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Itayosara Rojas Herrera

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Limits and possibilities of contemporary land struggles by Indigenous Peoples, Black Communities and Campesinxs in the Colombian Amazon

Itayosara Rojas Herrera

International Institute of Social Studies, Erasmus University Rotterdam, The Hague, The Netherlands

ABSTRACT

In Colombia, rural working people's struggles are led by Indigenous Peoples, Afro-Colombians, and Campesinxs, each with platforms for land claims. While these efforts have yielded significant titles and land areas, contradictions arise as the state's and capital's attempts to capture land for capitalist accumulation. This process relies on a divide-and-conquer strategy to maintain political legitimacy through consent and coercion. The effect is fragmented movements and struggles that are 'merely sectoral'. The challenge for academic research and practical politics is to confront and not back away from complicated political tensions to construct a framework that can bypass the trap of being 'merely sectoral'.

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Introduction

Why do land struggles remain generally weak despite some local and sectorial victories? This question has various possible answers, depending on societies' political economy and sociopolitical histories. As a contribution to addressing this broad question, I argue in this paper that one reason for this is the 'merely sectoral' character of land struggles that cannot connect to systemic issues and seek structural systemwide change. This becomes even more problematic when isolated land struggles occur within movements that are already racialised and diverse in terms of class politics. Where this happens, even the most persistent, consistent and progressive land struggles and movements have limited impact, and together, their overall political work can fall into the divide-and-conquer scheme of the anti-reform forces within the state and their alliance with big capital. At best, these movements are 'merely sectoral' – following and inspired by Nancy Fraser's comradely critique of environmental justice struggles as 'merely environmental' (Fraser 2021).

Land is central to the indivisible spheres of production and social reproduction (Cousins 2022; Ojeda 2022), essential in multi-ethnic societies such as Colombia. In

CONTACT Itayosara Rojas Herrera  rojasherrera@iss.nl  International Institute of Social Studies, Erasmus University Rotterdam, Kortenaerkade 12 2518 AX's, The Hague, The Netherlands

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societies that are socially differentiated intersectionally – based on class and other axes of social differences: race/ethnicity, gender and generation – how land is seen and understood to play out in the inseparable spheres of production and social reproduction are necessarily fiercely contested. The axes of conflict are multiple and not limited to rural working people versus the state or big capital, but could very well be played out as a poor-on-poor conflict (Franco and Borrás 2019). Political reactions that attempt to recast existing land access or possibilities for a greater degree of land access are varied in form and ideological meaning, short-term and long-term outcomes, but also temporally and spatially (Borrás and Franco 2013). Reactions range from resistance against such political changes in land control to struggles to be incorporated into some of these changes to acquiescence (Hall et al. 2015). In the study of political economy, the contemporary political situation around land politics and land struggles is captured by Levien, Watts and Yan (2018, 876) as follows:

Struggles over means of both production and social reproduction remain as important as ever, but are not playing out in remotely the same way as Marx predicted. Land remains an important focus of such struggles, even if its precise significance remains fiercely debated. Such struggles are also, Marxists increasingly recognize, inextricably bound up with non-class forms of power and domination, whether patriarchy, racism, casteism, or anti-immigrant nativism.

Following Levien, Watts, and Yan (2018), this paper examines the significance and relevance of land struggles in Colombia and their ties with non-class forms of power and domination. Part of my argument is that land remains central to rural working people's production and social reproduction, especially in strategic ecosystems such as the Amazon. However, this manifests differently across social groups, especially in multi-ethnic societies where ethnic fault lines and tensions were shaped historically. In the case of Colombia, we have three main groups: Indigenous, Afro-Colombians, and Campesinx. Historical tensions within and between these social groups exist around competing claims over land as a resource and territory, which is the case in the Amazon, where currently, the three groups compete to gain or maintain access to land and resources.

The republican latifundia system exacerbated colonial-era land tensions and was further aggravated by the pervasive and protracted La Violencia (Fals Borda 2009 [orig. 1962]) in the countryside for decades, and more recently recast by political processes such as the 1991 Constitution and the 2016 Peace Agreement. Violence is rooted in and sustained through the particular configuration of land politics. The already tension-filled land politics has become even more so since there have been multiple interventions in recent years in the name of nature conservation like: National Natural Parks, carbon sequestration projects, conservation-cum-tourism projects (Ojeda 2012), and green multiculturalism (Cárdenas 2012). These projects are part of climate change mitigation and adaptation narratives, and measures started to gain ground and spread across the Amazon, competing for land as a resource and territory, among other impacts (Camargo 2022; Ojeda 2012). Land conflicts, political tensions, and violence in the countryside have been landmarks in Colombia's history. However, the land rush unleashed roughly 20 years ago pushed the level and character of such land-based tensions and conflicts to unprecedented levels and new political dynamics (Arango 2021; Grajales 2011; Rojas 2022).

The violent history of agrarian and land conflicts in Colombia must be added to the negotiations and peace dialogues that gave rise to the 1991 Constitution, producing a fundamental legal-political change with the recognition of cultural diversity, biodiversity, participatory democracy and collective property for ethnic communities. However, this recognition has not led to an improvement in the quality of life for these communities. It is necessary to depart from the perspective of political economy and power relations to account for the limitations of this multicultural recognition (Vélez-Torres 2013). This recognition alone is insufficient and leaves out the power dynamics that have historically perpetuated and reproduced ethnic social inequality. Today, the Amazon is the scene of a complex mosaic of agrarian conflicts from the last century, neoliberal multiculturalism of the 90s, and the contemporary land rush along with its green marks. This case elucidates the intricate fabric of macro processes, such as the land rush, and micro-processes constructed throughout history.

There is an essential contradiction in land struggles in Colombia, partly influenced by the agrarian social structures that have emerged over time (specifically, the emergence of three distinct social groups of Indigenous, Afro-Colombians, and Campesinxs) and the political institutions that endogenously developed within each social group and those framed and deployed by the central state. It is rather positive that the state and society recognise the distinct existence and realities of these three social groups and frame laws and policies, including how to identify or facilitate recognition of land rights in each of these three domains. These three institutional clusters provided the formal platform and route to land rights by local communities in these three categories. The positive side is that these sectorial platforms facilitate mass mobilising and organise demand-making and land claim-making from below (Duarte 2015; Quinones, Rosen, and Fox 2022). However, the contradictory process triggered is the inadvertent sectionalization of land struggles, sometimes playing into the divide-and-conquer scheme of the dominant classes operating within and outside the state. In itself, sectoral struggles are important, but when they block the possibility for intersectional struggles to emerge wherein non-class struggles against oppression interlock with class struggles against exploitation (Fraser 2014), it could inadvertently undermine and even cancel out sectoral gains in the long run. Conceptually, this is captured partly in Mamdani's formulation of the 'politics of minorization' (2022) that he explored in the context of Africa, which is explained by him as follows:

[A] new kind of political community in which colonised groups were subdivided into territorial homelands and made subject to separate legal regimes. These divisions were drawn along lines of cultural and ethnic distinction, thereby transforming ethnic groups into administrative units ... the territorial and legal boundaries created by indirect rule thereby became the basis for postcolonial conflicts over political belonging. (2022, 11)

Where this happens, one overall effect is that it feeds into the 'divide, weaken, and conquer strategy' of the state and dominant classes in society, and in Colombia today, these include cattle capital (Hoffmann, García Márquez, and Krueger 2018), big capital in the extractive industries (Potter 2020), narco-capital (Ballvé 2011, 2019), entrepreneurs in carbon trade (Ojeda 2012), tourism, and real estate. I argue that this is one reason for the weakened intersectional, anti-systemic political struggles and the resulting inability of scattered resistance against land grabbers where the latter choose to take over land and

nature. It is, therefore, not surprising that we rarely see resistance actions that could stop much more rollback and land grabs where and when they unfold during the peak of contemporary land grabs in the past 20 years in Colombia.

