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Identity vs Institution:

Political Violence Against Environmental Activists in Colombia

Sophie Genolio

Abstract

This paper addresses the political violence against environmental activists in Colombia and analyzes the roles colonization, political history, and identity play in this violence. It discusses the causes environmental activists have put their lives on the line for and the response of the state, which is often to murder, displace, silence, or brutalize these individuals. I argue that from the first instances of European colonization in the Americas to the modern extractive economies of globalization, the hegemony of foreign interests in Colombia has been maintained through the violence against Colombians resisting environmental degradation and the theft of wealth and resources from their country. While political violence continues to this day, the globalization of environmental causes offers some hope for accountability for the murder of activists and the reform of the governments enacting said violence. Chapter One defines the relevant terms necessary for understanding the nature of political violence and environmental activism and provides statistics from Global Witness to present the significance of the violence against environmental activists in Colombia. Chapter Two uses the discipline of environmental history to explore the colonial background of Colombia. It establishes the connection between colonial violence and the development of the extractive economy and explains the ways in which colonization continues to impact socioeconomic stability and environmental health today. Chapter Three lays out the past and present political climate of Colombia and explains the violence of the State through detailing on specific instances of political violence in Colombian history. Chapter Four uses Colombian-American anthropologist Arturo Escobar's concept of racialized geographies to highlight the violence of displacement that disproportionately impacts the Indigenous communities of Colombia. Lastly, Chapter Five explores potential solutions to this issue, such as the further development of transnational activist networks and mutual aid

programs, policy changes such as land reform made in discussion with Indigenous populations, and the addressing of human rights abuses of the past and present.

Keywords: Colombia, political violence, environmental activism, state-sanctioned violence, colonization, extractive economy, sociological lens, identity, human rights abuses

Acknowledgments

Colombia set the record for the highest number of environmental defenders murdered in 2019.

The names of the sixty-four Colombian martyrs to whom this is dedicated:

ALBERT ARMANDO SÁNCHEZ GÓMEZ

ALEX FERNANDO SALCEDO

ALFONSO CORREA SANDOVAL

AQUILEO MECHECHE BARAGON

ARGEMIRO LÓPEZ

ASDRUVAL CAYAPU

BERNARDO CHANCÍ

CARLOS ALDARIO ARENAS SALINAS

CARLOS BISCUE

CARLOS DANIEL OBANDO

CARLOS OBANDO

CONSTANTINO RAMÍREZ BEDOYA

CRISTIAN SÁNCHEZ

CRISTINA BAUTISTA

DANIEL EDUARDO ROJAS ZAMBRANO

DEMETRIO BARRERA DÍAZ

DIDIER FERNEY GONZÁLEZ

DILIO CORPUS GUETIO

EBEL YONDA RAMOS

ELIODORO FINSCUÉ

EMILIANO CHOCUE

ENRIQUE GUEJIA MEZA

ERIC ESNORALDO VIERA PAZ

EUGENIO TENORIO

FERNANDO JARAMILLO

FREIMAN BAICUÉ

GERSAÍN YATACUÉ

GILBERTO DOMICÓ DOMICÓ

HENRY CAYUY

HERNÁN ANTONIO BERMÚDEZ ARÉVALO

HUMBERTO LONDOÑO

JAIRO JAVIER RUIZ

JAIRO ORTIZ

JAMES WILFREDO SOTO

JESÚS EDUARDO MESTIZO

JOSÉ EDUARDO TUMBÓ

JOSÉ GERARDO SOTO

KEVIN MESTIZO

LEONARDO NASTACUÁS RODRÍGUEZ

LILIA PATRICIA GARCÍA

LUCERO JARAMILLO ÁLVAREZ

LUIS ALBERTO JUMÍ BAILARÍN

MAGDALENA COCUNUBA

MANUEL GREGORIO GONZÁLEZ SEGURA

MANUEL OSUNA TAPIAS

MARÍA DEL PILAR HURTADO

MARIA NELLY BERNAL ANDRADE

MARIO ALBERTO ACHICUÉ

MARITZA ISABEL QUIROZ

MARLON FERNEY PACHO

MIGUEL ÁNGEL ALPALA

MILTON HERNÁNDEZ

NATALIA JIMÉNEZ

PABLO EMILIO CAMPO TEQUIA

REINALDO CARRILLO VERA

RODRIGO MONSALVE

SEFERINO YUNDA CAMAYO

TORIBIO CANAS VELASCO

UVERNEY VILLANO

VÍCTOR MANUEL CHANI,

VÍCTOR MANUEL TRUJILLO

WALTER RODRÍGUEZ

WILMER ANTONIO MIRANDA CABRERA

WILSON PÉREZ ASCANIO

(Defending Tomorrow 2020, 4)

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An Introduction to Violence: Stories from Colombia

In January of 2022, three human rights defenders and Indigenous guards were killed in the *Nasa Las Delicias* Indigenous reservation in Cauca, Colombia. Breiner David Cucuñame López, Guillermo Chicame Ipia, and José Albeiro Camayo Güetio were members of the *Guardia Indígena del Cauca* (Indigenous Guard of Cauca), “a community protection network made up of women, men, boys and girls who defend their territories peacefully” (Front Line Defenders). On January 14th, 2022 Breiner David Cucuñame López and Guillermo Chicame Ipia were shot and killed by unknown assailants. At just 14 years old, Breiner was a human rights defender in training and a member of Guardia Indígena del Cauca’s student guard program. His work with Guardia Indígena del Cauca consisted of planting trees and cleaning rivers. He was shot alongside Guillermo, who was a human rights defender and member of the Indigenous guard. Ten days later, an armed group attacked the Nasa community, murdering the well-known land defender, José Albeiro Camayo Güetio in front of his 13-year-old son, who was then kidnapped. José’s son was released later that evening. Indigenous communities in Colombia face these attacks frequently, and intimidation tactics such as kidnapping are often involved in the perpetrating of political violence. This report and the following ones were sourced from the United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner and the database of “Front Line Defenders,” an organization dedicated to the protection of human rights defenders globally.

In April of 2021, Sandra Liliana Peña Chocué, an Indigenous authority of the Nasa people, human rights defender, and governor of the La Laguna Siberia Indigenous Reservation, was violently abducted from her home in Caldono, Cauca by four unidentified men before being shot and killed. Prior to her death, Sandra reported receiving several threats from illegal groups that have territorial control over Cauca, but the authorities ignored her concerns. Sandra’s

leadership and activism was unphased by these threats; she continued speaking out against human rights abuses and, in the hours leading up to her death, was preparing to meet with Colombian officials.

On May 2nd, 2018, Hugo Albeiro George Pérez was shot and killed during a peaceful protest against Colombia's *Hidroituango* Hydroelectric Project. Hugo was a community leader involved in *Movimiento Ríos Vivos Antioquia* (MRVA), a community-based human rights movement fighting against environmental and human rights violations of the *Hidroituango* project. This project is being carried out by a company called *Empresa Públicas de Medellín* (Public Enterprises of Medellín or EPM), which is known for conducting “illegal logging and hazardous waste disposal without considering the impact on the environment and on local communities” (Front Line Defenders). The MRVA has documented 152 attacks on their members, and though most of this violence goes unresolved by the legal system, the MRVA suggests that “the private security company hired by EPM and illegal armed groups represent the biggest threat” for their members (Front Line Defenders). The MRVA has worked with the Colombian government to create a Prevention and Protection Plan, but the State has failed to implement any of the agreed upon measures and continues to ignore both EPM's environmental violations and use of violence. Police officers even interrupted Hugo's funeral to question his grieving widow about the murder of her husband. Officials then attempted to reduce the political implication of his murder by claiming that it was unrelated to his protest of the hydroelectric project and that he was not a human rights defender. The themes of State inaction and abusive extractive institutions we see in the murdering of Hugo Albeiro George Pérez will be present throughout my argument.

On November 13th, 2015, Daniel Abril was killed in a bakery in the town of Trinidad in Casanare, Colombia. Daniel was a member of the *Movimiento de Víctimas de Crímenes de Estado*, or MOVICE (Movement of Victims of State Crimes), “a national human rights organisation working with victims of the armed conflict, monitoring and seeking justice for human rights violations committed by the State and paramilitaries” (Front Line Defenders). Daniel spoke out against the human rights abuses of oil companies in Casanare and received several threats in response to his activism. Three days after his death, the secretary of MOVICE, Maira Cardona, was followed by an unidentified man. She overheard this man saying, ““when I was in the military, massacres were what we did, like what I am going to do to this blond girl and her boss’ (‘cuando yo fui militar, masacres era lo que hacíamos, como le vamos a hacer a la peliteñida que tengo al lado y a su jefe’)” (Front Line Defenders).

Around three months after the murder of Daniel Abril, another member of MOVICE, Nelly Amaya, was shot five times at her place of work in San Calixto. Nelly was also an active member of the *Asociación Campesina del Catatumbo* (Peasant Association of Catatumbo), an organization that promotes “the land rights of campesinos and indigenous communities in the Catatumbo region of Colombia and to defend their access to natural resources” (Front Line Defenders). In addition to her work as a political activist and human rights defender, Nelly was also the mother of three children. Nelly and her family have yet to see any meaningful legal action on her murder and are still waiting for justice.

