Beyond the “dismal imagery”
Amerindian abdication, repulsion, and ritual opacity in extractivist South America

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*Life in oil* tells the story of the Cofán’s tribulations since the discovery of oil in Ecuadorean Amazonia and the arrival in 1964 of Texas Petroleum Company.1 The continuous oil spills in the lands and rivers that surround the Cofán depict an apocalypse that has already occurred and continues to ravage their lives: Cofán “described how they used to push away pools of floating oil with their bare hands. In the small, clear-looking pockets they uncovered, they bathed, washed dishes, butchered game, and gathered water for cooking and drinking” (5). Their apocalypse is one they have to live with on a daily basis, one that is not only “out there” in a supposedly external environment, but (quite literally) inside their (sick) bodies: “Everyone knows that oil wastes exist inside their bodies” (9).

In the midst of this environment saturated by extractivism, Cepek’s book both denounces its anthropogenic ruination and describes the Cofán’s oscillating and ambivalent diplomacy—to use a term recently proposed to understand indigenous stances regarding extractivist and developmentalist projects (Nahun-Claudel 2018). On the one hand, *Life in oil* corroborates the Cofán as “victims of history who deserve material compensation for oil’s assault on their lives” (11). At the same time, it denounces not only Texaco’s devastation—“I do not know how their executives and lawyers manage to sleep at night” (162)—but also its negation—because of which, although “an Ecuadorian court awarded the Cofán and other residents of Amazonian Ecuador roughly $19 billion for the damages” (12), it is still unknown when the legal battle (currently underway in the US Supreme Court) will finally end.

On the other hand, this book could also be seen, at least partially, as a chronicle of an abdication. In 2013, after years of opposition, “one of the world’s most anti-oil indigenous peoples” (167) finally decided to allow seismic operations and oil exploration on their land, this time by the China National Petroleum Corporation (called BGP or the *compañía* by the Cofán). The reasons behind this shift in the Cofán’s diplomacy seem to intermingle an old fear and a convenient hope: they “no longer believe they can block roads and take over oil wells... the Cofán are afraid they would end up in jail—or dead... but they do believe they can say how it [oil] will be extracted” (217–19).

Whatever its causes, the end of their opposition to oil extraction shows that not only has oil finally been accepted as an unavoidable part of Cofán’s lives (and of their bodies) but that it has also become paradoxically
promising: “Saying yes [to oil] would mean more resources, more control, and less damaging extraction process” (217). This pledge—which sometimes sounds too good—noticeably permeates the Cofán’s abdication with aspirations of both cultural survival and social uprising: “Ironically...the oil industry might allow them to ensure the future of their culture” (220) and “to overturn the structures of domination that have plagued them” (207) in Ecuador’s “long history of anti-indigenous racism” (20).

In a diachronic perspective, the Cofán’s recent abdication becomes part of an oscillating diplomacy that seems to lack any drama when changing sides (Krøijer 2019)—patent also, for instance, in some Amerindian religious conversions (Vilaça 2016). This perspective also broadens the spectrum from individual leaders to collective persons.² Martin, who first worked “to enable oil to flow from Dureno,” later (when a decrease in the prices of oil put “everything on hold”) “began to work for an international environmental organization” (231). But in addition, the community of Dureno received money through the Socio Bosque program and still more money for letting a company dredge rocks from the bottom of the Aguarico River to build roads.

Despite its optimism regarding the Cofán’s resignation to oil, this book also describes with clarity some of its less positive effects, such as the (consolidation of) monetization of Cofán life. The review made by Cepek of the received amounts of money is telling. The community of Dureno received $54,000 a year through an environmental program, $35,000 a year for letting a company dredge rocks from the bottom of their main river to build roads, and more than $500,000 (distributed to families in the form of cash payments and outboard motors) from a Chinese oil company doing seismic exploration. But there is more:

An agreement with Petroamazonas to allow work on the western edge of Dureno stipulated that the company would buy eight trucks for the community and then rent them back for three years. Cofán leaders decided to disburse the income to each Dureno household in the form of a $100 monthly food allotment at a...Cofán-owned grocery store. Other uses for community income include paying for...travel expenses...[and] a Cofán-staffed child care center. (41)