Despite that, since the 1990s, Colombia has embraced multicultural policies aimed at protecting Indigenous peoples and Afro-descendants. These communities continue experiencing dispossession and violence; instead of improving their living conditions, multiculturalism under neoliberalism divides and domesticates ethnic communities (Dest 2020). As Hale puts it, 'the core of neoliberalism's cultural project is not radical individualism, but the creation of subjects who govern themselves in accordance with the logic of globalized capitalism' (2004, 17). In Colombia, multiculturalism and multicultural policies end up perverting and reinforcing the power structures under which ethnic communities have been oppressed, displaced, marginalised, and even annihilated. Bocarejo explains these complexities of multiculturalism as follows:

Multiculturalism is one of the most widespread political illusions in contemporary liberal democracies. A large part of the multicultural illusion lies in consolidating a political culture that promulgates ideals of tolerance, coexistence and equality among the citizens of a nation-state. However, the political practice of multiculturalism produces and reproduces a number of paradoxes. These paradoxes have the same origin: although the legal arrangements of multiculturalism aim to change practices that have historically marginalised certain communities, in many cases, these ideals are a form of political rationality that silences, perpetuates and conceals the complex contexts of political power in which it develops. (2011, 98)

Building on this, Mamdani's notion of 'Politics of Minorization' in the neoliberal era exacerbates conflicts between communities and their various administrative units. It reinforces the dominance of capital and the state over divided communities. This aspect has been extensively discussed in Latin American and Colombian literature on 'Neoliberal Multiculturalism' (see, e.g. Bocarejo 2009; Chaves and Zambrano 2006; Del Cairo 2011; Del Cairo Silva 2012; Vélez-Torres 2013) and the various mechanisms it employs to divide and conquer.

The divide-and-conquer strategy of state and capital comes in various institutional forms. One way to have a relevant conceptual handle on this is to have a normative lens on what ought to be to achieve 'social justice', that is, a sense of fairness and equity for the rural social groups. Here, the concept of the indivisible principles or programs of and around Recognition, Redistribution, Restitution, Regeneration and Representation – or 5Rs – in the context of the politics of land and how it shapes social life, as elaborated in Borrás and Franco (2018) and Franco and Borrás (2019), is helpful.

Briefly: Recognition is strengthening existing access to land for rural working people (including Indigenous, Afro-descendants, Campesinx, women and youth) where they still exist but are politically fragile; Redistribution is to provide land to landless and near landless who are either in rural or urban areas and dismantling land and power concentration; Restitution is to restore access that was forcibly taken from social groups or that the latter were forced to abandon involuntarily; Regeneration pertains to use of land and nature that are regenerative ecologically and provide socio-economic opportunities for rural communities; and Representation refers to securing and promoting political autonomy and rights for rural working people to pursue the first four Rs (Borrás and Franco 2018). The 5Rs underscore the inseparability of agrarian justice, as elucidated by

Scott (1976), and environmental/climate justice, as highlighted by Newell (2022), particularly within agrarian societies. In the context of climate change, it serves as a pivotal framework, exemplifying what Borrás and Franco (2018) refer to as 'Agrarian Climate Justice', offering a valuable political and intellectual normative reference point as explored by several authors, for instance: Calmon, Jacovetti, and Koné (2021), Paprocki (2022), Sekine (2021), and Yaşın (2022).

The divide-and-conquer tactics of the state and capital partially manifest by putting the three groups against each other or groups within these three categories in direct and indirect ways. Thus, we see variations of 'recognition without restitution', 'regeneration with recognition', 'recognition without regeneration', 'regeneration without restitution', and so on, and the widespread phenomena of 'representation without redistribution, restitution, recognition and regeneration'. The combinations are almost infinite, but it is always one or two at the expense of the others. This happens across space and temporal cycles of land rush, as Edelman and León (2013) observe in the case of Latin America historically. One effect of this is to weaken across-the-board/across-social groups' coherent movements that advance class-wide and system-wide land demands rather than 'merely sectoral' ones (Fraser 2021). As a result, despite impressive quantitative outcomes regarding the number of formal land titles provided for the three social groups, positive outcomes are limited, and social justice struggles cannot make progressive structural shifts. However, some movements are beginning to recognise this weakness and attempting to address it through the 'Agrarian Climate Justice' framework and the 5Rs principles. Whether these initiatives will gain political traction remains to be seen.

This paper critically examines the sectoral struggles for land by Black Communities, Indigenous Peoples, and Peasants, all of whom can be categorised as 'Working People' (Shivji 2017) and 'Classes of Labour' (Bernstein 2006). This critical examination follows the (Wolford 2010) reflection by not focusing solely on the coherent message of these struggles. Still, it pays particular attention to these efforts' ambivalences, dynamics and limitations and the possibilities for overcoming them. It also considers how these land-related concerns are socially differentiated (Borrás and Franco 2023). These groups grapple with a rigid and unequal agrarian structure, deepened by a new moment of land rush (Borrás and Franco 2024; Wolford et al. 2024) and resource grabbing in the Colombian Amazon. My analysis explores the various institutional platforms through which these communities make their land demands and mobilise. It engages with questions such as: What are the limitations of sectoral land struggles in the context of the contemporary land rush, and how can they be addressed? How can the partial gains of these struggles, such as several titles, hectares secured and community territorial governance processes, be protected from the assault of capital and the state? What type of alliances need to be forged between different landless social groups to defend common territory under the principle of social justice?

This study is framed in the tradition of political economy, guided by the four fundamental questions: Who owns what? Who does what, Who gets what and What do they do with it? (Bernstein 2010). It involves understanding land struggles from a historical perspective and history as the unity of the past and future following the main traditions of March Bloch (1992) and Eric Hobsbawm (1971, 1973). As part of this, it analyses the political core of the agrarian question in which land struggles are embedded and the possibilities of socio-ecological transitions beyond capitalism (Shattuck et al. 2023).

My analysis follows the extended case method proposed by Burawoy (1998, 2009), built on 2 years of ethnography in several parts of the Amazon, to move from macro processes, such as the land rush, to micro-processes, such as the diverse forms of local resistances. This perspective allowed me to be coherent with historical analysis, that is, as Burawoy puts it, to connect the present to the past in anticipation of the future' (Burawoy 2009, 21).

The argument presented in this paper results from two and a half years (2021–2023) of fieldwork in the Northern Amazon to study the contemporary land rush and its effects on rural communities in this strategic ecosystem. During this research, I realised that communities are not passive agents merely affected by the land rush. On the contrary, they have a significant history of struggles defending their shared land through similar episodes of land rush and boom and bust cycles. This paper is a tribute to them and their victories and an invitation to build common horizons of struggle where Agrarian Climate Justice and the 5Rs can play a decisive role.

This paper is organised as follows: First, I examine the scene in which land struggles take place, shaped by the historical process through which the Amazon has been integrated into the Colombian and international economy, driven by cycles of booms and busts (Acosta García and Fold 2022). Second, I present briefly the data collection strategy and methods leading to the reflections and main argument motivating this paper in the first place. The following section explores the historical factors contributing to the Colombian Amazon's current land and resource appropriation processes. It highlights the role of agrarian and conservation policies and their impact on different rural communities, including Indigenous Peoples, peasants, and Black communities. The next section shows how policies have addressed the land issue for Indigenous Peoples, Afro-descendants and Campesinx, highlighting specific implications for land access. Furthermore, this section explains how policies aimed at providing access to land for various groups of poor rural people are embedded in the logic of minority-making and the politics of minorization (Mamdani 2022). The final section elaborates on the aims and goals of the current land management within the framework of Agrarian Climate Justice and the 5Rs (Borras and Franco 2018; Franco and Borras 2021).

Land struggles across cycles of land rush in the Colombian Amazon

In the nineteenth century, Colombia emerged as a significant exporter of tropical agricultural and forestry products on the global stage, which fostered the expansion of the rural economy into the wastelands (LeGrand 1986). This process of integration in the world market unfolded nationwide and was marked by successive booms of commodities like tobacco (1854–1877), cotton (1862–1870), indigo (1868–1876) and quinine (1869–1882) (LeGrand 1986). The consequences of this process have had profound and enduring impacts on the Colombian economy – extending well into the 20th and 21st centuries. On one hand, this economic shift ushered in a focus on short-term profitability associated with commodity booms, notably coffee (Ocampo and Villar 1995). On the other, the insertion process into the world market accelerated the transformation of territories and ecosystems, such as the Amazon (Fajardo Montaña 2022). Not just in the Colombian case, the whole Amazon basin 'is but one of the specific environments that have supplied raw materials to changing global markets' (Bunker 2003, 218). This aspect has meant the

development of extractive economies in the Amazon as a product of the penetration of economic and political systems such as colonialism and capitalism. This history in the Amazon is described by Bunker as follows:

The history of this penetration, from the sporadic and limited expeditions of exploration and attack by isolated groups of adventurers, to the systematic conquests and attempts at control of the rivers by competing European armies, to the enslavement and transportation of Indians to work on plantations or in extractive expeditions, to the massive importation of indentured laborers to tap rubber trees, and to the expulsion of descendants of these laborers by large companies interested in using the lands they occupy to cut lumber, raise cattle, or extract minerals, has been a response to the needs of changing productive and political relations outside of the Amazon and the opportunities for enrichment which they offered. (1988, 15)

In the Colombian Amazon, the nineteenth century was marked by the extraction of quinine and rubber (Palacio 2006). From 1850 to 1872, there was a quinine rush primarily driven by the activities of the company 'Casa Elías Reyes y Hermanos'. The company operated between the Caquetá and Putumayo rivers, employing migrant workers from the Andes and Indigenous people as labourers, transporting its goods to Brazil using a steamship transport concession. In 1884, the company ceased its operations due to declining international prices. However, it left behind the established infrastructure, including trade routes, and a group of workers who opted to remain in anticipation of future opportunities in the forest. The rubber industry subsequently utilised the infrastructure and these workers (Domínguez and Gómez 1994; Mongua Calderón 2018; Pineda 2003).

