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CHOCÓ CHALLENGES: COMMUNITIES NEGOTIATING MATTERS OF CONCERN AND CARE ON COLOMBIA’S MARGIN
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Abstract

Chocó is a remote and biodiverse region located on Colombia’s Northern Pacific Coast. The region is home to indigenous Embera and Afro-descendant communities. Both communities share and contest a legacy of colonisation, violence, dispossession and discrimination. This thesis explores the ways in which the local communities of Chocó challenge and transform the matters that concern them. It focuses on their concerns over the effects of biodiversity conservation, development, and drug trade on their communities. It first investigates the challenges associated with doing research concerning both global and local concerns. Then, based on ethnographic fieldwork conducted in Chocó, it develops a methodology to address environmental value conflicts over the use of Utría National Park, located in the region. Third, the thesis studies the social protest of both local communities for the construction of a small hydroelectric power plant inside the park, finding that this protest for electricity reflects a complex post-colonial politics complementary to the discourse concerning political resistance as expressed by local and indigenous communities protesting against development. Fourth, drift-cocaine has been arriving recently to the coastal region of Chocó as a side effect of the country’s war on drugs. In Chocó, this phenomenon is referred to as the White Fish and is investigated here by situating its associated practices and transformations within the local context. Fifth, Utría National Park is explored visually as a place of rhythms and temporalities. Lastly, it argues that the mechanisms, grounded in concepts of solidarity and co-existence, which are employed by the local communities in negotiating the matters that concern them, provide alternative narratives to the ones often used to described them as in “poverty” and in need of “development”.

Keywords: Afro-descendant, biodiversity conservation, Chocó, cocaine, Colombia, development, drug trade, Embera, matters of care, matters of concern
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Original publications

This thesis is based on the following publications, which are referred to throughout the text by their Roman numerals:


IV Acosta García, N. (Forthcoming) Temporalities and Rhythms of Living in Utría National Park, Colombia. Visual Anthropology Review.

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1 Introduction

I am walking on a beach in Chocó. Small hills stand behind me covered with the exuberance that only the tropical rainforest can provide. Cold springs emanate from the hills and pour over the warm sand. The tide is low. The water trickles through a pile of float and jetsam elements that the tide has deposited on the shore. Wood, plastic bottles, a broken sandal, Styrofoam, leaves, all piled up and mixed with sand. It is still the early morning hours, and a small group of people, mainly children, armed with gloves and plastic bags sort through the debris. I join and assist them in their effort to remove these elements that are somewhat foreign in this scenic landscape (See Fig. 1). We dig them out from the sand making sure it is only rubbish that we put into the bags. After all, we do not want to carry bags loaded with sand. We fill the bags slowly. We go metre by metre along the beach and ensure that it meets our self-determined cleaning standards. It is hard not to notice the origin of the elements. They all come from somewhere else. There is no industry here. Most of it probably ended up at sea due to the actions–and inaction–of the people that live nearby, while labels on a few pieces identify them as being from Asia and elsewhere in the Americas. In the meantime, tiny white crabs look at us and hide away as soon as we come close. Time passes, and it is lunchtime. We have covered a large portion of the beach and we all look exhausted. The heat, the digging, and the bending over is taking its toll on us. We bring the bags and stack them in town. We congratulate each other for the effort. One of the business owners in town offers us refreshments. The tide does its cycle again. Next morning the beach is once again covered with all sorts of things, and the bags are still piled in town. Ten days pass. The beach is no longer clean. Finally, the garbage truck passes by. It is full, so it only picks up half of the bags that day.

In this ethnographic moment, things and people converge. Global networks of capital and materials become manifest in these landscapes which raise normative questions of fairness and justice. Why do these elements need to be removed, and why are we doing the work? What are the implications of environmental degradation in a biodiversity hotspot? Why are there no state agencies involved? The people in question here are from the Afro-descendant community of El Valle, a village in the region of Chocó, Colombia, where members of the indigenous Embera community also live. This is a story that could be told in a way that portrays this village as victims of global capitalism, neoliberalism and “modernity.”
However, in this thesis, I want to turn the tables by bringing forth and investigating the agency of those who are usually depicted in a position of weakness. My purpose is to investigate local troubles, concerns and worries, and their relation to the ways Chocó has been produced—deriving from the Constitution of 1991 and informed by local realities—as a region of “poverty” in need of “development” and as one of great biodiversity in need of conservation. According to the latter point of view, the argument is simple. Each article serves as a vignette in a larger process of negotiation in which visions of the future are articulated by engaging and rejecting development and its capitalist governance. Chocó illustrates the challenges of conservation and development when we approach it from a post-colonial perspective, and from this new angle we are provided with an approach which engages with the current debates in social sciences and humanities concerning global environmental change in the “Anthropocene” (see e.g. Haraway, 2015, 2016; A. Moore, 2016; J.W. Moore, 2016; Tsing, 2015). This latter, as described by Crutzen (2002), is an epoch in which human activities have had such a great effect
on a planetary scale that we have collectively moved beyond the Holocene, the previous epoch, dated from the last ice age around twelve thousand years ago.

Through her work, Donna Haraway (2016, 2015) introduced me to a phrase from anthropologist and cultural theorist Marilyn Strathern (1992, 10) who wrote: “it matters what ideas one uses to think other ideas.” Donna Haraway goes further saying that, “It matters what thoughts think thoughts. It matters what knowledges know knowledges. It matters what relations relate relations. It matters what worlds world worlds. It matters what stories tell stories” (2016, 35). In this text, my aim is to make explicit the story that is used to tell stories with throughout the five articles: matters that concern local communities turning into opportunities. Anthropologists, sociologists, geographers, and philosophers –Bruno Latour, Donna Haraway, Herbert Marcuse, Arturo Escobar, Martin Holbraad, Paul Robbins, my co-authors and others– are my companions for thinking in this text and in the Articles.

The thesis is organised into five chapters and five original articles. The first chapter introduces the topic, theoretical arguments, and contribution as well as laying down the objectives. The second chapter explains the methodology employed during this research. The third chapter presents a historical and ethnographical overview of the region of Chocó. In the fourth, I set the theory in motion and present and analyse ethnographic materials from the articles. The last chapter presents the conclusions of the research and is followed by the five articles.

1.1 Studying human-nature relations in anthropology

Land and natural resource use are hot topics in Colombia. The recent peace agreement with the Colombian Revolutionary Armed Forces (Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia) or FARC have raised expectations over the use of the resources present in areas that were not previously accessible to the majority of the Colombian population. Colombia, occupying 0.22% of the planet’s surface, has 10% of all known species, found in the country’s five bioregions, one of which is Chocó (Corzo et al., 2011). The debate is ongoing as to what will happen to these “rediscovered” resources. Academics have chosen sides, in seminal recent articles in Science and Nature, expressing their concern over the use of these “new” resources (Baptiste et al., 2016; Clerici et al., 2016). However, the relations of the human and the non-human in these “rediscovered” areas is, to say the least, complex. Especially since the processes of expansion of markets and investment in agriculture, energy and mineral resources are presumed to be not only inevitable outcomes of peace, but also the way things should be. Chocó is a place that requires
other narratives beyond this developmentalist model (Escobar, 1995). Chocó needs a narrative that weaves through the local troubles, worries, matters of concern and care, empowers local people by not reducing agency to power relations, and that considers the histories of environmental degradation and social inequalities.

In broad terms, this research is situated within the larger umbrella of Political Ecology and is concerned with the relations between local and indigenous communities, and their environment. Political Ecology is a rather large and heterogeneous group of ideas and approaches to describe and analyse the relations between humans and non-humans. Perhaps what is more important is that political ecology presents an explicit alternative to an apolitical ecology (Robbins, 2012). Research in this field tends to reveal winners and losers from environmental outcomes and makes explicit the relations of power between them. For example, it asks questions in terms of who benefits, or not, from a certain policy or economic activity. Approaches to the study of human-nature relations in political ecology are manifold, for example, marxist, feminist, post-colonial, environmental-historical, and from the perspective of global-local dynamics.

Informed by this body of work, my approach to human-nature relations is through the normative standpoint in anthropology of “taking people seriously” (e.g. Astuti, 2017; Henare et al., 2007; Holbraad, 2012; Pedersen, 2011). This implies a non-essentialist view of the relations between humans and natures (Escobar, 1999). In a world made out of humans and non-humans, many of those involved in these politics have no voice or remain quiet. In this sense Latour (1993, 2004a) proposes the “parliament of things” where nature, society, and discourses are studied as hybrids. He proposes this enterprise to overcome the illusion of a human/nature divide, which he argues is what makes “modernity” possible (1993). Science and technology, which are central features in Latour’s views of modernity, are what have permitted the illusion of a divide. Every new chemical, particle, sequenced gene, that comes out of a laboratory to the world as an attempt to separate nature from culture, are, in reality, Latour tells us, hybrids of nature-culture. Every subsequent attempt to keep separating them, creates more hybrids. His point is that one cannot “purify” or separate humans from non-humans without creating more hybrids. Latour embraces sciences, not Science. His tool in that first project was to move away from the facts that made those hybrids up and focused instead on the conditions that made them possible. Latour’s work is full of efforts to convince fellow anthropologists and humanists that technology and objects are not matter without a soul, while at the same time, he tries to convince scientists and engineers that their facts and technology are embodied sociality (Latour, 1996).
In a paper in 2004, he attempts to change course from this first enterprise (Latour, 2004b), realising that those same tools which he has used against Science are under risk of being used to undermine it in politics. He is concerned with the politics of climate change, where scientific credibility has come under fire by the use of the same tools that humanists and social scientists employ in revealing science’s embodied sociality. His proposal is to change focus from “matters of fact” and to move towards “matters of concern”. To Latour, a matter of concern is a thing. He explains this from the etymological Old-Norse roots, where a thing means assembly or gathering. Matters of concern are then gatherings or arenas of discussions, in which Latour sees a possibility for critique to add to reality and not subtract from it. Thus, objects are subjected to deliberations in a parliament of things that recognises them as mediators, or actors with the capacity to translate, redefine, redeploy, and betray meanings (Latour, 1993, 81). In the parliament of things, objects are translated into matters of concern so that they have a language compatible with political life in democracies and be read as issues of public concern. Concerns hold together in complex, unsettled, sometimes in subtle and at other times explicit ways.

Haraway (2016, 42–43) notes that Latour’s (2004c, 2014, 2015) latter work relies on Carl Schmitt as a companion for thinking. Latour proclaims climate and science wars, and sees enemies in the others’ positions; Science (capitalised and singular) is no longer the pre-established referee. Schmitt’s thought, leads him towards unsettling arguments concerning the resolution of concerns, disputes and conflicts, and takes him to an authoritarian notion of legitimacy: “when you are at war, it is only through the throes of the encounters that the authority you have or don’t have will be decided depending whether you win or lose” (Latour, 2014, 60). He then makes clear that he does not want division and wars, but sees no way around it. Concerns require attention, consideration and thinking. They need other companions for thinking and other ways of resolution than through arguments of authority.

Other social scientists have taken Latour’s project on a different course. Building on his constructivist project of matters of concern, Maria Puig de la Bellacasa (2011) argues that concerns also replace interests as motivations of political claims, where they “call upon our ability to respect each other’s issues, if we are to build a common world” (2011, 88). Her reconfiguration of matters of concern differs from Latour’s and shows another way to think about issues. To her, the researcher’s responsibility is not in the dismantling of things, nor in the undermining of their reality by suspicion of human interests, but to enrich things
by adding further articulations. To achieve this, Puig de la Bellacasa brings attention to the notion of care, which she sees disregarded in Latour’s politics of things. She argues that “the politics of caring have been at the heart of concerns with exclusions and critiques of power dynamics in stratified worlds” (2011, 86), and that there is a need to move from concerns towards connotations that are more affectively charged, “notably those of trouble[s], worr[ies] and care” (2011, 89). To her, there is an important difference between “I am concerned” and “I care”, the latter denoting a relation of responsibility. I share with her this difference that underpins a politics of care. In Chocó, the tensions between poverty and development, environmental conservation and degradation, require a politics of care.

In a similar notion of care and matters of concern, Haraway (2016) proposes “staying with the trouble”. She takes trouble from its thirteenth-century French etymological root that means “to stir up”, “to make cloudy”, and “to disturb”; her proposition is that, “Our task is to make trouble, to stir up potent response to devastating events, as well as to settle troubled waters and rebuild quiet spaces” (2016, 1). Haraway is concerned with the loss of habitats and refuges across the planet. She, by quoting Latour, argues that we face a great divide: “on one side “Humans” and on the other “Earthbound”” (Latour, 2014, 1). She is determined that humans should remain “Earthbound”, which she defines as the state of “Those who tell Gaia stories or geostories … eschew[ing] dubious pleasures of transcendent plots of modernity and the purifying division of society and nature” (2016, 41). This comes accompanied with the notion of “response-ability” as the capacity to respond, that derives from her earlier work in human-animal ethics (see Haraway, 2008). To her, this concept does not mean the obligation to answer for one’s actions and choices, but rather it means a “praxis of care and response … in ongoing multispecies worlding on a wounded terra” (2016, 105).

As an alternative narrative to the Anthropocene, she proposes the Chthulucene: the epoch in which the Chthonic, or beings of earth of all sorts, live and die in ongoing practices of becoming with. Her most compelling argument is that the outcomes of the narrative of the Anthropocene always end badly. Her call is to think of alternative narratives to those of extinction and devastation. Grounded in Hannah Arendt’s analysis of Nazi war criminal Adolf Eichmann’s inability to think, she argues that at the root of the “surrender of thinking lay the ‘banality of evil’ of the particular sort that could make the disaster of the Anthropocene, with its ramped-up genocides and speciessicides, come true” (Haraway, 2016, 36). She
repeatedly calls upon us to reflect: “Think we must; we must think. That means, simply, we must change the story; the story must change” (2016, 40).

The possibility of life coming from death is a key topic that she develops in reference to the ethnographic work of Anna Tsing (2015). For Haraway, this outcome is only possible from learning the practices of “sympoiesis”, or “making with”. Sympoiesis is her radical invitation to rethink individualism and relations, both with humans or not. Hence, one of her answers to overpopulation is to make kin beyond genetic and genealogical relations, or oddkin, proposed under the slogan of “make kin, not babies!”

I share with Haraway (2016) the idea of providing narratives that move away from thinking of calamitous futures, where either technology or religion will come to our rescue, or the game is over and it is too late to do anything. Haraway’s (2016) “staying with the trouble” serves as a way to connect and embrace the many situated alternative technical projects that run counter to this narrative of calamity.

Yet Haraway’s proposition requires an additional move, so that it includes the many people that do not get the possibility to choose whether to participate in these alternative projects and to become “earthbound”. I employ her concept of “staying with the trouble”, with a twist, in order to approach the constant engaging-with and rejection-of development and its capitalist governance that takes place in Chocó. I borrow and complement its signification by including performances of making and stirring up troubles, of living with those troubles, and keeping —some of— the troubles ongoing in situated ways to make oneself heard.

Inspired by her call to think otherwise and in a nudge to “Gender Trouble” by Judith Butler (1990), the troubles of Chocó serve to destabilise narratives of “poverty”, “modernism” and “development” that pervade public opinion and policy prescriptions for Chocó.¹ The same narratives that over and over again raise the question of “Why is Chocó poor?” (Bonet, 2007) and that find their answers in “purified” (Latour, 1993) divisions of nature and society that command planned intervention to conform the “weak institutions”, lack of “human capital”, “geographic and climatic conditions”, and “geographic isolation” (Bonet, 2007: 56; DNP, 2008, 46). This begs the question of what kind of development is sought when local natures and societies are portrayed as antagonists. The narratives of Chocó deserve better writers, actors, and plot, other than those that portray the region as standing in the way of itself.

¹ For an overview of development in Chocó see Chapter 4 and Article II.
A more recent study that questions the “persistence of poverty in Colombia’s Pacific” by Galvis-Aponte et al. (2015) tries to move forward from the purified project of Bonet in its policy prescriptions. Yet, the authors are unable to present something other than a hegemonic notion of development prescribed to overcome poverty. This absence of critical questioning of “development”, Escobar argues, is highly problematic – when developments fails and even when it succeeds – as it operates by setting the terms of how people should live: “In this narrative, peasants appear as the half-human, half-cultured benchmark against which the Euro-American world measures its achievements” (Escobar, 1995, 194). Just as the narratives of the Anthropocene impede thinking other than calamitous futures or that religion or technology will be salvation, the narratives of “poverty”, “progress”, and “development” present in Chocó obstruct the possibilities of thinking anything other than technocratic solutions, and obscure the many ways in which local communities negotiate, engage with and reject capitalist governance (Asher, 2009; Ng’Weno, 2007; Tsing, 2015). Material needs and scarcity are very present and real in Chocó, yet the humans and non-humans in this region deserve a better narrative than “poverty” with its solution of “development”. Empowering narratives are needed for Chocó that move away from normative prescriptions of what life should look and be like.

My work concerning troubles and matters of concern and care of the peoples in Chocó builds on Arturo Escobar’s (2015a, 2015b) post-colonial and post-development notion of the “pluriverse”. His concept is built on the Zapatista movement motto of “a world in which many worlds fit”. Escobar takes the pluriverse as a counter-narrative to the interrelation between the ecological and social crises and their inseparability from the historical dimension of the current model of social life, be it capitalism, industrialisation, modernity, patriarchy, or neoliberalism. To Escobar (2012) the pluriverse is a possibility where many worlds and many knowledges can be said to co-exist. He argues that these worlds are interconnected through power relations. Plural knowledges and worlds, he continues, are built on many ontological and epistemological configurations and practices of being, knowing and doing. The sole proposition of a pluriverse implies that there are multiple ontologies, and radically moves away from a modern understanding of the world as a single universe, to one that is plural. Instead of a unifying experience and modes of being in the world, for Escobar the pluriverse is the symmetrical opposite. The pluriverse is a narrative for co-existence and solidarity among peoples that live together on a damaged planet.
1.2 Objectives and scope

The overarching objective in this research is to study the ways in which the local communities of Chocó challenge and transform their matters of concern and care. Initially, I was interested in the relations between local communities and their environment in ecotourism. Once in the field, however, my interests changed. If my research was to have any value for the local communities it had to respond to the participants’ worries, troubles, matters of care and concern, and find ways to shift focus from discourses of “poverty” and “development”. The research question is intended to generate alternative and empowering narratives. Empowerment is needed if the moral imperative of development to alleviate poverty is to be destabilised and challenged. Life is about troubles. It is about those things that disturb, provoke responses, and that we have to learn how to live with (Haraway, 2016). Troubles require us to be attentive and to focus on the detail in order to understand and learn from them. My focus is on those issues that participants considered important and relevant, and that they shared with me in my role as researcher. Braiding those troubles together and reading the thread that they form is a task of anthropology. I take research in anthropology as this process of weaving stories of peoples and places with critical creativity (cf. Ingold, 2017).

Of course, a story told is distinct from the events which took place, art and life being distinct. Motivated by the ethnographic materials provided by my supervisor Prof. Hannu I. Heikkinen, I started by investigating how to avoid silencing the voices of the people whom we work through the imposition of discourses of science. In the field, I attentively waited, listened, observed, and participated in the struggles of my participants and the communities in general. Each one of these matters of concern is reflected in the research themes outlined below. Admittedly, this thesis is just a small picture of everything that happens in the communities of Colombia’s northern Pacific coast. It is not my purpose to cover everything. Instead, my focus is on a few situations that implicate global, national and local matters of concerns. The contribution of this thesis as a whole is that by taking local concerns seriously in a context of marginality and post-colonial relations, the mechanisms through which those concerns are negotiated, assessed, and discussed can be made explicit. Each of the five articles is motivated by one matter of concern and correspondingly it has a research question in its own right. These questions show ingenious mechanisms for living with matters of concern in situations where staying is not a choice but an obligation. The questions can be summarised as follows:
I In Utría National Park, there are different ideas on how to use a park area. How might environmental value conflicts between the communities be avoided, or, where present, constructively resolved?

