



Navigating shifting waters: Subjectivity, oil extraction, and Urarina territorial strategies in the Peruvian Amazon

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the relationships between extractive infrastructure, changing territorial strategies, and contemporary processes of subject formation among the Urarina, an indigenous people in the Peruvian Amazon. We first introduce the uneven and combined character of oil extraction in the Loreto region in north-eastern Peru, and how its racialised spatial contradictions are expressed in the ethnopolitical field that gives political form to regional extractive operations. The paper goes on to analyse the case of the Urarina people in the Chambira river basin, their particular place in the geography of extraction, and the case of the community of Nueva Unión. We examine contemporary processes of subject formation in the community, which combine radical transformations in the role of money, territorial strategies, use and valuation of the environment, and changes in political structure, in non-linear ways. The paper closes by examining how the case of the community of Nueva Unión sheds light on broader dynamics of subject formation, localised relations to the environment, and extraction as they play out in contemporary indigenous Amazonia.

1. Introduction

As the boat made its way around one last river bend, a line of newly-built houses appeared on the riverside, most of them no more than stilted platforms hastily erected over the previous weeks before the water level rose and left no dry ground to stand on. The previous location in which the community of Nueva Unión had settled for the last few decades had been abruptly abandoned as part of their negotiations with Pluspetrol,¹ the oil company then operating the pipeline that cuts across the community's lands, to the resentful resignation of some, the hopeful expectation of others, and the anxious ambivalence of most. As much as

by the stilted platforms, life in the new settlement was sustained by a strong sense of promise, albeit tempered by a generalised cynicism about the intentions of the oil company. Every aspect of life, it now seemed, was being marshalled to better navigate a new and uncertain situation.

This paper will explore the case of Nueva Unión, and how recent changes in the way the community's territory is inhabited and used cast light on the changing character of indigenous relations to extractive economies and national society in the Peruvian Amazon, the dynamics shaping localised relations to the environment, and the convergence of these forces in new processes of subject formation.

Recent decades have seen an important spatial, political, and

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¹ This pipeline was at the time managed by Pluspetrol Norte, a subdivision of Pluspetrol Peru, who according to their website is currently the largest oil and gas producer in the country. This is a subsidiary of Pluspetrol Resources Corporation B.V., who conducts operations in 9 countries across the Americas, Europe and Africa.

technical reconfiguration of extractive industries across Latin America (Bebbington, 2009; Gudynas, 2018; Riofrancos, 2020; Svampa, 2012), expressed in the opening of new resource frontiers, qualitative leaps in the scale of material throughput entailed in extractive operations, as well as the reorganisation of older economies of extraction (eg. Delgado Pugley, 2019). This deepening of South American economies' dependence on primary commodity exports has been a process closely bound to world-historical geographical shifts in industrial production in the world economy (Arboleda, 2020), one that has important and ongoing impacts in the infrastructural, political, and cultural forms through which new territories are incorporated into global supply chains across the different national spaces that encompass the Amazon basin (eg. Hope, 2016; Lyall, 2021; Sauer, 2018; Wilson and Bayón, 2018). This is a process that, far from expressing a seamless organisation of space under the abstract logic of capital, must instead be understood as an irreducibly uneven process which combines a vast array of disparate social and cultural logics under the aegis of capital accumulation in unstable and contradictory ways (Andueza, 2020). In the case examined in this paper, this is a process that involves the reproduction of non-capitalist social relations and values, the political dynamics associated with regional constitution of the 'landlord state' (Purcell and Martinez, 2018), and the global movements of fossil capital (Malm, 2016). In other words, we are here approaching extractive processes as bringing together heterogeneous spatial, temporal, and social relations in hierarchical and contradictory ways – what Arboleda (2022) has called the 'uneven and combined' nature of contemporary extractivism.

In this sense, the multiscalar nature of the ongoing production of extractive space in the region—in which the planet-spanning dynamics of the world market converge with scales as intimate as the body and identity in localised relations to the environment—calls for attention to be placed on the various political, social, and cultural mediations that articulate these different moments as an organic whole. Among these mediations, processes of subject formation associated with extractive frontiers have received recent attention from a range of different theoretical perspectives (eg. Buu-Sao, 2020, 2021; Frederiksen and Himley, 2020; Gago and Mezzadra, 2017; González-Hidalgo and Zografos, 2017; Van Teijlingen, 2016). Here we start from the contention that a critical, defetishizing² understanding of extractive processes needs to place attention on how 'extraction' as economic process—i.e. extraction as the production of ground-rent bearing primary commodities (Caligaris, 2016)—is always predicated upon the production (and destruction) of social subjects, and the relational socio-ecological fields in which these are defined at the different scales and spaces of capitalist production, circulation, and consumption. This means paying attention to how subjects are constituted through the material organisation of social reproduction and how they are interpellated³ by the field of power emergent from this organisation, in ways that cuts across any strict delimitation of political, cultural, or economic spheres. In other words, 'extractivism' is here approached as an environmentally mediated process of subject-formation; as the way in which the processes of class formation, racialisation, and gender differentiation that organise capitalist accumulation are made sense of at the level of the life-worlds that constitute concrete subjects.

In this sense, key to our analysis here is the *social* and *relational* constitution of subjectivity and agency – how concrete persons and their capacities come to be through the material reproduction and/or

² By 'defetishization' we are referring here to the analytical implications of the Marxian critique of 'economic objectivity' as being ultimately about the production of social subjects and the social relations through which these are constituted.

³ Interpellation refers here to a political and ideological process of subject formation; how a 'subject' comes to be through the multiple ways in which they are recognized, 'hailed', by the particular configuration of power they are part of (see Althusser 2006).

transformation of the field of relations they are a part of. In other words, we start from a decidedly non-individualist conception of subjectivity. This overlaps with long-standing themes in Amazonian ethnography over the specific modes of sociality and practice through which forms of personhood, identity, and agency are constituted in the context of indigenous Amazonia (eg. Bonilla, 2016; Santos-Granero, 2012; Seeger et al., 2019). In this paper we focus on how the specific modes of engagement of the Urarina with the political and economic dynamics associated to oil extraction converge in the production of novel subject positions, and their associated forms of agency, dependency, solidarity, and antagonism, as well as new forms of inhabitation and engagement with the landscape.

Contrasting the production of 'extractive subjectivities' to the more overtly direct and coercive forms of dispossession and political control often associated with resource frontiers, Frederiksen and Himley (2019) emphasise the ways in which processes of subject formation associated with extractive industries express the 'quieter registers of power' through which resource frontiers become politically stabilised. As they point out, geographical conditions shape the multiple ways in which power is both projected and resisted (Frederiksen and Himley, 2019:54). In this sense, attention to the many particular forms by which extraction economies are socially and politically articulated is warranted, especially given the role of persuasion, seduction, and manipulation—in addition to genocidal violence—have played in Amazonian resource frontiers (see Barclay, 2012; Martín Brañas et al., 2019). It is important, however, to remember that adaptation, negotiation, seduction, manipulation, and strategic ideological appropriation are as much part of the repertoire of power as they are of resistance (Scott, 1985, 1990), and that often the subject positions emergent from power-laden situations not only stabilise them politically, but also establish new terms for the political composition of the contradictions and antagonisms inherent to resource frontiers (cf. Buu-Sao, 2020; González-Hidalgo and Zografos, 2017). As we will show, subjectivities also often bear very long local histories of engagement with different extractive cycles, and the adaptive strategies emergent from these, many of which might not be immediately apparent (see Lyall, 2021; Vela-Almeida, 2020). In this sense, processes of subject-formation associated with extraction can only partially be approached as an effect of the projection of power by extractive capital or the state. More broadly, subjectivities express the ways in which the material realities of extractive cycles—including strategic interventions of the state and capital—are made sense of and faced from the historically and geographically situated moral economies⁴ that mediate and condense the long history of localised relations to the landscape, national social formations, political institutions, and the impersonal compulsions of the market (cf. Andueza 2020; Walker, 2012a). All these factors delineate the changing field of values, solidarities, and antagonisms in which subjectivities become defined.

