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Extractive Violence

The Global Political Economy of Sexual and Environmental Violence in Colombia

ENGLISH

ABSTRACT

Despite the formalization of the 2016 peace agreement in Colombia, sexual violence and environmental degradation persist as structural conditions that disproportionately affect marginalized populations and the territories in which they live. This paper theorizes these interwoven forms of violence as systematically produced by extractive capitalism that articulates through colonial and gendered socio-ecological relations of power. Drawing on the concept of the "coloniality of violence" (Sachseder 2023), the analysis demonstrates how economic, socio-ecological, and symbolic 'gains' function as structural drivers for both sexual and environmental violence. These gains—whether material or immaterial, social or ecological—sustain conditions in which violence is not only normalized but also intensified as a means of reproducing power asymmetries.

Rather than constituting incidental or residual phenomena, sexual and environmental violence operate as mutually reinforcing mechanisms that consolidate a broader architecture of socio-ecological, political, and economic inequality. These forms of violence are not extraneous to extractive capitalism but foundational to its operation and simultaneously facilitate capital accumulation while stabilizing (post)colonial hierarchies of power. By positioning sexual and environmental violence as an intrinsic logic of extractivist economies—rather than an aberration, by-product, or temporary rupture—this paper argues that extractive capitalism represents a fundamental, yet frequently overlooked, impediment to peace for both humans and non-humans in Colombia.

DEUTSCH

Extraktive Gewalt. Die globale politische Ökonomie sexueller und ökologischer Gewalt in Kolumbien

Trotz der Formalisierung des Friedensabkommens von 2016 in Kolumbien bestehen sexuelle Gewalt und Umweltzerstörung weiterhin als strukturelle Bedingungen fort, die marginalisierte Bevölkerungsgruppen und deren Lebensräume überproportional betreffen. Dieser Beitrag theoretisiert diese verflochtenen Gewaltformen als systematisch hervorgebracht durch den extraktiven Kapitalismus, der sich über koloniale und vergeschlechtlichte sozio-ökologische Machtverhältnisse artikuliert. Unter Rückgriff auf das Konzept der „Kolonialität der Gewalt" (Sachseder 2023) wird aufgezeigt, wie ökonomische, sozio-ökologische und symbolische „Gewinne" als strukturelle Triebkräfte sowohl sexueller als auch ökologischer Gewalt fungieren. Diese Gewinne – ob materiell oder immateriell, sozial oder ökologisch – sichern Bedingungen, unter denen Gewalt nicht nur normalisiert, sondern auch intensiviert wird, um Machtasymmetrien zu reproduzieren.

Sexuelle und ökologische Gewalt stellen dabei keine zufälligen oder randständigen Phänomene dar, sondern wirken als sich gegenseitig verstärkende Mechanismen, die eine umfassendere Architektur sozio-ökonomischer, politischer und ökologischer Ungleichheit konsolidieren. Diese Gewaltformen sind dem extraktiven Kapitalismus nicht äußerlich, sondern konstitutiv für dessen Funktionsweise: Sie ermöglichen Kapitalakkumulation und stabilisieren zugleich (post)koloniale Machtordnungen. Indem sexuelle und ökologische Gewalt als innere Logik extraktivistischer Ökonomien – und nicht als Ausreißer, Nebenprodukt oder temporäre Unterbrechung – positioniert werden, argumentiert dieser Beitrag, dass der extraktive Kapitalismus ein grundlegendes, jedoch häufig nicht beachtetes Hindernis für Frieden in Kolumbien darstellt – sowohl für menschliches als auch für nicht-menschliches Leben.

| KEY WORDS

sexual violence; environmental violence; extractive Capitalism; gender; coloniality; peace; conflict; Colombia

sexuelle Gewalt; ökologische Gewald; extraktiver Kapitalismus; Gender; Kolonialismus; Frieden; Konflikt; Kolumbien

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1 Introduction[1]

In October 2016, Colombia's National Unity government, led by President Juan Manuel Santos Calderón, signed a ceasefire agreement with the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia—the People's Army (FARC-EP), the country's longest-standing insurgency, to end one of the most protracted conflicts in history. Since the 1970s, this war has involved multiple actors—including paramilitaries, drug cartels, guerrilla groups, the state, and transnational corporations (TNCs)—competing for political, military, and economic control. The conflict has resulted in over 220,000 deaths and has displaced more than seven million people, with women, particularly those of Afro-Colombian and Indigenous descent, disproportionately affected by sexual violence and environmental degradation (cf. Miroff 2016; Grattan 2021; Ulloa 2023).