II Inside Utría National Park a hydroelectric power plant was built. It provides electricity to the local Afro-descendant and Emberá communities. Why is electricity so important that it has been the only motivation for the communities to protest?

III Drift-cocaine has been arriving at the coastal area of Chocó. Local communities refer to it as the White Fish. Why do people use this imaginative periphrasis?

IV In Utría National Park, the relations between peoples and objects occur in different rhythms and temporalities. How do these networks manifest themselves?

V In a context of science and policy interfaces, what are the challenges for examining the interplay between global change and local concerns?

1.3 Original articles


IV Acosta García, N. (Forthcoming) Temporalities and Rhythms of Living in Utría National Park, Colombia. Visual Anthropology Review.


The original articles are presented in a thematic order intended to support the argument of the dissertation. Next, I will provide an overview of the content of each article, and, where appropriate, I will specify the contributions from the different co-authors to the text.
Article I explores the environmental value conflicts over use of the natural resources in Utría National Park by three stakeholder-communities, the Afro-descendant and Embera communities and the Park Administration. As there is no clear solution as to how best to manage the park area, we characterise the management along Rittel and Weber’s (1973) definition of a Wicked Problem. We employ Faber et al.’s (1995) three-telo heuristic of living organisms to compare and contrast the encoded responses from the three stakeholder-groups in search of the deficiency of the third telos, service, which we take as symptomatic of Wicked problems. We identify deficiency in this telos and develop recommendations for park management aiming at encouraging cooperation among the concerned stakeholders.

Article I is based on 32 thematic interviews that I conducted in the field and that I transcribed verbatim. The ecological economist Katharine N. Farrell provided the theoretical approach. I adapted this framework in order to make it operational with qualitative data, and made the initial analysis and interpretations of that data. Farrell and I collaborated extensively in the subsequent steps of analysis, interpretation and drafting. Heikkinen and Sarkki were involved during a later stage of interpretation and revision of the text making significant contributions to the logic of the argument and the tone employed. Farrell and I made the final editorial changes to the text, and she proceeded with the final proofs as a native English speaker.

Article II tells the story of another arena of discussion: Mutatá small hydroelectric power plant. This infrastructure project was built inside Utría National Park. In the text, we tell the story of the relationship between the infrastructure and the communities through time. In brief, this relation can be characterised first as one where the Afro-descendant community of El Valle expected to be provided access to electricity by the central government. Then, as the environmental license for the construction of the power plant was not promptly issued, the Afro-descendant community decided to protest. Members of this community invited members of the Embera community to join them in the protest. The place decided upon for the construction of the hydroelectric plant was Mutatá waterfall, an important cosmological passageway between the worlds of the Embera. The Embera community decided to take part in the protest as it was explained to them by members of Afro-descendant community that the waterfall would not be included in the territories granted to them. The hydroelectric infrastructure was built and the Embera communities were compensated with free electricity and a few development projects. We contextualise the protest of the
Afro-descendant community within their larger struggle for legal, political and economic justice. We characterise the waterfall as a place where two infrastructures can be installed: a passageway between the worlds of the Embera or a hydroelectric power plant. We interpret the outcome of one infrastructure replacing the other as a manifestation of the post-colonial power relations between the Embera community and the government of Colombia. That the Embera had protested for the destruction of their world-crossing infrastructure seems contradictory. We make sense of this through what the political philosopher Herbert Marcuse (1969, 1964, 1955) called the Great Refusal, that he explains as “the protest against that which is” (1964, 63). We interpret the Embera’s protest for electricity as a refusal of the encroachment of the Colombian state into their traditional territory. Thus, we show how long-term historical structures, reaching back to the Spanish colonisation, continue to permeate and shape the projects of the future in both communities and the ways in which they engage with and reject the contemporary Colombian state’s project of development.

Article II is a collaboration between Farrell and myself and is based on all the ethnographic material I collected during my fieldwork in Colombia. Farrell provided expertise in Critical Theory, with my work complementing and extending her position. My work was more focused on analysing the ethnographic materials in the context of social movement in Colombia, with her work complementing and extending mine. In this sense, the conception of the paper was a collaborative process between the two of us. The analysis and interpretation of the ethnographic materials was developed together with her. I led the writing process of the text; and both Farrell and I made the final editorial changes and carried out the proof-reading of the text.

In Article III, I tell the story of the White Fish. This is the main aspect of the drug trade present in the coastal region of Chocó. The cocaine that reaches this area arrives on speedboats from the south of the country, where coca is farmed, processed into cocaine, and packed and sealed in plastic in the form of bricks. I investigate the use of this imaginative periphrasis to describe drift-cocaine. Cocaine is an illicit activity in Colombia. This condition limited my capacity of involvement in an important issue that required an analytical response. Thus, I use an approach that allowed me to get closer to the deeply felt effects of transnational drug trade. Based on Henare et al. (2007), I employ an ontological approach to the White Fish which allows me to describe this complex phenomenon, avoid theoretical assumptions concerning communities involved in drug-trade, and permit participants to assess their own situation. In the text, I show how the White Fish
imbricates fishing livelihoods with drift cocaine, which has effects on traditional fishing livelihoods, which are the pillar for the community’s way of life. In addition, I show that as the White Fish grants fortunes to those who find it, there are contradictory ideas over what is considered appropriate work. Also, I show through ethnographic examples the White Fish’s effects upon the way people perceive and use space. I am the sole author of the article.

Article IV is a photo essay that combines images and text. This photo-essay conveys in images the subtleties of living in the precarious and difficult conditions of a damaged planet. The images are connected textually with interview excerpts concerning the politics of living by a National Park. I selected the pictures that contained the untold stories of communities living-with, making-with and dying-with a damaged planet where responsibilities, benefits, and burdens are not equally shared. In the text, I use the emic concept of “rhythms” to explore networks and temporalities in situated elements of the pictures, for example, the temporality of drift plastic and driftwood, in their travels and troubles. I am the sole author of the article.

The final text in this list is Article V. The text is based on ethnographic data from Finland collected by my co-authors Heikkinen, Sarkki and Lépy (see Chapter 3). The analysis, recommendations and lessons from this article served as a guide through my fieldwork in Colombia and constantly reminded me of the responsibility of my position as a researcher. The text is based on fieldwork conducted by my co-authors during climate change workshops in Finland with local stakeholders. In the text, we look at the interplay of different concepts, their meanings and the ways in which they are understood by different stakeholders. We focus on proposing conceptual ways to overcome the research challenge of dealing with scientific knowledge supressing local knowledges and voices. We argue that this interplay creates a space of friction and contradiction where the power dimension of knowledge becomes manifest. In the article, we produce guidelines on how to deal with power imbalances. However, my reason for discussing the findings of this article is to emphasise two aspects. First, that the negotiation between knowledges is political and has consequences over how policies are shaped and future state funding spent. Second, that without sensitivity to power concealed within the negotiation of knowledge, the experiences and lives of people can change for the better or for the worse. In this text, the first three authors – Heikkinen, myself and Sarkki– provided the conceptual framework; worked together in developing a position to interpret and analyse the materials; and, co-authored the different sections in the text. Lépy made comments, designed the map
and figures. All the authors were involved in the final editorial revisions for publication.
2 Thinking through methods

The methods used for fieldwork were informed by a theoretical approach developed in Article V of the appendix. In this chapter I describe the methods employed in this research. During fieldwork, I adopted a conventional approach to ethnography by working with members of the communities that included participant observation and interviews. As I was unaware of the many roads that fieldwork would lead me down, in this section, I describe the ways in which the different ethnographic materials were collected and analysed. I argue that the tools developed in Article V provided me with ways to engage with and take seriously the concerns and possibilities of the local communities.

The fieldwork I conducted has an undertone of traditional ethnography² (cf. Malinowski, 1922) in the sense that I worked with small communities with a certain degree of isolation, where I attempted to understand and situate myself to get a sense of the local peoples’ point of view. Following what Marcus (1995) calls “multi-sited ethnography”, I conducted three rounds of fieldwork during the course of two years (2015–2016) in Chocó. During this time (and after) I maintained contact, and exchanged correspondence with participants when I was not in the field through phone calls and e-mails, on many occasions in order to discuss the topics and issues that concerned them – on others just to keep in touch. Hence, the field site can be interpreted as a network of virtual and spatial configurations (Burrell, 2009). This network allowed me to enquire and establish social relations with people to whom I am grateful and indebted for sharing their time and stories with me. I take ethnography as rendering accounts of life, as it is lived and experienced by those people that worked with me (Ingold, 2017, 2014). I refer to them as participants, as they play an active part in my research, they informed me, taught me and shared with me their stories, concerns and ideas. The main material for this research is their stories, which I collected during interviews, complemented with observations, field notes, anecdotal evidence, experiences, and public and scientific literature.

Choosing Chocó as the place for fieldwork was a careful decision. My criteria for selecting a place for fieldwork were based on finding places with ecotourism, multi- or polycentric governance³ (see Ostrom et al., 1961; Ostrom, 2010), and

² In spite of employing a traditional ethnographic approach, I must note that I do not adopt the colonial, imperial, misogynistic and even derogatory attitudes of that traditional approach.
³ While this was part of the selection criteria for fieldwork sites, the experiences from that same fieldwork led the research project on a different path.
low-intensity armed conflict. The initial screening for potential sites of research included national parks and protected areas across Colombia. Most national parks overlap with the territories of indigenous peoples. This gave the project the polycentric governance dimension. In addition, Chocó is inhabited also by Afro-descendant communities, which made the region intriguing by adding more complexity to the political relations. Within this region, two municipalities in particular were selected as suitable to fieldwork: Nuquí and Bahía Solano. Bahía Solano was chosen as the main site for research for two reasons. Firstly, due to its proximity to Utría National Park. And secondly, on the basis that I had some degree of contact with people who had previously worked in development cooperation in this area. In addition, I worked and travelled to other coastal areas within the region that will remain undisclosed in this text to maintain participant confidentiality concerning drug-trade (Article III).

2.1 Doing context-sensitivity political ecology

My fieldwork was guided by the concept of “context-sensitive” political ecology (Article V). This approach to fieldwork is characterised by a sensitivity to societal phenomena of power relations and inequality that are usually present in the study of environmental issues. This, all the more, since it is often the case that people affected by environmental issues rarely have the choice to stay with the trouble but rather have to learn with it of necessity (Haraway, 2016). The task of this political ecology is to analyse the politics of ecology and the ecology of politics with a clear normative purpose: to improve the flow of information between stakeholders while being attentive to power relations and agency. We propose four suggestions, with some degree of overlap, on research approaches to political ecology that foster dialogue among those concerned:

- Global discourses on environmental change have more power than local conceptualisations. These power asymmetries should be made explicit. Any analysis must consider assumptions, power, purpose and history of those discourses.
- Researchers must be attentive to the ways in which global discourses tend to homogenise the analysis of environmental change and overshadow the importance of local issues. Networks must be studied from the bottom up, starting from lived realities. The study of heterogeneous networks is the strength of a context-sensitive political ecology.
Discourses on global environmental change are useful for raising awareness, for example, of the impacts of climate change and biodiversity loss. Their legitimacy rests on the power of certain narrative produced by scientists that are adopted by policymakers. The task for political ecology is to bring forth and include local voices and counter-discourses in the broader narratives, which may otherwise be suppressed (Peet & Watts, 1996).

Researchers in Political Ecology must take the role of reflexive practitioners, intermediaries, facilitators and/or capacity builders in order to enhance the balanced co-production of locally sensitive knowledge. Thus, bridging the gap between “science” and local conditions, fostering public debate, reflecting upon practical problems and facilitating deliberations between administrative sectors. This mediating role could potentially help make global concerns meaningful for local people, and in turn take seriously local concerns instead of ignoring them.

2.2 Doing context-sensitive fieldwork with the peoples of Chocó

Based on the four recommendations listed above (Article V), I proceeded to conduct fieldwork in Chocó, which included three field visits, two in 2015 and one in 2016. The region of Chocó is an area where there is the constant presence of drug-trafficking, left-wing guerrillas, right-wing paramilitaries, and the Colombian military. In official reports, the area has been the stage for kidnappings of public officials and tourists, a battleground between the many armed groups, and a zone of forced displacement, among other complex realities. In newspapers and mass media the region has been associated with violence, remoteness and armed conflict – such are the associations engendered by Chocó. These dynamics of representation are pervasive across the country: I too experienced them. Since the moment I began planning my trip to the region of Chocó I confronted a wall of imaginaries of violence. A short message to my family and friends telling them of my plans to do research in this area quickly escalated into messages and phone calls expressing their worries over my trip. To the point that I was even asked if I needed a letter from the army addressed to the university explaining why I should not or could not conduct my research in this area. Adding to this tension, there was the kidnapping of an army general near Quibdó, the region’s main city, by a guerrilla group of the FARC-EP. This kidnapping was the first of its kind in 60 years of armed conflict and was presented on the news as a major setback for the peace negotiations that were ongoing at the time (“Secuestro del General”, 2014). However, spaces and
geographies are produced by imaginaries based on information that is available to us. The messages I received reflected the imaginary of a homogenous region full of drug traffickers and violent strife, and thereby conformed to a certain position regarding the armed actors present in the area (Larkins, 2013).

These imaginings could not be more different from the situation that I found in these villages: people leaving their doors and windows open every day, everyone greeting each other, buoyant commerce, and bored policemen playing on their mobile phones when they were not flirting with local women. Not exactly the type of situation one would expect in an area with drug trade (cf. Tate, 2015b; Valencia, 2015). However, that perceived calmness need not mean security. From my previous experience of doing fieldwork in Arauca, a conflict-stricken region in Colombia on the border with Venezuela, I learnt the nuances of being in such places of conflict. Calmness can be a temporary state, and risks vary considerably depending on a myriad of factors. Moreover, the local population usually seem to assess risk differently mediated by their identities, capacities and access to spaces. During that previous fieldwork, I learnt about the notoriety of my own body where people would wonder and question me about my origins and my purpose of being in a certain place. The colour of my skin, the clothes I wear, the way I talk and the body language that I use, are all markers that helped people to determine my origins or class-status, or at the very least allowed people to recognise that I was not from there. Some of these markers are built around national racial ideologies that associate wealth to certain skin colour (Ng’Weno, 2007). Hence, my self-perception and self-awareness informs the way I conducted fieldwork in Chocó and has influenced the length of it: I spent a total of four months in the field.

However, I count as fieldwork the two years during which I collected different kinds of materials that include interviews, field notes, meetings, pictures, phone calls, emails and whatsapp messages. The several repeated fieldwork trips were calculated to avoid giving the perception of meddling or stirring up the calmness, something which permanent residence could have led to, which facilitated me in gaining a privileged—with much responsibility—amount of access to information. Calmness is a state or emotion that is projected for the sake of visitors and is intended to maintain the flow of tourists to the area. As I would find out during fieldwork the presence of drug-trafficking and the military is pervasive (see Article III). It would not be uncommon to find soldiers camping on the outskirts of villages, or a town waking up to find soldiers occupying every corner. For the most part, the military and other villagers would classify me in the category of “tourist”. However, this would not stop them asking me questions. As my answer was always that I was
doing research, I would be furthered questioned what kind of research was I conducting, and, many times, this was followed by remarks in which they noted their curiosity concerning my continuous questioning and talking to many local people in the villages. These situations in which I was produced as a researcher who is somehow out-of-place (McDowell, 1999), and necessarily influences and shapes my ethnography. In a similar account, Bettina Ng’Weno (2007, 121) writes “Not only do Africa and my origins give me a perspective from which to view what I encounter, but they also give people a perspective from which to frame their interpretations and descriptions of daily life”. In my research in Chocó, the parameters which would shape the whole study are conditioned around how people understood my origins, my purpose of being in those places where I worked, and my own training. Therefore, people structured, articulated, and presented information to me in a particular way in accordance with how they perceived and produced me in a certain capacity. For example, after being perceived as a tourist, I was also seen as a project-proposal expert who knew how to write proposals in order to secure funding from NGOs for local community projects. At other times, I was asked to give open lectures concerning Law 70 of 1993 concerning the rights of Afro-descendant communities; or to write letters to national authorities in order to request information regarding the lack of mobile network coverage. While I acceded to all these requests, they also show the many capacities in which I was produced.

My original approach to the area was based on ecotourism, which served as a gateway to getting to know the local people and their concerns. During fieldwork, I attempted to avoid imposing my research interests, and instead I paid attention and listened to the rhythms, networks and flows that happen in the villages. This led me to focus on topics that may seem disarticulated, yet they are pressing to the local communities, requiring – from my field of expertise – an analytic response. Examples are the use of a national park’s resources (Article I), lack of action in addressing issues besides electricity (Article II), and the arrival of drift cocaine (Article III). Corresponding with participants meant collecting different stories that in turn produced different kinds of ethnographic materials, for example, interview transcripts, field notes and pictures. The Articles I to IV draw from these different data to different extents.

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4 See Section 3.5.
2.2.1 Reflecting, interviewing and research ethics

Once I was in the field, I discussed the scope of my work with the ethnic authorities for each community and requested permission to conduct the research. I explained to them the overall objective, scope, and opportunities associated with relaying the stories and producing academic research about the region of Chocó. I followed the recommendations from the American Anthropological Association’s (2012) code of ethics with its principle of “do no harm”. This guiding principle marked my fieldwork as well as the analysis and writing processes of the articles. I paid special consideration to gain consent from the communities and individuals that I worked with, ensuring that participants were aware of their rights and of the procedures of the research. For this purpose, each interview started with the recording of the informed consent that included objective and scope of the study, a description of how the interview would be conducted, the right to stop the interview at any given time or skip any question, as well as my duty of causing no harm and keeping the information safe.

As I said, my identity is a relevant part of how ethnographic materials were collected. This can be understood under the umbrella of reflective ethnography (Davies, 2009). My body differentiated me from the local people and, in turn, it affected that same data: I perceived as a white-skinned man from the capital city Bogotá, and with the privilege of working abroad in Finnish academia. Upon my arrival in Chocó I had to explain my networked reality of a Colombian studying Colombian society while based in Finland – a multi-sited life with its perks and quirks. Usually, this included explaining Finland’s location in Europe. I often had to explain that a Finnish university was indeed paying for this study, that I had no economic interests in the area, that I did not work for any NGO, and that the outcomes would be scientific publications where I would relay the stories that people entrusted me with. I was also careful to avoid raising expectations from the outcomes of the research, where at most, together, we would produce scientific information in an area that remains at the margins of Colombia. Context-sensitivity is a two-way street, and meant not only being sensitive to the information that was being collected and the happenings around it, but also being honest about my networks and identity.

In El Valle, my main interlocutors were the Rojas family from the Afro-descendant community, whose members are mostly women. I stayed at their hotel

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5 For the debate on this ethical approach see e.g. Bell (2014), MacKinnon (2017); Lederman (2006).
and they provided me with their friendship and countless hours of conversation. Moreover, they were instrumental in helping me establish a network of participants. Their family, I was explained, was one of the first settlers of the village. The family is numerous with complex kinship relations that can be considered as what Haraway (2016, 2) calls “oddkin”, family relations additional to biological kin. The family has several small businesses, and some of their family members are active in local politics. They were instrumental in my research, helping me to make contacts, form networks, and sense the local world. Their Embera counterpart was Jorge, from the Embera village of El Brazo. He is a man in his sixties and spends his time raising his five-year-old grandson. Like most members of his community, he works mostly in agriculture and sells his surplus in El Valle. He also serves as a leader in his community. He has a house in El Valle, and many of our conversations took place in his house. I am indebted to his endless patience to my many questions.

