How do Real Indigenous Forest Dwellers Live? Neoliberal Conservation in Oaxaca, Mexico

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Abstract

Protected areas such as wildlife sanctuaries, national parks, and forest reserves have become an important feature of the global economy. Using an intersectional lens, a critical political economy approach, and document analysis, this paper explores how power operates through the production of Indigenous difference, the greening of the economy, and the commodification of the environment. It also considers neoliberal conservation as a racialized process that downloads the burden of protecting the environment onto the most vulnerable Indigenous communities.

Résumé

Les zones protégées telles que les refuges fauniques, les parcs nationaux et les réserves forestières sont devenues un élément important de l'économie mondiale. À l'aide d'une optique intersectionnelle, d'une approche d'économie politique critique et d'une analyse documentaire, cet article explore comment le pouvoir fonctionne au moyen de la création de la différence indigène, de l'écologisation de l'économie et de la marchandisation de l'environnement. Il considère également la conservation néo-libérale comme un processus racialisé qui transfère le fardeau de la protection de l'environnement aux communautés autochtones les plus vulnérables.

Introduction

Protected areas such as wildlife sanctuaries, national parks, and forest reserves have become an important feature of the global economy. In Mexico, the establishment of institutions devoted to conservation in the 1980s and neoliberal land reforms in the early 1990s fostered a wave of territorial reorganization that targeted the forests that have historically sustained Indigenous communities. It is estimated that as much as 80% of the forests are communally owned (Bray et al. 2008, 7). Oaxaca, besides being the most culturally diverse state in Mexico, has been praised for both its biodiversity and the existence of strong Indigenous governance institutions. A number of scholars have noted that the combination of self-regulated communities, high biodiversity, and the limited number of national ecological reserves create alluring conditions for conservation projects in this state (Bray et al. 2003; Chapela 2005; Bray et al. 2008). However, less attention has been paid to the impacts and effects that such conservation schemes have on Indigenous peoples' lives.

Tania Li (2010) notes that it is important to explore how conservation schemes distinguish between forested and agricultural lands and raises questions about how risks of dispossession are being downloaded onto communities (386). Similarly, Andrew Walker (2004) observes that this distinction works to "arborealize" or cast Indigenous peoples as primarily forest dwellers. Importantly, while conservation schemes have largely been at the expense of Indigenous peoples, women have been particularly invisible in forest governance. This paper asks: What kinds of gender impacts and effects do these schemes have in places devastated by austerity measures? How do these conservation schemes intersect with the market and the production of cultural difference? Although agriculture has been an integral part of Mesoamerican Indigenous peoples' ways of life, an understanding of conservation as void of people effectively displaces Indigenous farmers away from their lands. In this conservation framework, ag-

riculture is a problem that requires intervention while Indigenous peoples are constructed as "forest dwellers" who have a romanticized relationship with their environments (Matthews 2005, 796; Walker 2004, 314). Moreover, while these conservation schemes are constructed as "just," alternative economic development, they lack a gender focus, thus concealing how patriarchy and the legacy of colonialism have shaped resource conservation.

This article uses an intersectional lens, a critical political economy approach, and document analysis to explore the political, social, and economic dimensions of forest conservation in the Zapotec community of Santiago Lachiguiri, Oaxaca. It shows that a naturalised understanding of the relationships "forest dwellers" have with their territories serves to foster new forms of capital accumulation and is coercive. In the current neoliberal context, conservation is shaped by international policies, national concerns, and local circumstances. An intersectional analysis of how power operates through the production of Indigenous difference, the greening of the economy, and the environment reveals neoliberal conservation as a racialized and gendered process that downloads the burden of protecting the environment onto the most vulnerable social groups. From this perspective, the focus of the intersectional analysis is not only about identities but also intersecting processes by which power and penalties are produced, reproduced, and resisted in contingent and relational ways (Dhamoon 2011, 234). According to Rita Dhamoon (2015), integrating power in intersectional analysis is important for at least two reasons. First, gender differentiation cannot be separated from other systems of domination, including colonialism, capitalism, and racism within which people operate and distinctive degrees of privilege and penalty are accorded. Second, power and penalty can operate simultaneously within and among marginalized communities, shaping the structure that maintains the matrix of oppression (30-31). Thus, my use of feminist insights of intersectionality pays attention to the ways in which the state, indigeneity, colonialism, and the economy operationalize the different ways in which Indigenous men and women are regulated relative to one another in Oaxaca. As a case study, Oaxaca provides insights into how neoliberal conservation has ignited new territorialized conflicts.