Despite numerous peace negotiations since the 1980s, most notably the failed demobilization of the right-wing paramilitary groups in 2003, sustained peace has remained elusive. It is therefore the 2016 peace agreement that sparked hope for a lasting 'postliberal' peace (cf. Paarlberg-Kvam 2021; Yoshida/Céspedes-Báez 2021). It not only involved civil society but also addressed gender, race, class, land, and environmental issues. Yet, despite progress, specific forms of violence, including sexual violence and environmental degradation, have persisted and disproportionately affected women and marginalized communities. These include Afro-Colombians, Indigenous peoples, and *campesinos* (peasants) as well as Environmental Human Rights Defenders (EHRDs), making Colombia one of the most dangerous countries for activists in Latin America (cf. Ulloa 2023; Yoshida/Céspedes-Báez 2021; Ganzenmüller et al. 2022; Salazar et al. 2022, Murillo-Sandoval et al. 2023). In Colombia's post-peace agreement context, EHRDs often serve as the last line of defense for ecosystems, biodiversity, and the cultural survival of Indigenous and local communities with deep-rooted ties to their land and territories (cf. Krause et al. 2025). Yet, how is it possible that violence continues at the same time as peace is declared—*and why is it so easy for them to get away with it, without sanctions or an international outcry*?

To approach this puzzle, this paper will explore the intersections of extractive capitalism, gender and coloniality as significant yet often overlooked barriers to achieving genuine peace in Colombia. Drawing on the concept of the "coloniality of violence" (Sachseder 2023), the paper will analyze how violence is rationalized, sustained, and rendered invisible in

1 A portion of the fieldwork data, analysis and research has been published as a scientific article in several peer-reviewed journals and chapters, including e. g. the *International Feminist Journal of Politics*, *Globalizations*, *Handbook of Security Studies: Critical Perspectives* (Oxford University Press 2022); CAPAZ (2022), Rosa Luxemburg's foundation (2022), and finally in my book manuscript *Violence against women in and beyond conflict: The coloniality of violence* (Routledge 2023).

so-called times of "peace." It argues that economic, social, and symbolic "gains" function as a foundation for violence. These gains—whether material or immaterial, social or ecological—create an environment in which sexual violence and environmental degradation are not only tolerated but often exacerbated as a necessary means of maintaining power and control.

Sexual violence and environmental degradation as means of maintaining power

Whilst not side-lining the relevance of guerrilla groups and drug-traffickers in perpetrating violence—and in the latter case, also financing paramilitaries—the paper primarily focuses on the triad state/paramilitary/TNC. Drawing on in-depth fieldwork in 2016 and 2017 in Colombia corroborated with peer-reviewed research, studies by Colombian civil-society organizations, professional think tanks and the Colombian 'Truth Commission', it will elucidate how TNCs in the extractivist sector (e. g. oil, coal or gold) and the state—both understood as two kinds of "investors" in land yet to be "cleared for investment"—are entrenched in exacerbating local forms of domination that may eventually (directly or indirectly) produce sexual and environmental violence to gain control over so-called sacrifice zones—i. e. economically significant and resource rich environments yet peripheral and marginalized—for the production of profit. Both contract local militias, mainly paramilitaries, for various purposes. However, the violence is eventually (and perhaps implicitly) *outsourced* for the implementation of mega-projects (such as those by large companies) and for maintaining the state's own prevailance and the country's position in the global market (cf. Grajales 2021; Maher 2015, 299; Sachseder 2020; Sachseder 2023). At the same time, this political economy of profit is not separate from intersectional constructions of gender and race. As most post- and decolonial scholarship, I begin with the premise that colonialism constitutes a critical historical juncture in which (post)colonial identities have been constructed in opposition to European ones and come to be seen as Europe's "Other". My analysis builds on the concept of the "Other" (cf. Fanon 1968; Said 1978) within the "colonial power matrix" (cf. Quijano 2000). The "Other" is not seen as entirely human; but always-already positioned as inferior, dangerous, enslaved, and thus denied the (social) existence of the human and not endowed with subjectivity (cf. Howell/Richter-Montpetit 2019, 6). In this

colonial matrix, different degrees of value are produced with some being positioned as valuable and thus worthy of protection, while others appear almost 'value-less.' The life of those Othered is thus always already made vulnerable in and of itself (cf. Fanon 1968; Lugones 2007).
In combination, this paper will contribute to expanding the understanding of sexual violence not in isolation of but as intersecting with environmental degradation. Both are expressions of global and local inequalities and a tool for domination and appropriation of extractive capitalism. This conceptualization of violence as part of a broader architecture of socio-ecological, political, and economic inequality shifts the focus away from purely individual or situational explanations. Instead, it highlights how patriarchal, colonial, and capitalist structures systematically enable and reproduce both forms of violence across different societal contexts. The paper concludes by demonstrating that a critical analysis of capitalism, when integrated with a gender- and race-informed perspective, is essential for understanding the structural conditions, dynamics, and intersections of sexual and environmental violence—both within and beyond the context of armed conflict. This approach reveals how these forms of violence are not merely contingent outcomes of conflict but are embedded in broader systems of power that sustain and reproduce socio-ecological inequalities.

