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Geographies of Emancipation and the Production of Autonomy in the P'urhépecha Forest

by Victor Arroyo

This paper is the result of ethnographic fieldwork conducted in the forest of Cherán in the Mexican state of Michoacán. I used ethnography and participant observation, resulting from long-term investigations and interventions. I was an artist-researcher in residence at El Colegio de Michoacán from 2015 to 2018, exploring various articulations of colonial violence manifested in diverse forms of extraction, state-sponsored violence, land appropriation, and enforced disappearance. My research was approved and supported by the Concejo Mayor de Gobierno Comunal de Cherán K'eri 2015–2018, the main Indigenous authority in the community.

Introduction

Cherán is an Indigenous P'urhépecha town located in the state of Michoacán, Mexico. For many decades, the P'urhépecha people have experienced various iterations of colonial violence such as illegal logging, murders, kidnappings, and extortion. Like many other P'urhépecha communities, Cherán suffered under the rule of political powers colluding with drug cartels, organized crime, and a corrupt police force. Illegal loggers operated freely in the community, procuring the protection of politicians associated with organized crime, particularly the drug cartel *La Familia Michoacana*.

Until one morning, on April 15, 2011. As the story goes, a group of P'urhépecha women from Cherán, armed with only sticks and stones, detained a busload of illegal loggers transporting wood that had been stolen from their forest. After the incident, it took just a few days for the P'urhépecha community to organize and assume political control over the town, blocking all entry roads and expelling the police force, bribed politicians, and state authorities. What followed from the women's confrontation with the illegal loggers was the emergence of a new political structure in the community. An Indigenous collectivity decided to reclaim political autonomy from the compromised state pow-

er, forming instead an autonomous government that articulates P'urhépecha knowledge and ethnic identity as its foundation and functions as the leading protector of the territory, the community, and the forest.

In this paper, I reflect on the social and material conditions of the 2011 P'urhépecha uprising in Cherán, which not only exposed how environmental extraction in Michoacán is bound to a longstanding history of colonial violence against the P'urhépecha people, but also positioned the P'urhépecha people in a global conversation about the relationship between colonial forms of governance, state-sponsored violence, and various forms of extractivism. Violence in Michoacán is not a new phenomenon but a material manifestation of decades of economic punishment, social exclusion, and exception. In September 2006, in the city of Uruapan in Michoacán, a group of gunmen broke into a nightclub and threw five human heads onto the dance floor. Such public demonstrations of extreme brutality became the hallmark of drug cartel practices, initiating an unprecedented regime of violence in Mexico. The state of Michoacán is the birthplace of the Mexican government's war against drug trafficking. Former president Felipe Calderón initiated "Operation Michoacán" in 2006, the first large-scale deployment of federal troops to combat drug trafficking. The "Mexican Drug War" is an ongoing, asymmetric conflict that has lasted twelve years and resulted in a total of 100,000 deaths and indescribable social ramifications. Against this backdrop, the fate of the P'urhépecha people, their territory, and forest, is closely bound up with various forms of extractivism, narco-industries, and land disputes.

Logics of Expulsion and Erasure

The 2011 Indigenous P'urhépecha uprising in Cherán had the protection of the forest as its primary goal. Environmental crises are not accidental or unintentional side effects of modernity. Such environmental changes have never been simply collateral damage but rather materializations of colonial violence woven together with disparities of race, class, and geography. The Indigenous P'urhépecha people are ancestral victims of state power and colonial forms of governance, with their territory at the center of a historical struggle for power and dominance. The territorial struggles of the P'urhépecha people date back to the very beginning of the Spanish Conquest, as "Hernán Cortés, captain of the Spanish colonial army, sent his delegate captain Cristóbal de Olid to Michoacán in 1522, almost a year after the fall of Tenochtitlan" (Roskamp, 2004, p. 298). Hans Roskamp (2004) has uncovered substantial historical evidence of the territorial struggles of the P'urhépecha people, presented in his research of the canvas painting "Lienzo de Nahuatzen," an early example of a

