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**Oil as the “blood of all”: Reconfiguring conceptions of the common from U’wa
thought**

As pointed out in the *Magical State* by Fernando Coronil, the Venezuelan case brings to light how perceiving oil as “la cosa de todos” is a prerequisite for persuasion through spectacle (104). This logic - “*es la cosa de todos*” - rooted in the verb *ser* - is an *abstraction*, an *ideal* that must be willed into existence or to make reality - or whatever is perceived at their disposition, like oil - imitate this ideal. As Coronil argues, this has been the rhetoric of each Venezuelan government since the discovery of oil in the country. Furthermore, these abstractions, as the verb *ser* indicates, are perceived as permanent. While Coronil and other critics of Venezuela’s oil-fuelled modernism - including Arturo Uslar Pietri and Juan Pablo Pérez Alfonzo - both question these two logics, they do not question their status as abstractions, as Ideals molded in Plato’s cave. Rather (*más bien*), their argument stems along the lines of “no *es la cosa de todos*”, which is still in the playing field of abstractions. In other words, the idea of “no *es la cosa de todos*” must also be willed into existence to allow for a more inclusive future (Coronil) or a more diverse economy (Uslar Pietri, Pérez Alfonzo).

If “the end of oil” is apparent in Venezuela (Si en Venezuela se podría hablar de un “fin” del petróleo), we must ask if the realizations of oil as *not* “la cosa de todos” indeed cover the blind spots of our relation to oil that would characterize a political response to situations of extraction. Is it enough to think of oil as a social good that needs to be redistributed in a different matter? Is the dichotomy of developed/not developed also enough? More fundamentally, does nature really care about the categories that is imposed on it?

For this end, my goal, from Andean Studies, is to ontologically open the oil-as-commons framework to the oil-as-living-being framework of the U'wa people, which flips the script about oil. A note of clarification should be made here: with this ontological move, following Viveiros de Castro, I do not seek to “present how Indians think” but to reflect (*para hacer una reflexión*) in front of a line of thinking that is a hybrid product of a dialogue between these two ontological positions (Duchesne Winter 181).

I find that one of the more useful articulations of this nature vs categories debate is Rodolfo Kusch's opposition of an ontology of *ser* vs an ontology of *estar*. *Ser* denotes permanent being (*permanencia*), while *estar* denotes its transient nature (*transitorio*). Kusch, an anthropologist and philosopher, uses *estar* as a conceptual persona to describe the radical “staticness” of quichua culture, which recognizes the happenings of the world as provoked by an external force which cannot be modified - hence energies should be directed towards one's internal forces: “*venciendo al inconsciente, se vencía al mundo*” (266). This way of non-action being-with-the-world stands in contrast to *el ser*, originating from Western philosophy, which sees the need to modify the external world - nature - through action. This arises from a dis-encounter with one's internal world, which produces what Ortega and Gasset call “a sustained effort to hold onto (*aferrarse a algo*) something in existence” and then project that something onto all existence, modifying and invading nature through objects or the city (268), and then patting itself back every time it does so, finding refuge (*justificarse*) in the narrative of Progress.

As oil became inevitably intertwined with the construction of the nation in the 20th century, it did so as well with human exceptionalism. In platonic terms, oil becomes the material fodder through which ideals of Bolivarianism are made reality. In the case of Venezuela, this relationship is compounded by what Coronil calls “the Magical State”, whereas the Venezuelan

state, like a magician, uses the income of oil revenues to cement political persuasion through spectacle (6). Furthermore, the “Magical State” disavows its roots, with each iteration government claiming they nothing like the dictatorship of Juan Vicente Gómez (1908-1935), even though the naturalization of extraction and the persuasion through spectacle originated there (4).