2 Contextualization of Colombia's armed conflict

Colombia's six-decade armed conflict has involved insurgent groups (notably FARC-EP and ELN), state forces, and far-right paramilitaries, with civilians—especially rural, Indigenous, and Afro-Colombian communities—bearing the brunt of displacement and violence. While the conflict is rooted in longstanding land inequality and political exclusion, from the 1980s onward, it became increasingly entangled with drug economies, territorial control, and the expansion of extractive and agro-industrial frontiers (cf. CNMH 2016; CEV 2022; Rey Sabogal 2008). Between the 1980s and 2010s, transnational corporations—particularly in mining, oil, palm, and other agro-industrial sectors—entered and expanded across conflict-affected regions. Several ranked among the country's twenty most profitable firms (cf. Richani 2008). In the 1990s, foreign direct investment (FDI) grew at an average annual rate of roughly 55 % (cf. Richani 2008). Paramilitary groups were pivotal to making these ventures

"viable": they cleared land, terrorized and displaced communities, and suppressed labour, environmental, and human-rights organizing around projects (cf. CNMH 2016; CEV 2022; Indepaz 2020; Vélez-Torres/Méndez 2022). Over nearly six decades, an estimated 6.6–8 million hectares were expropriated by armed actors, much of it later consolidated by criminal networks, large landowners, and corporations (cf. International Crisis Group 2021). After the 2016 peace accord with FARC-EP, violence did not uniformly recede; in many zones, state absence, criminal reconfiguration, and commodity pressures drove sharp increases in deforestation and new rounds of land clearance (cf. International Crisis Group 2021). Hence, the Colombian conflict is not only a war among local armed actors; it is also a struggle over territory and the distribution of environmental harms and benefits along global commodity chains (cf. Gómez et al. 2015).

Dispossession under the cover of formal legality and privatized coercion

A number of Colombian and transnational companies have faced investigation for financing paramilitary structures that enabled environmentally destructive activities (cf. Benítez 2023). The *Environmental Justice Atlas* (https://ejatlas.org/ [22.09.2025]) lists 50+ documented environmental conflicts tied to mining and resource extraction in Colombia, with scholars and advocates noting that many more remain unregistered. In this setting, paramilitary and drug-trafficking groups have often functioned as armed enforcers for extractive firms: while corporate entry is framed as lawful investment, it has frequently coincided with cycles of intimidation, assassinations, and mass violations aimed at securing access to land and subsoil wealth (cf. Ramos 2022). A frequently cited illustration of the legal-economic dynamics is Cargill's 2010–2012 acquisition of 52,576 hectares in the Altillanura. Using 36 shell companies to fragment purchases, the firm may have sidestepped legal limits on land concentration—amassing more than 30 times the cap for a single owner (cf. Oxfam 2013, 2). From agribusiness expansion to mining concessions and beyond, such practices reflect a broader pattern of accumulation via the means of dispossession under the cover of formal legality and privatized coercion. In response to growing attention on human rights and the global push for responsible business conduct, corporate security strategies have increasingly been rebranded and "softened" (cf. Jakobsen 2021). Contemporary resource extraction companies emphasize relationship-building and

the financing of local development initiatives (cf. Blowfield/Dolan 2014; Owen/Kemp 2017; Sesan et al. 2013). They present themselves as key actors in creating employment and driving economic growth in impoverished regions (cf. Barbier 2010; Singh/Bourgouin 2013; Wilson 2016), and even as contributors to democratic governance (cf. Rettberg 2013). Yet, TNCs are involved in the production or transformation of violence, which will be revealed and analyzed here on the example of La Guajira, Colombia.

3 Approaching sexual and environmental violence theoretically.

3.1 State of the art

"People tend to agree on the vital importance of peace, but there is no consensus on what peace is and even less so on how it can be accomplished and secured" (Kurtenbach 2017).

It is only recently, that peace and conflict scholarship has started engaging in questions of how social, economic, and political conditions for peace can be strengthened through environmental politics and management (cf. Ide et al. 2023; Cóbar et al. 2022). Emerging against the backdrop of increased debate around the links between environmental scarcity and conflict, environmental peacebuilding as both a field and practice rests upon the assumption that the mutual benefits of cooperation outweigh the self-interested rationale of conflicts and can contribute to the pacification of coupled human–natural systems in a durable and multifaceted manner (cf. Dalton 2011; Dombrowsky 2009; Dresse et al. 2019; Henderson 2013; Cóbar et al. 2022).

The assumption that the mutual benefits of cooperation outweigh the self-interested rationale of conflicts

Environmental peacebuilding offers an approach for the conflict-sensitive and sustainable management of renewable natural resources that supports sustainable and resilient peace in conflict-affected or post-conflict states by making explicit the links between the environment and conflict prevention, the management of natural resources, climate security, (post)disaster risk reduction, and peacebuilding efforts between communities (cf. Ide et al. 2023; Yoshida/Céspedes-Báez 2021).

