

# Reproductive Work, Territorial Commons and Political Precarity in Peripheral Extractive Sites in Ecuador and Bolivia

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## ABSTRACT

This article examines the labour and political dimensions of non-salaried women workers in the extractive peripheries of Bolivia and Ecuador, to show how the appropriation of racialised and gendered work is a foundational aspect of the extractive logic of capital. We consider extraction in its broadest sense as the dispossession not only of resources but also of informal and reproductive work, and examine the ways in which the territorialised commons produced by, and necessary for, the interdependent activities to sustain life also form the basis of political identification and organisation. Territories as the making of places are fundamental for the constitution of marginalised collective identities. In peripheral sites where extractive logics have been socio-culturally and institutionally established, the literal and figurative common grounds for women's social reproduction are reduced, individualising livelihoods and increasing physical, economic and subjective vulnerability. As such, the extraction of resources and of territorialised networks intersects with the historical appropriation of reproductive work to configure both material and political precarity.

## KEYWORDS

informal work; reproductive labour; extractivism; territory; commons

## Introduction

A large body of literature on precarity has analysed the implications of both labour flexibilisation and the loss of salaried jobs, among other transformations in labour markets. But salaried work has rarely been a characteristic of racialised populations in the postcolonial and peripheral countries of global capitalism. This is even less so for women in these places, where marginal populations have subsisted on informal work, piece-rate and freelance activities, micro- and self-owned businesses and domestic work. In this article, we focus on the political subjectivities and possibilities of women who dedicate themselves to such heterogeneous work for social reproduction, in the intense contexts of extractivism and precarity.

With contemporary shifts in capital–labour relations, the increasing organisation and mobilisation of informal workers have taken on a new prominence. We have seen, for example, the politicisation of street vendors, sex and domestic workers, undocumented and gig economy workers and other populations excluded from the formal labour sphere. But a discussion of informal work from a feminist perspective cannot overlook the historical domestication and devaluation of reproductive work (Dalla Costa and James, 1975; Federici, 2010). The appropriation of women's work – particularly women's work in postcolonial and peripheral sites – is a foundational aspect of the racialised and extractive logic of capital (Mies, 1986; Pulido, 2017). This

logic can be understood as expanded extractivism, in which not only resources, but also unpaid or underpaid work and energy are appropriated and dispossessed (Mezzadra and Neilson, 2017; Moore, 2018; Gago, 2019).

To examine these issues, we focus on the labour and political dimensions of indigenous and Afro-descendant women's lives in the extractive peripheries of Bolivia and Ecuador, highlighting the ways that the appropriation of their reproductive and informal work and territories are a fundamental dimension of the racialised processes of extractivism (Gómez-Barris, 2017; Preston, 2017; Colectivo, 2018; Hernández, 2019; Mezzadri, 2019). The intense precarity these women experience is characteristic of the extension and violence of the appropriation of "women, nature, colonies" necessary for the continuous accumulation of capital (Mies, 1986). We argue that such extractivism reduces the literal and figurative common grounds for women's social reproduction. This loss of the collective and subjective dimensions of their territories individualises their subsistence and increases their physical, economic and political precarity (Escobar, 2008; Prada, 2008). We thus analyse extractivism not only as the exploitation of natural resources, but as a subjective structure of unequal relations and as a multi-dimensional "model of power" (Zibechi, 2019).

In what follows, we explore these extractive dynamics by first examining capitalism's ability to appropriate labour and to exploit resources based on a separation between paid and unpaid work.<sup>1</sup> The gendered opposition between salaried and productive work on the one hand and informal and reproductive work on the other is constructed along with the frontiers established between races and spaces on an imperial scale and between humanity and nature in resource extraction. We also establish that there are no clear divisions between productive and reproductive spheres in daily activities to sustain life; for most unsalaried workers of the world, informal work and reproductive work are interdependent. We then examine the territoriality of that interdependence, showing that the acute precarity experienced by marginal women workers in extractive sites in Bolivia and Ecuador is a result of the extractive economies that appropriate their work and their territories. Finally, we explore the ways in which the interdependence of reproductive work means that territorial dispossession also leads to precarious communality, to the loss of belonging to social and ecological systems that might support livelihoods and reproduction. The dependent and insecure pursuit of subsistence makes inhabitants of extractive sites vulnerable to opportunistic and violent connections, which, in turn, weakens their collective demands. Extractive processes dispossess people not only of land and labour through racialised and gendered processes, but also of territorialised identities and the political possibilities to resist such dispossessions.

## **Appropriating Nature and Labour**

Subsistence, reproductive and care work are interdependent and give the lie to the constructed distinction between social production and natural reproduction, which is central to capitalist system's appropriation of labour and resources. As Alessandra Mezzadri (2019: 33) has shown, however, not only is unpaid women's work necessary to the generation of value and the

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<sup>1</sup> While we find Moore's (2018) use of the term "appropriation" useful to connect the various forms of violently taking possession for one's own use that characterise capitalist processes, we use the term "exploitation" more broadly than his limited use – that is, referring to the exploitation of waged labour. In our use, "exploitation" is also used for dispossessions that are legitimised by the conceptual categorisation of resources – that is, once Nature is defined, its land and its resources can be exploited. In a similar sense, "expropriation" is used to refer to state-legitimised deprivation of possession, such as through eminent domain and, in this case, extractive concessions.

accumulation of capital, but so is the underpaid work of informal and informalised labour “in the processes of surplus extraction ... particularly (albeit not only) [in] developing regions”. Our interest in examining extractive sites in Bolivia and Ecuador relates to the distinctions and devaluations that undergird the exploitation of nature through the racialised and gendered appropriation of both informal and reproductive work. This section begins with a brief review of relevant discussions of the boundaries among populations and between humans and nature that are necessary for capitalism’s logics of “expanded extractivism” (Gago and Mezzadra, 2015). We then introduce this dynamic in Potosí, Bolivia, and emphasise its common characteristics with the city and province of Esmeraldas in Ecuador. Despite the importance of each of these extractive sites for their national economies, we will see in this section that indigenous Bolivian and Afro-descendant Ecuadorian women are burdened with underpaid and unpaid work – both informal and care work – as they seek to reproduce their families in marginal and precarious situations.