To respond to the questions stated above, I use document analysis, which is a relevant method for exploring the motivations, intent, and purposes driving specific phenomena within historical and contemporary contexts. In this article, document analysis relied on theoretical prepositions, highlighting how "problems" are constructed at different scales and "rendered technical" through different strategies (Li 2007). I analyzed different types of documents, including the World Bank reports, government records, agrarian legislation, a community self-study, and press releases, in an effort to illuminate how neoliberal conservation is tied to specific modes of governance and subjectivities, which have disciplinary effects on people. This article is organized as follows. First, it traces the continuities between colonial constructions of the Indigenous Other and the representations that transpire in contemporary policies and resource management practices. Second, the article maps discussions of neoliberalism and its intersection with indigeneity and the environment and highlights how "problems" are depoliticized and rendered technical. Third, it discusses what kinds of impacts and effects neoliberal conservation has in places that have already been devastated by austerity measures. The fourth and fifth sections are concerned with the community of Lachiguiri's experience with conservation. Finally, the paper offers some concluding remarks.

Indigeneity and Nature

Peoples considered Indigenous have long fascinated travelers, anthropologists, and missionaries. The representation of Indigenous peoples as "living in nature," as reminiscence of primitive stages of life, has long been deployed by colonial powers and post-colonial states. The distinction between nature and culture facilitated a utilitarian approach to nature, which became natural resources that existed for human consumption and accumulation of wealth. William Cronon (1995) argues that, through this separation, entire ecosystems were replaced by wheat and cattle and thrived more for their economic value and than for their natural adaptation to new environments. Where land did not have economic use, nature was preserved as wilderness, supposedly "free" from human beings' presence (69). Moreover, these understandings of nature and community created clearly delineated borders between those who were considered people and what was found beyond them and also between people and "savages." Thus, far from be-

ing untouched by human beings, wilderness is a social construction of specific societies and times (69). This construction has functioned to dispossess Indigenous peoples by collapsing them into the realm of nature (Braun 2002). Moreover, characterizations of the "noble savage" functioned to effeminate the colonized Other and create gendered relationships between the latter and Europeans. In this regard, Maria Mies (1986) notes that, when Indigenous peoples and peasants are described as being "closer to nature." they are considered "housewives," whose work has no value (106).

These colonial representations continue to shape state policies and practices regulating Indigenous peoples' access to natural resources. Indeed, expectations of "authentic" Indigenous traditional economic practices coexist alongside various criteria for political recognition (Sisson 2005, 39). Indigenous peoples are recognized to the extent that they rendered themselves legible through the performance of subsistence "hunting gathering" practices, which are bounded to an idealized stewardship of the land (Altamirano-Jiménez 2013, 211). In their demands for recognition and other material rewards, Indigenous peoples themselves have replicated these stereotypical meanings of indigeneity, which have had the effect of freezing their identities in time. As I will show in this paper, in the current neoliberal context, the processes through which the economy is organized, indigeneity is recognized, and the environment is regulated reinscribe these patterns of colonial, racial, and gender inequalities.

Neoliberalism and the "Will to Improve"

This section maps neoliberal conservation and its intersection with the will to improve people's lives and highlights how "problems" are rendered technical through different disciplinary strategies. Neoliberalism has often been discussed as a governance process that emphasizes the efficiency of the market, the regulation of public services, individuals' responsibility, and government deregulation. In this process, the economy, society, and the environment are governed by networked interactions between states, international financial institutions, and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) (Jessop 2002). Although considered a hegemonic force, there is no single or unitary neoliberalism. Rather, it is a contradictory and messy process that materializes differently across diverse geo-political spaces yet has important commonalities that account for patterns (Larner 2003; Peck 2004; Castree 2009). By applying the concept of governance to the management of the environment, scholars have shown that the incorporation of environmentalism into the neoliberal economy shapes complex interactions between nature and society (Watts and Peet 2004), which are reworked through colonialism and economic development (Robbins 2006).