During my fieldwork, I observed and participated in different meetings, events and happenings of everyday social life within the communities. I held informal conversations with many interlocutors from the area as well as with tourists. They remain in the background of my analyses, in my field notes and memories of those happenings. They are an important part of the generative process that guided my wondering, and later understanding, of local issues. These observations and conversations served to screen out and identify from a wealth of eight key themes that concerned the communities: tourism, transportation, infrastructure, public services, governance, national park, presence of governmental agencies, and armed conflict. In an effort to elicit responses concerning the participants’ general views regarding local realities and main concerns without intentionally silencing any of them (see Article V), interviews took the form of a conversation that would start with open ended questions about family histories, and were followed by those eight key themes in a structured way.

I attempted to cover as many livelihoods as I could in order to get a grasp of the culture-nature and power dynamics in the villages (see e.g. Articles I and III). It is worth noting that many of the participants from the Afro-descendant community had links to the ecotourism sector and to productive chains connected to it, with most of their families deriving at least part of their basic income from this activity as it is the main economic activity in the study area. On the other hand, participants from the Embera community do not display these same ties to ecotourism, as their participation in ecotourism is, on balance, rather limited. Participants covered a wide range of the main ecotourism activities underway in the area (Robbins, 2004), including agriculture, fishing, running restaurants,
guiding tours, transportation services, manufacturing handicrafts, hotel services, Park Administration, and local authorities.

I had formal thematic interviews with 56 people, sometimes in groups, but mostly with individuals (see Table 1). Most interviews were recorded and some were annotated, depending on the preference of the participant. Interviews were conducted in the locations where the participants thought it would be most suitable given the purpose, for example at their homes after work. All the interviews were held during the first and second fieldwork rounds. Participants were all adults, both males (n=38) and females (n=18). While I chose some of the participants looking to have both male and female voices, others were suggested to me and some volunteered to participate in the interviews. Males were more eager to approach me and participate in the interviews than females. Moreover, the Rojas family members whom I spent most of the time with in El Valle were mostly women who helped me make contacts with mostly men, having an influence in this gender imbalance. I attempt to counterweight this imbalance with field notes and other materials, which include, for example, the many informal conversations with the Rojas family members. Knowledge is always partial and situated (Haraway, 1988), and so is my access to the participants and my own interpretations of the many situations.

With the exception of the ethnographic material included in Article III, where the locations and identities are undisclosed, most participants were members of either the Afro-descendant community of El Valle, who live beside Utría National Park, the Embera community of Alto Río Valle-Boroboro reservation (resguardo), whose territories include part of the park area, or staff members of the Park Administration. In the text, I use pseudonyms and omit identifying characteristics. Both communities and the park are located within the municipality of Bahía Solano in Chocó. Recorded and annotated interviews were transcribed verbatim, and all interview data were organised and analysed using the N-VIVO software programme according to the storyline and theme of each article.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Number of Interviews</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Afro-descendant Community</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Incl. 1 small group interview with two participants)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Embera Community</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Incl. 1 large group interview with seventeen participants)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Park Administration</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
2.2.2 Identifying troubles that matter

When I began my fieldwork, I was amazed by the beauty of the Pacific littoral, the exuberance of the rainforest and the kindness of the people. However, the lack of social services, the background of armed conflict, and the many needs and poverty, made me inquire into the possibilities that are frustrated in these communities. The affirmative action contained in the Constitution of 1991 gave a series of possibilities in terms of self-determination to the peoples of Chocó that Colombians elsewhere do not enjoy (See Section 3.5). During my fieldwork, I first inquired during many informal conversations into why the communities had not taken action through legal mechanisms. This first inquiry created two kinds of discussions, on the one hand those regarding issues that I classify as “internal” and on the other as “external” to the communities in their dynamics with local and national actors (e.g. the central government, municipal government, NGOs, the park, drug-trafficking, armed actors) (cf. Asher, 2009). I must caveat that the issues covered here are not exhaustive, but are part of a process of co-production between myself, as ethnographer, and the people, as they related to me, who produced information by selecting what they deemed it relevant to share with me.

In a widely-cited essay, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1988) raises the question “Can the subaltern speak?”. She makes her argument through reference to the case of a suicide of a young Bengali woman indicating a lack of self-representation. Spivak argues that the Bengali woman attempted to speak through ways that were illegible in patriarchal channels. She thus argues that “the subaltern cannot speak.” Spivak takes Gramsci’s concept of the “subaltern”. For Gramsci this corresponds to the proletarian whose voice could not be heard by being structurally left out from capitalist governance. She applies then this concept to post-colonial groups and argues that the subaltern cannot speak as they are barred structurally from having a voice. As I said, my analysis of the issues present in informal discussions in Chocó is not exhaustive, however the analysis is informed by this notion of giving voice through my own work to subjects which can be considered subaltern. I acknowledge that internal/external are artificial categories with degrees of overlap, however they allowed me to classify my first impressions and notes in the field and served to organise the themes that I used to guide the interviews, and they are the categories through which now I attempt to give voice to otherwise unheard issues: the histories implied in the management of the national park, the lack of social protest except in pushing for the construction of Mutatá, the social changes crafted
by the White Fish, and the global relations and rhythms of living in an otherwise “isolated” part of the Pacific littoral.

In the first category “internal” to the communities, I classified those issues that dealt with conflicting relations in the villages. For example, between members of the Afro-descendant and Embera communities on the one hand and paisas, “white” or “mestizo” people from the nearby Andean cities in Antioquia that have a particular intonation on the other; or the value conflicts between the few foreigners that have established new business in the area and the Afro-descendant community. Also, I included here issues managed in a communitarian way through mingas (collective work) or through mano cambiada (labour exchange) (CCGLR, 2007). For example, mingas are organised for maintenance of the bridges that communicate stilt houses in certain neighbourhoods in El Valle. Also, mingas are organised between the councils and neighbours of Embera and Afro-descendant communities in order to clear felled trees that blocked waterways. Another example was the pruning of overgrown vegetation in public spaces. These examples of communal activities by themselves showed a level of organisation that participants seemed to disregard as obvious in tasks forming part of their lives. Hence, even though these relations and stories are present in the interviews, and are many times in the background, my central focus was not primarily on them.

The second group of topics that I classify as “external” were the issues in which local communities have no voice in public and scientific fora, and where their actions are constrained by this condition (Spivak, 1988). In the case of the National Park, the histories of land-grabbing by the state and the narratives of marginalisation by the park’s policies have been left out from the official discourse and management of the park area. These past issues underpin the conflicts that the Park Administration encounters today. Some participants that I shared time with, were often eager to talk about their experience in conflicts with the administration of Utría National Park (Article I). In a way, the park is seen both as a nuisance and as a resource. The latter is especially the case since it can help in pursuing funds from international NGOs interested in biodiversity conservation (see also Section 3.7). The engagement with and rejection of the park is a constant dynamic.

The protest in favour of the Mutatá hydroelectric plant can be perceived as seemingly counterintuitive (Article II). Both communities protested for its construction in order to have access to electricity. The protest was never reported by the press. In general, the situation in Chocó concerning public service provision is dire (DNP, 2008, 2015). As Bahía Solano is the only municipality in the Northern Pacific coast that has a permanent service of electricity –Nuquí and Juradó have
intermittent service— one of my inquiries was into how this situation came to be. What is critical from the perspective of not having a voice is that electricity has been the one and only reason that has stirred up members of both local communities of Utría to engage in social protest. Hence, the question: why have people not spoken up about other issues? Is partly answered by asking: why have people spoken up about electricity? This question required many informal and formal conversations so that I could reconstruct the past events that led to the construction of the infrastructure. As the past, present and future are mutually implicated (Hirsch & Steward, 2005), the reconstruction of the events that led to the protest meant also discussing the projects of the future of both communities.

In a similar vein, the White Fish is perhaps the best indication of voices that are unheard in Colombia’s transnational drug trade. I had no understanding of the White Fish when I arrived in Chocó for the first time. The issue struck me on a three-wheeler taxi. I had taken a seat in the back of the taxi, which, two blocks into our journey, stopped to pick up two middle-aged local women. They both squeezed into the back seat next to me. I could tell that the driver, who seemed very formal when I first entered the taxi, already knew one of the women by the way they warmly greeted one another. We shared the one-hour ride together and after some polite small talk, the driver began complaining about the current situation in the village. “It’s been many years since fish has been so scarce”, he muttered. To which the woman replied, “It’s been many years that fishermen are so scarce, because fishermen are out trying to catch the White Fish”. To my ears, at the time, there seemed an incongruity in the statement that there was not enough fish because fishermen were out trying to catch one particular type. To the untrained ear, the White Fish is just another creature of the sea. But for those who live in the coastal villages it is a matter of serious concern as the cocaine that reaches the coasts is having important implications on the communities (Article III).

The last trouble that I framed as rhythms and temporalities is somewhere in between the internal/external self-imposed categories. Let us go back to the first paragraphs of this thesis where I briefly mentioned global relations and networks that weave though the beach in the form of plastics. On my last field visit to El Valle, good luck was on my side. Walking towards the beach, Rogelio approached me. He saw me as a tourist and explained that he had a few nests of turtles’ eggs in his sanctuary. He and his wife are part of a group of brave local conservationists in El Valle – with long-term thinking – that patrol the beaches every night to collect turtle eggs in hopes of saving this endangered species and by doing so also earning an income. They create artificial nests in safe locations and ensure the newborns
make it to the sea. Thereby, they help this species continue its cycle of life and death, which involves a return to this same beach in 30 years’ time in order to lay eggs. Rogelio said that I should come see him the day after in the afternoon, that it was possible that then the eggs would have hatched. I was eager to participate in this remarkable experience of helping the baby turtles reach the waves of the sea.

Fig. 2. Newly-born sea turtle in El Valle. Picture taken by the Author.

The next day came, but the babies had not hatched yet. Two days after, it was the magical day. Rogelio had the babies ready in a box when I arrived. They had hatched a few hours before when the sun was at its summit. We walked to the beach. It was extremely difficult to find a site that was not covered by driftwood, plastic and rubbish. After some hundred meters of walking, we found a suitable spot. I took one baby in my hand and placed it in the sand facing the sea. It waited for the waves to carry it into the sea. However, our job was not done. We had to remove obstacles and bring back the turtles when the waves pushed them towards the plastic and wood covered parts of the beach. The concern for the upkeep of the beach is a local concern. For the people of El Valle whose livelihoods depend on
tourism, it is a matter of great concern. Tourists do not like dirty beaches. Most coastal communities are voiceless in the ecological disaster that plastic means to them. While the photo essay is not just focused on this issue, it is intended to show the many connections that isolated communities, in their own rhythms and temporalities, engage with and reject in a globalised planet.

2.2.3 Photography

This thesis includes photographic materials and a photo essay (Article IV). The pictures were taken at the beginning of 2017 with an analogue camera, as the high humidity in the region tends to damage electronic equipment. It is worth noting that during my first round of fieldwork in 2015 my virtually brand new laptop shut down one night while I transcribed an interview. At the repair shop in Bogotá, I was told it was damaged beyond repair. The service person even asked me if I had spilled water on it, which shows the extent of the humid conditions of Chocó. Nadine Wanono (2014, 196) invites us to reflect on “on the one hand the technical aspects of the apparatus surrounding our work, and on the other hand discourses surrounding their capacities”. In this sense, a digital camera, like any other modern technology (Latour, 1999), is a historicised device designed to operate under certain conditions of exposure to the elements. Chocó, perhaps, is not one of the intended places, and highlights the politics involved in technology development and availability. Without wanting to risk more expensive equipment, I decided against using digital equipment during later fieldwork.

This choice came with a series of consequences in the field and in working with the developed photographs. The analogue camera gives unexpected textures to the pictures combining contrasts of light, colours, and tones. The pictures are unique pieces co-produced between the sight, the camera and myself. They are a product of a series of aleatory conditions that, following what Martino Nicoletti (2014) calls “visual media primitivism”, become a shared interpretation of that reality that is being captured. This contrasts with the output of digital cameras, which allow the photographer to see and assess the picture immediately after the take and retake the picture if necessary. In the villages in and around Utría National Park, there are no photography laboratories, and rolls of film in rural Colombia have become hard to find, which meant a delay of months between taking the photograph and actually seeing the final product. These factors contributed to me being sparing when deciding which opportunities merited the depletion of the limited stock of film available. I constantly struggled between saving films for later
use or using them at once. More so, it was challenging at that time to know that even if I carefully considered each composition, it was impossible to predict if, and how, any of the pictures would come out (Nicoletti, 2014). This haphazard production process has influenced the quality, lighting and materiality of the pictures themselves. Some appear out of focus with degraded colours and seeming burnt marks. I have not corrected these “defects” in representation as they add a layer of precarious and awkward reality into the pictures. This representation of Chocó is in consonance with the precarious conditions of post-colonial and marginalized Colombia. In other words, I did not want to reproduce romantic notions of life in “paradise” commonly found in tourism brochures, but rather wished to capture in the material object of the photograph that other face of life in this region. In the pictures, I wanted to bring forth the not-so-apparent global connections of late-industrial society and to raise questions over the difficulties and opportunities that these entail. The connections are shown in certain elements, for example, plastic bottles washed up on the beach, sea turtles, satellite dishes, exuberant forests, and driftwood. The process of taking the pictures itself also involved challenges and opportunities, and some are reflected in the materiality of analogue pictures, for example, in the degraded colours, blurry parts, grainy and burnt images, and in the aesthetic composition of the colours and lighting.

In general, there are only a few people in the pictures. I wanted to protect people’s privacy, especially since some of the topics covered here are sensitive. The combination of few humans and places without humans is an invitation for the viewer to see themselves in the frames and to imagine the emotions, the smells, the climatic conditions, in the moment when a picture was taken. During fieldwork, context-sensitivity meant questioning the ethics and politics of representation in post-colonial Chocó. For example, the Embera community restricts the use of cameras in their villages. Members of the community explained to me that as women do not wear upper-body clothing, they had felt objectified by tourists with their cameras. I was given permission from the local authorities to take pictures. In my photographic practice, I attempted to avoid reproducing power relations that through othering or romanticising have affected the region one way or another. My purpose with the pictures is to tell stories of my experience of working together with members of the communities. The pictures that are present throughout this text are some of the pictures of Article IV, but in a different order and with slightly different descriptions in accordance with the arguments presented.
2.2.4 Working with the ethnographic materials

The multi-sitedness of my fieldwork and its associated network of peoples and global connections required an ethical duty to the communities I worked with. I had to be creative and find ways to relay and analyse the stories while being attentive and ensuring no harm would come to any of the people involved. This required theoretical approaches to the ethnographic materials that were sensitive to the local issues and power relations. One approach was looking into commonalities among the different stakeholder-communities that are present in Utría National Park (Article I). In this way, we were attentive to the historical relations among the communities and we were able to give recommendations concerning sustainability issues.

For the ethnographic material of Mutatá hydroelectric plant (Article II), the approach consisted mainly in maintaining participant anonymity. To the advantage of me and my co-author, the events narrated in the happenings of Mutatá hydroelectric plant in Chocó occurred more than 20 years ago, which now constitute part of the local “social memory” (see e.g. Abercrombie, 1998; Climo & Catell, 2002). These past events are far enough in the past for them not to be too sensitive, and for people to have crystallised their ideas and positions. In addition, archival and written sources of that period are rather limited. The absence of local press, at the time, combined with limited information on official documentation concerning this region in general led to us relying heavily on interview materials collected in the field with members of both local Afro-descendant and Emberá communities, as well as with park officials. The theory deployed in analysing the situation required us to avoid essentialising any of the groups of people involved in the dispute in order to focus on the symbolic and material relations of development infrastructure.

The materials concerning the White Fish were especially challenging (Article III). Drug trade is an illicit activity in Colombia and there has been a long history of violence surrounding this enterprise. I also had to maintain my commitment to doing a sensitive political ecology and avoid silencing a story and its voices; otherwise, I would potentially foreclose an opportunity for debating these significant troubles for the local communities. Each region in Colombia has its own

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6 In order to get to commonalities, we employ Faber et al.’s (1995) heuristic of the three tele as analytic categories for content analysis (Krippendorff, 2012; Bernard, 2011). See Article I for the analysis.

7 The analysis in this article is articulated employing Herbert Marcuse’s critical theory and development studies in Colombia. For a discussion please refer to Article II.
socio-economic dynamics when it comes to drugs. The analytical lens upon drug trade has been by and large focused on cocaine’s political economy, North–South relations, and the war on drugs (Lyons, 2016; Ramirez, 2001; Tate, 2013; Taussig, 2004). In Chocó people use an imaginative periphrasis to describe drift-cocaine. To access the issue, I explore the material-semiotic relations\(^8\) of the White Fish and drift-cocaine (cf. Henare et al. 2007). In other words, a study of the geography and relations of the objects of research in order to unlock relations from an emic perspective that are otherwise obscured by preceding analyses and theory. This approach allows me to circumvent some of the difficulties, which arise when carrying out ethnographic research on phenomena that remain invisible and difficult to access (see e.g. da Col, 2017). This was most certainly the case with my research: drift-cocaine remained inaccessible to me throughout my fieldwork; I was not a participant observer of the drug trade itself, and I cannot make direct claims about the practices that enact the White Fish and the transformations in the villages beyond my own observations of what was said or done.

The handling of the photographic ethnographic material was different to that of the field notes and interviews (Article IV). Besides the limitations upon the process of taking the pictures outlined in the previous section, the pictures also tell a story about me. They show visually what my eyes surveyed and convey my representation of the study area through a camera lens. They tell of the ways which I find appropriate for representing peoples and places. Hence, in order to maintain a story and my vision each picture comes accompanied by a text that describes the use of picture as an element, or appears together with other pictures that create a coherent whole.

\(^{8}\) This is part of larger debate in anthropology named the “ontological turn.” For a discussion on the positions, shortcomings and possibilities in the debate see Article III.
In this chapter, I will provide a historical and ethnographic overview of the studied communities from the administrative region of Chocó. The chapter starts by discussing the pre-Columbian history of the area, followed by an overview of the colonial history, then I focus on three separate strands: agricultural colonisation,
social movements, and emerging conservation. The chapter serves as preface to the upcoming chapters and to the articles, which in turn provide a more in-depth analysis of the current matters of concern, and care, of the communities. Here I articulate the narratives of survival and resurgence, of contact, destruction, and oppression that the people in Chocó have been subjected to. The following pages provide an account which highlights the disturbing ease with which certain groups of people in Colombia have been ignored, oppressed, and destroyed and how difficult it has been for them to build their worlds and make them a viable possibility (cf. Escobar, 2015). Hundreds of years of the oppressive model of “civilisation” have passed. The colonisers came; the borders were set, moved, and set again with the purpose of exploiting both peoples and natures. The alterity of indigenous and Afro-descendant identities remains in spite of all the colonisers’ efforts to homogenise and erase them. These identities have come to be defined in relation and difference to this dominant power, but remain nonetheless their very own. My focus here is on the region’s historical trajectories of colonisation, slavery, assimilation, social movement, and, later, biodiversity conservation.

The Colombian region of Chocó faces out onto the Pacific coast, stretching down from the border with Panama in the north. The region extends inwards from the Pacific coast in the west to the Andes in the east. Local topography is marked by a small mountain range named Serranía del Baudó and three main rivers Atrato, San Juan and Baudó. Chocó is famous for having an exceptionally high rate of precipitation (>10,000 mm per year) and is covered, for the most part, with tropical rainforest. The region is part of the Chocó-Darien bioregion (extending from Panama to northern Ecuador), an area considered a biodiversity hotspot of international importance and a key store of global genetic resources (Codechocó, 2012, 2016; Myers et al., 2000; OREWA, 1995).

