfunctioning of the well was due to excess water injection caused by an inexperienced engineer, adding that these young engineers did not know anything about the matter. "What are they taught in the universities?" Héctor said. Máximo agreed.

Máximo, responding to my question of whether the well was not responding because there was no oil left in the formation, said this was not the reason. He assured me that the formation would be "alive for many years to come", and added that in the unlikely case that it soon became exhausted, they could always drill deeper. He affirmed that the Chinese were already experimenting with extracting oil by employing technologies such as steam injection and hydraulic fracture. Máximo, (who had been in this field since the 1960s), told me that the
field experienced declining production when oil prices were low, the administration was bad or there were problems related to public order. As he saw it, problems were not due to the reduction of crude in the geological formation. My interpretation of Máximo’s understanding of the potential exhaustion of the oil in the Guaduas formation was that it could be deferred or hastened by its entanglements with technologies and sociopolitical factors. Oil resource availability was therefore dependent on stable relations between humans, an interpretation encouraged by the experienced inhabitants and oil workers. I was presented with an oil formation whose nature was entangled with social life, and whose finitude and infinitude depended on biosocial processes (Swyngedouw, 2006) including yearning and eagerness.

6.2 Transmission of Knowledge Practices on the Rigs

The next day at the oil rig, I felt the tension between engineers Páez and Máximo. In my conversation with Máximo and Héctor that day, they told me that they considered that there was lack of recognition, on the part of the oil company, of the knowledge of the local workers on the oil rigs. Yet according to Héctor, the local workers knew the operation better than any engineer, as the local workers and inhabitants had been born there. The irritation also had to do with the high salary differences between engineers and supervisors like Máximo. This feeling of not being taken seriously by the oil company was ever-present among the inhabitants of the ciénaga, who claimed to know the oil field and the ciénaga through accumulated experiences and have this knowledge in their bodies, having spent their lives ‘between canoes and machines’.

The differences in salary were significant. During my fieldwork in 2014, an oil engineer such as Oscar Páez, with moderate experience, earned about USD 72,000 a year. This was a considerable amount of money in a country where the average minimum wage was USD 2,592 a year, and where 10% of the families in the country lived on 1.25 dollars a day. The supervisors, who held the second most important position on the rigs after the engineers, had an annual income of USD 30,000 a year. This was a high salary compared to the

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73 http://www.portafolio.co/negocios/salarios-del-sector-petrolero-colombia-son-los-mejores

74 http://www.portafolio.co/economia/finanzas/10-familias-colombianas-vive-us-25-63150
salaries of workers further down the hierarchy, but less than half of an engineer’s salary, even though they had similar roles in the operation of the rig.

The difference between engineers and supervisors was also expressed in their educational background. In Colombia, to become an oil engineer one had to study at one of the four universities that offered oil engineering. Three of those were public. 75 Being admitted to any of those three universities was very difficult, because it was competitive. The last option, for those that did not manage to get accepted into those academic programs, was to study at a private and less prestigious university in Bogota. 76 I found that the majority of the oil engineers in the company hailed from the lower and middle classes. In most cases, their eagerness to become oil engineers had been triggered by a desire for social mobility, through receiving a high economic income from the oil industry. The prestige associated with having achieved a university education and a position as engineer in a foreign oil company, was reinforced in daily practices. For example, when they encounter fellow oil engineers working for national or local contractors. The oil engineers working for foreign companies noted with pride the difference they enjoyed in this implicit hierarchy of labor affiliation.

The supervisors did not have any formal professional education or even basic education. This was the case for Máximo too, who was defined as illiterate. The supervisors and most rank and file oil workers had to receive informal training to qualify for jobs in the company, training that took place in secret on the rigs.

The supervisors of this oil field are mostly older men, over 60 years old, who come from the Magdalena Medio, that is to say from the local region, and most of them live in Puerto Boyacá. They learned the trade by working with Texaco, then with the successor Omimex, and with the arrival of the Asian company their contracts were extended and they were promoted to supervisor. And due to the need for the company to have personnel with knowledge of the field, the supervisors trained low ranking oil workers in the middle of the night while the engineers were asleep in the compound or in their containers. These low-ranking workers were,

75 The National University of Colombia in Medellin, the University Surcolombiana in Neiva and the Industrial University of Santander in Bucaramanga.
76 The upper classes rarely study at these universities because they are not prestigious, have few academic programs and dispersed or limited infrastructure. Academic quality is considered to be consistent, and they are oriented towards the middle class. Tuition fees are high, however, so the students and their families end up heavily indebted.
in most cases, related to the supervisor by kinship, neighbourhood or friendship. Supervisors normally received, as reciprocity for the knowledge imparted, a *zarta* of fish (5 kilos) or bottles of whisky as tokens of appreciation from their apprentices. A number of apprentices were demobilized paramilitaries. According to Máximo, the possibility of working legally, receiving a regular salary and the possibility of planning their futures was what mobilized them to receive such training.

Jaime, a demobilized paramilitary working on the rigs, told me of the motivation in these terms: "Before it was vizaje to become a paraco, now vizaje is to become an oil worker". (*vizaje*: status). This must be understood in the context of Colombia’s extractivist boom between 2000-2018. In the mining and oil extraction regions of Colombia, this stimulated the formation of a new status and masculinity tied to the heavy machinery and the depredation of nature, which was linked to the militarized masculinities of the armed conflict.

The training, which enabled them to work on the rigs, could only be given if the supervisors and the trainees violated rules and safety regulations and made sure that the other workers cooperated as accomplices. This was accepted as the only way to appropriate knowledge practices related to oil extraction in the field. The technological institutions’ oil extraction education programs, which then abounded in the town, had in the majority of cases not been approved by the Ministry of Education or did not have training machinery. Taking a course at the SENA technological state institution, which was certified, implied contact with the local politicians who distributed the limited vacancies. And the oil company required references from those who applied for jobs on the rigs.

The company only accepted references provided by supervisors, which served as an acknowledgment that the workers who had been trained on their rigs and by a supervisor were good workers. This was, however, not made explicitly nor publicly recognized. Through transmitting knowledge practices in this way, they enacted kinship relations and perceptions about what was a good life. Transmission of these knowledge practices, unrecognized by formal education and by the company, was therefore integrated within the maintenance of the oil infrastructure. Oil extraction, through this practice, blended with social relations (a topic that has been also explored by Shever, 2012).
My observations of how hierarchies of expertise differentiated between (formally educated) engineers and (informally trained) supervisors were established, and how vernacular knowledge practices were transmitted to local workers-inhabitants, indicate an ongoing distinction between legality-illegality and formality-informality in this oil operation.

To conceive informality-formality as binary and oppositional, however, does not help when trying to understand knowledge practice transmission on the rigs. Sian Lazar (2018), drawing on the ethnography of trade unionism in Bolivia has described how the associations and the representatives of the informal economy in El Alto-Bolivia negotiated with and mediated between state institutions. She describes practices in which informality-formality operated as a continuum on a spectrum and were not oppositional. There were different gradations of informality in El Alto that could move towards formality, as negotiated with the state. Another approach has been presented by Hann & Hart (2011) showing that the difference between formal and informal resides in the bureaucracies and the power relations embedded in such bureaucracies as social institutions. I saw that on the oil rig the legitimate or operational social institutions did not have bureaucracies, but worked in practice while concealed by the formal-legal institutions.

For Hart (1985) who coined the notion of ‘informal economy’, informality meant something that had not been legitimised in protocols. Protocols inspired a sense of certainty, and oil production needed certainty. Hart argued that in spite of the repetition of a practice, which could demonstrate certainty, the practice would continue to be considered informal if there were no protocols in place. That is to say, if there was no social institutional recognition. In the Velásquez oil field, training of oil workers took place on the rigs every night. But the practice was not formalized, although the repetition of the practice was well known among local workers, engineers and managers. Although informality implied uncertainty, engineers and managers relied on such informal training for the extraction of oil in the field. Supervisors were the link between the inhabitants and the company, sustaining the oil infrastructure by making explicit agreements with the kin-community and implicit agreements with the company to facilitate the circulation of knowledge and a trained work force.

Hart has claimed that 'informality is built into bureaucratic forms as unspecified content' (Hart, 1985). The form of the training was ignored (undermined), while at the same time being productively used by the
company. In this way it was incorporated into the oil production as unspecified but necessary, as an ambiguity that was highly productive.

The engineers in the company knew about this situation very well. Even though they affirmed that this practice was illegal, they admired it, seeing it as a reflection of the workers’ desire to progress. They said, "they are verracos!" an expression used to describe someone’s eagerness and ability to advance and persist despite risks. Making this training illegal, ignoring its existence, while incorporating it into production, at the same time they lionised it. The morality that was transmitted to the oil workers from the engineers was one that claimed that taking risks (going illegal-informal) was good, and even highly valued, in order to progress, to become legal. Working on the rigs unfolded a continuum of informality-illegality with the expectation of legality. Like a conveyor belt.

I witnessed communal board leaders such as Sebastián Vargas from the ciénaga frequently urging the company to formally certify or document their knowledge practices, Sebastián said, "Their experience and skills made them professionals". The reason for this was that the local workers wanted to create an open and transparent system of promotion of workers. The oil engineers shrugged their shoulders in response, saying that the purpose of the company was to produce hydrocarbons, and not to provide or certify training and education. Somehow the company was not interested in generating a clear plan for the promotion of workers. The company wanted to continue to be detached from the local workers, to continue the enclave’s sovereignty and not return to the company town.

The authority of the supervisors resided in their vast experience and usually in them being persons who, decades ago, arrived in the ciénaga and the town as fishermen, colonos or migrant workers. The supervisors were called: empirical engineers. They were often in full command of the operations and organized a group of workers for a shift according to the knowledge and experience that they knew the workers had.

The university engineers implemented on-site general knowledge, they were capable of integrating socio-material complexities to make extraction possible. However, they had to collaborate with supervisors like Máximo and Héctor to extract oil, as elaborated by Harvey and Knox (2015). “The modes of authority in which expert knowledge can assert its impartiality, and constitute itself as generic knowledge (…) with global
authority and applicability, which has been referred to by critical authors as "Logics that Have No Place" (Mitchell, 2002), "Cultures without Culture" (Traweek, 1988), or "the Trick of God" (Haraway, 1991), in practice, are the result of particular conditions of knowledge production and circulation of knowledge” (Harvey and Knox, 2015, p. 9).

The oil company turned a blind eye to this practice of loading its responsibilities on the supervisors, and it seems clear that the company greatly benefited from these arrangements. It could be, based on how these practices evolved and continued to exist, that the formal-legal oil was extracted also through informal-illegal practices in vernacular protocols of unspecified content. Anna Tsing has elaborated on precisely this in relation to the logic of the capitalist plantation and its scalability (2013). She argues that this resides precisely in two movements, one of concealing and the other of enacting. The concealment hides the diversity of heterodox practices that make possible the deployment of capitalism. In this sense, capitalism is made with other productive systems, cultural diversity and ways of exercising violence. It is made with the domestic and the private, with kinship and gender relationships. Tsing's argument is that although capitalism denies this and claims to be a neat model, its scalability is made possible by these entanglements (2009; 2013), which also include acts of detachment (Apple, 2012).

The training on the rig continued silently every night. As long as the practice continues and is crucial for the extraction, it will not be incorporated into the formalities of oil production. If this transmission of knowledge suddenly rocked the stability of the oil production; for example, if there was an accident during training, the practice would quickly be labelled as illegal. As I was informed by the oil workers and also by the engineers in our conversations about health and security protocols, the workers doing the training could lose their rights to health security and would be fired.

However, a basic question to ask is why the oil company admitted this dynamic yet did not want to recognize that these training practices contributed to production? One answer could be that recognition was not given because this would imply higher production costs. The company would have had to devise a training plan with fixed schedules and payments for training, and even expand the internal company bureaucracy to follow up the process. An alternative answer takes into consideration the history of co-habitation of the locals
with oil extraction activities combined with the continuous rotation-change of managers and engineers, to which the inhabitants usually refer as 'migratory birds'. From this perspective, the reason that the company engineers and administrative staff did not want to recognize these knowledge practices could be that this would be to recognize that the locals had good knowledge about this operation, which would potentially empower them. A third answer would be that the company was not interested in getting involved with unfamiliar bureaucratic forms, kinship and neighbourhood protocols. The company representatives did not want to handle these, as it could have complicated their organizational standards. To formally involve supervisors as coaches and to rely on social relations between workers and inhabitants to train capable oil workers seemed to complicate the efforts of the oil company to remain detached. However, in practice, the company was, for the purposes of extracting oil, very much connected and entangled with the social relations embedded in the transmission of knowledge practices on the rig.

6.3 Drilling in the Ciénaga

Rig 166 consisted of five interconnected systems: the power system, the lifting system, the rotatory system, the mud circulation system and the security system. The articulation of five systems gives you an idea of how sensitive this operation was and how it involved the coordination of technologies, machines and people.

According to Dominic Boyer (2014), energopower is a concept that traces the characteristics, materialities and energies used in the production of energy delineated forms of governing. Boyer was inspired by the analytics of Timothy Mitchell (2013), who argues that infrastructure shapes the character of political relations. Boyer however, in contrast to analyzing how hydrocarbon production elicited biopolitics or political formations, as in Mitchell, traced the modes of governing embedded in the materialities of producing energy. My intention in this part will be to unpack the modes of governance embedded in the practices and materialities of drilling.

The rotation system was located on La Mesa, an elevated platform right under the derrick. The mesa was also called the second floor. Here was the driller’s shack, an operation station inside the container where the supervisor and the driller monitored the operation. The drill string crossed the centre of the table. It was here where roughneck workers screwed the pipes into the borehole. The driller’s console on the second floor
measured the pump pressure, the revolutions per minute of the table, the state of the torque, the weight of the
drill string and the gain or loss in the level of the tanks. It was an important machine for safety.

The console was operated by Ricardo, a local demobilized paramilitary who had converted into a local oil
worker. Interestingly, the driller’s console in this rig provided all information and indications in Mandarin or in
English, but not in Spanish. To my surprise Ricardo, who had not finished primary school, was fully able to
manage the driller’s console. The Chinese engineers, some years before, had trained him to operate the
console. Since then he had become very skilled in the use of the Chinese equipment. "At the beginning, it was
like driving with closed eyes. Now I know every function of these consoles and the meaning of their signals,"
Ricardo said. Months before, Ricardo had been accused of stealing a tool kit from Rig 192. The Chinese
noticed the absence of the equipment and immediately ordered the cordonning off of the rig, checking
containers and workers. The security guard found the shell tool enveloped in the uniform of Ricardo, hidden in
a bucket. Ricardo denied the accusation but later admitted that he had taken the tools. The Chinese toolpusher
forgave him. The Taiwanese translator for the operation, Katia Cho, told me that the Chinese toolpusher
wanted to show an example of their mercy. Ricardo was re-contracted, because his talent was highly
appreciated and needed by the Chinese engineers. This oil extraction depended on local workers like Ricardo,
with their life trajectories, vernacular knowledge practices and illegal endorsements.

On the floor level around the rig were different categories of lower ranking workers taking part in the
operation: patieros (roustabouts), floorhands, mud sample collectors, welders, mechanics, drivers and cleaners.
These workers belonged to the lower echelons of the hierarchy of the rig. They were men and women from the
villages and around the oil field.

The work on the rigs was provided through a labor supply contractor from the town, an intermediation
firm. The workers that labored on the operation were not directly employed by the oil company, but were
employed by the local contractor firm. The company therefore did not integrate the local workers into the ranks
of its direct employees, although they were deeply integrated in the operation and the history of this oil field.

