Coming-Of-Age as an Engaged Scholar Within the Neoliberal University

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It is 30 September 2015, and the crowd in the packed Teatro Nacional in Quito bursts into a wild applause. The man on the stage is Rafael Correa, the charismatic economist and President of Ecuador at the time. He is halfway through his speech at the *Encuentro Latinoamericano Progresista*, a meeting of heads of state, political leaders and youth movements from countries considered part of Latin America's 'Pink Tide.' In the first part of his speech, he told the crowd how his progressive government adopted a series of revolutionary reforms to recover the country from decades of neoliberal and neocolonial plunder and lift millions of Ecuadorians out of poverty. "We took back the power, for the common good", he asserted – hence the cheering. Then, he raises his hand to silence the crowd and share his main message: "Because dear Comrades, I insist, development is basically a question of power, of who rules in a society: the elites or the large majorities; capital or human beings; the market or society?"

As Correa speaks these words, I find myself hundreds of kilometers away in my guestroom in Tundayme, puzzling over quite similar questions of rule. I was living in this village in the Ecuadorian Amazon to conduct fieldwork on the conflictive expansion of mining promoted by the Correa administration. That day, I had witnessed the forced eviction of San Marcos, a small peasant community located in an area where a Chinese company is building a copper mine. Early that morning, the peasants had been woken up by the sound of police forces surrounding their house. When I arrived on the scene, bulldozers had just started to tear down their houses and bury the rubble. Some hours later, all that was left were piles of sand, barbed wire fences and baffled men, women and children standing by the roadside. After years of struggle to prevent their displacement, these peasants had been overruled and overrun by the development policies so eagerly advocated by President Correa.

DOI: 10.54195/PKKR9573_CH08

In retrospect, that day in September 2015 marked the start of my ongoing 'coming-of-age' as an engaged, activist scholar. Until then, I had approached the field much more as an 'observer' who sought to analyze the plethora of voices in the conflicts around mining-led development. I did not do so uncritically, for I highlighted the power relations and forms of marginalization that pervaded these conflicts in my writings. But in the field, I abstained from taking an overt position. That day, after having seen how peasants were violently dispossessed of basically everything they had, I realized that this position was no longer tenable (if it ever was). Development, as Correa said on that stage in Quito, is indeed a question of power, and I could no longer stay at the sidelines of the power struggle that unfolded right in front of me. So I decided to engage, and this marked the start of a journey into the (for me) unchartered territory of engaged scholarship.

This essay is a personal reflection on this ongoing journey and on what it taught me so far about engaged scholarship. Based on my experiences working with grassroots movements in Ecuador and the *Colectivo de Geografía Crítica del Ecuador*, I will argue that a praxis of engaged scholarship ideally involves building decolonial, collective, affective, and long-term relations. Such ideal relations are hard to achieve in practice, though, especially in an academic climate of increased individuality, competition, efficiency and precarity. That is, within what has become known as the "neoliberal university" (Berg et al. 2016). Drawing on anecdotal examples from my attempts to carve out a position as an engaged scholar while being early-career academic on a temporary contract, this essay also explores the (im)possibilities for an engaged scholarship within the neoliberal university.

From 'I' to 'el Colectivo': My Journey Into Engaged Scholarship

My first attempts to take my critical approach "beyond the text" (Kirsch 2018) and towards a praxis of engaged scholarship felt insecure and distressing. In the year prior to the evictions, I had joined the assemblies and *mingas* of the local peasant organization that tried to resist the dispossession. So there was a basic relation of trust, but how to act now that people actually got evicted? Publishing yet another critical analysis of the power relations at play at the mining frontier in some foreign academic outlet felt useless, offensive even. I figured out the best thing I could do was to just ask the organized peasants what they needed. "Resources and evidence", they told me straightforwardly. So I organized a crowdfunding, and when dust had settled I offered my capacities as a human geographer to support

their second demand: evidence. Together with some of the peasants, I organized participatory mapping workshops to document their collective memory of the place prior to the mine's arrival and of the process of dispossession experienced by the peasants. After the workshop, I digitized the data and made various maps which were shared with the peasants for feedback. Then, my fieldwork came to an end and I saw no other option than handing over the maps to the peasant organization and flying back home.