Although it is clear that the stream of oil was followed by a stream of money, the latter certainly did not stagnate like the former: it was (predictably) exchanged for urban commodities such as industrial beer and events such as parties and festivals: “Work flooded Dureno with money...To the dismay of their parents, a number of young men spent most of it on beer” (198). Before the oil companies arrived, money and commodities were not as essential to the Cofán as they evidently are today, when they “need money as much as they need the forest” (191). Commodification also affects Cepek’s involvement in Cofán life. It is not only that he serves “on the board of an organization that funds Cofán political and environmental efforts” (54), but also his own fieldwork participated in this apparently unavoidable monetization. Aware of “the deep inequality at the heart of” his relationship with the Cofán (55) and feeling “responsible” for it as a US citizen—“my main concern is their health and happiness” (123), his collaborators, research assistants, and those portrayed in his book’s photographs are paid in cash.³

All this money, nevertheless, seems unable to eliminate the “undecidabilities” of oil (Bubandt 2017) that saturate Cofán lives and are at the very basis of their diplomatic oscillation. The Cofán’s world has been filled with uncertainty, to the point that their fears of being kidnapped by foreigners end up infecting the ethnographer himself: “I was afraid every time a non-Cofán person showed up in the community...Cofán people were the ones who drew me into their anxiety and apprehension. It was them, not me, who decided that Manuel [a non-indigenous foreigner cocama] wanted to capture me” (91–92). The fact that, although they have been exposed to it for around half a century, nobody knows “the technicalities of how oil—and the wastes generated in its

2. A degree of voluntarism is apparent in the portrait of the Cofán leader behind their abdication: “Before, I really wanted to prohibit the compañía from our land. My heart still wants that, but we decided to let the compañía in” (216). Such an ethnographic emphasis corresponds to the suggestion that most Amazonian indigenous leaders have been affected by “a kind of spirit of individualism” (Chaumeil 2017: 204–6) transmitted by evangelicals’ bilingual education programs, at least since the 1980s.

3. This responsibility is taken as the other side of an attitude Cepek denounces as frequent: “So few of them [North Americans] do anything meaningful for the people of Ecuador. Most complete their research, publish their accounts, and use the status they accrue to better their social and economic positions in their own countries” (190). On a similar perspective, see Bird-David (1999: 81).
production—move through the environment and into their bodies” (126) is just another example. It is not only that “no one has studied oil’s specific effects on the health of Cofán people” (149) but also that, particularly in the case of poor, marginalized communities, it is “nearly impossible for scientists to link pollutants to illness or death with the degree of certainty courts demand in legal disputes” (130). In a similar vein to what Fabiana Li (2015) was told in La Oroya (the infamous refinery city of Peru), “many [Cofán] believe contamination will one day kill them. But the question of who will be the next victim, [and] when their demise will occur . . . are impossible to answer” (10). At the end of the day, uncertainty calls for ineffability: “Contaminación is a strange kind of dirtiness and a strange form of poison . . . a relatively new concept that is difficult to express” (133).

