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**PROLEPTIC PROTEST: LOCAL RESISTANCE TO NEW  
EXTRACTIVE PROJECTS IN ECUADOR**

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**Working Paper #415 – December 2016**

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## ABSTRACT

In Latin America, historically high prices for oil and minerals during the recent commodity boom (2000–2010) incentivized the “re-primarization” of national economies has induced the re-politicization of resource extraction, especially among communities directly affected by extractive projects. Anti-extractive protest can be seen through the lens of a Polanyian double-movement wherein directly affected communities anticipate and resist the territorial encroachment of socio-environmentally detrimental megaprojects. But neither shared identity nor shared perception of environmental grievance are automatic. I demonstrate that both the collective identification as and mobilization of “local communities” has been contingent on the historical confluence of specific political, economic, and legal conditions. Further, I argue that when local communities confront new extractive projects, they face the specific challenge of preventing projects the socio-environmental effects of which are not yet tangible. In analogy to the literary technique of “prolepsis” (the representation of a thing as existing before it has occurred), I propose the concept of *proleptic protest* to designate a category of strategies that organizers deploy to mobilize fellow community members and allies. These strategies aim to convincingly depict the “future” of socio-environmental impacts before those impacts actually occur. This article explores such strategies in the context of conflict over large-scale mining projects in Ecuador, and makes contributions to the study of extraction-related protest and environmental politics.

## RESUMEN

En América Latina, durante el reciente boom de las commodities (2000–2010) los precios históricamente altos del petróleo y los minerales incentivaron la reprimarización de las economías nacionales e indujeron la repolitización de la extracción de recursos naturales, especialmente entre las comunidades afectadas directamente por los proyectos extractivos. Las protestas contra las actividades extractivas pueden verse desde la perspectiva de un doble movimiento Polanyiano en el que las comunidades directamente afectadas se anticipan y resisten la ocupación territorial forzada de megaproyectos perjudiciales para el entorno social y el medio ambiente. Pero ni la identidad común ni la percepción compartida de daño ambiental son automáticas. Aquí demuestro que tanto la identificación colectiva como la movilización de las comunidades locales han dependido de la confluencia histórica de condiciones políticas, económicas y legales específicas. Más aún, sostengo que cuando las comunidades locales enfrentan nuevos proyectos extractivos, se encuentran con el desafío específico de evitar proyectos cuyos efectos socio-ambientales aún no son tangibles. Como analogía de la técnica literaria de la prolepsis (la representación de una cosa como si existiera antes de ocurrir), propongo el concepto de *protesta proleptica* para designar a la categoría de estrategias que los organizadores despliegan para movilizar a los miembros de sus comunidades y a sus aliados. Estas estrategias buscan describir los impactos ambientales “futuros” antes de que estos impactos ocurran. Este artículo explora tales estrategias en el contexto de los conflictos acerca de los proyectos mineros de gran escala en Ecuador y contribuye al estudio de las protestas relacionadas con las actividades extractivas y a la política del medio ambiente.

The historically high prices for oil and minerals during the recent commodity boom (2000–2010) incentivized the global expansion of the extractive frontier. In Latin America, the “re-primarization” of national economies has induced the re-politicization of resource extraction, especially among communities directly affected by extractive projects. Anti-extractive protest can be seen through the lens of a Polanyian double-movement wherein directly affected communities anticipate and resist the territorial encroachment of socio-environmentally detrimental megaprojects (Polanyi 1944: 136). But neither shared identity nor shared perception of environmental grievance are automatic.

In this paper, I demonstrate that both people’s collective identification as “local communities” and the mobilization of these communities have been contingent on the historical confluence of specific political, economic, and legal conditions. However, in the territories slated for new extractive projects, there remain significant obstacles to mobilization. In this paper, I argue that when local communities confront new extractive projects, they face the specific challenge of preventing projects the socio-environmental effects of which are not yet tangible. In analogy to the literary technique of “prolepsis” (the representation of a thing as existing before it has occurred), I propose the concept of *proleptic protest* to designate a category of strategies that organizers deploy to mobilize fellow community members and allies. These strategies aim to convincingly depict the “future” of socio-environmental impacts before those impacts actually occur. The paper explores such strategies in the context of conflict over large-scale mining projects in Ecuador, based on fourteen months of fieldwork. In Ecuador, the left-of-center administration of Raphael Correa has promoted large-scale mining, but so far with uneven success.

I focus on a proleptic strategy that is under-explored in the extant literature on anti-mining protest: long walks (*caminatas*) in the territories slated for mining projects. On these walks, farmers, environmentalists, youth groups, and indigenous activists behold and commune with the land they have not yet lost to mining. When successful, such acts of resistance imbue participants with a politically potent future perfect nostalgia—nostalgia about what “will have been” lost. But protest organizers are not alone in their attempt to conjure a particular mining future: state and corporate actors expend substantial resources to convince affected communities of the economic benefits of mining. In advance of extraction, they have invested in local infrastructure and social services. As the extractive frontier expands to new territories across

Latin America, the case of large-scale mining in Ecuador illuminates the novel protest strategies that social movements deploy—and the formidable challenges they face.

In what follows, I begin with an analysis of the political-economic context of contemporary extraction-related protest in Latin America. I then turn to an examination of the conditions that have politicized directly affected communities and to the proleptic protest strategies that such communities deploy—strategies that, when successful, in turn consolidate participants’ identity as a “community.” In two short case studies of protest, I explore both successful and unsuccessful examples of the proleptic strategy of *caminatas*. I conclude by considering the broader implications of proleptic strategies for environmental activism.

### **THE COMMODITY BOOM: FROM NEOLIBERAL RESTRUCTURING TO RESOURCE NATIONALISM?**

Conflict over mining in Ecuador is to an extent symptomatic of the intensification of resource extraction across Latin America during a decade of historically high prices for oil, minerals, and other primary commodities. The global commodity boom resulted in substantial economic reorientations across Latin America (CEPAL 2010; Cypher 2010; Ruiz Acosta and Iturralde 2013; Sinnot, Nash, and de la Torre 2010). In states that export primary resources, this boom resulted in an increase in both state revenues (primarily via tax and royalty payments) and in corporate profits. In some cases, such as Ecuador, states and corporations were able to reap fiscal benefits without significantly increasing production or productivity. High prices also facilitated alignment between state and corporate interests: with more revenue to go around, contracts could require a larger state take and still be attractive to investors. The boom also incentivized the expansion of resource extraction. Untapped reserves of oil or minerals that had formerly been perceived as unprofitable began to look like viable ventures for extractive projects. Ultimately, by ensuring that a larger portion of state income derived from resource sectors, the boom significantly increased fiscal dependency on resource extraction and export, and thus vulnerability to price shocks.

