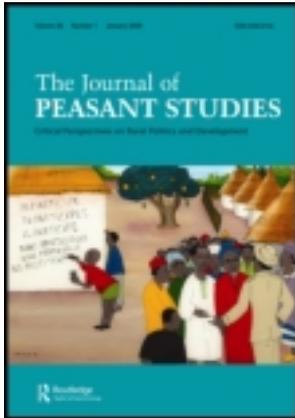


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## **Green multiculturalism: articulations of ethnic and environmental politics in a Colombian ‘black community’**

Rosbelinda Cárdenas

This paper analyzes the intersection of two parallel developments that have had a curious impact on agrarian politics in Colombia: on the one hand, attempts to appropriate land for ‘green’ ends such as biofuel production, which have become ubiquitous all across Latin America, and on the other, the implementation of multicultural reforms, which in Colombia resulted in the collective titling of more than five million hectares of land for ‘black communities’. Although these two developments can be read as contradictory – with ‘green grabs’ threatening ethnic groups’ territorial rights and multicultural reforms purportedly safeguarding them – I argue that, together, they produce a unique political articulation which I term ‘green multiculturalism’.

My analysis of oil-palm cultivation in a ‘black community’ in southwestern Colombia reveals three interrelated consequences. First, I suggest that green multiculturalism produces ‘black communities’ as ‘green’ collective subjects charged not only with being wardens of nature, but also bearers of the responsibility to right environmental wrongs. Second, I note that the agrarian practices associated with oil-palm cultivation act as disciplining technologies that seek to transform local rationalities into entrepreneurial ones. Finally, I contend that these initiatives are ‘landscaping projects’ that seek to transform forms of interspecies relating.

**Keywords:** black communities; multiculturalism; oil palm; Colombia

### **Unexpected convergences**

#### ***Going black***

Law 70 is Colombia’s poster child of successful multicultural reform. In 1993, following Colombia’s most recent constitutional reform, this law defined ‘black communities’<sup>1</sup> as collective beneficiaries of special rights. Broadly stated, the law’s objectives are the protection of black communities’ ethnic identity and rights as well as the promotion of their economic and social development in order to guarantee equality. Being the first large-scale state reform of its kind, Law 70 became a

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<sup>1</sup>I put this term in scare quotes here to highlight that this category was created to designate the collective units that benefitted from Law 70 and did not exist prior to 1993. Naturally, as land titling proceeded, these units became real in that they interpellated specific groups of people.

milestone of official multiculturalism in Latin America, with particular regard to Afrodescendants' rights. But Law 70 was not exactly a top-down juridical mandate. It is widely recognized that the law does not mark the *beginning* of ethnic rights for Afro-Colombians,<sup>2</sup> rather, it is the *outcome* of a prior social mobilization that ran deep and wide (Agudelo 2005, Asher 2009, Grueso *et al.* 1998). The law, therefore, stands as a landmark, not only because of the unprecedented rights that it granted black communities, but also because of the ethnic awareness that it generated.<sup>3</sup>

Most notably, the law materialized a discourse of ethnic territoriality that black activists and their allies constructed during a strategic political moment. In a nutshell, ethnic territoriality took the indigenous rights model that argued for land rights on the basis of autochthony and applied it to black Colombians. This meant emphasizing the black communities' traditional cultural practices and arguing that their preservation was inherently tied to the land from which they sprouted. In this way, cultural difference became tethered to particular territories.

But Law 70 is also a land reform project since, in practice, its main impact has been on land tenure. Since its passage, more than five million hectares of ancestral lands have been titled to black communities. In fact, its impressive breadth has led some observers to describe Law 70 as the largest land reform in recent Latin American history (Offen 2003). And although in practice, the exercise of black communities' territoriality is dubious,<sup>4</sup> its impact as a significant transformation in Colombia's land tenure structures cannot be ignored. The point I wish to highlight here is that although much has been written and said about Law 70, it is usually analyzed as a multicultural reform that focuses on cultural recognition when, in fact, it is much more than that.

### *Going green*

Parallel to this ethnicization of blackness, another transformation was brewing on the Colombian Pacific. In the late 1980s, the Pacific Region came to the attention of the national government as a new frontier for development. In 1989, drawing attention to its strategic location as a commercial hub, the DNP (National Planning

<sup>2</sup>I wish to make explicit the reasons behind my preference for the term, 'black', in this article. The term, Afro-Colombian, which is quite dominant today, gained currency in the context of the Durban conference and has become the most widely used (and politically correct) category of blackness in Colombia since then (cf Cárdenas, forthcoming, for an explanation of this shift). However, during the 1990s, when Law 70 and its land-titling project congealed, that term did not circulate the way it does today. In this article, I use Afro-Colombian whenever others explicitly use it in order to respect their term choice. However, in all other contexts, I prefer the term, black Colombians, because it is associated with the political project that resulted in the recognition of 'black communities'.

<sup>3</sup>Colombian anthropologist Eduardo Restrepo has brilliantly outlined the process whereby black Colombians went from being fellow nationals to being ethnic others. Although I cannot outline that process in detail here, I wish to emphasize that the ethnicization of blackness was neither natural nor necessary (Restrepo 2004).

<sup>4</sup>I say this because since the passage of the law, more than four million Colombians have been forced to flee from their homes. By 2007, according to the National Association for Displaced Afro-Colombians (AFRODES), 93 percent of the population of the 50 municipalities of the Pacific, where collective territories had been titled, had fled the region (AFRODES, ORCONE, CNOA 2008). This scandalous figure is compounded by the fact that those who stay must learn to live amidst violent armed conflict, which profoundly erodes their ability to practice autonomous forms of territoriality (see Cárdenas Forthcoming).

Department) drafted an ambitious development plan for the region, which included the construction of two ports, an inter-oceanic bridge and canal, multiple roads, a pipeline, a military base and several hydroelectric plants. According to the government's plan, this massive investment in infrastructure would be complemented by extensive commercial concessions for natural resource exploitation (including natural gas, mineral resources and forests) (Asher 2009, Escobar 2008).

But by the time the next administration dusted the document and considered its implementation, global standards of development had undergone significant changes. Most notably, in the light of the burgeoning global environmentalism, development models that were based on the indiscriminate advance of extractive capitalism were no longer acceptable. In response to these changing international standards, President César Gaviria adjusted the previous plan by including sustainability and conservation – alongside infrastructure development and resource exploitation – as critical elements for the pursuit of economic growth in the region. Over time, the initial nod to sustainability and conservation grew into a near obsession with inventorying and protecting biodiversity on the Pacific.<sup>5</sup>

Proyecto Bio-Pacífico, a five-year initiative funded by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the Global Environmental Facility (GEF), is perhaps the clearest example of this transformation. The project's objectives were to systematize scientific and traditional knowledge of the region's biodiversity in order to evaluate its potential value and create adequate frameworks to protect it. In addition, it sought to educate the local communities by teaching them conservation and development skills. Though perhaps unique in scope, Proyecto Bio-Pacífico was by no means an isolated case of biodiversity conservation efforts on the Pacific. For better or for worse, by the mid-1990s, sustainability and biodiversity conservation had become common sense.

In addition to these two significant shifts, the late 1990s witnessed a third profound transformation in the Pacific Region, precisely in the same areas where collective titling was under way. This third transformation was a shift in the combat strategies of all of the actors involved in Colombia's internal war. With the consolidation of a robust paramilitary and the strengthening of the military thanks to Plan Colombia's funding, open combat between the various guerrilla groups and these two (allied) counter-insurgency forces intensified. This interrupted the processes of territorial control that each of these groups had established and solidified over the last few decades and resulted in a reconfiguration of Colombia's geographies of violence. For the black communities, this meant their sudden incorporation into violent disputes over territory and the profound disruption of nearly every aspect of their members' lives. Due to space limitations, in this article, I cannot go into detail about this radical change, but it is important that the reader keep this in mind as a third central element that played into the reconfiguration of blackness on the Pacific.<sup>6</sup> For the purpose at hand, however, I will focus exclusively on the joint processes of 'going black' and 'going green'.

