

**Gómez-Barris, Macarena. *The Extractive Zone: Social Ecologies and Decolonial Perspectives*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2017. Print. 188 pp.**

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HÉCTOR HOYOS  
STANFORD UNIVERSITY

A short monograph with far-reaching ambition, *The Extractive Zone* embodies the activism it also analyzes. Put differently, the book is a political intervention in its own right. As the first title in Duke University Press's recent "Dissident Acts" series, edited by Diana Taylor and by the monograph's author, it bears a sizable responsibility. In situating herself alongside her objects of study (and of editorial curatorship), Gómez-Barris continues in the tradition of Michel Foucault and Edward Said of interrogating and transforming the blurry border between pure knowledge and political knowledge. The domineering epistemic apparatus at stake here is represented by a conglomerate of industries that produce enormous wealth while wreaking havoc throughout Latin America: extractive industries. On aggregate, these industries—logging, mining, monoculture and others—configure an economic model, extractivism. The author equates it to outright theft, particularly against Indigenous and Afro-descendent territories (xviii). With a "decolonial queer femme methodology," she attempts to counter the commodification of such territories with an appraisal of the proliferation of life and cultural practices that take place in what she goes on to call "extractive zones." The title concept, an underacknowledged expansion of Mary Louise Pratt's "contact zone," has both an ecological and a social dimension.

Under the aegis of decolonizing the Anthropocene, Gómez-Barris presents five chapters, each of which revolves around an extractive industry, an affected community-ecosystem, and a related cultural form or social movement. Respectively, the first chapter considers the oil industry, ultra-biodiverse Amazonian Ecuador, and the YASunidos social movement. YASunidos, a heterogeneous rural and urban, popular and middle-class coalition, articulates an alternative politics of *el buen vivir*. Its main goal is to protect the eponymous Yasuní region from the dubious politics of the socially progressive, ecologically regressive Quito government. The chapter's great merit, other than documenting a looming ecological disaster and the creative efforts to prevent it, is the nuance it brings to the study of the affordances and pitfalls of the Pink Tide. The qualified case it makes against ecotourism (36) is similarly worthy of note.

Furthering the case for transcending the pieties of liberal environmentalism, the second chapter considers the Andean highlands, spiritual tourism, and Q'ero traditions. In a scintillating

account of her experience as an embedded researcher, Gómez-Barris calls Centro Paz y Luz, a American-owned Cuzco outfit of new age hocus-pocus, on its bluff. The author's training as a disciplinary sociologist is much in evidence; the chapter stands out for its rigorous consideration of the various facets of its uncommon subject of study. In addition to examining the organization's questionable theology and exoticist discourse, Gómez-Barris denounces its role in a phenomenon she aptly describes as "new age settler colonialism." With another useful coinage, she goes on to discuss the broader "Andeanism"—an orientalizing of formerly Inca territories—that fuels the phenomenon.

The third chapter takes readers south, to the forests of Araucania, logging, and the work of Mapuche filmmaker Francisco Huichaqueo. Gómez-Barris does a fine job of recounting the convoluted history of the region, from the violent colonial and republican periods to the post-Pinochet criminalization of indigenous resistance, in order to situate Huichaqueo's work. Against a backdrop of corporate ecophilanthropy—spearheaded by private individuals including a co-founder of The North Face, 84—Huichaqueo's films reimagine conservation within a Mapuche worldview. *The Extractive Zone* finds here an alternative to the colonial condition. A key source is a moving 2015 film devoted to *machi* Silvia Kallfüman, who practices a river ritual that Gómez-Barris—questionably, in this reviewer's opinion—associates to a decolonial femme episteme. Debunking the implicitly white, heterosexual, male liberal subject that underwrites both extraction and ill-advised conservationism leads her at least in this one instance to oversimplify Huichaqueo's cinematic gaze, the subject of a growing literature by Chilean film scholars who are cited only in passing.