Our research is based on visits and work with Potosí mining communities and with Esmeraldas rural and urban neighbourhoods over several years, encompassing several research projects and in coordination with women’s groups in each site from 2014 and 2015 through to the present. Research in Bolivia began in 2014, in the framework of a study on the impact of mining on the water supply of the city of Potosí. Close ties were forged with the organisation *Mujeres y Solidaridad* (Women and Solidarity), which works directly with the area’s *guarda minas*, or minekeepers,<sup>2</sup> seeking to improve their living conditions and providing legal support when they suffer violence. Recurrent visits between 2014 and 2017 enabled close to fifty semi-structured interviews to be conducted with minekeepers and local organisation leaders. In Ecuador, a study on the impact of the Esmeraldas refinery on women’s livelihoods and gender relations began in 2015. In 2017, researchers extended their work to support the *Mujeres de Asfalto* (Women of the Pavement) collective, in its efforts to organise and support grassroots women’s groups and leaders. Between 2015–2016 and 2018–2019, more than forty interviews were conducted with inhabitants, local leaders and state officials in Esmeraldas to identify shifting economic and social conditions of women in the city and province.

### **Categories and divisions for extractive appropriation**

Since the early emergence of salaried work in market economies in the fourteenth to sixteenth centuries, the reproductive work to sustain and reproduce families and communities has in large part fallen on women (Federici, 2010). At the same time, the establishment of capitalist accumulation processes were contingent on the extraction of land and nature and of colonised labour. Jason Moore (2014, 2018) shows that the productivity of labour in capitalism depends on ever-increasing appropriation of unpaid work:

Without the massive streams of unpaid work/energy from the rest of nature – including that delivered by women – the costs of production would rise, and accumulation would slow. Every act of exploitation (of commodified labour power) therefore depends on an even greater act of appropriation (of unpaid work/energy) ... The historical condition of socially necessary labour-time is socially necessary unpaid work (Moore, 2014: 251–252).

We extend Moore’s insight that capitalism’s “crucial divide is between paid and unpaid work – not

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<sup>2</sup> “Minekeepers” is our translation of *guarda minas*, the term used for women who work for mining cooperatives and live at the entrances of the mine tunnels. Their task is to watch over who enters the mines, to safeguard the mine’s equipment, explosives and minerals. More will be said about these women later in the article.

human and extra-human nature” (Moore, 2018: 241) with perspectives which argue that appropriations on a world scale depend on subjective scales of differentiation and devaluation of people and environments (Mies, 1986; Quijano, 2000). The definition of the related boundaries between genders, between races and their territories, and between humanity/nature is the laboriously produced work of science and subjectivity (Guillamin, 2005; Tsing, 2015; Mbembe, 2017; Pulido, 2017).

Colonial and categorical divisions among humans create subjects whose work and land can be appropriated (Strauss, 2020). Laura Pulido (2017: 5) writes of “capitalism’s incessant need to produce difference”, and cites Melamed’s (2015: 77) characterisation of racial capitalism: “antinomies of accumulation require loss, disposability and the unequal differentiation of human value, and racism enshrines the inequalities that capitalism requires”. Similarly, Falquet (2017: 192) refers to Guillaumin’s (2005) analysis of the structural relations of gender, as an “appropriation of a socially created and naturalised group to this end – the class of women... The appropriation is characterised by the possession and the complete and global use of ‘bodies-as-machines-of-labour-force’”.<sup>3</sup> Finally, we link the appropriation of gendered and racialised labour to the exploitation of natural resources in an expanded sense of extractivism, as a logic of capitalism and modernity (Grosfoguel, 2016; Gago, 2019). Mezzadra and Neilson write,

It is not only when the operations of capital plunder the materiality of the earth and biosphere, but also when they encounter and draw upon forms and practices of human cooperation and sociality that are external to them that we can say that extraction is at stake (Mezzadra and Neilson, 2017: 189).

To begin to understand the profound historical links between the appropriation of labour, the exploitation of resources and extractive logics, we now turn to the territorial dimensions of the interdependent informal and reproductive work of women in the extractive sites of Potosí and Esmeraldas.

### ***Exploitation in the Cerro Rico de Potosí, Bolivia***

The Spanish colonial exploitation of Latin America and its indigenous population began in Cerro Rico de Potosí, and mining was one of the bases of capitalism’s first process of accumulation. The Cerro Rico de Potosí became the most important silver mining site in the world close to half a millennium ago by virtue of indigenous peoples’ labour. This section provides a brief historical review of this early extractive site to examine the ways that exploitation of both natural resources and the appropriation of indigenous labour depends on the devaluation and accumulation of women’s informal and reproductive work.

From the early colonial period of Latin American mining, women’s work supplemented men’s meagre incomes. Indigenous miners, called *mitayos*, were always men; according to the first available records of the “rich mountain”, they earned 75 pesos for a month’s work in 1608. Because around 200 pesos a month were needed at the time to cover personal needs – including food, clothing and taxes – women carried out complementary activities to contribute to precarious family economies (Aranibar, 2003; Serrano, 2004). Yet these activities were supplementary to men’s work, and always more poorly paid. Women, for example, collected and sifted ore, though they only received half of what male workers received for their work (Capoche in Barragán, 2019). In the seventeenth century, indigenous women also began to take on central roles in trading minerals in major markets

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<sup>3</sup> All translations from Spanish, both in quoted texts and interviews, are by the authors.

(Aranibar, 2003; Barragán, 2019). Gender-defined activities made women in mining areas dependent on men, whose dangerous and sometimes deadly labour conditions often left their widows and fatherless children indigent.

