

Pachamama Politics: Campesino Water Defenders and the Anti-Mining Movement in Andean Ecuador. By Teresa A. Velásquez. Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2022. 288 pages. \$55.00 cloth; \$35.00 ebook.

Pachamama Politics presents a powerful ethnographic account of water defenders: Ecuador's *campesinos* fighting against the mining industry, fighting to protect the titular *Pachamama*—Mother Earth—through multiethnic and multiclass alliances (9). Set against the backdrop of the first country to grant Mother Earth constitutional rights, activist-scholar Teresa Velásquez's compelling narrative takes the reader inside the lives and work of the Indigenous and *campesino* Ecuadorans who are transforming resource politics in Ecuador. The defense of life movement described by Velásquez seeks to protect the water supply and land from neoextractivists and a government willing to criminalize its own citizens' efforts.

The author leverages the considerable time she has spent among these communities to provide the strongest account of the diverse groups' efforts to protect their watersheds through social activism and incorporation of Indigenous identity into the broader identity of all who call themselves *defensores* and *defensoras* (10). Interweaving Indigenous cosmology into the spatial politics of race, *Pachamama Politics* explores themes of the relationship between state and social movements, asking ontological questions about how nonhuman entities might become political actors (15).

Motivated by the possibilities Andean cosmopolitics bring to the fight against extractivism and historically flawed neoliberal policies, Velásquez calls upon her ethnographic work in the rural parishes of Cuenca, Ecuador, to demonstrate how the water defense movement spawned unlikely social alliances (19). The book's introduction is transparent regarding the author's methodology and positionality, dedicating a section to background on how Velásquez developed her activist research methods. She outlines her motivations, highlighting the impact of recent work on decolonizing anthropology and its influence on her choice to inform her research through commitment to political action and environmental justice (21). Furthermore, she acknowledges that such commitments may raise questions of her work's validity, preempting these concerns with support from existing literature and discussion of the problematic dichotomy of academic versus politically engaged research.

The organization of *Pachamama Politics* builds a strong foundation for the reader, making clear the relationship between antimining activism and the centrality of water in problematic "green" neoliberal reforms (28). Ethnographic methods allow for a rich narrative flush with details, transporting the reader to scenes along the southern Ecuadoran Andes, set within high altitude grasslands—where both water quality and the political dimensions of watershed management are under threat.

The book's structure makes strong use of each of its six chapters, demonstrating within the first three chapters how water defense is at once a localized management issue, a gender and injustice issue, and the impetus for multiethnic coalition formation. Chapters four through six turn to the legality of water issues through examination of water law, the role of Indigenous identity within that framework, and the more current state of affairs as activists fight against being criminalized, dispossessed of their water systems, and barred from the legislative process (138). A strong conclusion expertly links the struggles of Ecuadoran water defenders to global water issues; water is not only a resource, but part of a broader moral framework that calls into question consumerism and environmental racism (198).

Pachamama Politics' first chapters take the reader inside the struggles of *campesino* dairy farmers in Ecuador's Azuay Province, showcasing how existing fractures in the community might be cast aside at the arrival of a larger threat—a threat in the form of mining companies. *Campesino* dairy farmers faced water access challenges when state-led agrarian modernization programs seemed only to benefit the urban elite in the form of *hacendados*—small groups with money to invest in and therefore shape the dairy farming landscapes (30). This system at first pitted the *campesino* farmers against *hacendados* and the institutional complications which produced them, such as compulsion to show land titles proving ownership of inherited lands (33). This system was predicated on paying fees to register the land, prohibiting many from showing official documentation and resulting in *campesino* land being claimed by the state. Once under state authority, the land could be redistributed, resulting in loss of water resources and farming areas, compelling some farmers to seek ties with the local elites as a means of ensuring their business's survival (33). This historical setting and case study set up threads across the book, calling into question land-management methods and the role of the state.

With the arrival of the Iamgold Corporation into Azuay, even worse threats erupted to fracture the community: dairy farmers' autonomy was jeopardized as Iamgold blamed them for having contaminated the water with cow excrement (37), while simultaneously heavy-metal discharge and lead levels at twice the permissible limit began damaging the watershed and crops (33). These emergent concerns pushed for a restructuring of community alliances as both small-scale farmers and *hacendados* elevated the issues to the state level to seek justice (41). It is through these connections and the interweaving of stories that Velásquez's activist research methods drive home the role of social movements in transformation of resource politics. Community leaders concerned with destruction of water sources formed a water board and formally called the state to action through letters and declarations. They mobilized farmers to test their own water and shut down highways and local offices through protests (44). Community leaders found to be ineffective at protecting the parish saw their removal demanded, with *campesinos*—both Indigenous and non-Indigenous—organizing marches and meetings across Ecuador to advocate for the immediate cessation of mining (47).

This "citizen's revolution" demonstrates the strength of Velásquez's broader argument—that political boundaries cannot be considered synonymous with communities

(53). Rather, groups such as Ecuador's water defenders can emerge in response to threats such as external entities, the state itself, disenfranchisement, or the spectre of being criminalized for taking steps toward environmental justice. Across chapters two, three, and four, these threats manifest in the use of public force against protestors, assault on *defensoras* by nonstate actors, and use of legislative tools to inhibit the alliance of antimining activists with Indigenous groups (85). These types of threat emergence change perception of identity and define it not in terms of socioeconomic class, gender, or ethnicity, but as part of a broader ontological commitment.

The criminalization of Ecuador's *defensoras* and the negative impacts of problematic water law are exposed through the author's second set of rigorous methods: investigation of archival sources, interviews, and participant observation. This work showcases the vital role of women in the fight for environmental protection and highlights the Ecuadorian Constitution's commitment to the rights of the *Pachamama*. Here, the *defensoras* move beyond political boundaries to include those identifying as *campesinas* alongside a role as framers of a new ontology (61), while male water board leaders reconfigured the meaning of indigeneity by identifying as Indigenous (144). Overlapping goals and understandings coupled with new ontological frameworks to provide an outlook of the natural and human existence are entangled—the Ecuadoran defense of life movement challenged racial and spatial orders through shifting cultural identity, resulting in identity “not exclusively based on biology nor formal recognition,” but the concept of *indígena* as entering into a relationship with the *Pachamama* (162).

Velásquez has created a gripping portrait that presents the *campesinos* of Ecuador as citizens far beyond the confines of Cuenca or Ecuador. Their fight to defend water is a fight to defend life, and their activism and pursuit of environmental justice is representative of a global effort to protect Earth. While much scholarship has focused on the plight of Indigenous peoples, *Pachamama Politics* decolonizes the narrative of citizens as powerless against the colossus of corporate extractivism and the machinations of the state. Harkening to other recent work on resource extraction and Indigenous rights in Ecuador, such as Carmen Martínez Novo's *Undoing Multiculturalism*, Teresa A. Velásquez's work takes existing foundational approaches to new levels. Velásquez's political theorization of a “third way” to move away from extractive models of development (202) provides a path forward, where Ecuador's legitimacy could be found in embracing water defense movements and attending to the words of its own Constitution: “Nature, or Pacha Mama, where life is reproduced and occurs, has the right to integral respect for its existence and for the maintenance and regeneration of its life cycles, structure, functions, and evolutionary processes.”¹

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NOTES

1. “Ecuador First to Grant Nature Constitutional Rights,” *Capitalism Nature Socialism* 19, no. 4 (2008): 131–33, DOI: 10.1080/10455750802575828.

