



After titling: Oil palm landscapes and Afro-Colombian territories

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INTRODUCTION

“La Ley de Negritudes”

On September 28, 1994, Aroldo and a small group of other residents of *Bocas de Guabal*, a small village on the Mira River in Colombia’s littoral border with Ecuador, held a meeting to discuss the rapid rate at which their community’s mangroves were being destroyed. Mangroves were being exploited for the construction and leather tanning industries with dire consequences for locals’ livelihoods. For example, when the mangroves were cut, *concheras*, women who made a living collecting shellfish, lost their only source of income. But in addition to being an important source of money, mangroves were essential components in the villagers’ well being. During a conversation that we had in 2009, Aroldo explained the mangroves importance to me in detail. He described them as “daycare centers” where baby fish remained safe until they were large enough to swim in the river without being eaten by larger fish, and as “little houses” where crabs laid their eggs and made their homes. The disappearance of mangroves therefore meant a significant threat on locals’ source of sustenance. Also, a few families who lived on the river’s mouth had lost their houses when the Pacific Ocean’s waves, no longer contained by the mangroves’ powerful barrier, beat against the village’s residential areas.

That afternoon the atmosphere was tense. Because some people benefited considerably from the commercialization of the mangrove wood and bark, they opposed a ban on its exploitation. But the consequences of indiscriminate exploitation were too ominous to be ignored. The purpose of the meeting, therefore, was to reach a consensus in which commercial mangrove exploitation was not entirely prohibited, but rather carefully managed. Of course, this was easier said than done. On the one hand, residents of *Bocas de Guabal* were familiar with predatory capitalism. Everyone remembered how the *chanul*, (*sacoglottis procera*) an exotic tree that is a coveted source of export quality timber, had entirely disappeared following the entrance of foreign timber companies. At the same time, they were tired of living so precariously. In a region of Colombia with little to no formal State presence—health services, education, electrification, sewage, drinking water—or stable sources of employment, the possibility of exploiting mangroves for a small profit was undoubtedly attractive. The situation that they tried to resolve that afternoon was not new. The problem of how to create and sustain strategies to relate to plants and animals in a not-entirely-capitalist manner, while living in some of the world’s most promising areas for capital reproduction was a recurrent theme. Until then, however, the inhabitants of *Bocas de Guabal* had not had a concrete political tool with which to confront this conundrum.

In the midst of the exchange, the attendants heard the humming of a motorboat approaching. Hernán Cortés¹, a native of *Bocas de Guabal*, disembarked. He was accompanied by Juan Manuel, a man from Tumaco who aspired to a seat in the city council. Because Juan Manuel had funds from his political party, Hernán had asked if he could ride the boat with him as he traveled up and down the river campaigning. Juan Manuel had the money but as an upstanding young man born and raised on the Mira River, Hernán had the cultural capital. In the end, they reached an agreement that could be summarized quite simply as: “You do your thing and I’ll do mine”. Hernán’s “thing” was circulating the news regarding the recent passage of Ley 70. For several years, he had been a militant with one of Colombia’s most well known black organizations—PCN²—working for the protection of black people’s territories. For Aroldo, this was a memorable meeting during which he heard the word *territory* to refer to his village, to his farm, to the mangroves, and to the forest where he had hunted and cut wood his entire life, for the first time. Hernán’s message that day, as Aroldo recalled it fifteen years later, was straightforward and captivating:

“*Muchachos*, this territory is in danger”. He explained the issue of large companies, how they kept advancing, and he told us that collective titling of all the territory was a strategy to mitigate the impacts of their advance and that then we would have to make some internal rules so that each of us respected the space as it was defined. Well, back then he didn’t give us much detail, he simply said “This is good. We are part of this dynamic that is stretching all the way from Chocó to Nariño. Further down the road you will become familiar with the work that has been done in order to get President Gaviria to sign this law”

In 2003, ten years after the passage of the law, the people of *Bocas de Guabal*, along with fifty-three other villages of the lower portion of the Mira River, received a collective title for over forty-six thousand hectares of land. Although the work of lobbying the government to pass the law had been completed when they first heard the word *territory* in 1994, delimiting and protecting their own territory was not an easy task. First, they had to organize into a community council, a local government figure that had been especially created for black communities following Ley 70. This involved the difficult work of spreading the word up and down the river, mobilizing with little to no resources, and pressuring the State to finally grant them the land title. Despite all these difficulties, every single person that I spoke to about the titling process recalled it as a period of remarkable political effervescence and hopeful enthusiasm. When I asked the protagonists why everyone had been so enthusiastic, they all agreed on the reason, but as usual, Aroldo put it most eloquently:

¹ I use pseudonyms for all the people I refer to in this article except Hernán Cortés. I have opted to use his real name because he is a public figure and is well known among black organizations in Colombia.

² The PCN, or Process of Black Communities is a

[Because] it was a current issue. It was not a made up thing; it was something that was in fact happening in Buenaventura, in Chocó, in Cauca, and Tumaco was not an exception. We were losing our land through loans, sales, and also through invasion [...]. So people of course felt very touched by the message of the need to get the territory back, or at least protect what was left of it [...]. This is why people were so committed.

Ley 70 gained currency among the eleven thousand inhabitants of the lower Mira River because they saw it as a promising tool with which to protect their territories; because it provided them with a language with which to speak and be heard about the felling of the forests, the destruction of the mangroves, and local communities' own complex participation in these processes. In fact, during that meeting in 1994, the people of *Bocas de Guabal* referred to themselves and their neighbors as *campesinos* not as black communities. And yet, Ley 70 is commonly referred to today as the *Ley de Negritudes* or Blackness Law. I do not mean to suggest that Ley 70's recognition of cultural difference is negligible, nor do I want to minimize its impact on ethnic politics in Colombia. However, I think that a thorough analysis of its consequences as a land reform is long overdue. It is imperative that we evaluate whether collective land titling did in fact provide the people of the Mira River with an effective tool to confront the concrete problems they were facing. More broadly, it is necessary to analyze the consequences of Ley 70 as both a multicultural and land reform, and to carefully evaluate the consequences of this articulation.

Landscaping Projects

Ley 70 is Colombia's poster child of successful multicultural reform. In 1993, following Colombia's most recent constitutional reform, this law defined "black communities"³ as collective beneficiaries of special rights. Broadly stated, the law's objectives are the protection of black communities' ethnic identity and rights, as well as the promotion of their economic and social development in order to guarantee equality. Being the first large-scale State reform of its kind, Ley 70 became a milestone of official multiculturalism in Latin America, in particular as regards Afrodescendants' rights⁴. But Ley 70 was not a top-down juridical mandate. It is widely recognized that Ley 70 does not mark the beginning of ethnic rights for Afro-Colombians, but rather it is the result of a prior social mobilization that ran deep and wide. Many authors have traced the history of this mobilization noting that the process of drafting the law created an unprecedented political effervescence in which many sectors of civil society were involved (cf. Agudelo, Asher, Escobar et al, Oslender). Because of this, today many independent black organizations regard Ley 70 as the second most important accomplishment for black communities (after

³ Note on this juridical category

⁴ Note on terminology

the abolition of slavery) not simply because of the rights that it granted them, but mostly because of the ethnic “awareness” that it generated.⁵

Naturally, not all evaluations of Ley 70 have been favorable. In the eighteen years since its passage, many observers have produced incisive analyses of its impact on Afro-Colombians. Scholars, for example, have criticized the ossification of black identity that it produced, the way in which it has contributed to the cooptation of the black social movement’s agenda, the uneven distribution of its benefits, and its many conceptual shortcomings. On their part, activists have reflected on its actual reach and have proposed concrete ways to close the gap between the law and its effective implementation. But despite its mixed reviews, Ley 70 still stands as the paradigmatic example of the successful mobilization of ethnic blackness, not only in Colombia but for international observers as well.

But Ley 70 is also a land reform project. In practice, the law’s main impact has been on land tenure. Since its passage, more than five million hectares of ancestral lands have been titled to black communities. Its impressive breadth has led some observers to describe Ley 70 as the largest land reform in recent Latin American history.⁶ And although in practice the exercise of black communities’ territoriality is dubious,⁷ its impact as a significant transformation in Colombia’s land tenure structures cannot be ignored. The point is that although much has been written and said about Ley 70, it is usually analyzed as a multicultural reform when in fact it is much more than that.

In this paper I analyze the concrete consequences that Ley 70 has had on black communities in an “out-of-the-way place”⁸: the Mira River in southwestern Colombia. However, rather than focusing on its impact as a multicultural reform designed to protect “ethnic rights”, I analyze it as a *landscaping project*. Following Tsing, I understand *landscapes* as particular “configuration[s] of humans and nonhumans across a terrain” (Tsing 2004:174). *Landscaping*, then, involves both the material and representational practices through which any given landscape is created and maintained. Finally, I refer to *projects* in order to stress the fact that landscaping is processual and power-laden. At any given moment across any given terrain there are multiple landscaping projects, which seek to consolidate competing or dovetailing configurations of humans and nonhumans.⁹

Focusing on landscaping projects allows me to do several things. First, it enables an analysis that looks at the joint formation of humans—as multicultural subjects—and nonhumans—as “nature” or “resources”. Second, it uncovers multiculturalism as much more than the official recognition of ethnic rights,

⁵ Note on how ethnicity was constructed (Restrepo)

⁶ Need citation

⁷ Note on displacement and dubious territory

⁸ I am borrowing Anna Tsing’s term to describe places that are constructed as “marginal” (Tsing 1993).

