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Thinking the Anthropocene against the Backdrop of Armed Conflict: Territory as a Place for Cognitive Production, Affective Participation, and Discursive Imagination*

Aproximación al Antropoceno en el contexto del conflicto armado: el territorio como espacio de producción cognitiva, participación afectiva e imaginación discursiva

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Abstract: This article reflects on the Anthropocene against the backdrop of armed conflict. To this end, it analyses two mining projects: one in southwestern Antioquia in Colombia and the other in the Luhwindja Chiefdom in the Democratic Republic of Congo. After examining the **post-agreement** and **post-war** political contexts of each country, this paper describes the extraction projects implemented in the territories, as well as the forms of resistance of the local populations. It also depicts the reconstruction of the territory as a place for cognitive production, affective participation, and discursive imagination. The very concept of territory is re-signified, beyond its geographical definition, as a **territory of life**.

Keywords: Anthropocene, armed conflict, extractivism, popular resistance, territory.

Resumen: este artículo ofrece una aproximación al Antropoceno en el contexto del conflicto armado. Para ello, se centra en dos proyectos mineros ubicados en el suroeste de Antioquia (Colombia) y Luhwindja (República Democrática del Congo). Tras examinar los contextos políticos de **posacuerdo** y **posguerra** de cada país, se describen los proyectos de extracción que se llevan a cabo en cada territorio, así como las formas de resistencia de las poblaciones locales. También se hace una reconstrucción del territorio como espacio de producción cognitiva, participación afectiva e imaginación discursiva. En este sentido, se da un nuevo significado al concepto de territorio, trascendiendo su definición meramente geográfica para concebirlo como un **territorio de vida**.

Palabras clave: Antropoceno, conflicto armado, extractivismo, resistencia popular, territorio.

“We protect what we love, and we love what we know”
Jacques Cousteau

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INTRODUCTION

How can we approach ecological transition in contexts affected by armed conflicts and political transitions? This article addresses this question within the specific contexts of Colombia and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), two Southern countries undergoing, respectively, a “post-agreement” and “post-war” political transition¹. In such scenarios, forms of violence (Crettiez, 2008) have been recomposed after long periods of armed confrontation. Interesting as it is, the literature on **transitions** overlooks the difficult situations faced by these countries, especially when they have been—and continue to be—afflicted by endemic violence. This violence is often used as a screen to hide extractivist activities, for example, but also collective resistance. The situation is all the more problematic because these two countries occupy a paradoxical position in the global ecological crisis. On the one hand, they act as guarantors of environmental sustainability due to the richness of their forests and biodiversity. On the other hand, they serve as bases for the extraction of natural resources in the global capitalist system. This dual role has irreversible implications in terms of alteration of living environments and various forms of destruction (Wallerstein, 2011).

In contrast, our article considers the intertwining of the violence perpetrated between human beings and that inflicted on non-human living beings, while highlighting the resilience of the affected populations. This approach enables us to better understand how communities are impacted by Anthropocene-related changes. Their concerns stem not only from extractivist practices that threaten their livelihoods and harm the environment, but also from the need to constantly adapt their resistance strategies to these deteriorating conditions. The concept of **territory** thus emerges at the intersection of these different trends. Far from being reduced to its geographical dimension, it appears as a **territory of life**, where meanings and concrete struggles to inhabit the Earth converge.

¹ These expressions are the most commonly used in each of these countries to refer to a dual reality: on the one hand, the existence of formal peace agreements (i.e., the Colombian agreement signed in Cartagena in 2016 and the DRC agreement signed in Goma in 2008); on the other hand, the persistence of multiple forms of violence—especially armed violence—of which the civilian population remains the main victim. In the case of Colombia, the term **post-agreement** is preferred to **post-conflict** to indicate that armed violence did not disappear after the signing of the peace agreement, although it no longer involves confrontations with the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (abbreviated FARC in Spanish). In the Congolese case, the war seems to be over. However, Van Acker (2018) points out that armed conflicts remain in the background of social life and proposes to speak of **post-war** rather than **post-conflict**. In both cases, it is important to recognise that, while the peace processes did not culminate in the cessation of armed violence and the establishment of a sustainable peace, they were significant stages in the peacemaking efforts.

However, it does not erase the wounds from previous conflicts, which are a source of intense suffering and vulnerability.

From a methodological point of view, this article adopts a multi-site approach that allows communal knowledge production in response to situations with local meanings but linked to global extractivism processes. An ethnographic approach was also necessary to capture the discourse and construct the narrative about the relations between societies and their environment. In both cases, the research was based on extensive field visits, a series of life stories and semi-structured interviews with social leaders, and the documentary analysis of texts produced by grassroots organisations, including official policy and legal documents. This approach allowed us to capture social actors' life perspectives and worldviews. The ethnographic approach adopted was proposed by Usunier et al. (1993) and consists of six stages: familiarisation, reflection, conceptualisation, rectification, establishment of links between concepts, and re-evaluation. In addition, data processing played a leading role. The analytical process for constructing meaning from our data involved all these stages, although not in an orderly fashion but rather interwoven. This made it possible to check and compare the data, strengthen the arguments, and ultimately, give meaning to our observations.