Across the region, these processes played out within a variety of resource governance paradigms, each inflected with specific ideological commitments—and with the support of distinct constituencies. Countries governed by leftist administrations have seen the ascendancy of (or in some cases, a return to) so-called resource nationalism (Berrios, Marak, and Morgenstern

2010; Haslam and Heidrich 2016).<sup>1</sup> This policy trend is often portrayed in dramatic terms by both governments and conservative opposition (as well as in the US media): the anti-imperialist discourse and public ceremonies that have accompanied such policy decisions could lead one to believe that they are full-fledged expropriations of foreign-owned assets without compensation. While there are some historic examples of this type of nationalization, recent nationalizations in Argentina (2012), Bolivia (2006), and Venezuela (2001) are more accurately described as “forced divestments,” wherein states require oil or hydrocarbons companies to renegotiate contracts such that the state is the majority shareholder (Berrios, Marak, and Morgenstern 2010; Haslam and Heidrich 2016). Some governments have also re-invested in existing state-owned oil and mining companies or established new ones. Lastly, legislative and regulatory reforms stipulated contract models that increased state revenue from extractive projects. Reforms also channeled this revenue influx into social investment and public works, using the proceeds from oil and mineral extraction to pay off the “social debt” that had accumulated during hundreds of years of inequality and intensified during the “lost decade” of debt crises and neoliberal policies.

However, despite the exogenous shock of high commodity prices and the substantive reorientation in natural resource policy, the political economy of resource extraction in Latin America still bears the traces of the preceding era of neoliberal policymaking, characterized by the privatization, deregulation, and liberalization of economic activity in general and natural resource sectors in particular. In Ecuador and elsewhere in the region, vast tracts of territory were sold for exploration and extraction, often to foreign oil and mining companies for low prices and with scant legal, environmental, or labor oversight. Decades of austerity and privatization weakened state regulatory capacity and hollowed out state-owned oil, mining, and gas companies, forcing states to partner with private and often foreign firms in order to realize extractive projects. As a result, although there have been important changes in natural resource governance, the institutional legacy of neoliberal policymaking exercises significant constraint on states, and the political rupture of the new left is shot through with continuities.

The ascendancy of leftist governments across the region, however, has transformed the *politics* of extractive economies. As Hogenboom (2012) argues, the rise of the left transformed social expectations regarding resource extraction (151–52). Indigenous, peasant, environmental,

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<sup>1</sup> Although my focus here is on leftist governments, center and right of center governments have also recently increased the regulation of extractive sectors and the state “take” in terms of taxes and royalties. See Berrios, Marak, and Morgenstern 2011.

and labor movements, among others, that protested against neoliberalism paved the way for the electoral success of leftist parties. These movements have demanded a deeper reorganization of the relationship among state, society, economy, and nature than what has been realized by the left in power. For these movements, such a reorganization is needed to break the chains of dependency and thoroughly decolonize a continent in which the history of resource extraction is intimately tied to the history of conquest and colonization. In countries such as Ecuador, Bolivia, Brazil, and Argentina, leftist national governments thus have not only been the target of anti-extractive protest but have, in turn, often vilified indigenous and environmental groups, framing them as obstacles to the national good of resource-funded development.

This conflict is exacerbated by the fact that many of the continuities of the neoliberal model referred to above are particularly salient at the local level. Although public regulation and investment can reduce and/or compensate for consequences such as physical displacement and water contamination, from the perspective of the communities directly affected by extractive projects, the increased involvement of state officials may not fundamentally alter the local experience of an extractive model of accumulation and the forms of “dispossession” it often entails (Harvey 2005: 159–65). According to environmentalist and indigenous critics, such state interventions mimic the practices of “corporate social responsibility,” designed by multinational firms to improve their corporate image and protect their operations from local political resistance. The political debate over resource extraction thus often hinges on a conflict between national development and localized impacts.

### **POLITICIZED COMMUNITIES AND PROLEPTIC PROTEST**

Historically and across the globe, collective action in relation to resource extraction has taken the form of militant labor organizing (Mitchell 2011; Nash 1979; Valdivia 2008). The radical potential of workers is often attributed to their strategic location at crucial bottlenecks of energy extraction, production, and distribution, the shared experience of physically challenging and dangerous labor, and the framing of resource wealth in nationalist and/or socialist ideological registers. But in Latin America, while unionization rates in many countries have declined due to neoliberal restructuring, a new collective actor is ascendant in resource protest: the local, and often indigenous, communities directly impacted by extractive projects (Arce 2014; Aspinall



2007; Bebbington et al. 2008; Bebbington and Bury 2013; Bridge 2004; Jaskoski 2014; Mähler and Pierskalla 2015; Svampa 2015).

The politicization of the communities directly affected by extractive projects could be seen as a direct consequence of the specific *territoriality* of oil and mining projects: the socio-environmental impacts are geographically concentrated, whereas the economic benefits usually accrue to national governments and corporations. Large-scale mining in particular drastically alters the immediate landscape. This is in large part because mining is a segregative process in which a relatively small amount of the valuable mineral is physically and chemically extracted from a larger volume of economically valueless rock (Bridge 2004: 209.) For example, in the case of large-scale copper mining, “99.5% of the material mined...is rejected as waste during processing” in the form of waste rock, tailings, and slag, which are in turn stored in large basins near the mining site (209). Waste volume, while producing the most visually dramatic alteration of the landscape, is not the most detrimental environmental harm. Worse is the chemical contamination of land or water (especially in high precipitation zones such as the wetland ecosystems of the case studies below), either because of the addition of chemicals during processing (such as mercury or cyanide for gold mining) or from the oxidization of naturally occurring minerals as overlying rock is exposed (210).

But the asymmetric distribution of costs and benefits cannot alone explain why community-level protest has increased recently, or the cross- or sub-national variation in intensity of protest.<sup>2</sup> I argue that (1) the political ascendancy of the “local community” as a collective actor and source of claims is a historically contingent development, and (2) rather than it being obvious to local communities what environmental or social harms projects may cause, conjuring the future to be resisted is in fact a major challenge for mobilizing against extractive projects.