⁹ Note on place specificity and place making (will do this in another chapter)

showing instead that it is a broad political project that re-organizes relations between people and “nature” by producing particular categories of difference. Finally, as an analytical category *landscape* is much closer to the notion of territoriality that black activists constructed and mobilized around Ley 70. This is relevant not only because territoriality is the “emic” category that best describes the political project of the black activists that participated in drafting the law, but also because territoriality signals a counter-hegemonic landscaping project, one that seeks to challenge exploitative relations between people and nature. When Hernán spoke about *territory* rather than land, he was referring to a landscape, to an entire set of social and biological relations between plants, people, animals, and even “inanimate” objects and spirits. He clearly distinguished it from land as a “natural resource” or as a “factor of production”. As Aroldo put it, “land can be any old barren field but territory, territory is much more complete”.

Green Multiculturalism

Noting that official multiculturalism is a multi-pronged political project is nothing new. Most prominently, Hale has traced the ways in which multiculturalism articulates with neoliberalism (Hale 2005). Specifically, he outlines how collective land rights—a distinctive element of multicultural policies in Latin America—dovetail with neoliberal governance. He notes that contrary to *mestizaje's* homogenizing nation-building project, which had suppressed cultural difference, neoliberalism shapes, limits, and produces cultural difference. Therefore, it is logically compatible with multiculturalism. He employs the term “neoliberal multiculturalism” in order “to emphasize the integral relationship between these new cultural rights and neoliberal political economic reforms” (Hale 2005:12). Although Hale’s incisive analysis is very illuminating, it is not exactly surprising to find that multiculturalism, like most nation-building projects, is a full-fledged project of governance that seeks to reorganize political society. What I find most remarkable about his proposition is that the reorganization that he points to considers only relations between people, forgetting that “nature” too is an integral element of political society.

In order to correct this blind spot in critical analyses of multiculturalism, we can turn to the literature on the politics of nature. A good place to start would be with political ecologists who have denaturalized environmental phenomena by showing how they are informed by economic imperatives, social constructions, and political coercions (cf. Peluso and Watts 2000; Peet and Watts 2004). This perspective would enable an analysis of Ley 70 that makes explicit its reorganization of land tenure as a political project. It would elucidate the mutual constitution of black communities as multicultural subjects, and collective territories as spaces of natural resources. Here, other bodies of work are also helpful in analyzing how capitalism and its proxies—progress, development, neoliberalism—support exploitative configurations of people and nature (Merchant 1989). In particular, ecofeminism provides the tools with which to critique

capitalism's abuse of nature and to imagine more liberating configurations of humans and nonhumans.

This is the starting point for my analysis of Ley 70, not as a narrow multicultural reform but as a set of landscaping projects that compete to simultaneously define subjects and nature. But there is one final insight that must be added to this approach. While the Marxist critique of capitalism's exploitation of nature is necessary, more recently, scholars of environmentalism have noted that capitalism has entered a "green" phase (citations?). These authors document a transformation in the mechanisms through which value is produced and reproduced. Basically, they note that whereas in previous historical moments—for example industrial capitalism—value was primarily created through the exploitation of nature, now it is also possible to derive value from its conservation. Just like neoliberal multiculturalism replaced *mestizaje's* attempt to eradicate cultural difference with strategies to manage and contain it, green capitalism has abandoned its antagonism with environmentalism and replaced it with an investment in "green" ventures.

This paper explores Ley 70 as a grounded practice asking what happens when cultural difference is tethered to particular uses and definitions of nature. I follow Hale in noting that cultural recognition and neoliberal governance are deeply entangled, but I qualify two important things. First, I expand the realm of political society to include nature. And second, I note that neoliberalism does not only involve predatory forms of production, but green capitalism as well. To signal the articulation of these two counter-intuitive developments—a nationalist formation that tolerates and even encourages difference and a marketable environmentalism—I use the term *green multiculturalism*.

In order to explore green multiculturalism on the ground, I focus on the history and various modes of cultivating a specific crop: the African oil palm or *elaeis guineensis*.¹⁰ Looking at oil palm cultivation on the Mira River is particularly useful because it illustrates how official multiculturalism—in the form of collective land rights—and green capitalism—in the form of biodiesel production—meet and articulate in practice. It is particularly revealing to see how what began as two separate and antagonistic processes—landless black farmers and oil palm plantations—have gradually converged in a single landscaping project: green multiculturalism. Green multiculturalism is not simply a euphemism for cloaked capitalism and my purpose is not to narrate yet another story of capitalism's "unchallenged" triumph, or to make an inventory of everything that is destroyed by its advance. Like all landscaping projects, green multiculturalism competes with other projects, it is constantly challenged, and must continuously reassert itself; it is a grounded hegemonic process. In order to trace these various landscaping

¹⁰ *Elaeis guineensis* is commonly referred to as African oil palm, or in Spanish *Palma Africana*. However, some of the black activists with whom I have collaborated refuse to call it African in order to avoid creating or reinforcing a negative association between African-ness and devastation. For this reason, they prefer the term oil palm, or *palma aceitera* in Spanish.

projects, I begin with a brief history of the *elaeis guineensis* and its arrival to Colombia. Then I review the various modes of oil palm cultivation that currently exist on the Mira River and describe the consequences that this crop's expansion has had for the black farmers of the Mira River. Finally, I present some general conclusions regarding the articulation of cultural recognition and particular uses of nature, that is, of green multiculturalism.

ELAEIS GUINEENSIS

*El Regalo del Trópico para el Mundo*¹¹

As postcolonial scholars have shown, the colonial enterprise was centrally concerned with the management of nature, which sought to reconfigure human and non-human relations just as much as relations of power between colonizers and colonized (Merchant 1989; Casid 2004; Pratt 1992). Therefore, when we follow the *elaeis guineensis*' journey from Western Africa to the Americas, we also trace the history of the transatlantic slave trade and the colonial project that has been unfolding in this continent since.

West African farmers began using the *elaeis guineensis* since prehistoric times as a source of wine and cooking oil. Although it was a very important resource for Guinea coast and Congo villagers, it was not deliberately planted. Instead, oil palms sprouted in forest clearings that were made for edible crops such as yams and taro. The palms eventually grew above the forest canopy and developed into groves. Even when dooryards were more purposefully tended to, the *elaeis guineensis* was, as Anna Tsing describes, one of many plants that fall in the gap between "cultivated" and "wild" (Tsing 2004).

In fact, Sauer's historical geography of the *elaeis guineensis* describes the relationship between it and prehistoric farming peoples as symbiotic (Sauer 1993:191). This is not to say that all species involved in this relationship benefited equally from it, nor to suggest that West African farmers had a "harmonious" relationship with the "forest." Symbiosis, as I use it here, simply suggests that these two organisms lived in close physical association, and benefited—albeit differentially—from the interaction. Another way of showing this type of relationship would be by replacing our analyses of farmers and their cultivated crops, of gatherers and their wild fruits, with analyses of landscapes. This would allow us to see how oil palms and West African villagers flourished in tandem through a range of interactions that cannot be adequately described by the modern categories with which we describe "nature" today. That is, until the onset of European colonialism.

Although early European presence on the Guinean coast was not motivated by oil palm, but rather by slaves, the latter carried seeds of the former across the

¹¹ This subtitle is taken from Fedepalma's publication *La Agricultura de Palma de Aceite en Colombia* 2006

Atlantic, and Europeans often loaded palm fruits as provisions for the journey.¹² According to Sauer, by 1700, oil palms had been casually planted in Jamaica and Brazil, where Africans used it for cooking, and by the mid 1800s it had been introduced to other places in the West Indies. After the British banned the slave trade in 1807 slave traders began to load their ships with palm oil instead of captives. In this way the market for African palm oil—which became widely used in Europe and North America to make margarine, soap, and candles—gradually replaced the market for African men, women and children.

In 1911, a Belgian, who in prior trips to the Congo had seen locals use the oil palm fruit, was the first to embark on a commercial planting venture in Sumatra. Before this, the *elaeis guineensis* had been used only for ornamental purposes in the Dutch East Indies. However, it quickly expanded throughout the East Indies and Malaya, where after World War II it replaced many rubber plantations thanks to broad state support of the industry.¹³ In the Americas, commercial planting began in the 1930s, when after catastrophic disease problems on banana plantations, the United Fruit Company began experimenting with oil palm in order to diversify their crops. By the 1960s, there were more than 10,000 hectares of oil palm planted in Honduras and Costa Rica. In Colombia, commercial planting followed a very similar path only a decade later. The United Fruit Company initially cultivated it in 1945 in the northern state of Magdalena, also a banana plantation area.