<sup>5</sup>For a detailed history of this transformation, see Asher (2009).

<sup>6</sup>Although the black communities of the Lower Mira River are also inserted into these renewed geographies of violence, what is particularly interesting about the case that I present here is that unlike other cases on the Pacific, such as that of Jiguamiandó and Curvaradó, for example, oil palm cultivation is *not* openly related to armed conflict in Tumaco. On the one hand, it predates it, and on the other, local palm growers have made a concerted effort to distance themselves from those well-documented cases of overt land grab by intimidation,

***Landscaping projects***

In this article, I analyze some of the concrete consequences that the articulation of ethnic rights and ‘green’ capitalism has had for the black communities of the Mira River in southwestern Colombia. Therefore, rather than focus on Law 70’s impact as a multicultural reform designed to protect ‘ethnic rights’, I analyze it as a *landscaping project*.<sup>7</sup> Following Tsing, I understand ‘landscapes’ as particular ‘configuration[s] of humans and nonhumans across a terrain’ (Tsing 2004, 174). Landscaping, then, involves both the material and representational practices through which any given landscape is created and maintained. Finally, I refer to ‘projects’ in order to stress the fact that landscaping is processual and power-laden. At any given moment, across any given terrain, there exist multiple landscaping projects, which seek to consolidate competing or dovetailing configurations of humans and non-humans.

Focusing on landscaping projects allows me to do several things. First, it enables an analysis that looks at the joint formation of humans – as multicultural subjects – and non-humans – as ‘nature’ or ‘resources’. Second, it uncovers multiculturalism as much more than the official recognition of ethnic rights, showing that it is a broad political project that reorganizes relations between people and ‘nature’ by producing particular categories of difference. Finally, as an analytical category, landscape is much closer to the notion of territoriality that black activists themselves constructed and mobilized around Law 70.

This focus on landscaping projects dovetails nicely with the wider attention to land grabs that guides this inquiry. On the one hand, the attention to the grounded practices of small-scale farmers complements Li’s call to center our analyses of land grabs on labor practices (Li 2011). At the same time, this perspective does not focus exclusively on land transactions, but evidences the changes in livelihood practices that are occurring through various mechanisms, which include, but are not limited to, purchases, acquisitions and other forms of dispossession (Borras *et al.* 2011). In the case that I present here, black farmers have secure land titles and they have not been evicted from their lands, but none of this guarantees the effective exercise of territorial autonomy that they seek. In this sense, it is a vivid reminder of De Schutter’s warning that ‘we need to do more than impose a discipline on land grabbing’ and that we need, instead, to find ‘real alternatives to this kind of investment in land’ (De Schutter 2011).

***Convergence: green multiculturalism***

This is one starting point of my analysis of Law 70, not as a narrow multicultural reform, but as a landscaping project that seeks to simultaneously define subjects and

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abuse and even death. This is not to say that these forms of violence are absent on the Mira River, but rather, that there exist other less obvious mechanisms by which territorial autonomy is effectively undermined. Overall, my work has been centrally concerned with this violent transformation and the interruption of ethnic-territoriality that ensued (see Cárdenas Forthcoming). Also, there is a growing body of literature that deals with the various consequences of violence among black communities on the Pacific, which, unfortunately, I cannot fully engage with here (cf Hoffman 2002, Wouters 2002, Restrepo 2005, Oslender 2008, Ballvé 2011, Grajales 2011, Jaramillo Buenaventura 2009).

<sup>7</sup>This approach is heir to the work of other scholars of Colombia, who have also noted the curious ethno-eco articulation that emerged in the 1990s. I am referring specifically to Manuela Alvarez’s, Peter Wade’s and Astrid Ulloa’s insightful works, which track the linkages between biodiversity and multiculturalism (Wade 2004, Ulloa 2001, Alvarez 2002).

nature. But there is one insight that must be added to this approach. While the Marxist critique of capitalism's exploitation of nature is still necessary, scholars of environmentalism have noted that capitalism has entered a 'green' phase (Sullivan 2006, Katz 1998, Brockington and Duffy 2010). These works document a transformation in the mechanisms through which value is produced and reproduced. Basically, they note that in addition to the well-known mechanisms that produce value through labor exploitation and extractive and industrial transformation of nature, it is now also possible to derive value from non-extractive activities such as conservation (West 2006, Igoe 2007).

In fact, the rise of green capitalism responds to what I see as three significant shifts in global environmental discourse and policy. The first refers to the widespread adoption of 'sustainable development' following the Brundtland Report's recommendations in 1987. The second shift concerns the international preoccupation with biodiversity conservation, which spread as a result of the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), which was opened for signing at the Earth Summit in 1992. The third and more recent shift signals a growing international concern over climate change and its complex entanglements with the global economic and fuel crises. Together, these changes point to a major paradigm shift in matters of resource management, conservation and environmental responsibility and to the concomitant adaptations of extractive capitalism, which has selectively turned green.

My second point of departure is Hale's notion of neoliberal multiculturalism, which emphasizes the integral – if counter-intuitive – relationship between cultural rights and neoliberal political economic reforms in Latin America (Hale 2005, Gros 2000).<sup>8</sup> Hale shows that in practice, collective land rights for indigenous and Afro-descendant people – a distinctive element of multicultural policies in Latin America – have dovetailed with neoliberal governance. He explains that this is possible because contrary to *mestizaje's* homogenizing nation-building project, which suppressed cultural difference, neoliberalism shapes, limits and produces cultural difference. Therefore, it is logically compatible with multiculturalism (Hale 2005, 12).

I follow Hale in noting that cultural recognition and neoliberal governance are deeply entangled, but I qualify two important things. First, I expand the realm of political society to include nature. And second, I note that neoliberalism does not only involve predatory forms of production, but green capitalism as well. Just like neoliberal multiculturalism replaced *mestizaje's* attempt to eradicate cultural difference with strategies to manage and contain it, green capitalism has abandoned its necessary antagonism with environmentalism and complemented it with a selective investment in 'green' ventures.<sup>9</sup> To signal the articulation of these two counter-intuitive developments – a nationalist formation that tolerates and even encourages difference and a marketable environmentalism – I use the term, 'green multiculturalism'.<sup>10</sup> In order to explore green multiculturalism on the ground, I

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<sup>8</sup>In fact, this insight has an older history that can be traced back to Christian Gros' work on the politics of ethnicity in Colombia (cf Gros 2000).

<sup>9</sup>This is not to say that predatory capitalism is a thing of the past. Clearly, extractive, industrial and highly destructive production practices are alive and well. The point is simply that alongside these practices (which are often greenwashed), green capitalism has also thrived.

<sup>10</sup>There is a robust body of work on multicultural recognition and rights in Latin America that I do not engage with directly here. In general, these works describe and analyze the shift from the ideologies of racial and cultural homogeneity embodied in the nationalist concept of *mestizaje* to the celebration, defense and even promotion of cultural difference, which has been

focus on the cultivation of oil palm<sup>11</sup> in a black collective territory. Looking at oil-palm cultivation on the Mira River is particularly useful because it illustrates how official multiculturalism – in the form of ethnic land rights – and green capitalism – in the form of biodiesel production – articulate in practice. Some critics may point out that because the majority of the world's oil palm is *not* cultivated for biodiesel production, the linkage between this crop and green capitalism is tenuous. Added to this observation is the fact that the practices involved in oil-palm cultivation are far from being 'green'. Specifically, the bulk of oil-palm cultivation – in Colombia and elsewhere – is still done in large-scale monoculture plantations that have no pretensions of being or even appearing to be green.<sup>12</sup> While these observations are pertinent, the linkages between oil palm and green capitalism cannot be denied. Although in Colombia – and most specifically in the area around Tumaco – oil-palm cultivation was not introduced (nor is it still mainly destined) for biodiesel production, recent state incentives for its cultivation are driven by the global discourse of clean energy. The numerous economic-political incentives for oil-palm cultivation introduced by the Álvaro Uribe administration, for example, were all ideologically shored up by a vision of Colombia as a world leader in clean energy production. For example, in January 2008, during the inauguration of the first biodiesel processing plant in Tumaco, President Uribe's speech described the event as a major step towards realizing his dream for the Colombian agricultural sector: 'I have a dream that Colombia can be filled with alternative fuel processing plants that are based on agricultural raw materials, and this is the beginning of that dream.'<sup>13</sup> In the end, although quantitatively speaking, biofuel production is still a marginal portion of the industrial uses of oil palm, much of its expansion has been enabled by the discourse of clean energy.

