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Indelible Divides and the Creation of Myths: Visions of the Ecuadorian Amazon

Matthew Ford
State University of New York—Stoney Brook

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In 2018, the late anthropologist Stephen Nugent noted that Amazonia, "perhaps more than any other region of the globe, has consistently been idealized and mythologized. This is true both of its societies, often envisioned as 'lost tribes in the forest,' and the 'raw green hell' of its environment."[1] In many ways, we all know the common mythical images associated with the Amazon: the region that time left behind; the place where stone-age people continue to live; the green heart and hell of South America where western civilizing missions go to die. This mythic vision is strong and reeks of colonialist obsessions with the "backward" racial Other. Nugent went on to argue that, despite rigorous historical research, the Amazon "is so well known through an apparatus of mythic redundancy and hyperbolic, naturalistic excess that attempts to dismantle the stereotypes are largely ineffective."[2] Indeed, despite the countless efforts

[1] Stephen Nugent, "Stop Mythologizing the Amazon—It Just Excuses Rampant Commercial Exploitation," *The Conversation,* 15 February 2018. https://theconversation.com/stop-mythologising-the-amazon-it-just-excuses-rampant-commercial-exploitation-91343. [accessed 14 November 2018].

[2] Stephen L. Nugent, *The Rise and Fall of the Amazon Rubber Boom: An Historical Anthropology* (New York: Routledge, 2018), 1.

to historicize Amazonia and its people, images of timelessness persist in both popular and academic constructs of the region.

Although these stereotypical constructions, and interest in the "primitive" and exotic racial Other, were what drew many anthropologists to the region in the mid twentieth-century, they have also become contested terrain and ignited efforts to debunk the obsessive mythical visions of Amazonia and its people. These debates date back at least to Napoleon Chagnon's 1968 study of the Yanomami and the many criticisms that followed, and have continued to be relevant to twenty-first century constructions of Amazonian environments and indigeneity.[3] As Alma Guillermoprieto recently noted, these debates have cast a weighing shadow over academic research and the idea of the "primitive," "savage," and timeless Amazon.[4]

In many Amazonian nations, vigorous scholarly research has made progress in undermining the constructed images of "mythic redundancy and hyperbolic naturalistic excess," that Nugent criticized.[5] However, in other pockets of Amazonia, ahistorical constructions remain quite durable. The Ecuadorian Amazon (known locally as the *Oriente*), for example, has its share of romantic myths that continue to circulate in both popular and academic spheres. The Oriente is not only home to iconic and supposedly "lost tribes," (such as the Waorani), but the idea that the natural and social landscape remained unchanged and relatively intact until the mid-twentieth-century crops up frequently and in a remarkable array of guises.[6]

This essay analyzes the persistence of representations of the Oriente as a region that only emerged from isolation in the 1960s. I examine why this ahistorical construction continues to thrive and point to some of the causes that allow for its

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[3] Napoleon A. Chagnon, *Yanomamö: The Fierce People,* third edition (New York: Hold McDougal, 1984). Chagnon's most vocal critic is R. Brian Ferguson. See his *Yanomami Warfare: A Political History* (Santa Fe: School for Advanced Research Press, 1995) and "History, Explanation, and War Among the Yanomami: A Response to Chagnon's *Noble Savages*," *Anthropological Theory* 15, no. 4 (2015). For the continued relevance of primitive representations and indigeneity, see Conklin and Graham, "The Shifting Middle Ground: Amazonian Indians and Eco-Politics," *American Anthropologist* 97, no. 4 (1995); David Stoll, "The Obligatory Indian," *Dialectical Anthropology* 35 (2011).

[4] Alma Guillermoprieto, "Claudia Andujar: Witness to the Yanomami's Last Struggle," *The New York Review of Books,* 17 April 2019. https://www.nybooks.com/daily/2019/04/17/claudia-andujar-witness-to-the-yanomamis-last-struggle/ [accessed 20 April 2019].

[5] See the works of Santos-Granero and Barclay, Ferguson, Nugent, Garfield, Gootenberg and Dávalos, Taussig, Weinstein, among many others (all in bibliography).

[6] For another analysis of the ahistorical mythology associated with the Oriente, see José Almeida Vinueza, "El mito de la Amazonía en la construcción de la identidad Ecuatoriana," *Memoria: MARKA Instituto de Historia y Antropología Andina,* no. 4 (1994).

continued perpetuation. I argue that it is not only a useful construct for attracting tourists, as well as international NGO and philanthropic support, but its persistence is also related to academic disciplinary divides and evasions, as well as the curious state of the region within Ecuadorian historiography. When compared to that of other Amazonian nations, Ecuadorian historiography remains far behind the curve in incorporating the region into national historiographies and understanding the important contributions that can be made when analyzing broader thematic questions *from* the Oriente, which, I argue, are many. The essay concludes with a brief historical sketch of the twentieth-century Oriente that reveals how the region was shaped by global flows of people, commodities, and ideas long before the discovery of oil in the 1960s. Rather than a mere attempt at highlighting empirical details, this brief historical sketch suggests that studying the Oriente should engage the fruitful analytical frameworks that refuse to treat regions or cultures in isolation, but as part of multiscalar and multidimensional global flows. [7] I also attempt to illuminate important contributions that can be made when analyzing national and global historiographical questions *from* the Oriente. While necessarily selective and making no pretension to serving as an intricate social history, the final section attempts to reveal the shortcomings of constructions of the Oriente's isolation that have long been criticized but remain embedded in popular and academic discourse.

Isolation, Timelessness, and the Exotic: From Philanthropy to the Academy

Constructed images of a region isolated and untouched by the modern world until the 1960s are useful in many ways. First, the idea fits well into the ears and minds of foreigners that only know the Amazon through romantic tales. It is attractive to tourists looking for an adventurous jungle getaway, and it opens the wallets of philanthropists and NGOs professing desires to protect what they deem as the untouched "lungs of the earth." These constructions also draw attention to, and support for, David vs. Goliath struggles like the seemingly never-ending legal suit brought against Texaco (now Chevron) by the Oriente's poor and indigenous people.

[7] This is, of course, taking a page from the rich literature on the anthropology of globalization, the transnational turn (especially in cultural, intellectual, and commodity history), and new global histories of capitalism. This literature is far too vast to be cited here, but in many ways, it goes back to Ortiz, Mintz, Wolf, and continues through the works of scholars such as Appadurai, Beckert, Gootenberg, and others (see bibliography). For an analysis of the concept of "flow," and some of this anthropological literature, see Stuart Alexander Rockefeller, "Flow," *Current Anthropology* 52, no. 4 (August 2011).

As David Stoll has noted, attracting international support for these struggles often demands that indigenous people portray themselves as their supporters in the global north prefer—exotic and "authentic"—thereby creating "the Obligatory Indian."[8] In short, the notion that the Oriente and its people have lifestyles, as one story recently put it, "largely unchanged from that of their ancestors centuries ago," has great transnational political utility.[9]

This mythical version of the past did not emerge from a void—it was constructed by interested parties who today remain invested in preserving it. One (of many) examples is the Protestant missionaries that began working in the Oriente in the 1920s, but became internationally famous in the 1950s. Like postwar reincarnations of westward expansionist pioneers, a few of these young, adventurous missionaries landed in the Ecuadorian Amazon as a result of their search for another frontier to civilize.[10] Soon after, five of them launched "Operation Auca," which attempted to make peaceful contact and convert the Waorani. The "operation" came to a grinding halt in January 1956, when the Waorani speared them all to death on the bank of the Curaray river. The story was soon splashed over the cover of *Life* magazine and spread like wildfire. In the ensuing years, as more Waorani were drawn into the missionary orbit, the evangelicals became globetrotting celebrities. Waorani converts were brought to Europe and the US on televised publicity tours and paraded on public stages as living success stories of the most recent white civilizing mission. Amid this self-promotion campaign, missionaries played a critical role in constructing and spreading the ahistorical image of Amazonian timelessness and isolation.[11] On printed pages, on public stages, and on television and radio broadcasts, they constantly recited the idea that the Waorani were living remnants of the "stone age" who continued living as their ancestors had for millennia. Rachel Saint—the sister of one of the slain missionaries—even got Ralph Edwards, the host of NBC's "This is Your Life," to repeatedly claim

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[8] Stoll, "The Obligatory Indian,"; See also Conklin and Graham, "The Shifting Middle Ground."