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77 For security reasons I have changed the original name of the local outsourcing contractor
The local contractor firm managed the majority of the temporary workers in this operation as well as in other oil fields; according to the CSR manager of the oil company, the local contractor managed nearly 80% of the workforce in the Velásquez field, around 450 temporary workers. And this was a labor supply contractor accused of having emerged after the demobilization of the paramilitaries, a situation that was confirmed by the CSR manager of the company, who told me, "this firm was an example of how paramilitaries were moving into legality." This firm was arguably created with paramilitary resources. The CSR manager, the director of services and the human resources manager of the oil company who knew this told me that they were satisfied with the performance of this firm. The major argument was that the local contractor knew how to deal with demobilized paramilitaries. The CSR manager expressed it in these terms, "They know how to manage their people," adding that he strongly believed that subcontracting labor through this firm contributed to the reintegration of paramilitaries into civil life and to sustainable peace in Puerto Boyacá.

During drilling, floorhand workers laid out metres of black plastic as a mat around the drilling rig to collect what the engineers called inevitable drops of oil, to prevent the oil spills from penetrating the ground and spreading to the surroundings. Patieros carried around buckets of paint and brushes to paint white the oil spots that, in spite of the plastic mat, ended up staining the location. The women workers prepared tinto (coffee) and cleaned containers, offices and storage rooms. It was mandatory for all those who participated in the drilling to wear helmets, steel-tipped boots and overalls made of fireproof material, including me.

However, a few metres from the rig there were houses. I also saw a child passing close to the rig on a bike while playing with his dog. Shortly afterwards, two women passed by carrying fish, walking slowly, while the drilling was running at full speed. Inhabitants were moving around and in close proximity to the drilling and, in spite of the risks, they did not wear safety gear and were not in any way protected from potential harm. They literally lived 'inside the operation', unprotected by the safety protocols of drilling. In this way, security and environmental protection as well as the direct involvement of workers in the drill operation, were ambiguously enacted by entangling and detaching.

The sludge system was managed by another contractor, this time an international one, the US-based oil services firm Weatherford. Sludge was used in the drilling operation to soften the hard rock when the drill was
entering, to maintain wellbore stability and to cool and lubricate the drill bit. Different types of chemicals were added to the sludge of water and mud. There were also secret components, a patented formula. This powerful mixture was crucial in drilling, as the fluid was adapted to the specific characteristics of the sand and rock.

During the drilling, sludge circulated in and out of the hole in what the engineers called a closed system. The system was, however, not closed in practice. When the sludge was let out to maintain the desired consistency, chemicals and water were continuously added while stones and excess sand were filtered through vibration and grids. This was a complex operation which required specific knowledge to not damage the well or the equipment through an incompatible consistency or inadequate sludge formula.

The Colombian engineer working temporarily for Weatherford was young, and aspired to someday getting hired directly by an oil operating company. He explained to me that there were "differences among engineers based not only on age or experience, but also on contractual conditions."\(^7\)\(^8\) According to him, there was a major distinction between those who had permanent contracts, especially directly employed engineers, and those who were on temporary contracts. The latter found themselves in an inferior situation, as they could be removed at any time, this was an example of precarity.

The Weatherford engineer could not do his job in the sludge system without the approval of the company man, or without coordination with the local environmental contractor, Consupetroleo. The oil company had developed a policy of primarily contracting local contractors at different stages of the production. The idea was that by doing so they would return a part of the profits of oil extraction to the companies in the areas affected by the exploitation. This was something that revealed a sense of decentralization and redistribution of power and could even reflect the Colombian Constitution of 1991. In the constitution, decentralization is considered

\(^7\) According to ACIPET (the Colombian Association of Oil Engineers and ICFES' revistapetroleoygas.co (1997)) the oil engineers were, in the 1990s, one of the least well remunerated group of professionals, and almost 50% of them were on temporary contracts, a situation that somewhat changed after the discovery of various oil deposits like Cusiana, Cupiagua and Cano Limon at the end of 1990s. But it was only at the beginning of last decade, due to the increase in oil prices and the global wave of extractivism, that the oil engineers in Colombia experienced a real improvement in terms of labor conditions. They soon became among the best remunerated professionals in the country. In 2012 the average salary of an oil engineer in Colombia was about 69.000 USD annually. In 2015, after the end of the last petroleum boom, ACIPET reported that 3 out of 10 oil engineers were unemployed and 6 out of the 10 did not have formal experience in the oil industry in Colombia. Of those with formal experience, only 20% of the employed oil engineers were directly employed by oil companies.
to be a manner of providing regional state institutions and actors with economic resources and decision-making powers. Consupetroleo was one of those contractors, and was in particular dedicated to providing chemical treatment to contaminated sludge and brine. This was the muddiest practice in oil extraction.

Beatriz was the manager of Consupetroleo. The first time I met her I was amazed to see a woman running this very tough and dirty business. Sitting on a large leather sofa in the house of a former paramilitary commander (who was at that time still in prison), she told me that she used to be his nurse. However, some years ago, when the oil boom started, she had decided to change profession and become an oil services contractor. Beatriz told me that she had decided to create this firm, because it was a good business and her initiative received important investments from farmers and business persons in Puerto Boyacá. She said, “they know me, I am a fighter, a hard worker and I will make their money multiply.”

Beatriz was a confident person and proud of her achievements, for example that she at the age of 50 had managed to change profession and become a business woman. She told me that she had learnt the work by watching the engineers of Weatherford when she had been a mud sample collector some years back. According to Prentice (2012), learning a skill by ‘stealing by watching’ was a form of training that expressed not just cunning, but a desire to progress by taking a risk. For Beatriz this was empowerment, progressing through informality towards formality, which made her even more respected.

The brines are solutions of salts with water. Brines are used in oil operations for the completion and repair of wells. They are prepared with sodium and calcium without suspended solids and with suspended solids soluble with hydrochloric acid. The brine can be processed in the oil field by two techniques. The first by injection into deep wells (ISP), which involves injecting the liquid waste into the subsoil through a deep well. However, brines could only be re-injected into wells if there are no environmental impacts in the subsoil. According to wastewater treatment, this is possible under the following conditions: when the formation is capable of admitting the waste and when the well has a waterproof barrier that keeps the waste confined enough time until it is safe.

Five reinjection wells were installed recently in the field, as confirmed by the oil operation manager. This was an environmental action that was completed after the arrival of the Asian operators. The brines were,
however, also treated in artificial evaporation lagoons, as confirmed by the Consupetroleio manager. This technique consists of confining the brines in a raft. This option is used in high temperature zones (as in temperatures of the middle Magdalena region) and on a low surface. The director of Consupetroleio confirmed to me that farms around the ciénaga were used for this purpose, the brine being deposited there. One of the sensitive points of the technique is the environmental contamination of nearby aquifers due to the possible leakage of leachates, which was a form of contamination verified by me on my visits and manifested by the inhabitants, but not investigated by the environmental authorities.

The sensation of navigating the practices of drilling seemed to follow a regularized convulsion. It was a process in which that which was endorsed as being illegal was controllably incorporated into legal drilling, forming a powerful mix, like the sludge. A black-boxed formula. Former middle-ranking paramilitary officers managing lower-ranking demobilized paramilitaries who had become legal oil workers through informal-illegal training. The local contractors emerged after the demobilization of the paramilitary. Managers of the local contractor firms were reproducing the previous paramilitary structure in practices and over the people they used to command, but now in the legalized structure of a local contracting firm.

In practice, the oil operation needed informally trained skilled workers like Ricardo, and the kinship-based authority of supervisors, and illegal practices like of Consupetroleio. The ingredients were difficult to handle, as they were flammable components incorporated into the infrastructure of oil extraction. The regularized convulsion of illegal-informal-legal-formal practices fuels the operation’s practices of simultaneous entanglement and detachment.

6.4 The Ciénaga in the Oil Extraction

So far I have described how workover and drilling were carried out through practices in which the limits between illegality-legality and informality-formality are porous and made through entanglements and detachments. These were thus practices in which the demobilized middle range commander continued to control lower ranked demobilized combatants as subordinated workers. Oil workers in these conditions had to collaborate around the extractive operations, again on the edge of becoming illegal. I have also stated that the notion of infrastructure must include forces and materialities that come from different origins. Not just
machines, but also beings and technologies that organize humans with the machines to fulfil their mission, the
mission of the infrastructure being to sustain the extractive process. I have indicated that this includes an
organisational structure that is constituted, partly, through kinship relations and illegal practices.

In this final section, I want to describe the connection between the oil extraction machinery and the
affordances of the ciénaga, particularly with regard to the dynamic of fluids. My purpose is to deploy the
agency of the ciénaga in relation to the infrastructuring practices of oil extraction. I proposed the notion of
biosocial infrastructure, for the purpose of exploring the human-non-human assemblages. Technologies,
machines and beings of nature, in this case the ciénaga, that were infrastructured in this regime of extracting
oil.

In chapter 3, I presented how the biologists that worked for the company had made a map of the ciénaga
in which the borders of the petroleum infrastructure appeared clearly demarcated and separated from the body
of water. By using this map, the company has been able to detach itself from a great deal of the responsibility
for direct environmental impacts in the ciénaga. However, the connection ciénaga and oil field consisted of
more than material overlapping of the two bodies. It also involved conjoinment of processes, in particular the
mechanics of the fluid part of the infrastructure practices of oil extraction and of the affordances of the
ciénaga.

There were two central processes in the ciénaga: decomposition of organic material and flow of water.
The oil infrastructure was connected to these processes. I will show the connection between the battery of oil
production and the ciénaga, and how the inhabitants circulated in sustaining this unfolding biosocial
infrastructure.

It was about 3:00 p.m. in the afternoon on a Sunday in October 2014. In the tropical oil field the day
seemed to be eternal under the scorching sun. The combination of soporific temperatures and the strong
sunlight made me decide to wait for Álvaro, the linesman in charge of reviewing the data at each production
battery. I waited in the shade of a Matarraton tree, next to a public school named Battery 3, a school with the
same name as a production battery located nearby. This facility was connected to 35 oil wells and two oil
tanks, each having a capacity of 2000Bbls of crude storage. Around 42 children aged between 6 and 10 years studied at the school and there were two teachers.

Álvaro Márquez was one of four linesmen. His job consisted of measuring the pressure at each of the four batteries, following up the filtering process and making sure that the flow lines were intact. Álvaro invited me to join him while inspecting one of the batteries. When we reached the battery, he opened the security gate and explained:

"This battery receives about 2.500 barrels of liquid per day. More than half of its production is water (from the formation), gas and sand. At the battery, oil is separated from the other elements through a separator funnel. The water, which is denser than the oil, goes to the lower phase and the oil remains in the upper phase. You know that water and oil don’t mix, so water can then be extracted by periodically opening a stopcock that connects to the reinjector well. The production water is reinjected under high pressure into the formation. This technology is new here. This water was, for many years, simply discharged directly into the ciénaga until Texas was sanctioned and the oil field closed." (Recorded conversation with authorization).

He continued the narration by commenting that a few years back, the battery had suddenly caught fire. But the company had managed to control the incident. According to Álvaro, the major problem of battery production was saturation, which led to blockages and rot in the battery. The tanks in the battery were cleaned by local workers, who were contracted for this task periodically.

Jairo was an inhabitant of the ciénaga, who had worked cleaning tanks and batteries. Jairo recalled, "It is very risky work. You could fall, and you are normally dizzy and suffer from sore eyes for several days."

In the 1990s, the contamination in the ciénaga due to oil extraction was so overwhelming that in October of 1993, the Secretariat of Health of Boyacá and the Ministry of the Environment-Inderena’s Resolution 0782 of 1993 asked Texaco to suspend its regular discharges into the Caño Caimital (stream) that led to the ciénaga. A massive death of fish had occurred earlier that year and greatly contributed to the conclusion that the oil field had to be closed. The same year, after this resolution was passed, the company contracted the private
laboratory Prodycom to study the water composition in the ciénaga. The laboratory established that the parameters for the presence of chemical substances examined were below the limits established in articles 39, 40, 41 of the Decree 1594/84 of the Ministry of Health, except for the level of phenols, which was slightly higher near Battery 3. Bioremediation was carried out there and a few weeks later the oil field was reopened.

The inclination of the landscape of the ciénaga and the dendritic channels contributed to the drainage of different types of fluids into the body of water. The fluids which ended up in the ciénaga included oil spills from the wells, brines that were collected and eliminated by Consupetroleo, as wells as the inevitable oil leaks during workover and drilling. Not to mention the fluids from fertilizers from cattle ranching and from the cocaine laboratories in the Serranía las Quinchas.

According to resolution Auto 0594, of 2011 from the Ministry of the Environment, the ciénaga had experienced high levels of phenols, lead, barium, cadmium, mercury, chrome, selenium, aromatics and hydrocarbons, levels that often exceeded the legal contamination limits. The interplay between the natural draining process and the practice of dumping production water had led to the circulation of fluids towards the body of water, and towards the oil wells when water from the ciénaga was taken for steam injection and injection under pressure for the reparation of oil wells.

The old and ongoing contamination were deeply entangled at the juncture of the mechanics of fluids of the ciénaga and the oil infrastructure. These bodies materially converged when and where the bajos (natural channels) and fluids from the oil production met. The processes of absorbing, decomposing, filtering and ejecting connected both the ciénaga and the oil production battery, two entities that received, filtered and mobilized fluids. Much of the excess fluid produced by the oil extraction thus ended up in the ciénaga, which received and filtered that which was not re-injected by the production battery.

The inhabitants of the ciénaga participated on both sides by maintaining the battery of oil production, keeping the tanks uncontaminated for crude oil, and maintaining the ciénaga’s flow by removing

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80 Resolución Defensorial N.50 Ciénaga de Palagua: Recuperación de las zonas de ronda y preservación ambiental, diciembre 10 de 2007.
81 Refer to the previous chapter.
contamination and cutting the invasive plant, *tarulla*. It was difficult to establish a clear boundary between old and new contamination. The *ciénaga* and the inhabitants through their practices amplified the capacities of the oil infrastructure into a biosocial assemblage.

Infrastructure\(^2\) is a tool for thinking about complex relationalities (Star & Ruhleder, 1996) or circuits that entangle and mobilize with diverse entities (Jensen & Morita, 2017). Recent work in anthropology and STS explored how this notion unpacked and made visible other natures and actors that participated in production processes.

I want to deploy the interactive social, infrastructural and biophysical agencies that participate in this oil extraction, a process that however becomes concealed and even illegalized rendered illegal by the oil company and hydrocarbon legislation in Colombia. It is, however, a part of the enclave’s regime in which material, biophysical, environmental and human relationships connect through infrastructuring practices (Carse, 2012 and Boyer, 2014).

The company had an environmental department in the field and an environmental managing director in Bogotá. Mauricio Chica was the environmental engineer in the field, working with two inspectors. When I arrived at the field, the company was preparing for the renewal of its environmental licence. This was a particularly important renewal as this was a private oil field (both the soil and the subsoil were the property of the Sino-Indian company) and because this field had been in operation since the 1950s. This field did not comply with the current regulations of the Ministry of the Environment. The company therefore had to provide a global environmental management plan of the operation, and not a specific plan for each well or installation as is now required by Colombian legislation.

The company’s activities for contamination reduction had consisted of installing 10 injectors of water within its field, and the building ditches to channel oil spills. With regard to mitigation, the company had concentrated its efforts on two activities: *tarulla* cutting and the repopulation of fish. By analyzing the chain of infrastructural practices of oil extraction in this field, and taking into consideration the environmental practices

interwoven with this infrastructuring, I have explored in another way how the company oil operation connected with the *ciénaga* in order to achieve its productive permanence.

