

DOCUMENTARY FILM REVIEW ESSAY

Extinction in the Backlands: Recent Documentaries about Resource Extraction in South America

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This essay reviews the following works:

Hija de la laguna. Dir. Ernesto Cabellos Damián. Prod. Stefan Kaspar. Perú, 2015, 88 min. Film is available on Vimeo.

Sertão velho cerrado. Dir. André D’Elia. Prod. André D’Elia and Júlia Saleh. Brazil, 2018, 96 min. Film is available on YouTube.

Viaje a los pueblos fumigados. Dir. Fernando Solanas. Prod. Victoria Solanas. Argentina, 2018, 97 min. Film is available on YouTube.

Gran Chaco. Dir. Lucas van Esso. Prod. Miguel van Esso. Argentina, 2014, 67 min. Film is available on YouTube.

The recent films of Fernando Solanas, André D’Elia, Lucas van Esso, and Ernesto Cabellos Damián explore the advance of the extractive frontier for the onset of agricultural and mining activities. Three of these documentaries focus on the relentless expansion of soy monocultures into Indigenous lands and natural parks protected by law. *Viaje a los pueblos fumigados* chronicles the consequences of implementing soybean production as the new agricultural paradigm. Among them, Solanas explores the impact of agrochemicals on the health of communities including the Wichí Indigenous group and small towns in the pampas. *Gran Chaco* also centers on agribusiness expansion through land clearing and deforestation, which has severely affected the ancestral lands of the Wichí community in Salta, Argentina. *Sertão velho cerrado* focuses on the Chapada dos Veadeiros National Park in the Brazilian state of Goiás, an eco-region of tropical and subtropical grasslands. The region has become an extractive zone where hydroelectric, gold-mining, and agricultural corporations circumvent environmental laws to appropriate communal territories. Finally, *Hija de la laguna* documents Indigenous resistance in Cajamarca, Perú, where the Yanacocha mining company—owned by the Newmont Mining Corporation and the Compañía de Minas Buenaventura—sought to drain various lakes and exploit Mount Quilish, considered sacred by the region’s Indigenous communities.

The connecting thread of these documentaries is the violent advance of the extractive frontier through intimidation of Indigenous and Afro-descendant communities and agreements with local governments. Each film shows that deforestation and land clearing are rampant across diverse bioregions and ecosystems such as the Cerrado in Brazil and the Gran Chaco in Argentina.

I begin my discussion of these films with *Viaje a los pueblos fumigados* because of Solanas's seminal role in the emergence of the environmental documentary subgenre through films like *Tierra sublevada: Oro impuro* (2009) and *La guerra del fracking* (2013). In parallel to the trajectory of other contemporary documentary filmmakers such as Patricio Guzmán, Solanas went from being a key figure in activist cinema in the late 1960s to spearheading the trend in "green documentaries," a term that Helen Hughes uses to designate films that "disseminate knowledge and encourage debate" about human impact on the planet.¹ As in certain scenes of his classic *La hora de los hornos* (1968, codirected with Octavio Getino), Solanas focuses extensively on the Wichí Indigenous community and its invisible status in Argentine nation-building narratives. The other documentaries also expose how the costs of environmental injustice fall predominantly on South America's most vulnerable groups, such as the *quilombola* hinterland settlements of escaped slaves and the Indigenous communities struggling to defend life and the rights of nature. Together, the films push beyond the anthropocentric framework of human rights to show that our future is inextricably linked with the fate of ecosystems and nonhuman beings.

Viaje a los pueblos fumigados

Viaje a los pueblos fumigados follows Solanas's journey as he explores the impact of pesticides and agrochemical runoff on various Argentine regions such as the Pampas and the Chaco. The documentary begins with an aerial shot of the burning and clearing of fields in the province of Salta in northeastern Argentina to make way for the cultivation of transgenic seeds. Through voice-over, Solanas informs viewers that the expansion of the agricultural frontier in northern Argentina has happened despite the passage in 2007 of the Ley de Protección de los Bosques Nativos, protecting forests against the onslaught of extractive activities. Besides pointing to deforestation and land clearing, Solanas focuses on the consequences of pesticide drift for peasants and Indigenous communities. He visits the ancestral lands of the Wichí Indigenous community in the province of Chaco, which is forced to migrate to avoid being exposed to the dangers of aerial fumigation. The fact that Solanas begins the documentary with an aerial shot taken from a helicopter inverts the instrumental gaze of the agribusiness industry by showing the disasters caused by the expansion of the agricultural frontier. Omar A. Pérez stresses this point in his analysis of the documentary by showing how these shots, as opposed to the extractive method of flattening the land, defy "neoliberal claims of ownership."² The documentary is inscribed in the tradition of the Latin American road movie, which has thrived ever since the region entered neoliberal globalization due to the genre's critique of "the emptiness behind the promise of progress and modernization."³ Solanas documents rural landscapes and populations poisoned by agrochemicals with the consent of local politicians, tearing down the rhetoric of progress linked with soybean production and showing the complicity of the entire Argentine population.