Today, the Embera communities living by the coastal region are mostly farmers and hunters, and the Afro-descendant communities depend for their livelihoods mainly on agriculture, mining, forestry, fishing, tourism, and commerce (See Article I). It is also worth noting that the coastal areas are affected by international drug trade and the war on drugs, a phenomenon that was acknowledged by the studied communities (see Article III). Both the Afro-descendant and Embera communities in the region are currently classified as “poor” by the Colombian government (DANE, 2015; DNP, 2008). The Colombian statistics agency, “DANE” (Departamento Administrativo Nacional de Estadística), measures monetary poverty on a yearly basis, and poverty, by their definition, is calculated as a state where an individual does not possess a certain amount of money necessary if one
is to buy a basic group of goods in a certain area. While on the national level poverty has been reducing year on year, in Chocó it continues to fluctuate. For example, from 2013 to 2014 it increased from 63.1% to 65.9% (DANE, 2015).

3.1 The ancestral nations of Chocó

Prior to the arrival of the Spanish, diverse groups of people inhabited the area that today is Chocó. The information from this period is limited and comes from sporadic research efforts. Most of the archaeological studies on the Colombian Pacific coast have focused on the oldest settlement of the Tumaco la Tolita site (1000 BC–300 AD) located close to the present-day border with Ecuador. At this site researchers have found indications of agriculture (Stemper & López, 1995), and some remarkable findings in pottery and gold artefacts with a particular style of abundant zoomorphic decorations (Bouchard, 1988, 1998). A second period of settlement (200–800 AD) shows diminishing populations and less decorated ornaments (Bouchard, 1988). The third (800–1500 AD), or late, period shows changes in agriculture and housing built over earth mounds (Mora, 1988) with a characteristic style that is found from the San Juan River up to the gulf of Cupica in Chocó (Ulloa et al., 1996).

During the Spanish conquest and colonisation of the Americas there is evidence that several peoples inhabited the region of modern-day Chocó. However, due to their mobility, lack of documentation, and othering by the Spanish conquistadors, scholars find it difficult to distinguish and trace the different peoples that inhabited the region (Montoya Guzman, 2011). Moreover, many of the delimitations of space and place recorded by the Spanish are difficult to pinpoint with precision. Chocó was a name given by the Spanish conquistadors to many different peoples that lived in the area, which came by association to be the name for the area itself (Ulloa, 1992; Williams, 2004). In addition, during colonisation the Spanish forcibly displaced, fragmented and renamed many groups of people. Also, groups changed the ways in which they identified themselves, making it difficult to trace them through to the present day.

The territories of the Embera nation included the mid and lower basins of the San Juan and Atrato Rivers and the eastern tributaries of the Baudó River in what today is north-western Colombia and eastern Panama (Ulloa, 1992). According to Ulloa’s (1992) research on the ethno-history of the Embera, the Tatamá had their home on the upper part of the San Juan River and its tributaries Sima and Tatamá. The community of Citará had their home on the upper Capá and Atrato rivers. The
Cirambirá were located on the mid San Juan River. Another group –unnamed in Spanish historical records– inhabited the eastern side of the tributaries of the Atrato River. The contemporary Embera dialects come from these four ancestral groups (Ulloa, 1992).

The members of the Embera nation shared a common language, the space of the rainforest, a cosmology based on *Jaibanism*, territorial mobility, a non-centred government and a common social structure. This structure is based on family units that exchange labour between them to perform common tasks (Hernandez, 2001; OREWA, 1995; Ulloa, 1992). Bigger alliances among groups were also common in order to fight amongst each other or a common enemy. This was the case, for example, in 1637 when the Tatamá and Cirambirá allied to stop a Spanish conquering expedition (Montoya Guzman, 2011). For over a century, the flexible social structure worked as a resistance strategy to avoid invaders, allowing them to disband and relocate in places isolated from the Spanish colonisers (Montoya Guzman, 2008). Nevertheless, this did not prevent the conquest of Embera territories. The gold mines were the first areas to be conquered (Ulloa, 1992).

### 3.2 Spanish colonisation

As an aftermath of Spanish colonisation, sources and documentation improved and this period of history can be described in greater detail. Over a hundred years of clashes with the native population and a harsh tropical climate hampered the efforts of the Spanish colonisers. The difficulties involved in accessing Chocó combined with the resistance of the local population made its conquest late in comparison to other areas in modern-day Colombia. Colonisation in most areas of the country took place in the 16th century (Williams, 2004). Colonisation of Chocó began only on a very small scale with the founding of Santa María la Antigua del Darién in 1511 on the Caribbean coast (destroyed a decade after by the native population), and later with the towns of Toro, Cáceres, Arma, and Anserma (Ulloa, 1992). During the 16th century, the Spanish Crown wanted to replicate the achievements it had accomplished with the indigenous groups in the Andes – especially those by Pizarro with the Incas – where the colonisers took advantage of the already-in-place stratified social structures to make the native population pay tribute (Williams, 2004). The purpose then was to fund a settlement to maintain military control temporarily and, in time, turn it into a civil-based community (Montoya Guzman, 2008). For example, the Crown, in a *Cédula Real* from 1549, expressed its interest in concentrating the native population of Chocó for instruction in civil and political
life through the good offices of Catholic missionaries (Friede, 1976). However, this proved to be unsuccessful. The Franciscan and Jesuits missionaries failed in their attempts to concentrate the population as the Emberá neither had a stratified society which they could exploit nor recognised a political leadership (Isacsson, 1975).

The Emberá were not the sole inhabitants of this region before colonisation. Among other peoples, the Cuna were the largest. They inhabited the coastal region in the gulf of Urabá on the Caribbean coast, and most of them are presently located in Panama (Jiménez, 2004). The occupation of their ancestral lands by the Spanish settlers displaced them to the south into Emberá territories and triggered an interethnic war (Vargas, 1990). This situation led to a series of shifting alliances, with the goal of territorial control, between the Emberá and Cuna peoples on the one hand and the English, Dutch and Spanish on the other (Acevedo Tarazona, 2006). While the strategy of the Spanish was to establish forts and military outposts as colonisation centres for establishing an extractive economy, the local population responded by alliances, confrontation, and retreat (Vargas, 1990).

Chocó was seen as a region of unexplored mineral riches by the colonisers. Colmenares (1979) shows that since the 16th century, the inhabitants of the provinces of Popayán and Antioquia, lured by Chocó’s gold riches, tried many times unsuccessfully to occupy the region. Both governorships disputed each other’s claims over the borders and tributes of the area, undermining each other’s authority (Isacsson, 1975). During the 16th century, the Spanish crown was in pressing need of gold to finance its costly wars in the Mediterranean, which accelerated the colonisation process (Montoya Guzman, 2008).

The Spanish conquistadors had difficulties taking control of the territory of the Emberá. It was not until the 17th century, in 1600–1640 and nearly a century after they first arrived, that the Spanish began exploring the Atrato River and the first peaceful trade contacts were made. These initial contacts were based on trade of metallic tools. Commercial exchange between the Spanish and the Emberá led to the alliances, for example, between the Tatamá and the Spanish against the Citabirá in 1628 (Ulloa, 1992). In this year, the Spanish founded the towns of San Juan de Castro and Salamanca de los Reyes, towns that the Emberá destroyed shortly after. These failures made the Spanish change their strategy. Following the killing of a Spanish expedition in 1637, between 1638 and 1645 the incursions into Emberá territory were meant to be violent and oppressive (Montoya Guzman, 2011). In turn, this led to the failure of the new settlements that were unable to gather enough Emberá people for slave-farming labour to sustain themselves. At that point, some of the Emberá retreated deeper into the rainforest (Ulloa, 1992). The Emberá
groups that remained were enslaved and forced into mining on the San Juan River and on the tributaries of the Atrato River. Around the mid-17th century, the Embera began revolting and razed mining centres and towns. The collapse of the centres pushed the Embera to seek refuge in isolated areas, some on the Pacific coastal area. In the centuries to come, many of the Embera communities were forcibly displaced; others were forced into mergers, and yet others were obliterated (Jimeno Santoyo et al., 1995).

The completion of the colonising project in Chocó did not take place until the mid-17th century when both governorships authorised “Indian Reductions”, in an attempt to replace violent repression with conversion to Catholicism (Montoya Guzman, 2011). Soon after, African slaves were introduced to work in the mines. Through the intervention of Catholic missionaries, the Embera allowed the foundation of four settlements on the Atrato River between 1668 and 1672 (Colmenares, 1979). In these towns, the Embera agreed to live as long as they were allowed to keep their lands and were not subjugated under anyone’s rule (Ulloa, 1992).

The project of colonisation faced many difficulties as regards maintaining control. For example, in 1684 the Embera in northern Chocó in the province of Citará revolted again, bringing to a halt the mining operations, especially in the town of Neguá, where people coming from Antioquia had brought a great number of slaves from Africa (Jimeno Santoyo et al., 1995). The aftermath of the forcible “pacification” of the revolt by the Spanish was the decimation of the Embera population and dispersal of the slave population (Colmenares 1979). In the last quarter of the 17th century, the colonial rule finally conquered the Embera. This led to a gold rush in the area, the beneficiaries of which were entrepreneurs from Popayán, Cali and other places that had contributed to the military pacification efforts (Colmenares, 1979). From that point onwards, gold became the cord that linked Chocó with the rest of the country (Jimeno Santoyo, et al., 1995).

The region of Chocó also had geostrategic importance for the Spanish Crown. In the beginning of the 18th century, the Spanish discovered the San Pablo Isthmus (Meza, 2010). Located between the basins of the San Juan and Atrato rivers, this area was of strategic importance as it served as an interoceanic link between the Atlantic and Pacific oceans and connected trade routes for merchants coming from Valle del Cauca and Quito in the south with Cartagena de Indias, Jamaica and Spain (Jimenez, 2002). In order to establish control, between 1718 and 1730 the Spanish founded new towns on both the San Juan and Atrato rivers. This gave incentives for gold extraction and forced the Embera to move deeper into the rainforest. This
retreat made the Embera expand their territory south towards the lower Atrato and the Pacific coast in 1750, and on the way, they displaced other indigenous communities that inhabited this area (Montoya Guzman, 2008).

### 3.3 Newcomers, dislocated African slaves

The history of the African peoples brought to the Americas is marked by violence, dispossession, and discrimination. By the start of the 17th century, human trafficking of Africans to the Americas had been going on for over a century. According to historical records, in 1501 the Spanish Crown instructed their governor in Hispaniola Fray Nicolas de Ovando, among other things, to allow the import of slaves of African origin. That marked the beginning of the Spanish slave market in the Americas, where Cartagena de Indias – shortly after its foundation in 1533 – became the port of arrival for all African slaves for the Spanish colonies. Nicolas del Castillo (1982) shows that in the 60 years between 1580 and 1640 alone a total of 169,371 people arrived to Cartagena as slaves. In addition to those, from the mid-17th century on, the Dutch in Curacao and the English in Jamaica also smuggled slaves into the Spanish colonies. Most of these people were brutally taken from Western Sub-Saharan and Central Africa. While many of them perished on the trip due to disease and the inhumane conditions in which they were kept, many of those who survived subsequently resorted to suicide (Arocha, 1998). Slavers took them from Senegambia, the Pepper Coast, the Gold Coast, the Gulf of Benin, the Gulf of Biafra, and the Congo-Angola region (Granda, 1971).

In the region of Chocó, a slave-based society was established with the sole purpose of extracting the region’s gold riches. According to the census of 1778, the population was made of 39% “Slaves”, 37% “Indios”, 22% “Libres” (freed slaves), and 12% “Whites” (Perez de Ayala, 1951). The white population were the minority who ran the mines, the local commerce, and worked as public officers and priests (Wade, 1990). The majority of the owners of the mines, however, did not live in the region, but rather in the city of Popayán to the south where they had their families. The commercial relations inside the region as well as the development of infrastructure were extremely limited. Historical documentation from different sources (see e.g. Ortega Ricaurte, 1954; Sharp, 1976; Velasquez, 1960) report the disparity in wealth between what they describe as “miserable communities in Chocó” and the rich nearby cities in Antioquia and Popayán.

As the dominant white class feared slave rebellions, they erected and maintained strong social barriers and kept their distance from mining sites. For
example, they never tried to settle or farm the land beyond what was needed to support the mining operations, and racial and social mixing was rare (Jimeno Santoyo, et al., 1995). During the 18th century, the Embera lived alongside the colonial society, and their labour force was exploited to build houses, waterworks, boats and to farm in order to provide food for the mining camps. Slaves worked in mining and in farming to support the miners (Sharp, 1976). The *libres*, mainly “black and mulatto,” were not integrated into the colonial society as there was not much demand for paid labour from them, and, even though they sold their crops in the towns and mining camps, these commercial relations never led to integration (Wade, 1990).

The slave regime started to collapse towards the beginning of the 19th century, before independence from Spain in 1810. For example, in 1808, the slave population had reduced to 20% partly due to the collapse in gold exploitation (Sharp, 1976; Colmenares, 1979). Meanwhile the *libre* population had risen to 61%, mainly due to population growth rather than by manumission (Colmenares 1979).

With the collapse of slavery, the majority of the white population left Chocó, as they could not get labour to work in the mines. The *libre* population moved into rainforest areas where there was limited contact with the white population that remained. Emancipation came in 1851. However, as significant as this was, the social and economic structures of exclusion and resource extraction persisted. For the colonial and later republican white society, Chocó was seen as an inhospitable region, wild and filled with danger, and destined to be inhabited by those whom they considered primitive peoples of indigenous and African descent (Meza, 2006). At the same time, the white population from nearby cities continued to use the region and its people for the extraction of its mineral riches (Wade, 1990, 2005).

### 3.4 Agricultural colonisation

The end of the colonial period did not mean the end of agricultural expansion in the young republican era. In the 19th century, the Embera territorial unities continued to break apart as new settlements in the region kept emerging. Many towns were founded in strategic areas for commerce that linked the rivers with the sea and allowed the extraction of raw materials. Towns such as Nuquí in 1840, Pueblo Rico in 1876, Tierra Alta in 1913; Monte Libano in 1907, El Valle in 1917 and Bahía Solano in 1935 were all founded during this time (Jimeno Santoyo, et al., 1995; Meza, 2010). Catholic missionaries “collecting souls” continued with their conversion efforts on Embera communities. This situation accelerated with
the creation of the Apostolic Prefecture of Chocó in 1908, the Laura missionaries in 1914 and the creation of boarding schools where missionaries “civilised” the Embera (Ulloa, 1992).

Newcomers populated the recently founded towns. These people came from different parts of the country –mainly from Antioquia with white and mestizo origin– and others of Syrian-Lebanese origin were lured to the region by governmental subsidies and the high sale-prices on rubber, tagua and gold (Jimeno Santoyo, et al., 1995; Tapia, 1999). In addition, the construction of the Canal in Panama boosted the colonisation of the bays and beaches by the Afro-descendant population. The people then farmed the land and travelled by sea to Panama to provide staples and labour to the Canal (Meza, 2010).

Gold mining continued to be the region’s economic axis in different cycles of expansion and contraction. Expansion lasted up until the 1929 Great Depression and then continued again during the post-war period up until the 1970s. During the 1950s, the white elite migrated to other cities in the country as Chocó had lost the economic shine of its past. In addition, the rise of an Afro-descendant educated population slowly pushed into the administration bureaucracy and into the political system (Wade, 1990).

Colombia endured big political challenges during the 1950s. During this time, the latest period of armed political conflict began in Colombia. Economic decline had pushed Chocó further onto the country’s periphery, although the region remained relatively peaceful and stayed outside of the ongoing violence until the 1990s (Agudelo, 1999). Then, the presence of guerrilla groups in Chocó was limited to moments of transit or temporal haven (Echandía 1998). During the 1980s some areas were used for coca farming, and drug cartels made investments in mining, fishing and tourism (Vargas, 1994). Later during the 1990s, the situation would take a turn for the worse. The presence of guerrillas and paramilitary groups led to the forced displacement of communities, disruption of social life, and marked some of the darkest moments of the armed conflict during the 2000s (Taussig, 2004; GMH, 2010). This situation, although in a different form, continues today (see Article III).

From the point of view of Western sciences there was at that time virtually no scientific information concerning the human and non-human ecologies of Chocó. One of the first accounts was made by geographer Robert West, who in 1957 reported that even though the region’s mineral and forest riches had been exploited for centuries, scientifically the region remained one of the least-known areas in Latin America (West, 1957). The situation began to change with sporadic studies,
for example, as noted by Peter Wade (2005), that of the Jesuit José Arboleda, who presented his master thesis on the ethno-history of “The Colombian Negroes” in 1950. In the following decades, Nina de Friedemann and Jaime Arocha started exploring the African legacy of the people of the Pacific Littoral and to contest what they called the “invisibilisation” of black people in the homogenous Colombian social project (e.g. Arocha 1991, 1996, 1999; de Friedemann, 1993; de Friedemann & Arocha, 1986). Meanwhile, other anthropologists from Gothenburg, such as Nils Holmer, Henry Wassen and Sven-Erik Isacsson, explored local ethno-histories and provided the first accounts of Cuna and Embera myths (Holmer & Wassen, 1958; Holmer, 1963; Wassen, 1952; Wassen, 1963; Isacsson, 1974, 1975, 1980, 1993).

3.5 Social movement, the New Constitution of 1991

To account for the political transformation of 1991, we must engage with the work of several social scientists that during the 1980s provide ethnographies of the popular discontent in Chocó. In 1959, Congress enacted Law 2, which declared the Pacific basin as “fallow land” managed under the legal concept of a protected forest area (Arocha, 2004). This gave the state the prerogative to assign forests to private companies for exploitation and to bring “development” in the form of palm oil industry and shrimp farms, which in the southern Pacific area generated violence over the use of land and labour (Escobar, 2008). State-led development spread through the region in the form of the military base in Bahía Málaga, the Pan-American Highway project, the project of an interoceanic channel, and through resource exploitation of minerals, fisheries, forests, and hydroelectric dams (Ulloa, 1992) – such as the one built inside Utría National Park (see Article II). The reaction, and opposition, of the local communities to this complex situation forced the government to sign in 1969 the ILO convention No. 107 of 1957 on Indigenous and Tribal Peoples. Following its international commitments and 19th Century legislation concerning indigenous peoples in the country, the government granted land rights to indigenous communities across the country (Arocha, 2004). However, the land-rights of the Afro-descendant population continued to be ignored (Meza, 2006).

Afro-descendant activists began campaigning to address the land-right situation. Activism in the 1970s was inspired by a combination of the US Black civil rights movement, the anti-apartheid movements, and the anthropological studies of Nina de Friedemann (1966–1969) in Colombia. The main concern of the
activists was the longstanding racism and the invisibility of Afro-descendant peoples in Colombian society. Wade (2009) explains this situation in relation to the lack of identity of the Afro-descendant people as an ethnic group. The strategy of community leaders and activists was to create a unified identity that served as a basis to have a voice in political fora (Arocha, 1998). The Afro-descendant peoples of Chocó organised in the Proceso de Comunidades Negras (Black Communities Process- PCN) in order to have a unified voice. However, as Asher (2009) notes with regard to the PCN, the process of defining the terms of development were laden with tensions and contradictions as they both oppose and engage with official measures of development and conservation.