The verdict in the lawsuit of the fishermen’s association of 1993 against Texaco (Resolution No 537 of 13 December 1994, see chapter 2), was that the prime cause of contamination in the *ciénaga* was eutrophication. In ecology, this is defined as a form of contamination produced by chemicals or by the accumulation of rotting biomass that transforms the composition of the water and reduces the oxygen level, so prompting decomposition. However, several biological and chemical factors can cause eutrophication. Therefore, the biological term eutrophication could be interpreted ambiguously.

Studies of eutrophication of FAO carried out in different contexts, consider that the reduction of oxygen, observed in combination with an increase in the blue-green algae population, was “eutrophication”, defined as “the process of change from one trophic state to a higher trophic state by the addition of nutrients” (FAO, 2003). The causes and results of eutrophication may change dramatically from place to place. However, in the lawsuit verdict, contamination was clearly defined as caused by the waste and toxic elements emanating from oil production, that had ended up in the *ciénaga*.

The *tarulla* or *Eichhomia Crassipes* was, according to one of the oldest inhabitants, an aquatic plant introduced by Texaco to absorb the pollutants of oil production in the *ciénaga*. It ended up, however, becoming an invasive plant that covered the body of water increasing decomposition, rotting, reducing oxygen and killing the fish. In this way, the *tarulla* contributed to the reorganization of relations in the *ciénaga*, while hiding the oil pollution. The *tarulla* itself, while intended to mitigate the problem, ended up being the cause of eutrophication, and thus part of the problem of pollution.

In 1995, Omimex started financing the manual removal of the plant by contracting the fisherfolk association. This was an attempt to restore the local livelihoods damaged by pollution. In this way, via corporate, legal and scientific apparatus, the plant ended up as a site for the convergence of different interests, namely those of the company, the environmental authorities, and partially of the fishermen’s association.

However, the legal obligations of mitigation were not complied with by Omimex. The contracting of *tarulla* cutting was not formalized, the reduction of contamination was not undertaken and the *ciénaga*
experienced a decline in its water, as the satellite images of the biologist showed for the years 1990-1998 (see chapter 3). It was not until the entry of the Sino-Indian company in 2004 that the Ministry of the Environment, in conjunction with other state authorities, managed to secure some compliance. The sudden presence of the state in the enclave was taken by the fisherfolk as an opportunity to reinforce the cleaning of the ciénaga and recover their livelihoods. In this context, the fisherfolk managed to gain a voice in the negotiations with the Asians, and succeeded in increasing the cutting to two times a year, each lasting two months, and in formalizing the cutting periods.

The contamination in the ciénaga has taken new forms through different practices, materially transforming what was considered to be the cause of eutrophication. The environmental compensation for oil pollution became tarulla invasion, which later became a form of work in the environmental mitigation funded by the company.

Through its practices the oil company connected with different entities by incorporating them within its own system. It has co-opted and transformed the terms that defined the causes of eutrophication, and the practices to mitigate the pollution by contracting the inhabitants, who had previously been environmental victims, now related to the oil company as temporary oil workers.

The environmental practices instigated by the oil company were activities designed to maintain oil extraction. These activities resulted from environmental rules and regulations, pollution lawsuits and struggles led by the fisherfolk-colonos. The repetition of the practice of tarulla cutting during the last ten years has consolidated the idea that eutrophication has been generated by the expansion of the tarulla. Hydrocarbon pollution has, therefore, partly disappeared as a matter of concern for the oil company, the inhabitants and the state.

The biologist with whom I collaborated when studying the ciénaga and producing the satellite images, remarked that it was impressive that in spite of the erosive trend and the strong human intervention through oil infrastructure and cattle ranching around it, the ciénaga has persisted and the water mirror expanded. This, however, rather than being a manifestation of biophysical recovery of the ciénaga, might have something to do with the practice of tarulla cutting and the extraction of sediment from the bottom of the ciénaga, practices that
the oil company developed as environmental mitigation and part of the biosocial infrastructure that is required to extract oil.
This chapter is a historical reconstruction of the paramilitary regimes of Gonzálo Pérez (1970 - 1990) and Arnubio Triana (1990 – 2006). This reconstruction was made some years after the paramilitary demobilization in Puerto Boyacá in 2006, and through conversations with the inhabitants I tried to understand the past and its implications for the present. The reconstruction is based on conversations I had during my fieldwork, stories that emerged in the interstices of peace in the years since the end of the paramilitary regime, a period that is still extant and that I term ‘the transition’. The reconstruction has been built up from conversations with individuals and groups, a form of oral history that attempts to reconstruct the past from moments in which memories of past events emerged, moments where inhabitants told me their personal opinions, and moments that individuals told me about while sharing their opinions in front of others. These were moments during dinner, moments while fishing, on the rigs and in cars. They were often unusual moments as they emerged in places that used to be controlled by paramilitary violence, where freedom of speech was constrained.

My ethnographic experience has made me distance myself from interpretations that see the inhabitants of Puerto Boyacá and other territories of Colombia as controlled by these armed groups, or as active or passive accomplices (for example: Franco, 2002). During my time in the ciénaga, I heard stories that went beyond passivity or activity, indicating layers of history that revealed to me a more complex cohabitation with paramilitarism, a history of practices of navigating for survival, and therefore more than just antagonistic politics, but rather a politics of endurance in order to persist, which I have termed an amphibian disposition.

7.1 The Colombian Armed Conflict and Fantasy Island

José was teaching me how to weave atarraya at the fisherfolks’ association kiosk, when I dared to ask him about paramilitarism in the ciénaga. It was a sensitive issue which I had tried not to ask about. José answered me, “Yes, paracos, they were here, they were born here, they are all around… still, but that was the fault of the guerrillas. When I was a child everything was about the guerrilla, they abused the people until the people got tired of them and armed themselves.”
According to Medina Gallego’s interviews with the liberal politician Pablo E. Guarín, the FARC guerrilla movement’s IV Front operated in the region in the 1960s. It was a part of the guerrilla movement that had inherited its methods from the liberal guerrillas of La Ribera. In the beginning, the communist guerrilla group operated as an armed rural movement and grew rapidly due to strong local ties with trade unions and colonos, creating new units. Relations were even good with the first hacendados who paid them for security in the absence of the state police or army (Pablo Emilio Guarín in Medina, 1990).

In the 1970s the IV Front expanded into other regions, and the XI front was established in Puerto Boyacá to replace the previous front. Scholars such as Medina, (1990); Vargas, (1992) and Molano (2009) concur that there were two very distinct periods of FARC presence in the history of Puerto Boyacá. The first period was marked by general acceptance among the colonos, trade unionists and also hacendados. The second, and very different period, was characterized by kidnapping and extortion (such as the ‘vacuna ganadera’, the regular mandatory payments that ranchers had to make to the FARC).

An economy of escape took shape in those years in Puerto Boyacá. Ranchers desperately tried to sell their estates to escape from guerrilla extortion. This generated a second wave of accumulation of land in which unscrupulous investors moved in as landowners. In this tense context, people in the political and legal arenas started to propose the establishment of self-defence groups (Autodefensas). They argued that they were forced into this by the inability of central government and the regular security forces to protect them from the abuses of the guerrillas (Pablo Emilio Guarín, in Medina, 1990).

The historical inspiration behind the emergence of the self-defence groups was found in the so-called ‘La Ley del Llano’, which was the legacy of previous irregular armed groups including the ‘Los Chulavitas’ and ‘Los Pajaros’, and legal instruments such as Presidential Decree 3398 and Law 48 which made it possible to create Civil Defence Organizations, a legal development in line with the National Security Doctrine (Cubides, 1997).

When the drug trafficker Gonzalo Rodríguez Gacha, alias ‘El Mexicano,’ came to the ciénaga at the end of the 1970s, he built a house on an island in the ciénaga and called it Fantasy Island. I was told the name was inspired by a US TV series from the 1970s called Fantasy Island, which was about a mysterious tropical island
in the Pacific Ocean where people came to live out fantasies of all kinds, paying the owners a hefty sum for their silence. That Gacha had chosen this name for the island says something about the cultural imaginaries of the Colombian mafia of the 1970s that admired and took inspiration from USA aesthetics, whose influence was also visible beyond popular culture. Paramilitarism also had connections with the Doctrine of National Security promoted by the United States during the Cold War.\(^\text{83}\) The USA trained hundreds of officers from the Colombian army at the School of the Americas (Franco, 2002; Richani, 2003), and provided guidance to the judiciary in the application of laws during a state of exception. For example, Decree 3398 of 1965, Law 48 of 1968 and Resolution 005 – the Regulation for Counter Guerrilla Combat – were promoted by the government of the United States in Colombia at that time.

In 1978, the XIV Brigade of the Army established a permanent military base in the municipality of Puerto Berrio, not far from the ciénaga. This base was in addition to the military base of Batallón Bárbula, established in 1978 inside the Velásquez-Texaco oil field to confront guerrillas. A year later, in 1979, the massacre of communist members of the community council of the nearby municipality of Cimitarra occurred. This was the first of a number of assassinations and forced displacements in the Middle Magdalena Region of trade union leaders and social leaders who represented Juntas de Acción Comunal and Peasant Associations (Colombia Núnca Más, 2017).

The repression of peasants came from two different quarters: the army and the self-defence groups (Autodefensas). The army forced all locals over the age of 14 to be registered in the military database, giving each a special identification card issued by the army itself, a card they had to have in addition to an ordinary ID card: Cédula de Ciudadanía. The peasants could not purchase more food than they needed for their personal consumption, their territorial mobility was restricted and they had to report periodically to the army (Medina, 1990). The purpose of these impositions was to prevent possible collaboration with the guerrillas, and to

\(^{83}\) Practices that according to Velásquez (2007) came from France and the United States. France established paramilitary organizations and death squads, implemented counter insurgency strategies, and used irregular troops against independence movements in its colonies. The United States, thorough its training programmes at the School of America, supported the dictatorships in the southern cone, counter insurgency operations in Central America and paramilitarism in Colombia and Peru.
intimidate the inhabitants through a restrictive new security regime. The self-defence groups burnt down the homes and crops of those accused of supporting, or sympathizing with, the guerrillas and killed and tortured both young and elderly men and women who they suspected were collaborating with the FARC.

The *ciénaga*’s Fantasy Island became the headquarters of the paramilitary regime after the elimination of the guerrillas. It was a mysterious, well-protected and hidden place located near the geographic centre of Colombia. It was for many years controlled by Gacha, who was second in-command of the Medellin Cartel, after Pablo Escobar. In the 1980s, Gacha was considered to be the largest landlord in Colombia, a position he had achieved through money laundering and land grabbing. He started up his illegal activities in the emerald extraction region of Muzo-Boyacá, and from there he directed and financed the formation of a paramilitary organization in Puerto Boyacá to protect drug trafficking routes. The *ciénaga* and Puerto Boyacá were located in a strategic corridor between the Andean mountain ranges and the Caribbean Coast, via the Magdalena River. Fantasy Island soon became an important centre and coordination hub for trafficking activities unfolding in the political ecology of the drug trade (Robbind, 2004, p. 215).

Teo Ballvé (2013), building on the work of Robbins (2004), has underlined that the political ecology of drug trafficking is not only related to pollution from the chemical runoff of coca cultivation, or the production of cocaine base in laboratories, a major contaminant that comes from the mountain range in the *ciénaga*. It is also, and mainly, about a political ecology that transforms the landscape into pastures due to the accumulation of landed property through money laundering. Land bought by the drug cartels was often converted into cattle pastures, transforming a heterogeneous landscape into a particular homogeneous landscape dedicated to the provision of grass for livestock, or land held for speculation. I would add that the political ecology of drug trafficking under the paramilitaries also included the instrumentalisation of the waterways as a hiding place for this military organization, thus leading to the militarization of the everyday lives of the inhabitants and the environment. It also led to the proliferation of a shared aesthetic between cattle ranchers and drug traffickers that articulated cattle, farms, weapons, cars, escorts, alcohol, drugs and the hyper-sexualisation of gender relations towards specific connotations of the social order in the Middle Magdalena Region.
The political ecology of drug trafficking and paramilitarism in the ciénaga reinforced the imaginary frontier, reifying the ciénaga-as-floodable-jungle into the moral topography ascribed to lowland natures and peoples as violent and illegal, re-endor sing the colonial pasts, but this time through the illegal practices of drug trafficking and paramilitary activities.

According to the confessions of the jailed paramilitary called ‘Negro Vladimir’, 84 (who had the trust of the son of the first paramilitary commander, Gonzálo Pérez) Fantasy Island was the place of training for, and coordination of, the assassination of those fighting against the narcotráfico and landlord expansion. 85 By 1987, the articulation of these actors had enough resources to improve training in the school, bringing to the region British and Israeli instructors from the British Brothers League and former officers of the Israeli army. 86

The avalanche of death at the hands of paramilitaries between the 1980s and 1990s also included the assassination of inhabitants of Puerto Boyacá and the surrounding area, when the forces that created paramilitarism practically transformed the region into a laboratory of war. In this laboratory, different methods of intimidation, indoctrination and warfare were tried out. This war machine consisted of paramilitary squads of poor, vulnerable, traumatized and manipulated rural inhabitants, who Mbembe calls ‘murder-suicides’ (2003). These people were recruited and converted to paramilitary assassins with the promise of a better life, while those who chose not to become paramilitaries or who managed to avoid becoming recruited, risked losing their lives in acts of slow violence (Nixon, 2011), surrounded by contamination, poverty and state abandonment.

84 http://www.verdadabierta.com/bloques-de-la-auc/399-vladimir-se-confiesa
85 http://www.semana.com/especiales/articulo/el-dossier-paramilitar/11674-3
86 The first training courses were named after the cattle ranches where paramilitary training took place: ‘Zero Uno’, ‘El Cincuenta’, ‘El Tecal’, ‘La Corcovada’ and ‘Galaxias’. One of those who received such training was Alonso de Jesús Baquero, alias El Negro Vladimir, and a subject known as Jaime Rueda Rocha, who on August 18, 1989, assassinated presidential candidate Luis Carlos Galán Sarmiento. The Israelis mercenaries Yair Klein, Melkin Ferry, Izahack Shoshani Meraiot, Avraam Tzedaka, Arik Piccioto Afek and the British mercenaries Peter Stuart McAlesse, Brian Tomkins, Dean Anthony Shelley, John Richard Owen, Andrew Jibson and Terrence Tagney arrived in Colombia in 1988 to train these private armies. It was the Colombian drug trafficker Gonzálo Rodríguez Gacha, nicknamed ‘The Mexican’, who allegedly had financed this training. El Espectador newspaper, Judicial: ‘This was the genesis of paramilitarism’, 27 Jul 2013, By: Diana Carolina Durán Núñez.
7.2 Fantasy Island

Julio was a security guard working in the oil field and is one of the many in the Ciénaga who has a past working for the paramilitaries. One day in August 2014 we agreed to visit the island together after his morning shift. When I arrived at the ciénaga as an anthropologist interested in the social life of that place, people always advised me to go to the island, and Julio one day convinced me to go, offering to take me there for a few pesos to cover the expense of the motorboat gasoline. Julio knew Fantasy Island well, as he was also a fisherman and was familiar with every corner of the ciénaga: the main water body and the islands, streams and bogs. We met in front of his house at 2 pm, walked down to his canoe, pushed it out into the water and then rowed gently towards the island. Julio had advised me to wear a long-sleeved shirt to protect myself from insects and the baking sun. He told me I should also bring something to cover my nose and mouth, which he said I would need as the air on the island was fetid and unbearable because of the amount of rotting organic material that accumulated in the surrounding water. The afternoon was grey and sultry, as it was about to rain. Both the heat and the mosquitoes made an offensive atmosphere without respite.