The rubber rush in the Colombian Amazon involved internationally denounced exploitative practices like those in the British Parliament with the report 'The Devil's Paradise' (Casement 1912). In the Amazonian department of Caquetá, the 'Casa Arana' – the largest rubber company, is infamous for exterminating Indigenous people and enslaving its Indigenous workers. As Domínguez and Gómez (1994) put it, 'rubber tappers are often likened to the ruthless conquerors denounced by Bartolomé de Las Casas in the early decades of the Caribbean conquest' (own translation from Spanish) (1994, 130). Despite the exploitative treatment of workers and the environment, the long-term environmental impacts of these rushes were limited, as they tended to reverse once the boom subsided, allowing ecosystems to recover relatively quickly (Palacio 2006). While the modernisation project around quinine and rubber – with the participation of religious missions – failed to transform the territory of the vast basin, they did significantly affect the demographic composition of Indigenous peoples (Palacio 2006). Furthermore, alongside the demographic impact of the quinine and rubber, they also contributed to the devaluation and erosion of the Indigenous people's traditional knowledge of forest management, among others.

The rubber boom in the Amazon declined largely because rubber plantations in Malaysia and Sri Lanka proved more competitive. As international rubber prices plummeted in the 1920s, the government awarded land titles to former rubber entrepreneurs, enabling them to shift their focus to cattle ranching. These land titles came with a requirement for the construction of road infrastructure, which not only set the stage for the rise of the local elite but also facilitated the development of the extensive cattle ranching model that thrived between 1930 and 1940 (Acosta García and Fold 2022; Domínguez and Gómez 1994; Molano 1989a).

In the twentieth century, the government maintained the policy of granting concessions for rubber and later oil exploitation in exchange for infrastructure development. Oil extraction projects in the Amazon attracted migrant workers to the region. However, when the boom period ended and the company withdrew from the area, the infrastructure became accessible to settlers. This marked the beginning of the colonisation of the Rionegro forest, during which many of the companies' facilities were repurposed into settlements (Holmes, Pavón, and Guitierrez de Pineres 2018; Molano 1989b; Torres 2018). Over time, these regions became the epicentre of coca production and coca paste processing (Ciro 2018b; Ramírez 2011; Torres 2015). The cultivation of this illicit crop lured migrants in search of quick profits, with many coming from cities and some even having prior involvement in the illegal trade stemming from their experience in emerald mining (Thoumi 2003, 1995). In the mid-twentieth century, the Amazon region gained prominence in development programs, notably those linked to the Alliance for Progress. These initiatives were characterised by extensive infrastructure development and state-led colonisation, which I will explore further in the subsequent section. Infrastructure projects launched in the latter half of the twentieth century, such as the construction of the 'Marginal de la Selva' road and state-led colonisation programs, played an essential role in adding marijuana and coca to the Amazon's list of commodities during the boom and bust cycles, alongside quinine and rubber (Acosta García and Fold 2022; Dávalos, Sanchez, and Armenteras 2016).

Extractive boom economies, religious missions, and colonisation policies attracted peasants from the inter-Andean valleys and Afro-descendants from the Pacific coast to the Colombian Amazon. As early as 1917, the Capuchin monk missions facilitated the migration of Black communities to the Amazon, where they eventually integrated into the region's booming economies (Gacha 2021). In parallel, government-led colonisation policies were instrumental in drawing landless peasants to these areas (Molano, Fajardo, and Carriosa 1988). These profound transformations reshaped the Amazonian landscape and introduced Black communities and peasants alongside the Indigenous peoples of the Amazon. The participation of rural communities of the Amazon in these economies has been diverse and has significantly shaped their struggles for access to land and natural resources.

In addition to the fluctuating boom and bust cycle economies, the Colombian Amazon has also served as a battleground where armed conflict historically unfolded and continues to persist. Over the years, it has been a strategic stronghold for guerrilla groups like the former FARC (Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica 2013, 2017; Molano 1994), and in the 1990s, it was a contested territory involving paramilitary forces (Vargas and Barrios 2016). Regrettably, the region's inhabitants, including Indigenous people, Black communities, and peasants, have been victims of this protracted armed conflict.

The signing of the 2016 peace agreement raised significant hopes within rural communities in the Amazon, yet these expectations remain largely unfulfilled. Since 2016, the region has witnessed a surge in socio-environmental problems, and it finds itself amid a new cycle of boom and bust economies or, as some authors argue, a new land rush (Arango 2021; Grajales 2013; Ojeda 2018; Rojas 2022). This cycle is exemplified by alarmingly high deforestation rates, closely tied to the withdrawal of FARC troops and the evolving dynamics of conflict (Baptiste et al. 2017; Clerici et al. 2020; Prem, Saavedra, and Vargas 2020; Rodríguez-de-Francisco et al. 2021). Initially sparked by the granting

of oil extraction licenses (Ciro 2018a; Diaz 2019a, 2019b), this new cycle has progressively intertwined with livestock expansion (Murillo-Sandoval et al. 2023) and the emergence of a fresh market for carbon credits (Rodríguez-de-Francisco et al. 2021). These three economic activities now vie for the use of Amazonian land, jeopardising the land access of Indigenous peoples, Black communities, and peasants residing in the Amazon region. This contemporary land rush in the Amazon is influenced by five socio-economic and political processes post-2016 peace agreement (Rojas 2022): (i) Political contestation surrounding the peace agreement between the Colombian state and the former FARC guerrillas; (ii) the reconfiguration of territorial control dynamics following the withdrawal of FARC troops and the reconstitution of dissident armed groups; (iii) the reorganisation of illicit economies, including the recent economic crisis related to the coca trade; (iv) fluctuations in deforestation rates in areas previously under FARC control and now ruled by dissident groups; and (v) the diminished institutional capacity to implement the 2016 peace agreement and the recent attempts to seek a political solution that involves dissident armed groups.

The Amazon's enduring process of spatial and territorial reconfiguration has been driven by cycles of land rush. To best grasp these cycles, we can examine them through the lens of commodity rushes – a phenomenon not new in the annals of capitalism (Cotula 2013; Dell'Angelo et al. 2017; Edelman and León 2013; Grajales 2021; Sassen 2013; White et al. 2012). This pattern has been evident in the Latin American region since the Spanish conquest and colonialism (Galeano 2020). Moreover, the contemporary land rush is part of the long history of land-grabbing cycles (Edelman and León 2013) and boom–bust cycles this region has experienced. These trends have been expressed more recently through green initiatives, such as carbon offset schemes and conservation programs.

In this complex context, rural communities assert and safeguard their land rights and the right to remain in their territory. Those who have existing access to land struggle to maintain it, those who are landless or near-landless struggle to secure land, and those who have been dispossessed struggle for restitution. Responses from communities affected by the global land rush are varied and far from uniform. In some instances, there is outright opposition and resistance; in others, there is a move to engage in capitalist enterprises that have emerged from the land rush (Moreda 2015). For example, certain communities oppose oil extraction and the expansion of cattle ranching in the Amazon but seek participation in green markets and initiatives related to trading carbon offsets. In this regard, the global land rush has reshaped land struggles in the Amazon, which have their specific historical origins and development predating the arrival of the latest cycle of the land rush, which spiked around 2007–2008.