This sinking (hundimiento) of oil down the hierarchical ladder, and the elevation of the Magical State to create its ideal magic, sees no end in sight. Both the “left” and the “right” in Venezuelan politics are colonized by human exceptionalist considerations of nature. As shown, not even the critiques to the myth of “el petróleo es la cosa de todos” consider the naturalization of oil extraction as a blind spot. Here I find useful Simón Yampara Huarachi’s take on history of Bolivia, and how “change” in Bolivian politics is not really change, particularly when in the presence of the “colonial spirit” and the “spirit of the system of capital” (3). I believe that it is not possible to speak of change in Venezuelan politics in the presence of the “Magical State spirit” and its platonic roots.

Made apparent the ontological limits of oil-as-commons, I provide an ontological description of the U’wa people’s construction of nature. I must stress again that the goal is not to represent the thinking of the U’wa people, but rather to provide hybrid ontological possibilities that open up the being instilled by the myth of “el petróleo es la cosa de todos”.

The U’wa are an indigenous group of around 7500 individuals present in the northern Colombia and along the border of Colombia and Venezuela (Colombia, Ministerio de Cultura, Dirección de Poblaciones 1-2). They have historically inhabited Venezuela and their descendants, the Pedraza, live in the country (World Directory of Minorities and Indigenous Peoples). In the media, they are most well-known for their successful political fight in the late

90s against the American multinational oil giant, Occidental Petroleum, by threatening mass suicide if the oil company did not withdraw from their lands (ibid.).

The threat of mass suicide responds to their relationship and conception of nature product of their ontology. According to this, the creator of the world, Sirateta, created (hizo) the world as a product of eight bases, with four comprising (conformando) “the world above” and the other four comprising “the world below”. These worlds are complements of each other: the world below sustains Mother Earth, as is “wet (húmeda), feminine, it is the warm (cálida) and fertile mother”, while the world above is “dry, masculine, it is the cold and infertile father” (22). These two worlds collide and generate a third world, the world where living beings reside.

Therefore, to ensure their existence, the U’wa people must keep balance between these two worlds. The main task to do this, according to their ontology, is to keep care of Mother Earth, as it was a treasure given by Sirateta to the U’wa people and all of humankind for their survival, and Sirateta will punish anybody who threatens the integrity of Mother Earth through natural disaster (World Directory of Minorities and Indigenous Peoples).

Several things are of note in relation to the U’wa people’s construction of the nonhuman world. The land is conceived as a separate physical being, “con espíritu propio” (Pueblo U’wa & Colombia, Ministerio del Interior 17) that enters a relationship of reciprocity with the U’wa people, with the latter providing protection while the land provides sustenance (sustento). This type of identification with the nonhuman other, in which only partial relationships can be established with a being that has a uniquely and different interior and physicality, and these partial relationships acquire the forms of analogies - e.g. Mother Earth - falls within Philippe Descola’s analogic mode of identification (Duchesne Winter 181-183). These partial relationships of otherness recalls the “partial connections” that Marisol de la Cadena describes

between herself - a Peruvian anthropologist working in North American academia - and her human *runakuna* others, Mariano and Nazario, in her efforts to understand earth-beings (*tirakuna*) through a relational lens:

“Take earth beings for example: I could acknowledge their being through Mariano and Nazario, *but I could not know them (conocerlos) the way I know (sé) that mountains are rocks*. But above all (*ante todo*), I learned to identify *radical difference as a relation*, not something Mariano and Nazario had (a belief or a practice) but the condition between us that made us aware (*conscientes*) of our mutual misunderstandings (*malentendidos*) but did not fully inform us about ‘the stuff’ that composed (*compusieron*) those misunderstandings.” (De la Cadena 63, my emphasis)

Analogic modes of identification - the ways of constructing *tirakuna* and Mother Earth - are compatible with a Kuschian sense of *estar*. By formulating nonhumans with unique interiors and different physicalities, it recognizes components of the worlds provoked by an external force *which cannot be modified*. Whether this thought is a result of a fight of the unconscious for the U’wa people falls into the same incommensurability (*inconmensurabilidad*) issues that the *tirakuna* presented for Marisol de la Cadena. But with this analogic thought, U’wa ontology puts forth a harmonious equilibrium with the limits of their being in relation to other beings - *estamos en el mundo, con otros* - in contrast to the *somos el mundo, y no hay otros of ser*, which runs away from its position of *estar* in order to modify and invade nature to the image projected in their ideals, as noticed by the U’wa people: “Para el indio la tierra es madre, para el blanco es *enemiga*: para nosotros sus criaturas son nuestras hermanas, para ellos son sólo mercancía ... ” (Asociación de autoridades tradicionales U’wa Werjain Shita, my emphasis).