While this scholarship has raised crucial practical and normative questions, more attention needs to be paid to intersectionality (cf. Kappler/Lemay-Hébert 2019), race, gender, and class (cf. FitzGerald 2023), "ethnicization" (cf. Cárdenas 2023) and racial capitalist violence (cf. Azarmandi 2023; Daniel Cruz 2021). Feminist and decolonial approaches have already offered reconceptualizations of peace by deconstructing mainstream binaries between self/other, public/private, high politics/the everyday, market/state and peace/war (cf. Allison 2015; LeBaron 2015; Elias/Roberts 2016; LeBaron 2015; S. V. Peterson 2012; V. S. Peterson 2010; Sanmiguel-Valderrama 2007). Through these works, they have shown how gendered and racialized constructions as well as structural sources of inequality not only produce violence in conflicts but may also contribute to worsening the security and safety of women and marginalized groups through e. g. sexual violence or displacements in peacebuilding (cf. Ryan/Almagro 2024)—a process feminists have conceptualized as "conflict continuum" (cf. Boesten 2014; Cockburn 2004). These accounts have not only advocated for women's inclusion and participation in peacebuilding (cf. Boutron 2018; Céspedes-Baéz/Prieto-Rios 2017) but have also argued for a more fundamental decolonial critique of (post)liberal peace that includes e. g. Indigenous claims to land rights (cf. Cárdenas 2023; FitzGerald 2023) and critically engage with postcolonial hierarchies in knowledge production processes (cf. https://www.postcolonial-hierarchies.net/ [12.09.2025]), providing key insights into the entanglements of knowledge and violence that Brunner (2020) importantly conceptualizes as epistemic violence.

Entanglements of knowledge and violence

Hence, these approaches offer expanded definitions of peace that suggest continuity between different forms of violence; foreground the diverse and crucial roles of women and marginalized groups in conflicts and peace processes; center on gender, race and coloniality as social and symbolic relations of power and provide starting points for delving into human and non-human interaction.

Yet, more needs to be done to understand and address the structural sources of both conflict and post-conflict violence and the ensuing obstacles to peace. The paper therefore integrates political ecology and political economy approaches to violence and peace. These have long documented how extractive industries have historically relied on threats and violence to gain access to land and natural resources, as well as to suppress resist-

ance (cf. Ballard/Banks 2003; Kirsch 2014; Le Billon 2001; Middeldorp/Le Billon 2019).

In particular, Political Ecology engages with the causes and consequences of uneven power relations over natural resources that may contribute to environmental degradation, conflicts and violence (cf. Brand/Wissen 2017; Forsyth 2008; Le Billon/Duffy 2018; Mostafanezhad/Dressler 2021; Paulson et al. 2003)—a phenomenon that some have recently termed environmental violence. Rather than only using terms like environmental degradation, these scholars push for considering environmental harms as violence, i. e. a "human-produced pollution" (Marcantonio 2023, 860), "due to toxic and non-toxic pollutants put into a local—and concurrently the global—ecosystem through human activities and processes" (Marcantonio 2023, 861). This results in both unequal access to environmental 'goods', including water, air and fertile land, and in an unequal burden of environmental 'bads', such as pollution, risks and threats to health, livelihoods and identities (cf. Scheidel et al. 2020, 2). Environmental violence thus tends to go unnoticed (cf. Nixon 2011, 2) until its effects start manifesting in the loss of e. g. biodiversity, pollution (cf. Watts 2001) or the occurrence of illness (cf. Barca 2014; Furley et al. 2018; Iengo/Armiero 2017).

Environmental violence tends to go unnoticed

While political ecology has gained widespread attention with the increasing debate on climate change, how environmental violence intersects with gendered violence and how extractive industries are complicit in or mitigate their perpetuation in peacebuilding requires further attention (cf. Holterman 2014). The paper therefore draws on International Political Economy (IPE) to unpack the relationship between extractivism and violence. Scholars have studied extractivism as an economic activity; as a historically present development model (cf. Alimonda et al. 2011); and as a particular set of logics that is simultaneously the cause and consequence of colonialism (cf. Shapiro/McNeish 2021). Economically, extractivism refers to the high intensity of resource extraction, the high concentration of value chains, the exportation in unprocessed form or with minimal processing, the accompanying environmental degradation, and the deterioration of working conditions (cf. Gudynas 2015; see also Dunlap 2020). As a development model, it has led to a division of land into extraction points both in the peripheries and thriving centers of

power that benefit from such extraction at little cost to them. This creates sacrifice zones, defined as "geographic areas impaired by environmental damage or economic disinvestment" (Shapiro/McNeish 2021, 5; see also Lerner 2010). As a logic, extractivism is based on the commodification of nature, the externalization of environmental costs and risks, and colonial patterns of thought and action (cf. Bertinat/Argento 2022; Svampa 2019; Svampa 2022). This logic legitimizes and presents exploitation as natural, and perversely renders the act of exploiting equivalent to the possessing of such land (cf. Durante et al. 2021).

Rendering the act of exploiting equivalent to the possessing of land

In addition to a conceptualization of extractivism, IPE offers an understanding of why particularly countries on the periphery of global capital continue to invest in extractivism (cf. Jakobsen 2022). They are not only likely to bear the disproportionate cost of systemic crises or structural adjustment measures by international financial institutions (cf. Patomäki 2008; Svampa 2019); they also collect substantial rents by making their natural resources available for extraction by e. g. TNCs (cf. Escobar 1995; Meger 2016). To protect such economic interests, the state may directly step in or outsource violence to local armed forces to achieve these ends (cf. Schmidt 2012). Yet, IPE has so far only marginally addressed both ecological and gendered and colonial relations of power that underpin violence in both conflict and post-conflict.