Colombia was going through political change at end of the 1980s. The thrust of the peace process with the M19, one of many guerrilla groups present at the time, culminated in a constitutional assembly. Despite the trajectory of the Afro-descendant social movement during the 1980s, and the important social mobilisation of the Afro-descendant communities to elect representatives, Afro-descendant candidates did not meet the necessary threshold to make it into the Constitutional Assembly (Sanchez et al., 1993). During the Constitutional assembly, it was the Embera representative Rojas Birry from OREWA who managed to include transitory Article 55 at the last hour of the discussions; together with Lorenzo Muelas (Guambiano indigenous representative from Cauca), they threatened not to sign the Constitution if the transitory article was not included (Sanchez et al., 1993, 187). This transitory article later gave rise to Law 70 of 1993, which protects Afro-descendant identity and promotes socioeconomic development. Both groups, based on a long tradition of solidarity, converged on issues of land rights and land tenure (cf. Ng’Weno, 2007). In addition, the political climate was conducive and the Embera representatives had the necessary clout to present the issues of the Afro-descendant community to an audience familiar with the concept of indigeneity. They presented “blackness” as cultural, rural and ethnic phenomena, in a way that resembled the concept of indigeneity (Hooker, 2005). However, there was much resistance from opposing interests that had different plans for economic development for the Pacific littoral (Asher, 2009). The activism from the previous decade translated into lobbying and civil mobilisation across

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9 This included: the peaceful takeover of administrative offices in Quibdó; the “black telegram” in which over 25,000 telegrams were sent to the Constitutional Assembly rejecting exclusion and racism, and demanding ethnic rights to culture, territory, development, and political participation; street protests of Afro-descendant and indigenous peoples wearing traditional attire and playing traditional music; and
Chocó and led to a transitory provision in the new Constitution – *Artículo transitorio 55*. However, as Asher (2009, 35–36) notes, there are many versions of how this provision came to be. Apparently, during a helicopter flight over the Pacific Littoral, sociologist Orlando Fals Borda was struck by the lack of fencing in the region. Asher (2009, 35–36) goes on:

“After discussing this issue with local communities in the region, he concluded that they managed resources in a collective fashion and that people did not hold individual titles to their lands. Fals Borda, one of the framers of AT 55, consequently saw fit to enshrine collective land rights for black communities in the draft legislation… Fals Borda later acknowledged that the land situation in the Pacific was more complicated than he thought and that by stipulating collective land rights as the basis of AT 55, he had inadvertently opened a can of political and administrative worms”.

The Constitution of 1991 came as a response to the dubious legitimacy of the state in the peripheral regions of the country (Asher & Ojeda, 2009, 293). The skewed distribution of income and land, the limited democratic participation and the lack of political solutions since the beginning of the 20th century made poor Colombians protest repeatedly against the oligarchy. In the 1980s, social discontent, armed conflict associated with left-wing guerrillas, right-wing paramilitaries, and drug-trafficking led to the adoption of a new Constitution that thus aimed to create a “modern” and inclusive state. In its Article 7, the Constitution of 1991 crafted the country into a multicultural and pluriethnic nation.

Transitory Article 55 forced Congress to enact a Law within the next two years based on the recommendations of a committee. The government had to create a committee whose members were elected representatives of the Afro-descendant communities of the Pacific basin. The commission had the sole purpose of proposing a Law that would recognise the rights of communities over those territories which they had traditionally made use of, and promote Afro-descendant identity and socioeconomic development. In the case that Congress did not pass the Law, the constitutional provision gave the government the prerogative to enact it.

After much lobbying and social mobilisations, in 1993 Congress enacted Law 70, which recognised communal lands only in the Pacific basin based on group ethnic identity and traditional use of lands, and promotes socioeconomic

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the symbolic take-over of the embassy of Haiti in Bogotá. (see e.g. Asher, 2009; Escobar, 2008, Sánchez et al. 1993; CCGLR, 2007)
development framed under a rubric of conservation. The law was later followed by Decree 1745 of 1995 that lays the basis of organisation and administration in comunidades negras (Afro-descendant communities). Since then, the Constitutional Court (i.e. C-030, 2008; C-175, 2009; C-253, 2013; T-576, 2014), through a series of court rulings, extended the recognition of ethnicity and affirmative action laws to other Afro-descendant communities across the country (Wade, 2016). In practice, however, this process of political reform has not had the intended effects of empowerment, especially in Chocó where, as Velasco Jaramillo (2014) describes, the mix of corruption, development, armed non-state actors, and violence has hampered efforts to attain self-governance. Moreover, there is a grave situation of poverty in this region with precarious state services provisions: there is minimal sanitation, education and healthcare infrastructure (DANE 2015; DNP 2008). The solution for this situation in the form of “development”, as a way to build institutions and end poverty, has been, to say the least, problematic (see e.g. Article II; Asher, 2009; Asher & Ojeda, 2009; Ballvé, 2012; Escobar, 1995, 2008; Ojeda, 2012).

The law for indigenous peoples’ rights took a different path. After being nearly driven to extinction, indigenous peoples in Colombia were expected to be assimilated into Colombian mestizo society (Wade 2009, 2016). As Ng’Weno (2007, 74–75) explains, Spanish colonial rule was structured around a double nation-state system: one for indigenous peoples and one for the Spanish colonisers (Thurner, 1997). Towards the latter part of the eighteenth century this dual system collapsed in favour of integration. For most of the twentieth century following provisions of Law 89 of 1890, indigenous communities, following the logic of “civilisation”, were expected to become peasants. This law, named “By which it is determined how savages must be governed so that they are reduced to a civilised life”, sets out how indigenous reservations could be created and how they were meant to work in relation to the Colombian state. The law organised indigenous peoples by assigning them a collective land (resguardo) under the authority of indigenous councils (cabildos) that governed and managed local affairs according to their own norms and customs.

In the Constitution of 1991 indigenous peoples were granted their own legal jurisdiction within their territories, self-governance, and collective territorial rights (Semper, 2003). Subsequent rulings by the Constitutional Court (2009) have acknowledged, for example, the need for special plans and programs, as indigenous peoples are at risk of “extermination from the point of view of their culture due to
[forced] displacement and dispersion of their members, as well as from the physical point of view due to natural or violent death of their members”.10

While recognition of multiculturality and pluri-ethnicity was a victory for all ethnic minorities in the country, it also created a series of regimes of differentiation that produced particular subjects to whom spatial arrangements were assigned (Bocarejo, 2009): Afro-descendants were assigned to the Pacific region and indigenous peoples to resguardos (reservations). As Cárdenas (2012) argues, these constitutional topologies were designed under a rubric of “green multiculturalism”, which essentialises “indigenous” and “Afro-descendant culture” and freezes their cultural difference and possibilities of development in relation to what are deemed “green” practices (see also Ulloa, 2005). In light of the recognition of the Pacific lowlands as one of the world’s biodiversity “hotspots” at the time (see e.g. Myers, 1988), plans were formulated to exploit the region’s natural resources and stimulate economic growth through infrastructure development. Development initiatives in the Pacific region thus became a struggle for reconciliation between the state’s capitalist governance, the production of a new multicultural and pluri-ethnic nation, biodiversity conservation, and the many plans for the future of local Afro-descendant and indigenous communities that were both engaged with and opposed themselves to official development and conservation measures (Asher, 2009; Ng’Weno, 2007).

3.6 Emerging conservation in Chocó

As described above for Chocó, many protected areas around the country have not only been used in order to preserve biodiversity and scenic beauty, but have also played an instrumental role in the appropriation of land for economic interests. For example, the first protected areas in Colombia were created in 1938 to protect water resources for the sugarcane industry in the region of Valle del Cauca (Rojas Lenis, 2014).

The National Decree 23 of 1974 laid down the framework for national parks and protected areas. This was intended to preserve biological and cultural diversity, restricting any kind of development, yet allowing indigenous communities to continue living and using the designated areas. On this basis during the following decades, the central, regional, and local governments would protect nearly 19% of

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10 Original: “exterminio de algunas comunidades, sea desde el punto de vista cultural en razón al desplazamiento y dispersión de sus miembros como desde el punto de vista físico debido a la muerte natural o violenta de sus integrantes”.
the country’s territory. Currently, in Chocó, there are four National Parks: Los Katíos, declared in 1973; Tatamá and Utría, both declared in 1987; and Acandí, Playón y Playona declared in 2013. Each park has its own political ecology and history. Part of my research focus was in and around one of these areas: Utría National Park.

Fig. 4. Detail of the rainforest of Chocó, taken close to Utría National Park and showing the humidity of the area (note the moss on the leaves). Picture taken by the Author.

In the 1980s and 1990s, there was a national interest in using the Pacific coast’s recently “discovered” biodiversity. Development plans that up until the early 1990s were only meant to build infrastructure, now considered biodiversity and genetic resources as key components for development (see Article II and Chapter 4; see also Asher, 2009; Asher & Ojeda, 2009; Escobar, 2008). A number of ethnographic studies were conducted in Chocó, for example, Jimeno et al. (1995) provides a general picture of local livelihoods of both Embera and Afro-descendant peoples. In addition, the creation of Utría National Park created interest and led to the arrival of environmental NGOs that financed research in social sciences with the purpose
of conservation. The work of Ulloa et al. (1996), focused on finding appropriate strategies to manage wildlife so that the hunting livelihoods of the Embera could continue inside Utría National Park. From a political ecology approach, she argues in her latter work (2001, 2005), that the production of “the ecological native” in Colombia conflates ideas of indigenous identity, communal livelihoods and harmonious lifestyle with nature that derive from national and global discourses.

Following this trend of finding alternatives which ensure sustainable use of local natural resources by the Embera of Utría, the work of Hernandez (2001) provides an overview of the intersection between territory, autonomy and traditions of this community. Meza (2006, 2010) looks into Chocó as a “frontier territory” in relation to local expectations of development and a perceived loss of “cultural manifestations”.

Later ethnographic research continues its focus on traditional knowledge and ethno-knowledge. For example, Trespalacios-González et al. (2004) designs a plan to manage local fauna in El Valle, a village next to Utría National Park. In a similar line, the ethno-ecological thesis of Vélez Tobón (2009) looks into local perceptions and representation of the communities of Utría in order to formulate alternative solutions for the management the local fauna. While Hernandez Valdivieso (2010) finds a lack of food security among Utría’s artisanal fishing communities, Correa et al. (2011) looks into the possibilities for using traditional knowledge concerning fishing in the Afro-descendant communities as a gateway to reduce conflicts with local authorities. Ethnographies of tourism in the area have focused, for example, on finding “traits” that can be commercialised (Guerra Gutierrez, 2011). Other researchers (i.e. Triviño Gómez, 2006) provide a more critical approach to the relation between tourists, products and services, and local communities. These ethnographies show the interest in – and trouble of – finding ways to reconcile the contradictions and complexity deriving from, on the one hand, the project of conservation (of particular notions of cultures and natures) and tourism development, and on the other the rights of indigenous and Afro-descendant peoples.
4 Thinking-with the communities of Chocó

Fig. 5. Five Afro-descendant men and one Embera man cross Tundó River with a cow, this is an affluent of El Valle River. Picture taken by the Author.
The overarching objective in this research is to study the ways in which the local communities of Chocó challenge and transform their matters of concern and care, and how these provide alternative narratives to “poverty” and “development”. In order to address this question, in this chapter I revisit the ethnographic materials and explore them in relation to the pluriverse (Escobar, 2015a, 2015b) and troubles, matters of concern and care (Latour 2004b; Haraway 2016; Puig de la Bellacasa, 2011).

Chocó is a place of renacientes. This is the word used by the Afro-descendant communities along Colombia’s Pacific Coast to refer to children and to future generations (see Escobar, 2008). Renacientes — those that are reborn, humans and non-humans alike — has undertones in the Spanish language of rebirthing and budding out of the earth. The Pacific is a territory populated by humans and non-humans with their stories of success in nurture and care, and of failure in development and post-colonial relations. Renacientes are the actors in this story. They resurge from the messiness of plastics, global capitalism, colonisation, timber, cocaine, fish, jais (essences) and mother spirits, and governments, among others. In their knots and contradictions is where the stories of living, making and dying occur. The concerns and troubles of renacientes are manifold. What does it mean to make and stir troubles, to keep some of them ongoing to make oneself be heard, and to learn to live and stay with them?

For Escobar (2015a, 2015b, 2012), the point of departure for analysis is the interlink between the ecological and social crises, and their inseparability from the historical dimension of the current model of social life, be it capitalism, industrialisation, modernity, patriarchy, or neoliberalism. In Chocó, this interrelation is manifested in the complex history of dispossession, displacement and domination of peoples and natures. To Escobar, these are all aspects of an underlying model that has spread the idea that we all live in a single world. John Law (2015) has described this as a project to create a “One-world world”, conceived from the spread of Euro-American historical experience exported around the globe over the past five hundred years through processes of colonisation, development and globalisation. The point of Law’s (2015) critique is that the metaphysics of the one-world world act as a background to the historical dimension that has produced the current model of social life.

For Escobar (2015a, 2015b), the way to interrupt the hegemony of the one-world world metaphysics and narrative is through the pluriverse. This post-colonial and post-development idea is based on the Zapatista movement motto of “a world in which many worlds fit”. The worlds of the pluriverse interact through power
relations that make up an ontological politics. For Escobar (2012), the pluriverse is built on different ontological and epistemological configurations and different practices of being, knowing, and doing. This idea of multiple ontologies moves from the modern understanding of the world as a “universe” to one that is plural. Instead of a unifying experience and modes of being in the world, the pluriverse is a notion for co-existence and solidarity among peoples living together in a damaged planet. The story of renacientes is one of not only surviving colonialism and its more recent forms like neoliberal development (Escobar, 1995, 2015b), but one of transforming-with, living-with and learning-with and in spite of the histories of Europeans in the Americas. The situation of precarious living and violence of the survivors of colonialism in Chocó is not a choice, and alternative narratives for staying, living, and stirring up troubles require further elaboration than ready-made answers of power relations, poverty, colonialism, and development. In what ways do the troubles in the communities of Chocó make us rethink living-with and making-with in a damaged planet? Moreover, what is required to think of a damaged planet as a possibility and an opportunity? My argument is that the troubles and matters of concerns and care provide narratives other than “poverty” and “development”. I relay here excerpts from the stories contained in the articles that twist and challenge in unforeseen ways that logic, and show the constant negotiation of engagement with and rejection of development, the state, and capitalist governance.

4.1 The politics of living with a national park

Utría National Park is an extremely remote area. The only options for accessing it from central Colombia are to travel by foot for days through the rainforest from Quibdó, the region’s capital (see Fig. 3), or to reach the area by a small plane also from Quibdó or from the city of Medellín. Adjacent to the park is the village of El Valle. From El Valle a two hour walk down the coast along Playa Larga (long beach) leads to a hill and a waterfall, which mark the natural border between El Valle and the park. El Valle is located at the mouth of a river, with the same name as the village. In the village one finds traditional houses, some raised on stilts, made of wood and concrete, as well as two and three storey buildings (see e.g. Fig. 6). El Valle literally translates as “the valley” and locals see the humour in this lack of creativity in the naming of the area. The mountains of the Serranía del Baudó surround the area. This small mountain chain (ca. 1000 meters in height) paints the horizon with the green of the rainforest and the white of the clouds that congregate
there and drench it in rain. The Park area was declared in 1987, “with the objective of preserving the flora, fauna, scenic natural beauty, geomorphological complexes, historical or cultural manifestations, for scientific, educational, recreational or aesthetic purposes”¹¹ (MA, 1987, 6). Unidad Administrativa Especial del Sistema Parques Nacionales Naturales (UAESPNN), an agency that is part of the Ministry of the Environment, currently administers the park area. The park covers 54,300 hectares, including a series of gulfs and bays and the highest part of the Serranía del Baudó mountain range, a combination with some of the planet’s most productive and biodiverse ecosystems, such as coral reefs, mangrove forests, tropical rainforests and river estuaries (PNN, 2006). At the time of the creation of the park in 1987, Afro-descendant and Embera communities were living inside what became the park. As Embera communities had legal rights over the territory they were allowed to stay. Hence, the park overlaps with the legal territories of the Embera (PNN, 2006). As the Afro-descendant community had no legal rights at that time, they were evicted and some settled in the nearby village of El Valle.

El Valle has around 5,000 inhabitants that rely on fishing, agriculture, some commerce and small scale seasonal tourism. The village has two schools, an agricultural and a teacher-training school that provide the few regular paying jobs found in the area. An Afro-descendant community inhabits the area and is legally organised since 2002 under Law 70 as a comunidad negra – black community. It is part of the “Consejo Comunitario Mayor Los Delfines” with land owned collectively and managed by a Junta del Consejo Comunitario (board of the communal council). Under Law 70 of 1993 and Decree 1745 of 1995, an Afro-descendant community gathered in a “general assembly” elects a council every three years by consensus or by vote. The board of the council is meant to oversee the natural resources that the community has traditionally used, that include for example collective territories, local fisheries and beaches. The board of the council are the de facto local authorities and their activities are usually largely underfinanced (Moreno-Murillo, 2015). The area titled Los Delfines extends from municipalities of Jurado in the north to Bahía Solano in the south. At the time when the lands were titled, there were 1,329 families and 5,846 people living on them (Resolución No. 002200 of Incora). The collective land title of 67,327 ha excludes

¹¹ Original: “con el objeto de conservar la flora, la fauna, las bellezas escénicas naturales, complejos geomorfológicos, manifestaciones históricas o culturales, con fines científicos, educativos, recreativos o estéticos”.

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lands that had prior claims, urban centres in the region such as El Valle and Ciudad Mutis, as well as any *resguardo* located in the area. Moreover, the area was titled with the express caveat of “Social and Ecological Function”, which means that the communities must contribute to the protection of the natural environment (Ulloa, 2005).

Fig. 6. A house in El Valle. An Afro-descendant woman stands in the door. Picture taken by the Author.

Under Los Delfines council, there are many local councils including the one of El Valle named *El Cedro*. The large bureaucratic structure of Los Delfines has been problematic since its inception. Meetings are rare and expensive as they require travelling by boat for many hours from one point to another. Moreover, there are a number of tensions between *Los Delfines* and local councils when interests collide, especially since the lack of financing encourage councils to exploit local natural resources (cf. Cárdenas, 2012). These tensions have become manifest in the recent past, for example, in disagreements over logging permits to companies. Moreover, as I have explained, many politicians who had previously lost in local and regional
elections tried and got elected to the councils bringing problematic ways of doing politics that included corrupt practices.

Communal councils are largely underfinanced, they do not receive state support. The few options for supplementing the lack of financing include the exploitation of their forests or contributions from NGOs. I was told by park officials that due to the tensions with Los Delfines, El Cedro, has tried for many years to part ways. However, I was also told that this is a slow legal and bureaucratic process.

The village space of El Valle is also shared with paisas, people from the nearby Andean cities, as well as with some members of the Embera community that have houses there. Paisa is a strange category in the area. I was many times called a paisa as many people had trouble recognising my accent from Bogotá. Paisa in Colombia generally refers to people coming from the Andean regions of Antioquia and Viejo Caldas – the latter made up of the current regions of Risaralda, Quindío and Caldas –, and is associated with distinctive features, such as intonation. This region is one of the industrial and agricultural centres of the country. The Viejo Caldas used to be the main coffee producing region for decades and coffee was the country’s main export for most of the twentieth century (Palacios, 2006). In addition, the only road access to Quibdó, Chocó’s main city, is from Antioquia and Caldas, which together with their role in colonial history, help explain the influence and presence of paisas in the region. Paisa is generally a racial denomination in Chocó to refer to non-indigenous and non-afro-descendant people based on appearances. And, it is part of a larger system of categories that people in Chocó use in their daily lives to refer to one another. In the Afro-descendant villages, I found depictions of people in relation to skin tones as “whiter” or “darker” than someone else (cf. Chavez & Zambrano, 2006). Some of the participants explained this with reference to racism within the community. Embera participants were particularly sensitive about the way people referred to them as Cholos, which they felt was homogenising and racist, and served as a quick workaround to actually learning their names.