Each one of these activists committed themselves to environmental justice both for and despite the lack of power and justice in their communities. Their murders, which were often preempted by community reports of direct threats and requests for protection, were acceptable to the State and its economic institutions due to victims’ identities as low-income people of color

and the prioritization of the extractive economy. Though the State condemns acts of violence against land defenders, it rarely commits to this position with meaningful investigation, rendering its condemnation worthless. Contemporary violence against land defenders can be seen as an extension of Colombia's colonial history, whereby economic interests, more likely to be represented today by multinational corporations than a nation-state, are maintained through extreme violence against those who resist. Throughout the next five chapters, I hope to effectively explain and raise awareness around the political violence against environmental activists in Colombia. Chapter One will define the terms relevant to the understanding of this paper and establish the prevalence of violence against environmental activists using statistics from Global Witness. Chapter Two will present Colombia's history of colonization and extraction and connect it to the present-day abuse of low-income people of color. Chapter Three will explain the causes and impacts of political violence in Colombia from the 1940s to the present. Chapter Four will use Arturo Escobar's concept of racialized geographies to explain who Colombia's political violence targets and why. And finally, Chapter Five will present the social and political progress being made and the potential for a turn from Colombia's history of political violence.

Chapter One: Terms and Statistics Relevant to Colombia

Discussion of the violence in Colombia would be worthless without defining key terms and presenting relevant statistics that will assist us in understanding the nature and impacts of this violence. I will begin my research with a broad definition of 'political violence' and applied definitions of 'ecosystem services' and 'land defender'. Defining these terms is a crucial step in addressing crimes against humanity and reduces the likelihood that activists will be blamed for

their methods of retaliation against the violence they are facing. If we have a clear and inclusive understanding of these terms, it is more likely that violence will be responded to ethically.

Researcher Sherry Hamby addresses the importance of defining these terms in her paper, “On Defining Violence, and Why it Matters” (2017). Hamby claims that the breaking down of the term ‘violence’ into specific categories is imperative to the development of a response to said violence. If we can understand the specifics of every violent act, there will be fewer victims failed by the justice system because of terms too broad to convict violent people. In other words, defining violence is necessary for the functioning of our legal system. In the second half of this chapter, I will present statistics on the global abuse of environmental activists and the specifics of said violence in Colombia. Statistics are crucial to addressing the scale and magnitude of human rights abuses. The accurate definition and presentation of relevant terms and statistics will build the basis of knowledge needed to understand the extent of the violence Colombian environmental activists are facing every day.

Relevant Terms

Political Violence. The definition of political violence has been widely debated by researchers worldwide due to preexisting complexities surrounding the definitions of both ‘political’ and ‘violence’. Sociologist Donatella Della Porta studied these terms extensively and combined multiple definitions of political violence to come up with the following general definition: “political violence consists of those repertoires of collective action that involve great physical force and cause damage to an adversary in order to impose political aims” (Della Porta 1995, 2). However, as Porta notes, this definition is useful in the discussion of theory, but less impactful in practice. This is due to the subjectivity of the words ‘great’ and ‘damage’. To solve this issue, Porta requires that an

accurate definition of political violence be researched through a historical lens so that future researchers understand the impact of the application of this word in future cases of violence. In addition, a definition of political violence must specify that although political violence implies unlawful action, occurrences that are technically considered political violence, such as protests, may be both unlawful and nonviolent. The presence of this context in the definition will reduce the likelihood that civilians will be subject to further violence when defending their rights and livelihoods.

Dr. Huda Gerard Seif of Fordham University presents and defines seven forms of political violence: revolutions, coup d'états, insurgencies/counterinsurgencies, insurrections, protests/reformation movements with a political agenda, riots, and civil wars.

1. **Revolutions:** The complete seizure of control of the state and its government by the public in response to radical changes made by the original government. These changes often include extreme shifts in the presence or state utilization of socioeconomic inequalities.
2. **Coup D'états:** A successful takeover of governing powers by a small group of elites within the state military. This form of political violence is extremely secretive due to the high risk of lack of cooperation from fellow government/military agents. Coup D'états generally do include public participation unless they fail to be kept secret, which could inspire broader movements.
3. **Insurgencies and Counterinsurgencies:** Insurgencies are armed rebellions that use violence against an established authority. It is important to note that insurgencies

are not considered organized revolutions, rather revolts. Counterinsurgencies are the established authority's response to the revolt: increased patrolling, targeted incarceration, and strong border control.

4. Insurrections: Violent uprisings against an incumbent government its authority, often fueled by sedition.
5. Protests and Reformation Movements with a Political Agenda: An organized or unorganized event that disagrees with the status quo, most commonly in discourse but may include actions. Protests and reformation movements seek to reimagine established systems and are often headed by a charismatic leader.
6. Riots: An unrestrained disturbance of peace through violent or lawless acts.
7. Civil Wars: Violent combat within a nation, often between parties with pre-established authority. Civil wars are the most common form of political violence.

Political Scientist Laia Balcells expands on this definition to include terrorism, ethnic cleansing, and genocide (Balcells 2015, 2). These terms can be defined as:

8. Terrorism: An intentional act of domestic or international violence, often against civilians, with political or ideological aims.
9. Ethnic Cleansing: The United Nations Security Council defines ethnic cleansing as “a purposeful policy designed by one ethnic or religious group to remove by violent and terror-inspiring means the civilian population of another ethnic or religious group from certain geographic areas” (United Nations Security Council 1994, 33). Reasons for ethnic cleansing are often labeled as misguided nationalism.
10. Genocide: The International Criminal Court defines genocide as the intentional attempt at destruction of a national, ethnical, racial or religious group

through murder, physical or mental harm, deliberate destruction of livelihood, forced sterilization, and/or forced removal of children of group (ICC 2011).

Though much of this definition focuses on non-state entities as the perpetrators of political violence, it is the institutions in place that not only allow, but often cause, this violence to occur. Several of the above categories of political violence are often in response to repressive or violent regimes. Balcells explains how political violence is connected to institutional abuse by explaining that:

Violence is more likely where there are ‘extractive’ institutions because individuals will want to extract a share of the pie in a context in which the state is expropriating any product that is being generated. In their framework, political violence is a characteristic of societies with ‘extractive’ institutions, and not of societies with ‘inclusive’ institutions. (Balcells 2015, 4)

Extractive economies are defined by anthropologist Richard Wilk in his paper, “The Extractive Economy: An Early Phase of the Globalization of Diet” as the destruction of natural resources for economic gains without regard for the health of the environment or the impacts on social organizations and cultural practices (2004, 286). In Colombia, institutions prioritize the State’s extractive economy by using violence against the environmental activists who oppose it. The extractive economy is willing to displace and murder civilians for monetary gains, and Colombians put their lives on the line to preserve land and culture.

Ecosystem Services. Environmental justice activism is a direct response to failing ecosystem services. The Millennium Ecosystem Assessment defines ecosystem services as:

The benefits people obtain from ecosystems. These include *provisioning services* such as food, water, timber, and fiber; *regulating services* that affect climate, floods, disease, wastes, and water quality; *cultural services* that provide recreational, aesthetic, and spiritual benefits; and *supporting services* such as soil formation, photosynthesis, and nutrient cycling. (Millennium Ecosystem Assessment 2005, V)

This report breaks down how these four services connect to human well-being. It argues that as the state of the climate worsens, humans lose access to the above services.-

In Colombia, extractive processes weaken all four services. I will be focusing on cultural services due to their connection to violence. Cultural services are “the nonmaterial benefits people obtain from ecosystems through spiritual enrichment, cognitive development, reflection, recreation, and aesthetic experiences” such as cultural diversity, spiritual and religious values, knowledge systems (traditional and formal), educational values, inspiration, aesthetic values, social relations, sense of place, cultural heritage values, and recreation or ecotourism (Millennium Ecosystem Assessment 2005, 40). One way in which cultural services are lost is through forced displacement. Historically, eight million Colombians have been internally displaced (forced to relocate within the borders of Colombia), 89 percent due to conflict and violence. Today, Colombia is second only to Syria in number of internally displaced individuals, with 5.6 million people displaced (Cortés Ferrández 2020). The degradation of cultural ecosystems through displacement impacts individuals in two ways. Firstly, when individuals who have been building environmental knowledge for centuries are suddenly moved to unfamiliar environments and lose any previous understanding of how to self-

sufficiently live off the land; they lose their traditional knowledge systems and sense of place. In the age of climate change, this is particularly concerning. As the environment becomes increasingly unpredictable through extreme weather events, familiarity with the land you live on is crucial to survival. Displacement takes away this ecological knowledge and familiarity with the land by placing individuals in unfamiliar territory, resulting in unstable living conditions: “around 89 percent of the respondents did not have access to education, 86 percent were not formally employed and 53 percent had no access to vocational training. Around 34 percent receive welfare” (Cortés Ferrández 2020, 9). Secondly, displacement leads to a loss of community and, in turn, connection to culture and ability to organize against oppressive systems. Without a sense of community, individuals are unable to recognize shared struggle and form an action plan in response. Displacement and the ensuing instability leave little room for community-building, resistance organizing, and solidarity because displaced individuals are focused on adapting to their new environment and meeting their basic survival needs. Without access to community, culture breaks down and is at risk of disappearing entirely.