My contribution builds on these streams of work to shed light on the interrelationships between the global political economy and (post)colonial formations of state and society in the production of sexual and environmental violence. This approach expands the understanding of sexual and environmental violence by showing the continuities between different forms of violence and their structural embedding in colonial, patriarchal and capitalist social orders.

3.2 Towards an integrated theorization of sexual and environmental violence as coloniality of violence

The article draws on and further explores the concept of "coloniality of violence" (Sachseder, 2023) to 1) theorize the interconnectedness and multidimensionality of gender within the same power structures in the

production of sexual and environmental violence (cf. Crenshaw 1989; Yuval-Davis 2006); and 2) connect intersectionality with colonial (dis-) continuities and extractive capitalism. For this purpose, the paper adopts a non-essentialist view of the concepts of "woman", "those marginalized" and "nature" to shed light on the ways in which their needs and vulnerabilities derive from "historically and culturally specific patterns of practices, processes and power relations that render some groups or persons more disadvantaged than others" (Resurrección 2017, 78). These processes are understood intersectionally, i. e. as constitutive of gender and race hierarchies (cf. Mollett/Faria 2013; Sato/Alarcón 2019) that articulate through coloniality. These relations construct women and nature as separate yet somehow related categories, i. e. as (id)entities that are thought and enacted as always-already inferior, rendering them inherently controllable, exploitable, and ultimately disposable, and hence a primary target of violence (cf. Bullard 2000; Hurni et al. 2015). Drawing on the notion of a "conglomerate of sociopolitical relations that discipline humanity into full humans, not-quite-humans, and nonhumans" (Weheliye 2014, abstract), these processes of (de)valuation and (de)humanization are understood as producing both forms of violence as multidimensional and long-term processes that occur directly, structurally or slowly and "gradually and out of sight" (Nixon 2011). Rather than understanding violence as an isolated one-time "discrete event" (Duncanson 2008, 16) with a clear beginning and an end (cf. Boesten, 2014; Eriksson Baaz/Stern 2013; Gray/Stern 2019), the paper thus goes beyond "exceptionalist" (Eriksson Baaz/Stern 2018, 306) notions of gendered and environmental violence as only common during conflict towards an analysis of their persistence in so-called "sacrifice zones" (Lerner 2010), which depend on disposable humans and environments (cf. Barca 2014; Furley et al. 2018; Nixon 2011).

Beyond exceptionalist notions of violence

For this purpose, particular attention is placed on how violence is instrumentalized and facilitated by extractivist industries through the "outsourcing of both the means and labour of resource extraction and accumulation" (Meger 2016). From this perspective, the paper analyzes extractive capitalism as a decisive and persistent power in the coloniality of violence: Either through temporal displacement by investing in long-term capital projects that "defer the re-entry of current excess capital

values into circulation well into the future" (Harvey 2006, 64) or through spatial displacements by opening up new markets, new production capacities as well as new resource, social and labour possibilities elsewhere (cf. Harvey 2006). This may result in a cycle that perpetuates violence and likely has detrimental, yet uneven effects on the security and safety of women, marginalized groups and the environment in contexts of peacebuilding (cf. Castañeda Camey et al. 2020) through pollution, the degradation of ecosystems and contamination (cf. Yoshida/Céspedes-Báez 2021) as well as the disruption of local economies, livelihoods and safe living conditions.

Taken together, beyond a purely additive model of oppression that sees violence as isolated from gender, race and capital, sexual and environmental violence are understood as part of an interconnected system that creates the power differentials that give rise to violence. Both are thus more than just the sum of different mechanisms of oppression; they manifest in complex, contextually contingent systems of meaning and power.

4 Approaching sexual and environmental violence methodologically

Taking seriously the lived experiences of violence in (post)colonial contexts as "the foundation of an-other possible rationality" (Grosfoguel 2011, n. p.), this article draws on extensive ethnographic field research conducted in conflict-affected regions of Colombia. Across two phases of fieldwork (2016 and 2017), I engaged in conversations with more than eighty individuals—primarily feminist and environmental activists as well as women directly impacted by both endemic and overt forms of violence. Complementary interviews with FARC combatants and military soldiers serve largely to contextualize the empirical analysis presented here.

During this research, I visited regions historically subjected to violent colonization and, more recently, targeted by national and transnational economic actors engaged in processes of expropriation, dispossession, and environmental degradation. These dynamics are not confined to the sites under study but mirror broader patterns across Colombia, where geopolitical and strategic considerations—particularly the proximity to natural resources such as coal, oil, and gold—have spurred paramilitary expansion alongside corporate investment by companies including Car-

bones Cerrejón, B2Gold, Corona Goldfields, and Kedhada Resources S.A. (cf. Petras/Veltmeyer 2014). Such regions exhibited high levels of violence against both women and the environment. Many of the women with whom I spoke lived in resource-rich, yet politically and economically marginalized territories along the Pacific and Atlantic coasts, such as Chocó, Sucre, and La Guajira. Throughout the war, they endured structural and overt violence, often leading to dispossession and disruptions of identity. Women marked as "Other" were particularly vulnerable, facing intensified threats to their bodily integrity and security, which further entrenched their marginalization. For many interlocutors, the entanglement of state institutions, paramilitary forces, and corporate actors reproduced and exacerbated cycles of violence.