Relations between the Embera and Afro-descendant communities are amicable. In the Afro-descendant villages there are many Embera families that have their houses. Also, there are many Afro-descendant families that share genealogical kinship ties with the Embera. Other relations can be understood to be oddkin (Haraway, 2016), such as compadrazgo, friendship and relations between neighbours. Christian compadrazgo – godparenting – was particularly important in interethnic relations. It was explained to me that the practice is now forbidden by the Embera, and consisted in giving Embera children a godparent from the Afro-
descendant communities, who would give the child a Spanish name. In return, the child would have a place to stay in the Afro-descendant villages and learn Spanish. Only Francisco, an Elders of the Embera that I spoke with, recalls that the name his parents gave him was *Tupuiquio* which means the smallest one. His godparents renamed him as Francisco. The Embera community at large reject these practices of forced integration and are zealous in preserving their identity (OREWA, 1995). For example, in the Embera villages, people do not accept anyone besides Embera people living in their lands. Couples of Afro-descendant and Embera partners must leave the Embera villages. It was explained to me that they are not barred from returning, and they can visit whenever they want, yet they are not allowed to establish a home in the villages.

From El Valle, it takes three hours by canoe, powered with an outboard motor, going up the El Valle River to reach the villages of the Embera community. The villages are surrounded by the mountains of the Serranía del Baudó, which is blanketed with the thick tropical rainforest. I conducted fieldwork in El Brazo, located close to the source of El Valle River, and Boroboro, located at the heart of Utría National Park (See Fig. 3). In the Embera villages, most of the houses are wooden, with few exceptions. Some have thatched roofs and others have zinc or cement roofs.

The Embera community is legally organised in *resguardos*. In contrast to Afro-descendant collective territories, *resguardos* are self-governing territorial units under the Colombian constitution that have their own legal jurisdictions. In other words, they are able to enact their own laws and enforce them as long as they are not in conflict with the principles enshrined in Colombian Law or the Constitution. The Embera community of Utría that I worked with relies on hunting, fishing and farming for their livelihoods. People sell their plantain surplus in El Valle and in return buy other staples, such as cooking oil, fish, and coffee. A *resguardo* is a territorial unit in Colombia, so the community receives small cash transfers from the central government based on the number of inhabitants. The members of the council (*Cabildo*) are elected every year and they are responsible for dealing with, and many times lobbying to, the mayor’s office so that the cash transfers are paid to them in due time.

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12 In the park, there are three *resguardos* Alto Rio Valle-Boroboro, where I conducted fieldwork, and Alto Bojayá and Santa María de Condoto. Due to their complex security situation that restricted my access to these two latter *resguardos*, these were not included in this study.
Fig. 7. The Gulf of Utría. Picture taken by the Author.

Not far from Boroboro, is the crown jewel of the park. A narrow gulf surrounded by mountains and which gives the park its name (Fig. 7). On the shore of the gulf, the Park administration has its offices. Also, there is lodging for tourists and a bridge overlooking the mangroves. On the other shore one finds one building standing and the remnants of another one. The building that is still standing is used by fishermen who come to spend the night in the park. The other one used to lodge members of an environmental NGO that worked in the area and was later donated to the park becoming a centre of “environmental interpretation”. It was destroyed in mudslide in 2016 and has not since been repaired.

But, what does this scenic landscape and its management as a park mean for the local communities? What are the troubles of living with a national park? In the Chocó region provision and access to public services, including electricity, has been extremely limited (DANE, 2015). Plans to address this situation have been drafted for decades. The first development plan for the Pacific region (Plan de Desarrollo Integral de la Costa Pacífica – PLADEICOP) was drafted by the National Planning agency “DNP” in 1983 under the rubric of the nation’s geopolitical interests to exploit the region’s enormous forests, fishing and mining resources (Escobar, 2008).
The plan included investment in 96 projects in infrastructure, production and development, and social services (DNP, 1989).

The plan was followed by the more ambitious Plan Pacífico, financed by the World Bank and the Inter-American Development Bank and focused on large scale infrastructural investment in order to lay the basis for capitalist development in the region. This plan, also written by DNP, labelled the region as a strategic commercial hub along the Pacific rim and as an area with untapped natural resources. Based on this diagnosis, the plan devised a series of measures to address the “basic needs” of the local population: the construction of several roads, a military base and multiple hydroelectric dams, including Mutatá in Utría National Park. The emphasis on infrastructure, as Asher and Ojeda (2009) discuss, was grounded in the “Washington Consensus” (apertura económica in national discourse) in which international funding bodies persuaded or coerced governments across Latin America into opening up their economies to foreign investment and markets, adopting structural adjustment policies, export oriented growth and investment in public infrastructure (Williamson, 1990). As Asher (2004, 2009) describes for this period, Afro-descendant and indigenous communities, various state agencies, and many non-governmental organisations (NGOs) attempted to shape the development initiatives in accordance with their interests, which were often filled with tensions and contradictions in a constant struggle to define the terms of development and conservation.

Julian proudly recalls when the engineers PLAIDECOP came to Utría. He is now in his sixties and has worked in tourism for many years as a lanchero (boat driver). He recalls taking them on his boat and showing the engineers several waterfalls including Mutatá in the early 1980s. The engineers were looking for potential sites for hydroelectric infrastructure. Mutatá was at that time identified as suitable for construction of a small hydroelectric plant able to supply electricity to the entire municipality (MA, 1986; MMA, 1995).

The site of the waterfall was declared part of the National Park in 1986, following the recommendations of a Colombian government commission (MA, 1986, 1987). Francisco, from the Embera, also recalls this episode. He has lived his whole life in this region;

“...There were some men that came to do research, but they never told the elders what they were [doing]. [Back] then, the elders were not literate and they didn’t think those studies were in order to carry out those building works. They even set some boundary stones on the Utría inlet. There is a hillside that goes down
to the inlet that they call the Cape of the Whale. Over there they left boundary stones all the way until they got to the flatlands by Boroboro River. They never said it was to build a dam or a park. Then they first declared the park, and after came the dam. They even took recordings. We, the indigenous people, didn’t know what prior consent was; we didn’t know that”.13

At the time both the local Afro-descendant and Embra communities were living inside what became the park area. While the Embra community, who had just been granted communal land rights in 1984 as a resguardo, were allowed to stay, neither they nor the Afro-descendant community were consulted as to whether or not there should be a park. However, at the time of the events described here, the government was not required to consult with any local community and could do with protected lands as it saw fit. The members of the Afro-descendant community became what Ojeda (2012) calls “bodies out of place” in the context of Tayrona National Park in Colombia, where particular subjects are assigned to particular spaces, in accordance with the land-grabbing dynamics that has marked a large part of the history of Colombia. In Utría, the Afro-descendant community was evicted. Their lands were bought by INDERENA, the national environmental authority at the time, at prices that many thought did not reflect the value of their properties. Some settled in the nearby village of El Valle. Jorge, an Embra man in his sixties recalls bitterly the reasoning behind the creation of the park and its political ecology. We talk in his house, where he tells me;

“There are some wise fellows that we call Jaibaná,14 and that in other regions they call shaman. This person is a fellow indigenous person who sits down and spiritually sees the whole of nature, what may happen, the good or the bad. All of these things, all of our nature, we cannot destroy it. That is the reason why here in the Chocó region, the forest is extremely rich, not only the woodlands, not only the fauna, but also the rivers. Then the government says let’s protect an area. They claimed we were finishing off the forest and that this

13 Original: “Había unos señores que venían a hacer estudios, pero nunca les avisaron a los viejos [para] qué era. [En ese] entonces, los viejos aquí no eran letrados, los viejos creían que esos estudios no eran para hacer esas obras. Hasta hicieron unos mojones en la ensenada de Utría. Hay una loma que baja hacia la ensenada, que le dicen la Punta de la Ballena. Por ahí iban dejando mojones de piedra hasta romper en lo llano hasta el río Boroboro... Nunca dijeron que iban a hacer represa o que un parque. Entonces primero hicieron la creación del parque y después que vino la cuestión de la represa. Hasta tomaban grabaciones. Los indígenas no conocíamos qué era lo de la consulta previa, eso no lo conocíamos”.

14 The Jaibaná is the authentic human who is able to interact with the other worlds and entities of the Embra (see also Ulloa, 1992; Isacsson, 1993; Pardo Rojas, 1986).
area was restricted to fell trees, hunt toucans or peacocks, fishing... So, what can we live off, if this was all ours? ... This was ours before the Colombian state made its laws. This is ours. We have lived here for many, many, years and we have preserved nature, because we know how to preserve. This is ours, right? It is ours, without the law and with the law, we have preserved it, because we know how to preserve”.15

Neither the Embera nor the Afro-descendant communities are satisfied with the park’s policies. Here living with the trouble means living with the park. From this realisation, what opportunities open up? The park is also a source of opportunities, requiring planning, thinking and negotiation between those concerned so that they can become real. In this case, between the members of the Afro-descendant community and the park. Ignacio knows this well. He is a young man in his early thirties, and spends his days taking tourists on his boat to the park and offering to them his services and knowledge of the area as a guide. Also, he participates in a community-run conservation project of coral reefs. He and his colleagues remove fishing nets, wood and other debris that the currents push into the corals and that have the potential to damage them. They do this work by holding their breath, and diving with a mask. Ignacio, understands the subjectivities involved in living with a park, he has many ideas about what to do with it. I relay here some of them;

“To tell the truth… I am going to be honest. The people from the park… I want to find a word so I don’t cross a line… look, the people from the park. The park doesn’t give a shit about the people here in the town. The people from the town are no use to the park . Out of the 2 or 3 workers that work there from the town there is only one who is professional, the other ones are just pawns [peasants]… the park doesn’t create any project that says, let’s do this… I said to them the other day and they said they couldn’t do it. But they can! To create a project where they say let’s give scholarships to the best 2 or 3 students to study conservation, or something else that has to do with the forest, so that this young

15 Original: “Hay unos compañeros sabios que llamamos Jaibaná, y en otros departamentos dicen chamán. Es un compañero indígena que se sienta y espiritualmente, él ve toda la naturaleza, qué puede pasar, el bien o el mal. Todas esas cosas, nuestra naturaleza, no la podemos acabar. Por eso en el departamento del Chocó el bosque es riquísimo. No solamente de bosque sino también de ríos. Entonces dice el gobierno, vamos a proteger un área. Dijeron que estábamos acabando con el bosque y que en esta área estaba restringido talar maderas, cazar un tucán o un pavón, pescar... Entonces, ¿de qué vamos a comer, si todo esto era de nosotros?... Todo eso era de nosotros antes de que el estado colombiano hiciera estas leyes. Esto es de nosotros. Hemos vivido muchísimos años y hemos conservado porque nosotros sabemos conservar. Esto es de nosotros, ¿si? Es nuestro, sin ley y con ley hemos conservado, porque sabemos cómo conservar”.
guy after studying can work at the park. One would say, look, that is a lifelong project that the park is doing in favour of the community. But instead they waste the money on other activities and workshops that they have to justify each year.

“We need to be the ones who run the park. We cannot wait for someone from Bogotá or Argentina or somewhere else to come to tell us how it is we have to work in what is ours. With all due respect, this is the truth. I do not agree with anyone [working here] who is not from here, even with the director of the park. Here, we must be everywhere, from the worker to the boss”.16

After 30 years of being neighbours with the park, Ignacio and Jorge understand well the long-term repercussions of having the park in their vicinity. The park is an issue and a place of gathering. Its management can be framed as a matter of concern and care (Latour, 2004b; Puig de la Bellacasa, 2011). Biodiversity, climate, mountains, sea and corals, local peoples and the Colombian state become conflated in this gathering. These factors are imbricated and become problematized in distinct ways by the different actors. For example, while Ignacio’s indignation over the way the park is run has an undertone of segregation of “us” versus “them”, it also manifests the lack of long-term planning in park policies to integrate the park with the local communities at all levels. And, for Jorge, his livelihood is damaged by a concept of pristine nature or nature without humans – as if it had ever existed here. Both Jorge and Ignacio have no plans of going elsewhere: this is their home.

In the park, the interests of the Embera, Afro-descendant and Park administration meet (Article I). Each community with their own purpose, ideas and legitimate claims concerning the use of the park’s natural resources. The ability of

16 Original: “La verdad, te voy a ser honesto. los del parque... quiero una palabra como para no excederme... vea los del parque, el parque no le da ni miércoles aquí al pueblo, no le sirve de nada, los 2 o 3 trabajadores que trabajan que son de aquí, el señor que esta aquí es el único profesional, de resto puro peón... el parque no saca ningún proyecto que diga vamos a adelantar un proyecto... yo les dije ese día y me dijeron que ellos no podían. ¡Pero si lo pueden hacer! sacar un proyecto que diga vamos a becar a 2-3 mejores alumnos en conservación, o algo que tenga que ver con el bosque para que ese mismo muchacho después de haber estudiado pueda trabajar en el parque. Uno diría que eso es un proyecto de vida que el parque está haciendo a favor de la comunidad, o sea despilfarran dinero en otras actividades en talleres en una plata que tienen que justificar anualmente. ¿Qué nos van a enseñar? ¿Qué me van a enseñar a mí en el parque?

“Este parque lo tenemos que trabajar nosotros, no podemos esperar a que venga un bogotano o un argentino u otra persona de otra parte a decir como tenemos que trabajar en lo de nosotros. con todo respeto es la verdad, yo no estoy de acuerdo con ninguno que no sea de aquí, con ninguna directora. la directora general de parques que es de Bogotá sí, porque es de allá, pero nosotros tenemos que ser todos, desde el peón hasta el jefe.”
each community to realise its rights depends on both the ecological limits of the area and on the actions and decisions of the other two communities. This situation required new ways of assessing and analysing the management of the park area in order to be able to propose concrete measures (see Article I). While there is a broad consensus in this Latourian “gathering” (2004b) in favour of continuing ancestral practices of care, resource use, subject to good standards of sustainable use, there is no agreements on what such standards are. Based on a comparison of the purposes of each community, there seems to be an opportunity to look for commonalities that foster relations of service and care to the other communities and to the environment in order to reduce environmental value conflicts (see Article I).

4.2 The park, development, and the small-hydroelectric power plant

Fig. 8. El Brazo village. Note the cables that cross the landscape. Picture taken by the Author.

The story of Utría National Park is one that can be viewed through a post-colonial perspective, one in which the Colombian state and the local communities interact
in complex and asymmetric ways. The long-duration structures of coloniality
remain in place today across Latin America (Quijano, 2015). This is part of our
legacy. But what does it mean to live with and stay with this legacy? How is change
and transformation accounted for (or not)? Moreover, what is it about electricity
that prompted the local communities to make and stir up trouble twice?

The Afro-descendant and Embera communities in Utría have engaged in
protests twice: first, in order to gain access to electricity, and later to get the
electricity supply re-established after the equipment broke down and was not
promptly repaired (see Article II). While all houses in El Valle, El Brazo, and
Boroboro have today power cables coming from the Mutatá small-hydroelectric
plant, this has not always been the case. In the Chocó region, where Utría is located,
provision and access to public services, including electricity, is extremely limited
(DANE, 2015). Isabel is an Afro-descendant woman originally from the Caribbean.
She is in her sixties and has lived most of her life in El Valle. Over forty years ago
she came to town with her husband who was born in Juradó, in northern Chocó. He
was assigned a position as a teacher at a local school. Now she is a grandmother,
and her children live in Medellín. She owns a grocery shop and a small inn. She
recalls the past with nostalgia, especially since she lived and took part in the social
protests for the construction of the small hydroelectric dam:

“They built the small hydroelectric plant because the community organised and
rebelled. From here they would leave at two in the morning with pot lids, just
like in Venezuela, shouting and making noise. They went to the gulf [of Utría]
and they fell trees, that’s what they did; and the government had to pay
attention. We were waiting for 20 years for them to come and install electricity
and they never came to do the work”. 17

When, in 1995, approval for the environmental license for the construction of the
hydroelectric plant was not promptly issued by the national environmental
authority in Bogotá, the Afro-descendant community 18 decided to protest. The
action was deemed justified, as the park had “never done anything for the

17 Original: “Se hizo la microcentral fue porque la comunidad se puso y se rebeló. De aquí salían a las
dos de la mañana con tapas, así como salían en Venezuela, gritando y haciendo bulla. Vámonos para
la ensenada y tumbaban palos, y así hacían; y el gobierno tuvo que poner cuidado. Es que llevábamos
20 años que ya nos iban a poner la energía y nunca venían a trabajar”.
18 It is worth mentioning that at the time of the protest, the Afro-descendant community was not
officially organised under the regime of Law 70 as a comunidad negra (black community) and their
ancestral lands had not been recognised as a collective territory. This process would begin at the end of
the 1990s. The community obtained legal recognition in 2002 through Resolución 002200 of Incora.
community” except restrict its activities and force its relocation, and was imposed, in any case, upon them without consultation. As Isabel mentioned, the tools employed by the protesters were disobedience of park rules and the occupation of the park facilities (cf. Scott, 2008). In the words of Alirio, an Afro-descendant fisherman from El Valle in his forties who took part in the protest, their course of action was justified as they were voiceless within a state that would ignore them otherwise.

“The park is the only entity where the state feels real pain … The state feels pain for the trees and for little animals … so [we said] let’s go to Utría, let’s go put pressure and cut down trees, let’s hunt, let’s fish with nets, it is the only way to exert external pressure on the state so they listen to us”.19

For Alirio, the state needed to feel pain in order to respond. He and his community are the survivors of colonisation, descendants from freed and escaped slaves, who still struggle to achieve equality and fair treatment and fight for self-determination. In the lead-up to the first protest, the Embera community was informed by the teachers from the Afro-descendant community that they had a legal right to prior consultation, and were asked to join their protest. Jorge, the Embera man quoted previously, recalls this situation clearly. The small hydroelectric dam was going to be built on a waterfall close to Boroboro. Jorge, was instrumental in how this situation unfolded:

“Two men from El Valle arrived, school teachers from the agricultural school. They said: ‘I present myself to you here to ask for your support.’ They said to me: ‘brother, you are our spokesman here at this moment and I want you to listen to me and understand me. I have come here to you. The park is of no benefit for us, it has done nothing, it has imposed prohibitions without prior consultation.’ Without prior consultation! ‘The Colombian state set [the park area] that encompasses the Boroboro community, within the protected area. How do you see it, right or wrong?’ When the two teachers tell me: ‘without prior consultation’ … prior consultation? What do you mean? The Colombian state had to consult us? Sitting at their desk in their offices, they had no right to make those decisions at any time! We are the ones who know best. They can know the map, but not the region. Then they tell me, march with us, invite the

19 Original: “El parque es la única entidad del estado donde más le duele... al estado le duelen los árboles, los animalitos porque entonces... entonces [dijeron] vámonos para Utría, vámonos a presionar y vamos a cortar árboles, vamos a cazar, vamos a tirar trasmallo. es la única forma de hacer presión hacia afuera hacia el estado para que nos escuchen”
people [of the other villages] and we are going to occupy the park. Well, I go with them. I invited my people to accompany me. We arrived, I supported the occupation of the park in 1995”.

In this way, the teachers of El Valle helped convince members of the Embera people to advocate the introduction of development infrastructure. It is also worth noting that prior consultation came with the Constitution of 1991, and was not a right in Colombia at the time the park was declared in 1987. The process of deliberation within the Embera community was far from simple. There were many dissenting voices. Especially since the waterfall was an important place for the Embera people in their cosmology. I asked Carmen about this situation one evening at her place. She invited me for a coffee. She is an Embera woman in her sixties. She was born and raised in Boroboro. She currently lives in El Valle in a wooden house by the river. The house has two rooms with very little lighting. It is night time and she shares with me her story in the shadows:

“In the old times the indigenous people played with that waterfall, [now] it has changed spiritually. Before, the Jaibaná used to cure with it, my dad cured with it. [We don’t cure with it now] because the spirit changed. Before, it was good. The waterfall was a point of connection with our worlds from above. It was the best place for that. The waterfall would tell if the day was going to be good, now [it] do[es] not listen”.