On the ethnographer’s side, undecidability is exorcized when the author relies on his twenty years of fieldwork, his ability to speak the Cofán language—“I am one of a handful of non-Cofán people who speak A’inga . . . so I could collect the most accurate information from the largest number of people” (14)—and his long-term friendship with some Dureno families, such as that of Alejandro, who also meets tourists eager to drink yaje and frequently appears in “tourist brochures, coffee-table books, and documentary films” (19). As with any similar claim of ethnographic authority, Cepek’s could partially be seen as a product of how the ethnographer did (or not) manage the always complex set of alliances and enmities he or she confronts during fieldwork. If there is a group whose images could be strongly contrasted with those of Cofán people, it is the cocama, nonindigenous, Spanish-speaking people. It is worth looking more closely at the Cofán’s repudiation of their most feared enemies—who in fact constitute the majority of the inhabitants of Amazonian Ecuador. Cofán people tell many stories about their encounter with these “poor Ecuadorians from crowded Andean and coastal provinces” (107): they came to work for Texaco, found no opposition, and settled down; they ate, drank, raped, and made a few gifts; they spit out papaya seeds, which grew in abundance. Once they left, Cofán people used the trails and waste the cocama left behind. Associated with “violence and death”—“more than anything or anyone else, the cocama cause the inhabitants of Dureno to question their survival as a people” (92)—the cocama are categorically rejected by the Cofán, since they “brought virtually nothing to the Cofán except trauma, disease, and dispossession” (195). This rejection acquires multiple faces: from the fear of being kidnapped to the interdiction of marriage with nonindigenous people (at least since 1980) and on to the denial of the cocama’s own tribulations—“To think that cocama suffering is equivalent to Cofán suffering makes little sense to most Dureno residents . . . ‘We are the only ones who truly suffer here’” (194).

The cocama portraits configured by this repulsion are in strong contrast with the friendly image in Life in oil of the missionaries of the well-known Summer Institute of Linguistics (SIL). Although it was forced out from Ecuador in the early eighties by various indigenous organizations, Cepek finds that “few Cofán people have anything bad to say about” (67) them. Among the Cofán, these missionaries make “life-saving medical interventions” (244) and warn them about “untreated water . . . far too contaminated for consumption” (144). In sum, and rather paradoxically, despite the brutality one could usually associate with rich corporate extractivism and obdurate religious proselytizing in South America, here it is the manipulated, voiceless, and poorly remunerated foreigner who deserves the strongest rejection from the besieged indigenous people.

6. But cocama can also staff NGOs, such as Acción Ecológica, which, although it had worked closely with the Cofán, stopped supporting them after they suspended their opposition to the compañía in 2013. According to Cepek, Cofán people “do not view the organization as a helpful ally in their attempt to negotiate a new form of coexistence with the compañía” (194) and “have grown wary” (189) of environmentalists in general. The ethnographer adds that Acción Ecológica did not want to collaborate with him either. On another recent critique of environmental NGOs in an Amerindian setting, see Kockelman (2016).

7. For a similar case, see Guzmán (2019).

8. Although not himself a missionary, Randy Borman—the SIL members’ son who today “identifies as Cofán” (xiii) and has become one of their leaders—is another key protagonist (although less visible than Alejandro) of this ethnography, where his opinions, perspectives, support, and long-term friendship are frequently acknowledged.
Both abdication and repulsion could be considered as the main components of the descriptive efforts in *Life in oil* against “the dismal imagery” (51) in which Cofán people appear tossed “into the waste bin of history” (235) and as “poor, sick, and unable to maintain many of their most valued traditions” (10). Cepek regrets the persistence of these well-intentioned accounts (written by ethnographers, travelers, tourists, or journalists) that describe “only one more chapter of the story of violence, sickness, and dispossession they [the Cofán] already knew” (235). Although “not entirely inaccurate,” these “entirely one-sided” narratives depict Cofán “cultural difference in order to note its adulteration or bemoan its disappearance” (52). As a consequence, instead of listening to them, they restrict Cofán people to images of either victims or models.

The West demands too much of contemporary native peoples . . . It hopes to make them into tragic symbols of its worst crimes while portraying them as wise beacons who offer a superior and authentic way of life, even today. (12)

In a previous article—about those myths invented by well-intentioned foreigners who wanted to promote the cause of the Cofán—Cepek (2016) already showed how easily distortion or mistranslation prevail when ethnographies omit the asymmetric conditions and relationships that allow them (Bessire 2014).

outsiders will continue to . . . search for remnants of digestible cultural difference . . . They will use the community to tell a story they already know: oil is a nearly unstoppable force that lays waste to humans and the environment . . . [They] will not take the time to listen closely to the people of Dureno and to learn something new from them. Few will understand what oil has done to the Cofán and how they have managed to survive in its midst. (55)