It took us about 15 minutes to reach the island, a small patch of land in the north western corner of the ciénaga. As we slowly approached, I could see how the green vegetation enveloped what remained of a major human-made construction. I could see dozens of black birds sitting in the trees next to the ruins and others soaring above the construction. Trying to absorb my impressions and make a mental map of the island, I asked Julio: “Who did this house belong to?” Without even attempting to answer the question, Julio corrected me: “It is not a house – it is a mansion”.

As we got closer to the island, the ruins of what must once have been an imposing white two-storey building became visible. Not much of its former glory remained. Only destroyed walls, broken windows and parts of the roof could still be seen. The ruins, debris and rubble were the accumulation of layers of destruction and pollution that had shaped this island. Julio tied the canoe to a log sticking out of the water. On stepping out of the canoe, I could see that the ground was covered with a carpet of accumulated leaves, reeds, branches, decomposing aquatic plants and the excrement of birds. Occasionally, we saw small green lizards, that emerged from the rotting vegetation before crawling hastily away from the human intruders. The dense
vegetation on the island was dark green and brownish in color, with patches of light green palms and banana plants. Julio explained to me that the palms had once been part of the mansion’s garden, but that the undergrowth had slowly overtaken what remained.

As we approached the ruins of the mansion, we passed four deep pits in the ground, side by side. The walls of these square pits seemed to be made of concrete reinforced with iron rebars. Julio explained that these pits were ‘caletas’, secret chambers where the paramilitaries had hidden money, drugs, weapons or people. Julio recalled that after paramilitary demobilization, soldiers from the regular army came to the island to look for caletas inside or around the mansion. They were most likely searching for valuable items. Locals also saw demobilized paramilitaries engaged in such activities on the island. The statue of the holy Virgin of Carmen on the island’s dock was smashed to pieces during one of these excursions, perhaps because the caleta hunters thought that something valuable was hidden inside this sacred statue.

These paramilitary caletas mobilized the imagination of fortune hunters in the post-demobilization period. The caletas, in addition to converting these sites into places where wealth could be found, also helped to make them places for visitors who admired narco and paramilitarism. This ruin was a site for the remembrance of painful memories of the internal armed conflict of Colombia.

During the first months and years after demobilization, Caletas, including the one on Fantasy Island, were turbulent places surrounded by surveillance, guards, antipersonnel mines, demobilized combatants, army personnel, new and old criminal groups and regular treasure hunters. The caletas are associated with the Colombian guacas, i.e., indigenous funeral burial sites where long-departed individuals were ritually buried as mummies, with gold and precious jewels. Opening and stealing the treasures found inside a guaca is thought to bring down a curse on the perpetrator, and this also applies to those who break into caletas. In both, higher powers could take revenge. The guacas and caletas around the ciénaga are most likely empty, as treasure hunters have been very active in the area, but they are still full of stories evoking the turbulent past and the hope that new fortunes can be found.

We continued inspecting the caletas, and for a moment I imagined myself falling into one of the pits, a thought that made me shudder. I asked Julio, “And what do you think was hidden here?” Julio looked down
into one of the deep pits and replied coldly, “I think mostly guns and people, maybe dollars…? The paras did military training here and they had a lot of parties. They also held more than one pobrecito (person in a hopeless situation) captive here.” I was shaken. I thought about how people had been locked up against their will in these small, dark, concrete chambers beneath the ground. I suddenly felt a strong desire to leave the island. But I knew that this was, perhaps, my only chance to visit this place with Julio. So, I decided to continue.

While standing behind Julio, I got the feeling that nobody had visited this place for quite some time, as we had to use machetes to hack our way through the thick brush surrounding the mansion. This might not have been the case, however, as the weed grew astonishingly quickly in that climate. Out of curiosity, I asked Julio, if he could confirm my suspicion that this place had not been visited by anybody in a long time. He affirmed that “You are the first person to visit the island since demobilization. The first that is not from here.”

Standing in front of what remained of the mansion, I found that it no longer looked as imposing as it did from a distance. Perceptions of the mansion have changed over time through the different paramilitary regimes. At the time of my fieldwork, the mansion had re-emerged as debris. While Julio was telling me these stories, I felt that it was testimony to how the present was unfolding in the ciénaga, as a new horizon of possibilities opened after demobilization; it was a time of transition in which past events could be told and re-interpreted in the present.

Historians inspired by the praxiography of Annemarie Mol (2003) have studied practices from historical records. These studies have traced how a technology or body has, through different practices, taken different versions at different points in history (Geertje, 2012 , pp. 9-10) and they have identified how in the tracing of versions, a ‘virtual common object’ is formed (Roque & Wagner, 2012). Following this insight, I trace the inhabitants’ versions of paramilitarism to understand these pasts in the present, in order to sense how it is to live in the ciénaga at precisely the moment of transition that allowed the manifestation of these narratives.

Traditional anthropology elaborated on the interplay of past and present. Evans Pritchard’s seminal essay on Anthropology and History (Evans-Pritchard, 1961), in which he elaborated critically on the inadequate separation between history and anthropology, argued that the present could not be understood only by the
present. Quoting Boas, he claimed that an intelligent knowledge of a complex phenomenon requires that ‘we must know not only what it is that the phenomenon is about but also how it came to be’.

When we were on the island, Julio told me about the ostentatious parties that had been held there, with guests including high-ranking military officers, leading politicians, famous models and musicians. These guests were flown in by plane or helicopter, which, according to Julio, usually landed at the oil company’s private airport inside the company compound.

Julio said that he personally had not enjoyed working for the paras. When speaking about how it had been to work for the paramilitaries, he compared his experiences working for Gonzálo Pérez (the commander of the first paramilitary regime) with working for Arnubio Triana (the commander of the second paramilitary regime). He emphasized that he had preferred working with Triana, who was more serious. Pérez was considered by different people to be mentally ill, so he was extremely difficult to work with. In saying this, he revealed to me that there were different practices inside the paramilitary project.

Much of what happened in the ciénaga in the 1980s and 1990s is unknown, as the paramilitary phenomenon in Colombia was unrecognized by the government and the media until 1996, when the Ministry of the Interior presented the first data on the number of victims of paramilitarism, gathered between 1988 and 1995 (Cubides, 1997). This indicated that there had already been 16,694 victims by that time. The ciénaga was ignored by these investigations as it was the central control area of the paramilitaries.

In my research I found a few rudimentary reports about human rights violations relating to the municipality of Puerto Boyacá in this period, mainly from the CINEP (a Jesuit human rights organization). Human Rights organizations could not reach the ciénaga as they feared (with good reason) that they would be targeted by the paramilitary. Some organizations did, however, attempt to trace and follow the actions of the paras, Paracos, Paraquitos and The Organization are terms used by inhabitants when referring to the paramilitaries. Paras is a more general and somehow informal term that is used to make reference to the paramilitaries in a broader sense. The term Paraco is a more brutal and rude term used to characterize a specific paramilitary combatant, commander or collaborator. The term Paraquito makes reference either to an adult person who is a secondary collaborator or to a child who collaborates with, or belongs to, the ranks of paramilitaries, or who potentially would enter the paramilitary army. The term ‘the organization’ refers to paramilitarism as a legitimate entity and with authority that governs the territory.
paramilitaries in Puerto Boyacá from a distance, collecting and systematizing information, operating out of municipalities in the neighbouring departments of Santander, Cundinamarca and Antioquia.

The isolation of the ciénaga was reinforced when, in 1989, the paramilitary commander Gonzálo Pérez placed a huge placard at the entrance to the town, declaring Puerto Boyacá the anti-subversive capital of Colombia. The invisibility of Puerto Boyacá, the placard at the entrance to the town and military-paramilitary control of the ciénaga created compliance with paramilitary forces inside the region, at the same time as it consolidated the idea among people outside the region that all the inhabitants of Puerto Boyacá were supporters of paramilitarism.

Orlando Fals Borda has said that the inhabitants of the floodplains of the Momposina Depression behaved like armadillos which, when facing danger, hide in their shells to survive, or like turtles that retreat into their shells during a drought, or amphibians that dig down into the mud to protect themselves from danger (1986). These were amphibian practices that ensured endurance in harsh conditions, or that helped navigate the situation when things became dangerous.

The Colombian anthropologist Jorge Cancimante (2014), exploring daily life by interpreting silence in conflicted areas of Putumayo-Colombia, found that the silence under paramilitary control helped the people to reduce the intensity of the trauma and keep going. Cancimante claimed that silence was a practice that, in this context, allowed the inhabitants of Putumayo to persist in their territory (2014, p.181). For Cancimante, the victims of paramilitary activities and of the guerrillas in Putumayo-Colombia were neither passive nor active. They played the game by resisting in these spaces of terror (Taussig, 1984).

Kristina Lyons (2016) took a similar approach to that of Cancimante. Besides demonstrating the survival of the peasants, who live in the middle of the war against drugs (coca cultivation and cocaine production) in Colombia, she also showed how through artful creativity a new vitality emerges from conditions of decomposition. Hence strategies for life, despite the proliferation of policies of death, are not necessarily antagonistic to death, but can re-emerge from that condition of decomposition. Inspired by her approach, I suggest that precisely by exceeding these oppositions of resistance-and-complicity, the art of living in the
ciénaga was an artful way of re-emerging in spite of hardships, which demonstrates the amphibian disposition to endure and navigate in order to persist.

For this reason, it is relevant not only academically but also politically to incorporate oral narrative into the historical reconstruction of paramilitarism in the ciénaga (and in general), to allow us to understand the complexity of the circumstances under which the inhabitants were subsumed under paramilitarism. This is, in my opinion, a decolonizing intellectual commitment to the side of the subalternized, the stigmatized, to tell other stories from the vernacular experiences of the inhabitants. As Don Milagros has said, “not all the people supported paramilitarism.” Don Milagros endured it.

7.3 A State of Exception in the Ciénaga: The Regime of Gonzálo Pérez

By 1989, Puerto Boyacá was subject to draconian decrees that imposed a state of siege (see for example Barón, 2011; Cubides, 1997; Gutiérrez, 2014). By issuing Decree 2100, Virgilio Barco, the president of the republic, declared the municipality of Puerto Boyacá to be a special zone for the restoration of public order. This was based on Decree 1038 of 1984 that declared a national state of siege in Colombia to defeat its internal enemies (guerrillas), a security policy derived from Article 121 of the Constitution of Colombia of 1886.

Following Decree 2100, the military took over the civilian government in Puerto Boyacá, thus cutting off the territory from the rule of law and respect for civil rights. The central state apparatus in Bogotá maintained contact with Puerto Boyacá through the commander of the army battalion, whose headquarters was inside the Texaco enclave. The oil corporation would provide them with infrastructure and economic support. In this way, in a state of siege, Texaco and the army collaboratively governed the oil enclave.

Achille Mbembe has elaborated the notion of necropolitics (2003) to conceptualize the modes of government in colonial territories. Biopolitical-necropolitics could, in this sense, be understood along the lines proposed by decolonial thinking, as the mutual constitution of the administration of the dead and of the biological life (for example: of the oil and of the ciénaga, as well as of the cattle and pastures, and of the affordances of the inhabitants). Under enclave conditions, colonial practices continue in the productive administration of life and death through oil extractivist economies and the militarization of territories and people.
Biopolitics operates in the realm of law and wage labor in modern capitalism. Necropolitics, however, operates in a state of exception and develops other forms of exploitative work and control over production that cross the legality-illegality line. The configuration of spaces of death (Taussig, 1984), which resonates with that of necropolitics, reveals again the moral topography that organizes the Colombian territory.

A simplified reading of the internal armed conflict in Colombia in the 1980s and 1990s would be that there were three armed actors in confrontation: the national army, guerrillas and paramilitary groups (Cubides, 1997; Gutiérrez, 2014; López, 201; Medina, 1990). However, this simplification prevents us from seeing the more complicated and complex aspects of warfare. It must, however, be made clear that these actors were not unified entities and that there were internal frictions, contradictions and alliances among them. This is one of the reasons why the Colombian armed conflict unfolded in a complex and intricate manner.

Julio remembered the regime of Gonzálo Pérez (1979-1991) as a period of indiscriminate and overflowing violence. Triana (1995-2006) was, for him and for others in the ciénaga, a more reasonable commander, a person with whom it was possible to reach agreements. At the same time however, Julio emphasised that Triana was also ferocious when absorbing inhabitants into his sphere of control.

Walking around the ruins of the paramilitary headquarters, the mansion on Fantasy Island where both Pérez and Triana had lived and ruled, Julio recalled an episode that described the character of Gonzálo Pérez:

“We complained to Gonzálo Pérez that when his men were doing target shooting practice on the island, in the afternoon or early in the evening, they fired shots at us, when we were fishing. We begged Pérez to tell them to be careful… perhaps they were drunk or drugged when they did it, or maybe they were crazy… every time we heard a shot… puff… we laid down as fast as possible on the boat floor, or we jumped directly into the water. But, even though we complained, nothing happened. They just continued shooting at us. Because of that, we decided to stop fishing at night… and since then we have not fished at night.”

Texaco continued its operation in the oil field, in spite of the murders, the training, and the shootings. Segundo Gonzáles (ex-president of Omimex, the company that operated the field after Texaco) confirmed this in an interview with me in the exclusive Club El Nogal. He told me that the Texaco oil field was occupied by the Bárbula Battalion of the national army and by Gonzálo Pérez’ paramilitary group, which operated and
trained openly in the field. Segundo said: “when we bought that field, I had to administer it under these conditions, I had no other option, I had to negotiate with the paramilitaries, and with the mayor, who knew what was happening there” (published with permission).

The absence of the rule of law in the ciénaga allowed the violence to reverberate onto the inhabitants, who became like guinea pigs for paramilitary training. But it also meant that Texaco could operate the oil field without having to take into consideration the protection of any human rights, labor rights or environmental obligations in this necropolitical space where rights were suspended.

In the 1980s, the inhabitants witnessed the first massive deaths of fish and uncontrolled decomposition in the ciénaga, due to the overflow of contamination following 30 years of unregulated exploitation of oil (see Chapter 2). This led to the body of water entering into a miasmatic state of organic putrefaction due to the lack of oxygen and the increase of aquatic plants. Dead fish floated in a potage of waters polluted by an increase in bacteria caused by the discharge of chlorides, phenols, fats and oils and dissolved and suspended solids from oil production. However, at the same time dismembered bodies appeared in the oil field, next to machinery, floating in the murky waters or on the road. This was what had happened to Andres’s brother, whose lifeless and mutilated body was found next to a pump jack. Clementino Jiménez’ son suffered a similar fate, his bruised and almost unrecognizable body being found on the internal dirt road. The terror that was sown in the village by such acts of violence made many leave the ciénaga to seek refuge elsewhere in the country. This was the case for one of Don Milagros’ sons (who went to Putumayo) and one of Luis Montaña’s daughters, who went to Leticia. Most of the fisherfolk-colonos, however, decided to stay, enduring the violence because they did not want to flee again as they had done before. Don Clementino told me, “Where could we have gone? We had already escaped from other places. Here we had our house and the ciénaga. Why would we go to Bogotá to starve?”