Market-driven conservation of the environment or "neoliberal conservation" is here understood as the process through which the expansion of capitalism and protection of the environment become mutually compatible by transforming previously untradeable entities, such as ecosystem services, into commodities. Neoliberal conservation emphasizes a set of institutions, management practices, and discourses aimed at facilitating the commodification of nature's services (McAfee 1999; Hason 2007; Igoe, Neves, and Brockington 2010). This model of conservation relies on the assumption that ecosystems are self-functioning entities where the various outputs or "free" services can be valued and incorporated into the market (Vacanti Brondo 2013). Although conservation policies begin from the conceptual division of nature from society, such policies are reworked when applied to inhabited environments in order to be legitimized as both promoting development and conservation (McAfee and Shapiro 2010; Li 2010).

Conservation of ecosystems started in the 1970s but it was not until the 1980s that a model of "debt-for-nature," involving international environmental non-governmental organizations (ENGOs), debt-holding governments, and international financial institutions, such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF), was implemented in Mexico. In 1982, the Mexican government announced that it could no longer meet its debt obligations and threatened to default on its borrowing. In response, the IMF demanded the substitution of state-driven development for market-oriented policies, which coincided with ideas about the state's incapacity to manage the economy (Altamirano-Jimenez 2013, 157). Between 1982 and 1991, Mexico received thirteen structural and sectoral adjustment loans (Barry 1995). The accompanying structural reforms included investment deregulation, the elimination of import substitution policies, the privatization of publicly owned corporations, and substan-

tial reductions in price supports (Liverman and Vilas 2006). The IMF also proposed to "swap a portion of the country's national debt for the conservation of forests and the titling of Indigenous communal lands, arguably forcing the 'inept' and 'inefficient' state to protect both Indigenous inhabitants and forested areas" (Altamirano-Jiménez 2013, 158).

Because most forests were and are inhabited by Indigenous communities, a relevant question at this juncture was: how to prevent this model of conservation from being perceived as land encroachment by Indigenous communities? As I show elsewhere, the debt-for-nature approach was justified as a deal that would benefit everyone. Indigenous peoples would get their lands titled and countries would get help fostering development while protecting forested areas (Altamirano-Jiménez 2013, 158). Though neoliberal conservation advocates often blame "corrupt" and "inefficient" states as major obstacles to environmental protection, state sponsored protected areas continue to be a central pillar of this model of conservation worldwide.

As a major environmental policy trend, neoliberal conservation involves the superior efficiency of the market, a shrinking state, participation of local communities, transnational networks, and the creation of legal mechanisms to title and privatize property rights to land, forest, water, and fisheries. A critically important aspect of this model of conservation is that it centers the "community as a bounded unity of action" (Li 2001, 157). This understanding is central not only for how communities figure in conservation but also for how ecosystems, struggles over resources, and identity are delimited. According to Li, "Communities" are constructed as entities affected by actions from the outside, concealing how processes of state formation and market involvement have already produced negative effects in specific places (159). Former director of the Centre for International Forestry Research, David Kaimowitz (2003) suggested that in countries of the global South where the rule of law is weak and spotty, only Indigenous communities that are "truly" committed to conserving and protecting the forest can "save" the environment. Thus, far from being counter posed to the market and state, communities are a reflection of how boundaries are constructed for specific economic purposes (Li 2001, 159).

In legitimizing market-driven conservation projects, the idea that such projects are win-win solutions for different "stake holders" and for fostering democracy in the global South has been advanced (Igoe and Brockington 2007). In this framework, Indigenous and local communities supposedly win because this model of conservation forces governments to simultaneously title Indigenous land and fight poverty.

An increasing body of literature shows that this picture is far more complicated than the promises listed by advocates. Benjamin Kohl (2002), for example, notes that, although the stabilization of property regimes is usually represented as promoting good governance in the global South, this policy is embedded in asymmetrical power relations between the global North and South. Similarly, Katja Neves and Jim Igoe (2012) show that there is a "sociogeographical disconnect between the concentration of financial capital in the global north and the concentration of ecosystem use value in the global south" (175). Thus, far from communities being separated from the market and the state, neoliberal conservation involves processes of territorialization that bring then into the realm of the state for the purposes of controlling their resources (Igoe and Brockington 2007, 437).