Land Defender. I will use the term land defender interchangeably with environmental defender/activist. Global Witness defines land and environmental defenders as, “people who take a stand and carry out peaceful action against the unjust, discriminatory, corrupt or damaging exploitation of natural resources or the environment. Land and environmental defenders are a specific type of human rights defender – and are often the most targeted for their work” (Global Witness 2022). Examples of exploitation of natural resources include projects in mining, coal, gas, carbon intensive oil, and large-scale agriculture. The leaders of these projects are often

willing to murder, injure, and displace individuals who oppose their initiatives “to clear the path for commodities like palm oil and sugar” (Defending Tomorrow 2020, 6). Land defenders are often members of Indigenous communities and/or individuals who are facing the worst impacts of the climate disaster. Those facing these impacts are already subject to socioeconomic inequalities that are exacerbated by the climate crisis. Examples of Colombian land defenders and their corresponding organizations of choice can be found in the Introduction.

Statistics. As the evidence of human-caused climate destruction becomes more blatant, the need for activism increases globally. This activism is often in direct disagreement with the respective nation’s government, which makes true commitment to environmental activism a dangerous choice. These governments prioritize financial gains that come from exploiting the natural environment, whether by coal mining or deforestation to increase agricultural production, over the well-being of citizens. So much so that as environmental activism becomes more necessary and prevalent, governments all over the world have become increasingly abusive towards those who partake in it. According to Global Witness, there were “212 land and environmental defenders killed in 2019 – an average of more than four people a week. Reports show that many more were attacked, jailed or faced smear campaigns because of their work” (Defending Tomorrow 2020, 10). These numbers, concerning as they are already, are likely much higher than this. This violence is difficult to record, as the institutions involved in silencing activists are committed to keeping the media coverage on these incidents as low as possible. This is what makes this topic so crucial to explore, the power dynamic between those killed and those organizing the killings is concerningly unequal. Discussion of this topic leads to necessary global media coverage that reduces the ability of governments to abuse their power.

Violence against environmental activists occurs globally, but predominantly in South America where two-thirds of environmental defender killings have taken place. Within South America, “64 defenders were killed in Colombia in 2019 – that’s more than anywhere else in the world and a shocking 30% of documented killings globally” (Defending Tomorrow 2020, 21). This is almost twice the number of Colombian land defenders killed in 2018, suggesting a rapid increase in the presence of environmental violence in recent years, partially influenced by the COVID-19 crisis which has allowed for an increase in fascist methods of surveillance and control (Defending Tomorrow 2020, 21). Environmental defenders in Colombia take great risks to defend the land with little to no global backing. The state refuses to acknowledge the needs of its people and only works to further silence their concerns and reduce the environmental protections in place.

In the next two chapters, I will establish the colonial and political history of Colombia and how it connects to present-day violence against land defenders. As Sociologist Donatella Della Porta recommends in her definition of political violence, including historical violence is crucial in the understanding of when and why political violence occurs. Chapter Two will explain the colonization of Colombia and Chapter Three describes various instances of political violence that have occurred in Colombia since the 1940s.

Chapter Two: History of Colonization and the Extractive Economy

Colombia has a long history of colonization, which remains entrenched in its sociopolitical landscape, engendering drastic social inequalities in its social stratification. The power dynamics that stem from colonization have allowed for the human rights and environmental abuses I am studying in my thesis. Colonization in Colombia occurred over

multiple centuries. After the initial violence of the first encounters between the Indigenous and the Spanish in the early 1500s, colonial expansion rapidly developed. The conquest of the 16th century gained momentum in the 17th century, strength in the 18th century, and maximized its territorial and demographic expression after the end of the 19th century (Escobar 2008, 45).

Spanish desire for control was fueled by the economic benefits of extracting resources from modern-day Colombia. The historical processes of colonization impact the health and stability of both the colonized and their lands. Impacts on the colonized include the complete extermination of civilizations and the imposition of social inequalities that result in future struggles with socioeconomic mobility, unsafe living conditions, and violence. Impacts on the land, or environmental damages, include the overextraction of natural resources for the benefit of the colonizing economy without regard for the health of the land. In this chapter, I will establish Colombia's colonial history and analyze how the relationship between colonized and colonizer have contributed to the present-day political violence.

Colonial History

Pre-Conquest. Humans have occupied the land we now call Colombia since at least 14500 BP and have sustained complex societies since 2000 BP. Indigenous communities lived completely and self-sufficiently off the land through advanced land management techniques such as “raised fields” used to support populations in swamp areas as well as controlled burning. (Etter, McAlpine, and Possingham, 2006). The advanced capabilities of these civilizations made Spanish conquest difficult, but over the course of 100 years, the Spanish destroyed these societies actively, through violent wars of dislocation and extermination, and passively, through the introduction of European disease.

Conquest. Upon their arrival in around 1500 C.E., the Spanish began the destruction of Indigenous communities and the development of “a purely extractive economy with rudimentary mining techniques based on enslaved labor” (Escobar 2008, 45). The arrival of the Spanish corresponds with extreme loss in Indigenous population; over the course of 100 years only about 25 to 30 percent of the original Colombian population remained (Etter, McAlpine, and Possingham, 2006, 7). The level of population decline varies between the five regions of Colombia: Andean, Caribbean, Pacific, Eastern Amazonian, and Eastern Orinoco plains. Between these regions, “the impact was highest in the Caribbean lowland (probably up to 90 percent decline), somewhat less in the Andes with an estimated 50 to 70 percent population decline, and a minor initial impact in less accessible regions such the Amazon and Pacific” (Etter, McAlpine, and Possingham, 2006, 7). Population decline was the result of wars of extermination that included the burning and looting of villages and agricultural fields by Spanish troops in addition to “unlimited exploitation of forced labor; contraction of European diseases; and by a decline in the birthrate and an increase in the mortality associated with the disintegration of the Indian communities” (Oquist 1980, 24). The surviving Indigenous population was forced into enslaved labor to build the extractive economy. Since the success of this economy relied on the strength and size of its labor force, the Spanish quickly realized that their active weakening of the Indigenous population had stunted their own economic development. To compensate for the decline, both in numbers and in health, of the Indigenous population, colonizing forces enslaved Africans and brought them to Colombia throughout the Colonial period.

Colonial Period. Colombia's colonial period lasted from around 1600 through 1819 CE. The Spanish remained in power over this period through an oppressive and powerful military. As described by Dr. Paul Oquist, a former Member for the Latin American and Caribbean Group (GRULAC) to the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change Standing Committee on Finance, "the superiority of Spanish military and transportation technologies gave the conquerors great material and psychological advantages in their armed confrontations with the indigenous groups," but they struggled economically because their mass exterminations of Indigenous peoples during conquest resulted in a small and weak labor force (Oquist 1980, 24). As aforementioned, the Spanish resolved this issue by looking across the Atlantic to build their workforce; the colonial period is marked by the introduction of African slave labor, "approximately 50,000 African slaves were brought to Colombia between 1580 and 1800, mainly to work in the gold mining industry" (Etter, McAlpine, and Possingham, 2006, 7).

The extractive economy in Colombia was developed during the colonial period using mining groups known as *cuadrillas*, made up of enslaved African and Indigenous peoples who were forced to work in gold extraction under Spanish colonial rule (Escobar 2008). *Cuadrillas* frequently protested the work they were subject to, but they were weakened by displacement and the "continual application of violence by the state" to suppress any attempts at revolution (Oquist 1980, 28). One example of the suppression of revolution took place in Cartagena in 1600 C.E., when an escaped enslaved African man known as Rey Benkos organized a social movement made up of a group of fellow escaped enslaved people, or *cimarrones*. Benkos and his movement "raided ranches and destroyed commerce throughout the Caribbean coastal region, but especially in

Cartagena, Tolú, Mompós, and Tenerife” and established a protected liberation community, known as *Palenque de San Basilo*, for other fugitives of the slave-labor economic system to find security in (Oquist 1980, 26). The local governor of Cartagena made two failed attempts at reducing Benkos’ power and movement before engaging in peace talks with Palenque de San Basilo. A peace agreement, in which the Spanish and citizens of Palenque de San Basilo agreed not to interfere with each other’s existence, was reached in 1613. This peace lasted only until 1619, when Benkos was found to be involved in a coastal slave revolt and was executed by the Spanish. Despite Benkos’ violent death by hanging, *palenques*—which is the Spanish term for ‘settlements of escaped slaves’—continued to be formed throughout Colombia, posing a threat to the functioning of Spanish economy (Oquist 1980, 27). Palenques forced the Spanish to reimagine their approach to securing laborers and would eventually play a major role in process of reaching independence and abolishing slavery, as discussed in the following section.