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88 As the Ministry of the Environment later confirmed under Governmental Resolution N. 0782 of September 1993
89 According to Tate (2015) the practice of dismembering bodies characterized paramilitary groups in Colombia, and was part of the training provided by the USA army. It was believed that this practice would prevent the re-emergence of subversion and challenges from the population. This was one of many elements in the new US counterinsurgency strategy that were soon felt in rural Colombia.
The ACDEGAM (Association of Cattle Ranchers and Peasants of the Middle Magdalena) was led by Gonzálo Pérez and Pablo Emilio Guarín. Texaco’s oil field was the territory in which the ACDEGAM, the Army and the drug traffickers collaborated to build up the paramilitary forces. Texaco might have collaborated financially, and in any case allowed illegal activities to take place inside the oil field. Pablo Rubio, a former mayor of Puerto Boyacá, also expressed his satisfaction with the generosity of the company without referring directly to support for illegal armed groups, “A generous gift from the Texas Petroleum Company, its directors and staff in general, which drives the initiatives of the Municipality and provides elements and money for works that ... make Puerto Boyacá a friendlier and more welcoming city.” (Medina, 1990, p. 231).

Those who inhabited the ciénaga in the 1980s paid a high price for continuing to live there, suffering abuses and limited freedom of movement and supply of food. They witnessed assassinations or encountered dead bodies and many locals were killed. Voluntary or forced recruitment by the paramilitaries was also a common practice. The ongoing violence was accompanied by the establishment of a regional political movement called MORENA, set up by Gonzálo Pérez and Pablo Guarín. This political organization claimed to defend morality, family and private property, and it campaigned for social cleansing. The declared military objective was to eliminate guerrilla sympathizers, communists, drug addicts, beggars, thieves, prostitutes and what they called sapos (toads/informer), meaning all those who were openly critical of the paramilitary regime or who simply behaved suspiciously.

The inhabitants of the ciénaga that I spoke to, and whose family members and friends had been murdered as part of this social cleansing campaign, maintained that those who were assassinated did not belong to any of the categories mentioned above. They felt that the victims were randomly selected to be used in military training, to spread fear and even to strengthen the paramilitary’s grip on the inhabitants.

The assassination of peasants was justified in the name of reducing criminality and fighting communism. The feeling that anyone could be the next victim infused a sense of panic through the ciénaga. Luz told me, “anything could kill you; gossip, bad luck, being outside your home after 7:00 p.m. or not responding positively when a paraco fell in love with you. All those things could make you disappear.”
Uribe (2004) showed that one practice, or technique of terror during the war in Colombia was the endorsement of sides in the confrontation by claiming, for example, that someone was an infiltrator or a secret informer just to show loyalty to the group that had territorial control or, for example, to get rid of difficult neighbour. This technique, according to Uribe, had a psychological impact on both individuals and collectives, as one could be arbitrarily accused of being an informer, which caused widespread anxiety.

As Luz said, “No one could trust anyone. No one knew who would be the next ‘toad’ (el sapo).”

The son of Don Milagros was accused of being a toad and marihuanero and killed, which resulted in his other son leaving for Putumayo. The accusation of being a toad exacerbated paranoia; a toad could point to others and nobody knew who would be assassinated next. To be singled out as a toad, according to Maria Victoria Uribe (2004), made a person enter the terrain of the non-human, of being dead in life, of being infected. For that reason, people moved away from that person, they did not want to be infected as well. The person became isolated from the community (neighbours and relatives) until he or she was murdered, and then the next individual was pointed out, and became the next to be treated as if he or she suddenly had the plague.

Although she was very young at the time, Luz still remembered how commander Gonzálo Pérez, his sons and his paramilitary soldiers behaved when dealing with the inhabitants of the ciénaga. She particularly remembered one person nicknamed el enfermero (the nurse), “He was unpredictable, sometimes a good person and sometimes not. I learned that he was called el enfermero, because he did terrible things inside the bodies of people, people thought he was mentally ill, but he wanted to be my friend.”

In another conversation, Luz recalled, “We lived in constant anxiety. It was bad if you looked at them, bad if you didn’t look at them. They would always find a reason to take you away and punish you.” This situation made both Luz and her sister leave the ciénaga. Her younger brother was recruited into the army and then disappeared, his body never found. The picture of her young brother still hung on the wall of her restaurant on the village dock. Her parents, who arrived at the ciénaga as fisherfolk-colonos, escaping from violence in Tolima in the 1950s, decided to continue living there in spite of the violence, as they were tired of fleeing. However, their family was fragmented during the rule of Gonzálo Pérez.
The inhabitants of the ciénaga not only experienced social cleansing, forced displacement and waves of assassination. They also experienced forced recruitment. Don Clementino and Don Milagros told me how boys as young as 10 years of age were picked up in the streets of Puerto Boyacá and in the ciénaga and forced to ‘do military service with the paramilitary’, a practice that they said took place with the complicity of the army.

At night, inhabitants had to stay inside their homes as the paramilitaries had imposed a curfew that came into effect every evening at 7:00 p.m. Sebastian Vargas remembers this practice, by telling me that when it was dark a white SUV drove slowly through the village inside the oil field, with the lights off. According to him, paramilitary personnel inside the car had infrared equipment so that they could see and monitor any movement in the dark. Those daring to violate the curfew could thus be seen in the darkness. When they suddenly heard the sound of a car advancing rapidly in their direction, it was too late to escape. In different and separate conversations, Julio, Andrés, Sebastián, Luz and John told me about this practice. Some told me about this with fear and pain, others as if they were narrating an action movie to me, and some with indifference as if it were a normal way of maintaining security. After stopping the car with a jolt, armed men jumped out of the vehicle and quickly immobilized the victim on the ground. The helpless victim was put into a fabric bag and thrown into the back of the SUV, taken away and desaparecida (disappeared).

By the late 1980s, outsiders considered all those living in Puerto Boyacá to be staunch paramilitary supporters. The local victims of paramilitarism, the inhabitants who stayed even if they did not support paramilitarism, were ignored. Many refused to leave. Most of them did, however, send their children or family members to other regions to protect them.

One day when in the oil field, I was observing the process of hiring local workers during a socialization of labor vacancies. I noticed that many men between 30 and 40 years of age had managed to obtain their national ID card: cédulas de ciudadanía in the neighbouring village of La Dorada-Caldas, instead of in Puerto Boyacá. I asked why. They explained to me that having an ID from Puerto Boyacá would mean they would be immediately associated with paramilitarism and that could cause them problems with mobility in the country, but also that many of them grew up outside this town and have come back since the paramilitary demobilization.
7.4 Tarulla and Paramilitarism

Tarulla or water hyacinth is an aquatic plant known for its ability to absorb contaminants (FAO, Martínez-Jiménez, 2003), this was apparently why Texaco’s engineers had introduced it to the ciénaga in 1985 (refer to chapter 4). Doña Nieves, a grandmother who for years ran a bar on the village dock, remembered the day when Texaco scattered tarulla seeds by plane over the water surface. According to her, they had been told that this was a company measure to remove pollution from the ciénaga, something they considered to be positive. Others that I spoke with could not remember that the company had done this and thought that it was a perennial species native to the ciénaga. But irrespective of whether it was native or an introduced plant, what is sure is that the contamination in the lake for some reason has increased its ability to expand and invade the ciénaga. This has transformed the plant into a hostile actor that interfered with the continuity of the ecological relations of the fisherfolk with the ciénaga. The tarulla has become a species that is threatening the livelihood of the locals, which has unleashed an orchestrated response from the people of the ciénaga. The tarulla had interfered in their practices and transformed the body of water.

It is now clear to Doña Nieves and the other villagers that the tarulla did not heal the ciénaga as the oil company had expected. It just hid the contamination under a thick green carpet. My reading of the situation is that the tarulla not only hid the toxic contamination in the water, but transformed the understanding of what was considered to be contamination and the relationships and alliances between the paramilitaries, Texaco and the inhabitants (see Chapter 6).

Don Luis Montaña, one of the first settlers, a fisherman-colono, recalled that when Texaco noticed that the tarulla threatened to invade the entire ciénaga, they reportedly attempted to get rid of the plant by introducing bacteria. They soon realized that the bacteria did not reduce its expansion, but that rather the opposite seemed to happen. The plant expanded even faster than before and rapidly transformed the dark body of the ciénaga into a large green and violet-white garden. Don Luis Montaña said, “The tarulla had a beautiful flower, but we did not have anything to eat; under the flowers all the fish were dead.”

Through its suffocation of the ciénaga, the tarulla’s invasion affected the fisherfolks’ lives and impeded navigability and mobility, which affected not only the fisherfolk, but also the narco-paramilitaries. The tarulla
created different problems for different groups that had different relations with the body of water. For the paramilitaries, it represented a threat to their hiding places and training grounds, so they forced the fisherfolk to cut the *tarulla* twice a week, paying them only a kilo of rice, a kilo of panela (compacted molasses of sugarcane) and a kilo of meat for this. This payment was, according to Julio, not proportionate to the hard work and pressure they were exposed to under the supervision of the paramilitaries.

The *tarulla* made the paramilitaries vulnerable, as they could not move out of the *ciénaga* as quickly as they had done before. Not only was the *tarulla* choking the *ciénaga*, but it was also invading and blocking the streams that connected the body of water to the Magdalena River. It seems that soon the paramilitaries felt trapped on their Fantasy Island due to this unexpected organic invasion. The political ecology of paramilitarism and drug trafficking had made the *ciénaga* a place of hiding, but the *ciénaga* was now being devoured because of this invasive plant that has been introduced to control oil contamination.

Realizing this, the narco-paramilitary commander Gonzálo Pérez called a meeting with the fisherfolk and ordered the manual eradication of the plant, at the same time promoting the creation of the first Committee of Fishermen (in the 1980s). One day in June 2014 I was having lunch with Don Milagros and his daughter, Raquel. She was looking after farm for its owner, the jailed paramilitary commander Botalón. Don Milagros said, “The paracos organized the Committee of Fishermen, but I did not like it!” Raquel who was cooking in the kitchen, heard this and replied, “Stop father! Shut up! Don’t you see that we have somewhere to live thanks to the paracos?” Ignoring his daughter, Don Milagros continued, “The paracos wanted the Committee to be established for their own benefit.”

Don Milagros explained that the strategy behind the establishment of this committee was to allow a legal claim to be filed against Texaco for introducing this alien species into the *ciénaga*. He added that the paramilitaries wanted to use the inhabitants in their case against Texaco. The *tarulla* therefore reconfigured the relation between the paramilitaries and the fisherfolk, as well as between the paramilitaries and Texaco, allowing new alliances to form.

The paramilitaries invoked Colombian environmental law against Texaco for the introduction of this plant; they wanted to get their *ciénaga* back, their hideout and political fortress cleaned up. The *tarulla’s*
agency was this weedy invasion that affected the ciénaga, fish, fisherfolk and paramilitary operations. Because of its capacity to expand faster, the plant was able to temporarily destabilise the paramilitaries.

As Michael Marder states ‘plants are not just passive entities in history, they are active agents that mediate relations among people and of people and their environment, knowledge, markets, and politics, as well as serving as go-betweens in non-human spheres’ (2013). Natasha Myers has elaborated on how plants can sense interrelating environmental factors and has discussed the sensing of plants and chemical interactions as concrete-porous boundary markers that compose multispecies relationships. For her, plants ‘feel out their worlds’ as they sense, perceive and respond to their environments (Myers, 2014). The tarulla grew not only because it was seeded in the ciénaga, but also because the chemical discharges from the oil production did not stop. These components could have nourished its disposition to invade, triggered by the ecological practices of the oil company, ranchers, paramilitaries and drug trafficking. A lack of predators, and the humidity and incessant sun of the Middle Magdalena meant that the agency of the plant was amplified in an environment of toxic discharges and the expansion of pastures.

One afternoon during my fieldwork, I accompanied a group of local women and men who were unclogging one of the streams of the ciénaga. Imitating Gonzálo Pérez’ croaky voice, Andrés Trujillo, the president of the fisherfolks’ association, told me how the paramilitary commander had ordered the fisherfolk to cut the tarulla. Andrés, who at that time had been a child, remembered Gonzálo Pérez saying, “Even if we have to use donkeys to pull the plants out of the water, we have to clean the ciénaga and eliminate the tarulla. If not, the law will catch us.”

For some time, Tarulla became the paramilitary’s main enemy in the ciénaga, but also the enemy of the fisherfolk. It is not too far-fetched to believe that it was his frustration with tarulla that had made Gonzálo Pérez pay lawyers to formalize the establishment of the association of fisherfolk. Don Milagros himself confirmed that this social organization had been partly supported by the paramilitaries to defeat Texaco.

7.5 The Lawsuit Against Texaco

In May 1991, the Association of Fishermen gained legal status (Personería Jurídica). Two months later, on 8 July 1991, Gonzálo Pérez was assassinated, and twelve days after that, his son, Henry Pérez, suffered the
same fate. The assassination of Henry Pérez is particularly well remembered by the inhabitants, as it occurred in July during a procession in honour of the Virgin of Carmen in Puerto Boyacá. These killings were attributed to the ongoing war between the paramilitaries and the Medellin Cartel of Pablo Escobar.

On December 2, 1994, the Association of Fishermen filed a lawsuit against Texaco in the Sixth Civil Court of Bogotá, denouncing the contamination and the effects it had had on their livelihoods. The lawsuit’s purpose was to preserve the rural environment and the natural resources that the fishermen depended on. During the lawsuit, the Association not only represented the fisherfolk, but also the colonos and the cattle ranchers, who were all affected by the contamination. The lawsuit once again reorganized social relations in defence of the ciénaga. The inhabitants regained a certain degree of autonomy, enacting their identity and belonging to this body of water.

Prior to the creation of the Ministry of Environment in 1993, cases of environmental pollution were mostly considered to be a rural issue for the Ministry of Agriculture. Both peasants and ethnic groups emerged, with the establishment of the Ministry of Environment and the new Constitution of 1991, as new subjects with rights in relation to their habitats and cultural practices, generating new ways of problematizing rurality and the environment.

Reading the lawsuit against Texaco and the resolution issued by the Ministry of Environment, I found that the texts interestingly articulated two logics pertaining to the nascent Ministry of Environment. On the one hand, in the lawsuit the self-proclaimed colonos appealed for rights stemming from agrarian reform. The fisherfolk, however, asked the court to consider their connections with the ciénaga’s ecosystem. On the other hand, the fisherfolk not only argued that the contamination of the ciénaga had affected their livelihoods as rural inhabitants, but also contended that it had threatened their cultural practices of fishing.

The inhabitants’ capacity to translate their claims into a lawsuit and to mobilize their autonomy over the ciénaga through the fisherfolks’ organization occurred precisely at the moment of transition between two

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90 In the same year, in Lago Agrio-Ecuador, a similar lawsuit was filed, led by indigenous groups against Texaco, and making similar claims, although it did not defeat the big oil company in the national courts until many years later (Sawyer, 2004).
paramilitary regimes (Pérez and Triana), an aspect that is important to understand in the ethnographic present. It illustrates the inhabitants’ capacity to articulate practices, knowledges and politics to protect the *ciénaga*, protecting themselves at the same time. This capacity seems to be more visible in periods of transition when they were not under paramilitary control.

In 1994, the fisherfolks’ association won the lawsuit against Texaco. However, just a year after the verdict in favour of the fisherfolk, Texaco suddenly announced that the field had been sold to the Colombian oil company Omimex (managed by engineer Segundo Gonzáles). The paramilitary phenomenon was, at that time, spinning out of control. Segundo told me at the Club el Nogal that the paramilitaries had begun to steal pipelines, gasoline, naphtha and crude oil from the oil company’s pipeline. Some of the inhabitants, including Luz and Angel, interpreted this to mean that Texaco had decided to sell the oil field due to the paramilitary threat, and because of their loss in the courts. However, there are other elements that could explain why this big oil company declared it would sell the oil field in 1994. For Texaco, controlling the sovereignty of the enclave without the alliance with the paramilitaries was unsustainable and threatened the safety of its personnel. Commodity market conditions were also not favourable. This was the context in which Texaco decided to leave perhaps its most important enclave in Latin America at that time, considering that in this field the company owned both the soil and the subsoil.