After Bolivia's independence in 1825, the nascent Creole-run economy remained dependent on mining and on Chilean and European investors. The resulting decrease in miners' relative wages and increased control of previously permitted personal collection of ore made it more difficult for families to subsist, and indigenous women and children were massively incorporated into mining work in the nineteenth century (Rodríguez, 1981). Women took on "minor" jobs, such as washing, crushing and selecting out minerals (Aranibar, 2017). Only men were contracted to work inside mines, except during periods such as the War of the Pacific in 1879 and the Chaco War from 1925–1936, when male workers were unavailable (Absi, 2013).

Women are still barred from entering mining tunnels, now for cultural reasons<sup>4</sup>. In this context, women's activities in mining have continued to be relegated to unsalaried, more poorly paid and secondary roles. They have indeed been incorporated into the mining industry, but in ways that intensify their informality, dependence and precarity. The vulnerable positions of the indigenous women who today work as minekeepers on the Cerro Rico de Potosí, as we will see below, are a concrete example of these processes and of the "endless dispossessions" (De Coss, 2015) of extractive economies that have made them dependent on precarious informal and reproductive labour for their subsistence.

Extractive economies are unequal economies (Bermúdez, Rodríguez and Roa, 2011; Delbene-Lezama, 2015; Carvajal, 2016). Potosí continues to appropriate indigenous and especially women's work, yet remains fundamental to the nation's economy. In 2016, the province of Potosí ranked second in national exports, exporting minerals valued at US\$1.8 million (Andersen, Branisa and Canelas, 2016). The most important extractive sites in Bolivia are concentrated in the Potosí province, including the San Cristobal silver mines licensed to the Japanese company Sumitomo, the Mexican-held Manquiri mines and the lithium reserves exploited by a state-owned company. Yet Potosí also has the highest poverty rate in the country, with 52 per cent of its population living below the poverty line (INE Bolivia, 2018). Dependent on an undiversified and unindustrialised primary export economy, the workers in the mines of Potosí remain in situations of poverty and marginality.

### ***Extractive impoverishment in Esmeraldas, Ecuador***

Our review of the historical exploitation and accumulation in Cerro Rico de Potosí shows the devastating conditions that extractivism creates for specific populations. In such sites, women's informal and reproductive work sustains both capital accumulation and marginalised populations in their precarious positions. Extractive industries arrived more recently to the city and province of Esmeraldas in Ecuador. Yet, despite differences from the Bolivian case, there is a similar logic at work: the exploitation of natural resources critical to national and private economies depends on the appropriation of racialised and gendered labour.

The city of Esmeraldas is the site of the largest oil refinery and port for the export of petroleum for the oil-dependent national economy,<sup>5</sup> yet its largely Afro-Ecuadorian population is among the

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<sup>4</sup> A journalist quotes an adolescent girl who lives near the Cerro Rico de Potosí: "A miner told me that women shouldn't enter into the mines. That the Tío [a devil who makes it possible for men to find minerals] will fall in love with her and pursue her, and the Pachamama [the Andean equivalent to Mother Nature] will get jealous and hide the minerals" (Izagirre, 2018: n.p.).

<sup>5</sup> In 2014, projected revenue from oil was US\$17.5 billion, over half Ecuador's total projected budget (Lyll and Valdivida, 2019).

poorest in the country. The most recent census shows that 78.3 per cent of Esmeraldas' population is poor, as measured by the Unsatisfied Basic Needs Index (Villacís and Carrillo, 2012: 29). The refinery established in Esmeraldas in 1973 – just after petroleum was discovered in the Ecuadorian Amazon – was meant to carry the city and nation headlong into modernisation and development. Yet Esmeraldas has remained underdeveloped; scarce national investment in the area's public services exacerbates inhabitants' suffering amid the environmental degradation that comes with petroleum processing in Esmeraldas city and with aqua- and agro-industries in the rural areas of Esmeraldas province.

Esmeraldas is left with contamination, with disease, with cancer that you see in a large part of the population... [whose] health is finished off (Interview, Esmeraldas resident, 2016).

Esmeraldeños' sense of the state's abandonment is keen:

Esmeraldas has been such a forgotten city. It has things like the refinery, an industry that could help Esmeraldas be an economically productive city; it has a port, a timber company, but Esmeraldas continues to be an abandoned city, in health, in education, in practically everything (Interview, Ministry of Defence representative, 2018).

The residents' understanding of the racial injustices experienced by their province – with the highest proportion of Afro-Ecuadorians in the country – is historically rooted and empirically supported. One Esmeraldeña said,

You're discriminated because everything bad is associated with blacks. That's the stigma: degenerate black man, degenerate black woman, lazy black man, criminal black man.... That's since slavery, when blacks were considered animals (Interview, Esmeraldas resident, 2019).

In 2016, Afro-Ecuadorians had the highest unemployment rate (9.5 per cent) of all racial/ethnic groups in Ecuador, almost twice that of the national average. Their earnings that year (US\$413.30/month) are second lowest only to indigenous Ecuadorians (Anton, 2018).

Esmeraldeños are acutely aware of these extractive industries' degradation of their territories and livelihoods. The dispossession of necessary elements for social reproduction results in profound material precarity for women and their families. As feminist studies have long noted, economic vulnerability increases women's care work. In Ecuador, women's participation in unpaid reproductive work is about three times that of men. When that difference is disaggregated racially and regionally, we see that the gap between women's and men's care work is largest among Afro-Ecuadorians: black women work four times more hours in unpaid care work than black men (INEC, 2019) and that gap is largest in Esmeraldas, where women dedicate six times more hours than men to household work (Gallardo, 2016: 52). This data is borne out in the stories poor women tell of how the contamination by the refinery increases their work burdens:

I can't go to work now, because my son is sick from the flu. He always has the flu ... flu, flu and more flu, because of the refinery. You can tell how bad it is because of its strong smell. It's an unbearable smell (Interview, Esmeraldas resident, 2016).