Independence. From 1800 to 1850 C.E., cuadrillas gained independence. This independence came as a result of population growth and social organizing of the 18th and 19th centuries. By 1850, the Black, Indigenous, and mixed-race individuals that made up the enslaved labor force had become the dominant population in Colombia, giving them the upper hand against the colonizers. Cuadrillas had always protested the work they were subject to, but the increasing population combined with the growing organizational strength of palenques allowed for a power shift between the colonizer and the colonized, as described by Colombian-American anthropologist Arturo Escobar:

The fundamental dynamic was characterized by a simultaneous process of adaptation and resistance to enslavement... The cuadrillas developed cultural and social forms of organization that resulted in domestic relations in which women provided internal group cohesion while men took on the relations with the white society. (Escobar 2008, 45)

This intentional relationship-building allowed for discussion of compromise with the, now threatened by the growing power of the colonized, Spanish officials. In tandem, laborers finally had the stability needed to protest their conditions effectively and create community solidarity.

The above cultural and social organization led to the transformation of Colombia's economic system from one strictly based in slave labor to one that allowed for the purchasing of freedom. As cuadrillas became more powerful, they created the conditions needed to obtain freedom. This was partially a result of the initiative of Palenques to build independent mining enclaves with the support of Indigenous groups. These enclaves relied on the "circulation of indigenous knowledge among blacks and indigenous groups around mining and agricultural techniques" to become self-sufficient (Escobar 2008, 46). Several enslaved people began participating in independent mining in addition to the forced labor they were providing for the Spanish. Forced laborers saved the money they earned from these independent mining enclaves and would eventually have enough to purchase their own freedom. As the number of laborers grew, Palenques became more capable of initiating "processes of cultural, demographic, and military resistance and reconstitution" (Escobar 2008, 47).

An example of military resistance made possible by Palenque organizing was the *Comunero*, or “commoners,” Rebellion of 1782. This rebellion, among other factors, contributed to the collapse of the Spanish occupation and the abolition of slavery in the 19th century. The *Comunero* rebellion was sparked by an unfair increase in taxes, but ultimately was an expression of colonial grievances, often marching under the banner of “The Oppressed against the Oppressors” (Oquist 1980, 34). The response to colonial grievances was extremely well organized, officials of the rebel movement were elected in multiple towns and power in numbers grew rapidly. The Spanish attempted to stop the organizing, but “troops sent to crush the rebels were easily defeated” (Oquist 1980, 34). It is important to note that though the Spanish military was powerful, international concerns regarding a potential British invasion limited their ability to suppress rebellions at this time. In 1782, an estimated 16,000 to 24,000 rebels marched on the capital:

The *Comunero* march on Santa Fe was accompanied by land invasions, the proclamation of Indigenous monarchs, and slave rebellions. Another *Comunero* army, led by José Antonio Galán... spread the most radical aspects of the revolt to the Magdalena River Valley. Galán defeated numerous Spanish garrisons and freed the slaves in all regions under his army’s control. (Oquist 1980, 34)

This was one case in which the Spanish military was unable to respond, as several troops had been relocated to the coast in anticipation of British attack. This powerful liberation movement resulted in an agreement known as the *Capitulaciones de Zipaquirá* which granted the following demands in return for the disbanding of the *Comunero* army:

- Rescinding of the new taxes that sparked the rebellion,
- Abolishing of the tobacco monopoly,

- The complete removal of sales tax from food items and the limiting of other sales taxes to 2%,
- Stop to demolition on reservations,
- Return of previously sold reservation lands to the Indigenous, and
- The granting of full property rights of reservation land to the Indigenous.

The agreement was signed despite internal arguments amongst the *Comuneros* and the failure to make any progress on the abolishing of slavery. However, it immediately became clear that Spain had no intention of respecting the agreed upon demands. The negotiation and signing of the *Capitulaciones de Zipaquirá* was merely a tactic to buy the Spanish troops time to travel back to the capital, “the Spanish troops soon returned from their coastal preparations against the British and proceeded to violently repress the *Comuneros* and to execute the militant leaders” (Oquist 1980, 34). The Spanish justified the complete disregard of the signed agreement by claiming that the threat to the capital deemed it nonviable because it was signed under duress. Though unsuccessful, the *Comuneros* rebellion increased tensions, proved the weakened capability of the Spanish to control mass rebellions, and further united the colonized under the common goal of liberation. All of the above impacts of this rebellion led to the final push for independence in the 1800s.

Independence in colonial Colombia was finally achieved through the successful organizing of colonized peoples, the surprising support of the *criollos* (the Spanish-American Oligarchy) and the British empire, Spain’s loss of position and impact in global politics, and the guerrillas of the Llanos Orientales (Eastern Plains). The *criollos* were an unexpected ally in the wars of independence due to their previous allegiance to Spain

during the Comuneros Rebellion. Their changing of sides was in response to political turmoil during the French invasion and occupation of Spain during the peninsular war, which lasted from 1807-1814 and contributed to the weakened power of Spain in global affairs. The British also provided support to the independence movement through the “supplying of troops and supplies, and harassment of Spain’s long naval supply lines” due to interest in obtaining influence in the region after the fall of Spanish colonial rule (Oquist 1980, 39). These factors left the Spanish vulnerable to attack by the British Legion-backed guerrillas. The guerrillas defeated the Spanish in several battles throughout the 1810s and slowly pushed Spanish occupation to the Southern peninsula before successfully expelling them entirely in 1819.

Though the region was finally free from Spanish rule, the process of forming an independent state proved to be incredibly violent and complex due to the continued domination of wealthy citizens, such as the criollos, the lack of a national identity, and infighting regarding how Colombia should be developed. Around three decades after the expulsion of Spanish colonial rule in 1819, Colombia established the two-party political system that is still in place today. Once national politics were solidified, slavery was abolished and ownership of Indigenous reservation lands was transferred to Indigenous communities, among other decolonization reforms. As we have seen throughout this section, the three centuries of colonization in Colombia are defined by mass violence and oppression. In the following section, I will explain how these processes impacted the land itself.

Environmental Impacts of Colonization. Landscape changes in Colombia were driven by colonialism and directly relate to the environmental degradation that we see today. As explained

by Andres Etter, Clive McAlpine, and Hugh Possingham in their paper, “Historical Patterns and Drivers of Landscape Change in Colombia since 1500: A Regionalized Spatial Approach,” the arrival of the Spanish corresponds with changes in land use, as seen in Figure 1. The changes seen from 1500-2000 C.E. occurred because of the introduction of the colonizer’s understanding of land use; colonizers view land as financial opportunity within the global economy, rather than as a resource needed for collective survival.

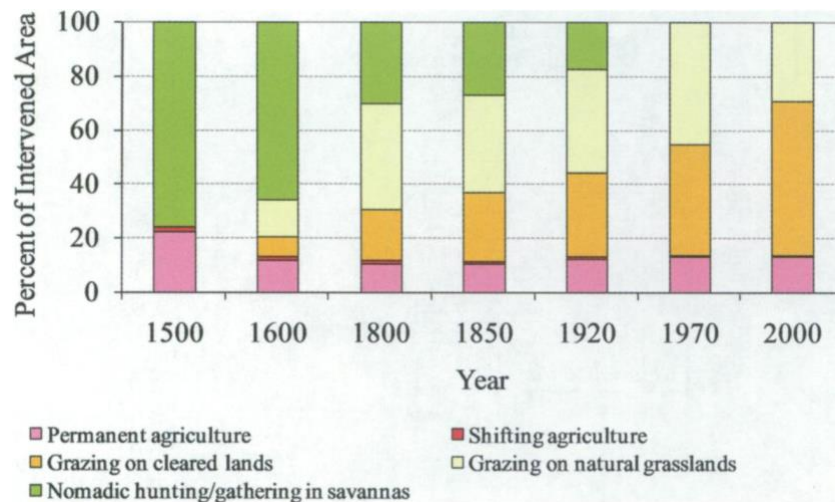


Figure 1. Land use changes in Colombia from 1500-2000 C.E. (Etter, McAlpine, and Possingham, 2006, 12)

In 1500, “agricultural land use was entirely devoted to crops, with the adjacent regrowth vegetation and remanent areas also used for hunting and gathering natural products of forests and secondary vegetation” (2008, 12). Over 70 percent of the land was used for nomadic hunting and gathering, with the remaining designated to permanent and shifting agriculture, which is the cycling between cultivation of areas to allow time for the land to renew itself before replanting. When the Spanish arrived, they brought cattle, sheep, and goats, and placed them in natural grasslands for grazing. The introduction of these grazing animals led to impacts on “native vegetation, indigenous agricultural infrastructure and crops, and soil erosion” (2008, 15). From 1600 through 1800, deforestation for agricultural land became increasingly frequent, products of mining made up over 70 percent of Colombian exports, and the population of grazing animals

steadily increased. With the abolishing of slavery in 1850, mining practices were significantly reduced due to the illegalizing of forced labor. Other forms of extraction were increased to make up for the loss of mining exports. Over the next two hundred years, nomadic hunting and gathering was entirely phased out and the land was cleared; non-native plants replaced the forest to expand the grazing animal industry and meet the demand of the extractive economy for natural resources such as rubber, quinine, chiqui-chiqui, palm fiber, and plant ivory. (Etter, McAlpine, and Possingham 2008)

Etter, McAlpine, and Possingham explain how the above changes in land use since the colonization of Colombia have impacted ecological and social health through 1) a loss of biodiversity, 2) increased rates of erosion, and 3) forced phasing out of traditional peasant farming.

