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New Geographies 02

Landscapes of Energy

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Landscapes of Energy

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Plane Violence

A Sectional Landscape of Oil in Amazonia



El Dorado. Getulio Vargas, former president of Brasil, with oil on his hands.

1909

An article titled *The Devil's Paradise: A British Owned Congo* is published in London describing the numerous atrocities committed, promoted, and condoned by rubber baron Julio Cesar Arana, head of the Peruvian (and British) Amazon Rubber Company. Roger Casement –once friend of Joseph Conrad and consular representative of the British Crown– is sent to Amazonia to investigate.

Four years later, Casement's famous report on the Putumayo killings is published by the British House of Commons. "The number of Indians killed either by starvation –inflicted as a form of death penalty on individuals who failed to bring in their quota of rubber –or by deliberate murder by bullet, fire, beheading, or flogging to death, and accompanied by a variety of atrocious tortures during the course of these 12 years, in order to extort these 4,000 tons of rubber, cannot have been less than 30,000 and possibly came to many more."¹

The same year a film is commissioned by Arana to deny his involvement in any sort of genocide (i.e. to deny even the possibility of genocide). The film stages a benevolent double: Indians are well fed, they're educated, kept healthy and happy by his civilizing company. The trade itself brings them to life.

This was the first film shot in Amazonia. The reels never made it to Britain. They sank in the Atlantic.

2009

The Peruvian government declares a state of emergency in Amazonia. Troops are mobilized to foil native uprisings in the northern states of the country. Police officers are taken hostage and macheted to death. The number of missing natives remains, as yet, unknown or unreported. President Alan Garcia, citing Aeschylus' *Dog in the Manger* fable, via Lope de Vega, asserts: "We have to understand that when there are resources like oil, gas and timber, they don't belong only to the people who had the fortune to be born there."²

The U.S.-Peru Free Trade Agreement, effective February 2009, stipulates the need for property reform as a vehicle for resource mobilization and environmental protection in the Amazon basin. This extra-legal space, for long abandoned by the central state, must somehow be incorporated de facto as a national asset. Tenancy must be clearly defined. The world order must be foisted –reproduced, internalized, mapped, zoned, layered– over this seeming Void. The Peruvian Minister of the Environment, Antonio Brack, submits a qualification: sub-soil ownership and land tenure are two entirely distinct matters. Whatever happens underground should not affect what happens on the surface.³ Indigenous territories and oil blocks are not by necessity mutually exclusive.



Amazonia-UNASUR-Shell Logo. Designed by Carol Ruiz and Santiago del Hierro for Some True Stories at the Storefront for Art and Architecture, NY, 2008.