Because of their need to balance care and income-generating work, women in Esmeraldas often take on informal or piecemeal work; 51.4 per cent of Esmeraldas' men work in service, sales or in undeclared or day-labourer work, compared to 66.9 per cent of Esmeraldas' women working

in these insecure and unstable occupations (INEC, 2010a, 2010b). Even in domestic or informal work, women nationally earn almost a third less than men – \$241.50 per month on average compared to men’s \$370 per month (Ferreira et al., 2014: 94). When Esmeraldas women do access more stable work, it is often more poorly paid or more dangerous. For example, women in the refinery work in the most toxic of activities such as cleaning the plant, or cleaning out petroleum from pipes or tanks. Entire days are spent in these activities, “breathing in the toxic gases that emanate from the area, but that is the work that there is” (Interview, Esmeraldas resident, 2018).

For decades, Esmeraldas’ inhabitants have sought to participate in the benefits reaped by PetroEcuador, the national oil company, through the refinery. Recently, PetroEcuador initiated social compensation programmes aimed at delivering specific development projects to populations affected by their extractive and refinery processes, thereby pacifying protests against the oil industry (Lu, Valdivia and Silva, 2016; Valladares and Boelens, 2017). A city official described the refinery’s social programmes for women, which encourage them to engage in small business ventures:

If they did that with workshops for environmental awareness, I would applaud it.... But women have been excluded from making any decisions about the environment they live in ... on riverbanks with contaminated water, on sinking mud. They are obligated to raise their children in those inhuman conditions. They have no other choice (Interview, municipal representative, 2017).

Oil companies’ social compensation programmes seek to equip women with activities that will enable them to continue to subsist, even as the petroleum economy increases inequalities and unpaid reproductive work, and finally obligates women to patch together informal and reproductive work to maintain their families in deplorable conditions.

## **Interdependence of Informal and Reproductive Work**

Precarious work can be formal or informal in the sense that it may or may not be regulated by the state; more specifically, it refers to unfavourable and unstable conditions of labour. As we showed above, more salient than their definition as formal, informal or reproductive work, activities that are poorly paid or unpaid enable their appropriation by extractive logics that produce precarity through the instability of income or the difficulty of labour conditions intricately linked to marginalised positions in extractive structures (Pineda and Moncada, 2018). In this section, we show the ways that extractive industries expropriate not only the resources in territories but also destabilise territorialised networks necessary to secure informal and reproductive work. We begin by examining the place-based interdependence of women’s informal and reproductive work in our two cases, then turn to the displacement and dispossession that these women experience in extractive conditions that make their lives, labour and links to land vulnerable to appropriation and capitalisation.

### ***Pluralities of activities for subsistence***

Rural studies have used the lens of “pluriactivity” to examine agricultural workers’ and households’ piecing together of diverse activities and enterprises that enable them to subsist (Kay, 2009; Valle, 2009). This line of analysis has stressed that a clear separation of productive and reproductive work – a separation on which the social structure of salaried work depends – is difficult to identify, particularly in rural areas newly incorporated into market economies. In such areas, as well as in marginal urban sectors, families and their members combine precarious and informal work with reproductive work to make ends meet.

For poor women in Bolivia and Ecuador, there are few salaried positions they might access:

Women work in their house, wash, have their little businesses, small stores (Interview, Esmeraldas resident, 2019).

For example, I sell *morocho* and *empanada*,<sup>6</sup> but depending on the place, sometimes you can sell, sometimes not. This is work that does not guarantee economic stability, but at least it's yours. Others sell magazines, or clothes or other products from catalogues. So that's another way that we try to subsist, support ourselves. Others work in rural areas; they bring their produce to the city to sell... the point is to survive (Interview, Esmeraldas resident, 2017).

A professor at an Esmeraldas university describes the ways that these resourceful women “figure it out” in enterprising ways (Interview, 2017). Many are constantly working, yet the overlap between their income-generating and reproductive work leads to the devaluation of their activities. One woman in a poor neighbourhood near the refinery said she was “just a homemaker. I don't do anything”. Further inquiries about her household economy revealed that she also washes and irons clothes for three or four other households to earn money. As another woman present commented, “Poor women's work is denigrated!” (Interview, 2019).

The fluidity between women's different spheres of work is reflected in the name of a union that seeks to represent them, the National Union for Workers in Domestic and Related Activities (UNTHA, for its initials in Spanish). An officer of the union told us,

We each, well, we're dedicated to different activities: many in our own businesses, in small ventures, working in our homes. Those who live in tourist areas, for example in Atacames, work in hotels or eateries during holidays (Interview, UNTHA official, 2018).

The work of these women cannot be understood as specific activities to which one is exclusively dedicated. There is no salary which will guarantee a livelihood, only continued activity in a variety of spheres pieced together to sustain themselves and their families.

These dynamics are particularly acute for the women minekeepers of the Cerro Rico de Potosí, women who work for mining cooperatives and live at the entrances of the mine tunnels. Minekeepers are exclusively women. They live in small one- or two-room houses next to mine entrances and are responsible for keeping guard twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week over the mine and the tools, chemicals and explosives used by the miners. It is impossible, therefore, to separate these women's income-generating and reproductive spaces. Since their workplaces are also their living and family spaces, the displacement between the work they do for their meagre earnings and the work they do to sustain their families is almost imperceptible.

Yet even though minekeepers' work is controlled by the mining cooperatives, these women do not receive any formal work benefits. Their situation has remained precarious over the last decade, even as extractive economies reached their most lucrative period (Jancko, 2019). They earn the equivalent of US\$70 to US\$140 a month, or an average of about US\$2.50 to US\$4.50 a day – no more than they earned over ten years ago (Ganahl et al., 2008). In these extremely difficult conditions, not only do women combine income-generating and caretaking work, but subsistence is a family effort. Reproductive tasks are shared, and from an early age, sons and daughters also

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<sup>6</sup> *Morocho* and *empanada* are often sold together on the streets of Ecuador. The former is a thick, warm corn drink and the latter a small filled pie. Preparing *morocho* and *empanada* requires minimal capital, and they are often sold in Esmeraldas by women street vendors.

participate in income-generating activities, with children selling small remains of minerals or sweets, or offering to guide tourists visiting the area. One minekeeper told us,

Besides keeping watch over the mine, I sometimes go in to sweep up [minerals] that I might find. My oldest son also helps by working in the cooperative. The mountain gives us food; otherwise we would have nothing (Interview, minekeeper, 2017).