[9] Peter Korn, "A Village in Ecuador's Amazon Fights for Life as Oil Wells Move In," *National Resources Defense Council,* 4 April 2018. https://www.nrdc.org/onearth/village-ecuadors-amazon-fights-life-oil-wells-move [accessed 20 November 2018].

[10] Greg Grandin, *The End of the Myth: From the Frontier to the Border Wall in the Mind of America* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2019), 5.

[11] There were, however, exceptions, such as the Borman family. See Randall B. Borman, "Survival in a Hostile World: Culture Change and Missionary Influence Among the Cofán People of Ecuador, 1954-1994," *Missiology: An International Review* 24, no. 2 (April 1996).

that the Waorani were a "tribe still living in the stone age," but being rescued by benevolent North American Christians.[12]

This was a remarkable act of Sartrean bad faith, as these missionaries were well aware of local inter-ethnic contact and commerce during the rubber era, as well as countless Waorani raids in pursuit of non-stone age tools. The construct, however, was a useful rhetorical tool, which grew from publicity needs and political posturing rather than historical interpretation. The legendary "Operation Auca" still inspires waves of young and adventurous pioneers to continue seeking out isolated peoples. The line connecting the Curaray martyrs to people like John Allen Chau—the North American missionary/adventurer who was recently killed by indigenous people on North Sentinel Island while attempting to spread the gospel—is hard to miss.[13] Today, the children of these missionaries continue to spin mythical historical tales where Waorani are made into stone-age savages that were, until missionary contact, "living the same way the Waorani people had lived since the beginning of time," as their 2005 film, *The End of the Spear*, tells us.

The hyperbolic trope of regional isolation and "authentic" Indians not only finds a comfortable refuge in popular culture. Although less often, the idea is spread by academics as well. For example, while examining discursive shifts within the national indigenous movement, the political scientist Thea Riofrancos recently argued that with the inclusion of lowland indigenous people, the national indigenous movement began making demands for "territory" (a "space of cultural is (re)production," according to Riofrancos) rather than "land" (a material source of subsistence). Although this argument is about a particular context (twenty-first century social movements), it is rooted in a particular vision of the past. "This territorialized understanding of cultural identity," argues Riofrancos, "was historically grounded in Amazonian peoples' relative autonomy from the state (and often, other indigenous settlements) until the 1960s."[14]

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[12] James C. Hefley, "Aucas Abroad," *Evangel Magazine*, April 24, 1967. To see a clip of Rachel Saint on "This Is Your Life" in 1957, see Justin Taylor, "This is Your Life: Missionary to Ecuador Rachel Saint and Huaorani Convert Dayuma," *The Gospel Coalition,* 5 June 2017. https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/evangelical-history/this-is-your-life-rachel-saint-june-5-1957/ [accessed 20 January 2019].

[13] Jay Riley Case, "What the Waorani Mission Wrought," *Christianity Today* (March 2019) and Tim Sohn, "Inside the Story of John Allen Chau's Ill-fated Trip to a Remote Island," *Smithsonian,* 7 December 2018. https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/inside-story-john-allen-chaus-ill-fated-trip-remote-island-180970971/ [accessed 20 January 2019]

[14] Thea Riofrancos, "Extractivismo Unearthed: A Genealogy of a Radical Discourse," *Cultural Studies* 31, no. 2-3 (2017): 285.

Thus, lowland indigenous people become, yet again, isolated populations tucked away in the jungle that time left behind.

There are many attempts to prop up contemporary social and political analysis on mythical historical scaffolds. For example, in the context of a larger argument about the "persistence of the indigenous commune," Ana María Durán Calisto recently argued that "the Ecuadorian Amazon remained relatively unaltered until the end of the 1960s. Indigenous communities subsisted up until then on shifting agriculture (rotating *chakras*), hunting, and fishing. This relative isolation was lost when oil was discovered in 1967 by the Texaco-Gulf consortium."[15] Another scholar supported an argument about twenty-first century indigenous social movements by asserting that the Oriente "had been a sort of last frontier, a borderland beyond the reach of the state, in which indigenous groups. . . had been able to survive relatively unmolested into the second half of the century."[16] In all these examples, the Oriente and its people emerge from the timeless void of the rainforest in the 1960s.

The isolationist vision of the Oriente's past has been dressed up in many styles. Sometimes it is more modest and carefully qualified than others, recognizing historical forces but never straying far from the notion of timelessness. For example, one scholar recognized that in the pre-petroleum years, forms of debt peonage did penetrate indigenous territories in the Oriente but argued that they "did not significantly alter lowland Quichua internal social or political organization."[17] The takeaway, again and again, is that history really began with the oil boom.

Of course, how we evaluate these statements depends completely on how far we can stretch the meaning of "relative" or "significantly." In my view, however, even the most generous semantic stretch is not equipped for facing the rich and dynamic social and ethno history of the Oriente. I argue that rather than semantic tweaking, it is more fruitful to broaden our analytical contours and forego notions of isolation or authentic "territoritorialized" culture, as so many other currents of scholarship did long ago. For decades, an eclectic group of thinkers have deployed concepts like "flows" and "deterritorialization" in developing multiscalar analyses which refuse to treat cultures

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[15] Ana María Durán Calisto, "For the Persistence of the Indigenous Commune in Amazonia," *e-flux,* 5 Feb 2019. https://www.e-flux.com/architecture/overgrowth/221618/for-the-persistence-of-the-indigenous-commune-in-amazonia/ [accessed 12 Feb 2019].

[16] Timo Schaefer, "Engaging Modernity: The Political Making of Indigenous Movements in Bolivia and Ecuador, 1900-2008," *Third World Quarterly* 30, no. 2 (2009): 404.

[17] Thomas Perreault, "Changing Places: Transnational Networks, Ethnic Politics, and Community Development in the Ecuadorian Amazon," *Political Geography* 22 (2003): 73.

or social formations in isolation, but rather as products of global flows and transformative interconnections.[18] It is clear, not only in the examples cited above, but in countless academic and popular representations of the Oriente, that the analytical confines within which the region continues to be studied have largely evaded this current of analysis.

It is far more fruitful to start from the premise that before the 1960s, the Oriente and its people were far from isolated. Instead, global flows of people, ideas, and commodities had profound impacts on the region long before the 1960s, and the Oriente was rarely (maybe never, but especially not in the twentieth-century) outside of the purview of the state, in both ideology and practice. The indigenous people who faced an onslaught of colonization and oil extraction in the 1960s did not have a history of isolation, but were instead historical protagonists and survivors of numerous national and global forces that converged on the region, uprooted communities, and left deep scars on the social and natural world. Thus, the oil boom and agrarian reform-led colonization were simply the most recent forces enacting change on the Oriente's social landscape.