Over the past two decades, several factors have politicized directly affected communities. First, the expansion of the extractive frontier (due to neoliberal deregulation, technological advance, and high commodity prices) to geographically “peripheral” zones has opened up new territories to resource extraction. As a result, communities without prior experience of extraction now face potential socio-environmental consequences, including residential displacement, water

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<sup>2</sup> As demonstrated by Haslam and Tanimoune’s (2016) quantitative study of the determinants of mining-related conflict, open pit mines—which, compared to underground mines, exacerbate many of these local environmental impacts—are significantly more likely to trigger social conflict (409).

and soil contamination, impacts to hunting and fishing grounds and agricultural lands, and influx of economic migrants.

Second, in cases such as Peru and Argentina, the coincidence of the commodity boom with processes of fiscal and political decentralization or in the context of pre-existing federal arrangements has politicized the territorial distribution of resource rents, leading to conflicts between municipal, provincial, and national governments (Arce 2014; Arellano-Yanguas 2011; Christel and Torunczyk 2016; Eaton 2010). In some cases, anti-mining activists have taken advantage of federal arrangements to enact municipal or provincial referenda on mining activity (Christel and Torunczyk 2016; Walter and Urkidi 2015).

Third, and relatedly, new international legal norms such as ILO Convention 169 and the United Nations Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples have recognized the right of indigenous communities to be consulted prior to any policy measure that could directly affect their environment or territory. ILO Convention 169 has been ratified in twenty-two countries (among them Ecuador), two-thirds of which are in Latin America (Falleti and Riofrancos 2015). In addition to the rights of indigenous peoples, the 2008 Ecuadorian Constitution recognizes the right of *all* affected communities, regardless of ethnicity, to be consulted prior to any policy measure that could affect their environment. Rulings by the Inter-American Court of Human Rights provide more detailed jurisprudence on the implementation of this collective right, such as the July 2012 decision ruling that the Ecuadorian state had failed to consult Sarayaku indigenous people prior to oil exploration. As exemplified by this case, state institutions do not always substantively enforce the right to consultation. In response, affected communities have taken enforcement into their own hands, deploying their right to participation as a legal tool in their political struggle to assert local jurisdiction over resource policy and prevent mining projects from proceeding. The right to prior consultation has emerged as a venue for the clash of local versus national democratic authority in extractive economies around the region, and anti-mining activists have deployed community consultations to stop mining before it begins (Riofrancos 2017a). Scholars have documented “hundreds” of cases of community consultations in Guatemala, and the practice extends to Peru, Argentina, Ecuador, among others (Christel and Torunczyk 2016; Costanza 2015; McGee 2009; Walter and Urkidi 2015). State and corporate actors often attempt to delegitimize these consultations, calling them unconstitutional, illegal, non-binding, or the result of “manipulation” by indigenous or environmental groups.

In this context, directly affected communities—facing the threat of displacement and contamination and empowered by new rights protecting their territory and environment—have mobilized via pre-existing organizational structures and/or forged new alliances with indigenous federations and environmental groups at the national and transnational level. These grievances and demands presuppose that residents of the “zones of influence” of projects *perceive* the threat that such projects represent. But when projects are still in their initial licensing phases (i.e., before resource exploitation has actually occurred), perceiving their future effects presents, from the perspective of community organizers, a problem at once epistemological and political. Precisely because large-scale mining so dramatically transforms ecosystems and the human communities they support, sometimes in ways that are not visible to the naked eye even once they occur (e.g., chemical contamination), sparking and sustaining resistance against such projects requires an impressive feat of political imagination.

How do you organize against a threat that does not yet exist? In his analysis of anti-mining resistance, Kirsch (2014) analyzes what he calls “the politics of time,” drawing our attention to protest strategies that “seek to prevent the negative environmental impacts of mining by shifting their attention to the period before mining begins” and, importantly, before “irreversible” environmental damage has occurred (190–92). Under this rubric, he includes the community consultations or referenda on mining projects discussed above, of which there are several recent examples in Ecuador. In keeping with the logic of this temporal politics, here I focus on another genre of protest that in my cases was used in combination with consultations: *caminatas*, or long walks around the physical sites of planned mines.

*Caminatas* are emblematic of what I call proleptic protest. Prolepsis is the common literary technique of representing something as existing before it actually does, often to prefigure an event that will occur later in the plot (e.g., describing a character as a “dead man walking”). Like novelists building suspense or weaving together nonlinear plotlines, protestors principally focused on *preventing* the future they fear must proleptically represent negative consequences before they take place in order to stall or obstruct projects before they occur.

In this sense, we might compare *caminatas* to “toxic tours,” which invite visitors to sensorially experience industrial environmental damage (Peeples 2011; Pezzullo 2009; Yankovska and Hannam 2014). When tourists visit (or view photographs or documentaries of) Chernobyl city and nearby towns in Ukraine, “Cancer Alley” in Louisiana, or the oil-devastated

northern Amazonian region of Ecuador, the intention is to raise awareness about environmental degradation and related public health impacts and, if the contamination is ongoing, mobilize political support for those affected in their struggle for redress. On such visits, tourists behold the “toxic sublime”: the awe-inspiring encounter with industrial-scale toxicity (Peeples 2011: 375). In contrast to toxic tours, *caminatas* invite participants to behold what has not yet been lost. And, in the walks in which I participated, the participants were not “tourists”: the majority of them resided in the communities that would be directly affected by the mining project, and those that hailed from other regions or countries were often working in direct political alliance with those communities.

My analysis highlights the *co-constitution* between claims about threats to the community and the very collective identification as a “community.” Rather than presuppose either a shared knowledge of the future a given extractive project augurs, or a shared identity that predates the experience of collective resistance, my approach highlights the interpretive labor required to consolidate both—and the conditions under which such labor succeeds or fails. Grounded in an ethnographic method oriented towards the meanings that situated actors make of their social worlds, I analyze the collectivization of perceptions, interpretations, and negotiations of identity induced in the course of collective action (Auyero and Joseph 2007: 3–4; McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly 2001: 48).

To explore such proleptic strategies in further detail, I now turn to the case of Ecuador, a particularly fruitful site for the study of recent shifts and innovations in anti-extractive collective action.