CONTEXTS: MINING PROJECTS IN RURAL AREAS WITH A HISTORY OF ARMED VIOLENCE

Legacy and current reality of armed conflicts

To understand the cases selected for this article, some contextualisation is necessary. Colombia and the DRC share the commonality of having faced war situations resulting in unprecedented humanitarian crises.

In the first case, an internal armed conflict ravaged the country for over half a century. Various peace processes have taken place in this region, with the most recent being the **Havana Peace Talks** (2012–2016), which led to a constitutionally binding peace agreement. However, violence has not ceased. While it decreased during the peace process, it sharply increased again during Iván Duque's presidency (2018–2022), mainly against demobilised guerrilla members, human rights defenders, social leaders, and environmental activists². The reconfiguration of territorial control in the absence of the former guerrilla group favoured the consolidation of armed criminal, drug trafficking, and illegal mining organisations, in which former members of paramilitary groups have

² According to Indepaz (2022), more than 900 social leaders were assassinated during this period. As Pearce & Perea (2019) suggest from a peacebuilding perspective, it is imperative to go beyond the figures to understand the reproduction of violence in its various manifestations. Moreover, it is crucial to take into account the agency of both individuals and communities in responding to those manifestations, even after the signing of a peace agreement.

participated or resumed their illicit activities (Badillo & Bravo, 2020). Notably, this phenomenon intensifies in areas where extractivist and rural development projects are being implemented. Despite this challenging scenario, “total peace” (*paz total* in Spanish) is a flagship agenda of the current government. This policy aims not only at a negotiated peace with the second largest active guerrilla group but also at a series of social, economic, and political reforms to build a sustainable peace (Valencia Agudelo, 2023)³.

The second case is the multifaceted armed conflict that has mainly affected the eastern region of the DRC for nearly a quarter-century. This area shares borders with Rwanda, Burundi, and Uganda and is rich in natural resources, which has contributed to the ongoing conflict. Rising from the ashes of decolonisation and fuelled by the neocolonial practices of the former metropolis—which advocated and supported an authoritarian power—these conflicts are driven by two factors: On the one hand, Rwandan, Burundian, and Ugandan military forces that support rebellions within the region to destabilise it and appropriate its minerals resources; and, on the other hand, numerous local armed groups involved in mineral exploitation, often in collaboration with members of the national army or foreign armies. Recent studies indicate that approximately 80 armed groups are currently operating in the DRC and that their main source of income is gold mining and cocoa production (Vlassenroot et al., 2022). Although there have been several peace agreements since 2001 (including those of Sun City in 2002 and Goma in 2008), they have failed to put an end to the deadly spiral. Beyond the military confrontation, violence continues to be directed against the rural population, women, and all those who dare to claim their rights.

This violence in Colombia and the DRC is intrinsically tied to the struggle over natural resources and the emergence of an “agrarian capitalism” (Grajales, 2021) linked to “land grabbing strategies” (Ansoms & Hilhorst, 2014). In other words, the economic dimension significantly contributes to territorial conflicts, which often involve military action (de Nanteuil & Mora Cortes, 2020). From the *development* perspective, these processes are also key to understanding the logics of conflict and peace and the conditions that foster violence as a complex phenomenon (Pearce & Perea, 2019). What was true yesterday is still true today: armed groups are constantly trying to appropriate resource-rich areas to establish territorial control, generate economic revenue, and engage in various forms of exaction (Vogel, 2022)⁴.

³ In this paragraph, the expression “former guerrilla group” refers to the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), while “the second largest active guerrilla group” designates the National Liberation Army (ELN). It should be noted that the peace talks only involved the former.

⁴ Today, in the “post-agreement” or “post-war” period, former members of Colombian extreme right-wing paramilitary groups, current members of ELN, and dissidents from the former FARC are joining or restructuring criminal drug trafficking organisations with transnational reach, such as Clan del Golfo. In the case of the DRC, both national and foreign armed groups, as well as elements of the country’s republican army, are responsible for violence. It is important to mention that the economic dimension is not the only cause of armed violence. In Colombia, these groups form local counter-powers, often linked to national elites. In the DRC, many of these groups

The western environmental belt (WEB) in southwestern Antioquia (Colombia) threatened by a mining project: towards collective mobilisation

