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“Nos están matando”: (We Are Being Killed)

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Authors:

Catalina Mejía Moreno ([ORCID-0000-0002-2742-4677](https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2742-4677)),

University of Sheffield

In May 4th, 2019 a lamentable act took place. We (líderes and lideresas) have been attacked ... We hope that stigmatization against social leaders and environmental activists stops, because stigmatization kills; kills life; kills leaders, disappears and displaces entire communities. We hope to be guaranteed with our basic rights and to abolish structural racism in this country, and violence against women. A significant deed is that peace one day arrives to our territory, because we are exhausted, we are tired of this violence, we are tired of this nation-state-led barbarism, of racism and patriarchy ... We are tired of politics of death. Enough blood has been spilled as result of the armed conflict and of the political and economic violence ... We want life, we love life and want to care for it.¹ These are Francia Márquez’s words after an attempt to take her life.

Francia Márquez is an environmental activist and leader of the Afro-Colombian community in Cauca (south-western Colombia). She is one of the few who has escaped murder since environmental activists, human rights defenders and community leaders, defending land against social and environmental extraction, have become a ‘threat.’ It is horrifying. Just in the first sixteen days of 2020 twenty human rights defenders were killed in rural areas of Colombia; more than one per day. This form of violence has increased substantially in the last three decades, dramatically in the last three years, and alarmingly in the first days of 2020.²

The collective outcry “Nos están matando” (We are being killed) was first heard in Colombia years ago, with similar outcries taking place in different neighboring countries where, similarly, displacement and forceful disappearances as consequence of extraction practices were emergent and soon normalized.³ Also, where extraction was being imposed as the only social and economic logic; the most desirable one.⁴ Today “Nos están matando” is a form of protest outside and across Colombia, not only led by those vulnerable, but by a

whole community tired of an imposed invisibility. It is a collective call that asks the government for acknowledgement and action after its repeated claims of such murders as “aleatory.” It is a demonstration also addressed to a world that has not yet been exposed to this terrifying news, or, in a similar way, does not want to know about them.

This micro-narrative stems from the urgency of exposing a wearisome situation where violence, displacement and extraction practices are inextricably linked. It turns to the actors who are its invisible protagonists in order to emphasize that this invisibility derives from practices of othering inherited from colonization.⁵

Extraction

The Quimbo is the biggest hydroelectric dam in Colombia and the first constructed by a transnational company, Emgesa-Enel—an Italian-Spanish company through its subsidiary Endesa. It is built just 150 kilometers downstream from the Magdalena’s source; Colombia’s principal river and located just 30 km upstream from another large hydroelectric dam, Betania, which operates since 1987. The Quimbo Dam is 151 meters high and 632 meter long. It generated a reservoir of 8,250 hectares, covering fertile lands and forests. The families affected by the land clearing for the construction of the Quimbo Dam were not consulted, many of them had already been relocated for the Betania Dam, and were forced into a second relocation; six towns were directly affected and approximately 3,000 people have been displaced.⁶

The two film stills (Figs. 1 and 2) are from *El Desangre del Huila (Huila's Bleeding, 2015)* and *Tierra de los Amigos (Land of Friends, 2014)* respectively, and are part of a larger and ongoing project entitled BE DAMMED, led by the Colombian artist and activist Carolina Caycedo in collaboration with *Movimiento Ríos Vivos (Living Rivers Movement)*. The project investigates the effects that large dams have on natural and social landscapes in various American bio-regions, and the consequences of transitioning public bodies of water into privatized resources.⁷ Importantly, through aerial and satellite imaging, geo-choreographies and audio-visual essays, it exposes how water has become an index of extractivism, while emphasizing the significance of water as a common good.

Both stills are powerful and telling. In the first still, the foreign corporate structure of the dam under construction stands abruptly facing the fisherman, his embodied labor, and

the land and water that he and his family have inhabited and possibly lived from, cared for and protected for generations. The openness of the fishing net (*atarraya*) is superimposed with the concrete dam in the back; the malleability of the woven net contrasts against the impermeability of the solid structure behind. For Caycedo, this re-presents the complex interrelations between the construction of dams and social repression—here understood as an instance of power that interrupts the flow of the social and community organization.⁸ In the second still, a satellite photograph is intervened with black ink and brush, highlighting the forceful and painful intervention to the territory.