## PROLEPTIC PROTEST IN ECUADOR

### Political-Economic Context

In Ecuador, the politics of resource extraction have triggered a tectonic political realignment: activists who once fought for the nationalization of natural resources now oppose all resource extraction, a leftist president finds himself in conflict with the social movements that initially supported his election, and the left-in-power has become synonymous with the aggressive expansion of extraction. Pro-mining state officials assert that, if properly coordinated by the state, mining could trigger local and national economic development. Social movement actors in resistance to the administration, regime officials who have defected, and bureaucrats who are

more ambivalent about Ecuador's mining future, reject this argument. At stake for both sides is the model of resource-dependent development that has, in their view, structured the political economy in one form or another of Ecuador for at least two hundred years.

As discussed above, during the recent commodity boom, Latin American—and particularly South American—economies underwent a “re-primarization”: states increased their fiscal dependency on the revenues generated by the extraction and export of primary commodities, and state and private firms invested in new extractive projects. Even in this regional context, Ecuador has stood out as one of the most resource-dependent economies on the continent (see Figure 1).

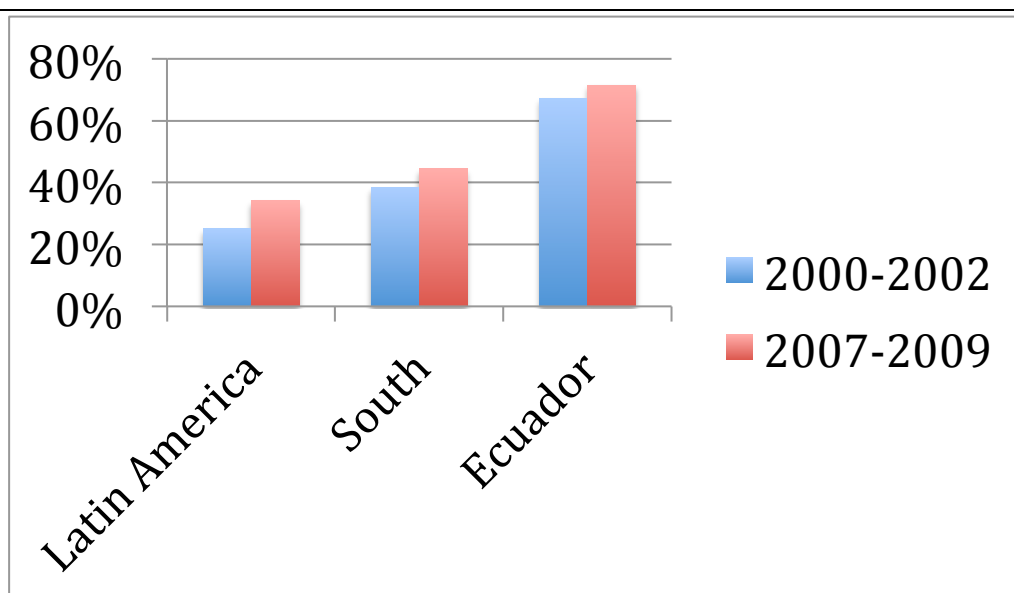
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**FIGURE 1**

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**RESOURCE DEPENDENCY: PRIMARY PRODUCTS/TOTAL EXPORTS**

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Source: Author's graph based on data from CEPAL (2010).

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Until the recent sharp decline in oil prices, the Correa government had benefited more from oil price increases than any prior administration since democratization in 1979. Oil revenues financed over a third of the state budget (Banco Central del Ecuador 2012, 2014; Ruiz Acosta and Iturralde 2013: 29). A reform of the oil contract model to increase the tax rate on extraordinary profits and to channel profits to the state in the event of production above forecasted levels augmented the fiscal benefits of high prices (Ghandi and Lin 2014; Mateo and

García 2014). But social spending has outpaced these revenues. The Correa administration has turned to Chinese development bank loans (often in exchange for future oil) to fill the budget gap (Gallagher, Irwin, and Koleski 2012; Schneyer, Perez, and Medina 2013). In addition to loans, the government has pursued large-scale mining as a new source of state income and as a means of bringing development to local communities in the Amazon and southern sierra. This was an appealing option in large part because the prices for metals such as gold and copper reached historic highs, and most of Ecuador's mineral reserves remain unexploited (PricewaterhouseCoopers 2008, 2012).

While there is long history of small-scale and “artisanal” (i.e., without the use of heavy machinery) mining, and although prior administrations had attempted to develop a more modern, capital-intensive mining sector, when Correa came to power, no large-scale mining project had moved beyond the exploration phase. The administration made the development of large-scale mining a centerpiece of its economic agenda, proclaiming the irrationality of living like “beggars seated on a sack of gold” (Correa 2010). The liberalization and deregulation efforts of prior neoliberal governments (with assistance from the World Bank) had resulted in a “hemorrhage” of mining concessions with little productive investment (Sacher and Acosta 2012). The 2007–2008 Constituent Assembly responded with the 2008 Mining Mandate, which revoked unproductive concessions and issued a moratorium on new concessions until a new legal framework was established. In 2009, the National Assembly passed a new Mining Law, which both reasserted the state's role in developing the sector (by, for example, significantly increasing tax and royalty rates) and explicitly sought the promotion of new mining investment.<sup>3</sup> The law provoked a spate of anti-mining protests, coordinated by the national and regional highland indigenous federations, local water councils, and radical environmental groups. In the 2011–2015 National Mining Plan, the Ministry of Nonrenewable Resources identified five “strategic” projects (based on the revenue they are projected to generate), along with a slew of other projects at various levels of priority. These strategic projects, located in the southern highlands and the southern Amazonian regions, all have concession holders and have been at least initially explored, but only one has a contract for exploitation. This is for the Mirador project in the Amazonian province of Zamora Chinchipe, currently under construction, the contract for which

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<sup>3</sup> The law has since been reformed to further encourage investment (specifically, by delaying the application of the tax rate on windfall profits until after initial investments have been recouped).

was signed in 2012 with a Chinese consortium of state-owned companies (ECSA). When construction is completed and extraction begins, Mirador will be the first large-scale mine in Ecuador's history.