In this paper we analyse these processes as they are taking place among Urarina communities in the Peruvian Amazon. Urarina lands are traversed by a section of the North Peruvian Oil Pipeline (*Oleoducto Nor-Peruano*)—that connects extraction sites in the northern Peruvian Amazon to the Pacific coast (see Fig. 1)—and have been affected by an undetermined number of oil spills (Lawson et al., 2022), as well as associated conflicts, interventions, and other processes this paper will examine. Many of the complex and rapid transformations taking place in contemporary Urarina territories (see Dean, 2009; Martín Brañas et al., 2019; Walker, 2012b) show a significant spatial overlap with the pipeline (Fabiano, 2021). This paper explores these transformations as they converge in rapidly evolving processes of subject formation and

⁴ We are here using the term moral economy to signal the cultural field of values in which social reproduction must always be ultimately embedded. The terms through which this articulates with, contradicts, and is reciprocally shaped by the imperatives of capitalist accumulation is a key empirical question. For a theoretical discussion see Andueza, 2020.

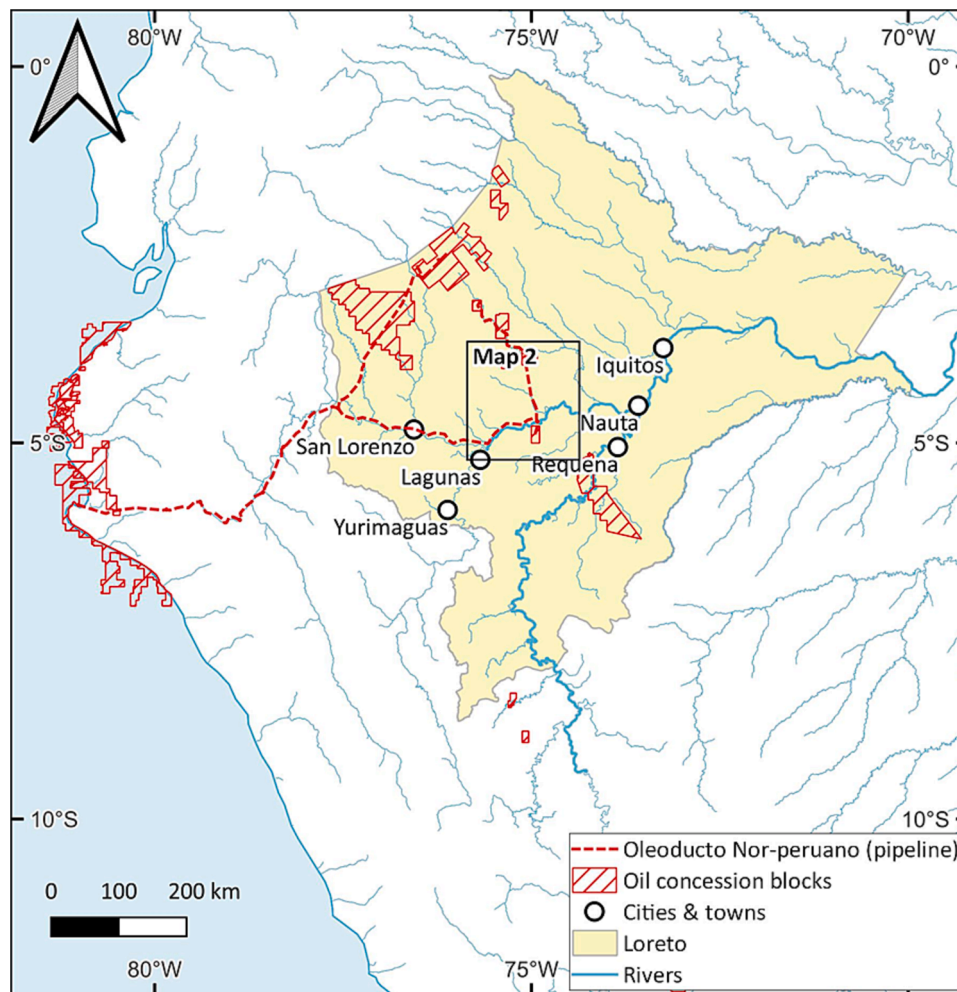


Fig. 1. The North-Peruvian oil pipeline connecting oil concession blocks in the Amazon basin to Peru's north-western Pacific coast. The black square corresponds to Fig. 2.

changing relations to the landscape, in which extractive infrastructure and its functions within different social spheres—from extractive logistics to the spatial dimensions of Urarina political strategies—play a critical role. Contemporary extractive operations are locally faced through both continuities and breaks in Urarina strategies for dealing with national society and previous iterations of extractive economies and are expressed in changing identities and local relations to the environment.

Much of the empirical basis of this paper derives from two month-long periods of fieldwork undertaken during 2019 in the Chambira river basin, in the Urarina communities of Nueva Unión and Nuevo Pandora, by an interdisciplinary team of researchers⁵. These periods involved participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and a range of participatory methods such as participatory mapping, focus group meetings, and guided transects. These data are framed, complemented, and interpreted in the light of observations, interviews, and conversations developed over a much longer period of ongoing

⁵ This was a very diverse team in terms of positionality – some of us are local researchers with long experience in the region and in Nueva Unión in particular, others were working with the community for the first time – and was characterised by different forms of expertise and roles within the research process, as well as being embedded in a diverse range of institutional affiliations, both north and south. Consequently, the authorship of this paper seeks to acknowledge the variety of ways in which the members of this team contributed across the different stages of the research process.

engagement and work by some of the authors with the community of Nueva Unión. This constituted an important ethnographic basis for the development of the arguments presented here, as well as for our original discussions around access and consent with Nueva Unión. It is worth mentioning that the questions around the impacts of oil extraction emerged over the course of the participatory development of a research agenda originally oriented towards understanding the different forms of cultural and social values associated with the surrounding wetlands, which are part of the largest known peatland complex in Amazonia (Hastie et al., 2022). It became evident that the changing values and contexts associated with the territory could only be understood in the context of the ongoing impacts of extractive infrastructure, and the ongoing strategic and adaptative territorial responses of the people in Nueva Unión.

The first section of the paper contextualises the situation in Urarina territories within the broader geography of uneven and combined development of oil extraction in the Loreto region of the Peruvian Amazon. It analyses the ways in which oil extraction has brought together processes of urbanisation with the production of a racialised extractive periphery. The contradictions inherent in this geography take the form of an 'ethnopolitical' field through which both forms of state power as well as new political subjects are constituted. The paper then moves on to the case of the Urarina in the Chambira basin to look at how this situation is faced from their history of engagement with national society as mediated by different iterations of extractive economies. As noted in the ethnographic literature (eg. Bonilla, 2016; Rival, 1998;

Walker, 2012a), in indigenous Amazonia asymmetry, power, and dependency can often be mobilised in the constitution of subject positions and forms of agency that complicate any simple opposition between domination and resistance, and dependency and antagonism. In the case of Nueva Unión, however, this relational matrix is modulated in important ways by radical shifts in the role of money in daily life, which introduces important new spatial, political, and socio-ecological dynamics and tendencies that converge in the constitution of new subject positions.

2. The Amazonian oil complex: uneven development and the ethnopolitics of extraction

Over the past half-century, one of the defining features of the northern Peruvian Amazon—administratively, the *Departamento* of Loreto⁶—has been its oil extraction industry. Although the sector did not really take off until the 1970s, its roots in the region can be traced as far back as the 1920s (Barclay, 2011; Santos-Granero and Barclay, 2002). While this early period only saw a series of rather unsuccessful exploration operations and small-scale extraction by US oil companies in the region, the prospect of vast oil deposits was one of the key driving forces behind efforts towards territorial consolidation of both the Peruvian and Ecuadorian states in the more remote parts of the western Amazon (Ibid., cf. Bridge, 2014).