Determined to overcome this dismal imagery (as any good ethnographer), Cepek intends “to hear Cofán people’s message in the terms they favor” (12). Nothing but intimacy is what allows him “to share the largely unknown stories Cofán people create themselves—the ones they tell in their own language, in their own communities, to each other and the few outsiders they know and trust” (14). But how do Cofán people keep “strong” (10) their “sense of themselves” and prevent their “way of life” from becoming “completely dead” (42)? How will Cofán people “mobilize” oil in order to create “a more promising space for themselves” (235)? In sum, what are the main Cofán “arts of living on a damaged planet” (Tsing et al. 2017) that feed Cepek’s optimism—“There is still time to make this planet a more just and sustainable home for all its residents” (15)?

Where is the room for positivity in the forms in which Cofán people face the ruination (Gordillo 2014) that surrounds them? *Life in oil* highlights many times the Cofán’s “ever-present humor” (168), but repulsion and abdication still seem to predominate in most of its pages. What is, for instance, the role of ritual in Cofán life? In contrast to their explicit dialogic testimonies, their ritual world, as portrayed in *Life in oil*, seems affected by a persistent opacity. Does ritual have any function in the expression of their humor and “sense of themselves”? In the latter case, for instance, the roles of ritual are well known, both in the self-differentiation from other groups and in the construction of themselves in distinctive forms of organization. Could Cofán ritual expressions (or their forfeit, displacement, or concealment) explain, for instance, the (key) difference of their fate from that of their Colombian kin? How does ritual mediate, for example, the presumed differences between the *comuna* of Dureno and the Cofán ethnic federation? The issue of the multiple collective faces of the Cofán people highlights another aspect of indigenous identity usually closely linked to ritual and designated under labels such as landscape, environment, or territory. How could this usual technique for the managing (and construction) of

9. The Colombian Cofán, trapped between “coca growers, narco-traffickers, left-wing revolutionaries, and right-wing paramilitaries,” are considered by the Ecuadorian Cofán to be thieves and killers. Nevertheless, we learn that the mythic Cofán shaman, hero, and “body-owner” (Costa 2017)—who perished near Texaco’s base camp and whose wife seems to have become a prostitute in its worker camps—was possibly born on the Colombian side of the frontier, where his baptism was apparently registered.

10. Although they are clearly not the same—“Cofán leadership had done little to stop Dureno from working with the compañía” (190)—many people most probably pertain at the same time to both the community of Dureno and the Cofán ethnic federation. This seems important especially because it was only to the former that, in 1978, the Ecuadorian government “granted . . . full legal personhood” with land (9,571 hectares) “held in common by its members” (115).
time and space allow us to understand here the distinction between the categories of “territory” and “lands.” Furthermore, could ritual illuminate how these categories are understood by the Cofán people and how these local understandings are being translated (Di Giminiani 2018) in their current claims to the Ecuadorian state?

All these questions about Cofán ritual are only meant to suggest a positive direction in a process that Life in oil depicts in rather negative terms. The indigenous sense of humor to which Cepek had access clearly suggests that the Cofán manage to face the many undecidabilities in their current situation beyond their nod to monetization and their mistrust of foreigners.

Finally, another intriguing dimension (this time, a methodological one) of Life in oil is what Cepek calls “the possibility of reimagining” oil “from a novel, provocative perspective” (15). How exactly could his ethnographic approach to “the impact of oil on Cofán lives . . . motivate us to rethink and transform our own relationship to” it (15)? Whether or not this reimagining of “the omnipresent commodity” (15) is similar to what the methodological version of the so-called ontological turn stresses as “ontography” (i.e., the reaccommodation and reformulation of our conceptual tools by our exposure to fieldwork) remains an open question. Nevertheless, the laudable efforts of Cepek’s insightful ethnography to go beyond commonplace observations and to strictly follow Cofán movements evidently respond to his careful and attentive fieldwork. In any case, to the extent that ethnography can aspire to become a reflexive form of reimagining our relationships with the main components of the world, this honest chronicle of Cofán experience of extractivism will long offer us a courageous and nuanced account of contemporary Amerindian lives and dilemmas.

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