The administration's embrace of large-scale mining represented a partial shift away from neoliberal resource governance insofar as it imposed new sectoral regulation and increased the state's share of resource revenues. But from the point of view of indigenous and environmental groups, and many potentially affected communities, it only further entrenched what they call the "extractive" model (Riofrancos 2017b). From their perspective, large-scale mining would destroy ecosystems, threaten constitutional rights, centralize political power, and reproduce underdevelopment. They saw large-scale mining as a "new colonization" of the Amazon and southern Andes, and the "extractive model" that it exemplified as the "essence" of "development," understood as the "500-year history" of Western modernity.<sup>4</sup> Although the administration's plans to develop mining help account for the timing of renewed anti-extractive protest, contention was not limited to this extractive sector: subsequent policies to expand oil exploration into the untapped reserves of the southeastern Amazon were also met with resistance. The polarization of conflict over extractive projects is reflected in the high level of contentious activity around extractive and energy projects under the Correa administration (Latorre, Farrell, and Martínez-Alier 2015).

Bureaucrats in the administration developed a range of strategies to mitigate protest and promote mining at the community level. One way to convince affected communities is with concrete economic benefits. For example, in September 2011 Correa signed Executive Decree 870, which established state-owned enterprise Ecuador Estratégico for the purpose of "the redistribution of national wealth and to bring development to citizens through the execution of programs and projects to provide infrastructure, equipment and services to the areas in whose territory nonrenewable natural resources are located" in order to "make these [directly affected] communities the first beneficiaries of oil, mining and natural wealth in general."<sup>5</sup> Another policy to fast-forward the economic benefits of mining is "anticipated royalties." Royalties are usually

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<sup>4</sup> Quotes are from an interview with Alicia Granda, 07/12/10, and Alberto Acosta's speech at the "First International Meeting: Constructing Buen Vivir" in Cuenca, Ecuador, 11/09/11. Acosta was a prominent member of the Correa administration before he resigned over disagreement regarding resource policy; he is now a prominent anti-extractive intellectual and activist.

<sup>5</sup> Rafael Correa Delgado, Decreto Ejecutivo N. 870, 09/05/11.

paid once extraction begins, but the contract for the Mirador mine stipulates that ECSA pay a total of \$100 million dollars in royalties in advance of generating income. And, as per the 2009 Mining Law, 60 percent of royalties must be channeled to “productive projects and sustainable local development via municipal governments, parishes.”

For many of the bureaucrats I spoke to, what they called “information” was another key way to convince the communities affected by large-scale mining of the benefits it would bring. To this end, bureaucrats conducted “socializations,” or social participation processes, which are legally required for extractive or large-scale development projects to move forward. The term “socialization” is associated with the corporate sector, but it is also common in bureaucratic discourse. It denotes the dissemination of information for marketing or promotion. These processes were often co-organized by state and corporate actors and have been implemented in many oil and mining projects, including the currently under-construction Mirador mine. Socializations emphasize the positive (economic) impact of mining projects and downplay the negative (socio-environmental) consequences. They consist of a primarily one-way informational flow (from state or corporate representatives to affected citizens), supplemented by “technically viable” commentary on the part of the citizenry.<sup>6</sup>

The newness of this extractive sector posed political challenges for both supporters and detractors. To prevent mining or oil activity before it begins, indigenous and environmental activists must make tangible the dire socio-environmental impacts that they predict and the “post-extractive” future they hope for. In the cases I studied, a key proleptic strategy was walks to the physical sites of planned mines, with the aim of forging an intimate connection with the territories slated for the projects and mobilizing for their defense. To explore the contexts in which this strategy has been deployed, and its political consequences, I present brief case studies of protest around two specific extractive projects: Vetas Grandes and Quimsacocha, both planned (but not yet developed) large-scale mining projects in the southern highlands of Ecuador.

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<sup>6</sup> Executive Decree 1040 (promulgated by Correa in April of 2008) sets out the guidelines for official socializations, including that only “technically viable” (scientifically valid) comments on the part of citizens be included in the final evaluation of the extractive project.



### **Vetas Grandes**

In June of 2012, I participated in a long walk (*caminata*) in the Vetas Grandes gold concession, one of several owned by Canadian junior mining company<sup>7</sup> Cornerstone, which has the rights to 44,000 hectares of mineral concessions in the southern sierra province of Azuay. This trip took place in a context already suffused with competing claims about the local impact of this planned mine. While not considered a strategic project by the government, Vetas Grandes has elicited protest on the part of indigenous and peasant communities, many of whom are organized into water associations that manage the provision of water for drinking and irrigation in this primarily agricultural region. State and corporate actors have painted these activists as misinformed or, worse, as intentionally misrepresenting the costs and benefits of mining. In response, anti-mining activists have directly contested the political and epistemic authority of the state and corporations. A month before the June visit, Ministry of Environment and Cornerstone representatives arrived in Shaggly, a rural parish in Azuay.<sup>8</sup> They had come to conduct the social participation process for their Vetas Grandes project, which was legally required in order for Cornerstone to proceed to the advanced exploration stage. But when the officials arrived, Shaggly residents and anti-mining activists from nearby rural communities physically prevented the officials and corporate representatives from entering. In response, the Ministry of Environment charged seventeen suspected protesters for the crime of “obstruction of public administration.”

Activists explicitly framed their blockade in terms of their constitutional right to substantive prior consultation, which they saw as a more democratic and participatory process than the technocratic exercise officials had planned to carry out. A few days before the planned socialization, Abel Arpi—coordinator of the Assembly of the Peoples of the South, an activist network spanning Ecuador’s southern provinces that mobilizes around the impact of extraction on the environment and rural livelihoods—declared during a videotaped interview, “I believe that it [the socialization] is violating the Constitution—we as peoples (*como pueblos*), as

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<sup>7</sup> A junior mining company is an exploration company that looks for new deposits of gold, silver, uranium or other precious minerals. These companies target properties that are believed to have significant potential for finding large mineral deposits.” (From <http://www.investopedia.com/>.)

<sup>8</sup> There are several different spellings for the parish. I will use this spelling unless I am directly quoting a source with a different spelling.

communities, have the right to self-determination, we have the right to water.”<sup>9</sup> Arpi contrasted the state and company-organized “socialization” with both constitutionally mandated rights and the communities that exercise them. He drew on an understanding of *consulta* that circulated widely among anti-extractive activists: communities exercise full “self-determination” over their territory and therefore have the right to decide whether extraction occurs or not.