Methods

Reconstructing land struggles in a particular context, such as the Amazon, and within the frame of macro processes, such as the global land rush, requires what Burawoy has called 'extending observations over space and time' (2009, 46). Examining land struggles in the context of the land rush in the Amazon involves considering social situations, social processes, social action, and changes in power regimes through ethnography and fieldwork entries (2009). Thus, the argument presented in this paper results from two years of

fieldwork between 2021 and 2023. I made ten field visits to Caquetá, Meta, and Guaviare municipalities in the northern Colombian Amazon. The selection of these departments and municipalities was based on the observation that, following the signing of the 2016 peace agreement, deforestation rates in the Amazon increased, with specialists dubbing this region the Northern Arc of Deforestation. Early press reports about these fires did not specify their reasons and blamed the local communities. Over the past 20 years, this area has also seen significant land deals related to oil palm, hydrocarbons, extensive cattle ranching expansion, conservation, and green initiatives. In other words, this region is a convergence point for multiple interests vying for control of land and natural resources, which ultimately became my primary motivation for choosing it.

However, as my research progressed, I realised that the land struggles of rural communities were a factor that deserved special attention in this new cycle of resource and land grabbing in the Amazon. Through these field visits, I conducted more than 50 interviews with peasants, Indigenous peoples, Afro-descendants, victims of the armed conflict, human rights defenders, and former members of the FARC guerrillas. I visited Indigenous Reserves, Community Councils seeking to become Collective Territories, Peasant Reserve Zones, and various Territorial Training and Reincorporation Spaces (ETCR in Spanish) where former FARC guerrilla members live now.

Additionally, I facilitated approximately ten focus groups: two with Indigenous people from the Jiw and Sikuani communities in the municipality of Mapiripan, Meta; two with Afro-descendants from the municipality of Miraflores, Guaviare; two with peasants and victims of the conflict in Mapiripan; three with signatories of the peace agreement in the ETCRs in Caquetá and Meta; and two with peasants in the department of Guaviare. I also collected secondary information related to various mobilisation processes in this area, including the demands that drove these communities during the national strike in 2021, which led to the Altamira agreements with the government. This information includes the subsequent mobilisations in Los Pozos in Caquetá in 2023, as well as the memories of the forum for Agrarian Climate Justice against oil extraction in defence of the Amazon, which took place in 2022 and was organised by one of the most important social movement's platforms in Caquetá, and in which peasants, agrarian workers, Indigenous people, Afro-descendants and peace signatories participated.

State-led colonisation, climate change politics and conservation

Climate change politics dominated by interventions of market-based orientation (green economy, greenwashing, etc.) have triggered diverse and multiple ideas about mitigation and adaptation measures that, in turn, require land and, by implication, the recasting of pre-existing land relations (see, e.g. Camargo 2022). Most of these are squarely within the logic of capitalism and are mitigation and adaptation measures that seek to continue the expanded reproduction of capitalism or capitalist accumulation while trying to deploy technical fixes to deal with climate change. Many of these technical fixes require land, such as carbon sequestration projects like REDD+, forest conservation projects and various renewable energy sources such as hydropower, solar and wind power. Biofuel is another, leading to the rise of flex crops and commodities (Borras et al. 2016). Altogether, these require a generally market-oriented recasting of land control distribution, partly resulting in the contemporary land rush (Franco and Borras 2021). To

fully understand the connection between climate change and rural dynamics in specific regions like the Amazon, it is essential to consider material histories, power dynamics, and the analysis of global environmental change (Borras et al. 2022) shaping the contemporary land rush.

In the case of the Colombian Amazon, two historical factors have led to a new phase of land and resource appropriation. The commodification of nature characterises this phase, the emergence of green markets, the implementation of conservation projects, and the rise of carbon offset markets (Arsel and Büscher 2012; Dunlap and Fairhead 2014; Fairhead, Leach, and Scoones 2012; Ojeda 2014; Woods 2019). These two factors are as follows: first, agricultural policies of state-led colonisation explain the migration of peasants and Afro-descendants to this region in the past. The second factor relates to the Amazon's conservation and protected areas policies, which have recently restricted land use for populations that settled in the area over 50 years ago. However, today, these communities face criminalisation for their continued presence in this ecosystem. This is explained by a peasant leader of the Guayabero region as follows:

There is a population that the government itself encouraged to settle in these territories. Then, the government imposed protected areas on them. Rather than engaging in conservation efforts in collaboration with these local communities, the government's primary approach has been to expand protected areas and designate them on lands already inhabited by peasants who have played a role in founding and colonising these regions. The authorities simply inform them, 'Neighbor, your farm is now within the park boundaries. You must vacate the area'. This has been the government's consistent approach: repressing these communities and expanding protected zones. (translated from Spanish) (Peasant Leader, personal communication, 26 January 2022)

State-led colonisation replaced land redistribution in the inter-Andean valleys and attracted people from different parts of the country to this region (Fajardo Montaña 2009). Consequently, besides being home to Indigenous peoples, the Amazon became a refuge for peasants and Afro-descendants. The rubber rush in the early twentieth century drew Afro-descendants from Brazil, who arrived in the Colombian Amazon via the Apaporis River. Additionally, Black communities from the Pacific coast migrated to the region, mainly due to the influence of Catholic missions. Afro-descendants arrival in this part of the Amazon is explained by an Afro-descendant leader, who stated, 'Black people came here to exploit rubber, take part in various economic booms, engage in labour, and establish their work clans, which consisted of several Afro-descendant families' (translated from Spanish) (Personal communication, 26 March 2022).

In the latter half of the twentieth century, the Colombian Amazon gained prominence in development programs due to guerrilla groups' influence and prevention of their spread. In the 1960s, the government initiated the National Rehabilitation program, which laid the groundwork for the 'Social Agrarian Colonization'. This colonisation program was overseen by the Agrarian Fund and INCORA (Molano 1989a). The program delineated three specific zones: Ariari-Güejar, encompassing 631,500 hectares south of the Güejar River and extending toward the foothills of the Macarena mountain range; El Retorno in Vaupés; and the Plains Region in Vichada. Its objectives included establishing a new colonisation hotspot in the Ariari-Guejar region and supporting existing colonisation efforts in nearby areas (Molano 1989a). However, an evaluation of the program conducted years later revealed that the principal beneficiaries were not the

intended recipients of the directed agrarian colonisation and the settled peasants facing displacement. Instead, medium and large entrepreneurs reaped the program's benefits (Molano 1989a).

Consequently, peasant colonisation was the departure point for the expansion of large landholdings, mirroring a pattern seen in other parts of the country where 'a frontier peasant economy based on subsistence crops such as corn and rice was replaced by entrepreneurial agriculture' (Torres 2018, 149). As a result, this region evolved into an open frontier and agro-industrial hub, eventually encircled by illicit coca crops. This model of agrarian modernisation led to the proliferation of the 'coca mestiza' (Torres 2022). Rice and traditional corn cultivation gave way to mechanised rice plantations, a form of production that *colono* peasants couldn't compete with, pushing them to the outskirts of the agricultural frontier, where coca cultivation became their primary survival strategy (Torres 2022).

In addition to the mid-twentieth-century development programs, Colombia established the first conservation policies with the figure of National Natural Parks in 1948 (Leal 2019a). The process of administration and conservation started with the establishing of the Biological Reserve of La Macarena in 1948 (Leal 1995; Molano, Fajardo, and Carriaza 1988). This case is an emblematic example of the conflicts concerning peasants' use, occupation, and land tenure rights within protected areas. The Sierra de La Macarena Biological Reserve played a pioneering role in Colombia's national park system. It marked the inception of a government approach to preserve specific parts of the national territory in their presumed natural condition. Today, this system encompasses over 14% of the country's land area (Leal 2019b). Ten years later, in 1959, the National Congress enacted Law 2, which designated 42% of the national territory as forest reserves. This law also featured a provision allowing the Ministry of Agriculture to declare areas as National Natural Parks if previously approved by the Academy of Sciences (Leal 2019a).

In 1960, Colombia began developing its environmental institutions, including creating some '*Corporaciones Autonomas Regionales*', which aimed to manage natural resources within specific river basins. In 1968, this corporation merged with the Ministry of Agriculture's Division of Natural Resources to form a centralised institution, INDERENA, with national jurisdiction and stronger institutional capacity (Leal 2019a). The nascent parks office within INDERENA played a crucial role in shifting the agency's focus from resource development to environmental conservation and protection. Park officials, primarily foresters, promoted a conservationist agenda, even opposing scientific research if it involved collecting specimens. They successfully redirected INDERENA towards environmental conservation rather than resource exploitation (Leal 2019a). Early accomplishments of this institution included drafting a unified Code of Natural Resources in 1974, which officially established a 'System of National Parks'. These parks aimed to protect environments close to their natural state, mainly in sparsely populated regions. Peasants living in these areas were considered illegal occupants, while Indigenous peoples had the right to reside in the parks (Leal 2019a).