Carmen was one of the few dissenting voices in her community at the time. Her father was a Jaibaná and her uncle was also a yerbatero (expert in herblore), however she was never interested in becoming one. In Embera cosmology there is a connection with at least two other worlds, above and below (see also Pardo Rojas, 20 Original: “Estoy aquí, cuando llegan dos señores del Valle, unos profesores de la [escuela] agrícola. Dicen ellos: “he hecho mi presencia aquí ante tí para que tú me apoyes.” Me dicen, “hermano, tu eres el vocero aquí en este momento y yo quiero que tu me escuches y me entiendas. He llegado yo aquí. El parque en beneficio no ha hecho nada, ha prohibido sin consulta previa,” ¡sin consulta previa! “El estado colombiano colocó [el área del parque], y abarca la comunidad de Boroboro, dentro del área protegida. ¿Usted cómo lo ve, bien o mal?” Cuando los dos profesores me dicen: “sin consulta previa.” ¡Consulta previa? ¿Cómo hombre? ¿El estado colombiano tenía que consultar? Desde la mesa desde su despacho, no tenía que tomar esas decisiones en ningún momento. Nosotros somos los que más conocemos, él puede conocer en el mapa, pero no la región. Entonces me dicen ellos, caneime, invite a la gente y vamos a tomar el parque. Yo invito a mi gente acompañe. Llegamos, acompañé a esa toma del parque en el año de 1995”.

21 Original: “Antiguamente esa cascada los indios jugaban con eso. [Ahora] espiritualmente está cambiado. Antes el Jaibaná curaban con eso, mi papá curaba con eso… Porque cambió el espíritu, antes era bueno. La cascada era un punto de unión espiritual de nuestros mundos de arriba. Ese era el mejor sitio para eso. La cascada avisaba si el día iba a estar bueno. Ya no [se] escucha”. 
Jorge explains this in symmetric terms to the myths of techno-science and Christianity (cf. Latour, 1993):

“I can say, in myth this is a planet. But there are many people who do not believe ([for instance] the Spanish) that after this planet there is a second planet for us. The first planet… the second planet (another planet there below), the second planet is another, and this is the third planet. This is something that anyone who doesn’t know has to be told about… after this planet, there are others that people have gone up to. Who? The Americans [like] Jupiter, the moon. Who knows them? The Americans. Are there any Colombians that have seen them? No, there aren’t. But, in our beliefs, in our myths there is one and another one under. And, yes, we come from below, from the first one, and from the second one, and in the third one is where, all of us Christians, catholic believers inhabit”.

There are certain spaces that connect the worlds of the Embera. Waterfalls and caves are especially important. As mentioned by Carmen, Mutatá waterfall used to connect another world with this plain of existence. Other worlds of the Embera are inhabited by jai, spirits or essences; wandras, or mother spirits; chi bari, or masters of species; and chambera, human-looking beings (Ulloa et al., 1996). The Jaibaná, the authentic human, is the point of connection for accessing the other worlds and interacting with them (cf. OREWA, 1995; Pardo Rojas, 1986, 1987; Ulloa, 1992).

To cross to another world means becoming another being, showing continuity of personhood across species and worlds (Descola, 1996, 2013; Isacsson, 1993; Viveiros de Castro, 1998). The landscapes of Chocó are dominated by the water produced by the incessant rains. Water is of particular importance for daily and ritualistic practices (see Isacsson, 1993). Carmen’s remembrances of the waterfall, can be understood following Santos-Granero’s (1998, 139) argument of place and memory, where “if the connection among landscape, memory, and historical consciousness is important in the context of Western literate societies, it is even more important in the context of nonliterate societies, where landscape not only

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22 Original: “Yo puedo decir, en el mito, éste es un planeta, pero hay mucha gente que no cree ... los españoles ... que después de este planeta, está el segundo planeta para nosotros. El primer planeta... la segunda planeta (otro planeta allá abajo), la segunda planeta es otro y ésta es la tercera. Eso no lo sabe, eso lo tiene que narrar al que no sabe... después de ésta planeta hay otros [a los] que han subido. ¿Quién? Los gringos, júpiter, la luna. ¿Quién los conoce? son los gringos, ¿hay algunos colombianos que los conocen? No los hay, pero en nuestras creencias en nuestros mitos hay uno y más abajo [otra], y si venimos desde abajo, del primero y del segundo y del tercero donde habitamos todos los cristianos, los católicos, los creyentes”. 

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evokes memory but is written upon it, thus becoming memory”. Remembering is a practice necessary for resurgence and for learning how to live with the trouble (Haraway, 2016, 69).

This space is remembered in particular as a place of communication between worlds and for its potential as a space for healing. However, this must also be set into the context of centuries of colonial and post-colonial rule, as well as Christian missionaries interfering in and disrupting the lives of these communities, as is shown in Jorge’s words. In this context, it is difficult, if not impossible, to reconstruct the deliberation process that took place over twenty years ago. Jorge tells us, at least partially, the reasoning behind the decision to participate in the protest:

“They [the teachers] said to us: ‘before creating the [Alto Río Valle Boroboro] reservation, the Colombian state had left a protected area, not a park, but a protected area of 300 hectares.’ Then, the legal document for the reservation came; and some of the people from our community they have read it and today have realised that before creating the reservation, the national government had left that area to make its small hydroelectric infrastructure. They had it [the area] ready. It was already theirs. They had seen it and that waterfall was now theirs. When they [the government] made the reservation, they claimed the waterfall was theirs and that they could carry out any construction project they wanted and that we couldn’t claim it back anymore”.

Mutatá waterfall and its basin became a protected forest area in 1986 (MA, 1986). Although the forest area overlaps in part with lands designated as Embera territory one year prior to that, the waterfall was not included in that designation. In 1987, the protected forest area and part of the Embera territory were included within the area designated as Utría National Park. That the waterfall was inside the Park but not within their territory came as a surprise to the Embera community. However, at the time the government was not required to consult with any local community and could do with protected lands as it saw fit. The Embera community was informed

23 Original: “Y dicen ellos: antes de crear el resguardo estado colombiano ha dejado un área protegida, no es parque sino un área protegida de 300 hectáreas. Entonces cuando ya llega la resolución del resguardo… y algunos compañeros la han leído y hoy en día han caído en cuenta que, antes de crear el resguardo, el gobierno nacional ya había dejado eso como un área para hacer su infraestructura de pequeña hidroeléctrica. Ya lo tenían listo. Eso era ya de él. Porque eso ya lo tenía mirado. Porque esa cascada era de él. Cuando él creó el resguardo decía que esto [la cascada] era suyo, que él podía hacer [en ella] la obra que él quisiera hacer. Cuando él creó el parque no podíamos reclamar ya”.

24 A case in point was Law 2 of 1959 through which the Colombian state declared the Pacific littoral as “fallow land” managed under the legal figure of a protected forest area (Arocha, 2004). This gave the
by their Afro-descendant neighbours that the Park Administration in Bogotá could make decisions about the use of this site without consulting them.

Jorge recalls this story with both passion and anger. They were powerless in the face of expropriation of their territory, in line with the tradition of selective appropriation of natural resources by colonial occupiers of the Americas (cf. Quijano, 2015). This colonial past is very vivid in the memories of the Embera. Participants remember in their stories the Spanish conquistadors coming to enslave the Embera people and steal their lands, resources, and “collect their souls” through missionaries.

Both communities protested side by side in solidarity for four days. Government officials came escorted by the military to request that the protestors end the protest. The protest was lifted after there was an agreement on approving the environmental license for the dam. The Mutatá small hydroelectric plant was built in 1997 and 1998 (Hernandez, 2001). As the hydroelectric infrastructure was built in close proximity to the Embera villages, the Embera community was compensated with development projects and with access to unmetered electricity restricted to a few appliances: refrigerators, blenders, sound systems, and televisions. The projects included fish farming and other types of animal breeding. All the projects failed. The process of negotiation of compensation was led by Embera men. Female participants made it clear that the selected appliances excluded the technological needs of women, such as stoves, washing machines and irons.

The hydroelectric dam was a matter of concern to all actors present in a conflict over post-colonial relations manifested in the exclusion of public services to the communities in this region. Under the legal framework set by the Constitution of 1991 that continued with a dual-nation system (Ng’Weno, 2007), the Embera community protested in opposition to the encroachment of the Colombian state into their own territory. From the perspective of the Afro-descendant community, the protest can be understood as a continuation to what Proceso de Comunidades Negras (PCN) had begun. During the decades-long activism work in the 1970s and 1980s against the state’s ideology of mestizaje (Wade, 2005, 2009), the PCN had managed to mobilise and gather grass-roots support across the region of Chocó (Sanchez et al., 1993). The form of justice demanded was having electricity “like you have in Bogotá”, which can be understood as a tool to gain participation in

prerogative to the government to assign areas to private companies without regard to the views and opinions of local Afro-descendant and indigenous inhabitants.
Colombian late-industrial society by acquiring a service which the community could not provide by their own means. The desire for electricity, which has been the only motivation for protesting, can be understood as part of the larger negotiation of engaging with and rejecting the presence of the state and its vision of “development”. The constant flow of electricity can be construed not only as the State’s fulfilment of its obligations but also as a projection of its authority into the villages (Barnes 2016; Akhter 2015).

In this conflict, living with the trouble of a park, meant also stirring up trouble in order to have some decision-making power in shaping and spinning the ways in which the new infrastructure would affect the community. The villages here studied are among the few villages in the northern Pacific coast that have continuous electricity service today. The consequences of their stirring up trouble speak loudly against passivity, yet the adoption of such efficacious action has nevertheless remained limited. That the securing of social services was not the aim of the protest is reinforced when one considers that electrification, after 20 years, has been the only reason for which both communities have protested for. They still have no water or sanitation infrastructure, which they also see as a concern.

The protest for electricity allows us to rethink the power relations in the negotiation of matters that people care about. The pluriverse in Utría is powered via hydroelectricity. This also challenges the narrative of peoples in need to be rescued from “poverty” by “development”, and highlights the complex realities that underpin the negotiation of matters of care and concern (cf. Asher, 2009). The actions of the two communities of Utría suggest that their expectations and imaginaries of development infrastructure are influenced by a range of subjective and shared histories (e.g. of Spanish colonialism, of centralism in the Colombian state, of peasant and social conflicts, of racism and marginalization) that both bind them together and distinguish them from one another. These manifest themselves in how, each community in its own subjective way and with its own internal contradictions and conflicts, stirred up trouble. However, one cannot always be an active part and decide to stay with the trouble in situated projects (Haraway, 2016). Sometimes, as is the case with the White Fish, events are set in motion by chance and become pervasive. These things can be understood as agents speaking loudly at us (Latour, 1993, 2004a). Their agency can be perceived in gatherings of social life ordering labour, traditional livelihoods, and spaces. Living with the trouble in precarious conditions is a process of negotiation.
4.3 The White Fish

The coastal communities of this region have not chosen to get the White Fish. Instead, it has chosen them. In this section, we zoom out from Utría and look at the entire Pacific coastal area of northern Chocó (Article IV). While the White Fish, to the untrained ear, may sound like a sea creature, for the coastal communities it is a matter of great concern. The White Fish, as a fisherman candidly expressed, refers to a substance currently entangled in much of the political, social and economic life of Latin America: cocaine, drifting at sea.

Colombia is the world’s top producer of cocaine (UNODC, 2016). And recently the number of coca hectares planted across the country has increased. However, this highly valuable commodity has its own socio-economic dynamics, where each region experiences different sets of issues. The Northern Pacific Coast is an area with constant military presence and home to a large government military base. There is no war on drugs there in the sense described for coca-producing regions (Tate, 2013). The main aspect of drug trade present in this part of the country is the White Fish. The cocaine that reaches these coasts arrives on
speedboats from the south of the country, where coca is farmed, processed into cocaine, and packed and sealed in plastic in the form of bricks (see e.g. Wilson & Zambrano, 1994). But, how do people learn to live-with this problematic newcomer?

“Practically, regarding the White Fish, the people, the youth, the fishermen… there is a specific time during the year. The government shoots down the boats that carry drugs and when this happens, the people go either to walk down the beach or to fish. They find two packs, two kilos and then they come and sell it and become rich. That is what is happening all along the Pacific coast… Because after they shoot the boats down it goes like crazy, it sprays everywhere and according to the waters it goes here or there, or by the winds. Well, it’s the scourge of this area… if you are lucky you will find it”. 25

Miguel and I are sitting on his porch in a village in the region of Chocó. We are looking out at the fishermen returning from their day’s work at sea. Miguel, a community leader, explains to me that cocaine and the White Fish have a special relation. It arrives by chance, when the authorities pursue and occasionally sink the speedboats of drug traffickers who drop off packs of cocaine into the open ocean. From these drifting packs of cocaine, fishermen sometimes catch the White Fish with their traditional fishing gear, just like they would any other fish in the sea. Some of them set sail actively looking for it, others happen upon it by chance. They interpret the winds and the currents they are so familiar with, albeit not always with success. People refer to them wittily as “fishermen of hopes”26, alluding to the high expectations and low probability of actually finding the White Fish instead of pursuing an actual fish catch.

“We do line fishing and also do drop line fishing. The drop line fishing is where we put a thousand or two thousand hooks attached to the line. We also have [something] called lifters, [which are] rafts with a fishing line about 15 fathoms long. Attached to those lifters we tie a stone to the fishing line so the current does not take it away…”

25 Original: “Prácticamente, frente a la pesca blanca, las personas, los muchachos, los pescadores… hay una época específica. El gobierno bombardea las lanchas que llevan la droga y cuando él la bombardea la gente va ya bien a la playa a caminar o a pescar y se encuentra su paca, sus dos pacas, sus dos kilos y luego vienen y la venden y se vuelven ricos. Esa es la forma que está aquí a lo largo y ancho de este pacifico… Como eso después de que lo bombardean queda loco, entonces riega para todos los lados, y de acuerdo a las aguas, echa para este lado o echa para acá, de acuerdo a la brisa. Bueno es una cantidad de flagelo… si usted está con suerte lo encuentra”.

26 Original: “pescadores de ilusiones”. In Spanish language, the meaning of ilusión lends itself to wit, as it combines hopeful anticipation with delusion.
“This is how we survive, when there is no fishing we do tourism, when there
is no tourism many guys do agriculture in the same place. We survive one way
or another. There are months when fishing is very good and others when we
throw three thousand hooks, and from those three thousand we fish ten fish.
We call them pieces; from those 10 pieces, we can produce 50 kilos that are
100 pounds and so on. When there is fishing, there is a month, for example,
when fish pull [the hooks], others when they don’t. But this has changed
through the [climatic] phenomena that have happened. El Niño comes and
lashes us here, then the many waters warm up and cool down and so on. Back
then, fish used to have their seasons and their months when one would find
them. Now this has changed”.

(Angel)

Traditionally, fishing has been the main livelihood in the coastal communities.
Fishermen do either line fishing or drop line fishing. Survival strategies demand
flexibility and adaptability through the integration of fishing with other activities,
such as taking tourists out to sea for sport fishing. As fishing is not very profitable,
families of fishermen also resort to other livelihoods. Families alternate between
participating in commerce in retail shops, restaurants, tourism and biodiversity
conservation projects that are linked to the regional tourism industry. Fishermen
are organised in cooperatives that rely largely on governmental subsidies and
international cooperation funds. Through previous NGO initiatives, some fishing
cooperatives provide cold-storage infrastructure and access to profitable markets,
which today include high-end restaurants in Colombia’s larger cities of Bogotá,
Medellín and Cali. However, the general economic situation is far from easy and
the use of the word “survive” in Angel’s speech is not haphazard.

Just like the villages in and around Utiria National Park, the Northern Pacific
cost is a remote place with limited access to the rest of the country. The villages

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27 Original: “La [faena la] hacemos a línea de mano y la hacemos también a espinel. Espinel es el que
le ponemos mil o dos mil anzuelos con una cantidad de sedal que utilizamos. También tenemos [algo a
lo que le] decimos alzadera, unas balsas con sedal, unas 15 brazas de largo. A esas alzaderas le
ponemos la piedra como para que agarre el espinel y no lo deje que la corriente se lo lleve…

“Así, al menos sobrevivimos cuando no hay la pesca se le hace el turismo, cuando no hay turismo
muchos compañeros le dan a lo que es la agricultura ahí mismo. Se sobrevive cuando no es de una
manera es de la otra. Hay meses de la pesca que son muy buenos u otros en los que tiramos 3mil
anzuelos t de los 3mil sacamos 10 pescados. Los llamamos piezas; de esas 10 piezas podemos sacar 30
kilos, que son 100 libras y así sucesivamente. Cuando hay pesca, tenemos un mes, por ejemplo, que
hala el pescado, otro mes que no. Pero ha cambiado a través de los fenómenos que ha habido. El Niño
que viene que azota por acá. Entonces a la variedad de las aguas que se han calentado y se han enfriado
y así sucesivamente. Entonces, anteriormente, el pescado tenía sus épocas y sus meses que uno lo
conseguía. Ahora ha cambiado”.
are located between the sea and Colombia’s exuberant tropical rainforest, conditions that are appealing for tourists who seek out ecotourism opportunities such as whale watching or come just to enjoy the landscape. The situation here regarding state services is also precarious: there is minimal sanitation infrastructure and very limited healthcare, a predicament that is not unrelated to structural and historical discrimination against these communities (Bonet, 2007; Taussig, 2004). Pablo said to me:

“The White Fish is a national and global issue, and Colombia and everyone needs to understand that in Colombia 80% of the people have no access to [a job in] a company and that people have no access to create small or medium-size enterprises. People have no knowledge or skills, and in this country the economy is coca, for the whole of Colombia. Everyone needs to understand that, and the whole world needs to know”.28

In Chocó, opportunities for improving quality of life, such as those granted by the White Fish, can seldom be disregarded. Cocaine and the White Fish are both relatively recent newcomers, yet nor at earlier times was it unknown (cf. Taussig 2004). Like most places in Colombia, the Pacific Coast has also seen the rise and fall of drug-related bonanzas (cf. Britto, 2015). During the 2000s, drug traffickers from the Andes bought lands and properties in this region as part of their wealth accumulation, as likewise across the country. In some villages, details about these relations are not hard to come by, as most residents know which lands were purchased when and by whom. Typically, people talk about it with an air of disregard, often because these properties have now been confiscated by Colombian authorities and are virtually abandoned. Yet, if this is the case, in which ways are the current relations with regard to the White Fish any different from other places? How has the White Fish become a trouble? Maribel gives us one answer to this question. She runs a small restaurant targeted at tourists. She splits her time between farming in a plot in the villagers’ communal lands together with her two daughters, and working at her restaurant, which she stocks with both her own produce and with fish she buys from local fishermen. The situation which Maribel tells us about is one of change:

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28 Original: “La pesca blanca es un problema nacional y global del mundo y Colombia y todo el mundo tiene que entender que Colombia el 80% para la gente que no tiene acceso a una empresa y la gente que no tiene acceso a constituir empresa pequeña, microempresa. Y la gente que no tiene conocimiento o capacidad. La economía de este país es la coca, para toda Colombia. Todo el mundo tiene que entender eso y el mundo entero lo tiene que saber”.

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“Many people left the fields, stopped fishing, and then when [the White Fish] is over, when these days there is nothing left [at sea], it’s like they want to return to work, but not really. But there is nothing like tilling the earth every day. This way you are more in contact with your neighbour and with one another. But when one finds 100 million [pesos], you don’t go to the fields or fishing”.29

Maribel depicts the not unfamiliar situation in which a commodity has changed the local labour structure, leaving other economic areas without sufficient workers to provide basic food for sustenance (cf. Tate, 2015; Tsing, 2013, 2015). Unsurprisingly, incomes from labouring in White Fishing are more profitable than they are in other economic sectors. However, Maribel’s words maintain a normative undertone. The White Fish is not seen as an appropriate way of earning a living in contrast to fishing, agriculture, tourism or commerce. Furthermore, she outlines the deeper issue that is starting to affect the communities: the rupture with traditional farming-labour institutions. Typically, in Afro-descendant communities in this region, neighbours worked collectively on each other’s plots of land farming yucca, plantains and rice. Labour was compensated by regular rotations from farm to farm and by providing food amenities during the day’s work (CCGLR, 2007). These farming labour institutions were the basis of communal solidarity upon which social movements for civil rights were built in the 1980s (Escobar, 2008). The White Fish makes visible the tension between, on the one hand improving the standard of living in a way associated with the cocaine trade which disregards public discourse, and on the other, labouring intensively in a way which reinforces communal solidarity.