### 7.6 Botalón, the New Paramilitary Regime

By 1994, Arnubio Triana was the new commander, and the paramilitaries had evolved into a national structure that aimed for political recognition and wanted to negotiate with the government.

The human rights and armed conflict researcher Winifred Tate has detailed, in the context of the implementation of Plan Colombia (in the 1990’s), the issuing of new instructions by the paramilitary commanders to change the practices of the paramilitary groups and to ensure negotiation with the government (Tate, 2015). The number of massacres were reduced in this period and the appearance of tortured and dead

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91 At that time, the oil price had decreased considerably (oscillating between 25 and 30 dollars a barrel for WTI in 1993-94), making the business far less profitable. After 30 years of extraction from the Guaduas formation, it was not sufficiently profitable to continue extracting oil in the region.
bodies of those assassinated gradually became a thing of the past. Jailed paramilitaries have stated that they began, in this period, to dump bodies into the Magdalena River to make them disappear. Bodies were also thrown into artificial water ponds in which ranchers raised alligators and babillas. Confirmation that the paramilitary had transformed their practices to eliminate evidence of their crimes came to me one day in a conversation at the oil company with Engineer Fajardo, a man who had worked in the oil field since the time of Omimex. He said to me one day when we were passing through an artificial lagoon at one of the farms near the oil field, “See… in these places they (the paramilitaries) threw bodies, they had crocodile hatcheries there.”

Although the fisherfolk triumphantly won the lawsuit against Texaco, the paramilitary structure re-organized quickly, again limiting the autonomy and political agency they had won. In environmental terms, measures that could mitigate and reduce discharge of toxic sludge, water and other liquids in the ciénaga did not start. Toxic water was still being dumped into the water, and the tarulla continued growing under the intense sun of the Magdalena Valley. The arrival of a new oil operator, after Texaco, and a paramilitary re-organization transformed the verdict into something else.

Arnubio Triana’s paramilitary regime was remembered as a period in which the paramilitaries were under a calmer and more rational commander, at least in comparison with the explosive Gonzálo Pérez, who had been behind the most intense period of annihilation of the political opposition or social organizations and successfully dominated the ciénaga and its inhabitants. Triana’s role was, perhaps, to hold on to the ruptures and recompose boundaries around a new structure that the inhabitants referred to as the organización.

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92 Tate suggests that the paramilitary in the 1990s started reducing the number of massacres and public displays of mutilated bodies and rather opted for victims’ disappearance, as they intended to negotiate with the government to reach a demobilization agreement. In order to achieve this, they had to reduce the number of crimes against humanity and accept the advice of the International Red Cross on International Humanitarian Law. According to Tate, however, the number of massacres, defined as simultaneous killings of more than four individuals, decreased in the early 1990s, but not the total number of assassinations perpetrated by the paramilitaries. She explained this phenomenon, based on fieldwork research, by arguing that the paramilitaries continued killing at the same pace as earlier, and even increased the number of massacres, but simply disposed of the bodies across different municipalities, separating them. By doing this they reduced the number of recorded massacres as defined by the Colombian authorities, reducing the emotional impact that the term massacre had on public opinion (2015). Another explanation could be found by looking at the number of crematory units and mass graves used by the paramilitaries; graves where hundreds of dead bodies were assembled, which have been found and dug up since demobilization in 2006. The former senator and leftist politician Piedad Cordoba has called these mass graves ‘larger common graves’ out of respect for the victims.
Some of the adult men I knew who grew up in the ciénaga experienced extensive human rights violations and the massive contamination of the ciénaga. They were impoverished and removed from the prospect of a decent job, education and adequate health care, and perhaps that explains why they did not have to be forced to join the paramilitaries. So, by the mid-1990s, being a paraco was no longer seen as something bad or strange. It had even become socially acceptable and promised social mobility.93

A traqueto was (always a man) considered by some of the people in the ciénaga I had the chance to talk to about this term, as connoting opportunistic behaviour, challenging legality and the rights of other people, using violence to obtain profits fast and engaging in illegal economic activities such as drug trafficking and money laundering, practices that an increasing number of people started to admire and emulate. The traqueto transformed the adjectives strength and courage, associated with colonos as hard workers, into being trickster-like risk-takers who participated in activities that were dangerous or illegal to make a profit or even to gain a legitimate right. The traqueto made sense in the casino-capital logic of neoliberalism, and spread into Colombia from the 1980s with the expansion of mafia aesthetics and practices. The traqueto resonated with the idea of the survival of the fittest. In Triana’s regime, the inhabitants no longer opposed paramilitarism and emulated the figure of the traqueto.94

This figure - the traqueto - was absorbed by some of the young inhabitants of the ciénaga during Triana’s regime, and these are the adults of today. One afternoon, John, an inhabitant of the ciénaga, a demobilized paramilitary who now worked for the oil company, explained to me his trajectory of social mobility in these terms: “It was vizaje (social recognition) to join the paramilitary, now what is vizaje is to work in the oil company”.

93 Here we can see how paramilitarism, as understood by Grandin in his study of the ‘Long Cold War’ in Latin America, showed how counterinsurgency was also a dynamic and creative project that resonated with the rhythm of reactionary and conservative previous political projects. Paramilitarism was relational and penetrated the fibres of people, exacerbating conservative, religious and violent practices that already existed in other social systems in terms of gender, race and class. Paramilitarism infiltrated, made sense with, and operated next to, other regimes of meaning that already existed. Grandin claims that the dynamism of contra insurgency not only reside in illegal space, but was a choreography between legality and illegality (2010:3). I would say that in Puerto Boyacá, paramilitarism, as a government option, arose in the context of brute force, bending of will and making sense of previous practices.

94 Interview with Arnubio Triana ‘Botalón’ en VerdadAbierta, and personal interview with Segundo Gonzáles, former president of Omimex, at the Club el Nogal, Bogota, June 2014.
It was not easy for me to open these wounds of the past and to dig into these controversial and sensitive issues. However, these conversations allowed me to reconstruct this history of the paramilitary regimes with narratives from the ciénaga. I put myself at risk of suspicion, of being seen as a toad for asking too much. However, in spite of this, the inhabitants agreed to go into the details of these painful and confusing pasts, not just because of the careful way I approached them, as inhabitants and oil company engineers, but also because conditions during my fieldwork were different to those that had existed before paramilitary demobilization. There were conditions that allowed people to remember and to re-articulate their memories about these regimes. Some, in their different visions of paramilitarism, projected themselves as victims, others as survivors and yet others identified themselves as winners mirroring the image of the traqueto. And then there were those who, distancing themselves from the past, emphasized the importance of working in the oil company, which was synonymous with progress and social recognition.
Chapter 8

Transitions and Amphibian Emergences

In this dissertation, I have sought to show the amphibious character of the social and biophysical relations that constitute life in the ciénaga, and to argue that it is precisely this that has allowed the inhabitants and this body of water to persist with resilience, that is to say, to continue living together there in spite of the paramilitary violence and the extraction of oil.

In this final chapter I want to show it felt to live there and do my fieldwork during the period of transition between the paramilitary demobilization and the post-demobilization phase, a transition that has not yet ended since many locals still feel they are living in suspense. This is a time marked by uncertainty about whether a new paramilitary regime will be established, and there are disputes between illegal criminal and armed groups. In the ciénaga and in Puerto Boyacá, social relations oscillate around rumors and speculation about who will take control or who will lose the efforts invested in one or another group. Such rumors concern efforts to protect the properties of Arnubio Triana alias "Botalón" or to support the Bacrim (neo-paramilitaries) that are allied with Mexican drug cartels, which are taking over the spaces and filling the power vacuum left by the demobilized FARC-EP guerillas and the paramilitary outfits. People also keep these things in mind when they are in contact with oil company engineers or representatives from Colombian state entities. They wish to be on the right side, on the side of the actor that takes over, the one who establishes the new regime and accumulates all the power.

The chapter shows how, in this period of transition, a deep uncertainty made the inhabitants of the ciénaga manifest their amphibian capabilities. In previous situations these have enabled them to continue living there. Now they display a tendency to entangle, to articulate and to move stealthily and non-antagonistically in a situation as shifting and unclear as were the first years of transition, and yet in this situation they focus on new opportunities, on possibilities and a future beyond paramilitarism and oil extraction.
8.1 Paramilitary Re-Organization after Demobilization

Paramilitary demobilization began in 2003 and culminated in 2006. A total of 31,671 combatants were demobilized across the country, double the number that the government and NGOs had expected. According to Álvaro Villaraga, the program director of the Truth Agreements department of the National Centre for Historical Memory, this phenomenon occurred because the paramilitary commanders had inflated the figures to get greater bargaining power in the latter phase of negotiations. But it was also the result of the government of Álvaro Uribe Vélez, during the demobilization process, not properly verifying whether all those demobilized were actually active paramilitary soldiers.95

Álvaro Villaraga has argued that the paramilitary demobilization was not only full of contradictions and mistakes, and lacking procedure and follow-up, but also that it was unable to prevent re-arming. Up to 20-30% of demobilized combatants had, after 5 years, re-enrolled in new paramilitary structures operating in the regions they had previously controlled (Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica, 2015). These emerging groups were under the command of middle-ranking paramilitary officers who were not attracted by the benefits of demobilization, and started recruiting combatants, especially young gang members from the slums. Many of these were hired as temporarily contracted combatants rather than on a permanent basis.

The Colombian Presidency’s Office of the High Commissioner for Peace defined the emerging neo-paramilitary groups, after the demobilization of the paramilitary bloc structures, as BACRIM (Criminal Gangs), armed groups that with few exceptions have their roots in structures belonging to the paramilitary umbrella group United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia (AUC), among them the paramilitary structures in Puerto Boyacá. Other terms used to describe major armed illegal organizations include ‘GAOs’ (Organized

95http://www.verdadabierta.com/justicia-y-paz/10-anos-de-justicia-y-paz/6061-las-amargas-lecciones-que-dejo-la-desmovilizacion-de-las-auc
96 The Colombian Commission of Jurists reported that during the paramilitary demobilization process between 2003-2006, 4,820 people in Colombia were killed or ‘disappeared’ by the paramilitary. In the same period, demobilized combatants – both genuine combatants and those pretending to be – began to receive benefits from the state, such as a fixed transition salary, health insurance and education and labor opportunities, to facilitate their re-integration. Simultaneously, the number of victims continued to increase, and registered victims did not receive any benefit until 2006 when the Victims’ Law was approved, thanks to the efforts of social organizations and human rights NGOs, a law that finally started to provide legal recognition and individual compensation to the victims of the armed conflict.
Armed Groups) and GAOR (Residual Organized Armed Groups), but these two terms have in general not been used to refer to groups that have their roots in the AUC. The heavily armed BACRIMs have territorial control and run trafficking corridors in different parts of the country. Not only are they involved in drug production and smuggling in association with Mexican cartels, but also other illicit activities such as illegal mining, human trafficking and and contraband smuggling (Oficina del Alto Comisionado para la Paz de la Presidencia, 2020).

Leading academic scholars such as Mauricio Romero (2003) Hristov (2014) and Richani (2013) consider that these new structures are mutations of previous paramilitary structures, and not simply organized crime as claimed by the Colombian government. Following this line of thought, these neo-paramilitary armies represent a continuation of forms of territorial control of the AUC for cocaine production, appropriation of land and commodities extraction. They continue to connect to local political parties, but now in flexible and dispersed ways. The neo-paramilitary dynamic is characterized by flexible networks of extortion and taxation using opportunistic strategies of violence (Gutierrez, 2014, p. 14).

According to Medina (2005), paramilitary organizations must be understood as a progressive process of transformation. Their consolidation has taken place through mutations, over time and through the reformulation of alliances and interest. Paramilitary armies are more than the formation of an illegal-private armed group. They are a network of highly performative actors with a tentacular capacity to connect to different institutions, entities or social groups. Paramilitary organizations display different forms according to their interaction with the economic and political dynamics at a regional and central level (Cubides, 1997).

New structures took control of territories in the aftermath of the signing of the peace agreement with the FARC-EP guerrilla movement in 2016, just as new criminal networks took over territorial influence and businesses left behind by the previous paramilitary blocs after their demobilization in 2006. This re-organization of illegal criminal structures and the filling of power vacuums generated new waves of violence, forced displacements, and assassinations of social leaders. These neo-paramilitary structures are not clearly identified by the government, which is hesitant to use the term “paramilitary” to describe them, but these structures are now increasing their influence and control. After the signing of the peace agreement with FARC-EP in 2006, Colombia was in transition to peace, but violence was still felt in the territories they previously
controlled and FARC dissident groups and the ELN guerrilla are increasingly active, some of them actively persecuting and killing former FARC combatants that are loyal to the peace agreement.

In Puerto Boyacá, after the demobilization, paramilitary patrols could no longer be seen, and there was no military training on the ciénaga's islands. The commanders of the paramilitary bloc were in prison in Itagüí-Medellín, seven hours by road from the ciénaga. However, the paramilitary legacy and presence still pervaded the atmosphere. The inhabitants, workers and engineers still talk about "the organization". It was as if they were expecting that at any moment, everything would be the same as before. Still, the paramilitary demobilization ceremony was fresh in the mind of the inhabitants.

8.2 Memories of the Ceremony of Paramilitary Demobilization

The paramilitary demobilization ceremony in Puerto Boyacá took place on January 8, 2006, in the village of El Marfíl, two hours from the ciénaga. It was a major public event with the Presidential Commissioner for Peace of the government of Álvaro Uribe, Luis Carlos Restrepo, as guest of honour. During the ceremony, soldiers of the XVI Brigade of the Army were present as well as paramilitary combatants. It resulted in the formal demobilization of 742 combatants and the decommissioning of 360 weapons.

John, who now worked at the oil company, told me his memories of the demobilization ceremony for the paramilitary bloc in Puerto Boyacá. A local cameraman recorded the event and produced a video that was then sold to the paramilitaries, their families and other participants. As he handed me the video, John said “The ceremony was just as important to me as a graduation ceremony”. He had not finished secondary school.

John recalled that not all his companions in the bloc demobilized at this event. "They did not want to boletearse," which means that they did not want to be registered in government files and or attract undesirable visibility as a result of this public event. One day we went to town and at the bakery, John greeted several men, who then greeted me with "good afternoon engineer" (I was wearing the company uniform as I had also been visiting rigs). Then John told me, "those guys were with me and they did not demobilize, they are cool." (están frescos, which means that they were not worried).

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97 Restrepo is currently a fugitive from justice, accused of having staged false paramilitary demobilizations
Both demobilized and non-demobilized paramilitaries continue to live in Puerto Boyacá, even though some were not originally from the town. They do not have any legal issues such as detention orders. Some of these, John added, currently work in the oil operation, either as directly employed workers or as contractors. Some have become *finqueros*.

There was another group of paramilitary soldiers that did not demobilize. These were minors whose commanders did not allow them to demobilize at the time of idemobilization. As Winifred Tate (2015) has investigated, paramilitary organizations learned that having minors in their ranks would reduce the chances that international organizations would support the peace process and demobilization. Commanders therefore forbade minors from demobilizing. John felt sorry for these *muchachos* (kids) who were excluded and did not receive the state benefits offered at demobilization, such as health insurance, free technical education or a monthly salary of nearly USD 160 for the reinsertion period. “Some of them have been found assassinated and others have joined BACRIM (the new paramilitary structures), looking for protection and revenge,” John said.

For John not all the people who demobilized were 'real paramilitary'. According to him, some were regular criminals or normal people who wanted to get the social benefits. But notably, according to John, after the demobilization ceremony the false paramilitaries have not continued to follow the orders of Arnubio Triana 'Botalón', and that is generating new conflicts in the territory.