Scholars can, and should, debate the extent of the impact of global and national forces on the region and its people. Even those that disagree about the magnitude of these impacts, however, can arrive to productive ground by discarding the romantic notion of isolation. For example, while tracing a disagreement between himself and Robert Wasserstrom, Michael Cepek recently argued, "many activists and journalists[19] suggest that the Cofán lived in a pristine, isolated, and ahistorical state when Chevron (then Texaco) arrived in their territory in 1964. The idea, of course, is absurd."[20] It is indeed absurd, but it is an idea that continues to be trafficked by academics and others. It is important not only to examine how frequently the idea is spread, but to examine *why* it remains prominent and popular, and counter it with a more realistic perspective of the region's past.

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[18] On the concepts of "flow," deterritorialization, and reterritorialization (and equally important, their roots in Deleuze and Guattari) see Rockefeller, "Flow." Much of this literature is cited in footnote seven.

[19] As we have seen, academics must also be included with activists and journalists.

[20] Michael Cepek, *Life in Oil: Cofán Survival in the Petroleum Fields of Amazonia* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2018), 256.

Disciplinary Divides and Contributions from the Frontier

Aside from the overactive romanticism of the western imagination, there are also concrete explanatory factors relating to research and scholarship that help explain the persistence of the isolationist vision. One factor is that Ecuador's rigid geographic and regional divides have been mapped onto the scholarly literature. While this is not a uniquely Ecuadorian problem, there is something particularly resilient about regionalism in Ecuador. While geographic divides throughout the Andes have also given rise to regionalist scholarship that has broadened our analytical focus beyond the lettered cities and toward national peripheries, elsewhere, there seems to be a more concerted effort to bridge regional contexts with larger national and global processes, and scholarly debates.[21]

Most of Ecuadorian historiography and its prominent themes pivot around Andean and coastal poles.[22] Even with respect to critical events and ruptures in the historiography of Ecuadorian state-formation—for example, the Liberal Revolution—the Oriente has been left out of the story. In what is undeniably a superb analysis of the multifaceted aspects of the Liberal Revolution and the many complexities of Ecuadorian Liberalism, Enrique Ayala's Mora's nearly 400-page *Historia de la Revolución Liberal Ecuatoriana,* the Oriente is barely mentioned. This is not a critique of Ayala Mora's book—it is excellent and, in any case, no study can cover every corner of a country. However, the point is that the Oriente is almost always seen—until the oil boom—as disconnected from the historical forces driving change in the highlands or coast. And this is far from the only case. Ecuadorian historiography includes rich studies on Liberalism, Populism, state-formation, labor regimes, subaltern resistance, economic development, and political history—all the topics that attract historians—but the Oriente is either completely excluded or highly marginal. Tellingly, in a sweeping

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[21] Brooke Larson, *Cochabamba, 1550-1900: Colonialism and Agrarian Transformation in Bolivia,* expanded edition (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998), ch. 10, in particular, 330-338; Seth Garfield, "'Where the Earth Touches the Sky': The Xavante Struggle for Land in Brazil, 1951-1980" *Hispanic American Historical Review* 80, no. 3 (August 2000); Nugent, *The Rise and Fall of the Amazon Rubber Boom*, 5.

[22] Here, I am strictly concerned with the Oriente's role in Ecuadorian historiography before the oil boom. Of course, it is undeniable that the Oriente bursts onto the national scene in the scholarly literature after oil is discovered (see the works of Martz and Philip in bibliography). I also do not want to discount the growing literature on Amazonian indigenous politics, although these works typically begin after 1960, leaving aside the deep history of indigenous agency and resistance in the Oriente (see, among others, Lucero and Yashar in bibliography).

analysis of Ecuadorian historiography—and even in the section on regionalism—the Oriente is absent.[23]

However, important national events like the Liberal revolution were not geographically limited to the highlands or coast. In fact, like their counterparts in the rest of the country, anti-clerical Liberals in the Oriente also took up arms against the entrenched powers of local parish priests. Armed fighting ensued, insurrectionists faced repression from conservative forces, and some even landed in jail. After the Liberals triumphed, Alfaro's Minister of the Interior and the most radical member of his cabinet, José Lapierre, named one of the jailed anti-Jesuit rebels as the first Liberal Governor of the Oriente.[24] This is merely one of the many examples of how the Oriente was not only influenced by, and participated in, national political events that transformed the country, but also became a high priority within the political designs of central governments.

The other side of this equation is the fact that much of the scholarly literature directly focused on the Oriente—mainly dominated by cultural anthropology and political geography—delves deep down into the cultural subsoil of indigenous Amazonians. For all of their useful insights, findings, and arguments, carefully detailed ethnographies sometimes come at the cost of treating the Oriente and its people in isolation from the larger national and global flows of politics, people, and ideas that shaped the region. As a result, the important works on local ethno-linguistic groups or small villages have been largely passed over by the central themes of Ecuadorian historiography. Furthermore, much of the Oriente-focused literature has also evaded what, in other fields, seems to be a pressing need to abandon rigid and essentialist notions of culture—which in the Oriente, lead to isolationist myths—and turn toward analyzing global connections and inter-cultural flows.

It is rather surprising that these disciplinary divides continue to be so potent. Almost twenty-five years ago, it was harshly criticized by Anne Christine Taylor. In the opening essay of *Historia y región en el Ecuador: 1830-1930,* Taylor noted that in the

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[23] Enrique Ayala Mora, *Historiografía Ecuatoriana: Apuntes para una visión general* (Quito: Universidad Andina Simón Bolívar, 2015). The Oriente fares better in Ayala Mora's "Centralismo y descentralización el la historia del Ecuador del pasado a la situación actual", *Procesos: Revista Ecuatoriana de Historia,* no. 19 (2003).

[24] Luis Anda, "Guarnición de Oriente, Plaza de Archidona," May 1895, Archivo Nacional del Ecuador, Ministerio del Interior, Oriente (hereafter ANE-MIO); José de Lapierre, *Informe del Ministro de lo Interior y Policía a la Convención Nacional de 1896-97* (Quito: Imprenta Nacional, 1897); Alejandro M. Sandoval to Ministro de Estado en el despacho de lo Interior in Quito, May 10, 1896, ANE-MIO.

planning stages of the volume, the editors did not even consider including an essay on the Oriente. Despite its importance to the nation (by then, wars had been fought and lost over Amazonian territory, and the national economy was based on Oriente oil), this *region* and its *history* were to be excluded from an edited volume on Ecuadorian regions and history. Taylor argued that the "curious state of the Amazon in Ecuadorian historiography" was due to the "traditional division of our disciplines," which led anthropologists to "study the immobility of the peripheral jungles" while historians studied the centers of economic and political power. For Taylor, a meaningful analysis of the Oriente would not only offer important contributions to Ecuadorian historiography, but would also highlight the pressing need to stop peddling ahistorical myths. In particular, she argued, "the time has come to discard, once and for all, the lamentable mythology—the basis of a dishonest tourism—which sees the Waorani as the living examples of miraculously preserved primitivism; the survivors of the Casa Arana, living fossils of the stone age."[25] But unfortunately, that "lamentable mythology" continues to thrive.