Such a connection to the mountain signals the importance of the places in which marginalised populations work; these are often also the places they call home. The same woman continued,

We live on the mountain; my children were born here.... We cry here, we're happy here, we drink here... (Interview, minekeeper, 2017).

Minekeepers' territorialised patchwork of informal, precarious and care work recalls not only agricultural households' pluriactivity, but also historical or anthropological studies of societies and cultures less fully integrated into modern economic structures. In these places, the interdependence of productive and reproductive work is accompanied by interdependence in territorialised economies and ecologies (Singh, 2017). Social, economic and socio-ecological webs of dependence are formed and extended in places where diverse subsistence activities take place.

### ***Displacement and dependence of vulnerable populations***

Minekeepers are attached to their tiny homes, despite the inadequacy of these spaces for their families, and despite the endless risks of living on the mining cooperatives' land. One interviewee proudly told us:

My little room has two beds and the little kitchen; that's all that fits; everything has to be hung up. I like cleaning; everything is clean (Interview, minekeeper, 2017).

Such attachment is, in part, due to the hopes for stability that minekeeping might mean, despite its minimal pay. Ninety-five per cent of minekeepers on the Cerro Rico de Potosí are migrant women from surrounding rural areas, who have left their indigenous and peasant lands to move to the city. Another woman we spoke with recalled:

There is never anything in the countryside, nothing. If it rains you eat; if it doesn't rain, you don't eat. There is frost; ooohhhh, it's terrible suffering there; there is nothing. If you harvest potatoes and try to sell them, you don't even get back what you paid in transport to get to the city... I've gone up and down the streets with my mother, selling. People are no good. That's why I tell my children that they shouldn't trust anyone; no one helps out for free (Interview, minekeeper, 2017).

Most minekeepers have arrived at Cerro Rico after trajectories of violence, marginalisation, dispossession and abandonment. Working as a minekeeper is the last resort for many, the result of a process in which they have systematically and sequentially lost their relationship with their territory of origin. Another shared her story:

I didn't want to come. My husband said, let's go to the city; there's work there; both of us will find work. I gave him three children and the bastard went off with another woman after we got here. He left me with nothing; what can I do? I cried and cried. They threw my kids and me out of the room where we lived. At least I found this job. It's hard, but at least we have a roof over our heads (Interview, minekeeper, 2017).

Minekeepers' testimonies of their migrant trajectories all include histories of poverty and family violence and abandonment that leave them in completely vulnerable situations. Yet another told us:

When I was little, my parents died; I was left an orphan. I suffered a lot. My aunts treated me like their maids. All my parents' lands were taken, everything, even my mother's *aguayos* [woven cloths] were taken; they were very beautiful *aguayos*. At the village festival, I escaped; I became a wife. [After we had kids], my husband left me. So, what else could I do but come here? I have no other family; I have nothing. I'm alone here. The only reason I put up with it is because of my children (Interview, minekeeper, 2017).

Similar stories are heard in Esmeraldas' informal neighbourhoods near the refinery. The life stories of these poor women attest to the difficulty they face in finding a stable space to claim. The difficulty of reproduction in marginal situations displaces them, at very young ages, into migrant and work trajectories. One woman now living in Esmeraldas was originally from a province many hours and worlds away from Ecuador's capital city of Quito:

I started working in houses at eight years old. My first job was in Quito; I worked three years there. During that time, my mother was sick and so they divided us up. They sent each one of us to a different house. I worked in Quito, a girl taking care of another girl. I wasn't mistreated, beat or anything like that, but for example, at four in the morning, I was sent to the patio to wash clothes (Interview, Esmeraldas resident, 2018).

Forced movement contributing to the instability and insecurity of poor women is not only apparent in life trajectories, but also in the daily spaces where these women work. Hierarchies of power are evident in the displacement of informal vendors' work in city spaces. In Esmeraldas' main market area, shrimp vendors – all women – have been continually moved around, unable to remain in one spot, displaced by the mostly male fish vendors.

So, the women [shrimp vendors] were displaced.... If you look at what's happened, it's been: OK, you can be here, now you must move, move and go over there. Now you must leave there, and go further over, until they're in the worst spot. And, who are the fish vendors? They have more money; they're the men. And they take up much more space than the women (Interview, Esmeraldas resident, 2019).

Vendors who must sell on the street are even more vulnerable:

They look for a little space there, sit on their bucket... Before, when it was still the campaign period [for local elections], they were left alone. But yesterday, they were no longer there. They move them and take away their goods (Interview, Esmeraldas resident, 2019).

Displacement not only makes work to sustain oneself and one's family more difficult, but also makes populations more vulnerable and dependent. The dispossession of territories by extractive industries exacerbates these conditions.

### ***Dispossession and territorial precarity caused by extractive industries***

The precarity of informal and reproductive labour conditions for both Potosí and Esmeraldas'

inhabitants is intensified by the ways that extractive industries dispossess vulnerable populations of their territories. This dispossession has not only taken place by the direct expropriation of land – although that is certainly the case as well – but also through other forms of engendering territorial degradation. In this section, we look at collective loss of territories by the appropriation and dispossession of territorial resources through both extractive industries' environmental impacts and their literal expropriation of inhabitants' land.

Several interviewees spoke of the appropriation of one of Esmeraldas' poorest communities, who are now located along the banks of the city's contaminated river. As a long-time city resident noted:

All those people who are now on the riverbanks are always excluded and discriminated. They were closer to the city before. Do you know how many times they've been displaced? They're always being moved, because they're considered to be the ugly part of the city, the disorganised part, the dirty ones, the drunkards, the whatever... and they're moved, and they're moved, and they're moved (Interview, Esmeraldas resident, 2019).