In her ethnographic work with Meratus mountain dwellers, Tsing describes a forest that is neither pristine nor spoiled. Although to an untrained eye, there might only be “natural” forest, these forests are in fact human-made though not necessarily cultivated. She explains that relationships between plants and people take on a range of forms that lie in the gaps between cultivated and wild, and describes the forest as a “weedy, patchwork naturalness” with no clear demarcations (Tsing 2004:174). Turning away from the neat dichotomy cultivated/wild, she proposes the notion of “weediness,” which can help us better see and describe a wide variety of relations between people and plants. The point is not simply to note that there are numerous ways to engage in and understand relationships between plants and people. This would amount to naïve cultural relativism when in fact Tsing’s observation is an anticolonial proposition. It is anticolonial because it seeks to make visible and challenge the asymmetrical power relations between these various ways of categorizing and manipulating “nature.”

Like the history of colonialism, the history of the *elaeis guineensis* in the Americas is marked by a relentless effort to eradicate weediness, both materially and discursively. Because weediness is inherently unruly it challenges the modern

¹² Patiño disagrees with some historians’ assertion that the oil palm was introduced into the Americas by slaves themselves because they were stripped before boarding the ships and were unable to smuggle anything. According to him, it is far more likely that slave traders carried the first kernels across the Atlantic. Despite this disagreement, there is a general agreement that its introduction can be attributed to the slave trade.

¹³ Note on longer history in Southeast Asia

demarcations that have kept nature and culture separate. Where it cannot be physically eradicated—by replacing symbiotic dooryards with monoculture plantations, for example—weediness is systematically invisibilized or portrayed as marginal or unlawful. It might be tempting to say that the history of the *elaeis guineensis*' in the Americas follows the path from symbiosis to domination, from diversity to uniformity, from wild to cultivated. But this description would be too facile. By doing this, I would simply reinforce the teleological History of capitalism and reinscribe the false separation between nature and culture. Instead, I want to suggest that the history of the African oil palm on Colombian soil has been a fierce struggle between various forms of weediness and the homogenizing discipline of the plantation, and although the relation of forces is quite uneven, the outcome of this tug of war cannot be predicted.

Clearly then, agriculture is a landscaping project that seeks to produce colonies and generate colonial subjects through the joint territorialization of land and bodies (Casid 2004:xiv). But, as Latour has shown, the separation of nature and culture has never been entirely successful (Latour 1993). This is in part because even when rendered invisible, marginal or outlaw, weediness continues to sprout and spread; it cannot be eradicated. What is more, landscapes are also battlegrounds where counter colonial actions are unfurled. They are fertile soil on which possibilities for transformation can thrive. In what follows I tell a weedy story of the oil palm on the southern Pacific Coast of Colombia. One that is clearly marked by the capitalist imperative but not exhausted by it. One that reveals a colonial project that seeks to put people and plants in exploitative configurations. But also, one that unfolds unevenly across a terrain where a multiplicity of other configurations still grows and sometimes flourishes.

La Reina de las Oleaginosas¹⁴

For those of us leading Western lives, wherever on the globe we may live, it is virtually impossible to avoid consuming palm oil. On any given day, the daily activities of the average middle class person will most probably involve numerous encounters with this abundant oil. Spread margarine on your toast for breakfast. Lather your arms with soap in the shower. Eat a muffin with your mid-morning coffee. Pour a spoonful of creamer in that coffee. Throw a load of laundry in your washer. Even if you think that your consumption preferences can bypass consuming palm oil, you are probably wrong, for after oleochemical processing, palm oil can be found in alcohols, paints, and lubricants all around us. In fact, palm oil consumption in Europe at the beginning of the 19th century was spurred mostly by its use in the metal plating industry. In a sense, this oil greased the machines of the industrial revolution.

A century later, its success as a commercial crop was guaranteed by its exceptionally high yield. Once it began to be planted in identical rows of equidistant palms, the *elaeis guineensis* became the undisputed queen of oily seeds. Today, one

hectare of oil palm can yield up to ten times more oil than a hectare of sunflower, soy, or rapeseed and for this reason it is the leading vegetable oil in the world market.ⁱ By the end of the 20th Century, oil palm was already well established as a profitable agribusiness worldwide. In fact, by the 1990s Malaysia and Indonesia were covered by millions of hectares of oil palm. As if this dizzying repetition of oil palm across the world's tropics were not enough, this crop has an additional quality that has further accelerated its expansion in the last decade.

In addition to its remarkably high yield, it turns out that converting palm oil into fuel does not require that much energy. Once we take into account the amount of energy needed to transform crude palm oil into diesel, calculations show that this fuel produces six times more energy than is required to produce it.ⁱⁱ This energy input/output balance is the highest of all feedstock crops for agrodiesel production (compared to maize, soy, rapeseed, and castor oils). So once again, the oil palm reigns supreme. Unsurprisingly, this characteristic has become very profitable in the midst of the energy crisis, and worldwide cultivation has responded accordingly. In light of the ongoing depletion of fossil fuel reserves, the oils and fats sector has become the fastest-growing sector in the world, with palm oil leading the way.ⁱⁱⁱ

Paisajes de palma

On the Mira River three modalities of oil palm cultivation co-exist today: the plantation, independent cultivation, and small-scale cooperatives. Overall, in the vicinity of Tumaco, the infamous plantation model continues to be dominant both in total land extension and capital investment. In 2010 there were ten plantations with extensions that range from a few hundred to five thousand hectares, and seven oil processing plants, which are all owned and operated by the plantations. The collective territory of the Mira River borders with three major plantations: *Palmas de Tumaco*, *Salamanca*, and *Palmeiras* and therefore, its inhabitants are incorporated into the plantation economy in various ways. Most prominently, they work as laborers on various plantations and processing plants.

A tour of *Palmas de Tumaco*, the largest plantation in the region, reveals the nightmare of monoculture agriculture in full splendor. During my first visit in 2007, riding in one of the company's four-by-fours, I crossed large extensions of uniform rows of equidistant palms of identical height. The numbered lots were tended by laboring groups of three: a *tallero*, a *mulero*, and a *pepero*. The *tallero*, or stem cutter, is considered the most skilled laborer and is therefore better paid. His job consists of cutting the stem at precisely the right distance from the bunch and at the ideal moment of ripeness. The *mulero*, usually a younger and more inexperienced male, picks up the seed bunches and handles the beast of burden, a mule or water buffalo. The *mulero* is followed closely by the *pepero*, or seed collector—oftentimes a woman or an adolescent—who picks up the stray seeds that come off the bunches as they hit the ground. The employment models on plantations range from labor contracts to piecework and daily wages. But, in general, relations of labor on the plantation are similar to those in most capitalist industrial sectors. In other words, they seek to extract the greatest amount of labor at the lowest cost possible. This is

done through a variety of well-known strategies that include accumulation by dispossession, induced indebtedness, labor market fragmentation, and vertical integration of the industry. In brief, Third World plantations like *Palmas de Tumaco* are veritable “factories in the field”—that is, centers of capital reproduction—characterized by their managerial regimes of labor discipline and military-style methods of agriculture (Wolf 1982; Scott 1999).

The exploitative nature of the plantation economy is evident in areas other than labor conditions. If we employ a nature-sensitive analysis, we can easily see that oil production on plantations seeks to simultaneously exploit people and nature for the purpose of capital accumulation. Palms trees, water, weeds, pests, mules, and people are carefully managed to maximize profit. Seeds are carefully selected, nurtured in a greenhouse, and replanted as seedlings in numbered lots where they will be fertilized and protected from weeds and pests. From this perspective, the terrain on which oil palm is cultivated is not simply the prediscursive background on which human action unfolds. Plants and animals are not inert objects but rather protagonists in the violent encounters between nature and people precipitated by capitalism.

Moreover, the colonial relations of the plantation extend beyond the field and the processing plant. Oil palm plantations reproduce social relations reminiscent of 19th Century European colonialism. *Palmas de Tumaco*, for example, is a full-fledged structure with workers’ living quarters, a health center, a school, a small shop, and a requisite bar for the unskilled workers. A ten-minute drive from the fields, there is a main house that lodges the administrative and technical personnel during their stays on the plantation—these staff members don’t usually live in the area but rather fly in from large cities such as Bogotá and Cali. This house, with impressive views of oil palm extensions and exuberant tropical gardens, offers all the amenities that these predominantly white out-of-towners demand: a recreational area with a pool table and TV, a restaurant with an all black female staff, and a gym. At a larger scale, oil palm plantations have established colonial relations with neighboring villages. Because of their intrusive nature, plantations tend to develop into enclaves, that is enclosed territories with little relations to their exterior. To counter the negative reputation of the enclave as an exploitative intruder, plantation managers have undertaken development initiatives with neighboring villages—building schools, employing locals, financing public works. The purpose—in addition to strategically improving their public image—is to become better integrated to the region, to seem less alien, and therefore position themselves as fellow “locals” and “engines of development.”