1. Much of Colombia's native biodiversity has been replaced by non-native species, which removes the traditional food sources native animals instinctually rely on and reduces the relevance of traditional Indigenous knowledge that is based in self-sufficiency off of the natural ecosystem.
2. The increased rates of erosion can be attributed to the introduction of grazing animals, deforestation and mining activities. Erosion often leads to soil runoff into bodies of water, which can negatively impact water quality and harm both human and non-human species.
3. Traditional peasant farming is no longer financially sustainable due to the high demand of the globalized economy and powerful occupation of productive lands by extractive institutions. This furthers the socioeconomic divisions in Colombia by

taking economic opportunity away from historically oppressed Black and Indigenous Colombians. (2006)

As mentioned in Chapter One, land use changes also lead to traditional knowledge being lost through the destruction of cultural ecosystem services. Loss of native biodiversity and community displacement by extractive projects both impact the applicability of traditional knowledge by forcibly changing the landscape and removing individuals from the communities that hold traditional knowledge.

The above examples of the impacts of colonization on the land and its people directly connect to violence against environmental activists in Colombia. Instability from the lingering socioeconomic and environmental impacts of colonization has created opportunities for the further oppression of an already weakened population. As we have seen throughout this chapter, the State has historically been uninterested in solving issues of instability and inequality—such as the emerging impacts on ecological and social health described above—due to its prioritization of and reliance on the extractive economy. This results in cycles of rebellion and oppressive violence that only prove to further the divide between the powerful and the powerless. In the age of the climate crisis, emerging environmental activists have become subject to this cycle of violence. In the following chapter, I will explain the historic cycle of political violence in Colombia through major examples from the past century in order to explain the present-day violence against environmental activists.

Chapter Three: Political Violence

While the previous chapter established how the colonial system embedded social inequality into Colombian institutions, this chapter will explain how failure to address these

inequalities has led to a long-lasting systemic crisis marked by cycles of uprisings and oppressive political violence. One reason that political violence flourishes in Colombia is because of the State's failures to address the grievances of its people. Dr. Andrés Solimano, founder of the International Center for Globalization and Development, explains how these failures lead to a systemic crisis marked by the further emergence of violence. Dr. Solimano defines a systemic crisis as "phenomena in which institutions become dysfunctional in terms of their ability to process internal societal conflicts, as both the formal and informal rules that mediate social interaction collapse" (Solimano 2000, VI). He expands on this definition by dividing systemic crisis into four categories: economic, rationality, legitimation, and motivational. I will focus on how the failures of the Colombian State can be labeled as crises of rationality, legitimation, and motivation:

A rationality crisis... is a breakdown of the "rational administrative" practices necessary to maintain the economy in due course. This can be interpreted as the inability of the government in a crisis situation, to properly manage and regulate the economic system. A *legitimation crisis*, in turn, is characterized by a breakdown in the level of public support, credibility, and trust on existing institutions. A *motivational crisis* is a crisis in the realm of values, traditions, and norms in society. (Solimano 2000, V)

Colombia's historic commitment to the upholding of the extractive economy despite the damages it causes to the underserved populations of Colombia can be labeled as a rationality crisis; the State maintains its economic system through irrational administrative practices, such as the use of violence to enforce oppressive social dynamics against their own people, to clear the path to their economic goals. In tandem, their violent methods of reaching economic success lead to social and political unrest, resulting in a legitimation crisis. The combination of a rationality and

legitimation crisis leads to the further emergence of violence from both state and non-state entities, such as paramilitary and guerrilla groups, and the development of a motivational crisis. A motivational crisis is characterized by the acceptance of widespread corruption and the eventual “breakdown in rules and behavior” (Solimano 2000, VI). The development of these crises over the past century have marked Colombia as “one of the most violent countries in the world because of its high rates of political violence, criminality, and homicides” (Richani 2002, 1). In the first section of this chapter, I will connect the political violence of the 20th century to the aforementioned cycles of violence. In the second section, I will apply these topics to present-day political violence against environmental activists.

La Violencia. As described in Catherine LeGrand’s paper, *The Colombian Crisis in Historical Perspective*, one of the most important instances of political violence in the history of independent Colombia occurred after about 40 years of relative peace throughout the country. This peace ended in 1946, and political violence in Colombia reached its historic peak in 1946 with the spark of a civil war known as *La Violencia*. *La Violencia* was a civil war between the Liberal and Conservative parties of Colombia that lasted from 1946 until 1964. Over 200,000 people were killed in the violence, one of the highest numbers of deaths in a civil conflict in the Western Hemisphere, exceeded only by the US Civil War and the Mexican Revolution. Though sparked by the Conservative win in the presidential elections of 1946, violence didn’t explode until two years later. In 1948, Jorge Eliécer Gaitán, “the leader of the radical faction of the Liberal Party and a presidential candidate who was favored to win the election of 1950” was publicly assassinated (Richani 2002, 11). Gaitán fought for the lower class and the minorities, with an overarching goal of achieving peaceful change that would uplift the voices of the underserved. His gruesome and unexpected death led to mass uprisings and an explosion of class

grievance. These uprisings, known as the *Bogotazo*, were “the largest urban riot in Latin American history” (LeGrand 2003, 172).

The political turmoil created by the *Bogotazo* led to significant changes in Colombian politics. The Conservatives used their control over the government and military to oppress the Liberals and create paramilitary groups across Colombia. In response to both the death of Gaitán and the armed oppression from the Conservatives, the Liberals began to form guerrilla groups, some of which are still active today. Nine years after the death of Gaitán, elites of both parties began to express concern about the level of violence in the streets. The leaders of each party decided to make a compromise, which manifested itself as an agreement called the National Front of 1958. This agreement established that instead of the classic democratic voting system, Colombia would alternate between parties when electing the President. This system was ineffective in creating peace, as “the establishment became increasingly bogged down in bureaucracy, clientelism, and corruption” (LeGrand 2003, 173). Assigning the presidency every term reduces the people’s motivation to vote and takes away political freedom even further. These political failures led to the further development of guerrillas in the 1960s, made up of armed leftists with goals of challenging the system.

The two main guerrillas that took power were the National Liberation Army (ELN) and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), both of which are still active. I will focus on the FARC, as they were involved in peace talks with the government that resulted in political violence. The FARC emerged out of the Colombian Communist Party (PCC) which was involved in native land rights, tenant farmer rights, and public land claims:

During the 1950s, several parts of western Cundinamarca, eastern and southern Tolima, Huila, and Cauca, where the Communist Party had generated support 20 years earlier,

came to be known as “independent peasant republics” (González Arias 1992). These Communist-influenced rural redoubts became refugee zones for peasants fleeing from the partisan violence. (LeGrand 2003, 175)

These zones were helpful to those most impacted by political violence, but shortly after their establishment, they were destroyed. In the early 1960s, the Colombian government (The National Front), “attacked these peasant republics with aerial bombing, and people streamed out of them toward new frontier regions in the Eastern Plains and the northern part of southern jungles” (LeGrand 2003, 175). This further established the state as the enemy of the lower class, intensifying the support for armed movements such as the FARC, which emerged after these bombings. This unrestricted violence, the bombing of innocent civilians, made opposition to the formal government in Colombia seem nearly impossible. The National Front was using its power to extinguish any leftist movements, which reinforced the leftist’s tactic of taking arms to make change. When the voice of the people is oppressed through political violence, the response is often to retaliate with force.

As the FARC became more established, elites once again became concerned with the growing violence in the country. In 1982, right-wing President Belisario Betancur began peace talks. The FARC agreed to a compromise, which established a legal political party to represent the ideals of the FARC, the Unión Patriótica (UP). What little power the UP was able to gain in the following years was taken away rapidly:

Over the next decade, members of the Unión Patriótica party who ran for political office, became involved in union organizing, and so on, were assassinated by faceless killers whom we now know were hired by incipient paramilitary groups, army people, or local political bosses. More than 2,000 people associated with the Unión Patriótica were

murdered in the late 1980s and early 1990s, and the party was wiped out. (LeGrand 2003, 176)

The government presented this compromise as one with the aim of peace between the parties, but the moment they became threatened by the opposition, they regained control over the population through violence. Not only does this impact the ability to create policies that advocate for the people, but it also creates widespread fear. Political violence is both active and passive, it kills innocent civilians who are fighting for their rights, and silences those who have hopes for the betterment of their country.