Back home, I continued to feel insecure, distressed and increasingly self-critical about these engagements. Were the peasants served by my action, and was it even legitimate to think I could be of help as a naïve, individual PhD student without any political leverage? Did I challenge power relations through my efforts, or did I only further reinscribe my position as privileged researcher with a 'white saviour' complex? As my attempts to continue supporting the peasants from abroad failed, wasn't I just doing another self-interested and extractive 'helicopter research' project? My self-critique also swung to the other side, though. Plagued by the rigid ideas about 'objectivity' that were central to my education, I also worried whether my engagements would affect my analysis, and whether I could still be critical of the very same peasants with whom I collaborated.

While figuring out possible answers to these questions, I was approached by members of the *Colectivo de Geografía Crítica del Ecuador* (hereafter *el Colectivo*), a group of activist researchers using critical geography and countermapping to resist the extractive industries and racist and patriarchal power relations (Bayón Jiménez and Torres 2019). They were working on a report on the forced displacements with the peasants from Tundayme (CIAP 2017), and wanted to include the maps we drew during the workshops. This collaboration led to the publication of a map of the process of dispossession experienced by the peasants (Figure 1). One thing led to another, and when I moved to Ecuador in the last phase of my PhD I joined *el Colectivo*.

Through my work with *el Colectivo*, I experienced that a wholly different form of engagement was possible. Here, there were no questions about objectivity: an explicit (epistemological and political) positioning as anti-extractivist, anti-capitalist, anti-racist and anti-patriarchal forms the very basis of the collective's existence and legitimacy (Bayón and Zaragocin 2019). Most of the action research carried out by *el Colectivo* is developed in collaboration with grassroot actors and activists, and is designed to serve their concrete territorial, political and legal struggles for emancipation. At the same time, *el Colectivo* is known as a reliable source of critical research among parliamentarians, government officials and jour-

nalists, for which its members also have the connections to influence political debates and decision-making processes (Bayón Jiménez and Torres 2019).