The boom that would finally place oil extraction at the basis of the region's political economy started in the early 1970s, when state-owned company Petroperú and US-based Occidental Petroleum discovered important oilfields north of the Marañón-Amazon river (Santos-Granero and Barclay, 2002; Delgado Pugley 2019; Osinergmin, 2015). These discoveries were soon followed by an intense phase of prospecting for oil and the eventual construction, financed by the Peruvian state, of what would be the infrastructural backbone of the northern Amazonian oil complex: the North-Peruvian oil pipeline, which to this day remains one of the largest infrastructure projects in the country. The main section of the pipeline was completed in 1977 and runs for 854 km, connecting the small town of San José Saramuro on the banks of the Marañón river, across the Andes to the port of Bayóvar, located on the Pacific coast in northern Perú (Osinergmin 2015). To this main section, branch pipelines were soon appended, connecting remote extraction sites to the main pipeline.

The building and completion of the infrastructural basis for oil extraction, and the ensuing inflow of its associated rents, thoroughly transformed the spatial dynamics of Loreto at multiple scales, and established some of the core patterns of uneven and combined development that characterise the region to the present day—most notably, a deeply racialised geography that ties together the concentration of oil rent reinvestment in expanding urban centres with the widespread pollution of indigenous territories in the extractive periphery. By the end of the 1970s, the vast but transient labour market created by the early exploratory boom and the construction of the pipeline had thoroughly reorganised social reproduction in the rural spaces it had pulled into its orbit, ultimately leading to a wave of migration to regional cities, especially to Iquitos, the regional capital (Barclay, 2011; Chirif, 2011;

⁶ The scale of analysis here broadly corresponds to the Loreto administrative region. It is important to point out that the very production of scale, both at the level of the state administrative apparatus and at that of regional identity, is deeply intertwined with the political geography of oil rent distribution and its associated struggles (see Santos Granero and Barclay, 2002; cf. Irarrázabal, 2020).

Delgado Pugley, 2019). In addition, the distribution of the regional state revenue from oil extraction, known in Peru as the '*canon petrolero*'⁷, came to be heavily concentrated at the level of the central regional government, more so than in any other region in Perú where hydrocarbon extraction takes place. Over 52% of the *canon* goes directly to the regional government, 8% divided between regional educational and research institutions, and the remaining 40% thinly and unevenly spread across the various local municipal governments (ACP, 2019; Osinergmin, 2015). The geographical expression of this distribution of oil rents has been the sustained growth and concentration of investment and political power in and around urban areas, particularly in the regional capital of Iquitos and at the level of the regional government. Moreover, the new role of public investment facilitated by oil rents reshaped the relationship between the state and economic activity in the region, and public provision of services and infrastructure developed in tandem with new forms of political power and forms of citizenship and political subjectivity (Santos Granero and Barclay, 2002; cf. Irarrázabal, 2022). This included the development of new forms of regional identity in opposition to national society during the protracted struggles around the distribution of oil rents vis-à-vis the national government (Ibid.).

The flipside of this process has been the attritional, slow violence (Davies, 2019; Nixon, 2011) entailed in the widespread pollution of territories located in and around extraction sites and infrastructure, the scale of which is hard to overstate (see Delgado Pugley, 2019; Lawson et al., 2022; León and Zúñiga, 2020; O'Callaghan-Gordo et al., 2018; Rondoni, 2022; UNDP, 2022). Originally, the petroleum concession blocks were defined and infrastructure built on indigenous territories that were yet to be recognised by the Peruvian state, with generally no consultation of the peoples living in the areas in question (Barclay, 2011; Buu-Sao, 2020)—as Julian, one of the elders of Nueva Unión recalls: “[they asked] nothing, nothing, they worked here as if it [the land] was theirs”. Already in 1984, the National Office for the Evaluation of Natural Resources characterised one of the main concession blocks (1AB, now 192) as the most environmentally damaged region in the country (ONERN, 1984). From 2000 to 2019, 474 oil spills were officially registered in the region's different concession blocks and along the North-Peruvian pipeline, the majority of them associated with concession blocks 8 and 192, both operated by Pluspetrol Norte during most of this period⁸ (León and Zúñiga, 2020). It is important to note however that the remoteness of these regions has historically made rigorous monitoring sparse, especially during the early decades of the industry. León & Zúñiga (2020:47) point to the remarkable increase in registered oil spills since 2007—seemingly uncorrelated to production levels—and suggest that this increase may simply be due to the new light shed on the scale of the problem by independent indigenous monitoring initiatives, starting from 2006. Whatever the case, frequent news of environmental disasters and associated conflicts have now become a feature of the region's political landscape, and one of the main axes around which indigenous political organisation and mobilisation has gravitated over recent decades in the region (Bebbington et al., 2011; Buu-Sao, 2020; Orta-Martínez and Finer, 2010).

In this sense, underlying the uneven regional geography of extractive development described above is the structural entanglement between the *economic* conditions of profitability of the extractive regime established by the oil boom in the seventies, and the *political and cultural* conditions that sustain the devaluation of indigenous territories, health,

⁷ This refers to the devolution of revenues from oil extraction made by national to regional governments. In the case of Loreto, 15% of the total value of oil production in the region is devolved to the Departamento, plus 3.75% of that undertaken in Ucayali, formerly part of the Departamento of Loreto (ACP, 2019).

⁸ Block 8 has been operated by Pluspetrol Norte since 1996 up to 2020, while block 192 was operated by Pluspetrol Norte over the period between 2000 and 2015, after which the operations were taken over by Frontera Energy.

and life—i.e. the structurally racial nature of fossil capitalism in the Amazon (see [Buu-Sao, 2020](#); [Espinosa de Rivero, 2009](#)). In other words, one of the questions raised by the scale of the toxification of the extractive periphery is that of the extent to which the competitive profitability of the sector over the decades—which has to deal with conditions of geographical remoteness as well as the relatively lower qualities of oil ([Osinergrmin, 2015](#))—has been sustained by the systematic externalisation of environmental costs onto indigenous territories. Available estimates of the costs of remediation in these territories shed some light on this question: drawing from official estimates, [León and Zúñiga \(2020\)](#) point out that the costs of remediation of just 32 prioritised sites in block 192—i.e., only 2.6% of a total of 1199 of impacted sites in just this one block—accounted for 280.5% of the total state revenue generated by the block in 2012, its best year of operations. These are remarkable estimates, and the scale of damage underscores the extent to which both the profitability of the sector and the associated fiscal dependency on oil rents have been premised on an unacknowledged and massive ecological debt to indigenous territories in and around the extractive periphery.

This situation—the regime of value and non-value entailed in the geography of extractive frontiers ([Moore, 2015](#))—is held in place by a particular balance of forces, the unsettling of which has destabilising effects on the political economy of hydrocarbon extraction. This is why the processes of political subjectivation through which these contradictions become expressed are key for understanding the contemporary challenges faced by the industry. Since the boom in the 1970s, the development of the oil industry proceeded in tandem with the process of recognition of indigenous Amazonian peoples by the state, at the centre of which was the process of land titling. This process introduced important spatial and political changes. The delimitation of indigenous lands secured the recognition of some areas as it simultaneously enabled state control over spaces that remained outside titled lands ([Chirif and García Hierro, 2007](#)). Indigenous territorial practices and strategies were uneasily fitted into the spatial, legal, and political logic of the state: the spatially fixed delimitation of the land title, the associated political unit of the *comunidad nativa*, and its modes of political representation (*Ibid.*, see sections below). Relatedly, the emergence and official encouragement of ethnic federations over this period played a key role as political form of mediation between indigenous populations, state institutions, and extractive interests ([Buu-Sao, 2020](#)). Since then, ‘ethnicity’ has become one of the crucial forms through which a wide range of rights in these regions have become recognised by the state.

The process described above established indigeneity as a crucial modality of political subjectivation and the federation as its main organisational form. This is a deeply ambivalent process through which the social tensions inherent in the Amazonian oil complex—the unstable and fraught articulation of the imperatives of capitalist investment and logistics with non-capitalist social formations and relations to the land—have come to be politically managed and contained through the ‘ethnobureaucratic’ field of the neoliberal state (see [Boccaro, 2011](#); [Boccaro and Bolados, 2010](#)), while at the same time outlining new grounds for the articulation of demands and new modalities of agency by communities affected by extraction in ways that threaten to disrupt extractive circuits (see [Buu-Sao, 2020](#)). As we will show, the subject positions emergent from the hydrocarbon-led extractive cycle thus express the development of these tensions through the production of new forms of internal differentiation within communities, new lines of alliance and conflict, unevenly distributed forms of expertise and power, and the politization of cultural and ecological elements as markers of autochthony.