Overall, I find it particularly revealing that what began as two separate and antagonistic landscaping processes – landless black farmers and oil-palm plantations – have in some senses converged. In order to trace this convergence, in this article, I begin with a detailed overview of the various modes of oil-palm cultivation that currently exist on the Mira River. Then, I use ethnographic data to illustrate three main consequences that this crop's expansion has had for black farmers on the

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termed (state) multiculturalism and which has taken place in the last two decades (cf Hale 2002, Van Cott 2000, Postero 2007, Offen 2003). A particularly interesting aspect of this multicultural turn is the fact that black Latin Americans have been included as cultural others in ways that they had not been prior to this (cf Restrepo 2004, Hooker 2005, Guss 2000, Wade 2005).

<sup>11</sup>*Elaeis guineensis* is commonly referred to as African oil palm, or *palma Africana* in Spanish. However, some of the black activists with whom I have collaborated refuse to call it African in order to avoid creating or reinforcing a negative association between African-ness and devastation. For this reason, they prefer the term, oil palm, or *palma aceitera* in Spanish.

<sup>12</sup>It is important to note that a significant change in oil palm cultivation practices is currently under way as a result of the global standards outlined by the Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil (RSPO), which was created in 2004. As L. Silva Castañeda notes, the RSPO's espousal of market-based incentives make this initiative's environmental soundness dubious at best (Silva Castañeda 2011). However, despite these well-placed critiques, the RSPO's impact on the concrete practices of both large- and small-scale palm growers in Colombia cannot be ignored. For a detailed account of the RSPO, see Silva Castañeda 2011.

<sup>13</sup>The original citation, which was taken from the Presidency's Press Secretary's webpage, read: 'Yo tengo el sueño de que Colombia se pueda llenar de plantas productoras de combustibles alternativos a partir de materias primas agrícolas y este es el principio de ese sueño' (Presidencia de la República s.f.).

Mira River. Finally, I present some general conclusions regarding this articulation of cultural recognition and the 'green' uses of nature.

### **Oil-palm landscapes**

On the Mira River, three modalities of oil-palm cultivation coexist today: the plantation, independent cultivation and small-scale cooperatives. Overall, in the vicinity of Tumaco – the main urban center in the region – the infamous plantation model continues to be dominant both in total land extension and capital investment. In 2010, there were ten plantations with extensions that ranged from a few hundred to 5,000 hectares, and seven oil processing plants, which are all owned and operated by the plantations. The collective territory of the Lower Mira River borders with three major plantations and, therefore, its inhabitants are incorporated into the plantation economy in various ways. Most prominently, they work as laborers on various plantations and processing plants.

A tour of Palmas del Sur,<sup>14</sup> the largest plantation in the region, reveals the nightmare of monoculture agriculture in full splendor. During my first visit in 2007, riding in one of the company's four-by-fours, I crossed large extensions of uniform rows of equidistant palms of identical height. The numbered lots were tended by laboring groups of three. The employment models on plantations range from labor contracts to piecework and daily wages. But, in general, relations of labor on the plantation are similar to those in most capitalist industrial sectors. In other words, they seek to extract the greatest amount of labor at the lowest cost possible. This is done through a variety of well-known strategies, which include accumulation by dispossession, induced indebtedness, labor market fragmentation and vertical integration of the industry. In brief, Third World plantations such as Palmas del Sur are veritable 'factories in the field', characterized by their managerial regimes of labor discipline and military-style methods of agriculture (Wolf 1982, Scott 1999, Escobar 1994).

But the exploitative nature of the plantation economy is also evident in areas other than labor conditions. If we decenter our humanist perspective, we can easily see that oil production on plantations seeks to simultaneously exploit people and nature for the purpose of capital accumulation. Palm trees, water, weeds, pests, mules and people are carefully managed to maximize profit. Seeds are carefully selected, nurtured in a greenhouse and replanted as seedlings in numbered lots, where they are fertilized and protected from weeds and pests. From this perspective, the terrain on which oil palm is cultivated is not simply a prediscursive background on which human action unfolds. Plants and animals are not inert objects, but rather co-protagonists in the violent encounters between nature and people precipitated by capitalism.

Moreover, the colonial relations of the plantation extend beyond the field and the processing plant. Oil-palm plantations reproduce social relations reminiscent of nineteenth century European colonialism. Palmas del Sur, for example, is a full-fledged structure with workers' living quarters, a health center, a school, a small shop and a requisite bar for the unskilled workers. A 10-minute drive from the fields, there

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<sup>14</sup>For security reasons, I use a pseudonym to refer to most identifiable places and people. The exceptions are public figures and widely recognized geographic referents such as cities and rivers.

is a main house that lodges the administrative and technical personnel during their stays on the plantation – these staff members don't usually live in the area, but fly in from large cities such as Bogotá and Cali. This house, with impressive views of oil-palm extensions and exuberant tropical gardens, offers all the amenities that these predominantly white out-of-towners demand: a recreational area with a pool table and TV, a restaurant with an all-black female staff and a gym. On an even larger scale, it is clear that oil-palm plantations have established colonial relations with neighboring villages. Because of their intrusive nature, plantations tend to develop into enclaves – enclosed territories with few relations with their exterior. To counter the negative reputation of the enclave as an exploitative intruder, plantation managers have undertaken development initiatives in neighboring villages – building schools, employing locals and financing public works. The purpose – in addition to strategically improving their public image – is to become better integrated in the region, to seem less alien and, therefore, position themselves as fellow 'locals'.

However, the landscaping project of the industrial plantation does not travel everywhere. There are many places where its regimes of labor and nature exploitation simply do not penetrate, or when they do, do not significantly transform pre-existent configurations of people and nature. This is evident in the second modality of oil-palm cultivation that survives on the Mira River. In the four decades since oil palm was introduced in the region, independent black farmers have developed a different kind of relationship with it. In his detailed description of oil-palm cultivation in the area surrounding Tumaco, Restrepo sharply contrasts this modality with the agro-industrial model (Restrepo 2004). Unlike plantations, autonomous farming does not follow strict agronomical practices of crop maximization. Local farmers do not plant homogenous rows of palms, they intersperse it with foodstuffs and other subsistence and marketable crops. Although they sometimes resort to wage labor for help in harvesting the ripe seed bunches, generally speaking, they rely on family and labor exchange practices to maintain the farm. And even though they sell their product to local processing plants, the reproduction of the domestic group, rather than generation of profit, is what drives their efforts (Restrepo 2004, Escobar 2008).

In fact, one could even argue that the category of labor does not adequately describe the relationship between oil palms and independent black farmers on the lower Mira River.<sup>15</sup> This Marxist category foregrounds only the exploitative relations of power in the human-nature encounter when, in fact, there exist myriad other ways of knowing nature through work. Moreover, the narrow definition of work as the transformation of nature for human advantage reinscribes the idea that work and nature are inherently antagonistic and that only those bodies and landscapes that escape work can be considered natural. Although autonomous farmers invest a significant amount of effort in tending oil palms, theirs is a different kind of work – one that does not rely on extermination, exploitation or objectification, and one in which humans do not compete with other living beings

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<sup>15</sup>I am aware that there is a vast literature that has critiqued the Marxist category of labor (notably feminists concerned with theorizing the labor that is done within the domestic sphere). I wish to make explicit the fact that although I believe that this revisionist work is extremely valuable, I do not engage with it directly here. Like all categories, 'work' and 'labor' are only meaningful insofar as what is being signified is made explicit. For the purpose of this article, the differences between the two hinge only on what I believe are two main kinds of relationships between humans and nature: symbiotic and alienated.

for planetary domination. I do not mean to suggest that independent oil-palm farming is entirely outside of the logic of capitalism, nor do I want to reinforce the myth of the noble savage who sustains harmonious relations with the environment. It's important to remember that oil-palm seeds were introduced by plantations, that most independent farmers took the seeds and learned how plant them when they worked for those same plantations as wage laborers, and that in the end, they have no choice but to sell their products back to them (artisanal oil processing does not take place in the region). My point is simply that it is imperative to remember that there exist other rationalities and other landscape configurations that do not strictly follow the agro-industrial model. On the Mira River, independent oil-palm farming, although minimal, is one such alternative that survives amidst the plantation.