However, the landscaping project of the industrial plantation does not travel everywhere. There are many places where its regimes of labor and nature exploitation simply do not penetrate, or when they do, do not significantly transform pre-existent configurations of people and nature. This is evident in the second modality of oil palm cultivation that survives on the Mira River. In the four decades since the oil palm was introduced to the region, independent black farmers

have developed a different kind of relationship to the oil palm. In his detailed description of oil palm cultivation in the area surrounding Tumaco, Restrepo contrasts this modality to the agro-industrial model. Unlike plantations, autonomous farming does not follow strict agronomical practices of crop maximization. Local farmers do not plant homogenous rows of palms, but rather intersperse it with foodstuffs and other subsistence and marketable crops. Although they sometimes resort to wage labor for help in harvesting the ripe seed bunches, generally speaking they rely on family and labor exchange practices to maintain the farm. And even though they sell their product to local processing plants, the reproduction of the domestic group, rather than the generation of profit, is what drives their effort (Restrepo 2004).

In fact, one could even argue that the category of labor does not adequately describe the relationship between oil palms and independent black farmers on the Mira River. This Marxist category foregrounds only the exploitative relations of power in the human-nature encounter when there exist myriad other ways of knowing nature through work. Moreover, the narrow definition of work as the transformation of nature for human advantage reinscribes the idea that work and nature are inherently antagonistic and that only those bodies and landscapes that escape work can be considered natural. Although there is significant effort invested in tending to oil palms, this is a different kind of work; one that does not rely on extermination, exploitation, or objectification, and in which humans do not compete with other living beings for planetary domination. I do not mean to suggest that independent oil palm farming is entirely outside of the logic of capitalism, nor do I want to reinforce the myth of the noble savage who sustains harmonious relations with the environment. It's important to remember that oil palm seeds were introduced by plantations, that most independent farmers took the seeds and learned how plant them when they worked for those same plantations as wage laborers, and that they have no choice but to sell their products to back to them (artisanal oil processing does not take place in the region). My point is simply that it is imperative to remember that there are other rationalities, other configurations, and other forms of human-nature relations that do not strictly follow the agro-industrial model. On the Mira River, independent oil palm farming, although minimal, is one such alternative that survives amidst the plantation.

The third modality of oil palm cultivation dovetails with the plantation. In the last two decades, the total extension cultivated by small-scale cooperatives in the rural areas surrounding Tumaco has mushroomed. According to a staff member of the main umbrella organization that groups the coops on the Mira River, Cordeagropaz, small-scale farmers now grow approximately 40% of all oil palm in the region. The coop is an interesting figure. On the Mira River, the first successful coops were established in 1999, when the main plantations in the region entered into a partnership with the mayor's office and together they secured State funding for the initiative. The plantation managers were interested in two main things: changing their image from economic enclave to regional development engines, and increasing the raw material for oil production. By 1999, black collective titling was

underway all across the Pacific, and local plantations could not aspire to purchase or otherwise acquire more lands. Because Ley 70 protects collective territories from any form of alienation (mortgage, sale, or transfer), any further expansion of oil palm cultivation would have to include black communities—their people and their lands—as *pequeños palmeros*.

Small-scale coops do represent a significant reorganization of human-nature relations on the Mira River. They are in essence branches of large-scale plantations on collective lands. The labor, administrative, and agronomical practices of small-scale farms mirror those of the plantation. By extending the reach of agro-industrial rationalities into collective territories, small-scale coops effectively discipline both black farmers and oil palms, creating new configurations of plants and people while technically respecting the land rights of black communities. In other words, small-scale coops enable the *de facto* transformation of black communities' landscapes while maintaining their *de jure* status as inalienable collective territories. At the same time, small-scale coops are not exact replicas of plantations, and the differences between the two are significant. Because they must recruit both people and "their lands" in a "lawful" manner, proponents of small-scale coops cannot resort to proletarianization by dispossession. Instead, independent farmers must be willingly enlisted to become *pequeños palmeros*. The main difference between *pequeños palmeros* and wage earners is that while the latter are reluctantly exploited for their labor, the former become willing stakeholders in the oil palm business. In other words, small-scale coops turn black farmers into green capitalists.

These are some of the landscaping projects that centrally involve the oil palm on the Mira River. Sometimes they overlap, sometimes they dovetail, and sometimes they collide. They operate on various scales and have access to very different kinds and quantities of symbolic and material capital. They do not fight on even terrain; they confront each other under conditions of vast historical inequality. And yet, they coexist, not harmoniously, but in a fierce struggle to define human-nature relations.

GREEN MULTICULTURALISM

Concertación: "Preferimos los buenos acuerdos a las malas demandas"

Sitting in the air-conditioned port building I easily forgot that it was an unusually hot morning in Tumaco. We were in a large room with an ocean view and long tables arranged in the shape of a U. Manuel, the MIDAS¹⁵ officer who had called the meeting, sprawled confidently on a metal chair at the head of the U. This was the first time since I met him—during a particularly trying walk through the forest—that I thought he was adequately dressed in his slacks, dress shoes, and long-sleeved baby blue collar shirt. It was also the first time that he was not sweating profusely. The team of experts from *Palmas de Tumaco* sat to Manuel's

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right. A senior lawyer, an engineer, an administrator, a topographer, and the only woman on their team—the plantation’s activities and social coordinator—waited patiently as the community council members trickled in and sat on the opposite side of the room. The meeting began with a round of introductions.

The items on the agenda were five reported cases of invasion of the community council’s lands on the part of the plantation. José, who had worked at *Palmas de Tumaco* for twenty-two years, narrated his story, claiming that the plantation had invaded his land in violation of Ley 70. The lawyer replied that this was a simple matter to settle; all that was necessary was to follow the INCODER’s¹⁶ maps with technical precision. Aroldo, the community council’s legal representative and oldest member, intervened:

Well, we prefer good agreements over bad lawsuits. The reserve areas [of the collective territory] have been sacrificed, who is responsible for this? Since we are all among friends, let’s talk about how to solve this. This problem can be fixed with boundaries. Our elders used streams and fruit trees as boundaries, but if you pull out the *calabazo* we can no longer know where the boundaries were and we have to use cement.

Emiliano, the second complainant, presented his case. He related that in the more remote areas of his lot, where he had been unable to farm due to time and money constraints, the plantation had dug ditches to mark property boundaries. What ensued was a tense back and forth with differing versions of the events. The plantation’s lawyer claimed that Emiliano’s father had been given 20 hectares in the 1950s but that he had proceeded to invade a much larger area for his six children. Emiliano agreed that his he and his siblings had expanded his father’s land in order to “occupy the territory”—a common practice within collective titles—but that the adjoining lands where they had farmed did not belong to the plantation. To this, the lawyer responded with an indignant monologue: “Ese es el problema. Cogen ese título como si los ampara para la ampliación a futuro, pero tienen un poco de pelos y esa tierra no alcanza.” Then he proceeded to read aloud from the neighboring community council’s application for collective titling. His point in doing this was to emphasize that prior to Ley 70 all those lots were legally “empty” and therefore, Emiliano’s ancestors had no legal claim to them. Then, to show his faithful observance of the law and his good will, he reminded everyone that he had been in charge of legally proving that those lots were not empty, and that they were in fact inhabited by black people. He explained that this noble deed of his had facilitated the transformation of those territories’ land use permit from “natural reserve” to “agriculture,” thereby paving the road for collective titling. He ended with an offended look on his face, saying that he was taken aback by the community council’s affirmation that the plantation was taking lands from black communities, and to prove that this was not the case he held up a pile of documents saying: “We

¹⁶ INCODER, the Colombian Institute of Rural Development, is the state-agency in charge of executing agricultural policies and overseeing land tenure.

have the INCODER'S resolution here. There is official documentation that says 'from here to there and from there to here'. The State said to us 'this is yours'.

The discussion became heated at the lawyer's mention of "empty lots"—a reference to Colombia's infamous Ley 2, which in 1959 declared most territories on the Pacific vacant. There were two main areas of disagreement. The first was a debate regarding the legitimacy of the State's laws. While the *Palmas de Tumaco* team kept referring to the INCODER maps and titles as the unequivocal source of truth, the community council representatives expressed a deep skepticism towards their validity. Milena—the only other woman on the community council's side of the table—succinctly illustrated this with the following comment: "Desde que se hicieron las leyes, se hicieron las mentiras." The second point of contention was regarding the alleged advantage of the change in land use that the lawyer had referred to. While the lawyer maintained that this transformation—from natural reserve to agricultural use—had greatly benefited Tumaco's black farmers, Aroldo differed. He held that maintaining their territory's official land use as a natural reserve would have been far better because it would have deterred the entrance of exploitative industries and been far more compatible with their ancestral practices.