The racialised extractive periphery as geographical form thus becomes the site of a process of political subjectivation intimately linked with extraction, the complexity of which lies in the exceptionally diverse cultural landscape it articulates with. Amazonian indigenous peoples in Peru have historically had a wide range of strategies regarding their relations to national society, state institutions, extractive capital, and

the market, and concomitantly, very different strategies and traditions of political organisation (see [Correa et al., 2016](#); [Surrallés et al., 2016](#)). All of this modulates the ways in which processes of subjectivation and engagement with the ‘ethnobureaucratic’ field mentioned above unfold across the cultural geography of the Peruvian Amazon. Some of these processes have received much less attention than others. The Urarina people in the Chambira basin, a northern tributary of the Marañón (see [Fig. 2](#)), have traditionally been among the least visible ([Martín Brañas et al., 2019](#)), partly due to their reluctance to engage in ethnopolitical organisation to the extent that other peoples in the region have over the past decades ([Walker, 2013](#)). In what follows, we will look at how these processes are unfolding in the lower Chambira basin, and the relationship of these with extractive infrastructure.

3. The Urarina and life in the Chambira basin

The Urarina people live along the Chambira river and its tributaries, a network of blackwater rivers⁹ on the northern margins of the Marañón river, one of the main Andean sources of the Amazon river in Perú. From an outsider’s perspective, these territories can easily appear as difficult places to inhabit. Urarina territories comprise a range of seasonally-flooded forests, palm-dominated and open swamps, and precious non-flooding lands that are used both as cultivation areas near settlements, and hunting grounds in the case of more remote areas (see [Schulz et al., 2019](#)). These territories easily blur any strict distinction between ‘land’ and ‘waterscape’, dominated as life is by rain, waterbodies, and their seasonal rhythms, through which the water level can vary by several metres. For the Urarina, the numerous rivers and streams serve as the main means of communication and mobility between communities, as well as geographic points of reference.

Official estimates of the Urarina population are notoriously imprecise, but generally range from 4000 to 6000 people ([Martín Brañas et al., 2019](#)), the vast majority living within the Chambira river basin. Despite having been in contact with mestizo society since at least the 18th century, the Urarina have retained a strong ethnic and cultural identity, and their language remains the main one used in everyday life within their communities—a situation that contrasts with that of neighbouring peoples along the Marañón (eg. [Petesch, 2003](#)). Many Urarina—generally men, but in recent years also younger women who have had access to formal education—are bilingual. The use of Spanish, however, is normally confined to communication with the non-Urarina, who include itinerant traders, schoolteachers, *ribereño* (non-indigenous) settlers in the scattered mestizo towns along the lower Chambira, representatives from state institutions and oil companies, and evangelical missionaries, among others. Relations with non-Urarina people is a highly gendered and male dominated sphere, which is why competence in Spanish is a highly valued attribute for men ([Dean, 2009](#); [Walker, 2012b](#)). Urarina houses are generally made from locally available materials, often consisting of wooden poles holding a raised platform made from extended palm bark, roofed with thatched palm leaves, and normally house a nuclear family. Contemporary Urarina settlements generally comprise several of these dwellings loosely clustered along extended family links. Sororal polygyny is common, and uxorial post-nuptial residence¹⁰ is the rule—thus these clusters are usually composed of a closely knit group of sisters with their respective husbands living around or near the household of an elder male head of family (*Ibid.*).

Contemporary Urarina livelihoods are markedly subsistence-

⁹ In the Peruvian Amazon these are distinguished from the sediment-rich rivers of Andean origin like the Marañón. The dark colour is explained by high concentrations of organic matter produced by low-nutrient, waterlogged ecosystems characteristic of this region.

¹⁰ Sororal polygyny is when sisters share a common husband; uxoriality refers to the practice of newly married couples living with or alongside the bride’s family for a period of time.

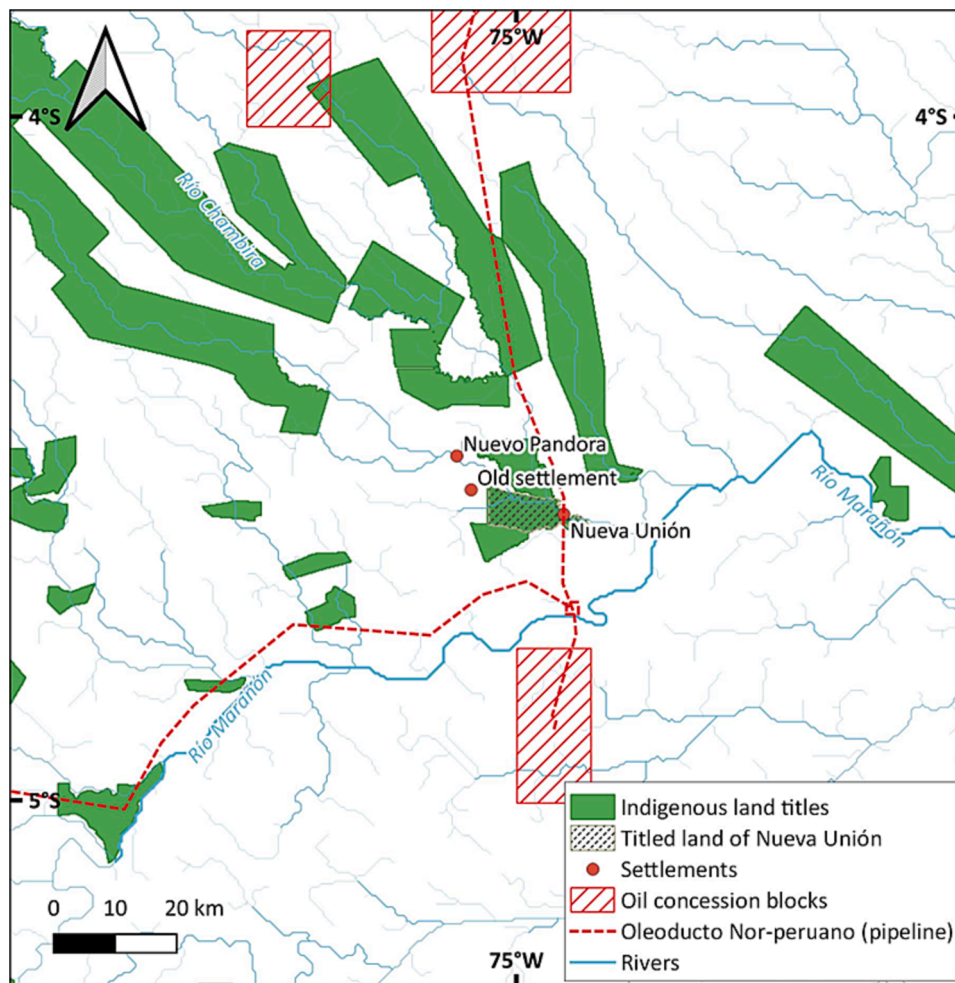


Fig. 2. The North-Peruvian Pipeline and Urarina territories. The map shows the location of the communities that participated in this research, as well as the old and new locations of the community in Nueva Unión. Concession Block 81 is located directly north of the Chambira basin. Block 8, which consists of several spatially discontinuous areas, has been in operation since 1974, and was managed by Pluspetrol Perú from 1996 until the end of 2021. The extraction sites—the fields of Payayacu, Corrientes, Capirona, Yanayacu, Chambira, Valencia, and Nueva Esperanza—are connected to Pumping Station 1 of the North-Peruvian Pipeline in San José Saramuro by the secondary Corrientes-Saramuro pipeline which cuts directly through the Urarina and riverine territories of Nueva Alianza, La Petrolera, Bellavista, Santa Teresa, San Pedro de Patoyacuillo along the Patoyacu river, a tributary of the Chambira; and Nuevo Progreso, Nueva Unión, Nuevo Perú, Nuevo San Juan and Ollanta in the lower Chambira basin. This pipeline has been the source of an undetermined number of spills over the years, some of which have been reported in the national press, and many which are yet to be officially registered.

oriented, organised around swidden agriculture, complemented by the combined use of the different ecosystem types in their territories for hunting, fishing, and gathering of a wide range of forest species. Urarina food gardens [*ukuana*] are cultivated on cleared non-flooding lands [*atane*] and are used for 1 or 2 years, after which the land is left to fallow for three to four years, and another plot is procured. The gardens are based on the combined cultivation of plantain and manioc, normally complemented by a wide variety of other useful species, ranging from edible fruits like papaya, to species used as dyes for textiles, and medicinal/ritual species like those used for the preparation of ayahuasca [*kuairi*] (Iverson and Iverson, 2021). These areas are owned and tended to by a nuclear family, with communal labour used for labour-intensive activities, such as the clearing and preparation of the land before sowing. Many of the varieties normally cultivated by the Urarina can only grow on non-flooded land, which, in addition to the relative scarcity of these in most of this seasonally flooding basin, make *atane* a highly valued space (see Schulz et al., 2019).