For Arpi and his fellow activists, self-determination was not just a legal concept: it was grounded in a particular relationship to the territory mediated through economic livelihoods and cultural practices—a relationship that mining would destroy. For these activists, territory was not inert land or mute nature, but a set of vital processes of natural and social reproduction, an entanglement of human and nonhuman actors.<sup>10</sup> As Arpi put it in another interview conducted the day of the blockade, “this is an ecological area, a tourism area, here are the water sources, and the people and communities that always have depended on agriculture, and cattle-raising, the rivers are totally clean, there is fishing, all of this is what we don’t want to lose” and “our rivers, our mountains, shouldn’t be touched, because they are sacred.”<sup>11</sup> To galvanize protest against mining, activists figured a future defined by the destruction of what is valuable; they conjured the natural and the mythical, the economic and the cultural; they invoked a nostalgia for the present and past (themselves conflated under the temporal logic of time immemorial practice) that must be defended. In doing so, they engaged in proleptic protest.

A month after the blockade in Shaggly, the *caminata* was organized by a coalition of groups including representatives from parish-level government and the Assembly of the Peoples of the South. On the day of the walk, an eclectic mix of 300 peasants (primarily members of local water users’ associations), environmentalists, regional and national indigenous leaders, and unaffiliated anti-mining activists gathered to explore the territory slated for the gold mining project. As stated in the email invitation to the event, “This trip (*recorrido*) aims to visibilize the threatened natural and cultural richness (*riqueza*) and social opposition.” The invitation also contained several photographs of the verdant natural landscape of the “concessioned territory,” some featuring the human members of directly affect communities. Another email invitation

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<sup>9</sup> See <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-wnTCq3SqQg&feature=youtu.be>. Accessed 05/06/2013. Translation of audio transcript is my own.

<sup>10</sup> For more work on this conception of “territory” see de la Cadena (2010); Sawyer (2004: 27–46; 81–105); Svampa (2008).

<sup>11</sup> <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-wnTCq3SqQg&feature=youtu.be>. Accessed 5/3/12.

encouraged recipients to “surround themselves (*rodear*) and recognize (*reconocer*) our territories, our sources of life.” The combination of the vivid photographs and the specific verbs chosen—visibilize, surround oneself, and recognize—suggested the total sensory immersion required to forge an intimate connection to the territory and to defend its vitality from the destructive forces of extraction. The Latin roots of *reconocer* (*re*, again; *cognoscere*, to know or learn) capture the unique temporality of proleptic protest, which implores participants to know more deeply what they already know, to yearn for what they have not yet lost, and to forestall a future that, if “we continue strengthening our struggles in favor of life” (as the invitation continued), may never arrive.

Reflective of its diverse participants, the trip interwove a variety of types of knowledge of and ways of depicting how the planned mining project will transform the territory and its inhabitants. The knowledge disseminated included forms of technical expertise, such as the hydrological maps that simultaneously guided our walk and showed participants the waterways that mining would potentially contaminate.



Activists consult a map  
Cornerstone Concession 06/09/12<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> All photos by author.

These claims to knowledge drew on the experience of both local inhabitants and some of the visiting anti-mining activists in managing community water systems in rural areas. In addition, the *caminata* also figured the landscape (comprising rivers, hills, mountains, soil, groundwater, grass, shrubs) as a transparent source of knowledge, self-evidently worth protecting. Participants constructed and disseminated what Escobar (2007) refers to as “knowledges otherwise”: ways of knowing and relating that challenge the taken-for-granted understanding of the political as an arena exclusively populated by human actors, and that disrupt the epistemic boundary between the human and the natural. One such knowledge otherwise was the Carachula, a towering craggy rock formation that, according to local myth, becomes a city at night. This rock formation and the accompanying myth were seen by anti-mining activists from the area, as well as those visiting from as far as the capital, Quito, as a testimony to both the landscape and the local cultural practices that would be threatened by the planned mining project. It was exactly the type of complex human-natural entity, imbued with mythic meaning, that an “extractive” relationship to nature destroys. For de la Cadena (2010), such acts constitute an “epistemic rupture” with the foundational opposition between “Humanity” and “Nature” (343–45). In letting the land speak for itself, the anti-mining movement invited potential activists to behold a future past, to experience and depict a politically potent nostalgia for what they have not yet lost. In the process, they enlisted the landscape as a political ally in their fight against extraction.



Carachula Rock Formation  
Cornerstone Concession 06/09/12

In contrast to the proliferation of state and corporate discourse that paints the activists as “outsiders” and the community as “manipulated,” the practice of visiting concession sites invokes a different relationship between directly affected communities and their allies in other environmental and indigenous organizations: it is the activists hailing from other locales who learn from local inhabitants, who themselves learn directly from the land. Meanwhile, according to anti-mining activists, it is the government and corporations that lack knowledge—*this* sort of knowledge—and that do not see what is self-evident to anyone who looks.

But such an understanding of and relationship with the territory also immediately implies a risk: the risk that such territories will not be sufficiently known—not only by state officials but by potential allies—and thus will not be defended against the expanding extractive frontier. The political work required to organize and ensure the success of such visits belies the transparent availability of the “territory.” Activists’ pedagogical efforts were by no means uniformly successful. Below, I describe a case of a doubly failed *caminata*: inclement weather prevented the landscape from communicating its natural and cultural value and undermined organizers’ attempt to forge collective identity through territorial encounter.

### **Quimsacocha**

Quimsacocha is a planned gold mine that, like Vetas Grandes, is located in the southern highlands of Ecuador in the province of Azuay. Since the 8,030-hectare concession was granted to the Canadian mining company Iamgold and exploration began in the early 2000s, the project has been met with local resistance (Cisneros 2011: 226–27). Quimsacocha, considered, along with four others, “strategic” by the Correa administration, has not advanced past exploration, and in June 2012 it was acquired by Canadian exploration junior INV Metals.<sup>13</sup> UNAGUA, a rural water users’ association whose members collectively manage drinking and irrigation water sourced from watersheds that would be affected by the planned mine, has played a key role in mobilizing resistance against the project. The relative cohesion of resistance to the Quimsacocha

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<sup>13</sup> Another reason for the sale was the 2009 Mining Law, which some mining corporations have seen as unfavorable to investors (it increased the state ‘take’ compared to the prior mining law); the law has since been reformed to be more investor-friendly. For interpretations of the sale, see “Iamgold bails out of Ecuador” at [http://business.financialpost.com/news/mining/iamgold-bails-out-of-ecuador?\\_\\_lsa=3734-a487](http://business.financialpost.com/news/mining/iamgold-bails-out-of-ecuador?__lsa=3734-a487) and “Ecuadorian Communities Welcome IAMGOLD’s Retreat and Warn INV Metals That There’s no Social License for Quimsacocha” at <http://www.marketwired.com/press-release/ecuadorian-communities-welcome-iamgolds-retreat-warn-inv-metals-that-theres-no-social-1672687.htm>.