Taylor's plea followed in the wake of what perhaps still remains the most thorough study of the Oriente's history. In 1991, Blanca Muratorio published *The Life and Times of Grandfather Alonso,* based on meticulous archival research and oral histories of a Pano Runa elder.[26] Muratorio not only provided abundant evidence of the dynamic forces of change that converged on the Oriente, but showed clearly how lowland Kichwa people engaged, contested, and resisted throughout the postcolonial era. Taylor's plea has also not gone completely ignored since 1994. For example, an important volume on the history of Ecuadorian state-formation published in 2007 included an essay on the Oriente.[27] A group of researchers—including Robert Wasserstrom, Natàlia Esvertit Cobes, William Fischer, Camilo Mongua, among others—have also produced engaging studies rooted in local archives that also place the region against the larger historical backdrop of state formation and global

[25] Anne Christine Taylor, "El Oriente Ecuatoriano en el siglo XIX: 'El otro litoral'" in *Historia y región en el Ecuador: 1830-1930*, ed. Juan Maiguashca (Quito: Corporación Editora Nacional/FLACSO/CERLAC, 1994), 17-18.

[26] Blanca Muratorio, *The Life and Times of Grandfather Alonso: Culture and History in the Upper Amazon* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1991).

[27] Juliet S. Erazo, "Same State, Different Histories, Diverse Strategies: The Ecuadorian Amazon," in *Highland Indians and the State in Modern Ecuador*, A. Kim Clark and Marc Becker, eds. (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2007).

commodity and cultural flows.[28] While mainly concerned with the impacts and transformations brought about by the creeping oil and colonist frontier, Michael Cepek's new book, *Life in Oil,* neither ignores the complex history of the region, nor sidesteps the debates about how historical processes have shaped the inter-ethnic confrontations that came after the discovery of oil. Perhaps most importantly, he does not, as one reviewer rightly noted, "simply make the natives into his philosophical playthings" as others so frequently do.[29] Taken together, all of these works should have tightly nailed the coffin of isolationist historical myths. Unfortunately, they have not.

It may be tempting to chalk this all up to the fact that frontiers are, by definition, peripheral to national societies and thus are logically peripheral to nation-based scholarly literature.[30] But this is not always the case. For example, it would be hard to overestimate the importance of the frontier in US historiography and popular lore of American culture. Indeed, after Fredrick Jackson Turner argued that it was the frontier that provided the regenerative energy to the American soul, the idea remained central for generations of scholars (although today, as Greg Grandin has recently noted, the centrality of the border wall in the American political sphere has probably permanently snuffed out the mythology previously associated with the frontier). In Chile, Argentina, and elsewhere, postcolonial frontier conquests (what one historian has called "postcolonial colonialism") are critical to the deep histories of nation-making and state-formation.[31] The Oriente has had no such luck.

Yet if we look closer, it is clear that the Ecuadorian Oriente is ripe with opportunities to engage larger historiographical debates. The Oriente's postcolonial history can provide important contributions to scholarly conversations forged by prominent scholars like Andrés Guerrero on state-formation and the varied and atypical forms of state power and ethnic administration. Echoing Philip Abram's argument from a few decades ago, when he warned us against reifying the distinction between

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[28] Also see Almeida Vinueza, "El mito de la Amazonía en la construcción de la identidad Ecuatoriana," and María del Pilar Gamarra, "La Frontera Nómada: Frentes y fronteras económicas en el proceso cauchero ecuatoriano (1870-1920)," *Procesos: Revista Ecuatoriana de la historia,* no. 9 (1996).

[29] Shane Greene, review of *Life in Oil: Cofán Survival in the Petroleum Fields of Amazonia,* by Michael Cepek, *American Ethnologist* 46, no. 1 (2019): 116.

[30] It is worth noting that this is among the reasons that the concepts such as "borderlands" and "zomia" emerged.

[31] Alberto Harambour-Ross, "Borderland Sovereignties: Postcolonial Colonialism and State Making in Patagonia, Argentina and Chile, 1840s-1922" (PhD diss., Stony Brook University, 2012); Many scholars still use the concept of "internal colonialism" to refer to postcolonial frontier conquests, although the concept has transformed from its early iterations developed by Pablo Gonzalez-Casanova and Rodolfo Stavenhagen.

"the state" and "civil society," scholars like Guerrero have shown that in the process of Ecuadorian state-formation, "the state" often delegated its authority and "ethnic administration" to powerful non-state forces such as hacendados.[32] Recently, this analytical focus has been carried forward by Christopher Krupa who has shown that forms of "state by proxy" remain prominent around the turn of the twenty-first century in the Ecuadorian highlands.[33] Rather than being condemned to a condition of statelessness and disconnected from forms of rule prominent in the rest of the country, the Oriente followed a similar pattern. In the late nineteenth century, the central government delegated a huge amount of what Guerrero called "ethnic administration" to Jesuit missionaries. As it did elsewhere in the country, the Liberal Revolution ruptured this ruling strategy in the Oriente. Liberals kicked out the Jesuits and a new state-building project was designed. Liberal statesman attempted to dismantle privatized forms of ethnic administration, become what Guerrero called "ventriloquists," and wrest indigenous peoples from the orbit of *patrones* to serve the state, labor on public works projects, and culturally "civilize" them. Thus, in this respect, the Oriente was not an outlier, but part of a similar trajectory that shaped the rest of the nation.

Furthermore, unequal ethnic administration amidst regimes of universal citizenship analyzed by Guerrero, as well as the racial discourses that justified ethnic inequality, can also yield new insights if examined from Oriente. Local forms of race-thinking emerged in the Oriente that not only engaged national debates on the so-called "Indian problem" and "Indian redemption," but were also informed by global flows of ideas such as Social Darwinism and Positivism. While engaging these broader currents of ideas, local forms of race-thinking were also shaped by the dizzying diversity of the Oriente's indigenous population. Like their contemporaries elsewhere, white settlers built typologies of the local populations, and practices of ethnic administration were

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[32] Andrés Guerrero, "The Administration of Dominated Populations under a Regime of Customary Citizenship: The Case of Postcolonial Ecuador," in *After Spanish Rule: Postcolonial Predicaments of the Americas,* ed Mark Thurner and Andrés Guerrero (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003); Andrés Guerrero, "The Construction of a Ventriloquist's Image: Liberal Discourse and the 'Miserable Indian Race' in Late 19th Century Ecuador," *Journal of Latin American Studies* 29, no. 3 (Oct 1997); Philip Abrams, "Notes on the Difficulty of Studying the State," *Journal of Historical Sociology* 1, no. 1 (March 1988).

[33] Christopher Krupa, "State by Proxy: Privatized Government in the Andes," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 52, no. 2 (2010).

distilled through local forms of race-thinking.[34] This often resulted in policies (official and unofficial) which stood in stark contrast to national projects and shaped frontier state-formation. Rather than being cast aside as a perennial outlier to national civilizing missions, however, examining the close relationship between state-formation and race-thinking *from* the Oriente can illuminate the contours of *national* thought and policy. Elsewhere, scholars have shown how frontiers can provide instructive insights for examining national idealogical currents and policies, but this remains largely unexplored in Ecuadorian historiography.[35] However, in my view, it is indisputable that analyzing similar questions *from* the Oriente can be instructive to historiographical debates that reach beyond Ecuadorian borders.

In sum, examining a variety of questions from the Oriente frontier can allow us to better understand the contours of national projects and impacts of global forces. Liberal thinking about the so-called "Indian problem" and the subsequent policies of ethnic administration are, in my view, among the most instructive questions where an Oriente-rooted analysis can be fruitful. However, integrating the Oriente into larger historiographical debates on state-formation, race-relations, race-thinking, labor regimes, Ecuador's role in global commodity chains (among many other themes) can contribute important findings to broader historiographical discussions while simultaneously undermining mythical and exotic images of isolation.