The expansion of the extractive model in Colombia began in the early 2000s as part of liberalisation policies promoted by international financial institutions, which led to a reorientation of the national economy towards export-led growth strategies. In addition to historical conflicts over land and territorial control among armed groups (Lemaitre Ripoll, 2011), these strategies, known as “locomotives for development”, positioned certain regions and municipalities on the strategic map of mining titles for mineral exploration and exploitation, giving prominence to transnational mining⁵. According to these policies, Colombia's gold belt is located in southwestern Antioquia—specifically in Jericó, Támesis, Tarso, Pueblorrico, Caramanta, and Andes—a geologically strategic area rich in metals such as gold and copper (González Díaz, 2018). Local political authorities have stated that this and other mining projects are important for boosting the country's economy, especially at a time of rising commodity prices on the international market. As a result, since 2005, more than 22 mining titles in southwestern Antioquia have been granted to transnational companies for exploration purposes, impacting almost 90% of the territory⁶.

One of the largest mining projects in Antioquia is Quebradona, by the South African transnational corporation AngloGold Ashanti (AGA), located within the jurisdictions of Jericó, Támesis, Pueblorrico, and Caramanta. In 2011, the inhabitants of these municipalities became concerned when they noticed helicopters flying over the territory and studying its topography. Thus, what was initially an informal search for precious metal deposits (**cateo**) became a systematic and unauthorised exploration of private lands and other areas that directly affected springs and watercourses. These incursions into the territory were perceived by the community as alerts and led student, peasant, and indigenous organisations to mobilise. This initial mobilisation had two purposes:

operate for self-defence reasons, political recognition of their communities, or in opposition to certain government policies.

⁵ “Locomotives for development” is the term used to refer to the five key economic sectors of the National Development Plan 2010–2014 that needed to be strengthened for national growth. These sectors are infrastructure, agro-industry, mining and hydrocarbons, real estate, and innovation. Although the foundations of this policy were laid in the 1990s with the adaptation of the Mining Code (Law 685 of 2001), it was not until 2006 that the National Plan for Mining Development - Vision 2019 was adopted, resulting in a substantial boost to the mining sector. Consequently, the map of strategic mining areas now includes territories that previously had no mining activity (Toro Pérez et al., 2012).

⁶ Almost nine municipalities in southwestern Antioquia have been impacted by mining exploration. It is worth noting that Antioquia, whose capital city is Medellín, is one of the largest regions in the country. It was one of the epicentres of the armed conflict and remains one of the lungs of the national economy. Violence against the civilian population remains intense in the northern part of the region (in Urabá, near Panama) and in the eastern part (bordering Chocó).

to understand the implications of large-scale industrial mining in the region and to prevent the fragile peasant economy from being transformed into a mining economy, which was contrary to their original vocation, culture, and way of life.

Despite neighbouring small mining municipalities, such as Titiribí and Marmato (Caldas), and experiencing a strong concentration of land due to coffee monoculture and livestock farming expansion, this region is characterised by a peasant culture. Furthermore, the hydrological configuration of southwestern Antioquia has fostered a close relationship between the inhabitants and the bodies of water that flow through the territory, which represent well-being, leisure, and enjoyment and carry spiritual significance (Ramírez Patiño, 2021, p. 24)⁷. However, the mining project threatens to break this connection.

The Luhwindja Chiefdom, in South Kivu (DRC), confronted with the consequences of mining: between landscape destruction and population displacement

Since the end of the dictatorship in the 1990s, DRC governments have prioritised the exploitation of the country's mineral resources (Noury, 2010; Rusembuka, 2013; De Putter & Decrée, 2013). Accordingly, the mining sector has been seen as a strategic lever for economic growth. In the early 2000s, a period characterised by the mining boom, international financial institutions, such as the World Bank, pushed the DRC to liberalise the mining sector, as increased mining was expected to fund the improvement of living conditions and the fight against poverty. At the time, the “mining modernisation” initiative became popular: a comprehensive programme aimed at strengthening the industrial mining sector and significantly reducing the artisanal mining activity—which was the source of livelihood of a portion of the population (Bashizi & Geenen, 2015). This mining modernisation, however, has apprehended mining territories as spaces to be exploited for strictly economic purposes. The resulting productivist practices have systematically ignored the social and environmental consequences of exploitation. Yet, it was within this framework that the Congolese State signed approximately 60 mining contracts with multinationals. Those contracts were drawn up in the form of economic partnerships that granted most of the mineral wealth to private investors (Bashizi, 2020).