The meeting stretched over two hours during which some of the thorniest issues surrounding Ley 70 were touched. The discussions about the validity of the law and the superiority of differing land use practices evidenced a clear tug of war, a struggle to define a cultural politics of nature. And still, despite what could have been a highly volatile meeting, cordiality and negotiation reigned. Overall, although there was a constant throwing and dodging of accusations back and forth, the meeting was construed as "friendly" by both parties. As the meeting drew to a close, Ingeniero De la Torre added his concluding remarks:

We really do want to maintain good relations with you [...] let us start from a point of sincerity and good faith. When I arrived in Tumaco twenty-four years ago my role was to divulge oil palm cultivation and I looked for organizations to do it with. We always wanted to have the best of relations with the people, but we didn't have the kinds of organizations like the ones that exist today [...]. The problem is not that [black communities] have been violated, but that there were no organizations like yours that would take the reigns of their own destiny

Milena, who had been quietly scribbling in her notebook stood up and asked if she could read a poem that she had composed in the midst of the exchange. Its title, tellingly, was *concertación*.

I recount this meeting because it condenses neoliberal multiculturalism's domesticating effects as well as its crafty articulation with green capitalism (Hale 2005). First, on the Mira River, as black communities attained cultural rights, they became more legible—and therefore more supple—to the interests of the State and institutions of neoliberal development. It is not an accident that the facilitator and mediator of this meeting was a high-ranking MIDAS officer, or that the plantation

representatives constantly invoked the INCODER's authority. At a very basic level, simply by having their territories' coordinates fixed on a State-sanctioned map, the black inhabitants of the Mira River have become legible to the State and to international capital. This, of course, has had some beneficial consequences for them. Most notably, it positioned them as political actors that must be contended with, as participants that cannot be simply swept aside or easily invisibilized. Concretely, this visibility has contributed to halting the more overt forms of dispossession that were common prior to the passage of Ley 70. Plantation owners can no longer hire lawyers to draft concessions of *tierras baldías*, or even pay local *campesinos* sub-market rents for land use. The changes in land tenure brought about by Ley 70 created new multicultural subjects—*comunidades negras*—and new spaces of agricultural production—collective territories—that must be jointly dealt with.

But this visibility has a dark side. Ley 70 has also made it possible for those same agents of the State and international capital to identify, negotiate with, and co-opt the new political actors. In a sense, Ley 70 crystallized the interlocutors necessary to facilitate capital reproduction in spaces that had until then remained relatively illegible to its agents. The organizational process behind Ley 70's collective land titling did a lot of the hard work necessary to create neoliberal subjects: it rationalized previously unintelligible landscapes. As Ingeniero de la Torre aptly put it, prior to Ley 70 the crux of the conflict between black farmers and plantation owners was the *absence* of a legitimate interlocutor with which to negotiate. Or, put more bluntly, what used to be clearly evident as violence can now be presented as compromise. In Gramscian terms, we could say that consent has (mostly) replaced coercion in the struggle for hegemony. And while overt uses of force have not entirely disappeared, the maintenance and expansion of plantation landscapes is made possible through the work of persuasion.

The second domesticating effect of Ley 70 is the separation of legitimate and undeserving subjects of rights. In the case of neoliberal multiculturalism, Hale notes that the criteria of legitimacy tend to be standards of cultural authenticity. He explains that under official multiculturalism, the state no longer functions as an adversary of cultural rights, but rather, becomes the arbiter of those rights by determining who does and does not measure up to satisfactory standards of cultural difference. Like its colorless cousin, green multiculturalism also separates "authentic" and "inauthentic" subjects of cultural rights, but the criteria for legitimation are somewhat different. While neoliberal multiculturalism drives a wedge between cultural rights and access to resources, green multiculturalism puts natural resources in the hands of multicultural subjects while charging them with the responsibilities of "sustainable" resource exploitation, forest preservation, "green" energy alternatives and whichever other environmental concern is high on the global agenda. The key is not so much in separating cultural rights from resource control as in carefully proscribing the terms under which resource control must be undertaken. In the case of multicultural subjects—such as black communities—who have legal control over resources that are regarded as a source

of value for green capitalism—such as land—the conditions of cultural recognition get intricately tied to their promise to display appropriately “green” behavior. In other words, environmental friendliness gets construed as a cultural trait that defines black subjects’ authenticity and therefore determines whether they deserve special rights.

During a particularly tense moment in the negotiation between *Palmas de Tumaco* and the community council, the plantation’s lawyer openly lamented that black communities had received so many privileges that they had not taken full advantage of. He referred to the entrenched “underdevelopment” in black communities, blaming them—rather than the State for example—for their incapacity to rise out of poverty. This comment established “development” as the marker of success, as well as the easily legible signal of rational behavior. Always the congenial strategist, Aroldo intervened to counter the implication that black communities did not “measure up” and were therefore undeserving recipients of special rights:

What many people call development we call aggression. For us the best thing would be for these lands to have their animals and their plants. Not just now, but always. That dollar sign is what has destroyed and continues destroying. We have created a reserve area as buffers and for reforestation. When we cut down the *chanul* the *tatabra* (pecari) and the *perico* (parrot) left. They all followed the banks of the Mira River to Ecuador. The animals that lived in Puerto Palma migrated to Esmeraldas. We were not wrong, our ancestors were right.

His strategy with this intervention was twofold. First, he delegitimized development as an outdated measuring stick of rational behavior by presenting it as primitively aggressive. Then, he introduced and appropriated green multiculturalism’s own criterion of legitimation: environmental friendliness. By opposing it to “savage capitalism”, he established environmental friendliness as a morally superior criterion of evaluation; a test that black communities could easily pass.

Finally, it is important to note that these standards of authenticity also have built-in political constraints, and therefore the choice to occupy the newly created spaces of cultural difference can come at the cost of more expansive and utopian political visions. Faced with a strict set of rules of the multicultural game, black communities must decide whether to play or not. Those who play become legitimate political actors, while those who opt out are construed as unruly, or beyond the pale. As this meeting shows, the central qualities that the deserving subject of rights must exhibit have little to do with cultural authenticity. The criteria are instead centered on black subjects’ willingness to engage in conciliatory actions. The cleavage that separates “good” blacks from “bad” ones is their docility, and this docility is in turn opposed to “undesirable” racial traits. The result, as Hale notes, is a subtle remaking of the racial hierarchy through a differential racialization of

multicultural subjects who are willing to engage in *concertación* and those who are simply too radical.

After Milena read the poem, Marcia, the plantation's social coordinator, gave a short speech expressing how impressed she was by the community council's hard work and their willingness to collaborate with the plantation. In the end, she said, it was very gratifying to see that there existed an organization that shared *Palmas de Tumaco's* whole-hearted pursuit of the region's well being. Her congratulatory tone was clearly a seal of approval; as far as the plantation was concerned, the community council had been recognized as a "good" black organization, as legitimate recipients of rights, or as Hale would say, as *negros permitidos* (Hale 2006).¹⁷

Racionalidades: "Tierra que no produce, no sirve."

In general, on the Mira River spaces designated for commercial or self-subsistence production are interspersed with stretches of swampy forest, or *bosques de guandal*. This is not to say that there exists a neat delineation of wild and cultivated, for forests are also sites of commercial production and self-subsistence activities—through lumber extraction and hunting for example. Conversely, family farms, or *fincas*, are rarely disciplined spaces of agricultural production. They are, to go back to Tsing's terminology, weedy spaces of human-nature interaction. In fact, to my untrained eye, *fincas* were often indistinguishable from the forest. But despite *fincas'* weediness, locals do differentiate between them and the forest, which has varying degrees of wildness that range from *monte alzado* to *monte biche* and *monte bravo*.¹⁸ These categories, however, are not intrinsic designations of a given space and what was previously a *finca* can easily become *monte*, and vice-versa.

In the village of *Bajo Jagua*, those shifting spaces that locals temporarily designate as *fincas* have been put to many different uses over the past sixty years. Usually some portion of every *finca* is destined for subsistence crops such as rice, sugarcane, taro, and fruit trees, as well as medicinal plants. While this practice has remained fairly stable, the commercial activities that are undertaken in the remaining portions of a given *finca* have varied considerably: from raising cattle to cultivating cacao, plantain, coconut and most recently, oil palm. In 2001, Santiago, a local who is now in his late forties, heard that people in the neighboring collective territory had started planting oil palm with Cordeagropaz, a Tumaco-based organization that was creating associations of small-scale oil palm growers, *pequeños palmicultores*.¹⁹ Santiago approached Cordeagropaz officials and invited

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¹⁹ Cordeagropaz emerged in 1999 as Colombia's first *Alianza Estratégica Productiva*, a joint public-private business venture meant to foster economic development in rural areas. The initial thrust behind *alianzas estratégicas*, which was to create productive alternatives for peasants who eradicated illicit crops under Plan Colombia, was gradually molded under the fire of multicultural reform. What began as an effort to provide employment opportunities and social services to

them to *Bajo Jagua* to evaluate the possibility of creating a local palm-growers' association. After a few meetings and expert evaluations of the swampy lands, Cordeagropaz gave its approval, and the hard work of making local farmers into *pequeños palmicultores* began.