The film is dedicated to Pope Francis and mentions *Laudato si'* (Praise Be to You), his second encyclical critiquing consumerism and environmental precariousness, as a source of inspiration. It is divided into nine parts: the transgenic model, fumigated schools and neighborhoods, scientific testimonies, and ecological alternatives, among others. Solanas

¹ Helen Hughes, *Green Documentary: Environmental Documentary in the Twenty-First Century* (Chicago: Intellect Books, 2014), 5.

² Omar A. Pérez, "Escaping the Visual Trap of the Agricultural Frontier: Fernando Solanas's *Viaje a los pueblos fumigados*," *Latin American Literary Review* 48, no. 96 (2021): 81.

³ Verónica Garibotto and Jorge Pérez, "Introduction: Reconfiguring Precarious Landscapes: The Road Movie in Latin America," in *The Latin American Road Movie*, ed. Verónica Garibotto and Jorge Pérez (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 10.

begins by interviewing scientific experts such as Jorge Rulli, cofounder of the Grupo de Reflexión Rural, who speaks about the transformation of the Argentine Pampas into a “green desert of soy.” Echoing Rachel Carson’s thesis in *Silent Spring* (1962), Rulli says that birds have disappeared from the countryside and migrated to the cities, the last spaces devoid of pesticide drift. Moreover, he refers to the practice of patenting Mother Nature with the approval of federal agencies and institutions like the INTA (National Agricultural Technology Institute) and the Facultad de Agronomía at the Universidad de Buenos Aires. Beginning in the 1990s, agricultural producers conceived themselves as entrepreneurs using engineering technologies such as genetically modified organisms (GMOs) and establishing new collaboration networks with foreign investors.

The documentary then moves to a small soy town in Santa Fe, Máximo Paz, showing how soy has gained control of the Argentine countryside. One of the agricultural producers refers to the region as “an ocean of soy” because of the removal of previous crops such as peaches and the displacement of the beekeeping industry. In *Seeds of Power*, Amalia Leguizamón has charted the soyification (*sojización*) of the Argentine economy and the transformation of farms into factories that prioritize profits over the quality of the yields.⁴ Similarly, in this part of the documentary, Solanas demonstrates the transformations through the disappearance of small and medium agricultural producers, and the new cycle of land concentration for the benefit of banks, financial groups, and landowners. Santa Fe not only is the nucleus of Argentine soy production but also is its exit point through the various Paraná River ports. Solanas travels to Puerto San Martín, where multinational companies such as Cargill have settled, shedding light on the lack of regulation and offshore accounts of the big agricultural producers involved in the Panama Papers.

Viaje a los pueblos fumigados is also a journey to the rural schools where biplanes dump toxic agrochemicals when children play outside during recess. Early in the film, we see a school abandoned due to the migration of farmworkers and its transformation into a pigsty. Symbolically, one of the shots focuses on a flagpole bereft of the Argentine flag, conveying the idea of a country taken over by the multinationals. Solanas interviews two school directors, Estela Lemes and Ana Zabaloy, who denounce chemical spraying during school time and the network of silence and complicity between the Argentine government and private corporations. Moreover, they attest to health problems, skin rashes, and nosebleeds caused by pesticide drift. People call Zabaloy “La loca de la escuela 11” (The Crazy Woman of School No. 11) for her repeated denunciation of the pesticide poisonings. This schoolteacher relates how she suffered facial paresthesia for fifteen days after being sprayed with agrochemicals. As Vincanne Adams observes in *Glyphosate and the Swirl*, glyphosate is an agrochemical “on the move,” manifesting itself “in heterogeneous ways in laboratories, soils, plants, foods, bodies, and governmental panels.”⁵ In his interviews with the Argentine scientific community, Solanas learns that pesticides can move kilometers through the air and the water and that they were even found in Antarctica. He interviews Dr. Andrés Carrasco, the first Argentine scientist to denounce the effects of pesticides in malformations. Carrasco argues that science is not neutral or absolute, that it can be conceived for specific purposes, and that at this time it is designed for the market and not the benefit of society. As Maristella Svampa and Enrique Viale remark in *Maldesarrollo*, after publishing his research in the American journal *Chemical*

⁴ Amalia Leguizamón, *Seeds of Power: Environmental Injustice and Genetically Modified Soybeans in Argentina* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2020), 61.