Furthermore, INDERENA took steps to create new protected areas. By the time the code was approved, resolutions had been enacted to establish additional protected areas. The conservation agenda has faced challenges from various quarters, mainly peasants. Among their demands for access to land, one of the most significant is the request to exclude certain areas from what is designated as forest reserves. Simultaneously, they have

spearheaded initiatives aimed at reconciling the conservation objectives of Natural Parks with the sustainable use of land and resources by peasants (Valencia 2019). This effort has been translated into the *'Parques con Campesinos'* (Parks with Peasants) scheme (Salazar 2021). More recently, the Amazon has experienced progressive climate and environmental policies. One example of this is the Amazon's legal recognition as a subject of rights by the Supreme Court (*Stc 4360-2018* 2018), which has been seen as detrimental to the rights of peasants. A leader and human rights defender from the Amazon has stated that those who promoted it 'did not fully grasp the harm they caused to all the peasants who actually make a living through their work in the forest' (translated from Spanish) (Personal Communication, 15 March 2022).

The recognition of the Amazon as a subject of rights has not mitigated land and environmental conflicts; instead, it has exacerbated them. One consequence of this legal recognition is that it portrays certain rural communities as defenders of the forest, as seen in the case of Indigenous peoples, while labelling others as loggers, as observed in the case of peasant communities. Additionally, it fails to acknowledge the forest rights of communities like Afro-descendants and does not consider the historical reasons behind their settlement in the Amazon. In this regard, some rural communities have more flexibility in justifying their continued presence in the territory, thereby maintaining access to land and resources. In contrast, others do not have the same advantage. This fragmentation is evident in the various land planning instruments applicable to each community: Indigenous Reserves for Indigenous Peoples, Peasant's Reserve Zones for Campesinxs, and Collective Territories for Black Communities.

Agricultural and conservation policies, along with recent developments aimed at recognising the Amazon as a subject of rights, have determined rural communities' access to land. These communities arrived in the region through state action or were drawn by economic opportunities during different commodity rushes. These local factors have significantly influenced the current land and resource rush. Furthermore, the intersection of climate change politics and the global land rush presents complex and multi-layered connections and interactions. These dynamics have profound implications for rural communities, particularly those residing in areas targeted for environmental and climate initiatives. Firstly, climate change is a contextual backdrop for the contemporary land and commodity rush (Borras and Franco 2018). Secondly, climate change politics and narratives legitimise the global land rush. Thirdly, climate change politics can also act as a delegitimising force for mitigation efforts or potential relevant solutions (Borras, Franco, and Nam 2020). Amid this evolving landscape of land and climate change politics, peasants, Indigenous peoples, and Black communities are actively asserting their right to remain in their territories and to secure or maintain access to land.

There are ample examples of various combinations of the 5Rs in the context of state and capital's attempt to divide and conquer Campesinxs and other social groups and classes. A few examples of how this unfolds are: *'regeneration without recognition'*, such as conservation initiatives that not only do not recognise land claims by those who have existing access to the space being contested, but they diminish or completely ban rural working people from accessing such a space (whether a forest, savannah or a body of water). The extreme type of this is called 'fortress conservation' in conservation literature in the context of Africa (Brockington 2002). Another example of problems in conservation or regeneration programs that have become more common in the era of

climate change is a resettlement site for ex-combatants of FARC in Guaviare who were geographically relocated in the middle of extensive '*fincas*', cattle ranches and conservation parks. The road to the quite geographically isolated resettlement area was a combination of clay and some thin layer of gravel – and the official reason for this is that it is part of the Amazon and a conservation area; thus, the construction of a proper concrete road to connect an isolated settlement area of ex-combatants is not allowed for ecological conservation reasons.

Meanwhile, the entire area is a patchwork of cattle ranches. So, small municipal concrete roads are not allowed, but cattle ranchers' deforestation is. This contradictory condition can be described as 'regeneration without restitution or redistribution' or, arguably, 'representation without redistribution or restitution.' These examples, and many other related manifestations, are far too pervasive in the Colombian Amazon, or at least in the general areas where I did my study.

Indigenous reserves, collective territories and peasant's reserves zones

Three types of land reserves are prominent in Colombian land politics: Indigenous Reserves, Collective Territories for Black Communities, and Peasant's Reserves Zones. They are critical nodes of sectoral land struggles and have resulted in significant land allocation to these social groups (the total number of hectares per land reserve is shown in Table 1). I will briefly describe these instruments and their outcomes and examine how the deliberately made incomplete reform processes resulted or might result in contradictory outcomes that generally facilitate state and capital's agenda for expanded capital accumulation while pursuing political legitimacy along the broader analysis by O'Connor (2002) and Fox (1993) with regards to the two contradictory tasks of the capitalist state.

Colombian state laws recognise three land planning instruments that guarantee group land access to rural communities: Indigenous Reserves ('*Resguardos Indigenas*') for Indigenous peoples, Collective Territories for Black Communities ('*Territorios Colectivos de Comunidades Negras*') for Black communities, and Peasant Reserves Zones ('*Zonas de Reserva Campesina*') for peasants. Campesinxs individuals' land rights are ensured through public lands known as '*baldios*', reserved explicitly to allocate individual plots to campesinxs (LeGrand 1986). These administrative designations align with the constitutional mandate concerning the acknowledgement of diversity, formal equity, the right to cultural identity, prior consultation with Indigenous peoples, and, most importantly, land rights and collective property.

Each administrative/ land planning instrument has its history and is linked to specific territorialities. In the case of Indigenous '*resguardos*', this concept originates in the Spanish Colony, and some of the titles granted by the crown during the colonial

Table 1. Officially approved land planning instruments and extension.

Land planning instruments	National total (officially constituted)	Total national land allocated (ha)
Indigenous reserves	767	50 million
Collective territories	240	8.5 million
Peasant reserves zones	11	1.2 million
Forest reserves	7	48 million

Source: Own elaboration with data provided by the National Land Agency and The Ministry of Environment.

period are still part of the demands of Indigenous peoples. Collective Territories for Black Communities and Community Councils have a more recent history, emerging in the 1990s, as do the Peasant Reserves Zones. Both administrative designations resulted from a significant process of social mobilisation, contributing to the enactment of Law 70 in 1993 for Black communities and Law 160 for peasants in 1994. As Franco (2008) explains, laws are passed but do not self-interpret nor self-implement, and the processes and outcomes of interpretation and implementation of these legal instruments are played out in political contestations among state, capital and rural working people (Coronado 2021). Each of the three land access methods, their historical background, their regulation within the framework of Colombian law, and, most crucially, their notable successes in enabling land access for respective communities have been associated with bitter conflicts within and between these communities. However, it's essential to acknowledge that despite these partial victories, the security of legal titles, whether held by groups or individuals, is never an absolute safeguard against the potential threats posed by commercialisation and enclosure, as Grajales (2013) noted. Additionally, state neglect can also pose significant challenges in this context. Figure 1 shows land use management figures in the Amazon, including Peasant Reserves Zones, Indigenous Reserves and Forests Reserves.

Indigenous reserves

Indigenous territories in Colombia boast a rich history that predates the Conquest, and they have witnessed significant changes owing to Spanish recognizing and the formation of the Colombian Republic. During the colonial period, *resguardos* functioned as tools for recognizing and overseeing Indigenous populations, primarily to provide labour for Spanish colonists' haciendas (Garzón Zabala 2017). Following the struggles for independence, influenced by liberal philosophy, the *resguardo* came to be viewed as an outdated form of land tenure. Despite early Republican laws and reforms aimed at dismantling communal land ownership and assimilating Indigenous communities, these systems endured (González Rojas 2014). However, in the early twenty-first Century, Indigenous communities began to reinterpret the significance of *resguardos*. They started to perceive these territories as crucial for safeguarding and recognizing their ancestral lands, especially in response to the processes of agrarian modernisation (Duarte 2015). Table 2 summarises the most relevant legal procedures regulating *resguardos* and land access for Indigenous communities from 1820 to 2015.