First, Cordeagropaz had to embark on the task of bringing local *campesinos* on board. Proponents of oil palm cultivation had to sell their idea as an unprecedented opportunity for black farmers to improve their socioeconomic conditions. In the main office of Cordeagropaz a poster showing black children playing in a well-equipped playground and a boatful of palm seeds in the foreground says it all: "*Palma de aceite, progreso para todos.*" But capitalism's unfulfilled promise of prosperity is nothing new. What is different under green multiculturalism is that proponents of development must employ an ethnic sensibility. Thus, the creation of small oil-palm business ventures was presented as an urgent necessity for black communities, who were construed as pre-capitalist societies in decline. Roberto, Cordeagropaz's business consultant described a situation in which the inevitable advance of capitalism had eroded black traditional labor:

The open economies that are so aggressive have broken down the culture of the *negritos* with their little canoes and their little coconut farms [...] When cash comes in, this structure of solidarity is broken, [...] the local modes of communal work—the *cuadrilla, junta de trabajo, cambio de mano*—are gradually lost (interview 10/29/09).

This narrative of cultural decadence functioned as the justification for the deployment of a whole set of disciplining technologies aimed at making multicultural subjects into green capitalists.

These efforts are clearly observable in the yearlong course that Roberto designed to train the new palm-growers. The workshops' training workshops have three distinct objectives. The most obvious of these is a decided effort to create entrepreneurs. The leaflets extol the virtues of associative labor units and carefully instruct farmers on everything from how to convert families into efficient productive units, to how to manage credit, build leadership, maintain workers' motivation, market their product, and keep accounting books. Each of the workshops is similarly organized. First, participants fill out an open questionnaire designed to assess their knowledge of the day's topic. The answers to the questions are then openly discussed in a collective reflection exercise that seeks to expose the group's "strengths" and "weaknesses." Finally, an intervention is made to remedy the diagnosed deficiencies. These sections, which are fittingly called "*Conozcamos*" or "Let's Learn" contain glossaries with definitions, lists of facts, and worksheets where participants practice their newly acquired skills.

campesinos involved in coca cultivation was quickly articulated with black and indigenous people's demands for state investment in economic development.

Although these workshops are presented as innocent efforts to teach practical skills, they are actually disciplining technologies. They are carefully designed to transform local farmers into entrepreneurs by changing those convictions and behaviors that are considered an obstacle to capitalist development. For example, the unit designed to teach farmers how to safely manage credit, craftily intertwines practical knowledge of bank loans with a discussion of trust. The first part of this workshop is dedicated to define trust as an essential social value and to encourage participants to be both trusting and trustworthy individuals. After that, it instructs pupils on interest rates, grace periods, IOUs, and the various State lending institutions in Colombia. The workshop's objectives are twofold. It seeks not only to create responsible borrowers, but most importantly, to convince skeptical farmers to take on loans. As if this interweaving of practical skills and capitalist rationalities were not clear enough, the workshop leaflet ends with a statement that explicitly inverts local farmers' logic regarding the risk and high cost of bank loans: "Recuerde, el crédito más costoso es el que no se tiene", "Remember, the most expensive loan is the one that you don't take."

The second main objective of the training course is to make black community members into proper multicultural citizens. This is equivalent to defining the *negro permitido*, in other words, a black multicultural subject who is sufficiently authentic and does not radically challenge the status quo. Because adequate multicultural citizens must exhibit and master two things—socially accepted standards of citizenship and manageable cultural difference—these interventions are necessarily two-pronged. On the one hand, they address topics such as "civic-mindedness and the culture of legality", "community organization and leadership", and "the role of the family in productive activities."²⁰ They are intended to instill the norms and duties of citizenship by presenting them as self-evidently desirable, by compelling participants to internalize the desire to become "better citizens."

The second part of producing multicultural citizens entails the management and normalization of cultural difference. This objective is most clearly observable in a workshop unit entitled "culture, territory, and economics." The handout for this workshop reinforces the official definition of blackness, for example by reviewing a superficial version of the history of slavery and by briefly pausing to consider Afrocolombians' contribution to the nation. It also repeats the stock phrases of multicultural political correctness for example by emphasizing the need to "protect Afrocolombians' cultural identity and rights as an ethnic group".²¹ At the same time, this reaffirmation of black cultural difference seeks to create an explicit link between "Afrocolombian culture" and particular uses of nature that are in turn construed as "green":

Traditional production practices are the agricultural, mining, forest, livestock, hunting, fishing, and gathering activities and techniques that black

²⁰ *Cartilla de Capacitación*

²¹ "[P]roteger la identidad cultural y los derechos [de los afrocolombianos] como grupo étnico."
Cartilla de Capacitación

communities have habitually used to guarantee the conservation of life and sustainable development.

In this way, cultural recognition becomes inextricably related to “green” practices, placing black communities with territorial control in a nearly inescapable position as “wardens of nature”.²²

The third and final area of intervention involves farming practices. Roberto modeled these training workshops after a publication entitled *El Diplomado de la Palma*, which consists of six modules with detailed instructions on how to build nurseries, prevent disease, manually pollinate, harvest, and generally maintain oil palms. The emphasis in these workshops is on what Roberto referred to as “*buenas prácticas agrícolas*”. Like the rest of the training units, these do not simply aim to build practical agricultural skills, but rather they seek to transform local forms of human-nature relating; they are landscaping technologies. To illustrate the depth of this intervention, it is useful to contrast the work of autonomous palm growers with the meticulous labor that is expected of *pequeños palmicultores*. In doing this, I find it useful to distinguish once again between work—as a non-capitalist form of transforming nature—and labor—as a distinctly exploitative manipulation of natural resources.

A small palm-grower in the making must first master the art of seed selection. A germinated seed of precise plumule and radicle size must be planted in a pre-nursery that is carefully traced and equipped with drainage canals. During its three months in the pre-nursery each seedling must be fertilized nine times with ammonium sulfate. After this, the first seedling selection process is done. Only plants with well-defined leaves, twenty to twenty-five centimeters tall, and growing at forty-five degree angles are chosen to be re-planted in the nursery. Once again, the instructions regarding the soil type, bag size, and method of replanting is meticulously prescribed. During their remaining nine months in the nursery, three different fertilizers—Triple 15, magnesium sulfate, and borax—are applied to each plant every other week. In addition, they must be watered daily and weeds must be manually removed. At the end of this yearlong process, there is a final selection of “normal” plants. Plants with leaves that are too upright or too limp are eliminated, as are those with leaflets that are too far apart or too close together, too abundant or discolored.

Even if the new palm-growers are given seedlings rather than seeds, they cannot escape the discipline of the plantation. They must first prepare the terrain where definitive planting will take place by eliminating all other vegetation and plowing the land. After this, the *palmicultor* must design the lot in a precise alignment. Each palm must be nine meters apart and each row must be 7.8 meters apart, making sure that palms in consecutive rows are not parallel to each other, but rather form an equilateral triangle. The seedlings are then carefully transported

and replanted making sure that the neck is not deep or too shallow. Once this is completed, a map of the lot is drawn in order to have an inventory of the plants and a graphic description of all natural and artificial waterways, as well as problem areas. Finally, kudzu is planted as a hedge plant to control soil erosion and maintain adequate humidity and nutrition.

The maintenance of oil palm lots is not particularly labor-intensive. Aside from building and maintaining drainage canals there are few other upkeep tasks involved. Mainly, a radius of 2.5 meters surrounding each palm must be kept free of weeds, the palms must be pruned once a year, and the spaces between rows must also be kept clear by manually eradicating weeds, mechanically mowing, and applying herbicides with pumps. Of course, the danger of disease must also be managed. In order to prevent catastrophic epidemics or pest invasions, farmers are instructed on disease prevention, early detection, and eradication techniques. If all goes well, an inexperienced but diligent palm-grower can expect that, three years after the definitive lot is planted, the palms will yield a harvest every ten to fifteen days. But the periodicity of this perennial harvest is only an estimate. *Palmicultores* must become experts at distinguishing ripe fruit bunches and skilled at using the telescopic tools to cut the stalk at just the right place. And even the most experienced palm cutter must then select and classify the bunches, which must be quickly transported to be processed in less than 24 hours, lest they become too acidic. More than extenuating labor, the optimization of both the quality and the quantity of palm oil involves constant supervision and precise timing.

Clearly, not all farmers follow these instructions to the t. But even if we account for substantial divergences from these rigid expectations, it is clear that the decision to become a *pequeño palmicultor* requires subjecting oneself to a regime that simultaneously disciplines humans and nature. Compare the injunctions of the *Diplomado de la Palma* with Milena's experience with a one-hectare lot of oil palms. A few years ago Milena took some loose seeds from neighboring lots and planted them in her backyard lot, where the palms grew in close proximity to her house. She interspersed the oil palms with plantain and other foodstuffs and timber. Her husband and two oldest sons pruned and harvested the palms on a flexible schedule and took the bunches out to the riverbank to be collected by the plantations' boats whenever the fruit was ripe. But Milena didn't keep her oil palms for very long. She realized that this irregular method of cultivation was not profitable in her own cost-benefit calculation. Put simply, it was too much hassle and too much money—in transportation and fertilizer costs—for very little gain. In the end, she and her husband decided to cut the oil palms down. When I visited her dooryard last year all that remained amidst plantain palms, various fruit trees, and a *zotea*, were a few oil palms, which she had decided to keep because they attracted *arditas*. *Arditas*, she explained, were insects that could kill cacao trees if they were not kept away by luring them with oil palms. In short, Milena and her family gave the oil palm plantation model a try and decided to abandon it. In the end, they did not entirely eradicate the oil palms but crafted a different type of relationship to them.