A Very Brief History of a Region With History

Along with the new Liberal administrative designs around the turn of the century, the Oriente was part of a more general Liberal program to integrate the nation.[36] Important efforts to build *vías de comunicación* (roads and railroads) to the Oriente were central to Liberal plans of national integration, and many projects

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[34] For a glimpse into local forms of settler race thinking, see Fidel Alomia's two pamphlets, *Sin Dios, ni Ley* and *Ecos del Napo,* both at the Biblioteca del Ministerio de Cultura y Patrimonio (hereafter, BMCP). See also Pedro I. Porras, "The Discovery in Rome of an Anonymous Document on the Quijo Indians of the Upper Napo, Eastern Ecuador" in *Peasants, Primitives, and Proletariats: The Struggle for Identity in South America,* ed. David L. Browman and Ronald A. Schwarz (New York and Paris: Mouton Publishers, 1979). This has also been published in Spanish as "Los Indios Civilizados" *Antropología: Cuadernos de Investigación,* no. 9 (2010). For a Pan-Andean analysis of racial ideas and nation making, see Larson, *Trials of Nation Making.*

[35] Knight, "Racism, Revolution, and *Indigenismo*." See also James Sanders, *Vanguard of the Atlantic World: Creating Modernity, Nation, and Democracy in Nineteenth-Century Latin America* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014), 128-132.

[36] This new design was outlined in numerous *Leyes Especiales* from 1899, 1900, and 1904.

involved global actors.[37] In fact, one contract involved the same US engineers that worked on the Erie and New York Central railroads and were involved with the Quito-Guayaquil railroad.[38] Another involved the joint collaboration of Chilean and Ecuadorian investors who drew up ambitious plans to build a rail up the Pacific coast, across the Andes, and east to the Curaray.[39] Perhaps the most ambitious was a contract with the C*ompañía Franco-Holandesa* which not only provided for a railroad, but also the settling of thousands of European colonists in the Oriente. After crossing the Atlantic and plying upriver through Brazil and Peru, however, these colonists were turned around by Peruvian authorities and sent back across the Atlantic.[40] Nevertheless, the massive and ambitious project is illustrative of the fact that the Oriente did not remain outside of the Liberal political program.

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, the global demand for Amazonian rubber transformed the region yet again, bringing white settlers from all over the world to the Oriente. Often through the use of indigenous mediators, *patrones* distributed goods to indigenous communities at extraordinarily inflated prices in exchange for Indian labor, ensnaring thousands of indigenous people into debt peonage. Although theoretically legal and regulated, the system was riddled with abuse. A missionary traveling between Puyo and Tena in the 1920s noted that peonage remained rigid and essentially permanent: "no instance was mentioned wherein an Indian had ever worked off his obligation."[41] Thousands of indigenous people spent their lives in servitude, and since debt could be passed down to children, the peonage system had multi-generational impacts.

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[37] For this project in general, see A. Kim Clark, *The Redemptive Work: Railway and Nation in Ecuador, 1895-1930* (Wilmington: Scholarly Resources Books, 1998); Countless road projects were initiated in the Liberal era. See, for example, "Informe del Gobernador de Tungurahua" in *Informe del ministro de lo Interior y Policía, Beneficencia, etc. al Congreso Ordinario de 1899* (Quito: Imprenta Nacional, 1899), BMCP; E.T. Hurtado, "Propuesta para abrir un camino de Archidona a Quito" in *Informe del ministro de lo Interior y Policía, Beneficencia, etc. al Congreso Ordinario de 1900* (Quito: Imprenta Nacional, 1900), BMCP; A.J. Holguin, "Camino de Canelos" in "Informe del Gobernador del Oriente" in *Informe del Ministro de lo Interior y Policía, Beneficia, etc. al Congreso Ordinario de 1900* (Quito: Imprenta Nacional, 1900), BMCP.

[38] *The Iron Age: A Review of Hardware, Iron, Machinery, and Metal Trades,* 76, no. 4 (1905): 1631.

[39] Sindicato Chileno-Ecuatoriano, *Ferrocarril de Puerto Bolívar por Cuenca y Loja al Oriente* (Quito: Escuela de Artes y Oficios, 1919), Biblioteca Nacional del Ecuador, "Eugenio Espejo" (hereafter BNE).

[40] P. Jaramillo Alvarado, *Ferrocarriles al Oriente: De Ambato al Curaray, de Machala a Cuenca, de Puerto Bolívar por Loja al Marañon* (Quito: Imprenta y Encuardanación de la "Editorial Quito," 1922): 85-88, BNE.

[41] Howard B. Dinwiddie, "Ecuador: A Missionary Survey" (New York: Christian and Missionary Alliance, 1924), 35.

Searching for rubber-rich regions, *patrones* uprooted indigenous communities (sometimes by force, but not always) and carried them east, down the Napo, Curaray, Tigre, Pastaza, and Aguarico rivers. Thousands were drug far from their territories, destroying countless lives and communities. The vortex of the rubber economy and the spectrum of unfree labor regimes left numerous towns in the western Oriente depopulated. Coerced labor, combined with the common practice of Ecuadorian *patrones* selling Indian *peones* to pay off debts held in Iquitos merchant houses—something similar to what Andrés Reséndez has called the "other slavery"—contributed to vast demographic and cultural transformation.[42] Just from the Avila-Loreto region, roughly 1,000 Kichwa speaking *peones* were carried downriver to tap rubber—only about 40 returned.[43] Along with Loreto and Ávila, Concepción was also severely depopulated due to this practice.[44] In 1899, one settler noted that the pueblos of Santa Rosa, Payamino, and Suno no longer existed.[45] By 1907, numerous *caucheros* were charged with uprooting indigenous families in Pucaurcu, Atahualpa, and almost draining the entire population of Ahuano, taking them all down the Curaray to gather rubber.[46] In 1908-09, the advocacy of a priest made a national scandal out of a widespread slave trading operation ran by Jaime Mejía.[47] The practice of buying and selling indigenous children was so widespread, and such a blight on the image of "civilized" government authorities, that those who drafted the 1899 *Ley para la Región Oriental* found it necessary to explicitly forbid any government authorities to "authorize

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[42] Andrés Reséndes, *The Other Slavery: The Uncovered Story of Indian Enslavement in America* (Boston: Mariner Books, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2016). Miguel Angel Cabodevilla, *La selva de los fantasmas errantes* (Coca: CICAME, 1997), 118; Also see Matthew Ford, "The Other Slavery at the Heart of America: Andrés Reséndez, Indian Enslavement, and Looking South to Amazonia," *Middle Atlantic Review of Latin American Studies* 1, no. 2 (2017).

[43] Udo Oberem, *Los Quijos: Historia de la transculturación de un grupo indígena en el Oriente Ecuatoriano* (Otavalo: Instituto Otavaleño de Antropología, 1980), 97-98; Taylor, "El Oriente Ecuatoriano en el siglo XIX," 43.

[44] See testimony of Fernando Andrade, in Leonir Dall' Alba, *Pioneros, nativos y colonos: El Dorado en el siglo veinte* (Quito: Abya Yala, Petroecuador y Misión Josefina del Napo, 1992), 53; Cabodevilla, *La selva de los fantasmas errantes,* 118.

[45] Fidel Alomia, *Sin Dios, ni Ley* (1899), 5-6, BMCP.