The Urarina have many and varied links to regional markets. These, however, are normally ancillary to the strongly subsistence-oriented use of the local resources described above. Itinerant mestizo traders [*regatones*] navigate the basin trading all sorts of goods with Urarina

communities. In general terms, production systematically organised for the purpose of market exchange is exceptional. Exchange relations normally consist instead in the rather haphazard exchange of any locally available surpluses or products the *regaton* might be looking for or be willing to acquire. In most Urarina communities money is very scarce, so these trade relations often take the traditional form of '*habilitación*', a contemporary adaptation of the old debt-peonage system used by mid-twentieth century extractive estates in the region by which market goods are advanced in exchange for a quota of different kinds of forest or horticultural products (see Dean, 2009; Walker, 2012a). Traders, for example, may leave the goods on their way upriver, and expect to be paid on their way down a few days later. Alternatively, a few times per year, families might undertake a trip, sometimes several days long, to larger mestizo towns and cities in the region like Nauta or Yurimaguas to sell some forest or horticultural products and obtain essential supplies, such as medicines, shotgun cartridges, clothing, batteries, or machetes.

The subordinated role of market exchange in Urarina use of their territories and the social reproduction of communities is premised on the centrality of the food garden or *ukuana* system in daily life, and the reliance on locally available resources for provision of most basic needs. This is in turn closely tied to the high value the Urarina put on personal

autonomy, the material basis of which lies on direct access to the means of subsistence, and especially in the case of men, individual access to *atane* and competence in hunting and cultivation (see Walker, 2012b)—all of which constitute fundamental aspects of Urarina conceptions of adulthood¹¹.

In recent years, however, there have been significant changes in the role of money within the context described above, which have entailed rapid and profound transformations in all spheres of life in some communities. These range from shifts in the local uses and relative values of the landscape, to changes in political structure, and in the strongly gendered spaces of daily life, which will be discussed in detail below. The spatial distribution of these changes seems to overlap significantly with extractive infrastructure (Fabiano, 2021), in particular that of the pipeline section connecting sites of oil extraction in Block 8 to the main pipeline on the banks of the Marañón river (Fig. 2). This process – which Bernstein (2010), drawing from Brenner (2001), calls ‘commodification of subsistence’¹² – not only takes the form and dynamics of impersonal market forces, but as explored below, has developed through the complex articulation of the political field that shapes extractive operations at the regional level, and longstanding moral economies that mediate Urarina relations to *mestizo* national society and regional extractive economies (cf. Walker, 2012a).

The modalities of exploitation that characterised previous extractive cycles among the Urarina have been studied by Dean (2009; 1995), and the ways local relations to *mestizo* traders articulate with local moral economies through debt, and its embeddedness in the reproduction of Urarina identity through lopsided relations to powerful outsiders has been explored by Walker (eg. 2012a). Nevertheless, despite the profound impacts of oil extraction on Urarina territorial, economic, and political strategies, the ways in which the Urarina relate to the Amazonian oil complex are only beginning to be explored (eg. Fabiano, 2021). In what follows we will analyse this process as it has taken place in the community of Nueva Unión, whose titled lands overlap with a section of the pipeline. This case illustrates how extractive operations work through the spatial and political tensions entailed in the changing role of money in daily life and introduce new dynamics in local processes of subject formation—an issue we argue is central to the understanding of contemporary transformations in indigenous Amazonia more broadly.

4. Nueva Unión: The pipeline, resettlement, and subjectivity

Nueva Unión is a ‘*comunidad nativa*’¹³ composed of approximately 50 nuclear families, totalling around 230 people. Up until late 2018 the community was located along the banks of *quebrada Espejo*, a small creek leading to the Tigrillo river, itself a tributary of the larger Chambira. Since then, Nueva Unión has resettled along the banks of the main Chambira river, on the eastern edge of their titled lands, in the context of their negotiations with Pluspetrol. Due partly to the ecological conditions in the new location—uniformly surrounded by seasonally flooded forests—the relocation has entailed a drastic change in all aspects of life

¹¹ In the case of men, adulthood is tied to the capacity of starting and sustaining a family, itself premised on the ability to hunt and cultivate a garden. In the case of women, this transition is rather more ritualised and directly associated to menarche, as well as with competence in the production of textiles made from *ala* fibre, which is obtained from *Mauritia flexuosa*, a palm species characteristic of wetland ecosystems in this region (see Martín Brañas et al. 2019).

¹² This is the process by which a social formation becomes structurally dependant on commodity relations for its reproduction, and becomes therefore subjected to the dynamics and compulsions of market exchange.

¹³ The *comunidad nativa*, first introduced by legislation in 1974, is the main legal form through which the Peruvian state recognised Amazonian peoples.

within the community. Before the relocation, life in the old settlement broadly shared many of the general features of Urarina life described above—i.e., one primarily reliant on a subsistence-oriented combined use of the territory’s different ecosystems, with shifting cultivation at the centre of social reproduction. However, the lack of immediate access to non-flooding land in which to cultivate food gardens has led to the process of ‘commodification of subsistence’ acquiring a particularly abrupt character under the new conditions. In the new site, money has rapidly shifted from being a peripheral, if increasingly important, element in daily life, to an unavoidable necessity at the level of food provision. This has meant a radical shift in the relational matrix upon which the material constitution of daily life, and with it of the different subjects within the community, is reproduced: from one based on direct access and use of ecosystems structured around the reproduction of Urarina gendered competences and subjects (that, as we will explain, in part expressed older political and spatial strategies vis-à-vis extractive economies and labour regimes) to one, as we will show, structured around the relations through which money flows into the community, at the centre of which are the relations to state institutions and extractive capital, and the associated ethnopolitical field introduced in the first section of this paper.

Although in many respects the vertiginous character of the transformations experienced by Nueva Unión are exceptional, they cast into relief deeper processes that can be seen to be operating beyond Nueva Unión and across the Chambira basin in more subdued and mediated ways. These are those related to the dynamics introduced by the growing role of money and its entanglement with extraction and state institutions, as well as how this interacts with older strategies in Urarina engagements with national society and extractive economies, ultimately leading to new forms of subjectivity, territorialisation¹⁴, and a reshaping of Urarina relations to national society.

4.1. Historical territorial strategies, and the founding of Nueva Unión

The recent changes in Nueva Unión need to be understood in the context of the broader history of the community, and its shifting territorialisation strategies vis-à-vis extractive economies and labour regimes that have operated in the Chambira basin in earlier periods. According to local accounts, the first families that founded the old settlement had come from further up the Tigrillo river sometime during the 1970s. Before settling there, these families had been working under a *patrón*—*mestizo* bosses who managed and organised extractive operations and estates, very common in mid-twentieth century rural Loreto. These estates, generally financed by commercial houses in Iquitos, constituted one of the main ways in which extractive economies became organised in rural Loreto after the end of the rubber boom in the early twentieth century, and were built on a racialised debt-driven labour regime premised on the local monopolies the *patrones* held over the supply of trade goods in rural areas (Santos-Granero and Barclay, 2002). As in other parts of the Amazon, in the case of the Chambira local moral economies came to be articulated to regional networks of extraction through these asymmetrical relations of credit and debt underpinning *patrón*-run labour regime and its subsequent derivations (see Walker, 2012a).