The company engineers, inhabitants and workers explained that there was a dispute in the municipality between those supporting the previous paramilitary regime of Arnubio Triana, alias Botalón, and those belonging to the BACRIM neo-paramilitary structures and newly arrived criminals who were attempting to take over Botalón’s business while he was in jail.

Paramilitarism and Bacrim always appeared as rumors and stories about civilian people working in the oil company, or about local contractor companies, or people walking on the streets of Puerto Boyacá. From the

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98 That the neo-paramilitary group 'Los Botalones' (according to a report published in 2017 by the Peace and Reconciliation Foundation), has since 2015 been controlling Puerto Boyacá, seems to show that the transition is complete, and that the winners are Botalón and his people. Botalón gained freedom in 2015, but was recaptured in March 2017 for recidivism - promoting paramilitary groups.
offices of the oil company came the rumor that BACRIM were taxing inhabitants and workers through communal leaders, and controlling the distribution of job vacancies offered by the oil company (see Chapter 4).

The presence of demobilized and ex-paramilitary soldiers (not demobilized), who were immersed in the regional economy of oil production, was widely known. This was a public secret (Taussing, 1984) expressed the way an illegal practice can be widely known and established, while its illegality cannot be articulated, mentioned, named or denounced. Taussig makes a useful distinction between a public secret and a rumor. While a rumor is the manifestation of a dispute between orders and the possibility of transformation of this order, the public secret was probably the acceptance of a state of affairs, even if not legitimized by all participants in the public secrecy. In the ciénaga, there were public secrets and rumors that portrayed two different sides of a performative dispute about the future that might come after the conflictive transition from paramilitary demobilization to the construction of a peaceful future.

8.3 New Actors: Landlords and Local Contractors

After demobilization and in the context of the reactivation of the oil field, new landlords and local contractors emerged in Puerto Boyacá. After demobilization, new landlords, who people rumored were middle-ranking paramilitary commanders, claimed to be the owners of abandoned or recently bought farms. The mid-ranking paramilitary 'Morcilla' ('The Blood Sausage'), for example, became a finquero after demobilization and now raised pigs on his farm inside the oil field. Others were caretakers of the farms of patronés who did not live in Puerto Boyacá. Traditional cattle ranchers were therefore cohabiting with middle ranking demobilized commanders or ex-paramilitary personnel who became finqueros.

Despite the region's self-proclaimed livestock identity, I saw very few cows or horses grazing on the pastures when visiting the farms and walking around the ciénaga. A few times, I saw herds of buffalo\(^99\) walking on the edge of the ciénaga.\(^{100}\) However, the pastures around the ciénaga remained almost entirely

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\(^{99}\) FEDEGAN (Colombian Federation of Cattle Ranchers) affirms that buffalo are a good alternative to the Cebu cattle, as they adapt well to floodable territories such as those in Middle Magdalena and in many other parts of Colombia.

\(^{100}\) Buffalo can feed on aquatic plants, shrubs and foliage, and not just grass as with cattle. However, their constant trampling, dung spreading, stirring up the water and consumption of aquatic vegetation make buffalo a new threat to the fragile biophysical process of the ciénaga.
empty of animals during my year of fieldwork. The lack of animals did not, however, stop the expansion of pastures in the ciénaga and the Serranía de las Quinchas, the mountain range at the east of the ciénaga, perhaps a manifestation of the political ecology of drug trafficking and the money laundering through the purchase of pastureland in Puerto Boyacá.

During my fieldwork I noticed farms transformed into recreation villages, air conditioners being installed, swimming pools and gardens being built to receive the potential tourists that the construction of the new highway Ruta del Sol promised to bring to Puerto Boyacá. This also made it likely that we would see an increase in the price of land. Farmers without animals cultivated grass towards the bajos (lowlands) of the ciénaga, and cut trees along the streams to transform the landscape into plains. When farms were converted into recreational farms, the expectation was, according to people from the ciénaga and landlords I talked to about their future plans, that Puerto Boyacá would become part of a tourist corridor that would start in Medellín, extend to the Hacienda Nápoles of Pablo Escobar in Puerto Triunfo and end in the Isla de la Fantasia within the ciénaga.

In May 2014, the oil company’s environmental engineer kindly invited me to accompany him to visit farms affected by oil operations. We went to visit the cattle ranch “Villa María”, a farm where horses were trained for competition. On our arrival, we were received by the two young adult brothers who jointly own the farm. The brothers were ganaderos (ranchers). It was 10:00 a.m. and the heat was already unbearable, so they invited us to come inside the farmhouse. The brothers were friendly with the engineer and he reciprocated this kindness. We were there to see how old pipeline tubes given by the company were being used as construction material for a horse yard. The company had voluntarily handed over the tubes\textsuperscript{101} as material compensation for an oil spill on their property.

Two horses were moving around languidly inside the horse yard. The two animals were beautiful, one dark brown and the other honey colored. They told us that these horses had won important competitions in

\textsuperscript{101} Oil tubes are a very popular construction material in this region as they are known to be made of high quality and very resistant steel. A meter of pipeline is therefore sold for up to 12 US dollars, and they are used in different types of construction. Because the pipes are so sought after in Puerto Boyacá and beyond, the company had to control the inventory of its pipeline tubes as they were often stolen or sold on the black market.
Boyacá, Antioquia and Caldas. Underlining how superior they were, he added, "This one is called Mancuso and the other one Castaño… names of winners." I was struck by his comment. Carlos Castaño and Salvatore Mancuso were the names of the two men who used to be the most powerful paramilitary commanders in Colombia. These two commanders had, at the end of the 1990s, unified the paramilitary blocs and battled to obtain political recognition for the paramilitary forces. By telling us the names of the horses, they were not only giving us more information about the animals, but also a clear reminder that the memory of those iconic figures was still in the minds of those in the region, and that their presence continued to envelop the ciénaga.

A wealthy family with an important presence in the political affairs of the municipality had a cottage inside the oil enclave. They wanted to ensure that the traditional organization of landowners, ACEDEGAM, would re-establish order in the municipality during the uncertain time of the transition. Mrs. Gloria was an old lady from Manizales living in this cottage, with her husband. They had arrived in Puerto Boyacá in the 1970s when her husband was designated general manager of the Caja Agraria (Agricultural Bank) of Puerto Boyacá. She expressed to me her worries about the emergence of the BACRIMs and the future of ACEDEGAM. She missed the time when the previous paramilitary regime of Botalón controlled the territory, as she recalls that this was a time of order and not criminality, "it was possible to sleep with the door open", she said. This was a common expression landlord and people supportive of the previous paramilitary regime used with a certain degree of melancholy, referring to the regimes of Gonzalo Pérez and Arnubio Triana.

There were no major violent actions during my fieldwork. According to police reports cited by the Forensic State Institution, crime and homicide had decreased (Medicina Legal Colombia, 2010). But one night I heard a series of shots from just outside the company compound. The next morning, when I asked the company’s security personnel what had happened, they said that somebody had shot at a vehicle belonging to the local contractor. The oil company reported the issue to the authorities as attempted robbery. Among the locals it was, however, rumored that the episode was related to the dispute between the BACRIM and those who were loyal to Botalón.

Rumors have agency and are performative indicators that direct our senses towards disputes and alliances. Taussig has elaborated on this by saying that 'rumors and stories delineate the world of the people, including its
large as well as its micro-scale politics, in stories and story-like creations (…), in the coils of rumor, gossip, story, and chit-chat (…) ideology and ideas become emotionally powerful and enter into active social circulation and meaningful existence' (1984, p. 464). In that sense, rumors participate in defining the regime of the truth of worlds, worlds as difficult to access as those of the paramilitarism in Puerto Boyacá.

One widespread rumor was that local contractors in the town were nothing more than a façade for laundering the money of the previous paramilitary organization’s businesses, that were participating in the oil economy. According to the oil company in Puerto Boyacá suppliers’ database, there were 52 local contractors offering services and equipment to the oil operation. Staff at the department of accountability explained to me that the majority of these companies were created between 2005-2014, i.e. after paramilitary demobilization.

I arranged an interview with one of the local contractors in the town. I did not have any expectations from this meeting. I mentioned my meeting to the social worker and the CSR manager at the offices of the oil company. The manager was amazed that I was going to interview such a dangerous man, so I asked him, "Well, if he is so dangerous, why does the oil company contract his services?" The manager replied, “He was a paramilitary… but he is no longer one… he is demobilized.”

The manager of the local contractor company welcomed me into his office. He was a thick-built man with curly hair and fair skin. He had scars on his hands and arms, tattoos on his fingers, thick metal rings made of silver and a heavy gold chain around his neck from which hung a crucifix. Conversation with him was not easy. He did not answer my questions. When he did respond, he mostly answered with a yes or no, or saying, “I cannot share with you that information.” The latter was the case when I asked him about the origin of the investment capital and who the owners of the firm were. His gaze was hard but evasive. After about half an hour, he told me that he had no more time for me and dismissed me. Somehow, I preferred that the whole thing ended this way.

In the oil field, this local contractor company offered various services such as transporting workers and inhabitants and providing heavy machinery for drilling. There were dozens of local contractors surrounded by rumors of their paramilitary affiliation, and who were providing services, contributing to, and benefiting from the reactivated oil economy since the arrival of the Sino-Indian company. The inhabitants of the ciénaga had to
navigate these conditions, the working opportunities, and the possibility of continuing to live in the ciénaga, while optimistically having expectations that this transition would end paramilitarism, or bring other horizons to the ciénaga.

8.4 Emerging Relationships in the Ciénaga

One day in May 2014, Helena, the daughter of an old fisherman in the ciénaga, Don Milagros, invited me to her house to have lunch. She wanted my help to outline a proposal for a waste collection entrepreneurship that she wanted to participate in, which would be presented under a call for environmental projects financed by the oil company. She arrived at the dock in a canoe and picked me up. We crossed the ciénaga and arrived at a farm on the other edge of the body of water. It was a large farm, old but ample and solidly built. I told Helena that she had a nice house, but she responded that it was not hers but belonged to Botalón, Puerto Boyacá’s paramilitary commander. She was taking care of it until he returned.

Helena had three adult sons. None of them had a permanent job. Helena complained about her sons, saying that they spent the day watching TV from their hamacas. José, however, reacted with anger, arguing that it was Helena who had pressured him to leave his previous job as a collector of drop-by-drop credit in Puerto Boyacá.

This type of informal-illegal credit scheme, drop-by-drop credit, has been studied by Lesley Gill (2011) in Barrancabermeja, a city located three hours from the ciénaga, and is part of the Middle Magdalena region. This business is mainly controlled by neo-paramilitary groups, and the scheme provides credit to those who do not have a means of economic support and have no property or references. Interest on this credit must be paid at a rate of around 20% (or more) per day. Credit collectors must therefore visit several customers every day and sometimes violently pressure them do do payment. This practice has continued in Colombia after paramilitary demobilization, which suggests that financial networks, or the paramilitary economy, have continued even after the conventional military structure of paramilitarism was demobilized.

According to the political scientists Ariel Ávila and the historian Carlos Medina (2013), the paramilitary economy continued after demobilization in the form of drug trafficking, extortion, robbery, prostitution, credit collection and money laundering, but was now expanding the scope of extortion to all types of transactions and
businesses, including the very smallest, such as informal vendors, taxi drivers and mototaxistas, temporary workers, housewives and shopkeepers. This system of taxation, extortion and credit collection shows, according to the author, that the paramilitary economic order continued to operate after demobilization.

Aníbal, Helena's oldest son, arrived at the farm. He wanted to be a co-partner with his mother in the environmental garbage collection project. At this moment, Helena wanted a new income because Botalón had not paid her for taking care of the farm for several months, but she could not leave this “job” because of the reprisals that he could make against her. It also seemed that this entrepreneurial environmental project did not clash with the agreement with Botalón.

Helena started working for Botalón more than 20 years ago, cooking food for his troops. She used to bring her children with her to the farm. In those days los muchachos, 'the boys' as she called the paramilitary soldiers, came to the farm for military training as well as to eat and rest, and Helena recalled that her children liked to watch them, look at their weapons and be there during military training. Her son Aníbal signed up as a paramilitary, but soon found that he could not handle the strict regime and wanted to leave, but they would not allow him. Helena then had to intervene and asked Botalón himself to let the boy come back home, and after her personal plea, he gave the order to let the boy go. She had since borrowed money from Botalón, a debt that she continues to pay by looking after his properties while he is in jail.

Listening to their histories of past livelihood strategies under paramilitarism, I observed that not only Helena’s but also other ciénaga families were starting to adopt new strategies for making a living, different to the coercive job opportunities offered by paramilitarism. However, they strove to find temporary jobs and other forms of subsistence that did not antagonize the paramilitary economy.

I was left alone with Helena, and she took the opportunity to give me a tour of the farm. Helena was worried because a few months ago the prosecutor's office and the anti-narcotics office sent officials from Bogotá to compile an inventory of paramilitary and drug traffickers' properties in Puerto Boyacá. They visited Botalón’s farm in the ciénaga. In the context of the demobilization of the AUC and a future peace agreement with the FARC-EP guerrilla (which was finally signed in 2016), Helena was worried that the state would expropriate "her" farm, and she was expecting that Botalón would give her a portion of this property as
payment for all the years of work. But Helena’s expectation of getting paid after many years working for Botalón had become weaker with the transformation of the relationships in the ciénaga.

Relationships changed after demobilization, and the uncertainty increased in times of transition as it was not yet clear who would be the new patron in the region: the oil company? Botalón? Or a new paramilitary regime? So in the meantime, Helena was navigating the situation by looking at another income opportunity, one that would not be opposed to the interests of either Botalón, or the neo-paramilitary, oil company or Colombian state institutions. She had to subtly navigate the situation without being very visible or stirring up antagonism; she had to do it amphibiously.

8.5 Amphibious Re-emergence

I would at this point again refer to the amphibian disposition that I argue runs through the relationships that I observed in the ciénaga during my fieldwork. The amphibiousness that I have discussed in this dissertation comes from an ethnographic sensitivity derived from living with the inhabitants of the ciénaga, and inspired by the biophysical process that the ciénaga elicited, including seasonal variations, the oscillation of water, and the presence of beings like animals and plants that move between water and land, in muddy environments, which in the process protect themselves to persist.

An ethological102 description of amphibians could heuristically influence the way that their disposition and survival strategy has been explained: the drive for life that takes place in the ciénaga, that I have termed amphibian disposition.

I argue in this dissertation that despite so much violence, contamination, and active abandonment by the state; the ciénaga and its inhabitants have persisted together during the last seven decades. Moreover, they have persisted in a situation where ciénagas in nearby regions have disappeared – along with their people – or where the ciénagas and the inhabitants no longer have the relationships of fishing and mutual care that generate a sense of identity with a body of water. The people and the ciénaga have persisted in this conflicted

102 The work of Lestel et al, who propose an etho-ethnography to understand the complex connections among humans and animal relationships forming hybrid communities in interspecific sociabilities (2006). These relations resound with the multispecies ethnography, in the arts of noticing practices that cross animals and human dispositions.
environment by navigating difficulty creatively and without antagonism, while articulating diverse
opportunities and possibilities, thus their autonomy is the result of their heterogeneous entanglements.

Ethology has informed my ethnographic conceptualization insofar as I have grasped amphibiousness in
the ciénaga from the “dwelling perspective” (Ingold, 2000) of the humans and other-than-humans that live in
the ciénaga, as way of living, practicing fluidity and articulating with this aquatic environment. This provides
me with the elements to characterize its situated resilience as an amphibian disposition.