⁵ Vincanne Adams, *Glyphosate and the Swirl: An Agroindustrial Chemical on the Move* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2023), 11.

Research in Toxicology, Carrasco was the victim of anonymous threats, political pressures, and repeated attempts to smear his reputation in the scientific community.⁶

In response to official narratives linking soybean production with the development paradigm, Solanas interviews various organizations that raise awareness about agrochemical poisoning and food security. In Mar del Plata, Solanas meets with BIOS, an environmental agency whose members speak about the high levels of chemicals in vegetables and our bodies. Solanas also visits the Ituzaingó neighborhood in Córdoba, where the Grupo de Madres de Barrio Ituzaingó Anexo spearheaded the struggles against Monsanto by denouncing the tragic consequences caused by the neighborhood's proximity to the soybean plantations. Purchased by the pharmaceutical company Bayer in 2018, Monsanto produced pesticides and genetically modified seeds, including its own herbicide, Roundup Ready. In Argentina, the world's third-largest soybean producer, the company faced backlash from the scientific community and rural populations. The Grupo de Madres is an example of how popular epidemiology can bring awareness about the consequences of the soybean model, as they denounced more than three hundred cases of cancer and leukemia in the neighborhood, most of them affecting children. In a dramatic scene, Solanas shows Sofia Gatica, winner of the 2012 Goldman Environmental Prize and founder of the Grupo de Madres, protesting the installation of a Monsanto factory in Córdoba by lying in front of a truck's tires. "It is them or us," Gatica screams after recounting how she lost a daughter to kidney failure due to agrochemical poisoning in 1999. The film documents this successful blockage of Monsanto's factory in Malvinas Argentinas, a small town in the province of Córdoba. After speaking with these organizations, Solanas raises a series of questions via voice-over: "We all eat the same food, but who knows where the food comes from? Who can tell us that brands are a guarantee for reliability?" He argues that the food that Europe rejects due to chemical excess is destined for the consumption of the Argentine population and that quality control must be done at the point of origin, not the destination.

Viaje a los pueblos fumigados is a political film calling for the Argentine people to conceive long-term plans for food, health, and job security—in other words, an ontological shift toward models of sustainable agroecology. The film charts Solanas's involvement in this environmental and political conflict, as he subjects himself to blood and urine tests and finds out that even urban inhabitants like himself carry glyphosate in their bodies. This self-reflexive turn is an apparent attempt to bridge the gap between the documentarian and the nation's others—Indigenous and peasant communities whose livelihoods are not protected by the state. According to Pablo Piedras, the contemporary first-person documentary, "while suggesting new ways of approaching a cultural, social, religious, or ethnic *other*, returns to earlier forms of ethnographies that provided methods to observe and analyze cultural practices of diverse individuals and human groups."⁷ The autobiographical turn also places Solanas's documentary alongside the work of postdictatorship filmmakers exploring the legacies of political violence in their own families, such as Albertina Carri's *Los rubios* (2003). In this sense, Solanas builds a connection between the political agenda of his earlier works of third cinema, which sought to inspire revolutionary activism, and the urgency sparked by the contemporary climate predicament, especially among younger audiences.

Solanas's documentary ends with aerial shots of flooded highways and fields in Santa Fe and La Pampa, showing that the current model of agro-industrial development is

⁶ Maristella Svampa and Enrique Viale, *Maldesarrollo: La Argentina del extractivismo y el despojo* (Buenos Aires: Katz Editores, 2014), 151.

⁷ Pablo Piedras, "The Contemporary Documentary Road Movie in Latin America: Issues on Mobility, Displacement, and Autobiography," in *The Latin American Road Movie*, ed. Verónica Garibotto and Jorge Pérez (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 224.