In the case of the families that would go on to create the old settlement of Nueva Unión, they worked extracting valuable timber species under the *habilitación* regime, in which trade goods such as clothing or soap were advanced in exchange for labour or production quotas, normally trapping people in unpayable debt cycles (see Dean, 1999; Dean, 2009; Martín Brañas et al., 2019; Walker, 2012a). As Medardo, one of the elders and founders of Nueva Unión, describes, this functioned as a system of debt peonage in which

¹⁴ By territorialisation here we mean the organisation of a set of relations, values, and political priorities in the form of a territorial space.

... they gave us pants, or blouses to women... and we gave him a hundred pieces of timber ... we did not know, didn't know anything. The *patrón* just wanted to take, and said, you owed this much ... and that's why we were still owing, that's how he deceived us.

Life working under the *patrón* is invariably characterised by the oldest members of Nueva Unión as marked by hyper-exploitation. According to these accounts, the old settlement in the *Espejo* creek was established as a way to move away from life under the *patrón*: “we had suffered enough, that's why we went to the Espejo... the people didn't want to work anymore, we were suffering too much, and had nothing, no clothes, nothing”, recalls Medardo, who was a young man in those times. According to Vicente, another elder member of the community, the conditions in the Espejo allowed these families to regain some autonomy, as there was a large area of non-flooding land in which to cultivate, as well as an abundance of fishing and hunting game.

[A relative had gone] and told us that it was very good to live there in Espejo, there was *restinga* [high land] to make *chacras* [food gardens] ... and lots of animals to eat, all kinds of fish ... so my dad said it was good, because where we were there was nothing ... and in those days there were no communities [*comunidades nativas* with titled lands], only [more dispersed] houses.

In this sense, the old settlement was founded as a way to flee from the debt-driven labour regime that underpinned the extraction economy at the time, and offered the ecological conditions for autonomy, even if that meant relative isolation and limited access to trade goods. It constituted an explicit territorial spatial, political, and socio-ecological response to the terms of the extractive economy at the time (cf. Halvorsen, 2019; López Sandoval et al., 2017), one that relied on a particular occupation and valuation of the environment structured around the aspiration of emancipation from the *patrón* and debt.

4.2. Changing relations to national society: On the spatio-political dimensions of money

Since these founding times, many things have changed in the region, including the disappearance of the *patrón*-run extractive economy in its classical form (see Dean, 2009; Santos-Granero and Barclay, 2002). But perhaps the most important changes in the terms of Urarina relations with national society have taken place over the last few decades, and relate to the combined effects of the land titling process—which among the Urarina took place mostly during the 1990s—and the growing, if unevenly distributed across the basin, role of money in indigenous economies.

The land titling process introduced fundamental changes in the organisation of space and local relations to the state, as well as new tensions within traditional Urarina political forms. To the extent that the titling process expressed the spatial logic of the state and its mechanisms of geographical and political legibility (Scott, 1998), it introduced a form of fixed territoriality and encouraged settlement patterns quite different to what older Urarina recall were previously the norm. Older Urarina speak of more dispersed and mobile settlement patterns in previous generations, in which communal longhouses were more common, rather than nuclear family dwellings, and individuals normally lived and moved frequently across the whole Chambira basin, something that remains relatively common. The conferred land titles were also permanently tied to the legal figure of the '*comunidad nativa*' and its associated positions of representation, such as the figure of the *apu*, or community chief. In general, these forms of territorial organisation and political representation have since developed in constant tension with the reproduction of traditional Urarina socio-political forms: namely, kinship-based and geographically diffused forms of social solidarity, coupled with an autonomy-oriented and egalitarian form of vernacular politics that has traditionally made political organisation of any large scale among the Urarina relatively rare and short-lived (cf. Walker,

2012b). In the case of those communities like Nueva Unión whose land titles overlap with the pipeline, these forms of political mediation and territorial organisation have nevertheless become especially important as the main means through which to negotiate their position within the geography of extraction and deal with its environmental consequences, an issue we will return to below.

These transformations and tensions interact in complex ways with more recent changes in local indigenous economies. People in Nueva Unión tell of a gradual process over the past decade in which money has played an increasingly important role within the community. Relations to *mestizo* traders, for example, have become increasingly monetised, and a growing number of families have opened new connections to regional *mestizo* and urban spaces—where money is an indispensable mediator—through evangelical church networks (Fabiano, 2018). Importantly, over this period the introduction of government conditional cash transfers has had a substantial impact on those communities in the lower Chambira who can access these programs more easily (Walker, 2016). However, and with particular intensity in the case of communities near the pipeline, access to money mostly gravitates around the operations of Pluspetrol, who in the case of Nueva Unión makes monthly payments to the community for the maintenance of the section of the pipeline that crosses their titled lands, as well as offering sporadic subcontracted wage work to some within and around the community.

The increasing role of money implies a gradual shift in the values mediating the community's relation to its territory, which in turn shapes a set of tensions in the local production of space that can be seen as eventually resolving in the sudden resettlement of the community. As explained above, the original foundation of the old settlement responded to the need for autonomy from the debt-driven labour regime of the extractive estates of the time and was materially premised on the direct access to the diverse range of spaces the location offered, chief among which is *atane* where food gardens are cultivated. From this set of political and material priorities, the old settlement provided an ideal setting. However, as money gains a more prominent position within daily life and reshapes the set of possibilities in relating to *mestizo* society, especially for young men, it is the political relations through which money flows into the community, rather than the relations to these ecosystems, that increasingly become a central concern—and chief among these, relations with Pluspetrol and state institutions. And from the point of view of navigating this political field the old settlement was not well suited.

Indeed, according to Gilberto – the community's current *apu* and president of the new Urarina federation FEPIURCHA (*Federación de Pueblos Indígenas Urarinas del Río Chambira*) – the idea of relocating developed over the course of a mobilisation against Pluspetrol, demanding the fulfilment of previous agreements regarding reparations and support for communities affected by environmental damage:

We mobilised against the company ... and well, we were here [in the new site by the Chambira and the pipeline] for a month, and [many within] the community got used to being here, so the community made an assembly and took the decision to move here, and if the company refused our demands, we could shut down the [pipeline] valves more easily, they are just around here.

Crucially, here Gilberto points to the proximity to strategic points in infrastructure that increased the community's leverage in their struggles with Pluspetrol as one of the main attributes of the new location that motivated the decision, a point that was also brought up by other local representatives. In the context of the need to navigate the political field of the extractive economy, and from the point of view of the forms of political subjectivity and agency this entails, these geographic attributes of their territory—i.e. the relative position to infrastructure and its strategic pressure points—acquire a critical importance and explain the logic behind the immediate reasons for relocation.

The discussion and decision to resettle came very suddenly and took

many within the community by surprise. Nevertheless, as abrupt as the decision felt at the time to everyone, it needs to be understood as the outcome of spatial tensions emergent from the more protracted process of the increasing role of money described above, and the implications this process had on the production of space at the local scale. Among the broader reasons people gave for resettlement, those having to do with the sense of isolation and other geographical challenges featured prominently. As Vicente explains, regarding the difficulties of accessing a government's cash transfer program,

People suffer when they need to go to get paid every two months ... it is a lot of expense to move all the way there, with the little money they get, they only buy the fuel for the trip, and can't make use of it. ... From here [new settlement], on the other hand, with only one gallon you're already there.

The sense that the old settlement 'was far away' was a common theme in local accounts of the resettlement, and it had a strong generational component, older people having been originally more inclined to oppose the decision to move, and often characterising, inversely, the new settlement as being 'far' from the food gardens and good hunting places. This emerging spatial problem—the different and contradicting senses of being 'far away'—points towards the shifting relational field in which everyday life, subjectivities, and emerging prospects have become increasingly implicated, to how the political relations through which money flows are expressed in spatial tensions at the local scale.