As we have seen through Helena and John, in the context of the transition, it was not so easy to let go of
the old relationships and take the opportunity to make new connections. They are still entangled with the
previous regime, at the same time as the new circumstances lead them to try to establish new relationships to
adapt in the emerging situation. However, they were struggling to get more manoeuvrability or freedom of
movement as the power of the current source of income seemed to be declining. This movement towards
something new was not easy because it was full of uncertainties. However, their advantage resided in their
capacity to move smoothly and creatively. They sailed through the transition by mobilizing efforts to maintain
parts of their relationship with the previous regime, cautiously disentangling from other aspects of it, such as
those related to violence and illegality, and by legitimizing the environmental conservation practices that were
being initiated by the Sino-Indian oil company, and as environmental institutions entered the region after
paramilitary demobilization.

The situation was difficult, particularly for John and Helena who were both strongly connected to the
previous paramilitary regime, perhaps more than most others. Nevertheless, for the people of the ciénaga in
general, the movement towards new connections and away from previous connections caused them both fear
and hope at the same time.

8.5.1 Luz Leading the Amphibious Persistence.

The period of transition from paramilitary demobilization in the ciénaga was a very interesting point in
time at which to study the amphibious capacity of the inhabitants, especially because it was a situation when
their future was not so clear. On the one hand, rumors directed against the Botalón regime were transforming
relationships, and on the other hand new opportunities were arriving in the ciénaga. So, in these new
conditions the inhabitants tried, as mentioned above, to entangle with new opportunities. In spite of the lack of clarity, a drive for life emanating from the deep-historical relationship between the ciénaga and its inhabitants contributed to the direction the transition was taking.

As I elaborated in Chapter 5, the intensification of the environmental impact studies required for oil extraction had left the inhabitants confused and exposed to environmental uncertainties. These studies, developed by environmental consultancies which reported to the National Environmental Licensing Agency in order for the oil company to continue to operate (as discussed in Chapter 3), had to deal with the question of the degree to which decades of accumulated oil exploitation in the oil field had contaminated the ciénaga. However, the studies did not accurately report on the seriousness of the pollution, the type of contaminants or the effects on the health of the locals. The state's environmental institutions did not show much concern about this problem, and the oil company denied that its current operation was causing serious contamination. In any case, among the inhabitants this confusing situation generated an enormous need to decontaminate the ciénaga.

Towards the end of 2014, Luz – the daughter of the Moino Don Lucho Montaña – began to call a group of relatives and close friends to cut tarulla on dates other than those agreed between the oil company and the fisherfolks’ association. They began doing this once a month, then twice, and at the beginning of 2015, they met to clean up the ciénaga every Wednesday.

Luz was a young woman with two little children; she looked after her parents. Luz set up a restaurant in front of the ciénaga's dock, and also rented recreational farms around the ciénaga. Luz managed to ask state institutions for social aid and environmental investments for the village. She was the primary contact for environmental consultancy firms and institutions.

Luz, her husband, father, sister and brother-in-law met at 6:30 a.m., just after breakfast, outside her house. They had put on their old oil company uniforms (from Sinopec, Mansarovar and Ecopetrol, where they also worked as temporary oil workers). They took two canoes, their own tools, knives, sticks, zartas, bags, buckets, shovels and went into the ciénaga, towards the streams, to remove the tarulla to allow the stagnant water to flow. Luz was the leader. She generated respect and honesty, her family and friends followed her and believed in what she told them: “That they must take care of the ciénaga as this was their enterprise, their heritage and
their home.” They went to the stream to cut tarulla, remove logs, remove sheets of crude oil from the water, and returned to the dock by 1:00 p.m. They arrived tired and hungry, and happy. A group of friends and relatives with an ethic of care, the kin-collective of more-than-human beings was re-emerging more prominently in the ciénaga during the transition.

Soon after, Luz was able to acquire some resources from UMATA (Unity of Agricultural Assistance of Colombia from the Ministry of Agriculture) to start repopulating the ciénaga with turtles, different fish, lizards and other animals. Luz told me that she imagines an economy around the ciénaga based on the protection and enjoyment of this body of water, in which the inhabitants could participate without the direct intervention of the oil company or any illegal group. She however realized that they could not completely detach from the oil company as they were born between canoes and machines and because, to some degree, they needed the continued support of the company.

Paramilitary demobilization and the peace agreements with the FARC-EP guerrilla movement were two monumental processes that took place in Colombia between 2006 and 2016, and which interestingly enough inspired an environmental sensitivity among local communities and scientists who collaborate to explore biodiversity in territories previously controlled by illegal armed groups, such as the ciénaga. However, environmental interest was not necessarily directed against oil extraction, as in the case of the ciénaga it was linked to and aligned with studies whose purpose was to secure environmental licences for the oil company.

This trend could, however, result in rescuing the kin-community from the toxicity of the contamination caused by oil extraction. This also was an opportunity to rebuild family and community ties – after years of destruction of the social fabric by the paramilitaries – through putting into practice a collection of activities that resembled the old practices of fishing and cleaning the ciénaga, practices that the first fisherfolk and the fisherfolks’ association had developed decades ago (I have mentioned these activities in Chapter 4).

The social organization and environmental initiatives lead by Luz emerged as a manifestation of the re-emergence of amphibious practices in the ciénaga through connections with entities (the state, NGOs and the environmental and social department of the oil company) that were more present in the transition period. This was the context in which this environmentalism emerged in the ciénaga, manifesting precisely this way of
living between different relationships. The inhabitants and the ciénaga, enduring and creatively trying to mend and protect their environment, sought different alliances and acted in a non-antagonistic manner with these other actors; their amphibious dispositions promised to help them defend this body of water and their own permanence there.

Luz knew that the paramilitary was reorganizing, but she was not very clear about how, towards where or who would be the new leader. So, she and her kin-community had to take advantage of this rare and temporary peace to bring people to the ciénaga and to break the isolation. Thus Luz formed alliances with Ecopetrol (the Colombian National Oil Company), the Asian oil company’s environmental engineers in the field, the new Mayor, the Ministry of Environment and the regional environmental agency, NGOs from Barrancabermeja and the von Humboldt Institute. She had found that the best defence strategy in this uncertain time of transition involved entangling with others: institutions, the state, scientists and environmental activists. By bringing them to the ciénaga, she told me, she was able “to let them know that not all the locals were subscribers of paramilitarism.” Luz wanted to end the isolation of the place to prevent a rearming of the paramilitary structures.

Amphibiousness is the ability to interlace to protect themselves, to move between environments, even between those that seem antagonistic, which became a way of continuing to exist in the world of the ciénaga amid this armed violence and contamination. Luz and Helena were betting on different numbers during the transition. They both wanted autonomy from paramilitarism and the oil company, however they were aware that complete detachment was not possible. They believed that the way for them to continue persisting there was not to challenge the oil company and paramilitarism, but to seek more autonomy outside of these realms. Helena hoped that this would be possible through the entrepreneurial environmental garbage collection project, while Luz opted for autonomy through promoting the conservation of the ciénaga. Helena, Luz and other inhabitants of the ciénaga were navigating this muddy moment, one which was difficult to discern, full of rumors and uncertainty, but one that also gave them the chance to imagine and make efforts to promote a transition towards a future different from the past.
Picture 16. A turtle of the repopulation campaign organized by Luz Montaña and her kin-community
Conclusion

The question with which I began this research was oriented towards understanding the persistence of a group of people and a body of water, a so-called ciénaga, in a region greatly affected by decades of crude oil contamination and paramilitary violence. The Ciénaga Palagua in the Colombian Middle Magdalena Valley and fisherfolk community living around it still exist. Notably, they do so in spite of the violence that in other parts of the region has produced forced displacement, widespread and serious contamination of waterways, soil and groundwater, and continued encroachment upon bodies of water by invasive species for agricultural or oil extraction purposes. During my research, I found that the water body and the inhabitants of the ciénaga had managed to persist in spite of all the hardship because, after decades of coexistence, they had ended up forming a community. While doing my fieldwork, I noticed that the locals were entangled with the affordances of the ciénaga through practices they had developed over many years. The articulation between the inhabitants and the water body has made possible the emergence of ciénaga as a concept, as a central being, as an environment and as a subsistence provider. The ciénaga gives the villagers a sense of belonging, one that is strongly articulated with the community and local families.

In this dissertation, I offer an ethnographic experience, exploring the various forms that constitute the relationship between the inhabitants and the ciénaga and the convergence of different practices at this specific site, such as those related to oil extraction activities, paramilitarism and artisanal fishing. I have shown that despite the destructive nature of oil extraction and paramilitarism, specific articulations and ways of navigating difficulties have emerged from the relationships between the local villagers and the ciénaga. This kind of kin-community relation has allowed this body of water to persist, displaying situated resilience. A central aspect of this, that has tied the inhabitants and the ciénaga together, has been the unfolding of a kin-community and mutual interchanges of substance between the ciénaga and the people attached to it. This interaction has shaped and intensified the expressive capacity of this collective to continue living.

I have incorporated the idea of situated resilience into my framework of understanding persistence in the ciénaga. Situated resilience refers to the capacity to overcome adversity and to artfully adapt or develop
capacities to continue living in spite of harmful and stressful situations. Situated resilience is a process that should be understood on its own terms, considering its composition, historical trajectory and particular ability to overcome damage and disturbance. Resilience is a historical concept that could be traced by observing responses to adversity over time, and in order to display the trajectory of amphibian disposition among the inhabitants and this specific body of water, I have therefore included in this thesis substantial historical explanations.

I understand amphibiousness as something that is elicited by the environment, as a capacity to interconnect and disconnect strategically and partially, as skills that allow for the survival and persistence of people and nature. In this thesis I explore the daily interactions between biophysical and social processes as they take place, and as they arrive in this material environment.

This dissertation has shown how the ciénaga's agency, by eliciting dispositions and actions, affects the inhabitants and other actors and entities that converge in this body of water. The different actors, however, such as the oil company and paramilitaries, also take advantage of or capitalize on the ciénaga's affordances to enable them to amplify and carry out their practices and purposes. It is important to point out that the dissertation does not attempt to reproduce a tale of environmental determinism over human agency. What it does is to include non-humans when it deals with the interactions and entanglements that make up agency in this place, and it is being argued that the non-human, together with the local inhabitants, forms a collective.

This dissertation is inspired by decoloniality, and my research should be seen as a contribution to the corpus of studies that employs concepts such as coloniality of power (Quijano, 2000) which refers to the existence or continuation of colonial practices in the present that are manifested situationally. I have also wanted to highlight the formation of knowledge practices outside the realm and focus of modern science, practices that sometimes manage to challenge hegemonic scientific knowledge. I have attempted to show that such knowledge otherwise, or, more precisely, localized biological conceptualizations of biophysical processes, are the result of the life experiences of the inhabitants in their interaction with the ciénaga, knowledge they have acquired in order to inhabit, understand and better navigate the water body. I have brought decolonial thinking into my research with a view to detecting other kinship relationships than those that are historically
embedded in Western European societies. So, when studying the deep relationships of mutual care and the formation of lasting ties between the locals and between the ciénaga and its inhabitants, I would particularly refer to Carsten’s work on relatedness and how it resonates with the work of the decolonial scholars Lugones, Oyewumi and Fals Borda on the subject of kin and gender.

Decolonial thinking has allowed me to destabilize my own analysis of the people and relationships in the historically stigmatized part of Colombia where the ciénaga is located, namely the Middle Magdalena Valley. This region is still so tainted by the violence of the past and the legacy of right-wing paramilitarism that even the social sciences are continuing to re-enact a type of moral topography when dealing with the region, a matter which I have discussed in detail in the text. Decoloniality has led me to unpack local stories and other practices that exceed the violent stigmatization of the inhabitants of the Middle Magdalena Valley. Instead of only reminding the readers of local inhabitants’ participation in the formation of paramilitarism, and observing its rapid growth, my research material also evidences that many locals have also resisted and suffered under the paramilitary regimes.

While lingering between decoloniality and semiotic materiality, I observed the daily practices of the people and the materialities involved while immersing myself in their stories about the ciénaga. I coined the expression amphibious disposition which allows me to display their ability to navigate difficulties by articulating various practices while intertwining with biophysical processes, as I explain in chapter 4 where I describe how the locals are making seasonality.

The ontological turn in anthropology has helped me to unravel the networks of practices and to trace their historical trajectories to see how they partially converge in some respects and conflict in others. However, practices do constantly and frictionally produce the emerging world or reality that we enact, a reality that is made of a number of worlds, just as the world of the ciénaga is made up of various different worlds that intervene by affecting it semiotically and materially.

Another way to unpack the worlds of the ciénaga and the different practices that intervene in it, is to deploy the agency of materiality and the assemblages through which this agency operates. I have therefore brought to my analysis the lenses of infrastructure, through which I explore the circuit of oil extraction
practices, to see how the affordances of the inhabitants and the body of water are integral parts of this circuit’s infrastructure. I have demonstrated that the ciénaga has been infrastructured to make possible the oil extraction activities in such a way that it amplifies the oil company's capacity to extract oil. The ciénaga is thus not only a place where externalities are deposited, but plays an important part in the whole oil extraction operation. Thus, even if this role is concealed or ignored, it is evident that the ciénaga has produced wealth for the companies that have operated the oil field.

A term that I have used throughout this dissertation is 'transition'. With this term, I intend to evoke the feeling of instability and ambiguity of my ethnographic present, namely the period after paramilitary demobilization in the ciénaga and in the rest of the municipality of Puerto Boyacá. In the midst of this ambiguity, the inhabitants navigate or try to locate themselves in this new reality, and I soon understood that this period of ambiguous transition offered me a unique opportunity to study their amphibian disposition. This ambiguity, however, opens up the horizon of possibilities to the locals and allows them to form a different relational assemblage, in which paramilitarism and oil extraction do not have much control over the ciénaga, or at least to a lesser degree than before. In this transitional period, rumors indicate the existence of potential disputes and point the locals towards new livelihood opportunities.

I also use the term transition to refer to the transition area around the deepest part of the main open water body of the ciénaga, the area where the water expands or contracts depending on rainfall and climatic variation, also called the ecotone. This transitional ecotone reflects the intrinsic variability of the water level of the cienaga and the seasonal variations. I therefore suggest that to understand the transitionality of the cienaga one has to make close and constant observations of the processes that take place in the ciénaga, and particularly in the ecotone.

There is thus, in view of the above, a need to immerse oneself into the intertwined historical, social and biophysical dimensions of the ciénaga. As a concept, transition implies openness to new possibilities, and it requires prolonged observations and fieldwork, substantial interdisciplinary work and recognition of local knowledge in order to understand the ciénaga’s situated resilience, its amphibian disposition.
In Ciénaga Palagua, amphibian dispositions have played an important role in sustaining the persistence of this collective of humans and more-than-humans. As I have shown throughout the chapters, the inhabitants have, by expanding and entangling with other actors, practices and interests been able to stay active and continue living in the *ciénaga*. This stands in strong contrast to the situation in other similar water bodies alongside the Magdalena River where biosocial *worldings* have disappeared or become less important. The inhabitants of Ciénaga Palagua, in order to make it easier to continue living in this place, have even incorporated other ways to conceive of the *ciénaga*, calling it a lake or a *humedal* (wetland), while some see it simply as a place to deposit waste. In this period of transition, after paramilitary demobilization, the arrival of a new oil company and of the stronger presence of environmental institutions, the inhabitants were also constantly searching for opportunities.

The people of the *ciénaga*, shortly before I left the field for the last time, asked me to write down its history, to make it more visible and attractive to the outside world, and they often expressed the hope that my research would help bring more entities, actors and investments to the *ciénaga*, making life somewhat easier by offering new opportunities and basic services to the locals.
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