Thus, from the 2000s onwards, the populations of regions with high mining potential have seen an influx of transnational mining companies. Among them, Banro Corporation, a Canadian multinational, has acquired several mining concessions in eastern DRC for industrial gold mining. One of its mines, known as Twangiza Mining, is located in the Luhwindja Chiefdom, covering almost the

⁷ The territory is also home to five **resguardos**, whose populations come from regions such as Chocó and Risaralda and belong to the Embera Chamí ethnic group. These communities settled in the southwest due to agricultural colonisation pressures on their territories. **Resguardos** are institutions recognised to indigenous communities that grant them collective land ownership.

entire surface area (180 km² out of 183 km²). Since 2011, the mine has been using heavy industrial machinery to reach the gold veins. To achieve this, machines raze hills, even mountains, without leaving anything in their path. More broadly, the mining modernisation programme has removed all social and moral constraints on the industrial extraction project. On the ground, Banro has engaged in land grabbing, population displacement, destruction of flora and fauna, violence against demonstrators, and profanation of sacred places⁸. Available statistics indicate that, in the initial phases of exploitation, at least 800 households were relocated and 12,000 artisanal miners were deprived of their sources of livelihood (Justice pour tous, 2015; Bureau d'Etudes Scientifiques et Techniques, 2020). The latter were also dispossessed of their villages, living environments, surroundings, and territory in the broadest sense (see below).

RESISTANCE: COGNITIVE PRODUCTION, AFFECTIVE PARTICIPATION, DISCURSIVE IMAGINATION... AND THE USE OF WEAPONS

We will revisit the similarities and differences between these two case studies in the third section. Beyond this brief presentation, let us delve into the resistance movements that have been opposing mining projects “in the name” of their territories. This is what we will explore next.

Why opposing? The aims of resistance

a. Promoting the bond between humans and territories within the framework of a “peasant vocation” (Colombia)

In southwestern Antioquia, large-scale mining directly affects peasant frames of reference, which were conceived as sets of norms and values related to working the land, but also to preserving nature (Observatorio de Conflictos Ambientales [OCA], 2017). Although AGA argued that their exploration activities did not cause any significant damage to the land and water in the study area, the local community, with its profound knowledge of the region, questioned the veracity of these studies⁹. They explained to the authorities that the contamination of air, water, and forests had adverse effects on their health, livelihoods, and rural and indigenous identities. Moreover, it divided the community between those who

⁸ In Luwhindja, the multinational has taken over areas formerly inhabited by local people and occupied by agricultural fields, forest areas, waterways, and artisanal mining sites. This strategy has damaged the local environment and left thousands of peasant households without shelter, land, water, job, and income. It has also dislodged all those graves buried for centuries and flattened the mountains and hills to finally succeed in producing its first ever gold bar in November 2011 (Bashizi, 2020).

⁹ The community emphasised that the uncontrolled crossing of streams and community aqueducts, as well as the construction of drilling platforms in seismic hazard areas, posed significant risks for damage and contamination.

view mining as a vehicle for “progress” and those who recognise its short-term economic benefits but long-term social and environmental costs (Castro Velázquez, 2014). If land and subsoil are contaminated to enrich foreign companies, the resulting environmental damage that leads to the displacement of populations outweighs any potential benefits of sustainable employment opportunities¹⁰.

In addition to the impacts on the land, peasants argued that mining is alien to the “peasant vocation”, so becoming employees of the mine was untenable for many of them (Mesa Ambiental de Jericó, 2018). They also questioned the municipal land-use plans, which never considered mining as a main activity. In this sense, they interpreted the arrival of mining companies in the territory as a national government imposition, contradicting the right to territorial autonomy conferred on municipalities by Colombia's current constitutional framework (see Articles 287, 288, 311)¹¹. The central issue at stake in the popular resistance went far beyond denouncing an abusive economic practice or easy enrichment: it affected the profound identity of the peasant world and, in particular, the peasant sense of **place**. Against the instrumentalisation of the territory, the inhabitants asserted: “we who live in this territory should be the first to talk about it because we are the ones who know it best. That is why we resist the arrival of external actors whose aim is to dispossess us of our land” (Comité por la Defensa Ambiental del Territorio [CODEATE], 2021, p. 5)¹². Thus, the purpose of collective action was to assert other meanings of territory beyond those that equate it with a mere “resource” for future prosperity. This non-instrumental conception is not a simple posture, nor even a simple mental construction: it refers to a series of shared experiences between human beings and their natural environment (Peemans, 2002). It opens up an authentic phenomenology of place (Hoyaux, 2002).

¹⁰ Prior experiences in the country, such as the Cerrejón open-pit coal mine in La Guajira and the Marmato mines in Caldas, have revealed the permanent impacts of mining, which are often ignored in environmental impact assessments (EIA). By closely studying these experiences and visiting these territories with the support of organisations for the defence of human, social, and environmental rights, grassroots organisations have problematised the discourse of prosperity before the authorities. They highlight the failures of the liberal tradition, which assumes that any difficulties encountered by populations or natural ecosystems will inevitably be **transformed** into future prosperity, typically through an increase in income or its equivalent (Balibar, 2010). The Anthropocene challenges not only the unequal distribution of the resulting wealth, but also the very principle of this transformation. The regime of ecological catastrophe that we have entered into creates irreversible destruction that cannot be compensated (“non-repairable”) in monetary terms.