More significantly, the passage raises the question of whether *The Extractive Zone* imposes on its subjects a narrowly Western understanding of gender relations. Extractivism surely does, as gendered indigenous labor amply shows (116). The book seeks to subvert, not affirm, this order of things. And yet it appears to assume the universal cultural value of queering. The reason for this paradox lies in the institutionalization of decolonial thinking. On numerous occasions, the author cites Walter D. Mignolo—editor of no less than two other book series for the press and of a blurb—as a "classic." The same goes for Aníbal Quijano, Nelson Maldonado-Torres, Sylvia Rivera Cusicanqui, and others. Meanwhile, as if erasing or rewriting the debates surrounding the subaltern turn, a footnote puts *The Extractive Zone* in opposition to Alberto Moreiras's *The Exhaustion of Difference* (2001), "arguing that difference is indeed inexhaustible (142, n.21)." (There is no mention of the Derridean game on differing and differentiating.) Elsewhere, the "exponentiation of subject positions" (138) is celebrated. The hypergenerative, faulty logic that bedevils decolonialism is in evidence here. A theory that

discredits theory, decolonial thought can lead to overly descriptive and bluntly prescriptive studies, where a finer instrument would do its objects more justice. Spivakian strategic essentialism risks becoming essentialism tout court when it stops thinking dialectically. That is, when it forgets that difference's constitutive other is identity. As a study so squarely and programmatically situated within institutional decolonialism, *The Extractive Zone* is susceptible to such more or less familiar criticisms.

Be this as it may, throughout the study the author takes great pains to not reproduce in scholarship the very tendency she is criticizing in the socio-economic realm at large. For instance, rather than “mine” anti-mining artworks in order to craft her own high-value cultural product, she constantly seeks to give back to those artists by repositioning their creations within broader cultural formations and critical trends. Put differently, Gómez-Barris likely sees herself as the scholar who whispers in the ear of art practitioners or as their comrade in arms.

Take Carolina Caycedo, the Colombian artist whose work graces the volume's cover and serves as the subject matter of its fourth chapter. Caycedo is known for large-scale documentation of the ecological damage inflicted on the Magdalena River, the country's main body of water, in the procurement of hydropower. Other than documenting, her pieces participate in community resistance to hydro-electric power plants and other aggressive development projects. The fruits of the artist's embeddedness within organizations such as ASOQUIMBO—video installations of sit-ins, sculptures made of fisherwomen's webs—become artworks themselves. A chicken or the egg dilemma here is whether Caycedo inspired Gómez-Barris with her decolonial art, as the critic writes, or whether Gómez-Barris inspired Caycedo to frame her own work in terms of decolonial thinking, as the artist's recent public presentations suggest. Whatever the case may be, the book speaks to a no doubt fruitful collaboration.

However, the question is not negligible. Problematically, as with Caycedo, Gómez-Barris tends to engage with creators as practitioners, rather than as theoreticians. An articulate activist artist, Caycedo has always had her own theories about under and over-development to offer. Some of them come across in quotations (96, 98), but mostly it's the praxis, not the theory, that interests Gómez-Barris. She offers instead her own theorization, speaking of a “fish's eye perspective,” a double entendre on the animal and the lens, that complements the famously top-down, often hegemonic “bird's-eye view.” The newly theorized viewpoint is submerged and horizontal, which speaks to the social and ecological values that the book espouses. But the purchase of the term for Caycedo, let alone ASOQUIMBO, is less apparent. At best, it crystallizes what they meant to say and becomes a jumping board for future organizing, creative, and critical work. At worst, it imposes the language of

decoloniality and ventriloquizes an organization and an artist perfectly capable of speaking for themselves.

Similarly, Caycedo is plucked away from her artistic origins, much as she joins a thought-provoking regional constellation. The advantage is that she is serendipitously placed next to, say, anarcho-feminist Aymara hunger strikers-cum-performers (Chapter 5). The drawback is that her connections to the more metropolitan art of one Antonio Caro, the preeminent conceptualist from Bogotá, is eclipsed. This is problematic not because *The Extractive Zone* fails to offer a more complete account of the individual cultural phenomena that it analyzes in short form—comprehensiveness is not the monograph's stated goal—but because embeddedness is. Even a decidedly enthusiastic book review such as the present one must note that, at unfortunate times, this fish becomes a bird.

At more fortunate times, the counterpoint of high and low can be thought-provoking. Such is the case of the above-mentioned anarcho-feminists, who take issue with Gómez-Barris, eloquently: “one member in particular found the idea of equating hunger striking to a performative act to be a decidedly North American colonizing gesture that misappropriated the painful reality to propagate US performance theory... [raising] a necessary question to the proliferation of academic texts coalescing around the term ‘decolonial’—and the ever-capacious understanding of the term ‘performance’ for that matter” (126). This may come across as “too little, too late” in terms of engaging with her subjects’ own meta-critical awareness, but it gives the book a much welcome choral quality.