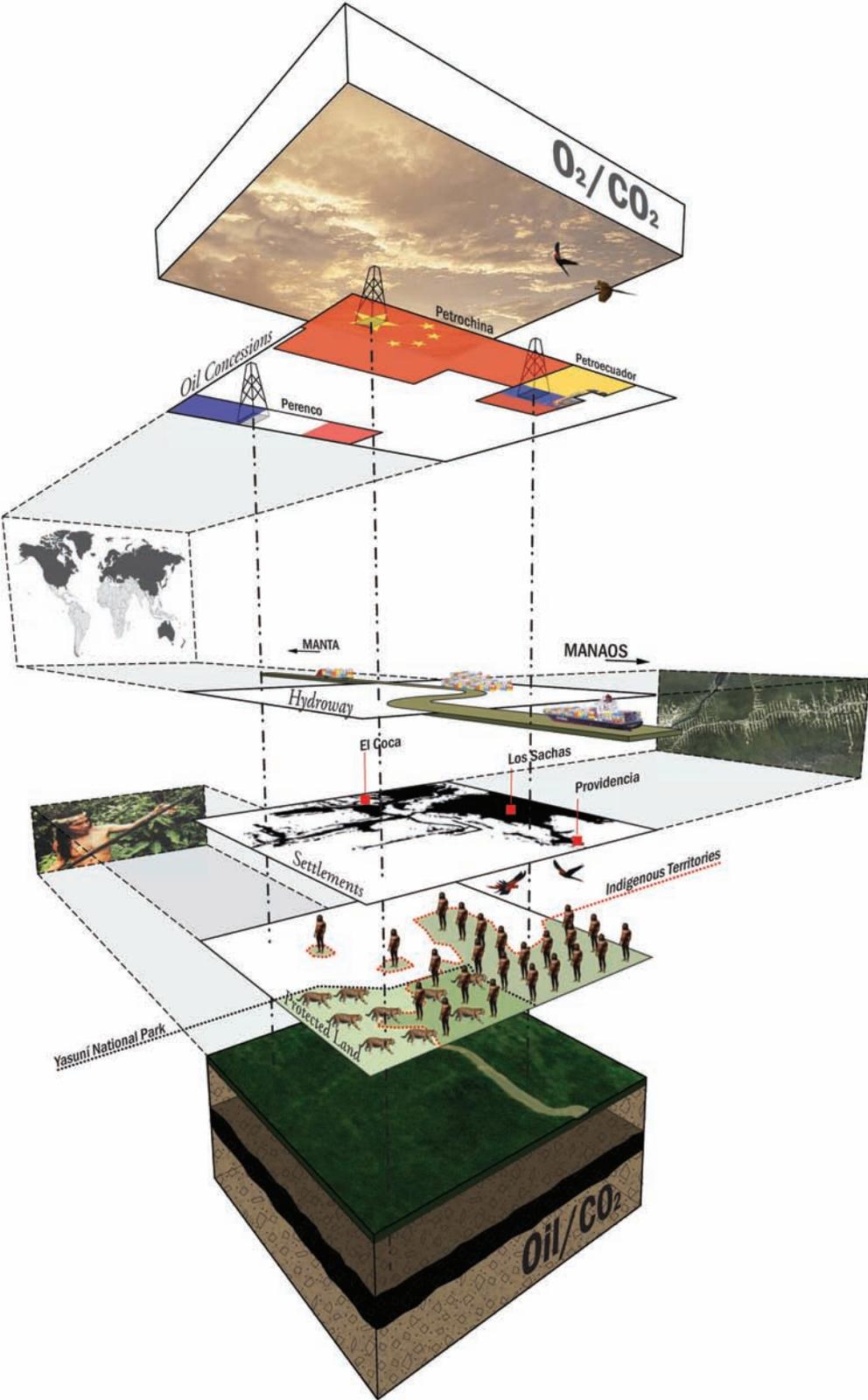
Concealment has been a civilizing force in Amazonia since colonial times⁴. The deadening sameness of the jungle was perceived by its earliest explorers as a cloak (and proof) to its fantastical wealth. Known materials, like gold, were hyperbolized in ways that transformed the Amazon as a whole into a seemingly endless repository of hidden riches. Even today, the basin is perceived as having a future value that far exceeds its current worth. Biological patents have replaced the gilded temples, carbon credits lure investments from the north. The gold-thirsting myth has dematerialized into a web of promises that now drapes over the whole terrain as a fragmentary map of utopia: oil blocks, natural reserves, mining concessions, native communities, all contesting grounds for the building of their own futures.

The degree to which different, and often oppositional, territorial logics have coexisted in a single area is nowhere as patent as it is in Ecuador.⁵ Starting in the 1970s, the country underwent a block-laying spree that quickly gobbled up most of the country's rainforest. About 65% of the basin's surface –52,300 km²– is currently zoned for oil extraction by national and multinational companies.⁶ Oil blocks are contractual/territorial demarcations leased by the central government to a drilling company (or companies) for the purposes of exploration, appraisal and extraction of oil. After years of social turmoil, environmental disasters, lawsuits, and bouts of nationalization, oil companies in Ecuador have had to negotiate a less-than-stable political wedlock with shifting national agendas, effectively assuming the role of the State in local matters. Oil blocks now function as units of spatial and social organization –straight-edged concessions with fuzzy ruling powers that grow, almost exclusively, in response to social and political demands. Health and education services, even entertainment, are provided to indigenous communities as measures of preemptive proximity (social responsibility, in business parlance). A long-term vision seems to be lacking.⁷ Yet precisely in account of the social and environmental threats that oil companies pose to these communities –threats that usually affect areas well beyond the space in which they are generated– oil blocks may be addressed as a network of spatial units and not just as isolated patches. They become, by dint of their aggregate extension and their long-established function as social interfaces, powerful vehicles for political action and massive territorial change.

Plane Violence

Historically, Amazonia has been reduced to two planes of representation: the cartographic and the experiential. The forbidding scale of the jungle –its sheer size, its impervious flatness– has led us to adopt either a vertical point of view represented horizontally “the cartographic,” or a horizontal point of view represented vertically “the experiential.” The cartographic plane depicts the rainforest as a single mass of indeterminate content, a space that can be drawn and parceled out as property and yet still be referred to as a single place: Amazonia. Lines here mean everything; the imaginary is projected as something to be realized. The first-person experiential plane, in contrast, projects an imaginary picture, a truth-claim, that is by necessity locked into the ethos of personal experience, “I have been there, therefore I know.” The commodification of Amazonia by national and international pressures requires, as a precondition, the distance afforded by the cartographic plane. The discourse of the local/social which NGOs and tourists champion, depends instead on the comforting fiction of the experiential plane. The in-between is notably absent. A political boundary means little on the ground; an isolated tribe means nothing to the tracing of an oil block. When a space in Amazonia is deemed irrelevant it is literally blotted out of the map as “insufficient data” –a white void marks the spot.