“*Titulo Primordial*.” This series of documents, produced during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, known as “*Titulo Primordial*,” present local visions of the pre-Hispanic and pre-colonial epochs. The “*Lienzo de Nahuatzen*,” dated to around the seventeenth century, is commonly regarded as one of a number of early legal documents to have been drafted by the Indigenous peoples in what is currently Michoacán. Roskamp (2004) stated that:

Although the canvas [*Lienzo de Nahuatzen*] deals with the origin of Nahuatzen and the delimitation of all its territory, it seems to emphasize the marking of the southwest and northwest of the town, that is to say where it borders both with the old and with the new settlement of Cherán ... they point out the routes taken by the pre-Hispanic warriors to take possession of the lands ... therefore, it is likely that the canvas was originally drawn up and used in the context of a land dispute with Cherán, although it could later also be used in other conflicts and situations in which the age and extension of the community had to be shown. (pp. 306-307)

Visual representation is a form of power tied to knowledge and imagination, but also to violence and exclusion, all of them impossibly entangled with the power to define who or what remains—where, when, and how. Land dispossession, social erasure, and colonial power, even though materialized violently in the landscape, have also been subtly exercised through visual culture. As such, Indigenous authorities expressed an interest in visually narrating their history to the colonial authorities in order to demonstrate rightful ownership of their lands. The “*Titulo Primordial*,” then, can be seen as a survival strategy in which the authors employed pictographs and maps as political tools for defending their lands.

From all the various struggles and insurrections for land reform in Mexico—dating back to the Colonial era in the sixteenth century—only the 1910 Revolution of the South and its leader, Emiliano Zapata, presented the struggle for land in a clear and decisive way. Zapata’s Revolution of the South had two main goals, the liquidation of feudalism and the institution of a proper legal framework for Indigenous land restitution. Thus, there was an effort by the Mexican government in 1915, after the Mexican Revolution of 1910, to restore stolen lands to various Indigenous communities. This restitution implied an emancipatory historical reconstruction, by the Indigenous communities, of their identity and culture via a search for their “*Titulo Primordial*.” The search for these documents was reinforced by the proclamation of Article 27 of the 1917 National Constitution, which established the sovereign right of Indigenous peoples to ownership of their traditional lands. To carry out this monumental task, the National Agrarian Commission retained the services of paleographers to transcribe as many “*Titulo Primordial*” documents as possi-

ble, which might then be presented by the Indigenous communities as legal proof of original territorial ownership. The struggle for land reform and legal redistribution of Indigenous land, dating back to the Colonial era to the latest modification in 1991 of the Article 27 of the 1917 National Constitution, is fueled by tangled colonial ecologies of labor, politics, and extraction. Even though the legal framework for such Indigenous territorial restitution was achieved, these communities continued to be dominated by various criminal groups employing practices of intimidation and extortion, including drug trafficking, logging, kidnapping, and murder.

The colonization of the P'urhépecha people began with early appropriations of land dating back to the sixteenth century, expanding over the years to contemporary narco-violence and various forms of extractivism. As Alejandra Guillén (2016) writes:

In Mexico, *el Cartel de los Caballeros Templarios* has ventured into other businesses, such as agriculture, extortion, kidnapping, mining, logging, transportation, trafficking of organs and women. In our country, organized crime, paramilitaries, governments, transnationals and local companies are all part of the same capitalism that deploys war against people in order to strip them of their territories, as well as against women, nature, young people and against all from those below. (p. 20)

This is what David Harvey (2004) calls “accumulation by dispossession,” where neoliberal capitalist policies result in the centralization of wealth and power in the hands of a few by dispossessing people of their wealth or land. Complementing Harvey’s notion, Saskia Sassen (2014) no longer simply associates mass consumption and the circulation of goods with modern productivity, but rather conceives of neoliberalism as a new form of capitalism comprising a gigantic mechanism for the extraction not only of natural resources but all kinds of human resources (p. 10). Sassen (2014) calls it “extractive capitalism” (p. 5). This is a form of capitalism that is based on the extraction of profit from human beings and nature, leaving behind dead land and dead water.