¹¹ Laws and decrees have reinforced this constitutional mandate. Thus, Law 136 of 1994—the Municipal Regime Law—was enacted to modernise municipal organisation and functions. Section 33 of the same Act stipulates municipal autonomy over decisions concerning land use and development. Similarly, Law 138 of 1997—the Statutory Land Use Planning Law—defines the parameters and roles of municipalities in fulfilling this mandate.

¹² Free translation by the authors of this article.

b. Against generalised dispossession, including the discursive one, conceiving the territory as a “living environment” (DRC)

Deeply attached to the territory, a significant portion of the Luwhindja population opposed Banro's exploitation. The failure to involve—or at least consult—the population in the granting of the “Twangiza” concession had generated conflicts between, on the one hand, the customary authorities who were complicit in this transfer and those who opposed it, and, on the other hand, between these customary authorities and the population. Part of this population chose to fight by all means against the exploitation. Their main goal, beyond the question of natural resources, was to enable the Luwhindja chieftaincy to maintain access to the territory. For a significant portion of the Luwhindja population, Banro had destroyed the chiefdom as such. As in the previous case, the issue at stake in the resistance was not only the serious social conflicts generated by the mining activity, but also, if not primarily, the associated ecological degradation. In the eyes of the population, mining activities have destroyed agricultural land, rivers, and forests¹³. The population sees the territory as a real “living environment”, inextricably linking social life and biological life. To undermine the natural environment is to undermine this connection between human beings and the Earth: It is to undermine life itself.

However, the specificity of this mining modernisation project does not end there. The establishment of the company was preceded by a long **discursive process** aimed at supporting the thesis of a division between natural resources and territories. This “discursive tactic” consisted of considering natural resources as autonomous elements within a given territory. Therefore, the question of the connection between these resources and the local populations, as well as the consequences of exploitation in terms of ecological degradation and impacts on the living conditions were not addressed. In this discourse, mining is seen as a simple “resource”, detached from any link with the other components of the territory. In turn, the exploitation of these “resources” is seen as a lever for creating wealth, which should solve the country's economic problems and meet the social needs of the population. From this perspective, the policies put in place ignore the other components of the living world, such as water, forests, agricultural land, and all the flora and fauna. It is precisely against such a perspective that the acts of resistance in Luwhindja have been directed: they are intended to oppose a process of destruction that is already underway. The aim is nothing less than the reconstruction of the territory in the face of its annihilation, which can be called “reterritorialisation”. It is a question of rehabilitating the connections between the various non-human components of the territory, but also between human beings and their natural environment, in the awareness that the exploitation of one polarity necessarily impacts the other. More than a phenomenology of place, we are dealing with the existence

¹³ The company has destroyed fields, razed mountains, and displaced people to infertile areas. Drillings have also caused the drying up of rivers, which were already contaminated due to artisanal mining activities. In addition, these mining activities have led to significant deforestation, particularly as a result of the felling of trees to clear the areas to be exploited.

of a **global conception of the territory** as a space of links between all the living components.

How to oppose? The modalities of resistance

a. Beyond networks, developing practical knowledge and enhancing the emotional attachment to the territory (Colombia)

The collaboration between social organisations and inhabitants took root in the municipalities of Jericó, Támesis, Pueblorrico, and Caramanta, where the first environmental committees (**mesas ambientales**) were established. These committees sought to initiate dialogues with mayors, municipal councils, and communal action committees (**Juntas de Acción Comunal**), which bring together various local actors. Peasant and environmental organisations such as the Asociación Agropecuaria de Caramanta (abbreviated ASAP in Spanish), the Agrupación de Caminantes de Támesis (abbreviated ACATA in Spanish), the Red de Acueductos Comunitarios de Támesis (abbreviated ACUATAMESIS in Spanish), or the Comité por la Defensa Ambiental del Territorio (abbreviated CODEATE in Spanish) played a key role in recruiting participants and creating a regional platform for the defence of the territory in the southwest. This collective effort led to the establishment of the Cinturón Occidental Ambiental (abbreviated COA in Spanish) in 2011. From its inception, COA's objective was to move towards a non-instrumental understanding of the territory, placing "life" – in its broadest sense – at the centre¹⁴. The confluence of COA actors facilitated synergies between peasant and indigenous economies. Based on the experience of ASAP, agroecology emerged as an integrated process that connects local knowledge about land, soil, and seeds, but also about risks and diseases, with sustainable management practices. The ultimate goal is to gradually transform conventional agricultural practices (COA, 2021).