Such characterizations of land - in particular, of an indigenous group with a presence in Venezuela - recalls “el secreto de la tierra” used by novelist and journalist Enrique Bernardo Nuñez. Gianfranco Selgas interprets “el secreto de la tierra” as a starting point for describing an “entangled (enredada) poetics”, which, building on the work of Karen Barad, uses the land as an ontological possibility for conceiving the intra-relationships between the human and the nonhuman entwined in operations (Lecuna, Montenegro y Troconis González 3). U’wa thought offers the possibility of conceiving these intra-relationships in the framework of *balance*: the partial (reciprocal) relationship to the land as a nonhuman actor is essential to maintaining the balance of the universe: “Nuestra misión en el mundo es narrarla (su ley de la tierra), cantarla y cumplirla para sostener el equilibrio del universo” (Asociación de autoridades tradicionales U’wa Werjain Shita).

The consideration of the land as a living being in U’wa thought, distinct from but in balance with humans, nonetheless (sin embargo) is united with the latter through oil, considered as “the blood of the earth” (la sangre de la tierra) *that supports (sustenta a) all living beings*, and all living things have blood (ibid.). This seems at odds (parece contradecirse) with the analogic modes of identification we had used to put into Western terms how the U’wa people construct the land - do they or do they not share physicality with the land? Rather than going for shared physicality, I consider to rather think of oil - or what the U’wa call *ruiria* - as an indicator of how the people and the land are entwined in intra-relationships. In a way, *ruiria* is the “secreto de la tierra” that Nuñez puts forth and Selgas eloquently frames. Ruiria therefore resists the conception of oil as a commons in the Western philosophy sense of the word (“es la cosa de todos”). The conception of oil as a commons is inscribed in an ontology of *ser* which places it at the bottom the hierarchical ladder to be shared by all as dead matter. This way of thinking about commons -

as sharing dead matter to create socioeconomic well-being for all - does not really change the game. Its main critique - *el petróleo no es la cosa de todos* - seeks the change the *rules* of the game, e.g. *sembrar el petróleo* to re-distribute and create wealth to achieve socioeconomic well-being. Extractivism is still assumed. But the “slow violence” of oil extractivism in Venezuela, the many blind spots of the “Magical State”, is starting to become more obvious, as the case of Río Seco shows (*derrames petroleros*), for which changing the rules of the game may not be enough.

However, *ruiria*, as a force that supports all living beings - *a blood of all*, puts forth the possibility of a new game, a new way of thinking about what is “common”. It indicates how the human and the land are entwined as two possibilities of being that are - *que están* - while recognizing that they are uniquely constituted entities with life of their own. *Ruiria* allows to enter into a relationship of *commonality (comunalidad)* with oil, rather than use oil as common dead matter for all - “una cosa de todos”.

In conclusion, as Selgas points out, the path of the Venezuelan nation towards Progress was paved by the silencing of ontological spaces like Amazonas in the Venezuelan literary canon. Following this, the land, seen through the eyes of the U’wa also provides an exciting ontological space of possibility to counter (*contrarrestar*) the platonic roots of the Magical State. It allows to reconfigure “the common” that has been one of the main blind spots of Venezuelan anthropocentric conceptions of nature - *el petróleo es la cosa de todos* and *el petróleo no es la cosa de todos*- to inch towards a new conception of what is “common” that recognizes relationality with nature, a game-changer from which new ways of dealing with the slow violence (*extractivismo*) of the Magical State can be achieved (*articuladas*).

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