In this regard, Li (2007) points out that, because in market-driven conservation schemes, it is places and the resources contained in them that are valued not people, conservation projects need to appeal to communities. Such projects must be presented as a form of economic development, as something that "improves" people's lives. She asserts that the "will to improve" justifies actions that deliberately move people from places and rationalize their land uses, reshaping their landscapes, livelihoods, and identities. As a hallmark of colonial relations, the will to improve is not to dominate others but to enhance a target population's capacity to act in certain ways (17). Li identifies two strategies through which advocates and policy makers translate the will to improve into development projects. The first one is "problematization" or the process of identifying the deficiencies that need to be corrected in a target population. The second strategy is the process of "rendering technical," which refers to the practices involved in making complex and contested problems into merely technical matters (5-7). These strategies are useful to illuminate how neoliberal conservation shapes people's behaviors and responses to artificially introduced systemic changes. Moreover,

such strategies are helpful to explore how problematization and rendering technical operates at different scales, highlighting the contradictions and disciplinary strategies produced in and through the implementation of neoliberal conservation.

An analysis of different World Bank reports illustrates how these strategies operate. In its 1990 report, the World Bank identified private property as the problem causing much of the poverty in Asian and Latin American rural communities (1990, 65). The report stated that the solution was to regularize communal property. Because in Mexico, Indigenous peoples' control over their lands had been maintained and recognized in the Mexican Constitution of 1917, neoliberal land reforms were aimed at creating different land tenure regimes. Following Jim Igoe and Dan Brockington (2007, 437), I use the concept of "reregulation" to illustrate how the Mexican state transformed previously untradeable entities, such as the *ejidos* and communal lands, into tradable commodities through privatization and titling of collective land rights. While regularizing property may be seen as a way to protect Indigenous landholdings, I am interested in showing how titling is the prototype of primitive accumulation, allowing capital to access different types of resources (Scarritt 2015, 7). As a prototype of capitalist accumulation, titling has imposed Western understandings of land uses that has had the effect of 'housewifizing' the autonomy and sociality of Indigenous peoples as their unpaid or poorly paid labour is conceived of as having no value (Isla 2014, 6).

As the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) was being negotiated, the federal government modified several constitutional articles. Importantly, Article 27 of the Mexican Constitution was transformed to liberalize Indigenous and peasants' control over their agricultural communal lands and *ejidos*. The *ejido* system, a form of land tenure in which plots could be individually used but neither sold nor bought, was legalized with Article 27 of the Mexican Constitution of 1917, which opened new spaces for landless peasants to reclaim lands and for Indigenous communities to get their historical lands recognized by the state. Article 27 had effectively shielded about half of the Mexican territory from the market and recognized Indigenous communities' rights to woodlands and water (Altamirano-Jimenez 2013, 142). However, it had legalized the term *campesino* or peasant, which mediated relationships between the state and communities and even the latter often insisted that people could simultaneously be peasant and Indigenous.

With the counter agrarian reforms of 1992, two important changes were made. First, privatization of *ejido* lands transformed them into a commodity that could be sold, mortgaged, and rented. Second, titling of communal lands redefined people's relationship to a property as a bundle of rights. A new forestry law was also passed at this time to actively promote forest management partnerships between communities and the private sector. According to the reformed Constitution and the Agrarian Law, forest dwellers maintain control of their forests as long as they observe their "customary" land use practices, reproducing the perception that Indigenous peoples live in the forest. According to Nora Haenn (2006), forests were maintained under the communal tenure regime in order for the state to continue to maintain control over how forest resources are used (144). I would add, however, that the distinctive regulations for managing agricultural and forested lands expanded access to goods and services beyond forest resources. The distinction between agricultural and forested lands produced boundaries in previously contiguous regions and a set of intercultural intricacies around how resources are managed. By distinguishing between "peasants" and "Indigenous" communities, risks of dispossession and management of dispossession were differently distributed among communities. Moreover, while land plots were previously granted mainly to males, women had historically participated in agricultural activities and accessed resources informally. Reregulation of land effectively prevented women from having access to the resources they used to and from the inheritance rights they enjoyed before the counter reforms (Deere and León, 2000).

The modification of Article 4 (now Article 2) in 1992 recognized Indigenous peoples' collective rights and solidified a one-dimensional understanding of their identity based on the economic activities they supposedly perform. The fifth paragraph of Article 4 states that, as part of their political autonomy, Indigenous peoples and communities have the right to "*conserve,* improve their habitat, and *preserve* the integrity of their lands according to the terms stated in the constitution" (emphasis mine). Thus, who and what is controlled and

what gendered patterns are produced through processes of reregulation are important questions to consider.