The third modality of oil-palm cultivation dovetails with the plantation. In the last two decades, the total extension cultivated by small-scale cooperatives in the rural areas surrounding Tumaco has mushroomed. According to Cordeagropaz, the main umbrella organization that groups the coops on the Mira River, small-scale farms now produce approximately 40 percent of all oil palm in the region. The coop is an interesting figure. On the Mira River, the first successful coops were established in 1999, when the main plantations in the region entered into a partnership with the mayor's office and, together, they secured state and Plan Colombia<sup>16</sup> funding for the initiative. Plantation managers were interested in two main things: changing their image from economic enclave to regional development engines and increasing the raw material available for oil production. But by 1999, collective land titling for black communities was under way all across the Pacific and local plantations could not aspire to purchase or otherwise acquire more land. Because Law 70 protects collective territories from any form of alienation (mortgage, sale or transfer), plans to further expand oil-palm cultivation would have to fold in black communities – their people and their lands – as *pequeños palmeros*.

Unlike independent oil-palm cultivation, small-scale coops do represent a significant reorganization of human-nature relations on the Mira River. They are in essence branches of large-scale plantations that have been established on collective lands. The labor, administrative and agronomical practices of small-scale farms mirror those of the plantation. By extending the reach of agro-industrial rationalities into collective territories, small-scale coops effectively discipline both black farmers and oil palms, creating new configurations of plants and people while technically respecting the land rights of black communities. In other words, small-scale coops enable the *de facto* transformation of black communities' landscapes while maintaining their *de jure* status as inalienable collective territories.

At the same time, small-scale coops are not exact replicas of plantations and the differences between the two are significant. Because they must recruit both people and lands in a 'lawful' manner, proponents of small-scale coops cannot resort to proletarianization by dispossession. In fact, *pequeños palmeros* occupy an ambiguous position that straddles the divide between landless proletariats and willing (and truly advantageously positioned) stakeholders. They are, in a sense, exemplary of what some Latin Americanist agrarian political ecologists have termed semi-proletariats

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<sup>16</sup>Plan Colombia is a bilateral agreement between the US government and Colombia, which began in 2000 and still exists today. In essence, Plan Colombia provides US funding, which supports the military in the state's twin internal wars: 'the war against drugs' and 'the war against terrorism'.

(cf Kay 1989, 1997, Edelman 1992) – they often combine subsistence agriculture, petty commodity production and wage labor as non-mutually exclusive livelihoods. Nonetheless, as I will show, the dominant discourse that is employed to enlist them as *pequeños palmeros* is pervaded by the ideology of the entrepreneurial subject, and the terms of their incorporation into oil-palm cultivation tend to erode their possibilities of combining commodity production with these other forms of agrarian practices. As a result, small-scale coops have turned independent black farmers and rural proletariats into alleged green capitalists.<sup>17</sup>

These are some of the landscaping projects that centrally involve the oil palm on the Mira River. Sometimes they overlap, sometimes they dovetail, and sometimes they collide. They operate on various scales and have access to very different kinds and quantities of symbolic and material capital. They do not fight on even terrain; they confront each other under conditions of vast historical inequality. And yet, they coexist, not harmoniously, but in a fierce struggle to define human-nature relations.

### Sowing green multiculturalism

#### *Green and black*

Sitting in the air-conditioned port building, I easily forgot that it was an unusually hot morning in Tumaco. We were in a large room with an ocean view and long tables arranged in the shape of a U. Manuel, the MIDAS<sup>18</sup> officer who had called the meeting, sprawled confidently on a metal chair at the head of the U. The team of experts from Palmas del Sur, the largest plantation in the region, sat to Manuel's right. A senior lawyer, an engineer, an administrator, a topographer and the plantation's activities and social coordinator waited patiently as the community council members trickled in and sat on the opposite side of the room. The meeting began with a round of introductions.

The items on the agenda were five reported cases of invasion of the community council's lands by the plantation. José, who had worked at Palmas del Sur for 22 years, narrated his story, claiming that the plantation had invaded his land in violation of Law 70. The lawyer replied that this was a simple matter to settle; all that was necessary was to follow the INCODER's<sup>19</sup> maps with technical precision. Aroldo, the community council's legal representative and oldest member, intervened:

Well, we prefer good agreements over bad lawsuits. The reserve areas [of the collective territory] have been sacrificed, who is responsible for this? Since we are all amongst friends, let's talk about how to solve this. This problem can be fixed with boundaries. Our elders used streams and fruit trees as boundaries, but if you pull out the trees we can no longer know where the boundaries were and we have to use cement.

<sup>17</sup>Of course, this is not a uniform or uncontested process. As Bernstein points out in his insightful analysis of the political economy of small-scale farmers, some *pequeños palmicultores* are relatively successful at becoming small-scale capitalists, while others simply become petty commodity producers and/or wage laborers. The outcome, as Bernstein shows, depends on a number of factors, which include differential access to social, political and agricultural capital as well as the intersection of these class dynamics with other social cleavages such as race, ethnicity and gender (Bernstein 2010).

<sup>18</sup>MIDAS, which stands for More Investment for Alternative Sustainable Development, is one of the United States Agency for International Development's (USAID's) programs in Latin America.

<sup>19</sup>INCODER, the Colombian Institute of Rural Development, is the state agency in charge of executing agricultural policies and overseeing land tenure.

Emiliano, the second complainant, presented his case. He related that in the more remote areas of his lot, where he had been unable to farm due to time and money constraints, the plantation had dug ditches to mark property boundaries. What ensued was a tense back and forth with differing versions of the events. The plantation's lawyer claimed that Emiliano's father had been given 20 hectares in the 1950s, but that he had proceeded to 'invade' a much larger area for his six children. Emiliano agreed that he and his siblings had 'expanded' his father's lot in order to 'occupy the territory' – a common practice within collective titles – but that the adjoining lands where they had farmed did not belong to the plantation. To this, the lawyer responded with an indignant monologue: 'See, that's the problem. You all take that title as if it guarantees future expansion, but then you go and have a bunch of kids and the land just isn't enough.' Then he proceeded to read aloud from the neighboring community council's application for collective titling. His point in doing this was to emphasize that prior to Law 70, all those lots were legally 'empty' and, therefore, Emiliano's ancestors had no legal claim to them. Then, to show his faithful observance of the law and his good will, he reminded everyone that he had been in charge of legally proving that those lots were not empty and that they were in fact inhabited by black people. He explained that his noble deed had facilitated the transformation of those territories' land use permit from 'natural reserve' to 'agriculture', thereby paving the road for collective titling. He ended with an offended look on his face, saying that he was taken aback by the community council's affirmation that the plantation was taking land from the black communities, and to prove that this was not the case, he held up a pile of documents, saying: 'We have the INCODER'S resolution here. There is official documentation that says "from here to there and from there to here". The state said to us, "[T]his is yours".'

The discussion became heated at the lawyer's mention of 'empty lots' – a reference to Colombia's infamous Law 2, which, in 1959, declared large tracts of land on the Pacific vacant. There were two main areas of disagreement. The first was a debate regarding the legitimacy of the state's laws. While the plantation's team kept referring to the INCODER maps and titles as the unequivocal source of truth, the community council representatives expressed a deep skepticism regarding their validity. The second point of contention was regarding the alleged advantage of the change in land use to which the lawyer referred. While the lawyer maintained that this transformation – from natural reserve to agricultural use – had greatly benefited Tumaco's black farmers, Aroldo differed. He held that maintaining their territory's official land use as a natural reserve would have been far better because it would have deterred the entry of exploitative industries and been far more compatible with their ancestral practices.