Because the Indigenous P'urhépecha are geographically located in forested areas, participating in extractive processes both as captives and as accomplices, they are situated at the center of extractive capitalism aimed at the violent dispossession and exploitation of both natural and human resources. Their situation is complex because of uncertain delimitations between what is legal and illegal, and the blurry political forces that control and carry out the violent extraction of the forest. They live amidst a situation where violence and threat prevail, hindering legal processes of defense. Various forms of ecocide within the Indigenous P'urhépecha communities are the product of an intensified

structural violence associated with new regimes of capital accumulation and their incessant voracity for temporal and geographical expansion.

In the wake of massive illegal logging of more than 18,000 acres of forest, and in the context of organized criminal violence—including extortion, robbery, and kidnapping—permeating everyday life, in April 2011, the Indigenous community of Cherán prepared itself for a standoff. Six barricades built with logs and sacks of sand were installed at all access points into the community. According to Ramírez Trejo (2016), “The women were responsible for preparing food while the men took turns to keep as many people on the barricades throughout day and night.” Built on collective action, an Indigenous political movement was self-organized as the basis for both the defense of the forest and the political and social reconstitution of the territory. The central demands of the people of Cherán were social security, justice, and the protection of the territory. The community expelled both political and state authorities. The prevailing feeling among the population was that they did not wish to continue with the conventional system of political parties, because that system had resulted in the collapse of the sense of community. As constitutional rights were diminished in the process of claiming political autonomy, this suspension of laws became a prolonged state of being. The community became convinced that they must begin to imagine exactly what kind of autonomous political project they wished to build. What kinds of strategies might be deployed against extractivist processes, against the logic of terror imposed by organized crime? How might they conceive of a social security based upon their relationship to the territory and the natural environment? What kinds of practices could allow for the organization, construction, and cohesion of an Indigenous-ethnic political insurrection?

The P'urhépecha community of Cherán decided to self-govern under the figure of the “sistema de usos y costumbres” (system of usages and customs). This mode of self-government is practiced by many Indigenous municipalities all across the country, and is legally supported under the second article of the Constitution of Mexico (“Municipios,” n.d.). But while opting for the “sistema de usos y costumbres” is a relevant component supporting their insurrection, it is not the most important. The Cherán insurrection is a political model that challenges the foundations of the democratic mode of political organization, but it is more than that. The P'urhépecha community of Cherán also reformulated their Indigenous identity by reclaiming remnants erased from their culture and shattered by the colonial experience. The notion of autonomy in Cherán was constructed internally within the community long before it was presented and negotiated before the institutional figure of the State.

Thus we should not think about the autonomy of the P'urhépecha community in Cherán only in terms of its oppositional political relation to the State. New forms of political and social organization are needed beyond the neo-liberal model and the already-known political structures. The legal strategies undertaken to achieve formal recognition as the first autonomous Indigenous municipality in the country are in fact propositions for alternative ways of understanding and for exercising political participation and communal organization. Autonomy is thus understood as a proposition for imagining a future governed by local forms of knowledge and is motivated by a desire to reassert control of collective powers that have been subsumed under capitalism. It is necessary to reflect upon autonomy as a process in which a community seeks to reverse the complex set of social relationships produced by the colonial experience, including resource extraction, property relations, state-making, and race. As Chatterton and Pickerill (2006) put it, “autonomous geographies are part of a vocabulary of urgency, hope and inspiration, a call to action that we can dismantle wage labour, the oil economy, or representative democracy, and that thousands of capable and workable micro-examples exist” (p. 2). The P'urhépecha people no longer accept archaic geographies of hierarchy intertwined with gender domination, racial oppression, and colonialism. They proposed a kind of geographical thinking that is culturally attuned and interrogates the relationship between capitalism and political power, violence, and social injustice. The 2011 P'urhépecha uprising in Cherán constructed a new mode of social organization beyond the colonial experience and the spaces produced by it, along the way rewriting a way of living that is guided by intersectionality, self-organizing, pluralism, and horizontal self-governance.

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