Because "saving nature to sell" (McAfee 1999) is a central tenet of neoliberal conservation, in 1994, the World Bank recommended that, in order for nature to have exchange value, it had to be *untouched*. Later, in the report *Agriculture for Development,* the World Bank (2008) noted that subsistence agriculture had no place in the conservation of forests and recommended that forest dwellers adopt other livelihood practices (1). In these reports, the interdependence between agriculture and forestry in contributing to the livelihoods of rural communities was deemed irrelevant and Indigenous peoples' relations to their lands were translated into a set of management practices aimed at adding value to their forests. Thus, under the guise of helping, reregulation of landholdings created the conditions for the expropriation of Indigenous labour and dispossession of lands and resources deeply affecting women. Although in many cases Indigenous women did not hold land plots, they harvest and grow plants for family consumption in spaces located between plots held by men or along bush lines. Through reregulation, women's informal access to land was eroded, putting the burden of feeding families exclusively on women. According to Li (2010), governing Indigenous peoples in this way is no less significant than colonial, coercive forms of domination (7).

Protected areas have been even more actively established since the United Nations adopted the Global Strategy for Plant Conservation in 2002. This document called for signatory countries to designate at least ten percent of their territory as protected for the purposes of climate change mitigation. Right after the adoption of this global strategy, Mexico modified its legal and institutional framework once again for the purpose of increasing its number of protected areas. A year later, the Mexican government established a national program, Payments for Hydrological Services (PHS), and, in 2004, it created a follow-up program in the form of carbon offset and trading. Since then, the Payment for Ecosystem Services (PES) program, involving both hydrological services and carbon offset, has expanded to be the largest program in the world (McAfee and Shapiro 2010). Thus, to understand neoliberal conservation, power asymmetries among countries, private corporations, powerful ENGOs, marginalized communities, and men and women must be taken into consideration. Who bears the burden of conserving the environment and who benefits from it are not irrelevant questions.

Austerity Measures: Planting Trees Instead of Maize?

What kinds of impacts and effects does neoliberal conservation have in places that have already been devastated by austerity measures? As noted earlier, in 1982, when Mexico virtually defaulted on its foreign debt, the IMF demanded that the government initiate a series of structural adjustment programs to get back on track. Although structural adjustments increased cash crop production, in the countryside, economic restructuring was marked by the elimination of tariffs and import permits for agricultural goods, the end of subsidies, the dismantling of state-run agricultural institutions, and the elimination of the Mexican Coffee Institute, which used to provide credit for and help coffee producers to commercialize their products. The consequent contraction of domestic market prices, along with cuts in state support for agriculture, made traditional rural livelihoods extremely challenging, fueling massive migration as families struggled to make ends meet. Migration intensified the unpaid work of rural women and children and created a number of households headed by women who were forced to find new survival strategies.

As the Partido Revolutionario Institucional (PRI), the state party, began to lose its stranglehold in the 1980s, notions about survival strategies circulated, downplaying the impact of aggressive austerity measures. One of the main actors in the construction of notions of survival skills and the poor's social capital was the World Bank (González de la Rocha 2007, 46). Ideas about the endless resources of the poor together with the increasing presence of NGOs working with rural communities fit well with understandings of bringing the poor into the market. In this framework, the household acted as the primary social unit responsible for social reproduction despite the fact that this was also a site of production deeply affected by austerity measures (Gonzalez de la Rocha 2007). In the countryside, the idea was that the poor could overcome their circumstances simply by accessing technical expertise, which in this case was provided by external "experts." Economic projects, such as collective corn mills, organic vanilla, shade coffee, and honey, were also actively promoted by the government who used sustainable conservation aid to

co-opt opposition in the countryside, thereby creating the perception that those concerned with sustainability were Indigenous while those concerned with land distribution were peasants (Altamirano-Jiménez 1998, 69).

In 1982, in the forested regions of the Tehuantepec Isthmus, with the support from a Jesuit mission team, coffee farmers from seventeen Indigenous communities formed the Union of Indigenous Communities of the Isthmus Region (*Unión de Comunidades Indígenas de la Región del Istmo* [UCIRI]). Articulating notions of Indigenous reciprocity and sustainability, this organization was constituted as a cooperative that sought to help shade coffee producers bring their produce directly to the market in the absence of the MCI (Cobo and Bartra 2007, 77). By adapting to the changing economic, political, economic, and ideological conditions created by the neoliberal reforms in the early 1990s, UCIRI was not only capable of inserting itself into the global economy but also of fostering some form of regional sustainable development. Based on an entrepreneurial logic, local participation, and collective decision-making, this cooperative was able to access international markets under the rubric of fair trade coffee. Although women have participated in all aspects of production and, in some cases, were the heads of households, their participation in the organization governance structures has been limited (Altamirano-Jiménez 1998; Chávez-Becker and Natal 2012). UCIRI's commitment to advance equal gender relations has translated into the creation of women led projects however peripheral to coffee. As a result, Indigenous women's working time has expanded without having the same kind of support to promote their products.