An oil block is an act of representational violence. It requires a level of abstraction that necessarily ignores, whether by choosing not to pay attention to or not knowing much about, the realities it nominally represents. All the social consequences of oil drilling –indigenous population displacement, social uprisings, etc.– stem from this founding act of violence. In Peru, oil exploration blocks now account for more than two-thirds of the country's Amazonian territory (which itself accounts for roughly 50% of the nation's land). Since 2001, more than 40 exploration blocks have been leased to foreign oil companies.⁸ Most of these, like the straight lines of colonial Africa, overlay and intersect natural reserves, indigenous lands, and/or reserves for indigenous groups in “voluntary isolation.”⁹ Recall Brack's argument for a sub-soil reality, of a space differentiated from its surface. Even if such a position were legally cogent –which it is, it would still fail to negotiate, to define the terms of a negotiation, between the natives' totalizing vision of their own territories and the government's sectional claims on its national resources. The 2009 road and pipeline blocks in northern Peru were precisely a reaction –fueled or not by outside influences– to this board-game mentality; a “backyard” protest against a set of free-trade-spin-off laws that were carelessly whisked up in Lima



Planes of View

to boost, among other things, oil extraction in the Amazon. It is only when violence is reified, i.e. when it becomes newsworthy, that we acknowledge its existence. The less visible violence of distance and abstraction, of that gaping in-between that separates the Ground from the Market, is somehow not violent enough to signify itself. Therein the source of its power. It can only produce acts of violence, which invariably point elsewhere, away from the underlying causes.

Future Values

The same week that the native uprisings surfaced in northern Peru, negotiations were taking place in Berlin between the German Parliament and a group of Ecuadorian government representatives. A proposal was submitted to prevent extraction in an oil block overlaying part of Ecuador's largest and most diverse Amazonian natural reserve: the Yasuni National Park. The claim is that oil reserves could be worth more if they remain underground. Keeping oil underground implies the non-emission of 407 million metric tons of CO₂, which at \$17.28 per ton, have a value of 7.03 billion US dollars (more than the net present value of the 850 million barrels of oil lying under the ITT oil block in Yasuni).¹⁰ In other words, the value of oil changes from the exchange of the commodity to its absence, or averted impact, in the global market. This new value is hedged against environmental services in situ (the ecological value of the rainforest as such) and the development of renewable resources in other locations. Thus, the less this particular space changes, the more it will be able to change the organization of abutting spaces and the structure of the market itself.¹¹

When it comes to tagging a dollar value on Nature, however, things get a bit tangled. Some have tried using marketing techniques, such as conjoint valuation, to price individual elements (from medicinal plants to gypsy moths) within an ecological patch; others are trying to use a more holistic approach, like contingent valuation, to gauge the total existence value of non-market goods (i.e. the use value of things that are not usually defined as either useful or exchangeable, like landscape and air). How, then, do we value a resource that is not grossly reified into daily life (as daily life, really)? How can pricing operate outside the daily reiteration (or re-assurance) of our habits, preferences, standards and expectations, that is, outside the rituals of quotidian transactions? Perhaps the answer does not lie in the growing precision of our valuation techniques –which are, by definition, limited, insofar as they reinforce the idea of nature as an exterior/autonomous structure to be appraised– but in the



Overlapping Jurisdictions
Indigenous Territories



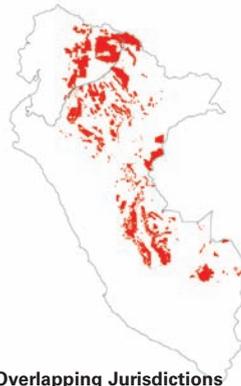
Overlapping Jurisdictions
Natural Reserves



Overlapping Jurisdictions
Oil Concession Blocks



Overlapping Jurisdictions
Layer Composite



Overlapping Jurisdictions
Territorial Overlaps



Oil Republics

mechanisms, the interfaces, that would allow us to tear down and rebuild this concept of nature as a form of human industry and transaction (to make solid of air, as it were).