incompatible with natural cycles. Solanas returns to the Wichí Indigenous community to expose how the bulldozers destroyed the local cemetery. The camera zeroes in on Don Juan, one of the community leaders, weeping as the bulldozers lay waste to the trees and the earth. Don Juan claims to be standing above his parents' graves, which will soon be turned into soy fields. Although it does not speak to the various murders of peasants and Indigenous protesters in recent years, the film sheds light on the Indigenous families displaced by clearing, living in complete abandonment, and malnourished. Paradoxically, many of the Wichí peoples Solanas interviewed were exploited to build the posts that demarcate the soy fields, excluding them from their birthright lands. This agricultural model of soybean production is based on land concentration and the exclusion of entire populations. As one of the INTA workers says at the documentary's end, people are not protagonists but spectators and parasitic actors in this national development paradigm. Maristella Svampa and Enrique Viale point out that agribusiness expansion relies on an agricultural model without agricultural workers, which has caused the exodus of peasant families from the countryside to the big cities.⁸ The inhabitants of small rural towns all depend on the well-being of the agribusiness model and refuse to speak up for fear of losing their jobs. Because soy finances the nation's economy, the Argentine population stays silent. Ultimately, *Viaje a los pueblos fumigados* reveals this cultural acceptance of the extractive paradigm.

Sertão velho cerrado

Other South American nations like Brazil also suffer the environmental consequences of the soybean agricultural model. *Sertão velho cerrado* is a choral documentary directed by André D'Elia that interrogates people from all sides of the political spectrum: large- and small-scale agricultural producers, environmental activists and artists, and anthropologists specialized in the Cerrado bioregion. D'Elia is the director of two other environmental documentaries: *Belo Monte: Anúncio de uma guerra* (2012), which focuses on the negative impacts of the construction of the eponymous hydroelectric plant on the Amazon's Xingu River, and *A Lei da Água (Novo Código Florestal)* (2015), which chronicles the effects of the 2012 update to the Brazilian Forest Code endangering the conservation of Indigenous reserves and native vegetation in the face of increasing deforestation in the Brazilian Amazon rainforest. The Cerrado ecosystem traverses various Brazilian states, such as Goiás, Mato Grosso, and Minas Gerais. The filmmaker fades into the background and is one more person in the communal presentation of this alarming issue. Although it does not have a clear structure like Solanas's documentary, *Sertão velho cerrado* shares with *Viaje a los pueblos fumigados* the movement from documenting the extraction of the Cerrado to displaying agroecological solutions and development models. As it focuses on a specific ecosystem, an ecological hot spot whose balance is vital for the rest of the planet, the film devotes long sequences to following the different animal and plant species that populate the landscape, such as the blue-throated macaws overflying it. The Cerrado is the oldest natural formation of planet Earth, an ecosystem developed forty-five million years ago. Human activity such as deforestation and clearing has significantly altered its structure. Many experts interviewed throughout the film claim that the Cerrado's destruction is not as well known and is much worse than the destruction of the Amazon rainforest, and that it has already entered an irreversible process of extinction.

The documentary shows the testimony of the Kalungas, the descendants of escaped slaves who founded maroon communities in the Brazilian hinterlands. D'Elia uses archival sources through the reproduction of paintings by Johann Moritz Rugendas depicting the

⁸ Svampa and Viale, *Maldesarrollo*, 133.

Kalungas during the nineteenth century. We see a painting entitled *Lavagem de oro* (Gold cleaning), which shows hundreds of slaves working in the gold mines of the Cerrado. Another Rugendas painting, *Negros novos* (New Blacks), depicts a group of Afro-Brazilian slaves working while being surveilled by a white overseer. “Sometimes people mistake culture with poverty,” says one of the women inhabitants of the Kalunga, denouncing the white extractive view that does not consider communal ways of relating to the land. For example, the Kalungas embrace the agroecological practice of the *roças* (garden plots), cultivated without chemicals and divided equally among the community members. Additionally, the people of the Kalunga preserve their ancestral culture via sustainable agricultural practices such as using medicinal plants and creating cooperatives that provide organic food to school children. The play on words that gives the documentary its title—*ser tão velho cerrado*, or “to be so old and enclosed”—suggests that even ancestral cultures and lands thought to be impenetrable are being erased by the extractive machine of single-crop farming.

Like *Viaje a los pueblos fumigados*, *Sertão velho cerrado* documents the expansion of the agricultural frontier into lands of the Cerrado labeled APA (*areas de proteção ambiental*, or environmentally protected areas). At the center of the debate is Fazenda Gavião, one of the largest estates in Goiás that cultivates transgenic soy and is expanding its area of influence through complicity with the state government. Several investigations have shown that the large estate’s owner is the father of Goiás’s former governor, Marconi Perillo, which means that agribusiness drives the state’s political and economic decisions. The expansion of the agricultural frontier has been accompanied by deforestation, land clearing, excessive use of water, and contamination of the region’s primary waterways due to pesticide drift. Moreover, hydroelectric corporations have built over five dams in the same river (Tocantinzinho). Because the Cerrado serves as an umbrella that distributes its water to the rest of the country, these unsustainable practices have caused cities like Brasília to suffer constant drought. In contrast to Solanas’s documentary, which focuses exclusively on the people who oppose extractive activities, *Sertão velho cerrado* films the testimony of the soy producers who believe that their agricultural methods contribute to the Cerrado’s well-being because of the region’s economic growth. However, immediately after their testimonies, we also hear from scientific experts who voice the consequences of this agricultural model on the ecosystem and the health of its inhabitants.