The meeting stretched over several hours during which some of the thorniest issues surrounding Law 70 were touched. The discussions about the validity of the law and the superiority of differing land use practices evidenced a clear tug of war, a struggle to define a cultural politics of nature. And still, despite what could have been a highly volatile meeting, cordiality and negotiation reigned. Overall, although there was a constant throwing and dodging of accusations back and forth, the meeting was construed as 'friendly' by both parties. As the meeting drew to a close, the plantation's engineer added his concluding remarks:

We really do want to maintain good relations with you [...] let us start from a point of sincerity and good faith. When I arrived in Tumaco 24 years ago, my role was to divulge

oil palm cultivation and I looked for organizations to do it with. We always wanted to have the best of relations with the people, but the kinds of organizations that exist today did not exist back then [...]. The problem is not that [black communities] have been violated, but that there were no organizations like yours that would take the reins of their own destiny.

Milena, a community council member who had been quietly scribbling in her notebook for most of the meeting, stood up and asked if she could read a poem that she had composed in the midst of the exchange. Its title, tellingly, was *Concertación*.<sup>20</sup>

I recount this meeting because it condenses neoliberal multiculturalism's domesticating effects (Hale 2005) as well as its crafty articulation with green capitalism. First, on the Mira River, as black communities attained cultural rights, they became more legible – and, therefore, more supple – to the interests of the state and institutions of neoliberal development. It was not an accident that the facilitator and mediator of this meeting was a high-ranking MIDAS officer or that the plantation representatives constantly invoked the INCODER's authority. At a very basic level, simply by having their territories' coordinates fixed on a state-sanctioned map, the black inhabitants of the Mira River have become more easily legible to the state and to international capital. This, of course, has had some beneficial consequences for them. Most notably, it has positioned them as political actors who must be contended with, as participants who cannot be simply swept aside. This visibility has contributed to halting the more overt forms of dispossession that were common prior to the passage of Law 70. Plantation owners can no longer hire lawyers to draft concessions of empty lots or even pay local *campesinos* sub-market rents for land use. The changes in land tenure brought about by Law 70 created new multicultural subjects – black communities – and new spaces of agricultural production – collective territories – that must be jointly dealt with now.

But this visibility has a dark side, too. Law 70 has also made it possible for those same agents of the state and international capital to identify, negotiate with and coopt the new political actors. In a sense, Law 70 has crystallized the interlocutors necessary to facilitate capital reproduction in spaces that had until then remained relatively illegible to its agents. By rationalizing previously unintelligible landscapes, Law 70 did a lot of the hard work necessary to create neoliberal subjects. As Ingeniero de la Torre aptly put it, prior to Law 70, the crux of the conflict between the black farmers and the plantation owners was the absence of a legitimate interlocutor with which to negotiate. Or, put more bluntly, because of the existence of 'black communities' as legal subjects of rights, what used to be clearly evident as violence can now be presented as compromise.

A second domesticating effect of Law 70 is the separation of legitimate and undeserving subjects of rights. In the case of neoliberal multiculturalism, Hale notes that the criteria of legitimacy are standards of cultural authenticity. He explains that under official multiculturalism, the state no longer functions as an adversary of cultural rights, but rather, becomes the arbiter of those rights by determining who does and does not measure up to satisfactory standards of cultural difference. Green multiculturalism also separates 'authentic' and 'inauthentic' subjects of cultural

<sup>20</sup>I could have simply translated *Concertación* as 'Agreement'. However, its usage in Colombian Spanish (as well as its etymology) signals a process of consensus building – of bringing differing views 'in concert' with one another.

rights, but the criteria for legitimization are somewhat different from the ones that Hale identifies. While neoliberal multiculturalism separates cultural rights and access to resources, green multiculturalism puts natural resources in the hands of multicultural subjects, while charging them with global environmental responsibility. In this way, environmental friendliness gets construed as a cultural trait that defines the black subjects' authenticity and a determinant factor in the decision to grant them special rights.

During a particularly tense moment during the negotiations between Palmas del Sur and the community council, the plantation's lawyer openly lamented the fact that the black communities had received many privileges of which they had not taken full advantage. He referred to the entrenched 'underdevelopment' in black communities, blaming them – rather than state-endorsed structural racism, for example – for their incapacity to rise out of poverty. This comment established 'development' as the marker of success as well as an easily read signal of rational behavior. Always the congenial strategist, Aroldo intervened to counter the implication that black communities did not 'measure up' and were, therefore, undeserving recipients of special rights:

What many people call development, we call aggression. For us, the best thing would be for these lands to have their animals and their plants. Not just now, but always. That dollar sign is what has destroyed and continues destroying. We have created reserve areas as buffers and for reforestation. When we cut down the *chanul* (*Sacoglottis procera*), the *tatabra* (pecari) and the *perico*<sup>21</sup> (sloth) left. They all followed the banks of the Mira River to Ecuador. The animals that lived in Puerto Palma migrated to Esmeraldas. We were not wrong, our ancestors were right.

His strategy with this intervention was twofold. First, he delegitimized development as an outdated measuring stick of rational behavior by presenting it as primitively aggressive. Then, he introduced and appropriated green multiculturalism's own criterion of legitimization: environmental friendliness. By opposing it to the mestizos' and foreigners' savage capitalism, he established environmental friendliness as a morally superior criterion of evaluation – a test that black communities could easily pass.

Finally, it is important to note that these standards of authenticity have built-in political constraints and, therefore, the choice to occupy the newly created spaces of cultural difference can come at significant political costs. Faced with the strict set of rules of the multicultural game, black communities must decide whether to play or not. Those who play become legitimate political actors, while those who opt out are construed as unruly, or beyond the pale. As this meeting showed, the central qualities that the deserving subject of rights must exhibit have little to do with cultural authenticity. The criteria are instead centered on the black subjects' willingness to engage in conciliatory actions. The cleavage that separates 'good' blacks from 'bad' ones is their docility and this docility is, in turn, opposed to 'undesirable' racial traits. The result, as Hale notes, is a subtle remaking of the racial hierarchy through a differential racialization of multicultural subjects, who are willing to engage in *concertación* and those who are simply too radical to do so.

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<sup>21</sup>Spanish speakers may be struck by the translation of *perico*, given that this word most generally refers to parrots or parakeets. However, in this area of Colombia, *perico* is used to refer to various species of sloths.

After Milena read the poem, Marcia, the plantation's social coordinator, gave a short speech expressing how impressed she was by the community council's hard work and their willingness to collaborate with the plantation. In the end, she said, it was very gratifying to see that there existed a black organization that shared Palmas del Sur's concern for the region's well-being. Her congratulatory tone was clearly a seal of approval; as far as the plantation was concerned, the community council had been recognized as a 'good' black organization and, therefore, as legitimate recipients of rights.

### *Rationalities*

In 2001, Santiago, a local *campesino* of the village of Bajo Jagua, heard that people in the neighboring collective territory had started planting oil palm with Cordeagropaz, a Tumaco-based organization that was creating associations of small-scale oil-palm growers, *pequeños palmicultores*.<sup>22</sup> Santiago approached Cordeagropaz officials and invited them to Bajo Jagua to evaluate the possibility of creating a local palm-growers' association. After a few meetings and expert evaluations of the swampy lands, Cordeagropaz gave its approval and the hard work of making local farmers into *pequeños palmicultores* began.

First, Cordeagropaz had to embark on the task of bringing local *campesinos* on board. Proponents of oil-palm cultivation had to sell their idea as an unprecedented opportunity for black farmers to improve their socioeconomic conditions. In the main office of Cordeagropaz, a poster showing black children playing in a well-equipped playground and a boatful of palm seeds in the foreground says it all: 'Oil palm, progress for all.' My point is not to draw attention to capitalism's unfulfilled promise of prosperity for all, which is certainly nothing new. What is different under green multiculturalism is that proponents of development must employ an ethnic sensibility. Thus, the creation of small oil-palm business ventures was presented as an urgent necessity for black communities, who were construed as pre-capitalist societies in decline. Roberto, Cordeagropaz's business consultant, described the lamentable erosion of traditional black labor practices in the face of capitalism's inevitable advance:

The open economies that are so aggressive have broken down the culture of the *negritos* (blacks) with their little canoes and their little coconut farms [...] When cash comes in, this structure of solidarity is broken, [...] the local modes of communal work are gradually lost.