In Colombia, there are approximately 1000 Indigenous *resguardos* (the exact figure is 850 – from which 767 have completed the legal procedure for recognition) (Ministerio del Interior 2022); in the Amazon region, as reported by the National Land Agency, there are a total of 222 reserves covering an area equivalent to 26,990,084 hectares. Among these, 211 reserves are entirely located within the region (100%), while 4 have less than 5% of their surface area within the regional territory. Additionally, seven reserves encompass between 42% and 90% of their surface area within the regional territory (Acosta-Delío 2019). Table 3 shows the evolution of the constitutional procedures of *resguardos* by different state agencies. The Indigenous population living in the *resguardos* of the Colombian Amazon was used as a slave labour force for export economies such as rubber from

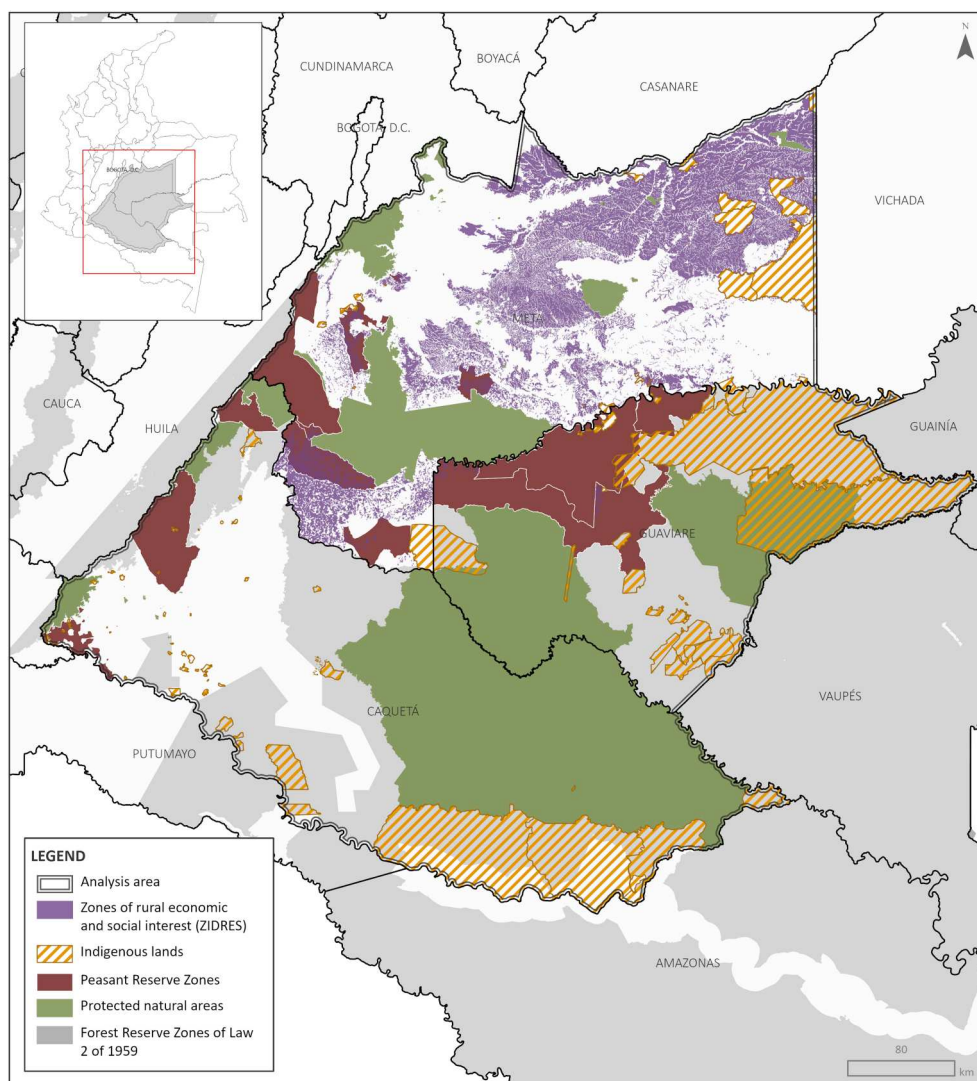


Figure 1. Map of land-use management figures in the Colombian Amazon. Natalia Caro's elaboration by author's petition.

the late 19th and early 20th centuries (Domínguez and Gómez 1994). In the twentieth century, the situation of Indigenous peoples did not improve; they continued to be exploited in other extractive economies, such as hunting animals for the fur trade (Castro-Caycedo 2018) or collecting coca leaves for the processing of cocaine (Mondragón 1992).

Indigenous reserves' socioeconomic and political conditions across the country are vastly differentiated. However, one thing is certain: most reserves are not like those advertised on giant commercial billboards to promote tourism or local culture. Many reserves are not very different from the uneven, contested, neglected, marginal and geographically isolated. The Indigenous reserves I studied in the Amazon region are similar to what Arango (2023) has observed in Altillanura, or indeed, similar to what Anthias

Table 2. Evolution of the legislation on Indigenous lands.

Year	Content and legal procedures fostered by the state	
1820	Decree 20 May	Return of lands to Indigenous legitimate owners of the lands that were part of the resguardos.
1905	Law 55	Authorization and legalization of the sale of land within resguardos and fractionation of resguardos.
1919	Law 104	Reinforcement of the splitting of resguardos and establishment of punishments for those who oppose it.
1930–1940		Extinction of resguardos under the excuse that their owners had lost their Indigenous identity
1961	Law 161	Allocation of land to Indigenous groups in marginal areas, which were later recognized as resguardos.
1991	Law 21	Adoption of the ILO Indigenous Peoples Convention
1994	Law 160	Regulation of land legalization for Indigenous communities.
1995	Decree 2164	Procedure for the constitution and expansion of resguardos.
2015	Decree 1071	Extension of the decree 2164.

Source: Own-elaboration with data provided by Garzón Zabala (2017).

(2018) described in Bolivia. In a discussion with our research team and the resguardo residents, the resguardo leader lamented:

Our Indigenous territory shrunk in size, and the officially constituted resguardo is too small for us to be able to survive by combining Chagra¹ with hunting. The territory is not that big anymore for wild animals to thrive and, thus, for us to hunt. The bigger part of our territory was parcelled and given to peasant colonos who established Fincas [private farms]. Our territory that got shrunk is now entirely surrounded by fincas, and we do not even have our own road, no right of way to and from our resguardo. We have to travel more distance and at the mercy of finqueros to allow us to pass through their land, now theirs, which was our land. These finqueros prohibit us from hunting in their fincas. Moreover, years back, there is a big company that took over a vast area of land, including a significant portion of our territory. It is now completely planted with oil palm. So yes, we have a resguardo officially constituted. Still, the size and quality of it do not guarantee our ability to survive, and our children will soon lose many of our cultural practices especially hunting skills because we are not able to hunt, or we are not allowed to hunt. There is nothing much productive activities possible inside our resguardo. We are demanding to take back our land taken over by the oil palm company, but nothing is happening. And now, many of our people in the resguardo because of poverty are forced to work in the oil palm plantation that grabbed our land. It is hard for us to swallow, but we have no choice if we have to survive. We rely mainly on regular food aid from the government to survive, which is not sufficient. (translated from Spanish) (Indigenous Leader, Focus Group Discussion, 17 July 2022)

This short vignette is fully loaded with all the conceptual and political contradictions and challenges that I flagged at the beginning of this paper. Let's take the number of titles and the hectareage they represent in terms formally constituting Resguardos. This particular *Resguardo* will be added to this census data that the Colombian government celebrates, as well as many advocacy NGOs worldwide today, especially concerning

Table 3. Evolution of the constitution and widening of resguardos (1960–2022).

Period	Institution	Number of constituted resguardos	Number of expanded resguardos	Area (ha)	Beneficiaries Indigenous families
1960–2002	INCORA	579	40	29.7 million	50,000
2002–2015	INCODER	169	69	2.53 million	23,000
2015–2022	ANT	79	36	1.14 million	18,000

Source: Own-elaboration with data provided by Garzón Zabala (2017) and ANT (2022, personal communication).

climate politics. But if we deploy a political economy analysis of what is inside this *Resguardo* and the social relations its residents are inserted into, then there are more challenges to confront than accomplishments to celebrate. This case tells us of multiple axes of conflict: between the Indigenous community and big capital (oil palm) and between the Indigenous community and Campesinos. Here we see how the concept of '*recognition without restitution*' comes into play: the government recognised part of the Indigenous territory but facilitated the grabbing of the rest, especially by the oil palm company, and despite repeated demands to take back the land, the land remains in the control of the agribusiness. We also see how '*redistribution without recognition*' could be at play: lands were redistributed to peasant colonos to establish their fincas at the expense of unrecognising the prior claims to land by the Indigenous community. Not only that, but the way and the extent to which redistribution was carried out was also to the point of undermining the integrity of the *Resguardo* in its ability to guarantee the social life of the Indigenous. We also see here '*recognition without regeneration*': a *Resguardo* was constituted but in a way and to the extent that it cannot guarantee regenerative socioeconomic activities, and not even socioecological reproduction because many of the *Chagras* were part of those taken over and destroyed by *Finqueros* and the oil palm company.