Like other rural organizations, such as the Barzón movement, UCIRI attempted to fill the gaps left by a receding state and find ways to deal with recurrent economic crises in the countryside. Visions of a modernized Mexico entering the global economy clashed sharply with the reality experienced by Indigenous farmers and coffee producers and also non-Indigenous farmers in the late 1990s. In 2003, when the national PES program was established, Indigenous and peasant organizations had already formed the national coalition *El Campo no Aguanta Más* (The Countryside Cannot Take It Anymore). This movement had quickly gained momentum and demanded the renegotiation of NAFTA's agricultural chapter and the rollback of federal agricultural subsidies. This social movement also advanced the idea that, for PES to become successful, it needed to be centered on a different understanding of conservation, specifically one that connected peasants and Indigenous peoples' activities to the protection of the environment. In doing so, the *El Campo no Aguanta Más* movement called upon the Mexican state to acknowledge the cultural role of Indigenous agriculture and its role in sustaining all Mesoamerican peoples. This coalition also demanded that the government reject a notion of imposed development that constructed the countryside as "empty of farmers" and the forest as "devoid of people" (UNORCA 2007). According to Kathleen McAfee and Elizabeth N. Shapiro (2010), this movement shaped the evolution of Mexico's PES program. Although initially conceptualized as a market mechanism, PES in practice ended up combining market-oriented restructuring and state supervision with antipoverty goals (8).

President Felipe Calderón fully embraced PES as a rural anti-poverty program. In his words, Mexico's "natural riches are and should be the solution to problems of marginalization and poverty experienced in many rural and Indigenous communities. For this reason we have launched programs focused on payment for ecosystem services such as ProÁrbol (ProTree). With this program we can offer a dignified income for those who dedicate themselves to protect and restore our forests and woodlands, of which Indigenous peoples are the first owners" (Calderón Hinojosa 2007). Later at the Cancun Climate Change Conference in 2010, Calderón said: "we will pay small land holders to plant trees instead of maize on the mountains" (Vigna 2012). In minimizing the role of agriculture to Indigenous peoples, Calderón noted that it was only a matter of choosing what to plant. Moreover, despite the key role Indigenous women play in caring for the ecosystems they live in, women seldom benefit from PES. Since communities are not homogeneous, women's absence from the management of natural resources is replicated in government policies, decision-making processes, and much of the technical assistance provided to communities.

In a context of recurrent economic crises, austerity measures, and the state's inability to offer meaningful support to the countryside, PES became a band-aid solution with pervasive effects. On the one hand, it continued to separate people from their

modes of production and their lands. On the other, by restructuring subsistence agriculture, PES became a means of dealing with *de facto* Indigenous dispossession. As members of *El Campo no Aguanta Más* observed, as a mechanism to alleviate poverty, PES is deeply misleading in that the no-touch forest policy can potentially accelerate the "abandonment of the forest and of the people who live in forested regions" (Merino Pérez et al. 2004, 6). To understand the impact of PES in specific communities, let us discuss the community of Lachiguiri's experience.

Dropping Conservation Out?

Oaxaca is located in southwestern Mexico, next to the states of Puebla, Chiapas, Guerrero, and Veracruz. Besides being the most culturally diverse state, Oaxaca has the largest Indigenous population in the country. According to the 2000 official data (Consejo Nacional de Población 2004), 48.8% of the population belongs to one of the 16 different Indigenous peoples inhabiting eight distinctive regions. Oaxaca is also one of the poorest states in the country. Indigenous peoples' livelihood strategies combine subsistence agriculture, gathering, artisan production, and remittances from both national and international migration to sustain an increasingly transnationalized rural population. Oaxaca has 570 municipalities, more than any other state in the country. Historically, the creation of municipalities was one way through which Indigenous communities were able to maintain their territorial and political autonomy (Velásquez Cepeda 1998; Recondo 2001).

