

Conclusion

In Pursuit of Environmental Justice

Disrupting the Patrón centers Enxet and Sanapaná futurities and endurance, despite generations of efforts to erase them from the history and present of the Bajo Chaco. This book has traced the interwoven luchas of the Yakye Axa, Sawhoyamaxa, and Xákmok Kásek communities that are working to rebuild relations with their ancestral territories and enacting environmental justice otherwise on Paraguay's cattle-ranching frontier. The Chaco is a site where racialized regimes of resource control produce uneven geographies of power that attempt to reduce biocultural diversity to one basic logic: settler capitalism. Enxet and Sanapaná endurance shows that coloniality is not total and that resistance is not futile but necessary. My analysis weaves hemispheric debates about the politics of recognition, indigeneity, and environmental justice with Enxet and Sanapaná insights to show how the *longue durée* of settler colonial dispossession conditions contemporary land rights struggles.

That is not to suggest that Paraguay has been outside the reach of neoliberalism and many of its associated reforms. Neoliberal economic reforms have radically shaped the direction of agrarian politics by emphasizing international exports, lowering all trade barriers, and opening Paraguay to world markets by creating an economy with minimal regulations, extremely low export taxes, and attracting foreign investors in all sectors. The effects of these policies reverberate throughout Paraguay, shaping migration dynamics, land-tenure inequality, and formal politics at all levels of governance. Former president Horacio Cartes infamously said, "You have to use and abuse [*usar y abusar*] Paraguay because this is a moment of incredible opportunity," shortly after taking office in 2014.¹ His goal was to encourage Brazilian financiers to invest in the country, capturing the elite class's embrace of neoliberal free-market logics. Simultaneously inflammatory and repugnant, Cartes's discourse was but one utterance in a long history of actions by

Paraguayan agrarian elites who have leveraged populist imaginaries to advance the concentration of resource access along lines of class, gender, and racial difference. Moreover, Cartes followed several recent Paraguayan presidents whose administrations embodied the governance model that the Stroessner dictatorship established. Stroessner cultivated an image of the state-as-patrón whose institutionalized corruption helped establish a generation of leaders who rule not by direct torture and violence but by a biopolitics of neglect that prioritizes other-than-human life over the country's most marginalized.²

The politics of Enxet and Sanapaná luchas are not determined by neoliberalism despite the neoliberal imperative that has gripped Paraguay, like many of its neighbors in Latin America. Reducing the lucha to neoliberalism would erase the very historical material, discursive, and epistemic modalities of violence that continue to shape the contemporary conjuncture and the social-environmental challenges that many Enxet and Sanapaná navigate. Without doubt neoliberalism exacerbates already existing forms of racism and oppression. Still, older forms of racial capitalism and their exclusionary logics condition how the politics of recognition play out in Paraguay and their effects on Enxet and Sanapaná justice struggles. This is evident in my excavation of the sedimented histories of settler land appropriations and their expression as racial geographies. State policies that effectively ensure the recurrent dispossession of Indigenous peoples in place reveal how patterns of patrón-Indigenous relations transcend the politics of recognition by reproducing environmental harms. Therefore, I have done more than argue for another approach to studying Indigenous rights struggles in Latin America. *Disrupting the Patrón* expands the conceptual and empirical study of Indigenous environmental justice struggles outside the US and Canadian contexts by centering Enxet and Sanapaná futurities based on rebuilding relations with their lands.

Enxet and Sanapaná dialectics of disruption informed my analysis in many ways, but I want to reiterate two of them here. First, interlocutors like Anivel, Eriberto, Ignacia, Clemente, and others shared stories about the strategies they have developed and adapted to employ a dialectical praxis over the long arc of their luchas that work to unsettle settler territoriality. Leveraging the law as a tool to disrupt settler land control while also seeking to improve the material conditions of life for Enxet and Sanapaná peoples, my interlocutors worked with the politics of recognition to a certain degree. Yet on confronting the limits of recognition within Paraguay, Yakye Axa, Sawhoymaxa, Xákmok Kásek, and Kelyenmagategma all turned to their legal counsel at Tierraviva to scale up their struggles to the international sphere by petitioning the Inter-American System. The legal victories that each community achieved before the Inter-American Commission and the IACHR cannot be minimized. Each case was a landmark victory for Indigenous rights that has established important jurisprudence, which Indigenous communities have used across the world in their respective efforts to hold states accountable for human rights violations. However, the lack of enforcement of the Inter-American System's decisions in Paraguay has required that Enxet and Sanapaná

peoples turn to extralegal actions to compel the state to act. Through this constantly shifting dialectic of working with and against the law, working with and against the patrón, my interlocutors have moved to unsettle racial geographies and overcome legal liminality. The dialectics of disruption entail never totally rejecting the politics of recognition while never fully accepting the terms established by the settler state. Instead, the strategy rejects *and uses* the politics of recognition to erode the power relations and patterns of dispossession inherent in the logics of settler capitalism that shape the Bajo Chaco. With each act of disruption, Enxet and Sanapaná not only exert their sovereignty; they also enact radical forms of futurity that summon visions of a more just future in the present by building new relations.