During one of our meetings, Roberto stated outright that the purpose of these training modules was to transform local farmers' rationalities. He hoped that these workshops would result in the internalization of cultural practices that would convert black farmers into *empresarios de la palma*, oil palm entrepreneurs. If these interventions were successful, Coordeagropaz would have succeeded in creating *pequeños palmicultores*, that is, green multicultural subjects with all the necessary characteristics to make them legitimate recipients of rights and of the State's socioeconomic programs: cultural authenticity, entrepreneurialism, and environmental friendliness. What makes green multiculturalism different is that it does not simply separate legitimate and undeserving subjects of rights, but rather it crafts new subjects who are both *negros permitidos* and green capitalists.

In June of last year I spoke to several members of Agromira in what ended up being an *ad hoc* riverside meeting. Sitting under a cement roof where locals hold public events, they enthusiastically recounted how the association was formed and narrated their personal experiences as palm-growers. Santiago, the visionary, said:

Thanks to [oil palm] cultivation people kept their lands, because lands that don't produce are no good. When your land is producing you don't want to sell it, you value it. The important thing is for people to work the land.

When I asked why they found oil palm cultivation attractive, Alberto explained:

We were all raised on cacao. There were years when the cacao was no good and the farm didn't produce. At first we thought that oil palm cultivation was economically hard, but today ours is one of the most thriving villages of the river.

We spoke for over an hour, comparing various crops in terms of profitability and labor-intensiveness. Tibercio, the current representative of Agromira, concluded with a noteworthy reflection that evaluated the overall experience of becoming a village of *pequeños palmicultores*:

The main mistakes were committed out of a failure to understand the production processes thoroughly, because we didn't trust ourselves. We were waiting for such and such to come and solve our problems and we didn't trust our own ability.

Los principales errores se dieron por no comprender bien los procesos, por no confiar en nosotros mismos. Nosotros esperábamos que fulano viniera a solucionarnos el problema y hoy podemos confiar en nuestra capacidad.

GREEN APOCALYPSE?

In March of 2010, I visited *Palmas de Tumaco* again. Once more, I rode in one of the company's four-by-fours and visited the nurseries, the water-treatment plant, a few cultivated lots, and the oil processing plant. But there were two important differences between the two visits. The first was that this time I was accompanying

the Lower Mira River's community council members, who were setting foot on company soil for the first time in their lives. Although our stated purpose was to verify whether the plantation was overstepping the boundaries of their property and invading the community council's collective lands, the visit turned into an *impromptu* tour complete with a sumptuous seafood lunch. After lunch, as we sipped coffee and discussed the next step of the negotiation, José, the former employee, leaned over and told me in a hushed voice that in the twenty-two years that he worked for *Palmas de Tumaco*, he had never been inside the main house. The reason for this splendid treatment, of course, was that we were accompanied by Manuel, the MIDAS officer that was mediating the land dispute.

Although this alone merits a thorough commentary, the second difference between the two visits was so overwhelming that it overshadowed everything else. On my first visit, I had been taken to a look-out point to appreciate the "green sea"²³ of oil palm spreading grandiosely across the plantation's five thousand hectares. Because on that occasion I was accompanied by a documentary film crew, our hosts offered to let us use the company helicopters to capture some aerial shots of the plantation. This time, the helicopters were put away because the company was drastically cutting costs. Although I had read and heard much about the fearsome disease that locals referred to as *la PC*, I was not prepared for what I witnessed: a seemingly endless oil palm cemetery. During the three years between my two visits, a fungal epidemic had ravaged the plantation killing more than eighty percent of the palms. We stopped by plots at various stages of decline. Some were just beginning to show the first signs of the disease—burnt lower leaves and a yellowed arrow—while on other plots all of the palms' leaves were completely dry and limp and we could make out the distinctly fetid smell of the palms' rotting hearts.

The plantation was hard hit by this mysterious epidemic.²⁴ Only 700 of an original 4500 hectares of oil palm had survived and the company was operating on a steady economic loss. But while a few other processing plants in the region had closed down, *Palmas de Tumaco* had decided to hold out. They were hopeful. The government had generously extended them the necessary funds to eradicate the diseased plants, and the Inter-American Institute for Cooperation on Agriculture (IICA) had quickly designed a hybrid seed that was more resistant to the disease. Aroldo, like many others, was highly skeptical about the hybrid's promised panacea and he was determined to make the most of the company's moment of weakness for the community council's advantage. Using his characteristically tactful tone he asked them if the plantation's owner had contemplated an alternative emergency plan, which he called "Plan B." Then, he subtly asked if he might be interested in selling the plantation's lands. To this, Ingeniero de la Torre responded with great conviction: "*Palmas de Tumaco* no tiene un Plan B porque estamos convencidos de que este híbrido va a ser la solución."

²³ This is Restrepo's term.

²⁴ Footnote on various theories of what causes the PC

They were not the only ones. When I asked Tibercio how Agromira's small-scale palm-growers were dealing with the disease, he responded with a detailed description of their renovation plan. He explained that the association was in the midst of negotiating with the Ministry of Agriculture to secure funds for eradication. Eradication was the most critical step of the renovation operation since the PC is highly contagious and small-scale farmers do not have access to the heavy machinery that plantations use to fell and chop the dead palms to prevent further spread. Also, Tibercio explained, thanks to Cordeagropaz, Agromira had secured renewed loans of approximately \$3600 per hectare to replant a hybrid oil palm seed. These loans, like the previous ones would not be directly disbursed to the farmers, but rather would be given in kind or as reimbursements for incurred expenses and performed labor. As for the original loans, a State-administered emergency fund (FONSA) bought the debt from the private banks and restructured the pay-schedule for the debtors. Although there was a seven-year moratorium on this old debt it was not condoned, so the oil palm entrepreneurs ended up taking on a double debt over a period of fifteen years.²⁵ But despite this double debt, according to Cordeagropaz's survey of affiliated palm-growers, 98% of those affected by the PC were willing to renovate their plots with hybrid seed.

In March of 2009, I sat with Raúl in the village school kitchen. Raúl was one of Agromira's 53 members and had cultivated six hectares of oil palm in 2002. Actually, although Raúl was the official member who had signed all the legal documents and taken on the responsibility of paying back the \$15,500 dollar loan, oil palm cultivation was a joint project that he shared with his five brothers. In 2001, he went through Cordeagropaz's intensive training course and three and half years after planting, Raúl and his brothers started harvesting fruit. The harvest was initially small—about 800 kilos—but steadily increased to reach fifteen monthly tons. When the harvest was large, Raúl and his five brothers would pay four additional men and recruit their wives' labor in order to collect all the seed bunches and get them to *Palmas de Tumaco* in time to process high-quality oil. The price that the company paid varied—from \$130 to \$180 U.S. dollars—as did the size of the harvest, but when business was good they collected up to two thousand dollars in one month. With this money he and his family fixed up their house and bought a motorboat, a TV, and a gas-powered generator. With enough cash to purchase the necessary gas to drive the motorboat to Tumaco, Raúl and his family bought basic foodstuffs in town and replaced their kerosene lamps with light bulbs. Overall, he summed up his assessment of incurring into the small-scale oil palm business by saying "life improved a bit".

But this bonanza only lasted a few years. In August of 2008 Raúl started noticing some burnt leaves on a few of his palms and Cordeagropaz's technicians recommended that he eradicate them. Although he immediately cut those sick plants down, the epidemic spread quickly. In order to eradicate all the remaining palms, he had to borrow an additional \$700 dollars, which were calculated into a

²⁵ The exact details on the debt.

second loan that had to be used for renovation. When we spoke in 2010, only six of his original 780 palms were left, but he had already replanted five hectares with the hybrid seed and was optimistic. While he waited for the new palms to yield and prayed for them not to get infected, he had negotiated a line of credit at a granary in Tumaco where he got the rice, sugar, oil and salt that his family needed. Plantain and fish were not a problem, Raúl said: “one can always lay out an overnight fishing net and hope to catch two or three fish”. And plantain is so plentiful in the region that even when one’s one farm was not yielding, a neighbor could always “lend” some out or exchange it for a day’s work. When I asked how any of his neighbors could afford to pay a *jornal* when Arcadio, Martín and Alberto had all reported having lost all of their oil palm to the PC, Raúl responded, “at the end of the day, in this village you only go hungry if you’re lazy ‘cause you can always walk out into the forest and gather *papa china* (*colosia esculenta*) and *pepepan* (*artocarpus artilis*).”