Residents living in informal neighbourhoods also understand that they cannot depend on the land where they've built their homes:

Who does land belong to? We come, we occupy and recover the land, we create our own dynamics in the space. Then the government, or whoever, sees an opportunity for something else there; they will just remove us... I assure you that in a few years if they realise that this can be used to expand petroleum processing, they will come and move us (Interview, Esmeraldas resident, 2019).

Once people are moved, their informal and reproductive work becomes more difficult. A previous resident of an island evacuated by the government<sup>7</sup> told us:

Since we were moved here two years ago, I haven't been able to sell anything. Look, on the island, I had my business, I sold *morocho* and *empanada*, and just with that I sold \$50 or \$60 each day, for a profit of \$20 or \$30. Here, I can't sell a thing (Interview, Esmeraldas resident, 2019).

In rural areas of Esmeraldas, people move because their land is taken away. The development of African palm plantations in the northern part of the Esmeraldas province has displaced long-standing communities. African palm production in this area bordering Colombia is not separate from narco-trafficking; the same groups establish plantations to support their economic and territorial dominance over an area (Roa, 2012). One inhabitant of the area said,

Palm plantations in Esmeraldas are full of blood... Thousands and thousands of families have been violently removed from their lands. Men, women have been threatened, persecuted, harmed and even killed when they don't want to leave their land (Interview, Esmeraldas resident 2019).

Many families in rural Esmeraldas have lived on the same land for generations, but have never obtained formal land titles. This has worked to their detriment:

One day they wake up, and they are told they are not owners of the land. ... The state tells you that you must have a title. But it turns out when you look for the title, it's a company, a faraway

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<sup>7</sup>The government declared the Esmeraldas island of Muisne a risk zone, but the majority of Muisne residents have not left, convinced that if they leave, private investors will sweep in to develop its touristic potential.

transnational company, that is owner of the land and you now have to leave. At what point did that foreign company become owner of the land that my family and I have lived on for more than fifty years? And it turns out that between one day and the next, we have no more land to live on (Interview, Esmeraldas resident, 2019).

The territorial dispossession described above, from forced mobility to the literal loss of territories, makes informal and reproductive work extremely difficult and insecure. Increased territorial precarity leads to increased economic and material adversity for women's informal and reproductive activities. Their livelihoods are made more precarious as they lose access to the territories in which they work. Yet territories are also the places where collective identities are formed and, as such, are the basis of collective and political claims. We now turn to the ways that territorial precarity leads to subjective and political precarity as well.

### **Precarious Communalities**

Throughout this article, we have linked extractivism to women's informal and reproductive work in order to empirically demonstrate capitalism's need to create boundaries in its logic of expanded extractivism. These frontiers, as we have seen, create gendered and racialised realms, devaluing specific forms of work, particularly in sites where resources are extracted. Marxists, feminists, ecologists and other social justice movements and theorists have insisted that a shift in such unequal structures requires collective identification and organisation (Salleh, 2017; Barca and Leonardi, 2018). Such identification and organisation implies the recognition, defence and even re-creation of commons that the market economy privatises (Caffentzis, 2010; Laval and Dardot, 2015). In this section, we look at the ways that territories create collective identification and commons, and then show how such collective identification is made more difficult in the conditions of appropriation of women's labour in extractive sites.

### ***From territorially based commons to contradictory senses of belonging***

The dispossession of common resources has been a fundamental critique of extractive industries and economies, particularly in territories such as indigenous lands where ecology is fundamental to cultural reproduction (Lopez, Robertsdotter and Paredes, 2017). Gago and Mezzadra (2015) describe the extractive logic of capitalism as the appropriation of socially produced labour. As we have seen above, the displacement and dispossession of territories both devalues and appropriates informal and reproductive work. In this process, extractive logics can also impede collective identification. If territories are the sites for the making of collectives, allowing their inhabitants to literally establish common grounds (Federici and Linebaugh, 2018), then their dispossession endangers collective and political possibilities. In this section, we look at the ways that the territorialised commons produced by – and necessary for – informal and reproductive work are also the basis of political identification and organisation.

Territories are fundamental for many marginalised populations' constitution of their collective identities, as we see in examples ranging from indigenous territorialisations to dispossessed urban groups (Escobar, 2008; Prada, 2008; Soja, 2009; Silva, 2014). Such a perspective is evident in communitarian feminists' analyses of anti-extractive mobilisations in which indigenous women's defence of their territories is linked to the defence of their bodies and cultures (Cabnal, 2013; Gutiérrez, 2015; Alvarado, Cruz and Coba, 2020). Recent studies have focused on the social and political power of such protests by inhabitants of lands threatened by exploitation; such

mobilisations are driven by the recognition that their families' and communities' reproduction depend on their collective territories of care (Cielo and Carrión, 2018). If the spaces and networks where reproduction takes place are endangered, so is the possibility of constituting political commons.

Regardless of formal land titling, one Esmeraldeño noted that growing up on a piece of land made it in significant ways one's own, just as much as one belonged to that land:

You don't need a piece of paper, because you have a history, memories constructed through your occupation of the land.... There is an identity that is constituted through territory (Interview, Esmeraldas resident and researcher, 2018).

Not only does one care for one's family and community in a specific ecological context, but one also attends to that ecology as part of the care work (Aitken and An, 2012; MacGill, 2014). Indigenous women's resistance to mining, drilling and agro-industries on their lands, for example, is based on a clear recognition of their interdependence with land and nature, and a refusal to accept extractive industries' appropriation of their socio-ecological reproductive work. These dynamics have been explored in studies that examine political dimensions of the loss of the commons (Laval and Dardot, 2015) as well as in studies of contemporary extractive contexts of territorial dispossession accompanied by organisational and political debilitation (Minda, 2015; Lyall, 2016).