Whose stories are told and whose voices are silenced?

Writing about violence and conflict is itself a political and power-laden act, situated within broader struggles over whose stories are told and whose voices are silenced. As Tuhiwai Smith (2013) reminds us, research has become "one of the dirtiest words in the indigenous world's vocabulary." I approached this project with the recognition that research is never neutral but always embedded in the ideologies of those who design, fund, and publish it (cf. Sinclair 2003). Rather than entering the field uncritically, I engaged in sustained reflection on these issues, consulting with interlocutors, colleagues, and relevant scholarship on epistemic violence (cf. Spivak 1999) and epistemic extractivism (cf. Suárez-Krabbe 2013). Critical fieldwork, I argue, demands such reflexivity, treating research as a shared and ongoing endeavor that extends beyond the boundaries of one's own work. This process was at times marked by discomfort but also opened up new perspectives (cf. Basini 2016). Accordingly, I understand research as a continual effort to grapple with its inherent contradictions and tensions. Acknowledging the inevitable limitations of ethnographic inquiry, and the impossibility of capturing the full complexity of Colombia's history and experiences of war, this paper offers a situated reading of the structures of gendered and environmental violence linked to the conflict—particularly through the lens of women's experiences. These experiences demonstrate that violence often persists well beyond the formal processes of demobilization and demilitarization.

5 The global economy of extractive violence

"This is one of the main causes of sexual violence here, because transnational companies have spread terror and criminality throughout the country. It is like once again; the Spanish are invading us. They have invaded us again. […] It is indigenous and Afro-descendant women who continue to suffer the most" (Focus group discussion 2017).

This excerpt stems from a focus group discussion with two Afro-descendant women, Tatiana and Ana, in 2017. It illustrates how understandings of Colombia's armed conflict are shaped by the locus of enunciation and raises critical questions about the role of (post)colonial asymmetries and transnational capital in sexual violence and environmental degradation—issues that will be further elaborated in the following.

A strategic zone for resource extraction, drug trafficking, and contraband

One of the departments I have worked in is La Guajira on Colombia's Caribbean coast. With its ports and abundant coal resources, La Guajira serves as a strategic zone for resource extraction, drug trafficking, and contraband. The department is also home to the large Indigenous Wayúu population. During several months of fieldwork, I primarily stayed with feminist activists who linked the violence they experienced to gendered and racialized power relations, and transnational corporations (TNCs) financing paramilitary groups. Despite their diversity and internal hierarchies and conflicts, the Wayúu share a history of colonial oppression and, more recently, violent encounters with the Cerrejón mine, one of the largest open-pit coal mines in the world and the largest in Latin America (cf. Goyes et al. 2017). It is currently co-owned by Anglo American, BHP Billiton, and Glencore, each holding an equal 33.3 % stake. While the FARC operated in the southern part of the region and occasionally targeted Cerrejón in the 1990s, paramilitary groups gained influence through alliances with drug traffickers and the state. The mine has destroyed the ecosystem, increased water pollution and deepened marginalization and "sowed terror among the communities" (Interview with Jeimy 2017). Women reported severe attacks and sexual violence (cf. Healy et al. 2019; Gomez 2007), and communities near the project were forcibly displaced just before mine expansion (cf. Human Rights Watch 2001; ABColombia 2020).

"The impact of transnationals on women is serious. So, when they want to buy land, they call the paramilitaries to bribe people, and if people do not sell their land, they have to leave, they are displaced, leaving everything behind" (Interview with Dayana 2017).

While gendered power relations had long existed and women had actively resisted patriarchal hierarchies, sexual violence had been socially unacceptable and harshly sanctioned. They attributed this, in part, to the matrilineal structure of Wayúu society, where women were considered sacred and played a central role in social, economic, and political life. However, the violence they experienced undermined these structures and positionalities. As Clara explained, raping and killing a Wayúu woman was tantamount to the extermination of the entire Indigenous community:

"Well, the impacts of the armed conflict: They killed indigenous women, that has a sociological and cultural impact, and it affects us massively: because the relevance of the people is lost. If they kill a woman in the Wayúu community, it affects the continuity of the people because we follow the matrilineal structure. The relevance continues because it affects our children when a Wayúu woman is raped. Killing a Wayúu woman means, therefore, the extermination of the Wayúu population. This [massacre] hit us very hard because in the Wayúu community there had never been murders of women. Women were respected in the structures that existed. One of our components [of the women's rights organizations] was the denunciation of paramilitarism in 2004 and 2005 where many women from my community have been murdered" (Interview with Clara 2017).