Collective territories for Black communities

There are approximately 200 officially constituted collective territories in Colombia, accounting for 8 million ha. (ANT 2023), with the majority of them located along the Pacific Coast and the Caribbean. The establishment of collective territories was a significant part of the constitutional and legal reform package during the wave of multicultural constitutionalism that swept through Colombia in the 1990s, aimed at safeguarding Afro-descendant communities and their territories (Baquero Melo 2014). This surge of multicultural constitutionalism was also found in the constitutional process of 1991 in Colombia, resulting in the recognition of rights and the provision of special protection for ethnic communities, including Indigenous Peoples and Black communities, within the Colombian Constitution. Therefore, the Constitution provided a new political opportunity for the Afro-descendants to mobilise (Oslender 2016; Quinones, Rosen, and Fox 2022).

The constitutional acknowledgement of the rights of Black communities and the establishment of the principles of inalienability, imprescriptibility, and non-seizability for ethnic collective territories served as the basis for the enactment of Law 70 of 1993. This legislation was designed to govern the demarcation and titling processes for the historically inhabited collective territories for Black Communities (Mogollón and Gómez 2018). Likewise, within Law 70, collective occupation is defined as the historical and ancestral settlement of Black communities on lands for collective use that constitute their habitat and on which they currently develop their traditional production practices (Mogollón and Gómez 2018). The law became a landmark due to the unprecedented rights it granted to Black communities, the ethnic awareness it generated, and the land reform project it

¹The Chagra serves as the family garden for Indigenous communities in the Amazon. Comprising a variety of temporary crops, it plays a crucial role in the social reproduction of Indigenous families. Typically situated in the river valley where the land is more fertile, the Chagra is integral to slash-and-burn agriculture practices in the Amazon.

represented (Cárdenas 2012). This last aspect was characterised as the most considerable land reform experience in Latin America in the 2000s (Offen 2003). The Collective Territories figures show how 'Colombia was able to implement this landmark advance in Black collective territorial rights, even in the midst of a rapidly worsening armed conflict and formal and informal attempts to undermine the letter and spirit of much of the 1991 Constitution' (Quinones, Rosen, and Fox 2022, 6).

In this manner, collective territories have become the most effective means for Black communities to secure access to land. The significance of this institution for Afro-descendants is not only derived from the recognition of their ethnic identity but also because it grants them land rights. This aspect can be elucidated by an Afro-descendant leader from the Amazon who stated:

The decree of 1745, which regulates the recognition of Black communities' right to collective property, explicitly states that it confers upon us the right to land anywhere in the country. Specifically, we have rights to public lands 'Baldíos' in any part of the country, particularly in regions abundant with such lands, like the Amazon region. Consequently, when a community council is established, it is founded with the utilisation of public lands. (Translated from Spanish) (Focus Group Discussion, 16 March 2022)

When asked about the specific criteria for establishing collective territories, Afro-descendant leaders, drawing on their extensive knowledge of Law 70 and community council legislation, stress that these collective territories should be formed on public lands historically inhabited by Black communities. However, this criterion introduces complexity since the ancestral use of these lands determines the official status, specifically the maroon and free territories established by Black communities during the Spanish colonial period. This historical criterion poses a significant challenge to land access for Black Communities in regions like the Amazon, where just five Community Councils are officially recognised (Comisión de la Verdad 2022). This figure contrasts with the number of Community Councils in other parts of the country. One community leader searching for land explains:

We encounter a challenge here because when the Seventy Law mentions 'ancestral lands,' what does that imply? It signifies that these are the lands where Afro-Colombian slaves, who arrived directly in these regions, such as in the Pacific, or in the case of the Atlantic Coast, the Palenqueros and the Cimarrones who refused enslavement, rebelled and established Palenques. Do you follow? ... I'm not sure if I'm mistaken, but that's precisely what we're discussing here. Although it was we who arrived in these places, we were just informed that these lands also provide us refuge, and that's where I perceive the issue. When they speak of ancestral lands, it directly pertains to these communities—those who have resided in these areas for over 400 years, you see? (Translated from Spanish) (Focus Group Discussion, 16 March 2022)

As shown above, the historical reasons for the presence of Black communities in the Amazon date back to the 19th and 20th centuries; however, Law 70 refers to an ancient process that has to do with the settlement of Cimarrones and Palenques in colonial times. The arrival of Afro-descendants in the Amazon had to do with the religious missions of the nineteenth century and the boom economies of the twentieth century, such as rubber and cocoa. This aspect explains why, at present, many of the Black communities organised in Community Councils in the Amazon are searching for the constitution of Collective Territories. Since many of them were dedicated to coca cultivation before 2016,

many of these communities are beneficiaries of the crop substitution programme of the 2016 peace agreement.

Black communities seeking access to land in the Amazon are aware that their expectations may generate conflicts with other land planning figures, such as Indigenous Reserves and Forest Reserves. However, in their interpretation, if Indigenous Reserves can be established in Forest Reserve areas, the same standard should be applied to Black communities, who, like Indigenous communities, protect the forest. They even believe that in cases where land interests conflict with those of Indigenous communities, an agreement should be reached since they have the same right to the land as Indigenous peoples do.

Other rural inhabitants of the Amazon do not favour establishing collective territories because they believe it would limit the amount of land available to different social groups. For instance, specific community action boards – Juntas de Accion Comunal – consisting of local peasants in this region interested in the land allocation of '*baldios*' oppose the formalisation of collective territories. Furthermore, there is a perception that specific environmental protection measures are viewed positively by Black communities and negatively by campesinos. For instance, the ruling that grants rights to the Amazon is welcomed by Black communities but met with resistance by peasants.

Peasant reserves zones

Peasant reserve zones were established with the primary objective of curbing the expansion of the agricultural frontier, regulating land occupation and utilisation, curbing land ownership concentration, and preserving natural resources. According to the Land National Agency, 11 Peasant Reserve Zones are officially constituted, accounting for 13 million ha (ANT 2023). Furthermore, this concept was conceived and championed by peasant movements during the 1990s to ensure the involvement of peasants in decisions regarding their territories and to secure the full realisation of their rights (Piscal 2020). The general idea behind the Peasant Reserves is to identify a large area of land, territory, and zone where peasants can live, survive, and make a living. However, a zone needs to be formally constituted, and this process towards a formal constitution is very much a contested political process.

The Peasant Reserve Zones (ZRC) are regulated by Law 160 of 1994, which established the agrarian reform system. Finding an initiative of this kind is paradoxical amidst a public policy of market-assisted agrarian reform driven by the World Bank, such as Law 160 (Pereira and Fajardo 2015; Rojas 2023). However, this concept was also a result of peasant mobilisation in the 1990s, with one of the strategic objectives of the peasant movement being to halt the expansion of large landownership, ensure the continued presence of rural settlers in the territory, and stabilise the agricultural frontier (Fajardo Montaña 2014).

ZRCs have made important accomplishments, although the level and extent are far below the original goals and targets. Once the pilot ZRC programs were established, there was strong peasant social mobilisation, which was suppressed through the democratic security policy of former President Uribe during the 2000s. In Uribe's government, ZRCs were criminalised, their promoters were pursued and imprisoned, and paramilitary forces eliminated many peasant leaders. In the Amazon, particularly in the Department of

Guaviare, a ZRC was established, encompassing the municipalities of San José, Calamar, and El Retorno, covering an area of 463,000 hectares (Resolution 0054 of December 18, 1997, by Incora). However, today, within the ZRC, large landholdings predominate, and the land is in the hands of landowners, cattle ranchers, and speculators (peasant leader, personal communication, 25 November 2021). Consequently, the concept of ZRC became blurred due to the 'cycle of violence or pressure: abandonment/forced sale – multiple transactions – final appropriation by paramilitaries or third parties – cattle ranchers, politicians, or others (Gutiérrez Sanín and Vargas Reina 2016; Vargas and Barrios 2016).