In this sense, it is in relation to the economic and political requirements imposed by the community's relation to Pluspetrol and the state that new forms of territoriality—understood as the appropriation of space in pursuit of a set of political priorities (Halvorsen, 2019)—have come to be shaped. This is a set of political priorities that introduces new and important tensions within the community. As mentioned before, the form of the *comunidad nativa*, and its associated modes of political representation, had always developed in tension with Urarina vernacular political forms—the highly egalitarian and autonomy-oriented character of which is materially premised on direct individual access to the means of life. However, as money becomes a necessary mediation, the political forms of representation that articulate relations to the oil economy and state institutions have become materially consequential to every nuclear family in a way that was not the case before, thus tying the destinies of Nueva Unión families to mechanisms of political representation in unprecedented ways.

Relatedly, these changes at the level of political structure have immediate impacts in gendered balances of power. As was the case with men, women's assessments of the relocation were generally very ambivalent¹⁵. They combined expectations around new income opportunities and a sense of being less isolated to access government programs, with dissatisfaction about the impact that the new situation had had on their everyday activities, the sense that everything "costs money now", and a concern about the emergent issue of pollution of water and fish, to which we will return below. While the labour-intensive aspects of food gardens are normally led by men, the everyday tending of the space is generally done by women and children. This is why the loss of easy access to food gardens was often cited by women as one of the most important downsides of the resettlement, many reportedly feeling 'bored' and with little to do. As one male interviewee put it, many women were just 'hanging around' ("*andan de haraganas*"). This situation was especially felt during the rainy season, which confined everyone to their stilted houses, sometimes for weeks or months on end. This partial displacement of the role of women in food provision is compounded by the fact that, as mentioned previously, relations with

¹⁵ This paragraph draws on meetings and interviews with groups of women. It is important to bear in mind that women are much less fluent in Spanish than men, and many times their accounts came filtered through male translations, setting important methodological limits to accessing women's perspectives.

non-Urarina actors is a decidedly male-dominated sphere¹⁶. As the relation to Pluspetrol displaces that of food gardens in the material reproduction of the community, the relative importance of the different gendered spheres of life is also transformed—from a process of social reproduction rooted in the female-dominated everyday tending of food gardens to one rooted on the male-dominated one of wage labour and political negotiation¹⁷.

4.3. Pollution and the shifting scales of political subjectivity

Among the most prominent changes in the local experience and valuation of the environment introduced by the resettlement is that of water pollution (see Lawson et al., 2022). In 2014, people in Nueva Unión registered an oil spill at kilometre 94 of the pipeline, where it crosses the community's titled lands, about halfway between the Chambira river and the Asna creek, a small tributary used by Nueva Unión families for fishing¹⁸. At the time of the spill, the community was still in the previous location in the Espejo creek and therefore did not feel the impact of the ensuing pollution as directly as they do now, due to the most frequently used parts of the territory being located a considerable distance upstream.

Now that the community has moved, however, the spill site is only a short walk away from the main settlement. As is the case across the area surrounding the new settlement, the spill site—which people hold was insufficiently remedied by the company—floods during the rainy season. According to local accounts, this disperses the remnants of the spill all around the new settlement area, including local drinking water sources and fishing spots. In the context of the changes analysed above, the latter have become a very important source of food in the new settlement, thus making the effects of pollution more noticeable (see Rondoni, 2022). Notably, in 2018 the community witnessed a mass die-off of fish in the Asna, and as Gilberto explains "we now are eating skinny fish, it is not like before because there is lots of pollution". This has brought the problem of oil pollution to the fore, which had not been the case before. Indeed, according to local accounts, the issue had not even been considered in the discussions leading up to the relocation of the community, and only started being identified as a problem after people had moved, once they started noticing the impact on health, particularly of children, which included recurring cases of diarrhoea, nausea, and vomiting (cf. O'Callaghan-Gordo et al., 2018). When the first period of fieldwork took place in early 2019, pollution figured prominently in local accounts of the main problems being faced by people in the new settlement.

The issue of pollution and proper remediation has thus become a core aspect of the demands of the community to Pluspetrol and the government. According to Gilberto,

The company ... said they had cleaned up, but they haven't done it as the community wanted it ... now that land is full of pollution, there under the ground, when you dig a hole, oil comes out, and when the water level rises, it floats, and as the community is close by, that's the water people in the community drink, the people living here.

When the fieldwork took place, the community was pushing for the company to remediate the site and pay reparations, and a few weeks

¹⁶ Here the important exception is the conditional cash transfer program *Programa Nacional de Apoyo Directo a los más Pobres - Juntos*.

¹⁷ Both of these spheres are not exclusive. Men participate in the everyday tending of the chacras, and women can perform some forms of wage labour for the company (e.g. cleaning up vegetation around the pipeline), as well as influencing political decisions in indirect ways.

¹⁸ Allegedly, this spill was not reported by the company, and is therefore not officially registered by the OEFA (*Organismo de Evaluación y Fiscalización Ambiental*), the government regulator, and there is consequently no official data on the volume of oil that leaked from the pipe.

later took part in a region-wide mobilisation coordinated by the federation ‘Cinco Cuencas’, which mobilised communities in the five river basins—Corrientes, Chambira, Marañón, Pastaza, and Tigre—affected by oil extraction, which blocked Loreto’s main rivers, and effectively paralysed extractive operations for several days (Ampuero, 2019). Indeed, although the Urarina have historically been notoriously aloof from political organisation (Walker, 2012b), and autonomous organisations able to represent a significant number of communities have been rare and short-lived, in the case of Nueva Unión, their position in the regional geography of extraction has made political organisation and the establishment of alliances a pressing need. As Gilberto explains,

The company never respects indigenous peoples, they want indigenous peoples to be humiliated and the company does not want indigenous peoples to rise and reclaim their rights, that’s what they don’t want. ... We told our neighbours from Nuevo Peru, we need to organise, if not who’s going to defend our rights?

According to Vicente, the previous *apu* of the community, the initial push to constitute a local federation came out of an invitation by Cinco Cuencas in the context of a mobilisation on Saramuro back in 2017, and a potential meeting with the government.

[The leader] spoke to me, and told me ... that you need an organisation of the Urarina, you need to set one up urgently, because the government minister is coming, and you need someone to represent there, and in the Chambira they are forgotten by the government, you’re not showing up in the system, so that you’re taken into account by the state So we went back and got together with Nuevo Perú [neighbouring community, whose lands are also crossed by the pipeline], we’ve agreed to form this federation, as a matter of urgency.

This federation – the previously mentioned FEPIURCHA – includes both Nuevo Peru and Nueva Unión, and has been establishing alliances with other communities in the lower Chambira and the Tigrillo river, as well as constituting a political vehicle for these communities’ participation in regional mobilisations and negotiations. The leading roles have been taken up by younger members in the community, who have since been making frequent journeys to Iquitos to meet with government officials, federation representatives, and taking part in mobilisations. In this sense, the issue of pollution not only affects the spheres of health, everyday life, and the environmental value of the territory, but also acts as a basis for the establishment of new relationships with communities and indigenous networks on the regional scale, and further cements the local material relevance of political representation and organisation.

5. Conclusion: dependent antagonism and flexible subjectivities

The extraordinarily deep and rapid changes that Nueva Unión is going through at present shed important light on some core aspects of the processes shaping subjectivities in this region of the Peruvian Amazon, their links with extractive economies and infrastructure, and how these processes reflect broader dynamics shaping contemporary indigenous relations to national societies in contemporary Amazonia. As we have shown, at the centre of this process is the growing role of money in everyday life, a very uneven yet arguably generalised process among contemporary Urarina communities, the speed of which has intensified over the past decade. In the case of Nueva Unión this process introduced important socio-spatial tensions between two relational fields, each structured around different political and territorial strategies vis-à-vis local relations to extractive economies and national society. On the one hand, the community itself was constituted as part of a territorialisation strategy historically derived from local responses to the debt-driven labour regimes of the mid-twentieth century extractive economy, oriented by values of autonomy and self-reliance at the level of the nuclear family, and closely tied to a particular way of inhabiting the landscape and its associated gendered competencies, such as hunting, cultivation,

and weaving, among others. The material reproduction of the subject positions associated with this strategy is necessarily embedded in the combined use of different ecosystems, and on the direct access to them. As money assumes an increasing role in the internal reproduction of the community, this older strategy comes into tension with the demands associated to the complex set of political-economic relations that mediate the circulation of money in the Chambira basin. And, especially in the case of communities in close proximity to the pipeline, at the centre of these relations is the ethnopolitical field that reflects the uneven and combined dynamics of the oil extraction introduced in the first section of this paper, which hegemonizes local possibilities of integration into national society, including access to money and trade goods. This entails a spatial strategy and form of territorialisation that prioritises leverages of political pressure (like the proximity to the pipeline), and institutional reach.