The documentary informs us that Brazil is the largest consumer of agrochemicals in the world, including the use of substances prohibited in other countries. This list comprises fourteen different types of agrochemicals. The contamination of the Cerrado’s waterways has led to the endangered status of the Brazilian merganser, one of the six most threatened waterfowl in the world because the species needs crystalline water to survive. The Cerrado also has the largest deposit of manganese in Goiás, becoming an extractive zone where mining companies have converged for the past three centuries. Like in the small towns of the Pampas, the Cerrado communities must live with rivers poisoned by mercury due to the onslaught of mining activities. One of these towns is Cavalcante. The two economic activities that the town depends on are mining and tourism. The film thus shows the paradox that one activity (mining) is laying waste to the landscape while the other (tourism) depends on the land’s natural beauty. An Afro-Brazilian tourism worker claims that this economic activity, as opposed to mining and soybean production, “doesn’t take anything, it only brings things.”

The documentary builds bridges between human rights and the rights of nature through dramatic shots of land clearing and deforestation. For example, it depicts cemeteries of pequi or souari nut, a tree protected by law. For Paula Serafini, “the concept of the rights of nature recognizes nature as an independent subject of rights, with intrinsic value independent of the use that humans might have for it.”⁹ The film follows

⁹ Paula Serafini, *Creating Worlds Otherwise: Art, Collective Action, and (Post)Extractivism* (Nashville, TN: Vanderbilt University Press, 2022), 108.

environmental activists who strengthen our relationship with nature through agrotourism and permaculture, as well as artistic works such as “O caminho do *cerrado*,” a photographic project that depicts seminaked men and women in the middle of the soy fields or among the felled trees. Despite these important cultural interventions and the passing of laws protecting the Cerrado, the documentary ends with an apocalyptic note showing Governor Marconi Perillo’s agreement to extend the agricultural frontier affecting areas of the Chapada dos Veadeiros. Although geologists observe that the organisms that inhabit the Cerrado have survived climate changes throughout history, the documentary seeks to transmit the urgency of this ecological predicament, conveying the danger of thinking that agricultural production and environmental conservation are incompatible.

Gran Chaco

Like *Sertão velho cerrado*, Lucas van Esso’s *Gran Chaco* focuses on a specific ecosystem usually neglected in discussions about Argentine agricultural production. The Gran Chaco is a region of dry forests with little water known for the white quebracho tree. Just like the Cerrado is considered secondary to the Amazon rainforest in discussions about environmental protection, the Gran Chaco is not as well known as the Pampas when considering Argentine agricultural production. It extends through Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, and Paraguay, and it is the most important wooded region after the Amazon. These features make it a site for deforestation and land clearing in the nationwide expansion of the transgenic soy industry. Though shorter in duration than Solanas’s *Viaje a los pueblos fumigados*, *Gran Chaco* also zooms in on the Wichí Indigenous community in northern Argentina and their struggle against extractive companies. It provides an ethnographic glimpse into the traditions of these communities and how they will be affected by the advance of the extractive frontier. For example, it reveals the medicinal use of plants and trees by elderly Wichí women. The camera accompanies them without a voice-over, sometimes escorted by Gustavo Santaolalla’s musical score. The film was financed by the Facultad de Agronomía of the Universidad de Buenos Aires and various environmental organizations such as Greenpeace. It thus centers on the official voice of the Argentine scientific community and its warning about the transformations suffered by places with deep-rooted cultural histories in northern Argentina following the introduction of genetically modified crops. Although it incorporates testimonies provided by many of the same actors as *Viaje a los pueblos fumigados*, including INTA personnel and members of the Wichí Indigenous community, *Gran Chaco* lacks the self-reflexive turn introduced by Solanas and therefore produces a greater social distance between participants and spectators. The film’s official backing also raises the question about the limitations of its critique of neo-extractivism in Argentina.