A common theme throughout the history presented in this paper has been the State's prioritization of the extractive economy, the functioning of which depends on the labor of the lower class. The appearance of figures such as Jorge Eliécer Gaitán threatened the State's control over this class and the power of the elite conservatives, resulting in a rationality crisis. The preceding beginnings of a civil war combined with the death of the people's representative, Gaitán, led to the mass *Bogotazo* uprisings. In the context of previous oppression of the lower class, as described throughout Chapter Two, the violence of a civil war based in class struggle and oppression was enough to reassert distrust of the State and its motivations, resulting in a legitimization crisis. The combination of these two crises led to the deployment of State-backed paramilitary groups to oppress uprisings and the following formation of Liberal guerrilla groups. Finally, the failure of the peace agreement (National Front of 1958) confirmed the presence of widespread corruption and inspired further development of leftist guerrillas, resulting in a motivational crisis. This cycle of political violence continues to this day.

Political Violence and Displacement. Political leaders and the corrupted democracy they created for the success of the extractive industry has embedded political violence into the history

of Colombia. Anyone who attempts to interfere with Colombia's extractive economy, will be silenced. Though proof of direct involvement of the State in the murder, displacement, and silencing of land defenders throughout the country is difficult to obtain, the extensive history of the State's prioritization of economic endeavors alongside the cycles of political violence established in the previous section, have revealed the corruption of the Colombian government. This corruption is sustained through the spreading of false narrative of the origins of Colombian political violence, an unorganized judicial system, and an abusive military.

As established in my introduction, Colombia had the highest number of murdered land defenders globally in 2019, with 64 defenders killed (Defending Tomorrow 2020, 21). Globally, this violence is often blamed solely on the guerrilla movements and their involvement in the distribution of drugs. However, from the history laid out in this paper, we see that the violence began long before drug distribution skyrocketed in Colombia. In addition, we see that the violent tactics of the guerrillas were often in response to state-sanctioned murder and bombings. The power of the state was too strong to be overcome through peaceful protests, and the guerrillas created positive change, such as when they established refugee zones in the 50s. This points to the importance of accurate media coverage, which will be discussed in Chapter Five, as it can reveal oppression that is dismissed due to the spreading of incorrect narratives by the governments that hold power over their people. LeGrand further disproves the theory that the drug trade is what makes Colombia violent by criticizing the state and its use of violence to control Colombian democracy:

The government has no legitimate monopoly of force and is extremely weak; it does not and cannot effectively protect its citizens. Most crimes never come to trial, judges receive death threats, and the army itself is accused of human rights violations. Since 1985 there

have been 25,000 violent deaths per year, a total of 300,000 murders over the past decade and a half, 18% of which are attributable to political violence. Homicide is the leading cause of death for men between the ages of 18 and 45, and the second leading cause for women. From 2000 through 2002, more than 5,000 people died in 900 massacres and another 3,500 a year were kidnapped for ransom. Trade unionists, teachers, human rights workers, politicians, church people, journalists, and peasant and indigenous leaders are threatened, and assassinations and disappearances are daily occurrences. (LeGrand 2003, 166)

Political violence is so embedded into Colombia's system that officials can ensure the sustaining of the extractive economy by turning a blind eye to the failings of the systems that are in place to protect the livelihoods of their citizens. As we saw in the Introduction, this results in several of the human rights abuses against environmental activists to go virtually unnoticed. The lack of support towards those facing violence in Colombia leads to further instability in disadvantaged communities and a loss of hope for an end to the violence.

As extraction of natural resources became more beneficial to the Colombian economy in the twentieth century, land defenders became the targets of this political violence. The state's experience in using violence to silence their citizens makes them well-suited to oppress those who speak out against the environment.

This is blatant political violence; the Colombian government is using its power to further oppress the most vulnerable of their nation. This is occurring because of the country's desire to continue growing its economy through the monetization of land. Even as issues of climate change gain traction in global politics, governments continue to ignore the pressing words of activists by presenting meaningless solutions with no action. And when activists of their own

country criticize them for their shortcomings in the climate crisis, they are quick to murder, displace, or silence them. In the next chapter, I will focus on the disproportionate level of violence experienced by Colombia's Black and Indigenous population.

Chapter Four: Racialized Geographies and Indigenous Displacement

In the last two decades, “Global Witness has recorded a surge in the number of murders and attacks on environmental activists, in addition to discriminatory laws and practices that criminalize environmental activism, or intimidate those who speak out” (Kwong, Hanson, and Sofia 2021). Companies that depend on the extraction of natural resources for financial gain can only survive if the silencing of activists continues, “in Colombia in 2012 and 2013, seven anti-mining activists were killed in connection with their resistance to mining and extractive companies operating on Indigenous lands. Four of those killed belonged to the Indigenous Awá group”:

- On 11 February 2012, in Turmaca municipality, Nariño, Gilberto Paí Canticús and Giovanni Rosero were shot dead by unknown gunmen on motorbikes. They were members of a non-violent group of Indigenous guards, established to defend ancestral lands.
- On 12 July 2012, Libio Guanga, Indigenous Awá governor of Cartagena Alto reserve, was stabbed to death in Ricaurte village. Statements from the National Indigenous Organization of Colombia (ONIC) relate his murder to the arrival of mining in the area.
- On 29 November 2013, another Indigenous Awá leader, Pai, died after being twice shot in the head by unknown gunmen. Pai had led attempts to stop the

contamination of his community's water supply by oil spills. (Deadly Environment 2014, 14).

The environmental activists facing violence often fit the identity of the four individuals above; despite Indigenous communities only making up 5% of the global population, 40% of the murdered land defenders in 2019 were Indigenous (Defending Tomorrow 2020, 10). In Colombia, Indigenous peoples accounted “for half of the documented killings, despite making up only 4.4% of the population” (Defending Tomorrow 2020, 21).

The identity of those subject to political violence in Colombia is crucial to understanding the power dynamics between the oppressor and the oppressed. Extractive economies target certain types of land for palm oil extraction, large scale agriculture, coal projects, etc. However, the people who inhabit these lands were placed there intentionally, creating what Arturo Escobar calls a racialized geography in his book *Territories of Difference: Place, Movements, Life, Redes*. He writes:

In these racialized geographies, writers established a direct connection between climate and territory and racial groups: the Andean plateaus were inhabited by the civilized and good white people of European origin; the humid, tropical lowlands by blacks and indigenous groups incapable of reason and progress... These recent historical studies emphasize the relations of dominance and subalternity mediated by ecological and ethnic processes, besides the more commonly studied economic considerations. They also make clear the spatial-cultural bases of coloniality anchored in notions of territory, nature, and race. (Escobar 2008, 48)

The tropical lowlands were originally considered less suitable for living, due to low altitudes and high humidity, but now that the State has realized that these climates are ideal for extractive processes, it commits land grabs and displaces the already vulnerable communities inhabiting these lands. This land, specifically the Colombian Pacific, was identified as one of the most important “biodiversity hot spots’ in the world” (Escobar 2008, Preface). This only adds to the people’s desire to protect the land, as destruction of it means furthering the climate crisis and increasing rates of extinction in Colombia.

The government is focused on generating wealth through extractive techniques that target tropical lowlands, land that is historically occupied by low-income Black and Indigenous groups, putting these populations directly in the state’s violent line of fire, “Global Witness recorded more killings of land and environmental defenders in Colombia in 2019 than anywhere else in the world. Indigenous groups were particularly at risk – accounting for half the documented killings, despite making up only 4.4% of the population” (Defending Tomorrow 2020, 21). The Colombian government is killing minorities who already face extreme hardship in their living conditions, “over 60 percent of the Colombian population live on incomes below the unestablished poverty line of two dollars a day” (Escobar 2008, 19). This results in land defenders having few options when the state comes in and takes their land. As mentioned in the Introduction, Colombia has the second highest number of internally displaced people, with 5.6 million people displaced (Cortés Ferrández 2020).

Escobar provides an example of targeted extraction with the story of a Colombian community member and leader by the name of Don Porfirio Angulo, or don Po, who describes his experience in the colonization of the Caunapí river in the 20th century. Smaller rivers in Colombia have historically been cultural and political gathering spaces for Black and Indigenous

community-building. The Canupí river was once inhabited by refugees from Colombia's civil war. The river was optimal for agriculture and had sustained communities in a non-invasive way for decades. don Po describes the changes that occurred once exploitative corporations began to take over the region:

The first external factor was the railway, which produced significant destruction of the forest. That was in 1926. Soon after there was an increase in the exploitation of rubber and tagua [vegetable ivory], followed by the cultivation of cacao. But local people did not care about money. They exchanged these products for kerosene, salt, and clothes.