Epidemics on monoculture plantations are so common that this oil palm disease is almost unremarkable. In the Tumaco region alone, most monoculture crops—plantain, cacao, and coconut—have eventually gotten sick and died. From a biological perspective, it is not difficult to understand that large extensions of a single organism tend to magnify genetic weaknesses. In order to survive and thrive, organisms need to engage in relationships with other organisms. In its obsession with single-organism repetition, monoculture obstructs symbiosis. Obviously, this goes for human beings as well. In fact, most of the community council’s argument against oil palm cultivation is founded precisely on this premise. The community council is not opposed to what Raul described as “improving one’s life.” In fact, in order to urge the State to remedy the region’s socioeconomic conditions—by providing public services in their communities for instance—the community council constantly mobilizes a notion of “ethno-development” that is precisely about improving one’s life.²⁶ Their opposition to the spread of oil palm cultivation is not due to a perspective that sees tradition and development as inherently antagonistic, nor do they blindly defend a static notion of “afrocolombian culture”. Rather, their concern with the spread of oil palm inside their collective territory reflects a preoccupation with preserving symbiotic relations between people, plants, and animals. Put differently, oil palm cultivation as it is currently practiced on the Mira River by large-scale plantations and small-scale farmers is a landscaping project that conflicts with the community council’s desired configuration of humans and nonhumans.

These two landscaping projects (along with others) spread simultaneously across the terrain of the Lower Mira River’s collective lands. The outcome of their encounter is somewhat predictable due to the unevenness of their forces but its consequences cannot be entirely foretold. Sometimes, oil palm cultivation dovetails with locals’ pursuit of well-being. Whether the State and oil palm capitalists genuinely share this concern is almost irrelevant as long as locals’ objective of a better life is met. Both individuals and the community council are sometimes able to

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tap into the oil palm project and exploit its (symbolic and material) capital to their advantage. This is clearly evidenced by the Bajo Jagua's residents' commitment to oil palm cultivation. Although we could simply see their devotion to it—in spite of the devastating epidemic—as a result of false consciousness, this explanation is off the mark. Like other hegemonic projects, oil palm cultivation does in fact resonate with local farmers' interests otherwise it could only be implemented through the use of force. And although the use of force is not entirely absent from this ongoing battle, its more crude manifestations are no longer as frequent as they used to be. This is undoubtedly in part due to the existence of collective land rights. Ley 70 was an important landmark that helped local black farmers reign in the virtually unchecked expansion of oil palm plantations. In this sense, land titling was unquestionably necessary to halt any further dispossession.

But oil palm cultivation did not end with land titling and its continued spread needs explanation. What I suggest is that even antagonistic landscaping projects have points of convergence, or at a minimum, points of mutual indifference. The pursuit of well-being that I outlined above and that Raul described, is an example of one such point. The plantation is not opposed to the improvement of locals' quality of life, in fact they are willing to collaborate in reaching this goal so long as it does not ultimately obstruct their main goal, which continues to be the reproduction of capital. The two projects' goals provisionally coincide and therefore they can coexist and even collaborate. This resonates with Tsing's analysis of collaboration, which focuses on the productive potential of difference. Thinking counter-intuitively, Tsing suggests that what facilitates solidarity is not consensus, but rather disagreements "about what are supposed to be common causes and objects of concern" (Tsing 2004:245-246). These differences are precisely what generate the necessary "friction" that helps an issue gain enough traction to move. Clearly, locals' desire to "improve their life", the community council's notion of "ethno-development", and the plantation's effort to become a "motor of regional development" are not identical goals, but their divergences in fact facilitate collaboration and enable concrete action around issues that are in some measure important to all parties involved. In fact, these points of overlap between seemingly antagonistic landscaping projects can result in unforeseen synergies. I use synergy to refer to the interaction of two or more agents that produces a combined effect that is larger than the sum of their individual effects. This does not require voluntary collaboration or awareness. In other words, synergy can occur in spite of the agents' will and it can be unknowingly generated. If the PC had not violently crushed palm-growers' various dreams of "development" perhaps Cordeagropaz could have resulted in synergy. But this is perhaps a futile exercise.

But these points of convergence and synergy are highly unstable. Although some goals are provisionally shared we cannot ignore that at heart these landscaping projects have conflicting commitments to people and nature. And while some of these differences are manageable and productive, others are simply insurmountable. In other words, friction must be present in just the right quantity. Both too much and too little friction make it impossible for political projects to get

off the ground. And while friction is a productive force of resistance, when a force becomes purely oppositional it results in collision. This is best exemplified by the tragic death of Felipe Landázuri, a former treasurer of the Lower Mira River's community council. On June 24, 2008, several armed men showed up at Felipe's home in one of the lower-most villages of the river. They dragged him out of his house, took him to the edge of the village and shot him point-blank. At the time Felipe was the community council's treasurer and had been very vocal in his opposition to the spread of oil palm cultivation. Although the circumstances of his violent death have not been formally investigated, those closest to his work as a local leader are certain that he was murdered precisely because of this. The narrative that circulates among past and present community council members is that several plantation owners paid paramilitary hit men to silence him. Felipe's death makes it brutally clear that sometimes opposition is entirely antagonistic, and that for one landscaping project to prevail it must annihilate its adversary.

CONCLUSIONS: ON BEING "BLACK AND GREEN"²⁷

If green multiculturalism is a landscaping project, what kind of landscaping project is it and what are its consequences for the people, plants and animals that it seeks to configure in particular relations of power? First, green multiculturalism is a scale-making project. It actively seeks to claim the local, national, and global scales as the spatial dimensions on which its particular views can be projected and naturalized. For example, in order to garner the political and economic backing necessary to create Cordeagropaz and get it off the ground, its founders had to mobilize a discourse of development that simultaneously conjured various scales the regional and the national scale. The work to abandon the enclave economy in order to become a motor of regional development conjured the local scale while the the usual macroeconomic discourse of increased employment, comparative advantage, and export-led growth provided the tools with which to project their vision onto the national scale. Finally, the global scale was engaged by making reference to the central role of palm oil biodiesel in the alleged resolution of the world energy crisis. Scales, however, are not innocent frames to view the world, or simple units of geographic measure. Scale-making is in and of itself a political endeavor because it locates actors and gives them relative "size".

Second, green multiculturalism is a specific articulation of cultural recognition and nature politics. In the particular guise that it has acquired on the Lower Mira River perhaps its most perverse effect is the way in which it facilitates a conflation of environmentalism and green capitalism. In the first moment, black and indigenous subjects are recruited (both through consent and coercion) into green capitalist ventures and subsequently their very involvement in these undertakings serves to legitimate these endeavors as environmentally sound. Small-scale oil palm cultivation on the Mira River is a clear example of this dynamic. Black communities are extended the financial resources with which to exercise control over their

²⁷ Kiran's term

collective lands on condition that they be used for oil palm cultivation, and their participation in this industry is then used to market biodiesel as a clean energy source. In this way the circle of cultural and environmental legitimacy is completed.

Finally, the main difference between green multiculturalism and its colorless incarnations is that it does not seek to drive a wedge between cultural recognition and access to resources. Instead, green multiculturalism puts natural resources in the hands of multicultural subjects while charging them with the responsibilities of “sustainable” resource exploitation, forest preservation, “green” energy alternatives and whichever other environmental concern is high on the global agenda. The key is not so much in separating cultural rights from resource control as in carefully proscribing the terms under which resource control must be undertaken. In the case of multicultural subjects—such as black communities—who have legal control over resources that are regarded as a source of value for green capitalism—such as land—the conditions of cultural recognition get intricately tied to their promise to display appropriately “green” behavior. In other words, environmental friendliness gets construed as a cultural trait that defines black subjects’ authenticity and therefore determines whether they deserve special rights.

I wish to conclude by remarking on an unfortunate irony: what began as a self-conscious search for globally recognized eco-ethno alliances that would legitimate their “indigenous-like status” and put resource control in black communities’ hands as a weapon against development-driven colonization of their territories, ended up placing these black farmers at the very heart of capitalism’s advance. While it is true that small-scale palm cultivation does not evoke the specter of accumulation by dispossession, it has nonetheless recruited Colombia’s black communities into capitalist ventures that contradict their vision of *ethno-development*. The irony turns to tragedy when it becomes clear that in their efforts to secure control of natural resources, black multicultural subjects have become full-fledged stakeholders in green capitalism’s industries. These palm growers are no longer proletariats who resist labor exploitation; nor are they landless *campesinos* who wage deadly battles against the landowning class. They are small-scale entrepreneurs, that is, “fellow” investors in the oil palm business who participate under deeply unequal conditions. Unlike their large-scale counterparts, *pequeños palmicultores* provide the land, exert the labor, and take on the full risk without the access to the symbolic and material capital that the former have. At the end of the day, if this model of industrial agriculture continues on Afro-Colombian collective lands, the land titles might end up being the most efficient means to appropriate black farmers’ lands without ever invading or legally owning them.

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- i
 - ii Martha ospina
 - iii ibid

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