mine hinges on UNAGUA's efforts and on the involvement of urban environmentalists from nearby Cuenca, Ecuador's third largest city. Rural and urban anti-mining activists have forged alliances by mobilizing to protect the Yanuncay watershed, which supplies farmers and city residents alike. Although UNAGUA is linked to the regional and national indigenous movement, its members do not all—and at the time of my fieldwork did not primarily—identify as indigenous, but as *campesinos*: small-scale farmers, mostly in the dairy sector (Moore and Velásquez 2013: 220–21). However, in the course of protest events and increasingly over time, UNAGUA members have deployed symbols and discourses that index indigeneity. During a community mining consultation organized by UNGUA, UNAGUA members from the parishes of Victoria del Portete and Tarqui, both in the area of influence of the Quimsacocha project, voted on the following question: “Are you in agreement with mining activity in the wetlands and watershed of Kimsacocha?” Ninety-three percent of the 1,037 water users (out of 1,500 total) who participated voted against it. The consultation, which the Correa administration called unconstitutional and undemocratic, helped consolidate the movement against mining Quimsacocha (Riofrancos 2017a). Bureaucrats I interviewed worried that local resistance, and the consultation in particular, had stalled the project, which has yet to advance to the exploitation phase.

As the involvement of a local water users' association suggests, water has been a central point of contention. Ecologically, Quimsacocha is located in a cold, humid, and high-altitude tropical wetland known as the *páramo*, found at 3,200–4,200 meters above sea level and, in the Andean region, extending from Venezuela to northern Peru. Dense cushions of moss, soil, and plant-life are key in the cycle of water capture and regulation, providing rural and urban populations with drinking water, farmers with irrigation, and powering hydroelectric plants (Moore and Velásquez 2013; Velástegui 2010). Indeed, all of the water sources in continental Ecuador (i.e., excluding the Galápagos Islands) originate in the *páramos* of the Andean mountains (Velástegui 2010: 16). The name of the mining project references its proximity to water sources: in Kichwa, “quimsa” (also transliterated “kimsa,” as on the ballot above) means three and “cocha” means lake, referring to the three high-altitude lakes within the concession. Ironically, despite its ancestral associations and invocation in anti-mining rallying cries, the name was chosen by Iamgold. Water became such a central site of anti-mining activism that the government has attempted to change the mine's name from Quimsacocha to Quinuahuaico and

then again to Loma Larga (although activists and bureaucrats continued to refer to the project as Quimsacocha).<sup>14</sup> To further disassociate the mine from the watershed, President Correa and other officials point to the 3,200-hectare nature reserve that encompasses the three lakes as evidence that the project will not affect the water supply. The reserve was created in July 2007 by the Ministry of Energy and Mines (now the Ministry of Strategic Sectors) in the midst of anti-mining protests that drew thousands of participants (Moore and Velásquez 2011). Activists and allied environmental experts assert that the notion that the nature preserve would protect the area's water from contamination fundamentally misunderstands the complexity of the *páramo* hydrological system, which comprises a vast, fragile network of underground waterways, within which the lakes play a visually striking but ecologically relatively marginal role.

Activists have used proleptic protest strategies, including *caminatas*, to conjure the future of contaminated waterways that they fear mining will cause and to strengthen communal attachments to the *páramo* ecosystem. With these aims in mind, in November 2011, a month after the community consultation, UNAGUA organized a trip to the Quimsacocha concession. In the invitation he sent, UNAGUA President Carlos Pérez encouraged recipients to join the trip and “raise our awareness (*sensibilizarnos*) with our mother earth Pachamama.” The verb *sensibilizar* is telling: it also denotes becoming sensitive to, whether in emotional or physical terms. At 7:30 a.m. on November 19, we departed in a caravan of chartered buses from one of the main plazas of the city of Cuenca. Three hours later, after traversing a series of vertiginous switchbacks that make the trip take much longer than the 40-kilometer distance might suggest, we had arrived. There were around 450 of us in total, hailing from directly affected rural parishes, Cuenca, and beyond. Among us there were anti-mining activists from around the country, such as members of the Quito-based radical environmental group Acción Ecológica and Carlos Zorrilla, a seasoned anti-mining activist from the Intag region of the northern highlands. We were also joined by Catholic priests in the tradition of liberation theology from Peru and Colombia. Throughout the visit, the emphasis was on water. As we traversed the *páramo*, the mountains covered in *pajas* grass and moss, and made our way down to the three lakes referred

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<sup>14</sup> For the name changes, see “Proyecto minero cambiará de nombre y Quimsacocha será declarada reserva hídrica” at [http://www.mrn.gov.ec/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=1148:proyecto-minero-cambiara-de-nombre-y-quimsacocha-sera-declarada-reserva-hidrica&catid=3:newsflash&Itemid=133&lang=es](http://www.mrn.gov.ec/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=1148:proyecto-minero-cambiara-de-nombre-y-quimsacocha-sera-declarada-reserva-hidrica&catid=3:newsflash&Itemid=133&lang=es) (01/20/12, accessed 01/30/12) and “ATENCIÓN: INV Metals/Iamgold reanuda la exploración en el Quimsacocha” at <https://marchaporlavida.wordpress.com/2013/05/04/atencion-inv-metalsiamgold-reanuda-la-exploracion-en-el-quimsacocha/>.

to in the project's name, participants noted that the "nature preserve" that encompasses the lakes was indicated by a flimsy sign with one arrow pointing towards the reserve and another to the mining concession, indexing the lack of protection from potential contamination, which, despite the sign and the boundary it invoked, would easily seep into the groundwater below.



Sign delineating nature reserve and mining project



One of the three lakes

When we reached the lakes, the priests held an outdoor mass that blended Kichwa and Catholic motifs in praise of the mother earth (*pachamama*). They nestled a small statue of the Virgin of Quimsacocha into a ledge in a boulder at the water's edge. After mass we shared a communal meal (*pampamesa*) spread out on textiles. With the perceived victory of the mining consultation still fresh, and buoyed by the large turnout, the moving speeches that figured the territory as a hybrid and valuable cultural-natural space, and the attendance of participants not only from other



parts of the country but from other countries on the continent, we left the mountain that day feeling invigorated by its cold air and the spirit of comradeship. Anti-mining activists expressed renewed dedication to defend life. The trip had achieved its goals.