My conversation partners did not perceive the violence against the Indigenous community as mere collateral damage or a simple consequence of the complicity of local actors. Rather, they emphasized how colonial constructions of gender and race were central to both enabling and justifying this violence. These constructions worked to dehumanize the affected populations and devalue the environments they inhabited, framing both as expendable and inferior; and eventually allowed for the systemic violence to be carried out without opposition from those in power.
As one of the women, Anastacia, described, the violence she had endured was not just physical or visible but deeply embedded in the structural inequalities stemming from colonial histories. She spoke about how these inequalities manifest in everyday life and are reinforced through institutionalized racism and sexism, making it easier for powerful actors—

whether corporations, the state, or paramilitary groups—to exploit both Indigenous people and their land. The systematic dispossession of the Indigenous communities and the destruction of their lands were justified under the guise of "progress" or "development"—terms that seemed detached from the communities' well-being. Karmen Ramirez-Boscan, founder of the organization Fuerzas Mujeres Wayúu, describes this as the "systemic onset of paramilitary violence," aimed at the strategic extermination of Wayúu communities (cf. Boscan 2007).

Sexual violence served as a deliberate tool of subjugation and control.

These experiences of violence and forced displacement have not only been poorly documented but have also been persistently neglected by state institutions (cf. Boscan 2007, 17). The absence of effective state presence (cf. Banks 2017) has enabled the continuation of paramilitary violence, while simultaneously paving the way for the disempowerment of the region and the consolidation of control by transnational corporations (cf. Global Witness 2021; Colombia Informa 2022).

> *"Look, they have been so predatory, there were so many acts of discrimination and racist phrases from the paramilitaries who were in our territory. They took the clothes off women. They raped several. You could hear them crying and screaming. I was also threatened by the paramilitaries; I left my village and lost my home and my dignity. But what strikes me most is that they sexually attacked me, because I am an indigenous woman; that they attacked my house, that they robbed me, and basically they took all my things, many things. They control [women] and they think they can do anything to women"* (Interview with Anastacia 2017).

> *"With around 50 cases [of sexual violence], the paramilitaries have committed sexual violence, using women as spoils of war so that other men submit to their interests and wills. They have used us to subjugate our men, they have used us to force them to do things that we did not want. They have used us for all these things and that is why we escape and flee. We are still objects, we are subject to the desires of white men, subordinate and we have to be ready to satisfy their impulses at any time"* (Interview with Rosa 2017).

By reinforcing gendered and racialized notions of the "Other," sexual violence served as a deliberate tool of subjugation and control aimed at

feminizing, subordinating, and weakening Indigenous communities—especially those resisting territorial dispossession or challenging hegemonic gender norms. Far beyond an individual act of harm, sexual violence operated as a collective wound, creating lasting psychological scars marked by guilt, fear, and resentment. It also reinforced stricter sexual norms that regulated and policed women's bodies, further constraining their autonomy. In this way, the violence reshaped social relations, eroding traditional structures of care, kinship, and resistance that had long supported the community.

Threatening livelihoods, food sovereignty, and cultural survival

At the same time, it is crucial to understand that sexual violence cannot be separated from the broader environmental degradation. Both forms of violence are deeply intertwined in the political economy of extractivism. The environmental destruction—through processes such as pollution, deforestation, and resource depletion—slowly but surely undermined the very foundations of Indigenous communities. This gradual destruction threatened their livelihoods, food sovereignty, and cultural survival, systematically eroding the means by which the community sustained itself. A striking example of environmental violence is the case of the Río Ranchería. Once the primary source of water for bathing, cooking, drinking, and irrigating crops, the river has now been significantly depleted and contaminated—according to local residents—as a result of Cerrejón's mining operations. As Banks (2017) notes, water holds profound cultural and spiritual significance for the Wayúu, serving as a vital link to Wounmaikat, or Mother Earth. The degradation of the Río Ranchería thus represents not only an ecological crisis but also a deep disruption of Indigenous lifeworlds and cosmologies. As ecosystems deteriorated, the social and economic vulnerabilities of the community increased, as Alejandra elaborates:

> *"For us, life is fundamental [...] we must protect human life and also care for the environment in which we live so that it can sustain us. If we destroy it, we know that we will not have the means for future survival. From this perspective, we began working for the victims of the armed conflict, seeking to support and empower them"* (Alejandra 2017).

These interwoven dynamics—sexual and environmental violence—created conditions that weakened, fragmented, and divided affected communities, making them more susceptible to displacement and dispossession. This convergence of violence—sexual and environmental—served as a mechanism of control, reinforcing existing structural inequalities and deepening both environmental and social injustices, and eventually forcing many to leave their territory:

> *"They raped the women in front of the men and exterminated them through massacres and murders. Those who were able to escape fled. I remember that it was very hard. We had to leave their territory, their houses, their animals, leave with nothing, only what they could carry and their children, nothing more. So this is a drastic change of life. From a modest life to a life of misery because they have to flee to the cities and then they have to beg"* (Interview with Indira 2017).

This violence demonstrates not only the devastating costs of resisting the armed actors' demands but also reveals how such acts served as a form of social and territorial control over Indigenous communities. The violence was deeply embedded within a broader regime that exploited racialized, gendered, and economic hierarchies, systematically weakening, fragmenting, and ultimately re-colonizing these communities. As a result, many were forced to flee, losing both their lands and their means of survival, being subjected to further marginalization and hardship in the process.