The municipality of Santiago Lachiguiri is located in the Tehuantepec Isthmus and inhabited mostly by Zapotecs who are ruled according to their own legal traditions and institutions. The main authority is the assembly of *comuneros* or communal landholders, mostly males. The municipality covers an area of approximately 26,000 hectares, which are communally owned by 30 villages and communities. In 1525, the Spanish Crown recognized the land title and the collective rights of the Zapotec communities to this territory (Schmidt 2010, 15). Most of the area is mountainous and covered with forests. The *Cerro de las Flores* (Mountain of Flowers) contains forests that many believe capture and filter large amounts of fresh water (Cobo and Bartra 2007). The numerous natural springs on the mountain are used by people for water consumption and to provide water to the Benito Juárez dam. The economy of this municipality is based on maize but other crops, such as beans, squash, and chillies, are also cultivated for self-consumption.

Coffee provides a source of income for small farmers and has been particularly important to the recent political history of Santiago Lachiguiri as this community is part of the fair trade cooperative UCIRI. Until the late 1970s, small producers depended on the prices imposed by the MCI and were unable to bring their coffee directly to the market. When the PES program started, it primarily targeted shade coffee producers who already had an "eco-friendly market experience." Santiago Lachiguiri became the first community to accept the scheme of Voluntarily Protected Areas in Mexico (Cobo and Bartra 2007, 121).

According to community members, when the representatives from the National Commission for Protected Areas (CONANP) and contracted surveyors first came to Santiago Lachiguiri in 2001, they painted a picture full of benefits for the community and encouraged people to voluntarily certify a portion of their lands, specifically the Mountain of Flowers (Schmidt 2010, 19). In August 2003, the communal assembly decided to declare part of the territory a protected area for only five years as an experiment. Without the communal assembly's knowledge, CONANP certified a conservation area that included the flanks of the mountain where over 140 smallholders cultivate the land. Moreover, the certification was issued for a period of 30 years. CONANP, on the other hand, has insisted that the local inhabitants freely participated in the process and were properly informed (Vigna 2012). However, communal landholders maintained that the certification documents never clearly laid out the consequences of "preservation" and "conservation" schemes for communal landholders. The documents briefly stated that lands in the preservation area were "untouchable" (Vigna 2012; Schmidt, 2010; Barmeyer 2012). The immediate consequence of this certification was that all agricultural activities were banned in the untouchable zone. This community, like many others, practices slash-and-burn cultivation wherein land is cleared, burned, and then planted every seven years. Although this ancient technique has been crucial to the maintenance of healthy ecosystems, *comuneros*

have been targeted as "fire setters" who destroy the environment (Matthews 2005). According to *comuneros,* the model of conservation being imposed forces them to "change our production methods, even if it makes no sense in ecological terms" (Vigna 2012).

Moreover, because conservation is often presented to communities as a way to improve their lives, people hoped that the certification process would bring some needed economic benefit and prevent further migration. In my view, this situation reveals that Indigenous communities are neither naturally conservationists nor "fire setters" and that such constructions are embedded in complex power relations. For many Indigenous communities in Oaxaca, the search for economic alternatives cannot be separated from the depopulation of the countryside. However, PES has failed to improve peoples' standard of living. For example, in this particular case incentives were offered only to some families, not the community. Out of 120 smallholders deprived from accessing their lands, only 15 were given assistance, creating mistrust among community members and the perception that some individuals were given preferential treatment (Barmeyer 2012, 55).

Feeling betrayed, community members voted to drop the area's "preserved area" status in 2011. A representative of the communal assembly observed: "The government has deceived us. We are still the legitimate owners of the land, but we have lost control of it" (Vigna, 2012). To these Indigenous communities, a model of neoliberal conservation contributes to declining health and nutrition as a large subset of the services the forest provides to the communities (including agricultural produce, hunting sites, and gathering grounds) are abrogated or diminished in exchange for insufficient and selective payments. Although food is deeply gendered, Zapotec women who are responsible for feeding their families are, ironically, silenced in this debate. However, external experts act on the food and bodies of Indigenous peoples in the global South.