Seven months later, I participated in another visit to Quimsacocha. In contrast to the November *caminata*, this visit revealed the challenges confronting activists in their deployment of proleptic strategies. On May 12, 2012, three buses transported around 120 participants to the concession from Cuenca. High-speed wind and torrential rain slowed down this particular trip to four hours on snake-like roads requiring hairpin turns. We were a diverse group: members of the *Ecológica Política* course at the University of Cuenca, for which the visit was originally organized, sociology and economics students with their professor, anthropology students from the main Catholic university of Quito, Cuenca-based anti-mining activists, two Colombian travelers researching social movements in Latin America, a Peruvian student Victoria del Portete, Parish President Federico Guzmán and resident Vinicio, and a family from Shaggly, invited in light of the recent anti-mining mobilization there. According to one of the organizers of the event, my close friend Kléver Calle, the intended purpose of the trip was to teach the students the hydrology of the *páramo* and the location of the gold deposits, as well as to introduce them to local social movement leaders. Guzmán gave a brief speech about his community's ten years of resistance against mining, and, at one of the many spots where the water literally oozed up from the soil—where the application of even the slightest pressure sent water trickling upward, through myriad minuscule pathways in the mossy ground—Vinicio kneeled and pointed at the subterranean water, as evidence against Correa's assertion that since the three nearby lakes are technically not part of the concession, the Iamgold project would not affect the water.

At lunch near the lakes, organizer Chela Calle discussed the environmental and cultural value of the water around and below us. But the activists' nonhuman ally then turned against them: the increasingly torrential rain made subsequent lessons practically impossible. According to Kléver Calle, the visit was a "missed opportunity" that had not realized its goals—which was especially disheartening given the tremendous organizational work required to arrange such trips.



Detail of *páramo* in Quimsacocha concession

In the context of a debate where an uncertain future is at stake, much hinges on compellingly depicting a particular mining future, to “paint heaven or paint hell” as I was told in two different interviews.<sup>15</sup> In letting the land speak for itself, the anti-mining movement invites potential activists to experience and depict a politically potent nostalgia for what they have not yet lost.<sup>16</sup> The political labor to disseminate a territorialized knowledge, as well as the accumulated experience of activism such labor draws on and extends, constitutes a rejection of the pro-mining claim that activists misinform “communities” or are themselves uninformed. Instead, in their rhetoric, it is those with no contact with the “territories,” those in the ministry building in Quito or the far-flung corporate headquarters of multinational mining corporations, who lack the knowledge and experience that ought to inform mining politics.

## CONCLUSION

In recent decades, socio-technical controversies have proliferated, especially in relation to the environment (Callon, Lascoumes, and Barthe 2009). In such disputes, there is disagreement among both experts and laypeople not only over the dangers involved but also over whether the issue at hand is “technical” or “social” and over what forms of knowledge and which actors are relevant. Mobilization around environmental issues such as climate change is hindered by their

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<sup>15</sup> With Ministry of Nonrenewable Resources functionary, Francisco, 04/25/12, and with the director of Fundación Avina, a “nonpartisan” but effectively pro-mining NGO, Maria Eulalia, 5/17/12.

<sup>16</sup> I am indebted to Anne Norton for this formulation.

large-scale, slow-moving, and cumulative nature, rendering them less available for concrete and immediate perception (an effect exacerbated by the widely circulating and politically demobilizing narrative of inevitable apocalypse; see, for example, Swyngedouw [2010]). Even when environmental or health impacts have already transpired, it can be difficult to connect causes and effects (e.g., pollution levels or cancer rates), especially when the accounts of corporate and state experts contradict one another, and residents lack the resources to conduct independent studies (Futrell 2003; Auyero and Switsun 2009). This demobilizing confusion is exacerbated when the potential environmental harm has not yet occurred and state and corporate actors are sanguine about the prospects of mitigating such impacts. When the future appears as both “opaque and threatening,” how do situated actors establish the epistemological foothold necessary to engage in concerted, collective action in the unfolding present (Callon, Lascoumes, and Barthe 2009: 19)? And how does the practice of concerted action redefine identities (ibid.: 34)? Given the complex temporal and subjective structure of “acting in an uncertain world,” proleptic strategies can give activists traction.

To take the example of one of the more challenging issues for mass mobilization, proleptic protest can help activists gain traction in addressing climate change by targeting its primary causes: fossil fuels and tropical deforestation. Coal, gas, and oil extraction are double culprits—first, when trees are razed to clear the area for the infrastructure of extraction and transportation, and second, when the compressed hydrocarbon energy is burned as fuel.<sup>17</sup> Any hope of combatting climate change involves leaving trillions of dollars’ worth of fossil fuels in the ground, unexploited and unburned.<sup>18</sup> “Pipeline politics” has emerged as one of the more successful strategies to prevent the extraction and distribution of fossil fuels (Dolšak, Prakash, and Allen 2016). Pipeline politics involves occupying the physical sites of the vast transportation networks that the distribution of fossil fuels requires, and it often takes place before these networks are constructed or in their early phases of development—thus functioning according to a proleptic logic. In resistance processes such as those that took place against the construction of the Keystone XL pipeline or currently against the Dakota Access Pipeline, multi-scalar activist

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<sup>17</sup> “Global Warming 101,” *The Union of Concerned Scientists*. Available at: [http://www.ucsusa.org/global\\_warming/global\\_warming\\_101#.WAvOTNwwcqY](http://www.ucsusa.org/global_warming/global_warming_101#.WAvOTNwwcqY).

<sup>18</sup> *The Guardian* 01/07/15 “Leave fossil fuels buried to prevent climate change, study urges.” Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2015/jan/07/much-worlds-fossil-fuel-reserve-must-stay-buried-prevent-climate-change-study-says>.

coalitions comprising indigenous groups and non-indigenous environmentalists have invoked and reinforced their affective bonds with the territories (understood as hybrid socio-natural entities) slated for pipeline construction, as well as the communal bonds among those who gather in its defense. Pipeline politics reveals the broader implications of proleptic protest. Yearning for what has not yet been lost is not a primordial reaction of traditional communities against a technologically advanced future. It is a timely political strategy to resist territorial dispossession and water contamination—and, in the process, address the root causes of ecological crisis.

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