This narrative of cultural decadence functioned as the justification for the deployment of a whole set of disciplining technologies aimed at making black multicultural subjects into green capitalists.

These efforts are clearly observable in the yearlong course that Roberto designed to train the new palm growers. The training workshops have three distinct objectives.

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<sup>22</sup>Cordeagropaz emerged in 1999 as Colombia's first Alianza Estratégica Productiva, a joint public-private business venture meant to foster economic development in rural areas. The initial thrust behind the *alianzas estratégicas*, which was to create productive alternatives for peasants who eradicated illicit crops under Plan Colombia, has been gradually molded under the fire of multicultural reform. What began as an effort to provide employment opportunities and social services to *campesinos* involved in coca cultivation was later articulated along with black and indigenous people's demands for state investment in economic development.

The most obvious of these is a decided effort to create entrepreneurs. The leaflets extol the virtues of associative labor units and carefully instruct farmers on everything from how to convert families into efficient productive units, to how to manage credit, build leadership, maintain workers' motivation, market their product and keep accounting books. Each of the workshops is similarly organized. First, participants fill out an open questionnaire designed to assess their knowledge of the day's topic. The answers to the questions are then openly discussed in a collective reflection exercise that seeks to expose the group's 'strengths' and 'weaknesses'. Finally, an intervention is made to remedy the diagnosed deficiencies. These sections, which are fittingly called '*Conozcamos*', or 'Let's Learn', contain glossaries with definitions, lists of facts and worksheets where participants practice their newly acquired skills.

Although these workshops are presented as innocent efforts to teach practical skills, they are actually disciplining technologies. They are carefully designed to transform local farmers into entrepreneurs by changing those convictions and behaviors that are considered an obstacle to capitalist development. For example, the unit designed to teach farmers how to manage credit safely, craftily intertwines practical knowledge of bank loans with a discussion of trust. The first part of this workshop is dedicated to define trust as an essential social value and to encourage participants to be both trusting and trustworthy individuals. After that, it instructs pupils on interest rates, grace periods, IOUs and the various state lending institutions in Colombia. The workshop's objectives are, therefore, twofold. It seeks not only to create responsible borrowers, but, most importantly, to convince skeptical farmers to take on loans. As if this interweaving of practical skills and capitalist rationalities were not clear enough, the workshop leaflet ends with a statement that explicitly inverts local farmers' logic regarding the risk and high cost of bank loans: 'Remember, the most expensive loan is the one that you don't take.'

The second main objective of the training course is to make the black community members into proper multicultural citizens. This is equivalent to defining the *negro permitido* – a black multicultural subject who is sufficiently authentic and does not radically challenge the status quo.<sup>23</sup> Because adequate multicultural citizens must exhibit and master two things – socially accepted standards of citizenship and manageable cultural difference – these interventions are necessarily two-pronged. First, they address topics such as 'civic-mindedness and the culture of legality', 'community organization and leadership' and 'the role of the family in productive activities'.<sup>24</sup> They are intended to instill the norms and duties of citizenship by presenting them as self-evidently desirable and by compelling the participants to internalize the desire to become 'better citizens'.

The second part of producing multicultural citizens entails the management and normalization of cultural difference. This objective is most clearly observable in a workshop unit entitled 'Culture, Territory, and Economics'. The handout for this workshop reinforces the official definition of blackness, as, for example, by reviewing a superficial version of the history of slavery and by briefly pausing to consider Afrocolombians' contribution to the nation. It also repeats the stock phrases of

<sup>23</sup>The notion of *negro permitido* is clearly heir to Hale's *indio permitido*, which describes a supple and docile indigenous subject whose cultural difference is therefore tolerated (Hale 2006).

<sup>24</sup>*Cartilla de Capacitación*.

multicultural political correctness such as emphasizing the need to ‘protect Afrocolombians’ cultural identity and rights as an ethnic group’.<sup>25</sup> At the same time, this reaffirmation of black cultural difference seeks to create an explicit link between ‘Afrocolombian culture’ and particular uses of nature that are in turn construed as ‘green’:

Traditional production practices are the agricultural, mining, forest, livestock, hunting, fishing, and gathering activities and techniques that black communities have habitually used to guarantee the conservation of life and sustainable development.

In this way, cultural recognition becomes inextricably related to ‘green’ practices, placing black communities with territorial control in a nearly inescapable position as wardens of nature.

The third and final area of intervention involves farming practices. Roberto modeled these training workshops after a publication entitled *El Diplomado de la Palma (Oil Palm Certification)*, which consists of six modules with detailed instructions on how to build nurseries, prevent disease, pollinate manually, harvest and generally maintain oil palms. Like the rest of the training units, these do not simply aim to build practical agricultural skills, but seek to transform local forms of human-nature relating. In short, they are landscaping technologies. To illustrate the depth of this intervention, it is useful to contrast the work of autonomous palm growers with the meticulous labor that is expected of *pequeños palmicultores*. In doing this, I find it useful to distinguish once again between work – as a non-capitalist form of transforming nature – and labor – as a distinctly exploitative manipulation of natural resources.

A small palm grower in the making must first master the art of seed selection. A germinated seed of precise plumule and radicle size must be planted in a pre-nursery that is carefully traced and equipped with drainage canals. During its three months in the pre-nursery, each seedling must be fertilized nine times with ammonium sulfate. After this, the first seedling selection process is done. Only plants with well-defined leaves, 20–25 centimeters tall and growing at 45-degree angles are chosen to be re-planted in the nursery. Once again, the instructions regarding the soil type, bag size and method of replanting is meticulously prescribed. During their remaining nine months in the nursery, three different fertilizers – Triple 15, magnesium sulfate and borax – are applied to each plant every other week. In addition, they must be watered daily and weeds must be removed manually. At the end of this yearlong process, there is a final selection of ‘normal’ plants. Plants with leaves that are too upright or too limp are eliminated, as are those with leaflets that are too far apart or too close together, too abundant or discolored.

Even if the new palm growers are given seedlings rather than seeds, they cannot escape the discipline of the plantation. They must first prepare the terrain where definitive planting will take place by eliminating all other vegetation and plowing the land. After this, the *palmicultor* must design the lot in precise alignment. Each palm must be nine meters apart and each row must be 7.8 meters apart, making sure that palms in consecutive rows are not parallel to each other, but rather form an equilateral triangle. The seedlings are then carefully transported and replanted,

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<sup>25</sup>[P]roteger la identidad cultural y los derechos [de los Afrocolombianos] como grupo étnico.’ *Cartilla de Capacitación*.

making sure that the neck is not too deep or too shallow. Once this is completed, a map of the lot is drawn in order to have an inventory of the plants and a graphic description of all natural and artificial waterways as well as problem areas. Finally, kudzu is planted as a hedge plant to control soil erosion and maintain adequate humidity and nutrition.

After this, the maintenance of the oil-palm lots is much less labor-intensive. Aside from building and maintaining drainage canals, there are few other upkeep tasks involved. Mainly, a radius of 2.5 meters surrounding each palm must be kept free of weeds, the palms must be pruned once a year, and the spaces between rows must also be kept clear by eradicating weeds manually, mowing mechanically and applying herbicides with pumps. Of course, the danger of disease must also be managed. In order to prevent catastrophic epidemics or pest invasions, farmers are instructed on disease prevention, early detection and eradication techniques. If all goes well, an inexperienced, but diligent, palm grower can expect that three years after the definitive lot is planted, the palms will yield a harvest every 10–15 days. But the periodicity of this perennial harvest is only an estimate. *Palmicultores* must become experts at distinguishing ripe fruit bunches and skilled at using the telescopic tools to cut the stalk at just the right place. And even the most experienced palm cutter must then select and classify the bunches, which must be quickly transported to be processed in less than 24 hours, lest they become too acidic. More than extenuating labor, the optimization of both the quality and the quantity of palm oil involves constant supervision and precise timing.