[46] Causa Criminal contra el Señor Antonio Llori, por infracción de los artículos 29 y 30 de la Ley de Oriente. Comisaria Fiscal, Tena, a 14 de octubre de 1907. Archivo de la Gobernación de Napo, Tena, (hereafter AGN). According to this long *sumario,* the Llori family was the main culprit. However, many others were involved, including the Alomia's.

[47] Miguel A. Román to General Eloy Alfaro, January 1909. ANE, "Reservas" 1873-1926, folder 177; Roman's criticisms of white abuse against Indians were also carried in the national press. See, for example, "Ya era tiempo" *El Ecuatoriano,* March 6, 1909 and *El Tiempo,* May 14, 1908.

nor tolerate the sale of *niños*, for any price."[48] Although scholars have debated whether it was the debt or the person that was being sold in these transactions, this academic debate was undoubtedly less relevant for those being transferred/sold.[49]

For indigenous communities that resisted being ensnared into debt peonage or simply resisted incursions onto their territory, white settlers organized slave raids and extermination campaigns.[50] Of course, the Putumayo region has become the most infamous example of the rubber-era bloodletting, but genocidal violence did not magically skip over what is today the Ecuadorian Amazon. One civil authority, Vicente Bravo, noted this unfortunate reality in 1906, arguing that it was not only Peruvians and Colombians that were guilty of vicious forms of violence, but that the "Indian hunts" were "scandalously carried out with cruelty on a grand scale" even by Ecuadorian "*ribereños* in the forests of the Napo, Curaray, Tigre, and their tributaries."[51] While these hunts were sometimes condemned by Liberal state-builders like Bravo, that was not always the case. In 1910, one governor even praised a group of whites and their indigenous *peones* for tracking down the "savages of the Nushiño" and sent arms and ammunition to use in the hunt.[52]

At times, the connection between the Putumayo and the Ecuadorian Amazon was quite clear. For example, after his indigenous *peones* expressed reservations about tapping rubber in Waorani territory, Oscar Peñafiel, the son of a Spanish immigrant, went to the Putumayo, recruited fifty Colombian men, bought a cache of weapons, and launched attacks against the Waorani.[53] These types of attacks were recounted in vivid detail by Vicente Bravo. After finding a Waorani longhouse, the whites and their *peones* made noises to scare Waorani out of their houses and opened fire on sight. "After finishing off the injured," wrote Bravo, "[the attackers] enter the hut, kill the elderly, tie

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[48] Article 17, "Ley para la Región Oriental," in *Leyes y Decretos de los Congresos Extraordinarios y Ordinario de 1899* (Quito: Imprenta nacional, 1900).

[49] Frederica Barclay, "Sociedad y economía en el espacio cauchero ecuatoriano de la cuenca del Río Napo, 1870-1930" in *Fronteras, colonización y mano de obra indígena en la Amazonía Andina, Siglos XIX-XX,* ed. Pilar García Jordán (Lima: Editorial de la Pontificia Universidad Católica de Perú; Barcelona: Universitat de Barcelona y el Taller de Estudios e Investigaciones Andino-Amazónicas, 1998); Muratorio, *The Life and Times of Grandfather Alonso.*

[50] Miguel Ángel Cabodevilla, *Los Huaorani en la historia de los pueblos del Oriente* (Coca: CICAME, 1994), 263-267.

[51] Bravo, *Viaje al Oriente: Segunda parte, En la Región del Curaray* (Quito: Imprenta del EMG, 1920), 124, BMCP.

[52] Carlos A. Rivadeneyra, Jefe Político de Cantón Napo to Señor Teniente Político de Archidona. March 12, 1910, AGN; Genaro Garcia to Jefe Politico del Canton Napo, Archidona. no. 83. August 16, 1910, AGN.

[53] Cabodevilla, *Los Huaorani en la Historia de los pueblos del Oriente,* 267.

up the women and young men, and led them out to their canoes," taking them as slaves and burning the house as they left.[54]

The idea that the region remained in isolation until the 1960s, and that legalizing indigenous territories only became important in the 1960s becomes particularly problematic when we examine histories of cultures like the Tetete. In what is today the Cuyabeno Wildlife Reserve, rubber gatherers rampaged through the region, killing Tetete people on sight. This orgy of violence nearly wiped out the entire Tetete population.[55] Today, this region is often portrayed as "untouched" rainforest to attract tourists.

It is difficult to overstate the impact that the global demand for rubber had on the Oriente and its people. Miguel Angel Cabodevilla called it a "time of destruction," and Blanca Muratorio argued that "in one way or another, all the Indians [of the Oriente] were affected and suffered the consequences of the process unleashed by the international demand for wild rubber. Their productive and exchange systems were disrupted[,] and aspects of their social organization transformed forever."[56] Despite these conclusions reached through rigorous archival research, the impacts of the rubber economy are often ignored in academic and popular discourse.

In the early twentieth century, the Oriente also played an important role in nationalist imaginaries. During the Liberal era (which coincided with the peak of the rubber boom), patriotic fervor to conquer the frontier arose among *serrano* and coastal populations. Numerous groups known as *juntas* or *sociedades Orientalistas* formed throughout the country, promoting the colonization of the region and raising money for settler ventures.[57] These groups, akin to pioneer advocates for the western United States, along with the assistance of missionaries and the state, eventually settled hundreds of colonists into the Oriente.

The crash of the global market for Amazonian rubber brought yet another transformation to the Oriente. Many *patrones* abandoned the rubber zones in the far east and brought thousands of indigenous debt peons back upriver towards towns

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[54] Bravo, *Viaje al Oriente*, 124, BMCP.

[55] Robert Wasserstrom, "Surviving the Rubber Boom: Cofán and Siona Society in the Colombia-Ecuador Borderlands (1875-1955)," *Ethnohistory* 61, no. 3 (Summer 2014); Robert Wasserstrom, Susan Reider, and Rommel Lara, "Nobody Knew Their Names: The Black Legend of Tetete Extermination," *Ethnohistory* 58, no. 3 (Summer 2011).

[56] This is a chapter title in Cabodevilla, *Los Huaorani en la Historia de los pueblos del Oriente;* Muratorio, *The Life and Times of Grandfather Alonso,* 107.

[57] *Estatutos de la Sociedad de Orientalistas* (Quito: Imprenta y Encuadernación Nacionales, 1912), BMCP; Junta Promotora del Camino al Oriente, *A la Nación* (Quito: Imprenta de "El Comercio," 1907), BMCP.

depopulated a few decades before.[58] In the 1920s, as the rubber economy gave way to a settler agrarian economy, the demand for labor dwindled considerably, and some indigenous people were even freed from peonage (although, coerced and unfree labor undoubtedly remained a regional mainstay). Some went west, back upriver, and settled around small towns, working as day laborers for *hacendados* or government officials. There, they set about putting their lives and cultures back together, but never in pristine form. As Anne Christine Taylor argued, the previous cultural and demographic map was irreparable after the rubber boom. Some indigenous groups were almost completely liquidated, others were drug hundreds of miles from their home territories and others were forced to assimilate amongst new neighbors, molding a new cultural landscape out of the wake of chaos.