More specifically, the documentary focuses on the recent expansion of agribusiness corporations through the takeover of thousands of hectares of Indigenous land. It also situates this boom of soybean agriculture within a more extended history of extractivism in the region, beginning with cotton production following the arrival of European settlers during the first decades of the twentieth century. The director mixes the testimonies of scientific authorities from INTA and other state organizations with a wide array of archival footage of settlers deforesting the Gran Chaco, Black women picking cotton in the plantations, and even advertisements promoting the reign of the cotton industry. Industrial land clearing started in the 1970s with the use of bulldozers. The soybean boom started in the 1990s due to a series of transformations in biotechnology and transportation. As Pablo Lapegna asserts in his study of soy’s introduction in the province of Formosa, “from a techno-productivist perspective, GM crops are showcased as the silver bullet to end hunger, a marvelous technologic development that deserves

nothing but praise, an instrument to lift the world's rural poor out of their misery."¹⁰ In this sense, the film shows the continuities between Gran Chaco's cotton and soybean industries through propaganda campaigns that hailed both activities as the solution to the region's underdeveloped status.

Various interviewees underscore the social and cultural richness of the Gran Chaco. Indigenous populations like the Guaraní, the Wichí, the Qom, and the Ayoreo inhabit these territories. Contrary to the vision of the Gran Chaco as *terra nullius* that can be flattened and deforested, the region is described by its inhabitants as "a forest with people." One of the most prominent land defenders to be included is activist Adolfo Pérez Esquivel. He echoes Vandana Shiva in stating that the "monoculture of the mind" is the most dangerous form of thinking because it conditions human beings to a system of domination and exploitation. According to Shiva, agricultural corporations in partnership with scientific authorities promote the notion that Indigenous communities do not possess legitimate systems of knowledge about the land. "When local knowledge does appear in the field of the globalizing vision," Shiva remarks, "it is made to disappear by denying it the status of a systematic knowledge, and assigning it the adjectives 'primitive' and 'unscientific.'"¹¹ For Pérez Esquivel, development is the relationship between humans and Mother Earth, and the current paradigm prioritizes financial capital over people's lives. When using the term *Mother Earth*, Pérez Esquivel is deliberately choosing this postdevelopment keyword frequently invoked by Indigenous populations of the Global South, for whom all living beings inhabiting the earth "have the right to exist, to be respected, to regenerate without her vital cycles being altered, to maintain their identity and integrity, and her right to an integral restoration."¹² Through these testimonies, the film captures the importance of bridging the gap between producing and preserving, usually cast as two separate activities. Scientists from the INTA speak about the need to promote sustainable business projects through practices such as selected clearing (leaving the trees intact) and replanting the trees that were extirpated from the land.

Perhaps the documentary's most direct response to the extractive threat is the positing of an ecofeminist way of relating with the land. Ecofeminism is, according to Serafini, "an environmental and feminist ethic and social movement that brings to light the ways the oppression of women and the domination of what is perceived as an external nature are linked symbolically, historically, and experientially."¹³ The film puts together an ecofeminist ethos through the scenes of the Wichí women working with plants and sowing clothing with the roots of the trees. This ancestral usage of trees stands against extractive methods such as deforestation and land clearing. The film's last scenes show the Wichí Indigenous community manifesting in the Plaza de Mayo—Buenos Aires's main square, the city's foundational site, and the usual place for political demonstrations—and chanting, "We want to live, not just survive." We hear the testimony of one of the Wichí leaders expressing that even though they do not have land titles, these are the territories passed down to them by their grandparents. The Gran Chaco appears as a patrimony of the world suffering from short-term visions of the land due to the neglect of Indigenous populations, who are cast as closer to the land and therefore as auxiliary to the nation's narrative of progress.

¹⁰ Pablo Lapegna, *Soybeans and Power: Genetically Modified Crops, Environmental Politics, and Social Movements in Argentina* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 16.

¹¹ Vandana Shiva, *The Vandana Shiva Reader* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2014), 72.

¹² Ramiro Ávila-Santamaría, "Tribunal on the Rights of Nature," in *Pluriverse: A Post-Development Dictionary*, ed. Ashish Kothari et al. (New Delhi: Tulika Books, 2019), 322.

¹³ Serafini, *Creating Worlds Otherwise*, 71.