Overall, the form of inter-species relating that is evident in plantation techniques can be characterized as colonial. Their deliberate purpose is to simultaneously discipline plants and human bodies in a way which maximizes production and which benefits neither the disciplined human body, nor the disciplined plant, but, rather, a third party. Compare the injunctions of the *Diplomado de la Palma* with Milena's experience with a one hectare lot of oil palm. A few years ago, Milena took some loose seeds from neighboring lots and planted them in her backyard lot, where the palms grew in close proximity to her house. She interspersed the oil palms with plantain and other foodstuffs as well as timber. Her husband and two oldest sons pruned and harvested the palms on a flexible schedule and took the bunches out to the riverbank to be collected by the plantations' boats whenever the fruit was ripe. But Milena didn't keep her oil palms for very long. She realized that this irregular method of cultivation was not profitable in her own cost-benefit calculation. Put simply, it was too much hassle and too much money – in transportation and fertilizer costs – for very little gain. In the end, she and her husband decided to cut the oil palms down. When I visited her door-yard last year, all that remained amidst the plantain palms, various fruit trees and a herb garden, were a few oil palms, which she had decided to keep because they attracted squirrels, which she explained would kill the cacao trees if they were not kept away by luring them with oil palms. In short, Milena and her family gave the oil-palm plantation model a try and decided to abandon it. In the end, they did not entirely eradicate the oil palms, but crafted a different type of relationship with them.

During one of our meetings, Roberto stated outright that the purpose of these training modules was to 'transform local farmers' rationalities'. He hoped that his workshops would result in the internalization of cultural practices that would convert black farmers into oil-palm entrepreneurs. If these interventions were successful, Cordeagropaz would have succeeded in creating *pequeños palmicultores*,

or green multicultural subjects with all the necessary characteristics to make them legitimate recipients of rights and of the state's socioeconomic programs: cultural authenticity, entrepreneurialism and environmental friendliness.

### *Exterminating weediness*

In March 2010, I visited Palmas del Sur again. Once more, I rode in one of the company's four-by-fours and visited the nurseries, the water-treatment plant, a few cultivated lots and the oil-processing plant. But there were two important differences between the two visits. The first was that, this time, I was accompanying the Lower Mira River's community council members, who were setting foot on company soil for the first time in their lives. Although our stated purpose was to verify whether the plantation was overstepping the boundaries of their property and invading the community council's collective lands, the visit turned into an impromptu tour, complete with a sumptuous seafood lunch. After lunch, as we sipped coffee and discussed the next step in the negotiation, José, the former employee, leaned over and told me in a hushed voice that in the 22 years that he had worked for Palmas del Sur, he had never been inside the main house. The reason for this splendid treatment, I surmised, was that we were accompanied by Manuel, the MIDAS officer who was mediating the land dispute.

Although this fact alone merits a thorough commentary, the second difference between the two visits was so stark that it overshadowed everything else. On my first visit, I had been taken to a lookout point to appreciate the 'green sea'<sup>26</sup> of oil palm spreading grandiosely across the plantation's 5,000 hectares. Because on that occasion, I was accompanied by a documentary film crew, our hosts had offered to let us use the company helicopters to capture some aerial shots of the plantation. This time, the helicopters were put away because the company was cutting costs drastically. Although I had read and heard much about the fearsome disease that locals referred to as *la PC* (*podrición del cogollo*, or heart rotting), I was not prepared for what I witnessed that day. A seemingly endless oil-palm cemetery stretched out in front of me. During the three years between my two visits, a fungal epidemic had ravaged the plantation, killing more than 80 percent of the palms. We stopped by plots in various stages of decline. Some were just beginning to show the first signs of the disease – burnt lower leaves and a yellowed arrow – while on other plots, all of the palms' leaves were completely dry and limp and we could make out the distinctly fetid smell of the palms' rotting hearts.

The plantation was hit hard by this mysterious epidemic.<sup>27</sup> By 2010, only 700 of the original 4,500 hectares of oil palm had survived and the company was operating

<sup>26</sup>This is the term that Restrepo uses to describe the large extensions of oil palm plantations in the region (Restrepo 2004).

<sup>27</sup>Although I have asked numerous people – ranging from local farmers to phytopathologists and from plantation owners to international aid officials – about the causes and nature of the epidemic, I have never gotten a consistent and straight answer. I have heard variously that the PC is a fungus, a bacteria and a virus, that it is caused and/or worsened by Tumaco's rain cycles, and people often told me – in hushed tones – that the disease 'coincidentally' spread in Tumaco precisely after the region was aerially sprayed with Roundup (glyphosate) when the Uribe government used Plan Colombia funds to eradicate coca. I dare say that much of the 'mystery' surrounding the origin and spread of the PC has been actively produced to muddle the situation and divert attention from the real culprits.



Figure 1. Epidemic on oil-palm plantation in Tumaco. Photo by Ricardo Angulo.

at a steady economic loss. But while a few other processing plants in the region had closed down, Palmas del Sur had decided to hold out. They were hopeful. The government had generously extended them the necessary funds to eradicate the diseased plants, and the Inter-American Institute for Cooperation on Agriculture (IICA) had quickly designed a hybrid seed that was more resistant to the disease. Aroldo, like many others, was highly skeptical about the hybrid's promised panacea and he was determined to make the most of the company's moment of weakness to the community council's advantage. Using his characteristically tactful tone, he asked them if the plantation's owner had contemplated an alternative emergency plan, which he called 'Plan B'. Then he subtly asked if he might be interested in selling the plantation's lands. To this, Ingeniero de la Torre responded with great conviction: 'Palmas del Sur does not have a Plan B because we are convinced that this hybrid will be the solution.'

They were not the only ones. Later that month, when I asked Tibercio, the local coop president, how the small-scale palm growers were dealing with the disease, he responded with a detailed description of their renovation plan. He explained that Cordeagropaz was in the midst of negotiating with the Ministry of Agriculture to secure funds for eradication. Eradication was the most critical step of the renovation operation since the disease is highly contagious and small-scale farmers do not have access to the heavy machinery that plantations use to fell and chop dead palms to prevent further spread. Also, Tibercio explained, thanks to Cordeagropaz, Agromira had secured renewed loans of approximately \$3,600 per hectare to replant a hybrid oil-palm seed. These loans, like the previous ones, would not be directly disbursed to the farmers, but would be given in kind or as reimbursements for incurred expenses and performed labor. As for the original loans, a state-administered emergency fund (FONSA) bought the debts from the private banks and refinanced the coop

members' loans. Although a seven-year moratorium was placed on these old debts, they were not written off, so the oil-palm entrepreneurs ended up taking on a double debt over a period of 15 years.

In March 2009, I sat with Raúl in a village school kitchen. Raúl was one of Agromira's 53 members. In 2001, he and his five brothers took on a \$15,500 loan to plant six hectares of oil palm. He attended Cordeagropaz's yearlong training course and, three and a half years after planting, Raúl and his brothers started harvesting the fruit. The harvest was initially small, but increased steadily to reach a monthly 15 tons. When the harvest was large, Raúl and his brothers would pay four additional men to collect all the seed bunches and get them to Palmas del Sur in time to process high-quality oil. The price that the company paid varied, as did the size of the harvest, but when business was good, they collected up to \$2,000 dollars in one month. With this money, he and his family fixed up their house and bought a motorboat, a TV and a gas-powered generator. With enough cash to purchase the necessary gas to drive the motorboat to Tumaco, Raúl and his family bought basic foodstuffs in town and replaced their kerosene lamps with light bulbs. After recounting the details of the business, he summed up his experience as a small-scale palm grower by saying that 'life improved a bit'.