How does this play out in the cases of the women in the extractive sites of our studies? The spatial displacement and dispossession that we saw above – their territorial precarity – hinders their reproductive work and possibilities of political demands. In Potosí, minekeepers' attempts to rebuild a sense of territory and belonging in the Cerro is only possible through the very mining economy and culture that debases their work. Where they go, who they know, what they earn and how they live are defined by the limits of the Cerro. Even the school that their children attend is on the same mountain where they work. This dependence on the mining economy and social world means that the women minekeepers identify with and support miners' protests and political demands, even though these demands do not represent their own. Because of their dependence on the social and economic world of the Cerro, minekeepers identify with the "mining class" even as this class excludes them. As one of these workers related:

Sometimes I want to leave; one suffers a lot here. The miners treat us badly. There are times they don't pay; they drink and come over drunk. Once, in front of my kids, they mistreated me badly. I was so angry, I wanted to leave. But where can I go? Here at least I have a roof over our heads; we can always make do. In my town, there was nothing to eat, always nothing. I've suffered enough; I'm tired. I think I'll die here on the mountain. That's what it's like being a miner (Interview, minekeeper, 2017).

Not only has the labour force of women minekeepers been appropriated historically, but so have their life expectations. This is the core of Zibechi's (2019) proposal to understand extractivism as a hegemonic "model of power". It is also a patriarchal model of power that decomposes and destructures gender and communal social relations. In this context of deterritorialised vulnerability, the minekeepers' reaction is to concern themselves with their own and their families' survival (López, 2019).

Despite approximately 220 women working in Cerro Rico cooperatives (out of a total of 15 000 workers), minekeepers have not been able to create a union or another type of organisation that might represent their needs. Many of these women find themselves in situations of

abandonment and feel isolated. Faced with their families' lack of food or continued theft of materials from the cooperatives, they feel that "nobody can help them" (Ganahl et al., 2008). Their own family's daily survival continues to be the priority for individual women. Responsible for watching the mine entrances all day, every day, and for sustaining their families, minekeepers have been unable to organise to make collective demands.

### ***Dependent organisation and opportunistic connections***

In Esmeraldas, similar dynamics of weak collective organisation exacerbate the precarity of informal and precarious workers. Throughout the previous government period under Rafael Correa (2008–2016), social organisation was weakened as the state became a stronger presence throughout the national territory (Ospina, 2013). As we saw above, despite the importance of oil to the national economy, Esmeraldas' poorest citizens benefitted little from the Correa-period oil boom. In fact, increased difficulty in their informal and reproductive work due to the environmental impacts of the refinery meant that women in Esmeraldas had fewer possibilities to work together through social organisations. Dispossessed women did sometimes organise in neighbourhood groups to meet basic needs, but that is a far cry from the increasing mobilisation of indigenous Amazonian women to defend territories under threat of – but not yet submitted to – extractive processes (Coba and Bayon, 2020).

In Esmeraldas, the social articulation and collective projects during the Correa period of high oil prices depended on the work of international organisations and top-down government initiatives. Government and international support became increasingly important for the functioning of local groups such as neighbourhood and women's organisations. When national and international projects began to leave the area around 2016, so did social links in the area. As the officer in charge of International Humanitarian Rights for the Ecuadorian Ministry of Defence surmised,

Organisations which were very strong some fifteen years ago have lost their political force and they have been reduced to very small groups or have completely disappeared.... There is a clear debilitation of the social fabric there (Interview, Ministry of Defence representative, 2019).

International organisations such as the Red Cross, which attended to the flows of Colombian refugees arriving in Ecuador, began moving their offices and projects out of Ecuador's border region and Esmeraldas once the 2016 peace treaty was signed between Colombia's government and its main guerrilla movement. The Ministry of Defence representative also stated,

[Since Colombia was] at the doors of the peace process, the idea was that the situation would become more peaceful. ... The support of international cooperation was so important in integrating social organisations on the border. So as these international groups that played such an important role began leaving, social disarticulation in Esmeraldas accelerated (Interview, Ministry of Defence representative, 2018).

More recently however, Esmeraldas has witnessed the increased presence of Colombian splinter guerrilla groups who do not feel represented by the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC, Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia), which signed the peace treaty with the Colombian government. These splinter groups have continued a fragmented armed assault in Colombia, spilling over into Ecuador's northern border province of Esmeraldas. As violence by these groups increased since 2018, even more international and state organisations began to

abandon Esmeraldas for security reasons. At a public academic event in 2018, a government representative said that government workers were prohibited from going to Esmeraldas for security reasons. International cooperation organisations made similar announcements and moved their offices from Esmeraldas to Quito or left Ecuador entirely.

Social organisation of the city's residents had clearly become dependent on these diverse organisations, and their departure left a disconnected and wary citizenry with weakened social networks. These weak networks are exacerbated by suspicion due to the increase of violent groups in the area, splinter groups often linked to narco-trafficking. An Esmeraldeña said:

People don't want to talk, first, out of fear. People are scared. Second, there is the question of authorities, that is, of local authorities of the [guerrilla] groups.... So, people limit themselves; they don't say much even though they know what is going on (Interview, Esmeraldas resident, 2019).

This sense of distrust, even among neighbours, cannot be understood simply as the effect of the increased presence of armed groups, but is the way in which new forms of violence have been incorporated into this area in which the underlying social fabric has already been made fragile by the dynamics described above. Informal and reproductive labour implies interdependence, interdependence which traverses and is realised in territories. In places such as Esmeraldas, where extractivism has led to increasing loss of territory and further difficulties in sustaining families and communities, the social connections that depend on territorialised interdependence have weakened. In such a site, an Esmeraldeña social scientist who has also researched her city notes,

One of the basic problems that I see is the dismantling of women's networks (Interview, Esmeraldas resident and researcher, 2019).

As extractive industries have advanced in Esmeraldas, the resulting environmental contamination, territorial dispossession, and increasing material and vital precarity have provided a fertile context for opportunities that illegal trade provides. Another Esmeraldeña told us:

When there are ways to participate in established or formal work, there is little space for drug traffickers. But when there is poverty, inequalities, corruption and absent leadership, someone can come and say: help me out by laundering these \$500 through your informal trade. Then, it's not just \$500, it's \$5000 or \$500 000 or \$5 million, and it becomes an endless chain (Interview, Esmeraldas resident, 2019).