In this transition towards non-extraction, an issue to address would be how to secure changes locally such that any changes in the market structure are properly supported. Aside from possible physical interventions, the answer may lie in developing new modes of representation, new ways to visualize and organize the space of Amazonia. The current model for addressing such issues –the regional plan, or plan de ordenamiento territorial– lacks the flexibility and the vision to go from a Cartesian worldview to one that can relate and constellate seemingly antithetical interests and scales of territorial action. This shift may imply the production of spaces that do not rely exclusively on legal enforcement or land use regulation. A property title or line in Amazonia –not to say anything about building codes and standards– is hardly enforceable in practice. It may also imply finding ways to un-build and subvert the prevalent modes of territorial expansion, using informality as both a constructive and destructive force. The verticality of the cartographic plane remains as yet divorced from the horizontal planes of experience. Discussions of environmental protection are concomitantly cast (and polarized) between development and conservation ideologies. The real challenge lies in finding ways to cut through these planes and provide a sectional understanding of their possible nexus, to constantly shift purviews and scales of understanding, to see politics as a space to be traversed and consequently altered.

The question is therefore not whether the rainforest should be preserved or developed, but whether we can imagine and produce the conditions under which both are made possible and practicable. Preservation may, in this sense, be the only futuristic project possible today; it requires thinking of action beyond intervention, of change beyond visibility. It implies a radical shift in our understanding of nature, involving the total destruction of the concept of nature itself. The ecological movements of the late 1960s were paradoxically rooted in an ideological reading of the future as a leap and not an extension.¹² Whether Buckminster Fuller's *World Game* (1970) or John McHale's *doubly-removed Future of the Future* (1968), the future as ideology was something to be continually projected, claimed, and fragmented. Much like Zenon's paradox, it was always almost there but somehow never moving. This is no longer the case: the future looms on us like a monster of consequence, not cause. We are impelled less by possibility than by failure. And it is this very notion of the future as failure –itself a

consequence of defining nature as something natural and therefore corruptible– that must somehow be debunked before it can be properly addressed.

1 Michael Taussig, *Shamanism, Colonialism and the Wild Man: A Study on Terror and Healing* (Chicago: University Of Chicago Press, 1991).

2 "Fatal Clashes Erupt in Peru at Roadblock," *New York Times* (June 5, 2009).

3 "I drink your milkshake, I drink it up!" Daniel Plainview (Daniel Day-Lewis) in the final scene of Paul Thomas Anderson's *There Will Be Blood*, 2007.

4 This article focuses on the Peruvian and Ecuadorian Amazon where most Amazonian oil exploration and extraction is currently taking place.

5 Ecuador's slice of the Amazon is one of the smallest amongst Amazonian nations and yet it holds the highest number of natives and produces the most oil barrels per year across the entire basin. Ecuador's Amazon constitutes 1.6% of the total area of the Amazon basin; Brazil holds roughly 68% of it. In 2006, Ecuador produced 182,693,891 barrels of Amazonian oil, while Peru and Brazil each produced around 16,000,000 barrels each. The number of natives (i.e. non-migrants) in the Ecuadorian Amazon is estimated at 369,810, while Brazilian natives total 300,000. Source: *Geo-Amazonia: Perspectivas del Medio Ambiente en la Amazonía*. The United Nations Environment Program, Organización del Tratado de Cooperación Amazónica, Centro de Investigación de la Universidad del Pacífico, 2009. p. 41, 72, 87.

6 Matt Finer et. al., "Oil and Gas Projects in the Western Amazon: Threats to Wilderness, Biodiversity, and Indigenous Peoples," *PLOS ONE* 3(8), 2008: 2.

7 This is due, in large part to not knowing whether the next government will nationalize foreign oil companies.

8 Ministerio de Energía y Minas del Perú, *Anuario Estadístico de Hidrocarburos* (2008). http://www.minem.gob.pe/hidrocarburos/pub_anuario_2008.asp

9 The term voluntary isolation is to be understood as a historical alibi, an imputed choice that conceals the real causes of a tribe's isolation (viz., torture, debt peonage, or disease).

10 Which at \$54.24 (WTI) means US\$ 6.07 billion (in May 2009 values). The Yasuni proposal shares a similar aim with the UN-REDD program (Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation in Developing Countries), but is not structurally related to it. The growth of this model would have to be limited in order to work; only tropical oil-dependant countries containing mega-diverse ecological systems would be eligible to participate. [Source: www.yasuni-itt.gov.ec]

11 The Yasuni Fund will be invested in numerous renewable energy projects across Ecuador, thus reducing the country's dependence on fossil fuels (which today account for 47% of all power generation). The interest earned from this fund will be invested by the State in the conservation and reforestation of 40 protected areas throughout the country (totaling 4.8 million hectares) and also in managing five million hectares of natural areas that belong to indigenous and Afro-Ecuadorian communities. Social development projects, from health and education to ecotourism and agro-forestry, are also contemplated in this proposal. Source: UNDP (Ecuador), "Yasuni-ITT Initiative: A Big Idea From a Small Country" (July 2009). www.yasuni-itt.gov.ec