But this bonanza lasted only for a few years. In August 2008, Raúl started noticing some burnt leaves on a few of his palms and Cordeagropaz's technicians recommended that he eradicate them. Although he cut those sick plants down immediately, the epidemic spread quickly. In order to eradicate all the remaining palms, he had to borrow an additional \$700, which was calculated into a second loan that had to be used for renovation. When we spoke in 2010, only six of his original 780 palms were left, but he had already replanted five hectares with the hybrid seed and was optimistic. In the meantime, as he waited for the new palms to yield and prayed for them not to get infected, he had negotiated a line of credit at a granary in Tumaco, where he got the rice, sugar, oil and salt that his family needed. As for fish and game, he would have to cross his fingers and hope for their continued abundance.

Epidemics on monoculture plantations are so common that this oil-palm disease is almost unremarkable. In the Tumaco region alone, most monoculture crops – plantain, cacao and coconut – have eventually gotten sick and died. From a biological perspective, it is not difficult to understand that large extensions of a single organism tend to magnify genetic weaknesses. In order to survive and thrive, organisms need to engage in relationships with other organisms. But monoculture, in its obsession with single organism repetition, obstructs multispecies symbiosis, or what Tsing has called 'weediness' (Tsing 2004). Weediness is a useful concept to describe a seemingly messy, but productively symbiotic configuration of species. Tsing uses it to describe landscapes that are neither pristine nor spoiled, neither cultivated nor wild, and to explain that relationships between plants and people in fact take on a range of forms that lie in the gaps between those categories. Weediness is, therefore, opposed to the disciplined and allegedly homogenous landscape of the plantation and, as such, it is critical for life.

Obviously, this goes for human beings as well. In fact, most of the community council's argument against oil-palm cultivation is founded precisely on this premise. The community council is not opposed to what Raúl described as 'improving one's life'. Their opposition to the spread of oil-palm cultivation is not due to a perspective that sees tradition and development as inherently antagonistic, nor do they blindly

defend a static notion of 'Afro-Colombian culture'. Rather, their concern with the spread of oil palm inside their collective territory reflects a preoccupation with preserving the symbiotic relations between people, plants and animals – with cultivating weediness. Put differently, oil-palm cultivation, as it is currently practiced on the Mira River by large-scale plantations and small-scale farmers, is a landscaping project that conflicts with the community council's weedy practices.

### **Conclusions**

If green multiculturalism is a landscaping project, what kind of landscaping project is it and what are its consequences for the people, plants and animals that it seeks to configure in particular relations of power? First, green multiculturalism is a specific articulation of cultural recognition and nature politics. In the particular guise that it has acquired on the Lower Mira River, perhaps, its most perverse effect is the way in which it facilitates a conflation of environmentalism and green capitalism. Initially, black and indigenous subjects are recruited (both through consent and coercion) into green capitalist ventures and, subsequently, their very involvement in these undertakings serves to legitimize these endeavors as environmentally sound. Small-scale oil-palm cultivation on the Mira River is a clear example of this dynamic. Black communities are extended the financial resources with which to exercise control over their collective lands on the condition that they be used for oil-palm cultivation, and their participation in this industry is then used to market biodiesel as a clean energy source. In this way, the circle of cultural and environmental legitimacy is completed.

The main difference between green multiculturalism and its non-environmental incarnations is that it does not seek to drive a wedge between cultural recognition and access to resources. Instead, green multiculturalism puts natural resources into the hands of multicultural subjects while charging them with the responsibilities of 'sustainable' resource exploitation, forest preservation, 'green' energy alternatives and whichever other environmental concern is high on the global agenda. The key is not so much in separating cultural rights from resource control as in carefully proscribing the terms under which resource control must be undertaken. In the case of multicultural subjects (such as black communities), who have legal control over resources that are regarded as a source of value for green capitalism (such as land), the conditions of cultural recognition get intricately tied to their promise to display appropriately 'green' behavior.

Second, despite its nod to the protection of cultural difference, green multiculturalism privileges entrepreneurial rationalities over notions of development that fall outside capitalism's grid of intelligibility. It is quite ironic to note that what began as a self-conscious search for globally-recognized eco-ethno alliances that would legitimate their indigenous-like status and put resource control in black communities' hands as a weapon against development-driven colonization of their territories, ended up placing these black farmers at the very heart of capitalism's advance. While it is true that small-scale palm cultivation does not evoke the specter of accumulation by dispossession, it has nonetheless recruited Colombia's black communities into capitalist ventures that run counter to their interpretation of ethnic territoriality.

The irony turns to tragedy when it becomes clear that in their efforts to secure control of natural resources, black multicultural subjects have become full-fledged stakeholders in green industries. Small-scale palm growers are no longer proletariats

who resist labor exploitation; nor are they landless *campesinos* who wage deadly battles against the landowning class. They are small-scale entrepreneurs – ‘fellow’ investors in the oil-palm business, who ‘willingly’ enter the market only to operate under profoundly disadvantageous conditions.<sup>28</sup> Unlike their large-scale counterparts, *pequeños palmicultores* provide the land, exert the labor *and* take on the full risk (both financial and bodily). And they do all of this without ever having access to the kinds of symbolic and material capital that plantation owners do.

Finally, as it currently unfolds on the Mira River, oil-palm cultivation is a colonial landscaping project. In fact, the *elaeis guineensis*’ journey from Western Africa to the Americas runs parallel to the history of the transatlantic slave trade and the colonial project that has been unfolding on this continent ever since. As postcolonial scholars have shown, the colonial enterprise is centrally concerned with the management of nature and seeks to reconfigure human and non-human relations just as much as the relations of power between colonizers and the colonized (Merchant 1989, Casid 2004, Pratt 1992). Although I cannot go into historical detail here, it is safe to state that the history of the *elaeis guineensis* in the Americas has been marked by a relentless effort to eradicate weediness, both materially and discursively (Patiño s.f., Sauer 1993). Because weediness is inherently unruly, it challenges the modern demarcations that have kept nature and culture separate. Thus, where it cannot be physically eradicated – by replacing symbiotic door-yards with monoculture plantations, for example – weediness is either invisibilized or portrayed as marginal, decadent and unlawful.

This might tempt us to describe the history of the oil palm in Colombia as a linear path that leads from symbiosis to domination, from diversity to uniformity, from wild to cultivated. But this description would be too facile. Doing this would simply reinforce the teleological history of capitalism and reinscribe the false separation between nature and culture that oil-palm landscapes seek to produce. Instead, I want to conclude by suggesting that the history of oil-palm cultivation on Colombian soil has been a fierce struggle between various forms of weediness and the homogenizing discipline of the plantation, and although the relation of forces is quite uneven, the outcome of this tug of war cannot be predicted. This is in part because even when rendered invisible, marginal or outlaw, weediness continues to sprout and spread. A clear example of this is the fact that despite the many interventions that have sought to domesticate landscaping practices on the Mira River, the local landscapes do not resemble the green graveyards of the plantation. Inside the black communities’ territories, spaces designated for commercial or self-subsistence production continue to be interspersed with stretches of swampy forest. And family farms, or *fincas*, are rarely disciplined spaces of agricultural production. Here, the forest has varying degrees of wildness that range from *monte alzado* (raised forest) to *monte biche* (immature forest) *and monte bravo* (wild forest). Unlike the cultivated versus wild dichotomy, these categories are not intrinsic designations of a given space.

What is more, landscapes are also battlegrounds where counter colonial actions can be unfurled. They are fertile soil on which possibilities for transformation can

<sup>28</sup>This is in essence what Du Toit has termed ‘adverse incorporation’, meaning that ‘poverty and disadvantage themselves can often flow not from exclusion, but from inclusion on disadvantageous terms’ (Du Toit 2007, 2). For a detailed analysis of adverse incorporation in oil-palm cultivation, see McCarthy 2010 and Du Toit 2009.

thrive. In all, although this story is clearly marked by the capitalist imperative, it is not exhausted by it. Although oil-palm cultivation on the Mira River seeks to place people and plants in mutually-exploitative configurations, this landscaping project unfolds unevenly across a terrain where a multiplicity of other configurations still grows and sometimes even flourishes.

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