IIn the context of recurrent austerity measures and the impact of ongoing neoliberal restructuring, PES may have been seen as an incentive for Indigenous shade coffee farmers but not as a solution in itself. Although there may be some success stories, the government has largely failed to provide economic alternatives for Indigenous communities living in resource-rich environments. Moreover, the government has not been able to fully convince Indigenous communities that planting trees instead of corn is a life alternative. To the communities living in this region, the main beneficiaries of conservation schemes are usually outsiders, the surveyors and evaluators who are being paid for their studies, the state, big businesses seeking to access and control biodiversity, and corrupt officials skimming off the funds intended for communities. As McAfee and Shapiro (2010) contend, despite PES being envisioned as a market form of biodiversity management, the state continues to be the most important buyer of ecosystem services. To small Indigenous coffee producers, conservation and its exclusive focus on biodiversity leaves the work they do taking care of perennial crops, such as coffee, cacao, and vanilla vines, grown in conjunction with shade trees, out of the equation. From this point of view, ecosystems are constituted by human non-human relationships and interactions. Neoliberal conservation simultaneously removes Indigenous peoples from their lands and appropriates the work they do to protect their forests. Indigenous women are the hardest hit by the ongoing restructuring of the countryside. Rigid gender roles within communities and lack of participation in decision-making structures simply mean that women bear the burden of being heads of the household without having a say on how communal lands are used.

The Flowers Mountain: Stewardship as Relationships

When the communal assembly of Santiago Lachiguiri demanded the early cancellation of their forest certification, it also approved a new communal statute on the management of their forests. Several articles in the document state that the communal assembly is the authority, not the individual landholder. The communal statute states that collective participation and informed consent are required in all issues related to communal lands. The statute notes that the regulation, maintenance, and control of ancestrally conserved lands remains in the community and that PES will be received only on an unconditional basis (Schmidt 2010, 22; Barmeyer 2012, 55). As stated in different forums, Santiago Lachiguiri is not against conservation *per se* but against a neoliberal model that dispossesses Indigenous communities from their lands and resources.

In the recent communal statute of Santiago Lachiguiri, Zapotec *comuneros* center the traditional *milpa* (agriculture plots), which is an ancient, traditional

agricultural system that maintains the balance between food production and caring for the mountain and forests. Caring for the mountain not only involves resource management practices but also complex interactions, ceremonies and fiestas through which healthy ecosystems are co-produced by nature and Indigenous small-scale farmers. Accordingly, it is the relationship of care between nature and people that produces healthy ecosystems, not the separation of people from their lands. Moreover, the emphasis on the historical and cultural role of Indigenous agriculture rejects a stereotypical understanding of the "forest dweller" or noble savage representation. In connecting subsistence agriculture to an ancient collective Mesoamerican past, diverse organizations stand against the arborealization of Indigenous peoples and the artificial division between the categories "peasant" and "Indigenous." Shade coffee producers not only harvest coffee but they also cultivate their food; they can be both peasants and Indigenous. In 2009, the *Red en Defensa del Maíz*, a network of environmentalists, Indigenous communities, and corn producers, issued a declaration in which it was noted: "The Indigenous peoples of Mexico created maize, they are the guardians and creators of the existing diversity of corn. Indigenous peoples' rights are crucial to the preservation of such diversity and food sovereignty." Similarly, in 2012, at the Indigenous Peoples International Conference on Corn, participants stressed: "Our struggles to protect corn as a source of our lives cannot be separated from our struggles to defend our forests, lands, water, traditional knowledge and self-determination" (Declaration of Santo Domingo Tomaltepec 2012). In challenging hegemonic narratives of Indigenous agriculture as environmentally destructive, corn has become central to the identity of Mesoamerican Indigenous peoples and a symbol of their environmental knowledge. Indigenous peoples' efforts to preserve subsistence agriculture and the traditional practices it is associated with hinges on notions of neoliberal development and national narratives that emphasize nature as an ever growing entity, ready to be exploited.

Conclusion

The case presented here illuminates the conflicts and contradictions produced in and through neoliberal conservation schemes, which are void of people. Although conservation has been represented as a win-win situation, an intersectional analysis of different axes of domination and oppression reveals conservation as a gendered and racialized form of capital accumulation that rests on the dispossession of Indigenous communities. In these conservation schemes, Indigenous agriculture has become the problem that requires intervention while payment for ecosystem services has become the solution to improve people's lives. In a context of restructuring and recurrent austerity measures, payments for conserving forests have become a program for supposedly alleviating rural poverty. However, while these handouts may bring some limited benefit, they still push Indigenous farmers away from their lands and conceal the ways in which patriarchy is embedded in market driven protection of the environment. What is at stake in debates on climate change mitigation is how neoliberal conservation reproduces power asymmetries, gendered dispossession, and a neo-colonial division of labour. Thus, in this context, the will to improve is a technique of power to manage those groups of people who have become an obstacle to capitalist accumulation.

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