Second, my rationale for the approach taken in this book is informed by the dialectic tension present in the way many of my interlocutors conceive of justice and express their rationale for the *lucha*. On the one hand, it is clear that justice as adequate recompense for past harms is impossible, an aporia, as Milciades's reflection presented at the beginning of the book insisted: "We will always be scarred from what they have made us live through. I don't think that land will bring justice, but it will help us find a sense of peace." On the other hand, Enxet and Sanapaná futurity is a politics of the possible that reworks time, territoriality, and social relations through "de facto self-determination" enacted in the dialectics of disruption, showing that faith in a better future animates enduring struggles for justice.³ Serafin's reiterated framing of the generations-long struggle to reclaim lands and lifeways shows this clearly: "We do this for our children and their children. . . . We fight so that they might have a future." Working with and through this dialectical tension and the many other dialectical relations that permeate this book, I have chosen to focus on the *pursuit* of Indigenous environmental justice because, in my view, justice is simultaneously an aporia and a political horizon that we cannot turn away from. But like the horizon we travel toward, justice always seems just out of reach, propelling the struggle further to other spaces, temporalities, and "yet-to-be possibilities."⁴ Forms of justice otherwise are both necessary and are not constrained by the limits of liberal political and legal theory. Environmental justice otherwise is defined by front-line actors fighting against environmental racism and for the environment as freedom.

THINKING WITH AND BEYOND ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE

Enxet and Sanapaná struggles to maintain collective lifeways are shaped by settler capitalism but not determined by it. Here I want to clarify two points—one about the current moment and the other about environmental justice studies within it. First, I opened the book with reference to how cattle ranching in Paraguay's Chaco—both its material form and its political-ecological consequences—resonates with the geographies of extractivism in Latin America. In the chapters that followed, I showed first how missionaries settled the Bajo Chaco to establish



FIGURE 17. Simplifying landscapes for cattle ranching. Recent deforestation (right) lays bare pasturelands just outside the Xákmok Kásek land (left), while two semis full of cattle kick up dust as they travel to local slaughterhouses. Photo by author, February 2020.

cattle ranching, then how the social-spatial relations of power produced through that system persist to the present through the politics of recognition and the ways that state officials govern Indigenous affairs. In so doing, I sought to show how a specific facet of the current conjuncture—the cattle ranch—has reconfigured life. Latin American studies scholars have long examined the role of economies and haciendas in structuring social relations of power and development.⁵ Further, the geographer Wendy Wolford queries the contemporary proliferation of plantation systems to suggest that “the long-distance simplification of landscapes; alienation of land and labor; and transportation of genomes, plants, animals, and people” is tied to race-based systems of modernity and coloniality.⁶

Cattle ranches of the Bajo Chaco operate on extractive logics. They are race-based systems that required Indigenous labor, often without monetary remuneration, to become established; they work by altering the preexisting diverse social-ecological systems to create new sites intended to support one genetically enhanced life-form. Instead of palm oil plantations like those in Colombia or soybean plantations like those across the Southern Cone, the Paraguayan Chaco has been made for cattle. The resulting racial geographies are simultaneously sites of Indigenous dispossession and labor exploitation as they are sites of dramatic

ecological change. As I recounted earlier, ranching is driving massive land-use change across Paraguay's Chaco and has turned the region into one of the world's greatest deforestation hotspots, with severe implications for Indigenous well-being. The current dynamics stem from the country's deep relationship with agro-export industries, namely, soybeans and cattle, that influence a land politics where Indigenous dispossession and the biopolitics of neglect imbricate. Each industry's specific effects and outcomes are distinct, but taken together they drive land-tenure inequality and work to ossify hierarchies of race and class that have always subjugated Indigenous labor as an enduring organizing principle. Attention must be paid to the environmental outcomes of the politics of recognition in Latin America and their effects on social justice.

Second, I have argued that Indigenous justice struggles for land and political recognition are always about more than rights-based claims. They are also intimately articulated with the long history of extractivism and the racial projects it facilitated in Latin America.⁷ Coombes, Johnson, and Howitt argue, "Indigenous motivations in environmental disputes are connected to broader projects of recognition, reclamation of sovereignty and resistance to northern capitalism; they are not mere resource conflicts."⁸ Struggles for land and the ability to maintain collective lifeways are social-environmental processes that exceed the limits of liberal legal frameworks that enable some to live well while others are excluded from their most basic rights. Environmental justice otherwise must foreground the social nature of "environmental" harms while attending to justice beyond legal remedies. Rather than reduce justice to monetary remuneration through, for example, indemnity payments that are often a default for reparations, a transformative approach begins with front-line actors defining what justice can be in the context of the harm experienced and works to ensure those harms are not reproduced.⁹ Enxet and Sanapaná strategies of resistance demand a more expansive notion of environmental justice than those based primarily on distributional and procedural remedies. This book thus joins a body of scholarship working to advance the conceptual frame of environmental justice studies by considering a wider array of actors, processes, geographies, and forms of justice than those that initially spurred this field of activism and study in the United States.¹⁰ These are not efforts to distort environmental justice but ways to think with and beyond defined concepts in an era of radical planetary change and disruption.