Caycedo's work is one of the most important ones to address nationally and internationally the consequences of the Colombian mining industries and extraction practices, which by the late twentieth century were still little discussed in the news. Local mining industry, together with other forms of extraction practices have only recently been repositioned at the center of the Colombian government's and other legal and illegal groups' political agenda. This largely due to the reduction in confrontations between armed groups such as guerrillas and paramilitaries, following the signed peace treaty (2016) between the government and the main guerrillas group—las FARC—, as well as to the pressing demands from mining corporations. Practices of extraction in the form of mining and hydroelectric dams are being promoted by multinationals, backed up by the government, and presented to the nation as 'progressive' projects. But they are projects conflicting in nature, and even so more problematic as they are further entangled with practices of forced migration taking place in rural areas of the country where processes of land redistribution are also taking place. In some cases, these territories were formerly controlled by FARC guerrillas, and sitting today at the margins of existing illegal armed groups.⁹

In a country with a wealth of natural resources, the looming prospect of these expansive projects has once again put all ecosystems at risk, thus having a direct environmental impact nation—and world-wide. The rivers have been greatly affected by all decisions about mining and its regulation, social and natural landscapes are being eroded, and whole communities are being forcefully and violently displaced of their territories. Collectives, organizations and individuals in rural and urban lands who mobilize in defense of these territories have become targets of constant attacks that aim to constraint their spaces of action.¹⁰ The murder attempt on Francia Marquez is one example. *Movimiento*

Ríos Vivos (Living Rivers Movement), who has been standing against el Quimbo for many years is yet another one of many others. On September 17, 2013 Nelson Giraldo Posada, 31 years old, was shot dead. Nelson was its leader. He was then in charge of a group of fifty people affected and displaced by the Hidroituango hydroelectric project, another large dam north-west Colombia.¹¹

Othering

Just before her murder in October 2019, the indigenous leader of the NASA community Cristina Bautista voiced: “If we keep silent we get killed, and if we speak too. So we speak.”¹² These words not only echo the words of Francia Márquez and Nelson Giraldo Posada whom like many have been threatened and murdered defending their land from legal and illegal extraction practices. For Bautista “we” not only stands for environmental activists, but also for community leaders whose race, ethnicity, class and sexuality has also been mobilized in definition and identification as ‘others,’ and thus as targets of historical and physical disappearance. This consideration of the ‘other’ as a vulnerable minority, instead of central pillars of biopolitics related to a specific region, is a clear example of what Peruvian Sociologist Aníbal Quijano denominates as “coloniality of power,” where “the fundamental axes of the model of power is [...] around the idea of race, a mental construction that expresses the basic experience of colonial domination.”¹³ Therefore, Quijano argues, the model of power that is globally hegemonic today—and the control of power in global capitalism, presupposes an element of coloniality. In this case bound to the long blood history of Colombia, like in many other previously colonized countries.

Colombia’s colonization process (as many other Spanish former colonies) operated through dispossession of land along bodies of water. The Magdalena river, as well as many other rivers, allowed colonizers to reach land, and to therefore introduce slavery while displacing, controlling and eradicating native indigenous populations. Drawing upon Quijano, stepping out of the colonizer’s vessel meant stepping onto the land of a “new world,” and of renaming the native populations as “others.”¹⁴ Those conquered through violence were “condemned to a zone of non-being, stripped of humanity, rights, and self-determination.”¹⁵ This is how the ‘other,’ the separation between human (European) and non-humans emerged, but also how categorizations such as the natural primitive, the

indigenous, and the enslaved, products of “western eyes” in Chandra Talpade Mohanty’s words, were legitimated.¹⁶

The ongoing assassinations not only prove that even today othering practices in the form of murder, racism and forced migration have survived colonization. They have also been further legitimized by the advent of republican systems of governance, modernization and development as Silvia Cusicanqui and others have argued.¹⁷ An urgent matter of concern is how they still permeate consciousness, social relations and relations of power on which economies of extraction such as hydroelectric dams are based. I would like to make a reference to an excerpt from the *Feminist Manifesto against Large-Scale Mining and the Extractivist-Patriarchal-Colonial Model* (2013), as it still seems to echo today’s situation:

“We are Latin American women and our identity was forged in the resistance to the colonial conquest of our territories and the pillaging of our land’s commons. After more than five centuries, we continue to face ever-renewed forms of colonialism and patriarchy, now at the hands of transnational corporations who, backed by national governments, plunder and steal our common goods, thus moving forward with the silent genocide of our people.”¹⁸

These words draw attention to and emphasize the main aims of this micro-narrative, as many others have done in different media and through different voices: an urgent conversation is still required to address these systematic and continuous ways in which processes of resistance have been criminalized, persecuted and led to the murder of those who are sustaining, maintaining and caring about life, bodies of water, and land. There is a blindness towards consequences of extraction practices, land protection, and distinctive local everyday realities; phenomena that in this case are one and the same. What makes me expose this terrifying reality through this writing, and in this publication platform, is a need to confront that legitimation and perpetuation of the ‘other’ through marginalization and murder; and to contribute to stopping the invisibility inherited from colonial differences that have kept this situation as many others, marginalized. “Nos están matando,” we are being killed, and it needs to stop.