More than a decade of resistance in the southwest has managed, albeit temporarily, to slow down the "pressure on the neck" felt by the inhabitants of this territory during the exploration and environmental authorisation stages of the Quebradona project (Quintero Díaz, 2021). In 2021, the application for an environmental permit was dismissed, which the communities regarded as a reprieve, not a total victory, as the company could still appeal the decision or propose a new EIA to start its exploitation activities. The dismissal was based on observations related to the lack of specifics regarding the mine's area of influence, the characterisation of hydrological and hydrogeological components, as well as considerations about tailings or mine waste deposits and

¹⁴ As a joint process, COA participants have outlined the following three objectives to position themselves as central actors in citizen participation and territorial planning: 1) to defend indigenous and peasant economies; 2) to advocate for water as a public good ("environmental commons"); and 3) to promote community organisation and participation.

their impact on major water flows (Quintero Díaz, 2021)¹⁵. This result is due, in part, to the concerns raised by the collectives jointly working in the COA, which, together with local environmental committees, have systematically denounced the “perpetual” environmental damage caused by mining and the deficiencies in the company’s conducted EIAs.

Mobilised populations began producing their own knowledge as soon as they perceived the risks weighing on the territory. In response to these risks, these collectives initiated “popular education” processes, particularly focusing on the environmental implications of the extraction projects. To do this, they started by exploring key mining-related aspects such as hydrogeology and biology, which enabled them to identify, among other things, the negative impacts on vegetation, biodiversity, and the hydrological structure of the mountains. In the case of southwestern Antioquia, the “sustainability schools” established by the Censat Agua Viva organisation and whose contents were approved by the participants themselves, have been fundamental in promoting the cross-fertilisation of experiences between different places at the national and international levels. The configuration of collective action has gone hand in hand with the search for the broadest possible alliances, engaging in dialogues with networks of lawyers and scientific experts, both national and international. This has indeed favoured the participation of citizens in the co-construction of advocacy strategies or political decisions, from which they are generally excluded.

Such a dynamic gave rise to what McAdam (1982, 2022) refers to as “cognitive liberation”, a concept that can be understood in the sense of *knowledge that emancipates* but also of *emancipation through knowledge*¹⁶. As a result,

¹⁵ According to the local social actors, the environmental impact studies ignore the potential and actual effects on surface water, particularly on groundwater and aquifers. Also, they do not specify how to prevent mine tailings from ending up in the tributaries that flow into the Cauca River. Thus, the local populations in the southwest have mobilised in response to the uncertainties surrounding risks to this major river artery, whose impacts are not limited in time and would radically change the river’s dynamics. They are, therefore, pleading with the authorities to invoke the precautionary principle as a preventive measure before authorising it through an environmental permit.

¹⁶ In this context, legal argumentation plays a decisive role. To build solid defence capabilities, members of the social movement have received training in constitutional law and legal accompaniment through workshops, conferences, and awareness campaigns. These trainings have been developed in collaboration with human rights organisations, such as the José Alvear Restrepo Lawyers’ Collective (abbreviated CAJAR in Spanish), university professors, and independent researchers. The aim is not only to help them identify arguments but also the justifications and mechanisms for legal and political action, so that they can assert their own vision of the territory, popular mandates, and community life projects. Also, efforts are being made to make the inhabitants of the southwestern region, in particular the peasant population, aware of their rights. Thus, the COA has adopted international declarations concerning the rights of peasants (Nations Unies, 2012, 2019), as well as the jurisprudential elements developed by the Colombian Constitutional Court regarding the recognition of peasants as “subjects of special protection”. This recognition takes into account their relationship to culture, their life projects, and their territoriality. On this basis, the COA has sought to bring the rights of peasants in the

communities began to appropriate the territory, not only through land redistribution efforts but, more fundamentally, by acknowledging the interrelationships between land use, the availability of water and subsoil resources, and the crucial role of forests and animals. For instance, by better understanding the way the mountains would be intervened and the impact of these interventions on the Andean bear corridor, as well as by recognising the corridor's role in seed dispersion to higher elevations, farmers began to reduce the hunting of Andean bears, which were once seen only as livestock predators (Vargas, 2021).

Furthermore, the defence of peasant and indigenous cultures, together with their natural environment (including water and mountains), is rooted in a constant process of "affective recognition" of the territory. This finds expression in initiatives such as *El abrazo de la montaña*, which involves recognition walks aimed at weaving memories and collective identities in harmony with the territory. From the perspective of "socio-spatial" popular education, these walks highlight the interrelationships between the life trajectories of the inhabitants and the archaeological, historical, and cultural dimensions of the territory. Similarly, communication practices on social networks and the production of media materials reflect an ongoing effort to enhance the value of the region's heritage. The objective is to produce counter-narratives to the official definitions that reduce this sub-region to its mere economic role as a supplier of gold and other mining resources.