Hija de la laguna

Hija de la laguna directed by Ernesto Cabellos Damián takes place in Cajamarca, Perú, where Indigenous communities stood against the Conga project of the Yanacocha mining company. The project sought to drain four lakes to extract the gold lying at the bottom when the prices of this mineral were spiking in the early 2010s. Hundreds of peasants and Indigenous peoples opposed the project by organizing communal assemblies and nocturnal rounds to defend Mama Yaku, the Quechua name for Mother Water.¹⁴ The documentary revolves around Nélide Ayay Chilón, a young Indigenous woman residing in the rural area surrounding the lake who has gone to the city to study law to defend her family's lands. In the beginning, we see Nélide standing on a mount overlooking the lake while talking in voice-over about the *duendes* and *duendas* (male and female spirits) that inhabit the depths of the lake. Addressing the advance of the Conga project, Ayay Chilón wonders what will happen not only to humans but also to the *vivientes*, the nonhuman beings and spirits that are part and parcel of the mountainous landscape.

Hija de la laguna is not the first environmental documentary directed by Cabellos Damián on the negative impacts of the Yanacocha mining corporation. In 2002, he codirected with Stephanie Boyd *Choropampa: El precio del oro*, which centered on the title's eponymous town after it suffered a mercury spill, putting its inhabitants in grave danger. *Hija de la laguna* alternates between panoramic views of the drilled mountains and close-up shots of Ayay Chilón's face, which immerses us in her point of view and counters the inability of Western viewers to access an Indigenous cosmovision. As Carolyn Fornoff has argued, the camera's close capture of her face places Ayay Chilón as the "ethical arbiter" in the battle between Indigenous communities and mining executives, at the expense of other Indigenous laborers who are rendered invisible by the film's narrative.¹⁵ The contrast between the lake and the mine blasts in the nearby mountains is complemented by the introduction of glimpses from Ayay Chilón's life in the city. We see Ayay Chilón living in Cajamarca, amid traffic noise, telling us in voice-over how hard it is for her to live so far from her community. Toward the end of the film, we see her crying and talking to her mother about how "insipid" the city dwellers are and how much she misses living in the countryside and caring for the earth. It is in the city where Ayay Chilón gets involved in the Gran Marcha Nacional por el Agua, in which more than twenty thousand people walked from Cajamarca to Lima in February 2012 protesting the damage caused by mining corporations across the country. The ensuing altercations resulted in five people being murdered by the Peruvian police and military forces. Ayay Chilón's involvement in these strikes against the Conga mining project led to her father's layoff (he worked as a miner for Yanacocha). The company's retaliatory actions toward the people who speak against it evoke the conspiracy of silence among the inhabitants of the Argentine soy towns.

Like other eco-documentaries about mining in Peru, such as *When Two Worlds Collide* (dir. Mathew Orzel and Heidi Brandenburg, 2016), *Hija de la laguna* foregrounds the violent repression of Indigenous environmental activists by police and military forces. At the center of Indigenous resistance to the advance of the extractive frontier is Máxima Acuña, a subsistence farmer who owns more than twenty hectares of land surrounding the Conga open pit mine. In recent years, Acuña has been the subject of other cultural representations. One of the *crónicas* of Joseph Zárate's *Guerras del interior* (2018) depicts her alongside Peruvian activists fighting against the multinational grip over the gold, oil, and wood industries. The film represents Acuña's house as the last bastion of resistance to extractivism in the mountains. Police forces repeatedly intimidate her, and Acuña shows

¹⁴ Gabriela Merlinsky, *Toda ecología es política: Las luchas por el derecho al ambiente en busca de alternativas de mundos* (Buenos Aires: Siglo XXI, 2021), 134.

¹⁵ Carolyn Fornoff, "Documenting Extraction in *La hija de la laguna*," *Mediático*, June 12, 2017, <https://reframe.sussex.ac.uk/mediatico/2017/06/12/documenting-extraction-in-la-hija-de-la-laguna-ernesto-cabellos-2015/>.

them the legal papers proving the land is rightfully hers. When Ayay Chilón visits Acuña, they listen to President Ollanta Humala's speech declaring a state of emergency in Cajamarca, followed by footage of the fierce police repression in the city's Plaza de Armas. To mourn the five victims, Ayay Chilón places their portraits and flowers on the lake's surface and prays for Mama Yaku to protect them.