Around the bust of the rubber boom, the state also fell back into old governing habits by contracting foreign missionaries— this time, Italians, Spaniards, and North Americans—to take up state-like powers on the frontier. Rather than independent religious evangelists, the government demanded that these missionaries contribute to state-building projects, essentially becoming arms of the central government. Some served as bastions of national sovereignty in contested frontier regions, others were tasked with building roads to bring colonists, many built schools to "civilize" indigenous people, the Josefines brought electricity to Tena, and Protestants built a hospital and an airstrip.[59] The central government also did its part to attract European colonists in order to—keeping with contemporary global trends of scientific race thinking—improve the racial stock of the region. In 1930, the government signed a contract with Karel Vohnout to bring "Czechoslovakians preferably, but also Swiss, Norwegian, Danish, English, German, Polish, Romanian, and Yugoslavian colonists" to settle around Puyo, even paying for transportation and other costs.[60]

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[58] A glimpse of the shifting demographic landscape in the early 1920s, as well as classification of Indian statuses as peons or otherwise, was captured by Emilio Gianotti's, *Censo de Medio Napo,* housed at the Josefine Vatican archive. I'd like to thank Rob Wasserstrom and Miguel Angel Cabodevilla for generously making this document available to me. For a thorough analysis of this demographic shift, see Robert Wasserstrom and Teodoro Bustamante, "Ethnicity, Labor and Indigenous Populations in the Ecuadorian Amazon, 1822-2010" *Advances in Anthropology* 5 (2015).

[59] *Entre Los Aucas—La obra civilizadora del Instituto Linguistico de Verano entre los Aucas. Informe del Instituto Linguistico de Verano* (Quito: March 1969), BMCP; *A la "Juno" y al honorable congreso nacional: Informe de las Misiones Religiosas que trabajan en el Oriente Ecuatoriano* (Quito: 1950), BMCP.

[60] *Informe acerca del Proyecto de caminos y colonización en la Región Oriental,* no. 24 (Quito: Talleres Tipográficos Nacionales, 1930), BMCP.

In the 1940s, international forces continued to converge on the Oriente. Most notably, it became the theater of a war with Peru, resulting in large territorial loss for Ecuador. The government also granted the Royal Dutch Shell Company rights to explore for petroleum in the area. A massive undertaking ensued. Assisted by North American missionaries, Shell constructed a company town in the jungle just outside of Puyo—it still bears the company name today. The land was cleared, an airstrip was built, and small houses with grassy middle-American front yards were constructed. Even livestock was dropped from the air to feed oil workers.[61] It was, perhaps, a less ambitious version of Brazil's Fordlandia. Shell also worked with the Ministry of Defense and other contractors to construct a road from Baños to Mera—continuing the project that Leonard Exploration Company had begun two decades before—and hundreds of colonists fled down the Andes and settled around Puyo and Arajuno.[62] Most of this grueling work, of course, depended on indigenous labor and many former *peones* found their first wage-paying job with Shell. Hence, although seemingly disparate actors, missionaries and oil companies were both part of state designs to remake the Oriente, infuse an industrious settler workforce, and retain Amazonian territory.

After the collapse of the rubber industry, most indigenous people did not return to a romantic life of hunting and gathering. While the post-rubber years brought a respite for some indigenous communities—for example, Cofán territory was largely abandoned by whites after the rubber crash—rigid regimes of unfree labor remained a prominent part of the social landscape until the 1960s.[63] Settlers incorporated more land into their haciendas and indigenous peones continued to be "transferred" (or sold) between patrones. In 1963, the French ethnologist, Francisco Javier Beghin, was contracted by the Instituto Nacional de Colonización to analyze the problems facing

[61] Photographic and film documentation of Shell's operations is available at Archivo Blomberg in Quito.

[62] *Inauguración de la carretera Baños-Mera-Shell Mera* (Quito: Imprenta del Ministerio de Gobierno, 1943), BMCP; Taylor, "El Oriente Ecuatoriano en el siglo XIX," 47; Sources disagree on whether the contract was to construct a road to Sucumbíos or Puyo. What is clear, however, is that Leonard completed little, if any, of the work they agreed to do. See Jaramillo, *Informe presentado por la Dirección de Oriente al Ministerio del Ramo, en Quito, a 16 de Julio, de 1923,* Archivo Histórico del Guayas.

[63] Wasserstrom, "Surviving the Rubber Boom"; Borman, "Survival in a Hostile World"; Cepek, *Life in Oil.* For the continued existence of unfree labor regimes, see, among others, Javier Beghin, "Señálese existencia de verdadero esclavismo en algunos regiones del Oriente Ecuatoriano," *El Comercio,* July 22, 1963; Augustín Cueva, *Los Quichuas del Coca y el Napo* (Universidad Central del Ecuador, Escuela de Sociologia, Quito: 1969); HS Dickey, "Indians of Ecuador Threatened With Extinction," *Current History* 20, no. 4 (1924); Wasserstrom, "'*Yo fuí vendida':* Reconsidering Peonage and Genocide in Western Amazonia," *Advances in Anthropology* 7 (2017).

the Oriente. In his reports, while noting regional particularities, he argued that "the Indian is a merchandise that can be bought and sold at the will of the owners" and that a system of "true slavery" continued to thrive between Coca and Nueva Rocafuerte.[64] As late as the 1960s, indigenous people that wanted to go visit family members were forced to carry a "passport," that specified which patron they belonged to and the amount of time that they were allowed to be away.[65]

Indigenous Agents

Among the most problematic aspects of the constantly reappearing construction of regional isolation is that it largely ignores the agency of the Oriente's indigenous people in shaping the dynamic history of the region.[66] Amazonian Indians did not emerge as powerful historical actors in the 1960s, but long before. Even if we isolate the twentieth-century, we can clearly see that their acts of resistance debilitated settler and government projects alike.

Because labor was so racially marked in the Oriente—one observer noted "no white man works here"—the pursuits of settlers and government officials alike depended on indigenous labor.[67] Without it, social and economic life for whites came to a standstill. On countless occasions, explorers, landowners, and government officials found themselves abandoned by their native laborers.[68] Numerous road building and construction projects were stalled because indigenous peons fled from white settlements.[69] One civil authority noted in 1914 that when faced with abusive whites, "the indians would rather simply leave and settle far away from the patrones."[70] And

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[64] These quotes are from Francisco Beghin, "Señálese existencia de verdadero esclavismo en algunos regiones del Oriente Ecuatoriano"; For Beghin's complete study, see, "Putumayo, Napo, Pastaza" (Quito, 1963), Biblioteca Ecuatoriana Aurelio Espinosa Pólit. A second and shorter draft was published as "Informe sobre las condiciones de servidumbre vigentes en las haciendas del Oriente Ecuatoriano," *Humanitas: Boletín Ecuatoriano de Antropología* 5, no. 9 (1964).

[65] Numerous *pasaportes* are found at the AGN.

[66] There are however, a few exceptions often plucked out of context. The most popular of these are relegated to the sixteenth century and include the Jumandi rebellion and the 1599 "Jivaro rebellion."

[67] Dickey, "Indians of Ecuador Threatened With Extinction," 599.

[68] A. Hamilton Rice, "From Quito to the Amazon Via the River Napo" *The Geographic Journal* 21, no. 4 (April 1903).

[69] See, for example, Tenencia Política de la Coca (signature illegible) to Jefe Político Cantonal en Tena, May 17, 1910, AGN.

[70] JV Darqueas to Señor Ministro de Oriente, September 30, 1914, Vicariato Apóstolico de Napo, Misión Josefina (hereafter VAN-MJ).

indeed, on many occasions, that is what they did. Indigenous actions shaped the contours of state-formation and could cripple or spur the projects of white settlers.