In this respect, it is important to underline the non-violent nature of the social mobilisations and/or protest actions, which typically involve road blockades by peasants and artistic marches in the municipalities. In a territory historically marked by armed conflicts and the constant stigmatisation and repression of social mobilisation (whether it be student, popular, or peasant mobilisations), it has become essential for all involved actors to protect the lives of participants, even in the face of continued intimidation practices. Therefore, understanding the affective dimension of a territory is crucial. The territory is not only seen as a source of material subsistence but also as a place for enjoyment and pleasure, where the care of nature is key to the preservation of life and human dignity. Serving as a fundamental lever of resistance, this affective dimension shapes how actors engage in legal or political activities to "defend the land". It gives meaning to their advocacy and participation. Yet, what would happen if the extractivist project finally became a reality, even if enforced through repression?

b. From discursive pacifism to the use of weapons: three strategies of resistance (DRC)

southwest into the public debate, placing them normatively above those of corporations. As evidenced by similar cases of resistance, communities appropriate technical, juridical, and scientific knowledge through popular environmental education and ethnoeducation (Escalante Prada & Hernández Epiayu, 2021).

The resistance in Luwhindja was sparked by the Banro company's decision to relocate residents living at some distance from its facilities. The big challenge was determining how and where to relocate these households. To address this issue, the multinational resorted to a consultative structure, commonly referred to as a "community forum" in the DRC. Its purpose was to facilitate discussions with the local population regarding the practicalities of the relocation process and address community complaints during the negotiations with the company. However, such a structure did not previously exist in Luwhindja, which prompted Banro to collaborate with customary authorities in its creation. In 2009, a community forum was established in Luwhindja by the customary authority and funded by Banro.

Importantly, a community forum is a structure created **by** the local community to defend its **own** interests. However, one of the main contradictions in the Luwhindja community forum was that its decisions ran counter to the interests of a large part of the local population and showed serious irregularities¹⁷. For the company, the aim was to secure formal approval from the people to minimise tensions and reduce displacement costs. Yet, this manipulation and the irregularities did not go unnoticed. A large part of the local population quickly recognised these practices as fundamentally unfair. Consequently, they began to challenge the forum and resist the relocation, despite the power of their opponent. This marked the initiation of a series of resistance strategies, which can be categorised into three levels:

- The first strategy was in the **discursive field**. By drawing on traditional law, it aimed to invest the field of imagination, encouraging the emergence of a new collective narrative, which was concretised in expressions such as: "This land belongs to my ancestors, to me, and to my descendants"; "I gave a cow to the Mwami and he gave me this land in return and forever"; "This is the land of the Congolese, and we, the Congolese, we are the ones who have the right to live on these lands or to exploit them". Importantly, the aim was not only to create the conditions for a discursive identification with the territory but also to counter the dominant legal rhetoric derived from the 1973 Congolese land law. This law designates soils and subsoils as state-owned and grants the state the right to expropriate landowners whose subsoil contains minerals. Although this narrative was not accepted by state representatives, this imagination work increased the population's sense of legitimacy regarding their

¹⁷ For example, in the agreements related to compensation, there was a notable lack of clarity, objectivity, and completeness concerning the compensation rate and modalities for property replacement. As a result, irregularities were reported in the compensation process. In addition, it appears that the relocated community was not actively involved in the evaluation of the properties to be compensated or in the establishment of the criteria for calculating compensation. Rather, everything was negotiated at the level of the community forum, and the members of this forum did not possess the necessary expertise in the field. For the company, the primary challenge was to secure formal endorsement to alleviate tensions with the population while minimising the associated costs.

territory. Nonetheless, alternative solutions were still needed to slow down the relocation process after having contested it.

- The second strategy focused on **trickery**. Through the forum, the community insisted on proposing the Cinjira village as a relocation site. Since this village is located on a difficult-to-access mountain, the population was convinced that, by suggesting this site, they would buy time. They argued that it was inaccessible, hoping to push the company to abandon the relocation project. However, Banro's industrial strength allowed it to build a road to Cinjira to bring in the construction materials for the replacement houses. This came as a disappointing surprise to the population, although it provided them with some time to employ other forms of pressure.
- The third strategy involved **peaceful and then armed protests**. Initially, the mobilisations remained fairly fragmented¹⁸. Nevertheless, the multinational managed to mobilise the state apparatus to proceed with the relocation, deploying the police and the army, who used physical violence to compel the population to leave. This resulted in numerous cases of imprisonment, torture, and inhumane treatment. Some people were left physically disabled, others experienced lifelong trauma, and some were forced to migrate to other villages or neighbouring chiefdoms, although several families refused to bow to the coercion¹⁹. At first, the repression was intended to deter protests against the relocation, but it failed to put an end to the discontent. In fact, some households even destroyed the newly constructed buildings once they reached the relocation site. Since 2017, the situation has further escalated. The repressive measures taken by both the company and the state have led to retaliatory actions by the population. Armed peasants, and even armed groups, have repeatedly attacked the company's camps and facilities. On several occasions, its equipment has been held hostage, and staff members have been kidnapped. In this tumultuous context, the company has found itself unable to continue its activities, and its unpopularity has failed to mobilise the local population to protect it. As a result, it had to suspend operations in its Maniema and South Kivu subsidiaries. The Namoya, Kamituga, and Lugushwa mines were the first to be affected by this decision. Over the course of 2019, this security crisis began to impact Luhwindja's activities. Consequently, the multinational decided not to suspend its activities but instead to sell Twangiza Mining to