In this context – the regional dynamics of which we explored in section 2 – local cultural and ecological elements acquire new meanings, functions, and values, and become associated with the reproduction of new subject positions—i.e. these elements become politicised as markers of indigeneity vis-à-vis national society. These include elements such as headdress and face paint, now used in the context of the political mobilisations mentioned in the last section, or the resignification of items such as local palm-fibre textiles [*ela*] – an everyday household item closely tied to the reproduction of Urarina female identity and palm swamp ecosystems, which was given ‘national cultural heritage’ status in late 2019 (see Dean, 1994; Martín Brañas et al., 2019). These are all now mobilised in the local production of the conditions for recognition by both state and market in the context of neoliberal multiculturalism¹⁹ (see Boccara 2011).

It is important to note, however, that the process described above cannot be adequately grasped as describing a simple linear trajectory, in which a ‘traditional’ way of life is integrated into the orbit of global capitalism’s supply chains from which it had hitherto remained relatively isolated. As we examined in section 4, local ethnohistorical discourse around the community’s origins speaks instead of a process much more oscillatory in nature, with Urarina families entering and exiting relations of dependence in the context of successive extractive regimes, where the values of self-sufficiency and autonomy are in constant tension with the affordances associated with dependent engagement with powerful outside actors. This oscillatory movement in many ways reflects the bind that arguably defines historical relations of Amazonian peoples to national societies—that of a choice between a relative autonomy marked by marginalisation, and those of an often violent racialised integration into national society mediated by the different iterations of extractive economies that these territories have endured over the course of the region’s history. This is a problem the Urarina have arguably been dealing with in different ways since the establishment of Jesuit missions in the lower Chambira in the 18th century (Martín et al. 2019), and more recently expressed in the relation to extractive *patrones*, and their present dealings with transnational fossil capital. The extent to which this bind articulates with, and is perhaps constitutive of, the tensions inherent in the particular combination of the values of autonomy and dependence in traditional Urarina conceptions of personhood and agency described in the ethnographic literature (cf. Walker, 2012b) is an open question, the shifting terms of which are well illustrated by the case of Nueva Unión.

This tension between autonomy and dependence can be seen reflected in the deeply ambivalent dynamic of antagonistic dependence that the community has pursued vis-à-vis Pluspetrol. Local relations to the oil industry are experienced as both sought and resisted, as opening avenues for new forms of agency and relations to national society as

¹⁹ This is, the specific ways in which the national and indigenous question has come to be formulated in the context of neoliberalism in Latin America (see Boccara 2011).

indigenous subjects, while at the same time subjecting the community to equally new forms of compulsion and deprivation. This ambivalence not only reflects the differentiated ways in which changes are experienced by different members within the community—which, as we mentioned, varies widely along the axes of age and gender—but also, and perhaps primarily, it reflects the contradictions inscribed within the individual subject positions emergent from the extractive economy themselves. For instance, in relation to money, expectations about new possibilities of access to it were as generalised as the complaint that ‘everything costs money now’. The material correlate to this ambivalence was the kind of ‘patchwork’ livelihood strategies many were pursuing in practice, combining the little income they could secure from traders and the occasional payments from the oil company, with fishing and traveling back to the old settlement area to tend to what are now far away food gardens.

Notwithstanding the non-linear aspects discussed above, it is also important to highlight the genuinely novel elements that the terms of contemporary political economy of extraction introduces into the Urarina context. The political coordinates in which Nueva Unión is placed by virtue of its proximity to extractive infrastructure introduce dynamics of subject formation that in certain ways cut against the grain of what ethnographic literature characterise as the Urarina egalitarian and autonomy-oriented political common sense (see Walker, 2012b; Dean, 2009). The processes of subject formation discussed in this paper are those of differentiated and relationally constituted subjects bound together by the legal figure of the ‘*comunidad indígena*’ and, secondarily, that of the Federation(s), and its nested scales. In itself, this process is not new for the Urarina, but the way that in the case of Nueva Unión this is combined with the compulsions introduced by the process of commodification of subsistence, embeds this relational matrix at the level of the material reproduction of the community in ways that the community had not experienced before. As examined in section 4, the relation between the representative and represented mediates to different degrees a wide range of newly consequential subject positions, from that of the wage labourer, to that of the indigenous beneficiary of government programs, to the broader but equally consequential position of the indigenous member of the Peruvian nation.

In sum, the case of Nueva Unión shows how contemporary ‘extractive subjectivities’ (Frederiksen and Himley, 2020) in the Peruvian Amazon must be approached as unstable and dynamic processes in which the extractive complex is made sense of through and integrated into historically dense moral economies and strategies, which bear a long engagement with different extractive regimes. In the case presented here, emergent subject positions can be seen to express the convergence and unstable hybridisation of long-standing Amazonian relational matrices to navigate asymmetrical relationships based on the forms of agency afforded by dependence (see Bonilla, 2016), and the particular subject positions entailed in the ethnopolitical form of Amazonian oil complex and its emergent forms of interpellation, subjectivity, and dependant antagonism. Furthermore, these positions also express contrasting conceptions of time, engaging directly with both the linear conceptions of time and change entailed in the discourse of progress that underpins contemporary interventions of the state and capital to secure the political stability of extractive operations (Buu-Sao 2020), and the more oscillatory experience of historical Urarina relations to the racialised operations of the extractive economy that we described. As recent events in the regional oil industry show²⁰, as indigenous movements succeed in imposing limits on the externalisation of environmental costs by fossil capital, the political conditions for the profitable operation of the industry in the region are far from stable or linear. In

²⁰ In December 2020 Pluspetrol announced it was liquidating its operations in lot 8, arguing that it was being made liable for environmental damage that it had no responsibility for by government regulators, which made its operations economically inviable (Sierra 2021). This is an ongoing process, which has introduced even more uncertainty in Nueva Unión.

this context, the contradictory character of ‘extractive subjectivities’ in this region can also be understood as expressing a form of plasticity and flexibility that keep the possibilities of reterritorialization open, and that reflects the historical unfolding of extractive boom and busts in a much more pragmatic and precise way than the linear narratives of modernisation and progress that have historically defined the state’s ideological incorporation of the Amazon as a resource frontier (cf. Santos-Granero and Barclay, 2002; Espinosa de Rivero, 2009). These subject positions are therefore not only windows into the history of these lands, but also bearers of the guiding elements that this history provides their people in the face of an uncertain future.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Luis Andueza: Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Supervision, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing, Visualization. **Margarita del Águila Villacorta:** Investigation, Methodology, Resources, Data curation. **Lydia E. S. Cole:** Investigation, Methodology, Visualization, Writing – review & editing. **Althea L. Davies:** Funding acquisition, Writing – review & editing. **Emanuele Fabiano:** Investigation, Validation, Writing – review & editing. **Euridice N. Honorio Coronado:** Writing – review & editing. **Nina Laurie:** Funding acquisition Investigation, Methodology, Supervision, Writing – review & editing. **Ian T. Lawson:** Visualization, Writing – review & editing. **Manuel Martín Brañas:** Investigation, Methodology, Supervision, Resources, Validation, Writing – review & editing. **Wendy Mozombite Ruíz:** Investigation, Methodology, Resources, Data curation. **Cecilia Núñez Pérez:** Investigation, Methodology, Resources. **Katherine H. Roucoux:** Funding acquisition, Methodology, Supervision, Project administration, Writing – review & editing. **Charlotte Wheeler:** Investigation, Methodology.

Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Data availability

No data was used for the research described in the article.

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