Many interviewees recounted similar experiences among their neighbours and acquaintances:

If you are poor, if you have three, four, five kids and fishing no longer provides for you, or in whatever work you can't make ends meet, and someone comes and tells you that you can take this package to this or that place and they'll pay you \$3000 or \$4000, you're going to do it.... That's what poverty does and there are no state policies from the government that help. No work, no health or education (Interview, Esmeraldas resident, 2018).

This has especially become the case for Esmeraldeños dependent on fishing, who have seen their harvesting possibilities decrease because of contamination by extractive industries. It is common knowledge in Esmeraldas that fishermen take "miracle trips", risking their livelihoods and lives to earn extraordinary sums. The drug trade provides ready networks to integrate Esmeraldeños whose informal and reproductive work is jeopardised. It is a vicious cycle. Men who take these trips hope

for the best but many have ended up in prison in Central America and the United States. Entire fishing towns have lost fathers, husbands, brothers, men who are now imprisoned abroad, further weakening the economic, reproductive and political possibilities of those who remain.

### ***Chains of violence and loss of political possibilities***

As we have seen throughout this article, extractive logics in both Bolivia and Ecuador have made informal and reproductive work more difficult and collective organisation characterised by solidarity less possible. When marginal citizens are dispossessed of territories and individual and collective possibilities for sustaining themselves that depend on territorialised work and networks, they turn to any possibilities for sustenance they may find, including hierarchical and violent networks.

We saw above that women working as minekeepers are dependent on asymmetric relations with miners and mining cooperatives. Violence by male miners against women minekeepers is part of the objective and subjective relations of power on the Cerro of Potosí. At least 80 per cent of the minekeepers claim to have suffered varying degrees of discrimination and humiliation at work and feel that they are singled out for accusations and threats every day. When equipment or materials are stolen, for example, the women must pay for them with their wages. Minekeepers even consider sexual violence to be one of the risks of their jobs, since their living spaces are controlled by the miners and their cooperatives. Miners frequently consume alcohol, and with minekeepers' homes readily accessible to them, sexual violations and rape are not uncommon.

Maristella Svampa writes of the “chains of violence” evident in extractive sites. She points out that:

different forms of violence, usually thought of as separate phenomena and analytically distinct, are linked and respond one to the other... this kind of socio-territorial configuration can be read as extreme forms of extractivism, characterised by social disruption, by inequalities, by maximum exploitation and by the reinforcement of patriarchal domination, which further buttresses the chains of violence already existing in the society (Svampa, 2019: 78).

The structural violence that Esmeraldas inhabitants experience as economic and territorial precarity can make opportunistic connections attractive. If, as we saw above, involvement in narco-trafficking networks provides an outlet for workers in vulnerable conditions exacerbated by the impact of extractive industries, subjective and political identification also shifts to those networks.

The illegal and armed groups that have been a violent force in Ecuador's northern border area are far less feared at local than at national level. A leader of one of these splinter guerrilla groups was called a “terrorist” by state representatives, but “Tío Guacho” by many Esmeradleños:

People cared for Guacho; they wanted to protect him. Guacho gave them access to education, access to health. Guacho gave them parties every weekend (Interview, municipal worker, 2018).

Kids in Esmeraldas, in fact, saw Guacho as a superhero, standing up for them and their communities. Another interviewee described a scene she saw with young kids under the age of ten pretending to shoot each other with guns made from sticks:

And all, all, all of the kids, fought over who got to say, I'm Guacho! (Interview, Esmeraldas resident, 2019).

Dispossessed of the territories they need to support and facilitate their interdependent informal and reproductive work, the voices of Esmeraldas' inhabitants are further suppressed by their dependence on violent networks. Zibechi's analysis in Brazil applies as well to Esmeraldas:

So who is playing the role of authority in the youth of popular sectors? It's the narcos.... They at least offer up a path. A path to riches, to strength, to power in their communities. The extractive model falls short of offering them a decent place in society (Zibechi, 2019: n.p.).

Likewise, Kate Meagher writes on the impact of informality on political and organisational voice:

The overall effect is more indicative of political involution than of collective action and political voice. Poverty, informality and network fragmentation have ... intensified the vulnerability of cluster associations to mobilization in the service of more powerful political interests (Meagher, 2014: 433).

## **Conclusions: Implications for Informal and Reproductive Work and Politics**

What we have seen through our exploration of women's interdependent informal and reproductive work in extractive sites is that extraction's territorial dispossession constitutes not only economic precarity but also dependent political subjectivities and diminished political possibilities. The extraction of resources is buoyed by the naturalisation of racialised and gendered frontiers, which permits the appropriation of unpaid and underpaid work. In addition, territorial dispossession of these extractive operations diminishes possibilities of collective resistance to its logic. In this article, we have sought to trace the subjective and political implications of extractivism as an operative logic of contemporary capitalism. Bringing together women's experience in liminal and racialised spaces in peripheral and extractive sites in Bolivia and Ecuador, we have argued that the appropriation of reproductive work in these places is facilitated by the debilitation of the political possibilities of their inhabitants, through the expropriation of their territories and of their territorialised socio-ecological interdependences.

Extractivism thus names capitalism's relation to its multiple outsides, including not only natural resources but unpaid work and energy. It functions not only because its dispossessions of labour and land increase economic and material precarity, but also because its extractive logic decimates collective and political possibilities. As we have seen, the production and devaluation of gendered and racialised differences is intimately linked to the human/nature divide on which appropriations and expropriations of extractive capitalism depend. In this sense, labour and land struggles cannot be considered separately. We must take seriously injunctions such as those by George Caffentzis (2010), Ariel Salleh (2017) and Stefania Barca and Emanuele Leonardi (2018) to analytically comprehend the diverse work, energy and politics that regenerate and sustain life, to contribute to the political potentials and social movements that link populations and territories vulnerable to the rapacity of contemporary capitalism's extractive logics.

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