From this perspective, violence is not solely driven by economic interests but is also deeply intertwined with symbolic and social 'gains' rooted in dehumanization. Beyond material dispossession, violence served as a tool to reinforce dominance, shape social structures, and maintain extractive economies. Ultimately, this systemic violence fractured social cohesion, decimated local economies, and accelerated environmental degradation. It violated fundamental social and cultural rights, sowing deep social tensions that manifested in various forms, including the destruction of traditional livelihoods, the political entanglement of corporate interests with state actors, and the criminalization, displacement, and persecution of those daring to expose extractive violence. The effects were particularly devastating for women who faced compounded threats to their survival, agency, and security, and who bore the added burdens of forced displacement and the erosion of traditional social and economic roles, which only deepened their historical subordination.

Despite multiple testimonies and evidence linking transnational corporations (TNCs) to paramilitary forces in exacerbating local power asymmetries, impunity reigned and those responsible for the violence were never investigated (cf. Cuéllar 2005). The blurred lines between paramilitary forces, the state military, and TNCs obscured their accountability, as local communities frequently observed:

> *"We cannot differentiate between the government and Cerrejón because officials arrive in the transnational's vehicles, wearing company helmets, and step out of Cerrejón's cars. There is well-deserved distrust between the community and the role the government plays—or avoids playing"* (US Office on Colombia et al. 2013).

The government prioritized corporate interests.

Rather than defending the affected communities, the government prioritized corporate interests, thereby explicitly or implicitly heightening insecurities for many of those I interviewed:

> *"The problem is that the State has the obligation to guarantee protection, but it does not guarantee it. Nothing happens in our favor"* (Interview with Liliana 2017).

Meanwhile, TNCs continue to either directly or indirectly contribute to environmental degradation and sexual violence, or, at best, turn a blind eye to these injustices. The involvement of TNCs with paramilitary groups in the production of violence is not an anomaly (cf. Hristov 2014; Oslender 2008). Rather, it follows broader structural patterns in which corporations systematically finance extreme right-wing groups to uphold a deeply entrenched "para-economy"—a violent economic order that sustains both corporate interests and the dispossession of local communities. This structural entanglement ensures the continued exploitation of both human and environmental resources for profit, further embedding these systems of violence into the fabric of territorial control and resource extraction. Thus, violence is not incidental or accidental, nor is it a mere outcome of local conflicts or the actions of rogue actors, or an unfortunate side effect of extractivism. Rather, violence is an intrinsic tool that sustained and expanded its reach (cf. Meger 2016; MacKenzie 2010).

6 Conclusion

This paper has demonstrated that sexual and environmental violence are neither isolated phenomena nor coincidental correlations. Rather, they are structurally embedded within the gendered and colonial logics of extractive capitalism. To account for this entanglement, I have advanced the concept of the *coloniality of violence* (cf. Sachseder 2023) as an analytical framework to understand how and why diverse forms of violence are interconnected and disproportionately target those rendered 'Other' in so-called sacrifice zones—resource-rich territories marked by dispossession and marginalization. I have shown that sexual and environmental violence are not accidental or unintended side effects, but constitutive features of a colonial and gendered fabric that determines whose lives are valued and whose are rendered expendable. This hierarchy creates the conditions under which particular populations and environments become sites of extraction, exploitation, and destruction. As Mbembe (2003, 40) conceptualizes, such processes reduce (specific) human and non-human life to a condition of abstract disposability—an ontological assault that extends beyond marginalization to target existence itself. Violence, then, is not spontaneous; it is cultivated through practices of division that produce what Fanon describes as "atmosphere of violence" (Fanon 1968, 30)—pervasive and ubiquitous forms of violence that simmer beneath the surface while shaping everyday realities. These atmospheres are simultaneously material and immaterial, economic and symbolic, social and environmental, and they extend to the planetary scale, where life and its conditions are treated as objects of extraction. In this sense, sexual and environmental violence become entrenched as an almost unchangeable reality.

These dynamics can be so readily exploited by extractive capitalism—often without sanction or accountability—precisely because they are both the product and the instrument of historically entrenched, intersectional inequalities. Such inequalities assault the ontological level of existence itself and render those affected either less-than-human or unworthy of protection. Sexual and environmental violence thus cannot be understood as temporary crises; they are structural conditions rooted in processes of dehumanization and devaluation inseparable from the political economy of extractivism. To analyze them as separate from the broader logics of extractive capitalism would obscure the very mechanisms that sustain them.

Taken together, the concept of the coloniality of violence enables a broadened understanding of sexual and environmental violence as systemic conditions that pose a profound obstacle to the possibility of a just and sustainable peace. They undermine the fundamental social and political prerequisites of peace—namely, the recognition that all lives, human and non-human alike, matter equally. As long as social activists continue to be assassinated, environmental destruction persists, and sexual violence remains endemic, peace will remain a privilege of the few, while a continuum of violence endures for the many. Confronting these direct, slow and structural forms of violence requires more than anti-discrimination or environmental policy interventions that merely address symptoms. Moving toward genuine peace demands the articulation of feminist, decolonial alternatives—ones that, as Fanon reminds us, imply a restructuring of the world (cf. Fanon 1968, 36).

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