(Escobar 2008, 50)

Those who had inhabited the river for their entire lives were able to keep the land healthy by only taking what they needed, using collective and family-based work. don Po says he built his house, "without a single nail" (Escobar 2008, 50). This was not for concern of supporting biodiversity, but rather out of respect for each other and the land. However, as we have seen throughout this chapter, the demands of the exploitative economy lead to environmental and social destruction, including the disappearing of forests and the loss of family-based work:

In the 1950s, Colonel Rojas Pinilla declared entire areas of the Mira and Caunapí as lands for colonization. From the Mataje to the Patía, this was still open forest used for hunting and agriculture, with the railway in between. But this changed in the 1950s ... One single man, Valentin Garcia, cleared 5,000 hectares of forest between 1958 and 1962. That was the time also when the railway was abandoned to construct a road, to the detriment of the people. With the road came the present avalanche of people from elsewhere to grab land

Right now there is growing consciousness that the forest is disappearing and we are going to be finished. (Escobar 2008, 50)

From the experience of don Po, we can see how the implementation of an extractive economy is directly connected to the relationship between identity and place. In addition to historically being targeted by the state for their ethnic identity and socioeconomic status, low-income Black and Indigenous individuals, such as don Po, are now subject to the impacts of a worsening climate. Economic instability has become increasingly dangerous as the climate unstable living conditions can easily result in death due to higher rates of floods and droughts. These impacts of the climate change are seen in Colombia today:

Many communities are already at increased risk of flooding and landslides. After years of conflict, the country has one of the highest proportions of internally displaced people in the world, with insecure land rights making many rural communities especially vulnerable to the impacts of climate change. The government's own report under the Paris Agreement underscores the importance of addressing the climate crisis on the country's road to peace. Yet, the very same government continues to pursue land- and carbon-intensive industries – Colombia is the world's fifth biggest coal exporter and has sizeable oil, gas and palm oil sectors. (Defending Tomorrow 2020, 22)

From this report, we see how the extraction of Colombian resources like coal, oil, gas, and palm oil bolster the nation's place in the global economy at the expense of its climate and its people. Those who, historically, have implemented and vouched for non-invasive land use techniques are facing the worst impacts of the climate crisis because of the economic interests of the States and industries who have been oppressing them for centuries.

Escobar explains the dynamic between those inhabiting profitable land and those who extract and profit from it, one that reinforces white power and privilege. The displacement, murder, and extraction resemble the colonization tactics we discussed in Chapter Two:

In many World regions similar to the Colombian Pacific, ethnic minorities inhabit territories rich in natural resources that are now coveted by national and transnational capital. Beyond this empirical observation, however, lies the fact that imperial globality is also about the defense of white privilege worldwide. By white privilege I mean not so much phenotypically white, but the defense of a Eurocentric way of life that worldwide has historically privileged white peoples at the expense of non-European and colored peoples. This is global coloniality at its most material. (Escobar 2008, 20)

This global coloniality directed towards minority populations in Colombia leads to communities that are threatened by fascist ideals manifested in the form of political exclusion, threats of violence, military repression, and surveillance. As the people of Colombia increase their efforts to oppose these tactics, the state increases the intensity of their oppression to keep the instances of injustice out of the global media. This is obvious when looking at Colombia's justice system, one in which an estimated "89% of the murders of human rights defenders do not end in a conviction" (Defending Tomorrow 2020, 22). The government covers up their lack of follow-up on crimes against humanity by dismissing "these killings as localised crimes, rather than seeing them as part of 'an attempt by various actors to continue to repress social change in a violent way'" (Defending Tomorrow 2020, 22). Once again, those most at risk of never receiving justice are the underserved communities of Colombia. In the context of environmental activism, this means individuals "with close connections to the land: subsistence farmers, tribal leaders,

lawyers, and organizers, who speak out against environmental and human rights abuses” are more susceptible to state-sanctioned violence and less likely to receive justice (Kwong, Hanson, and Sofia 2021). Evidently, identity has been a factor throughout the perpetuating of violence in the history of Colombia. In the following chapter, I will present my suggestions for achieving justice for the growing number of activists being murdered in Colombia.

Chapter Five: Justice in a Global World

Transnational Activism and Knowledge Sharing. The crisis of political violence seen in Colombia may be seen as a byproduct of globalization, a more modern form of colonialism that sees global financial institutions facilitating the enrichment of wealthy countries at the expense of poorer, resource-risk nations. Globalization furthers the extractive relationship of traditional colonialism without wealthy countries directly occupying poor ones, masking the fact that the winners and losers of the modern trade system are often the same. Colonization formed the extractive economy, and globalization increased its scale and power, allowing powerful companies to enter low-income countries and destroy their environment for monetary gain. However, despite the violent nature and origins of globalization, activists have found a way to use it to their advantage. In a globalized world, people of different cultures, countries, and histories can communicate with each other through technology. This has rapidly connected the world, allowing us to build community connections that transcend borders. With tools such as social media, we can raise awareness about the crises that wouldn't normally get media coverage, such as the political violence against environmental activists in Colombia. Political violence is often not the focus of the media when it occurs in poor, non-white countries and by governments that work to suppress the atrocities that their people are facing. As we have seen in

this paper, political violence is a frightening phenomenon that leads to countless deaths that frequently go unnoticed. Despite all of its own horrors, globalization may help us change this.

In “Globalization or Denationalization?” Saskia Sassen presents her understanding of the intricacies of globalization and how they change the purpose and duties of the state as well as the roles of individuals in politics. The changes she describes are due to “transboundary networks and formations connecting multiple local or national processes and actors” (Sassen 2003, 2). The connections she describes are a result of financial and social connections due to technology that knows no bounds. These connections create the necessity to break down what we consider a “national” affair, as it is rapidly changing and needs to be reestablished as transnational or global in order to fulfill the needs that globalization brings about. Needs that are no longer confined to the state but have become increasingly connected to localities and nations globally. She says that we need to create multiscalar systems that are not linear but have many components that will allow for the accommodation of global affairs. She labels these changes under the term “denationalization,” which encompasses both the national affairs described above, and the individual impacts, specifically within politics.

Sasson states that due to the transboundary networks described above, “activists can develop networks for circulating place-based information (about environmental, housing, political issues, etc.) that can become part of political work and strategies addressing a global condition- the environment, growing poverty worldwide, lack of accountability among multinationals, etc.” (Sassen 2003, 11). This information is crucial to circulate, as it creates global solidarity that can make for more effective change because of the sheer number of people who will be involved. If there is an issue in a country that is supported by groups all over the world, it will be much harder for those in power to ignore the activists. Also, as Sasson states,

these technological connections create “non-formal political activists.” These are individuals, often community leaders, who are not involved in their nation’s government system, but who have been elevated to a position where they can speak their concerns without the restrictions of the state. This provides increased representation and greater power among groups who have historically been oppressed and pushed aside. It also allows individuals to become influential without running for or holding office. This is a critical development in the political climate, given that election systems are often built around keeping the powerless away from official positions as seen in Chapter Three. With this development, those who would otherwise have no platform can create meaningful, globalized change, on their own terms and with intentions uncontaminated by money and power.

Arturo Escobar expands on this idea by placing importance on the knowledge generated in activist groups, as well as the importance of listening to the experiences of said activists, something that can be spread across the globe through the processes of denationalization described above by Sasson. Escobar describes the importance of community and movement knowledge below:

This insight has many dimensions, beginning with an emphasis on the articulation between knowledge and resistance established by movements themselves; the identification of knowledge as a tool for struggle; the fact that activists more than ever engage in research on their own experiences- sometimes even drawing on critical academic theories; the relation between activist knowledge production and critical genealogies of thought; and the challenges all of the above pose for more conventional understandings and institutions of knowledge production. (Escobar 2009, 24-25)

The idea of knowledge as a tool in resistance connects well to Sasson's ideas of denationalization and globalization. If activists can share the knowledge from their communities and their experience in resistance, it can be used globally by individuals facing violence and oppression in their own countries as well as bring awareness to the struggles both groups are facing. This creates transnational activism and transboundary networks, which will reduce the power of the state by lowering the likelihood that they can commit political violence without any backlash. Escobar elaborates on his definition of knowledge here:

This trend is leading to engagements focused on knowledge production practices with particular movements, in the belief that knowledge is embedded in local contentious practice and in larger historical struggles. The aim is to study the embeddedness of knowledge in social relations, that is, knowledge being produced in dialogue, tension, and interaction with other groups, and how this knowledge is enacted and networked.

(Escobar 2009, 24-25)

Escobar's definition of knowledge, especially his inclusion of historical struggles, is very applicable to Colombia. As mentioned in Chapter Three, the narratives spread globally about Colombian violence often blame individuals involved in the drug trade and dismiss the ideas of state-sanctioned violence. These are false narratives that are harmful to those risking their lives to make change in Colombia. If activists in danger are able to spread knowledge that includes the historical context of political violence, the narrative will change, and more people will support the activists and notice when the government murders them.