This subversion of values is what Martín, a now-retired community leader and activist, lamented to me. During conversation over coffee on a rainy morning in his beachfront house, we discussed local politics, and he explained to me:

“With the coming of the White Fish everybody becomes the law. I get some pesos and then I’ve seen to myself. Like we say, no one can raise their voice to me. Then the law appears, which is the real law. [People involved may say]: ‘Look here, take this [money] and keep quiet and leave me alone.’ So, let’s say,
it’s a phenomenon that distorts the whole of the positive image that we’ve wanted to have of the community”.30

Martín’s words reveal his concern about how the White Fish has affected the interrelations among community members, in particular the building process that has been underway since the 1980s and has stood at the core of the region’s social movement involving local people’s struggle for self-determination and identity (Escobar, 1995; Wade, 1990; Jaramillo, 2014; CCGLR, 2007). Through social movement and protest, communities across the Pacific Coast, such as those studied by Wade (2016, 2005, 1990) and Escobar (2008, 1995), succeeded in ensuring that the new Constitution of 1991 included affirmative action provisions that recognised the rights to self-governance and communal lands. These activist organisations continue to advocate today in defence of their legal rights and ancestral lands. However, this makes them, and their members, targets for violence and political persecution. Self-governance in the villages relies on the support given to the ethnic authorities by both community members across the spectrum and community-based organisations. This foundation of solidarity and social cohesion is a key component in the management of common-pool resources in the communal territories (Ostrom, 2010). At present, the very legitimacy of local ethnic authorities is in question, and people involved with the White Fish see it as a threat to their newly acquired power.

For any newcomer, there is an overall impression of prosperity in the villages that stands in stark contrast to both governmental statistics and to the lack of job opportunities depicted by Miguel. In the area, I frequently found new buildings, new cars, restaurants where food is sold-out and people who always find reasons to celebrate with giant loudspeakers. In most villages, people readily displayed their electronic gadgets, which included computers, TV sets, sound systems and smartphones. Cars and pick-up trucks move through the dirt roads. Everyone appears to be benefitting from the prosperous times. Alberto, a man in his fifties who works as taxi driver and mechanic explained to me with some disdain the local dynamics:

“Coca is brought by sea. When it falls into the sea [boats having been chased by the navy], fishermen bring it, and [people] that have friends outside [the

30 Original: “Con la aparición de la pesca blanca todo el mundo se convierte en ley. Yo ya me consigo unos pesos entonces ya tengo lo mío. Como se dice, a mi nadie me viene a hablar duro. Ya aparece la ley que es la verdadera ley: vea coja [dinero] y quédese callada y déjeme a mi quieto. Entonces es otro digamos un fenómeno que distorsiona toda esa imagen positiva que hemos querido tener de la comunidad.”
villages] buy it and bring the money back as refrigerators, washing machines, appliances … I’m talking about a billion or two billion pesos. [A trafficker may ask] How many packs do you have? [Someone may answer] I have three packs. Each pack has twenty-five kilos and is worth two and a half million [pesos] per kilo. So, they say: I have one for you hidden in that place, it is worth 500 million. [The traffickers answer] we will give you 250 million at your home and the rest in the place where we pick it up, and so they go”.

Even if the Alberto’s numbers were to be inaccurate, the income from the White Fish is substantial, and for some people it appears to be more appealing than other lines of work. But, as in any livelihood in these villages, it is combined with other activities. As I walked through one of the villages one day, a group of four shops caught my attention. They were all located on the main street; the two-storey buildings looked new and were constructed adjacent to each other. One informant explained to me that the owner of these shops had invested their white fishing earnings in expanding and improving his businesses and bringing new products to sell in town (cf. Bonhomme, 2012). Upon reflection, I came to see the challenge in distinguishing White Fish income from other sources of income, since practices associated with the White Fish not only require a high level of secrecy, but other commercial activities may benefit indirectly from spending resultant from increased income.

Yet, how do people learn to live with and adapt to the White Fish’s spatial networks? For Ramiro, a non-local hotel entrepreneur, this is unproblematic,

“There is no guerrilla here, there is nothing here. What we have here is a drug trafficking route. There are some shady characters that move some illegal merchandise from town to town, and these guys are trouble, they go around armed, they are bullies. But, if you don’t mess with them, you don’t notice that this exists. There are just a few. It’s not like one would say that this area is full of armed narcos, no. They come and when there is a shipment, the boss orders them to move [to each] village. They monitor the situation and move their

merchandise north … They only care about their drugs. They are not interested in any tourist, so it is not a problem”.32

Guerrillas, paramilitary groups and drug gangs have disputed regional control for years (Villarraga Sarmiento, 2014). Organised criminal structures transport and smuggle the cocaine from southern coca-producing regions towards Central and North America (Rincón-Ruiz & Kallis, 2013; Wilson & Zambrano, 1994). These structures are said to have inherited the business from the now extinct paramilitary groups, yet locally they are still referred to as paramilitaries (Lyons, 2016). This region serves as a corridor connecting the Pacific and Caribbean basins, in which local communities sometimes get entangled in conditions of violence.

For some unlucky ones, the White Fish also carries connotations of violence. The state of calmness of the villages broke one morning, when I ran into Maria – a cheerful woman in her forties who had a small shop on the outskirts of one of the villages. After greeting me formally, she began crying. She explained to me what had happened to her earlier in the week one night, and asked that I include her story in my recordings,

“First it was the presence of the paramilitaries … this year, they tied up Juan at the beach, they beat him up. It was the paramilitaries I think, they threatened us not to tell the authorities … they took everything we had … everything for our business, drinks, groceries, they broke things … They said they were looking for something there, that another group had stored and they asked us if we knew anything. But tell me, what would we know? We were just caught in the middle”.33

For Maria and Juan, her brother, this was a one-off occurrence, and in general, stories of drug-related violence in this region are still uncommon – or at least remain unspoken of. Although Maria claimed to know that some of the people who

32 Original: “Aquí no hay guerrilla, aquí no hay nada. Aquí es una ruta del narcotráfico. Hay unos personajes oscuros que mueven unas mercancías ilegales de pueblo en pueblo y esos personajes son malos, andan armados, son braveros. Pero, si tú no te metes con ellos no te das cuenta de que eso existe. Son relativamente pocos. No es que uno diga que esto está plagado de narcos armados, no. Ellos vienen y cuando hay un cargamento el patrón manda que se desplacen [a cada] pueblito. Se monitorean y van subiendo su mercancía… A ellos no les interesa sino su droga. A ellos ningún turista les interesa, entonces eso no es un problema”.

33 Original: “Primero fue presencia de paramilitares … este año, a Juan lo amarraron en Playa Blanca, le pegaron. Fueron paramilitares creo, nos amenazaron que no podíamos denunciar entonces me robaron todo lo que tenía, las bebidas, el mercado, las gaseosas, me dañaron cosas … ellos dicen que porqué decían que buscaban algo ahí, que otro grupo había guardado algo, que si nosotros sabíamos. Pero digame, que ibamos a saber nosotros. O sea uno en el medio”.

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assaulted them lived in the village, they decided not to tell the authorities or to leave. Nevertheless, the performance of the paramilitaries was enough to keep Maria and Juan awake at night for many months and to change the way they understand and behave in relation to the space around them (Larkins, 2013). Even during my last visit, Maria and Juan expressed to me that they feared the possibility that some other armed actor might set up a storage space close to their property or that they might receive undesired visits again. In my own experience, one aspect of growing up in Colombia means knowing the subtleties of place, which implies understanding how spaces can be atomised into a dichotomy of areas deemed safe and unsafe (cf. Goldstein, 2010). From these situations, it became clear to me that spaces along the coast become transformed by the White Fish into a chessboard of the navy, the communities and the drug traffickers.

The White Fish is a matter of serious concern. For the local communities, there is no way around it, and it occurs, for the most part, by chance. Thus, how do the troubles associated with the White Fish challenge the narratives of poverty and development, and engagement with and rejection of capitalist governance? In the region, coastal communities have learnt to live with it. They have no choice. They see their lives being transformed. The White Fish imbricates traditional fishing livelihoods with transnational drug trade in the form of drift-cocaine. Two worlds meeting at once in complex relations. Here they are conflated and re-appropriated in unforeseen ways. Coastal communities learn to live with drifting cocaine and transform it into the White Fish. It is no longer an abandoned material floating adrift on the sea. It is re-signified and produced as a different object. It is now an opportunity to change one’s fortune. This new opportunity comes with its own set of troubles. It also constitutes a way of subverting the structural discrimination, material needs and marginalisation through acquiring wealth, yet with the unfortunate violence that accompanies the process. Surely if the activity had different outcomes Maribel and Martin would have different opinions about it. Learning to live with the trouble is a slow process. But my reason for bringing this story here has been to show the difficulties of a post-colonial context which cannot be judged as a choice of thinking or acting otherwise – and in which the region of Chocó cannot be portrayed as a recipient of top-down solutions (i.e. development). The White Fish is not a choice; however, it provides a narrative about learning to live with troubles in the midst of complex and violent landscapes. Situations need to be valued from within their own relations and conditions. Living with the White Fish provides ways of thinking about matters of concern that otherwise would remained foreclosed. This context-sensitive approach unlocks the possibility of
studying and bringing to the foreground the economy of transnational drug trade that silently drives Chocó.

4.4 Troubles and the pluriverse

So, what do these stories have in common? In the messiness of a damaged planet (cf. Tsing, 2015), of oppressive post-colonial relations and in the hope of peace in Colombia, coexistence in the pluriverse depends on re-appropriations by renacientes – those that are reborn, budding out of the earth, both humans and non-humans alike.

The Pacific Coast of Chocó and Utría National Park are places of dreams and imaginaries for the local communities, and are especially places of hope and of possibility. The situations described and analysed here are far from ideal, but are nevertheless testimony to the creative capacity of the people of Chocó in their learning to live with difficulties by taking an active part in negotiating the outcomes of the matters that they care about. These stories occur simultaneously and shape in different ways their actors.

The Embera and Afro-descendant communities together with the Park Administration have the potential of reducing conflict over the use of the park’s resources. Concerning Mutatá hydroelectric plant, the Embera community was able to subvert the expropriation of their waterfall by participating in the protest–out of indignation and solidarity– at the request of their Afro-descendant neighbours, yet with consequences for their world-crossing infrastructure and subsequent restrictions on the appliances which they were permitted to use. In addition, the Afro-descendant community of El Valle obtained electricity by forcing the Colombian State to listen and to let them be part of a national project. As regards the White Fish, the sea shores are now spaces defined by its presence or absence. The people involved in the White Fish subvert the conditions of poverty, with positive and negative consequences for the villages at large. In these stories some degree of agency can always be found in difficult situations, where people have learnt to live with the trouble which was imposed and forced upon them.

For Escobar (2015a, 2015b) the pluriverse serves as a transition discourse in order to step out of institutional and epistemic boundaries to deliver significant transformations. His point of departure is the intrinsic relation between the current model of social life and the contemporary social and environmental crises. In the stories of Chocó the pluriverse is present in myriad relations – of kin, oddkin, solidarity, negotiation – between the local peoples. In this alternative narrative, the
arenas of matters of concern and care are based on discussions based on conviviality and solidarity. While for Escobar (2015a, 2015b) worlds are connected through power relations, in the stories presented here worlds are connected in matters of concern and care.

Shifting focus from the power relations of the pluriverse, towards the troubles, matters of care and concern of local communities reveals the many ways in which those local communities engage with and reject the current modes of social life described by Escobar (2012) as the one-world world of capitalism, industrialisation, modernity, patriarchy, development, or neoliberalism. Hence, by complementing the pluriverse with attention to local troubles, matters of concerns and care, the communities of Chocó also provide us with ways to rethink relations in the pluriverse. Members of both local communities take part in determining and shaping how elements interact, enact and transform. It is in the troubles where the relations of power manifest themselves and where there are opportunities to negotiate solutions. Many worlds are able to co-exist in Chocó through stirring up troubles, negotiating outcomes, finding commonalities and demonstrating solidarity. Chocó is a fertile space for alternative narratives that connect and explore what people care and worry about. The stories of the peoples of the Northern Pacific coast of Colombia, the renacientes of, and in spite of, colonisation are a break in grand narratives of “development” and “poverty”.

The process of constant negotiation of the terms in which the one-world world affects the local communities of Chocó, shows that denouncing this system is not enough (Law, 2015). Especially since there is no going back to a previous stage before encounters and hybrids, and before matters of concern and care. Staying with environmental and social crises in Chocó is not a choice (Haraway, 2016), but a given condition of living in this region which demands that troubles be stirred up repeatedly.

The communities of Chocó require narratives other than “poverty” and its solution of “development”. They deserve narratives that empower them and bring to the foreground their agency and possibilities. The pluriverse is a narrative for living together through dialogue and negotiation. Acknowledging the historical dimension of matters of concern has been a necessary step for a context-sensitive analysis. The stories in this thesis show alternative ways in which local communities are capable of having agency in unexpected ways when they negotiate matters that concern them. The communities of Chocó give us stories of learning to live with, and in spite of, precarious conditions. The social memories, the struggles, troubles and concerns of the communities of Chocó were kept quiet until
now: the memories of eviction had been silenced, the social protest concerning the
dam was not spoken of, and the White Fish was only mentioned in hushed tones
among members of the local communities. It is my hope that raising these issues in
academic fora brings attention to them and sparks debate which could lead to better
approaches towards solving these troubles.

Members of the Embera and Afro-descendant communities are the actors in
this story. They have given me the plot, which I have analysed and relayed in the
hope that my findings will prove useful to them. I have weaved their stories into
this greater narrative of the pluriverse, by taking their struggles seriously and by
finding points of connection that encourage learning and living together. If it truly
matters what ideas we use to think ideas with (Strathern, 1992), then any one idea,
narrative, policy, governance structure, project of conservation and development in
Chocó that is aimed at improving livelihoods and living conditions needs to be
thought, narrated, formulated, structured, and framed from a position of living with,
staying with, and sometimes stirring up trouble. This position means empowerment
of those who live with the difficult histories of environmental degradation and
social inequalities, and also means finding commonalities and solidarity in
precarious conditions.
5 Conclusion

In this thesis, I have explored some of the troubles and concerns of the communities of Chocó to show how these provide alternatives to grand narratives of “development” and “poverty” in the region. Afro-descendant and indigenous Embera communities inhabit this region. These communities are not only neighbours, they are family, in the sense of oddkin (Haraway, 2016): friends and partners in resistance against historical and ongoing oppression. While the Embera are the progeny of those people who survived the first encounters with Spaniards in the American mainland, their neighbours, the communities of African ancestry, are the survivors of slavery. These are communities that require alternative narratives to “poverty” and “development” which more often than not, end up in violence, dispossession, and destruction. They need narratives that empower them and that consider their histories of environmental degradation and social inequalities. The methodological approach of performing a context-sensitive political ecology has meant exploring matters of concern and divergent views with creativity.

To summarise key findings, in this thesis project I contributed to developing a methodological approach to political ecology which was named context-sensitivity that improves the flow of information while being attentive to power relations (Article V). In this thesis, I have followed this approach by taking seriously the matters that concern the local communities. The process of engaging, analysing, thinking and sharing with participants during fieldwork made me focus on four issues that required attention and creative approaches and that challenge the narratives concerning environmental value conflicts (Article I), development infrastructure (Article II), drug trade (Article IV) and rhythms and temporalities (Article IV).

A new methodology was developed in order to address the conflicting views over the management of Utría National Park between the members of the Afro-descendant community, Embera community and the Park Administration (Article I). This new methodology is an alternative to mainstream narratives of “ecosystem services” (MEA, 2005). It took as a starting point the complex historical relations among the stakeholders, and provided a way to organise the divergent views concerning the park’s resources. From those historical relations and conflicting claims, the focus was shifted towards finding commonalities for flourishing together, with each other and with the park. Based on a comparison of the purposes of each stakeholder community, fostering relations of service and care to the other
communities and to the environment could help in deescalating environmental conflict.

The construction of Mutatá small hydroelectric plant is a case in point of stirring up trouble for these alternative narratives where, at the request of their Afro-descendant neighbours, the indigenous Embera joined protests demanding the construction of hydroelectric infrastructure (Article II). While the Afro-descendant community protested for economic, political and legal justice, the Embera protested out of indignation over losing control of their territory. The dam, however, destroyed and replaced an important cosmological passageway of communication between the worlds of the Embera people. In the analysis of this counter-intuitive case, we show that what could be understood to be a single focused protest in favour of a specific development project is better understood as the articulation of a complex polyphonic voice, expressing a set of sometimes contradictory, multilayered projects of desired futures. Thus, we show how resistance in favour of infrastructure reflects a complicated post-colonial politics, which offers a complementary argument enriching the emerging discourse concerning political resistance by local and indigenous communities protesting against infrastructure projects.

Concerning the pressing issue of the White Fish in the coastal communities, I explored how this issue imbricates fishing livelihoods and drift-cocaine (Article III). As this issue limited my capacity of involvement and required an analytical response, I developed an approach that allowed me to get close to the deeply felt effects of transnational drug trade. This was particularly necessary since the White Fish is underreported in media and virtually unexplored in scientific fora. My interest lay in making sense of why there is White Fish and not drift-cocaine in these villages, and what it is possible to learn from this unlikely difference between the object as experienced and its technical descriptor. This approach allowed me to hear participants in their own words, which provided a nuanced explanation of the politics of living in this region. The White Fish can lead to an opportunity for betterment of any individual family’s quality of life. I found that to a certain extent, the White Fish has displaced traditional livelihoods of fishing and agriculture upon which community-building processes are based. In addition, contradictory ideas came to light regarding appropriate ways to earn a living and spend wealth. It is in these subtleties and nuances that living with trouble takes place.

I also employed visual methods to explore rhythms and temporalities present at the park (Article IV). The pictures show my vision of the peoples of Utría in their complex historical dimensions. Through the images, I show in situated elements
the networks and temporalities that characterise this era of globalisation. The images convey in an expressive and poignant way my preoccupation with endangered environments and threatened communities facing global challenges of biodiversity conservation and disruptive capitalism in a post-colonial order.

In these four stories about Chocó the lives of the communities are entangled. The historical ties that bind them together become manifest in their sense of solidarity and partnership in fighting against historical oppression. These are stories where some degree of agency can be found in difficult situations, where peoples that do not have the choice of staying with the trouble (Haraway, 2016), have to learn to live with it. In these precarious situations where choices to deal with matters of concern are not an option, the communities of Chocó, with their oddkin relations, teach us about solidarity, co-existence and subversion of power. My argument has been that these mechanisms through which matters of concern and care are negotiated provide ideas to think ideas with that challenge grand narratives of “poverty”, “development”, “colonialism”, and of the “one-world world” (Escobar, 2015), that have been used to describe and analyse Chocó.

The concepts of living with and stirring up the trouble, and the pluriverse are tools for thinking that are limited at the moment to an academic discourse in anthropology and political ecology. At this stage, it is my hope that this study and its findings can be of use for the communities and interested stakeholders in generative ways that challenge representations of the post-colonial subject. Also, they may provide useful to understand other similar places in Colombia where indigenous and Afro-descendant communities struggle with the material consequences of the narratives of development, conservation and poverty. Beyond academia, the study provides baseline information about this region and contributes with tools to think differently about the policies concerning development infrastructures, biodiversity conservation, and drug trade.
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