¹⁸ This was mainly due to organisational difficulties, the heterogeneous nature of the demands, the dissuasive strategies employed by the companies, as well as the socio-political context, which did not favour an effective mobilisation.

¹⁹ More than 800 households had to say goodbye to their villages. Among these, some were angry because they simply did not want to leave the villages that had been home to their families for generations. They did not want to leave their territory to go and live in unfamiliar and inappropriate lands. Others were unhappy because of the irregularities in the compensation process. Notably, several households refused to leave and hand over their land to the multinational company (Bashizi, 2020).

a Chinese multinational, Baiyin Nonferrous Group Company Limited. What will be the long-term impact of such a decision?

Territories: Between symbolic “re-signification” and practical contestations

In the backdrop of armed conflict, the two cases under analysis have many similarities, such as the presence of foreign multinationals aiming to extract minerals on a massive scale from specific territories, the persistence of peasant life marked by a radical asymmetry of positions and means of action, and a broadened conception of the territory versus an instrumental view that reduces it to a mere “resource”. Nonetheless, they also exhibit some differences. In Colombia, mining is still a **project**, and the local populations are mobilising to prevent its implementation. In contrast, in the DRC, mining has **already** taken place. In the Congolese case, resistance has a **restorative** focus, while, in the Colombian case, it has a **preventive** dimension. Regarding the networks of resistance, in Colombia, they connect **various** actors and have an **international** dimension, whereas, in the DRC, resistance is essentially **peasant** and **local** in nature. One of the most clear differences between both case studies, however, lies in the **approach to violence**. While the two territorial dynamics highlight the violence associated with global capitalism, often relayed or supported by local public authorities within the framework of the international division of labour, they also question the “proper use” of participatory processes:

- In Colombia, the relatively peaceful context linked to the peace process made it possible to demand a participatory approach that combines practical knowledge and emotional attachment to the territory. Mobilisation was sought to avoid armed violence, and it relied on numerous national and international networks. Although it is too early to know the effects of this mobilisation, it is interesting to observe how the cessation of armed violence creates conditions for a double investment (both cognitive and affective) in the socio-environmental struggle.
- In the DRC, the co-existence of the “end of wars” and the continuation of armed violence, coupled with the brutality of the extractivist project itself, has generated a range of contestations, which combine discursive imagination and recourse to arms. Here again, the combination of different options seems an essential characteristic of resistance, without these options being mutually exclusive: in the face of extreme physical violence and symbolic violations (including desecration of graves, manipulation of community forums, and betrayal of participation), discursive pacifism does not exclude armed contestation.

Beyond these differences, it is the very concept of **territory** that these two case studies make it possible to enrich. For the inhabitants, it is not an ancestral entity that exists by nature. Nor does it denote a reality external to their way of life or their identity. On the contrary, the territory takes shape through processes of

collective emergence, where inhabitants weave the threads of living relationships and maintain connections among the various components of the same place (including mountains, rivers, soils, animals, and humans). It emerges as a “theatre of shared experiences” between humans and their natural environment, while also functioning as a real “territory of life” that brings together social and biological life²⁰. This phenomenology of place and global approach to the territory suggests that inhabitants have learned to read and construct their territory as if it were an “open book” (Aristizábal, 2021). From a long-term experience, they became the bearers of an alternative definition of the territory and constituted a “public” in the sense of Dewey (2010). They then acquired a “capacity to object” (Stengers, 2006), enabling them to resist the violence of an economic regime that sought to erase the essential connections among individuals, between individuals and their natural environment, and between the multiple components of this environment. Undoubtedly, the main lesson from this comparative and multi-site study is that, against the fragmentation induced by global capitalism, resistance has arisen by transforming the territory into **a space of interconnections between indissociable forms of life**. History will tell whether this re-signification is an alternative to violence as a whole, whether related to extractivism-induced destruction, repressive logics, or armed protests by affected populations.

CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflicts of financial, professional, or personal interests.

AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS

The contributions presented in this article were collaboratively developed by all the authors.

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²⁰ In a similar way as Escobar (2020) reflects using the resistance of the Nasa peoples in Colombia and other examples, these emergences grapple with the complexity of multiplicity and understand the “territory” as a life-space of vibrant, interdependent, and ever-changing flows between different forms of life.

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