Lowland Indians were also savvy political actors who engaged state bureaucracies throughout the century. Local archives house countless examples of indigenous *peones* contesting the terms of their debts and demanding that government authorities enforce existing labor legislation. Some even traveled all the way to Quito to voice their demands. For example, at the end of 1908, numerous indigenous men presented complaints in Quito denouncing their *patrones*, Pedro Jarrín and Ignacio Quiroz, for abusing peonage relations.[71] Others engaged Liberal discourses and argued that *patrones* were violating their "individual liberty" and that the new regulations on *concertaje* were not being enforced.[72] In just a few weeks in early 1919, at least 17 petitions launched by indigenous men landed on the desk of the jefe político of Napo-Curaray. They demanded to have their account books reviewed and complained that they were being charged for goods that they never received.[73]

Aside from engaging official channels to contest the terms of their domination, sometimes indigenous people simply resorted to violent resistance. While this was more common among smaller communities with less consistent contact with whites—such as the Waorani and Tetete—Kichwa people also attacked abusive patrones.[74] One patron noted that on more than one occasion, he learned that his peons were plotting to kill him.[75] Although often sparking retaliatory raids by whites, violent resistance and even the threat of attack sometimes halted the daily workings of the government and settlers.[76] For example, in 1910 on the Nushiño river, as a rubber tapping crew was away in the forest, a group of Waorani showed up in their camp and set about destroying their belongings and food. One member of the expedition witnessed this act

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[71] General Hipólito Moncayo, El Ministro de Guerra y Marina, Encargado del Despacho en Quito, Ministro de Instrucción Pública, Sección de Oriente, al Señor Gobernador de Oriente, November 3, 1908, AGN.

[72] Pablo Surbacco de Lara to Señor Teniente Politico de "La Coca," no. 140, November 15, 1921, VAN-MJ.

[73] These petitions came in between March 24 and April 15 of 1919. See Pablo Burbano de Lara of the jefetura política, canton Napo-Curaray to señor teniente político de Archidona, March 24, 1919, AGN. Pablo Burbano de Lara of the jefetura política, canton Napo-Curaray to señor teniente político de Archidona, April 7, 1919, AGN; Pablo Burbano de Lara of the jefetura política, canton Napo-Curaray to señor teniente político de Archidona, April 15, 1919, AGN.

[74] Genaro F. García, *Informe del Gobernador de la Provincia de Oriente al Ministerio de Instrucción Pública, Oriente, etc.* (Quito: Tipografia de la Escuela de Artes y Oficios, 1909), 18.

[75] Porras, "The Discovery in Rome of an Anonymous Document on the Quijo Indians of the Upper Napo, Eastern Ecuador."

[76] E. Hurtado to Ministro de Estado en el Despacho del Interior y Policía, November 10, 1898, ANE-MIO.

and, in horror, crept back to tell the rest of the crew. They all immediately abandoned their rubber expedition and fled to safe ground.[77] The year earlier, as Jose Ignacio Vinueza carried the mail from the Curaray to the Napo, he came across a jarring sight. Scattered across the shores of the Nushiño, were rotting corpses and torn clothes. Fearing for his life, Vinueza doubled back toward the Curaray, abandoning his task and opting to return the mail back to the *teniente político* instead.[78] Still years later, the problem persisted. Shell oil workers were repeatedly attacked by Waorani.[79] On countless occasions, these attacks led settlers—from caucheros and missionaries, to oil crews—to cut their losses and abandon dangerous territory.

Toward a Conclusion

With such a rich history—the surface barely scratched here—it is strange that images of Amazonian isolation remain so durable. Regionalist scholarly writing, missionary incomes and fame, as well as tourist dollars and NGO support all contribute in their own ways to the persistence of these tropes. Although it is politically useful, we should not confuse political utility with historical reality.

The postmodern and cultural turns have led many scholars to examine how indigenous leaders and intellectuals navigate global networks and discourses in extremely sophisticated ways. The findings almost unanimously show how indigenous people are remarkably politically savvy and know which discursive tools open the hearts and wallets of their gringo audiences in the global north—something equivalent to Spivak's "strategic essentialism."[80] But this is not limited to representations of the present. Other fields—notably, histories of memory—have treated the past as a political tool and their analyses have contributed fresh insights to different currents of historiography.[81] It is unfortunate that this same analytical focus has not been applied to the political utility of the Oriente's past. As a result, constructions of the Oriente's

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[77] Guillermina Garcés Martínez de Guerrero in Dall Alba (ed.), *Pioneros, nativos y colonos,* 14-15.

[78] Jose Ignacio Vinueza to señor teniente político de la parroquia Garcia del Canton Curaray, February 24, 1909, AGN.

[79] Rolf Blomberg, *The Naked Auca: An Account of the Indians of Ecuador* (Fair Lawn: Essential Books, 1957)

[80] For the Oriente, see Suzana Sawyer, *Crude Chronicles: Indigenous Politics, Multinational Oil, and Neoliberalism in Ecuador* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004) and Gabriela Valdivia, "On indigeneity, change, and representation in the northeastern Ecuadorian Amazon," *Environment and Planning* 37 (2005).

[81] Joanne Rappaport, *The Politics of Memory: Native Historical Interpretation in the Colombian Andes* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1998); Ethan J. Kytle and Blain Roberts, *Denmark Vesey's Garden: Slavery and Memory in the Cradle of the Confederacy* (New York: The New Press, 2019).

past have not been treated as politically infused discursive tools, but are taken as objective fact, and continue to be peddled as historical reality in both popular and academic venues.

Aside from the historical images constructed by international NGOs, tourist agencies, and academics, perhaps a more interesting source to examine is how indigenous leaders themselves strategically deploy particular versions of history in particular contexts. For example, I once watched a prominent indigenous leader from the Oriente give a talk to a young and idealistic group of undergraduates in the United States. The regional history that he recounted reflected the romantic isolationist version which was destroyed with the oil boom. When asked about the rubber economy, he replied that not only did the rubber economy have devastating impacts, but that many people were taken downriver and never returned. In other words, he discursively constructed a past that stood in stark contrast to—almost the exact opposite of—the romantic isolationist account that he articulated to the broader audience. Here, it was clear that constructing the past was a strategic maneuver and that certain versions were useful at certain times and contexts.

The indigenous movement does not singlehandedly recount the isolationist version of history. In one of their early collective publications as CONAIE, commemorating, as the book cover clearly says, "500 years of Indian resistance," (rather than 25), the section on the Oriente's history argues that the region had been impacted by resource extraction since the colonial era, and its people were subjected to labor and tribute regimes "with similar characteristics as the Sierra." Furthermore, they noted that the rubber economy gave rise to "an inhumane exploitation that bordered on slavery," with many communities ripped apart by *caucheros*.[82] Here, in a very different context and aimed at a very different audience, we find a different recounting of the past.

Interpreting the past is a difficult endeavor, and honestly missing the mark is part of the risk that we take as scholars. However, when arguments about the present are premised on a vision of the past that is more of a useful discursive tool than a realistic historical interpretation based on archival evidence, the arguments fall apart. Despite the warnings of scholars like Taylor and the rigorous archival research of others, off-handed references to the Oriente's past of isolation, disconnected from global flows of people, commodities, and ideas, have not stopped reappearing in

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[82] Confederación de Nacionalidades Indígenas del Ecuador, *Las Nacionalidades indígenas en el Ecuador: Nuestro proceso organizativo* (Quito: Ediciones Tinkui-Abya Yala, 1989), 39.

academic and popular discourse. It is long overdue for scholars to discard the trope of the Oriente's isolation. But, more than filling an empirical gap and undermining ahistorical myths, we should also engage broader historiographical debates *from* the Oriente. We may be surprised at what we find.

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