If more just futures are ever to be realized, it is necessary to attend to the specific ways that settler colonialism produces environmental injustice across distinct geographies and the strategies that Indigenous peoples and their allies use to disrupt the persistence of injustice. Such an approach underscores the importance of working with *and moving beyond* the taxonomies of justice that have so informed the core of environmental justice scholarship from the United States to date.¹¹ While cognizant of critiques that draw attention to the "coloniality of justice" and call for decolonizing environmental justice studies, I employed language and

approaches from both critical environmental justice studies written from North America because those approaches operate as intellectual “boundary objects” that translate across intellectual, epistemic, and geographic worlds.¹² In keeping with Native environmental justice scholars, my approach has attended to “the challenges of the ecological crisis as well as the various forms of violence and injustices experienced specifically by Indigenous peoples” by grounding this analysis in Enxet and Sanapaná “philosophies, ontologies, and epistemologies in order to reflect Indigenous conceptions of what constitutes justice.”¹³ Yet I have intentionally resisted offering a coherent theorization of Enxet or Sanapaná environmental justice because I refuse to speak for my collaborators. Enxet and Sanapaná peoples speak for themselves.

My interlocutors’ perspectives populate the pages of this book while showing that the *pursuit* of justice transits the social-environmental politics of place and the histories that shape racial geographies. Shifting environmental justice studies from a strict focus on distributional and procedural issues to one that considers the capabilities of collectives and communities to live well on their own terms is imperative.¹⁴ As many of my interlocutors from Yakye Axa, Sawhoyamaxa, and Xákmok Kásek would say, *roikosé porã* (literally, “we want to live well”). In this regard living well requires land restitution as the basis of life free of the social-environmental harms that dispossession generates.¹⁵ Moving beyond a narrowly defined vision of environmental justice toward what Pellow has called “critical environmental justice,” I show how settler capitalism and the politics of recognition threaten Enxet and Sanapaná collective lifeways while my interlocutors nonetheless refuse to abide by the limits of statist law.¹⁶ As a result, I offer an environmental justice otherwise that foregrounds Enxet and Sanapaná experiences through decolonial border thinking with hemispheric analyses of Indigenous politics across the Americas.

LAND IS NOT ENOUGH

How is justice possible given that all the land was stolen? Is justice served by giving back a portion of land, even if the basic conditions to live well on that land have been radically altered by generations of dispossession? What is environmental justice in the context of persistent settler colonialities? For all of the gains my Enxet and Sanapaná interlocutors have made to reclaim their lands and rebuild their relations, Milciades’s words haunt. Since I began this research in 2012, Yakye Axa, Sawhoyamaxa, Xákmok Kásek, and Kelyenmagategma have gained land rights from the Paraguayan state after decades of struggle. While returning to the land has brought more peace to members of these communities, life is still marked by uncertainty because land alone is not enough. Demarcation and property titles are still lacking. State officials have refused to guarantee the basic conditions to live safely: due process, clean water, support for education, medical services, other

forms of vital infrastructure, or respect for Indigenous self-determination without being forced to do so. Yakye Axa has had land since 2012 but no viable road to access it at the time of this writing. These are some of the recurrent dispossessions and forms of slow environmental violence that legal liminality produces, and they threaten collective life even after land restitution has been achieved.

Further still, what of the veritable prison that Belfio spoke of when reflecting on his twenty-five years of life living on the margin of Ruta 5? Life dispossessed of land and decades on the side of Ruta 5 are a form of carcerality that is not inherently different from having to live and work on the ranches built on the lands taken from one's community for little to no pay because no other options exist.¹⁷ Unfreedoms such as these perpetuate environmental injustice because the incarcerated are denied the ability to live free of environmental harms. Stock pond water that people must drink is often polluted with animal feces and makes them sick. Passing traffic kicks up dust that people living in roadside communities inhale, to say nothing of the threat of being struck or the constant sound that interrupts daily life. Land reoccupations, road closures, and other forms of protest place community members in harm's way but have become necessary to make state officials act on Indigenous demands.

Environmental justice is more than a line of academic inquiry, government policy, or direct action and mobilization. Environmental justice is also an act of storytelling. Julie Sze reminds us, "Stories and how they are told matter. Storytelling is a deeply political act that brings a radical democratic vision to an issue often seen as largely scientific, based in engineering or the realm of policy-making."¹⁸ I have tried to tell this story with care and respect for my interlocutors, their struggles, and the futurities they are enacting. If we are to understand the "environment as freedom," as Malini Ranganathan has beautifully envisioned, it is necessary to abolish the conditions that produce the unfreedoms of everyday forms of carcerality produced by the racialized distribution of social-environmental harms.¹⁹ Another world is possible. Many already exist. Through solidarity, relationality, and stories perhaps we can bring them more fully into the light. This is the work of critical environmental justice and the challenge of enacting justice otherwise.