¹ Francia Márquez, “Francia Márquez: “Defender el territorio nos cuesta la vida,” Caracol Radio, May 04, 2005,

https://caracol.com.co/emisora/2019/05/05/popayan/1557015127_780594.html

² 683 murders of communal leaders or land owners between 1994-2014 registered by the UN; and 462 between the 1st of January 2016 and 28 February 2019. By the end of 2019 a social leader was being killed every 4 days. By 2020 the rate has increased to more than one per day. In: “Un líder asesinado por día,” Revista Semana, January 18, 2020, <https://www.semana.com/nacion/articulo/asesinato-de-lideres-sociales-uno-por-dia-en-2020/648542> Other independent platforms reporting the daily assassinations include: Pulzo and Pacifista.

³ “Latin America and the Caribbean, building on a tradition of protection,” Special Issue of Forced Migration Review, Issue 56 (October 2017). See also Global Report on Internal Displacement 2019 from Internal displacement monitoring center (IDMC).

⁴ Maria Viveros-Vogiyá, “From the president,” FORUM Latin American Studies Association, 50:4 (Fall, 2019): 1

⁵ Breny Mendoza, “Coloniality of Gender and Power: From Postcoloniality to Decoloniality,” in The Oxford Handbook of Feminist Theory, ed. Lisa Disch and Mary Hawkesworth (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

⁶ Carolina Caycedo, ““We Need the River to be Free”: Activists Fight the Privatization of Colombia’s Longest River,” March 17, 2015,

<http://creativetimereports.org/2015/03/17/activists-fight-privatization-colombias-magdalena-river/>.

See also: Carolina Caycedo, “BE DAMMED Interviews Brochure,”

December 2013, [http://carolinacaycedo.com/wp-](http://carolinacaycedo.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/BeDammedDAADBrochure1.pdf)

[content/uploads/2015/11/BeDammedDAADBrochure1.pdf](http://carolinacaycedo.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/BeDammedDAADBrochure1.pdf)

⁷ Carolina Caycedo, “BE DAMMED (ongoing project),” <http://carolinacaycedo.com/be-dammed-ongoing-project>.

⁸ Macarena Gómez-Barris, The extractive Zone: Social Ecologies and Decolonial Perspectives, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017): 95.

⁹ Prem, Mounu and Rivera, Andrés and Romero, Dario and Vargas, Juan F., “Civilian Selective Targeting: The Unintended Consequences of Partial Peace” (July 19, 2019),

https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=3203065

¹⁰ Camila Esguerra-Muelle, Diana Ojeda, Tatiana Sánchez Parra, Astrid Ulloa, 'Introduction,' FORUM Latin American Studies Association, 50:4 (Fall, 2019): 4

¹¹ "Comunicado, Denuncia, Movimiento Ríos Vivos" (September 19, 2013), <https://riosvivoscolombia.org/asesinado-lider-del-movimiento-rios-vivos/>. [References to this murder can also be found in Carolina Caycedo's work.](#)

¹² " "Si callamos, nos matan, y si hablamos, también": palabras de líder indígena antes de ser asesinada," Noticias Caracol, October 30, 2019,

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Hy8cp3TWSk8>

¹³ Aníbal Quijano (2008) 'Coloniality of power, eurocentrism, and social classification' In: Marael Montaña et al. (eds), *Coloniality at large: Latin America and the Postcolonial Debate*, (London: Duke University Press, 2018): 181.

¹⁴ Ibid: 181-224.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ See also Maria Lugones, 'Toward a Decolonial Feminism,' *Hypatia*, Vol. 25, No. 4 (Fall 2010): 742-759.

¹⁷ Breny Mendoza, Op.Cit.

¹⁸ Observatory for Mining Conflicts in Latin America (OCMAL), 'Feminist Manifesto Against Large-Scale Mining and the Extractivist-Patriarchal-Colonial Model,' 2013, ocmal.org. Referenced in Martin Arboleda, *Planetary Mine, Territories of Extraction under Late Capitalism*, (London: Verso, 2020): 68.