Another plot line follows a Dutch jewelry designer, Bibi van der Velden, who reflects on using diamonds during "ceremonies" like marriages and exhibits her designs in fashion shows. Her models are naked Black women fulfilling the fantasies of white European audiences. Women's bodies and jewels are regarded as nothing more than extractible commodities. The filmmaker interrupts this scene of exoticization to return to Cajamarca and show an Indigenous ceremony where jewels are practically absent, marking a stark contrast with the fashion show and revealing that Indigenous workers do not reap any of the benefits of their excruciating labor. The Amsterdam designer travels to Madre de Dios, in the Peruvian Amazon, and is shocked at the circumstances in which gold is mined. "In a certain way," she observes, "we all have blood hanging from our wrists, fingers, and necks." Her newly gained awareness of the atrocious circumstances under which diamonds are mined gives us hope that Indigenous labor might be put at the center of international human rights debates. Yet it leaves us wondering, as Fornoff points out, if the documentary posits sight as the predominant mode of environmental consciousness, relegating other senses to the background.¹⁶

Throughout the film, Ayay Chilón speaks to Mama Yaku and asks how to care for her in the face of escalating extractive violence. "Today the police are gone, but they always return . . . I fear for my own life . . . I ask you to give me the energy to keep defending you." Like *Gran Chaco*, this is a film about ecofeminist resistance dedicated to the women who have lost their lives defending the earth and the water. In *Earth Beings*, Marisol de la Cadena argues that "sacred mountains, Andean shamanism, and Andean religiosity can accommodate the hegemonic distinction between nature and culture."¹⁷ *Hija de la laguna* shows that lakes and waterways are nonhuman beings with inherent rights as well as interlocutors whose voices make themselves heard through everyday practices.

Conclusion

These documentaries participate in a larger trend in Latin American cultural production that engages with the advance of the extractive frontier. This emerging corpus of works mixes aesthetic formats to activate the response of spectators and contravene stances of relativism regarding our contemporary climate predicament. *Viaje a los pueblos fumigados* and *Gran Chaco* build dialogues with works such as Samanta Schweblin's novel *Distancia de rescate* (2014) and its film adaptation directed by Claudia Llosa (2021). Like Solanas's and van Esso's films, the two fictional works document the effects of pesticides on the human body through the vertiginous dialogue between a mother and a child, foregrounding the importance of motherhood and the ethics of care in the male-dominated context of soybean plantations. *Sertão velho cerrado* converses with recent works of Afro-descendant and Indigenous ecological thought in Brazil, such as Ailton Krenak's books about the agency and rights of nonhuman beings including mountains and rocks. Finally, *Hija de la laguna* takes part in a larger body of mixed-media works on the dispossession of Indigenous and peasant livelihoods following the onset of mining activity in the Peruvian Andes. An example is the interactive online comic *La guerra por el agua* created by Jesús Cossio, Nelly Luna Amancio, and Jason Martínez. The comic tells the story of two peasants whose

¹⁶ Fornoff.

¹⁷ Marisol de la Cadena, *Earth Beings: Ecologies of Practice across Andean Worlds* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015), 26.

small farm runs out of water with the arrival of Southern Copper's Tía María project in Arequipa, southern Peru. By making their audiences an integral part of the creative process, the above works seek to move us from an anthropocentric to an eco-centric worldview.

Besides denouncing the impact of extractive activities on human health and sociocultural development, these documentaries foster the recognition of the rights of nature and nonhuman beings. In *Viaje a los pueblos fumigados*, we hear from Don Juan, an elderly cacique of the Wichí Indigenous community who is glaringly distressed and points out that the collapsed trees still bear fruits. This type of tree, *Ziziphus mistol*, is considered a source of life and sustenance by the Wichí community and is quickly being erased from the landscape. *Hija de la laguna* reflects on the rights of natural formations such as lagoons and mountains. As mentioned earlier, Indigenous communities from Cajamarca consider Mount Quilish a sacred mountain. Following the advance of mining corporations, the mount became an important "political force."¹⁸ Under the slogans "Agua sí, oro no" and "El agua es del pueblo y no de las mineras," these communities prioritize long-term care for the earth over the short-term profits of the extractive paradigm. These documentaries posit an ethic of care for the land by recognizing that humans and nonhumans are interdependent. They push us to expand our understanding of human rights to encompass the well-being of our natural surroundings.

Additionally, the documentaries tear down several myths championed by extractive companies. One of them indicates that agricultural and mining corporations employ local inhabitants and are therefore essential sources of economic growth. However, as these documentaries show, soybean production and mining require little manpower, and companies usually recruit highly qualified laborers from other places to the detriment of local workers. These films' protagonists are the rural populations cornered by the escalation of the extractive frontier and poisoned by agrochemical spraying and water pollution. Although these films do not address the frequent murders of environmental activists covered up by corporations in alignment with local governments, they capture the increasing number of deaths caused by police and military repression. In stark contrast with the development narratives of countries like Argentina, Brazil, and Perú that conceal the effects of extractive corporations in the countryside, these documentaries expose the silent genocide affecting communities, ecosystems, and cultures in South America's rural areas.

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¹⁸ Merlinsky, *Toda ecología es política*, 138.