One environmental activist who set an example for the importance of development of the transnational networks and activism was Chico Mendes of Brazil. Environmental journalist, educator, and author of *The Burning Season: The Murder of Chico Mendes of Chico Mendes and*

the Fight for the Amazon Rain Forest, Andrew Revkin, describes Mendes as the inventor of “a reverse form of globalization a decade before the word became part of the buzz of international development debates” (Revkin 2004, 14). Mendes grew up working in rubber tapping, which is the extraction of latex from Hevea trees, but quickly became a part of nonviolent movements that challenged the extractive economy that his work supported. Mendes practiced solidarity with other social causes, such as movements against deforestation and for workers rights. Mendes’ commitment to human rights led him to being elected president of a worker’s union in Xapuri, through which he made incredible progress in the social transformation of the rubber tapping industry: he organized the eliminating of abusive middlemen who were taking profit from rubber tappers, the creation of a teacher training school, and the organizing a national meeting of the Rubber Tappers of Amazonia in 1985.

Mendes’ organizing and leadership capabilities were so impactful that they led to serious strides made in land reform, such as the increased advocacy for extractive reserves to allow sustainable harvesting of resources, led and controlled by Indigenous populations. Mendes quickly became what Saskia Sassen described above as a ‘non-formal political activist’ and his movement turned heads globally. Mendes received support from organizations globally who found solidarity in his insistence “that humans should not be held separate from nature but instead considered as an integral component of the natural landscape” which further strengthened his movement (Revkin 2004, 14). Mendes was a pioneer in environmental justice and the use of globalization to create change within smaller underserved communities. He realized that the only way to make progress in the defeat of the extractive economy that was controlling the health and prospects of his community was “not just was not just to stand in front of cutting crews, but to touch pressure points thousands of miles away. To do so, he linked his homegrown land-rights

movement with international forces like environmental groups, development banks, and the media” (Revkin 2004, 14). As we have learned throughout this paper, the interference of land defenders in the plans of extractive institutions leads to violence. This is exactly what occurred in the case of Chico Mendes, who was murdered in 1988 at the age of 44 in his own home. Even in death, Mendes made waves in environmental justice. Due to the transnational networks he built to support his community of underserved Amazonian laborers, powerful media in the United States and Europe covered his death, which was uncommon for other activists facing similar violence. This media coverage led to both the creation of a community-owned extractive reserve in his name and the conviction of his murderers — a notable achievement next to the scores of environmental activists whose lives have been taken without recourse.

Mendes’ life and legacy transformed the environmental justice movement, opening new avenues for global support and encouraging other rubber tappers to take on his goals. His activism and the response to his death allowed for elections of individuals of similar socioeconomic status as Mendes, such as Marina Silva, the daughter of a rubber tapper, as the federal minister of the environment in Brazil, actions by the state to reduce violence against environmental activists, and the formation of “a coalition- The Movement for the Development of the Transamazon and the Xingu- devoted to advancing education, nondestructive agriculture techniques revolving around tree-grown crops, and small scale development projects” (Revkin 2004, 20). Mendes is a perfect example of the usefulness of creating transnational networks and uplifting of non-formal political activists in violent movements against land defenders. Mendes’ murder, while having ramifications unlike the murders of the activists that came before him, is still a tragic event that shows that much more progress needs to be made to guarantee that the Earth’s protectors are not killed due to the threats they pose to wealthy interests.

Colombia has several environmental and human rights defense organizations in place, such as those described in the Introduction: *Movimiento Ríos Vivos Antioquia* (MRVA), the *Guardia Indígena del Cauca* (Indigenous Guard of Cauca), *Movimiento de Víctimas de Crímenes de Estado* (Movement of Victims of State Crimes), and *Asociación Campesina del Catatumbo* (Peasant Association of Catatumbo), to name a few. However, these networks need to continue forming allies with non-Colombian networks, since, as we learned in Chapter Three, the Colombian institutions in place to solve injustices are corrupt. If this is achieved, violence against environmental activists will be harder to cover up, bringing Colombian communities the power needed to make significant policy changes.

Mutual Aid. The solutions above are just one factor in the success of movements against political violence, but they would be irrelevant without local community organizing and mutual aid. Activist and writer, Dean Spade, defines ‘mutual aid’ as “collective coordination to meet each other’s needs, usually from an awareness that the systems we have in place are not going to meet them” (Spade 2020, 7). Mutual aid projects recognize the abuse of the State and its indifference to the needs and safety of its people. In response, they look within their own community to meet and understand the people’s needs without institutional support. This builds movements through mobilization and solidarity, “solving problems through collective action rather than waiting for saviors” (Spade 2020, 16). We have seen several examples of resistance organizing that resembles present-day mutual aid projects in Colombia, such as the palenques we learned about in Chapter Two. Palenques were communities of escaped enslaved people built to protect each other from recapture and organize revolts against the system of slavery. These communities show the strength of mutual aid projects, because as we learned, palenques met their own needs through solidarity with the Indigenous and were effective in mobilizing for

change throughout and beyond the period of colonization in Colombia. The State was threatened by the power of palenques and they played a major role in the freeing of Colombia from Spanish rule and the eventual abolition of slavery.

The environmental and human rights defense organizations listed above and described in the Introduction are also examples of mutual aid. For example, Guardia Indígena del Cauca recognized the fact that the justice system is corrupt and that the State and its institutions are uninterested in protecting the people and, in response, built a program of Indigenous guards to protect their own community from violence. Human rights organizations throughout Colombia are already finding ways to defend themselves against State violence and building the solidarity needed to fuel mass movements, but the commitment of the State to maintaining its economic system through violence means that these organizations are constantly under threat.

Policy Changes. Additional steps that need to be taken include direct changes to and actions by the government, made possible by both local uprisings and international pressure. Governments must heed the calls of advocates for strong land reform that takes land rights from extractive corporations, the strengthening of the rights Indigenous populations and granting them a seat at the table in government, and the creation of strong social safety nets that can work to undo centuries of social inequality. States have the power to make these changes, but many view these acts of justice as having an adverse impact on their economies as they are currently structured. The only way to force them to change their actions is by making their actions visible to the world. If this is done, they will be confronted with transnational lawsuits and the loss of much-needed support from powerful countries, forcing them to reckon with the violence they are perpetrating and, hopefully, listen to the knowledge of activists when making changes to their laws. Aside from the government, powerful companies that frequently use violence and

intimidation against environmental activists also need to make changes. Defending Tomorrow suggests the following:

Companies and their investors are responsible for mitigating risks and redressing harm as they relate to land and environmental defenders across their supply chains, operations and investments. Likewise, they should exercise their leverage over national and international policymaking to advocate for better safeguards for defenders and push for stronger state commitments to secure community land rights in their Nationally Determined Contributions under the Paris Agreement. (Defending Tomorrow 2020, 37)

This can be achieved through developing policy that truly bans violence against activists and the illegal accessing of land. This must include complete transparency in their organizational operations as well as full cooperation with Indigenous people and public claims that condemn violence against activists globally. In addition, all of the above changes must be monitored by a third-party transnational organization in order to ensure honesty. Lastly, both the government and corporations who have committed acts of violence against the people of Colombia should provide reparations. This should include land reform, financial compensation, and public apologies.

The election of Colombia's first leftist President, Gustavo Petro, in November of 2022 has restored some hope amongst Colombian activists. Though President Petro faces several barriers to policy implementation, he has already taken the first step in ending human rights abuses against environmentalists by signing *The Escazú Agreement: Regional Agreement on Access to Information, Public Participation and Justice in Environmental Matters in Latin America and the Caribbean*. Article 9 of this agreement addresses human rights abuses in the following ways:

1. Each Party shall guarantee a safe and enabling environment for persons, groups and organizations that promote and defend human rights in environmental matters, so that they are able to act free from threat, restriction and insecurity.
2. Each Party shall take adequate and effective measures to recognize, protect and promote all the rights of human rights defenders in environmental matters, including their right to life, personal integrity, freedom of opinion and expression, peaceful assembly and association, and free movement, as well as their ability to exercise their access rights, taking into account its international obligations in the field of human rights, its constitutional principles and the basic concepts of its legal system.
3. Each Party shall also take appropriate, effective and timely measures to prevent, investigate and punish attacks, threats or intimidation that human rights defenders in environmental matters may suffer while exercising the rights set out in the present Agreement. (CEPAL 2018, 29)

The signing of this document by a Colombian president brings hope that meaningful change will come due to the involvement of third-party organizations to monitor the commitment to the agreed upon changes.

There is a long way to go before these solutions can be implemented, and the complexity of the violence in Colombia will make it an arduous process. Unfortunately, it will be extremely difficult to get to the point where the much-needed restructuring of Colombian systems of governance can be implemented, especially considering the oppressive nature of the Colombian government. However, the spreading of community-based knowledge through transnational networks, the building of mutual aid programs, and the uplifting of the voices of Colombian community leaders is already underway. The perseverance of those who continue to oppose the

violence of the government and corporations in Colombia is remarkable. These activists have watched their community members become martyrs of the cause, yet they persevere with incredible bravery by continuing their unyielding opposition. The writing of this thesis would have been impossible without the continual resistance of communities in Colombia and the commitment to accurate reporting of global abuse from organizations such as Global Witness and Front Line Defenders.

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