In addition to the severe violent and legal persecution of the concept and its advocates, which explains the limited progress in achieving its objectives, ZRCs were designed for colonisation areas and areas where vacant land prevailed, as is the case of the Amazon. From the outset, this was a limitation since it was once again an attempt to create escape valves in colonisation areas instead of addressing the structural problem of large landholdings, as was the case with the timid land reform attempts of the twentieth century.

Since December 2022, the National Land Agency has sped up the process for the constitution of new peasant reserves and approved the establishment of four Peasant Reserve Zones covering 378,000 hectares in the departments of Cauca, Meta, and Cundinamarca (ANT, 2022). After nearly 30 years since its creation, there is finally political will on the part of the national government to support and develop this concept, a development that the peasants' organisation has widely celebrated but, in some cases, has been contested by other rural inhabitants like Indigenous Peoples and Afro-Colombians.

As demonstrated by the case of the Peasant Reserve Zone of Guaviare, its official recognition did not result in more equitable measures for peasants to access land. On the contrary, it continues to be a hotspot for land concentration, the expansion of extensive cattle ranching, and speculation in land prices. What was once a celebration by the peasant movement is now in the hands of landowners linked to the mafia capital. Therefore, in areas like this, 'Land reform processes must be undertaken even within the peasant reserve zones' (Mondragón, Personal communication, 28 October 2023). This is an example of recognition without redistribution or regeneration, as, despite the Colombian state's official recognition of the peasant reserve zone, it did not lead to a land redistribution process. The land remains in the hands of landowners, with the soils in this peasant reserve being heavily affected due to the expansion of extensive cattle ranching.

This situation becomes even more complex in the Colombian Amazon, where, in addition to the peasants interested in the land, there are also signatories of the peace agreement who, after disarmament, were relocated to areas near peasant reserves. This is the case in the department of Caquetá with the El Pato-Balsillas Zone (officially constituted in 1997 and expanded in August 2023) and in Guaviare, where they now demand to be part of the peasant reserve zone to gain access to land and ensure their sustainability.

The above cases illustrate the common need for land among socially differentiated groups: Indigenous Peoples, Afro-descendants, Campesinxs, victims of violence and signatories of the peace agreement. This shared need goes beyond their cultural, social and historical distinctions. Essentially, they embody what Shivji (2017) calls the 'Working People' and Bernstein (2006) 'Classes of Labour'. As Bernstein argues, these groups are part of 'the growing numbers..who now depend – directly and indirectly – on the sale of their labour power for their own daily reproduction' (Bernstein 2006,

455). These categories include dispossessed Indigenous peoples, peasants, and afro-descendants; in short, all of them share an everyday materiality:

All in all, the materiality which underlies producers – peasants and pastoralists, proletarians and semi-proletarians, street hawkers selling consumer goods and peddlers selling cooked food, operators and repairers in backyard workshops—in virtually all sectors is the minimising of their necessary consumption and maximising their labour. (Shivji 2017, 11)

While they have achieved some partial victories separately, all three approaches have sparked contentious conflicts among communities. These distinct mechanisms compete for the organisation of land use and the determination of specific land rights, setting the stage for a ‘divide, weaken, and conquer’ strategy employed by both the state and the dominant social classes. This strategy aligns with the concept of ‘minoritization’ in the realm of politics, as outlined by Mamdani (2022), and reinforces the limitations of neoliberal multiculturalism (Bocarejo 2011; Vélez-Torres 2013). It fragments collective struggles and perpetually generates new minority groups, all the while deflecting scrutiny of the underlying structural disparities in land distribution and the dismantling of land inequalities. The divisions established by the state, based on cultural and ethnic distinctions, form the basis of postcolonial conflicts over political belonging, as explained by Mamdani. In the Colombian context, these conflicts are exacerbated by neoliberal multiculturalism, intensifying the creation of minorities and relegating certain groups to second-class citizenship. Furthermore, these politics of minoritization extend their reach to other communities, including victims of armed conflict seeking land restitution and ex-combatants.

Concluding discussion: towards agrarian climate justice

There are important gains in terms of land struggles sectorally for Indigenous communities, Afro-Colombians, and Campesinxs, including ex-combatants needing to be resettled and victims of the armed conflict needing to be restituted. The quantitative data on accomplishments in terms of number of titles and geographic scope in terms of hectares is impressive for the Indigenous Reserves, Collective Territories for Black Communities, and Peasant Reserves. It is tempting to celebrate one on a stand-alone basis, and there is reason to do so, especially since such victories were born out of life-and-death struggles by these communities. This paper’s critical examination of these sectoral land struggles and my attempt at demonstrating their many problems is not to devalue the significance of these accomplishments; quite the contrary. I aim to see how to protect such gains while exploring that which can become building blocks towards constructing an effective shield against the persistent assault done by state and capital through capitalist accumulation drive, shrouded with attempts at maintaining a minimum level of political legitimacy.

Mamdani has shown how the ‘Politics of Minorization’ unleashes transformation processes in which existing cultural differences turn into boundaries of political identity, leading to the fragmentation of social groups and reinforcing the power of powerful elites. This is precisely the case of how neoliberal multiculturalism unfolded in Colombia, separating common claims and causes between landless peoples and working people: Indigenous people, Black communities and peasants. In this scenario of fragmentation and atomisation, what alternatives are left for critical analysis and political action? I

have demonstrated, using elements of the 5Rs, how the vicious divide-and-conquer strategy of state and capital has created the basis for tensions within and between local communities of Indigenous, Afro-Colombians and Campesinos and perhaps prevented the emergence of solidarity based on class and non-class politics. Likewise, it is also important to understand how Agrarian Climate Justice and the 5Rs principles can become powerful tools for forging alliances between landless peoples and rural working people seeking structural and systemic social change.

The various problematic combinations of the five elements of 5Rs that have played out in the Amazon region, some of which I briefly discussed earlier, have been picked up by grassroots organisations at the Department level that work simultaneously with all social groups that are the subject of this paper. This allows them to see a broad cross-sectoral picture and realise the divisive effect of a 'merely sectoral' approach – again, emphasising that I am not saying that sectoral work is wrong; what I argue is that sectoral work that stops there, and is unable to cross sectors to forge class-wide, across-the-board solidarity, and movement building is bound to be weakened and divided by the divided-and-conquer strategy of the state and capital.

Finally, the multiple crises and the contemporary land rush present a new challenge for land struggles, rural communities, and livelihoods. Within the current land rush, green initiatives and climate solutions become dispossession mechanisms, taking working people's land and livelihoods. Simply recognising their cultural and political identities is no longer sufficient. Real change requires the redistribution of resources, restitution of rights, regeneration of their soils, and the representation of all rural communities – moreover, the collective resistance against dispossession by the state and capital. Fortunately, there are already experiences emerging that point towards this new horizon. One of them, in the Department of Caqueta is COORDOSAC (*Coordinadora Departamental de Organizaciones Sociales, Ambientales y Campesinas del Caquetá*) – a Department-wide group that is neither a formal member of the main left agrarian movements or Indigenous and Afro-Colombian movements – but tends to work closely with these left agrarian, Indigenous and Afro-Colombian movements as well as with ex-combatant organisations and coca farmers and farmworkers. They realised the weakening and divisive effect of a 'merely sectoral' way of mobilising, organising and demand-making. They are now trying to frame their work across sectors using the 5Rs as a framework and bannered as 'Agrarian Climate Justice'. Whether such an approach will gain traction among the various sectoral groups, and if so, whether it will demonstrate some power to be more effective in both 'defensive struggles' – struggles that aim to block and unmake the divide-and-conquer strategy of the state and capital and its politics of 'minorization' – and 'proactive struggles' – struggles that attempt not only to dismantle the structures and institutions of exploitation and oppression but to construct the building blocks of a positive future simultaneously – is something worth not only watching but also accompanying.

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Note on contributor

Itayosara Rojas Herrera is a Ph.D. Researcher at the International Institute of Social Studies (ISS), Erasmus University Rotterdam, and a visiting researcher at the Centro Interdisciplinarios de Estudios sobre Desarrollo at the Universidad de los Andes. She is part of the ‘Commodity & Land Rushes and Regimes: Reshaping Five Spheres of Global Social Life (RRUSHES-5)’. This research is funded by the European Research Council Advanced Grant Project Number 834006.

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