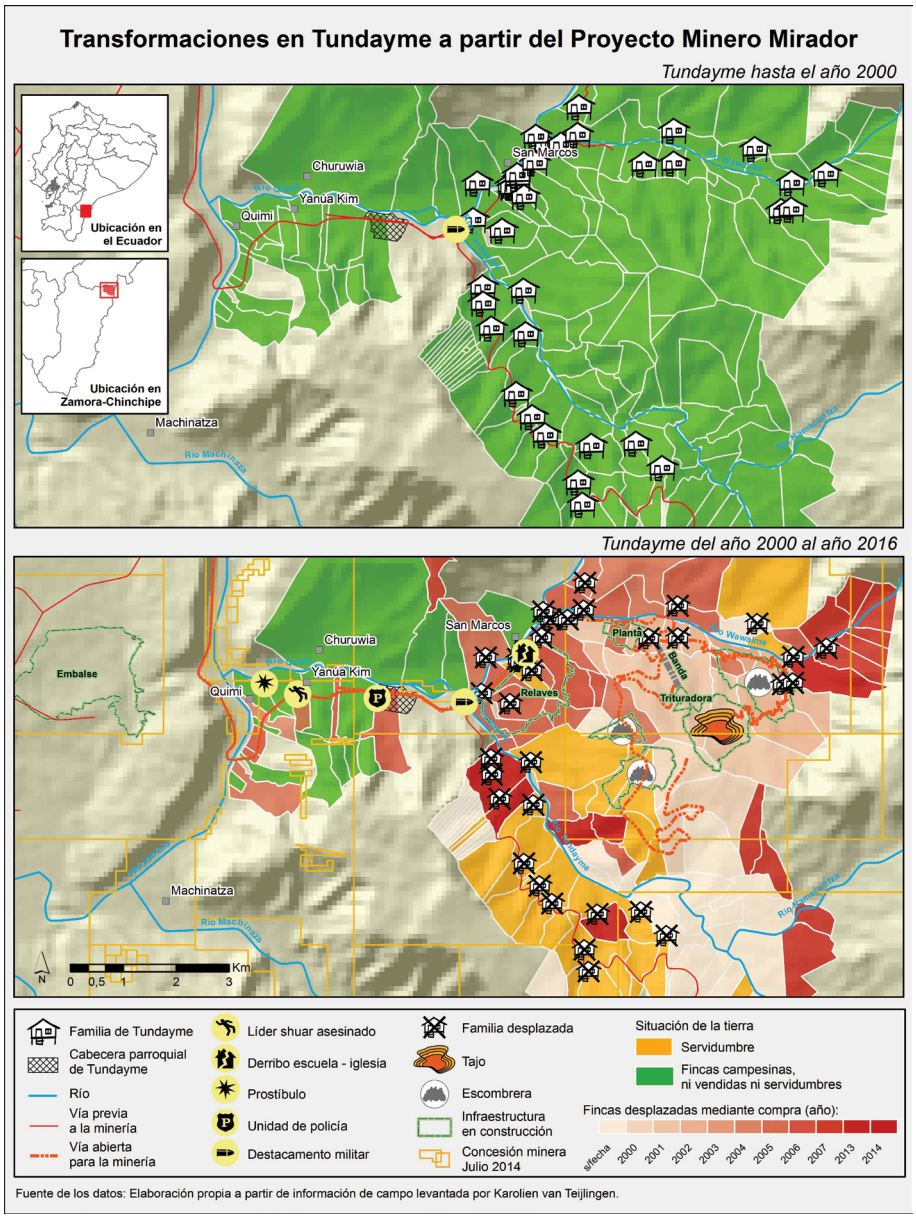

Figure 1. Dispossession and displacement around the Mirador copper mine, Ecuador. Source: CIAP (2017).

An example of such an action/research project in which I participated concerned the expansion of oil and mining operations in the Ecuadorian Amazon. Through a series of counter-mappings with grassroot groups, we showed the socio-environmental impacts of paradigmatic oil and mining projects. We developed a social media campaign, including infographics in various indigenous languages (Figure 2) and short movies. We also participated as expert witnesses in court cases started by these organizations, and lobbied ombudsman officials and parliamentarians.

In the years that followed, the research yielded concrete results. The maps contributed to a historical court ruling that forced all oil companies operating in Ecuador to stop the intoxicating flaring of gas (Reuters 2022) and to the withdrawal of the license for an oil block (GK 2022). At the same time, we translated our experiences into contributions to academic debates on, for instance, the intersections of political ecology and mobility studies (Bayón Jiménez et al. 2021), the gendered criminalization of environmental defenders (Moreano Venegas and Van Teijlingen 2021) or Latin American ecologist thought (Moreano Venegas et al. 2023).

These action/research projects also led me to travel back to Tundayme to collaborate again with the displaced peasants. As the Mirador mine had started extracting copper by that time, we set out to map water contamination and deforestation caused by its operation (Figure 2). The results of these mappings and those undertaken during my PhD research were presented at the Constitutional Court of Ecuador, in support of a lawsuit presented by indigenous groups demanding the closure of the project. The plaintiffs did not win the case, but these collaborations strengthened the alliance between *el Colectivo* and the peasants from Tundayme. This prompted us to undertake joint lobbying activities, and to set-up a project in which young people from the Ecuadorian Amazon were trained in making counter-maps.

So what had started as some hesitant and uncomfortable actions of support as an individual PhD student, eventually led to a much more meaningful and sustained form of engagement in the emancipatory struggles at the extractive frontier of Ecuador. While this journey has only just started, it has enabled me to explore what I consider key-ingredients of an engaged or activist scholarship. The first ingredient – a commitment to the struggle against multiple forms of oppression – should not be of any surprise. Taking a clear political position in power struggles like the one that unfolded in the Tundayme has been – and continues to be – the hallmark of engaged scholarship (Hale 2008). Yet, such positioning requires more than engaging with critical theories and 'speaking truth to power' in one's writing (Naylor 2018). Following decolonial scholars from Latin America

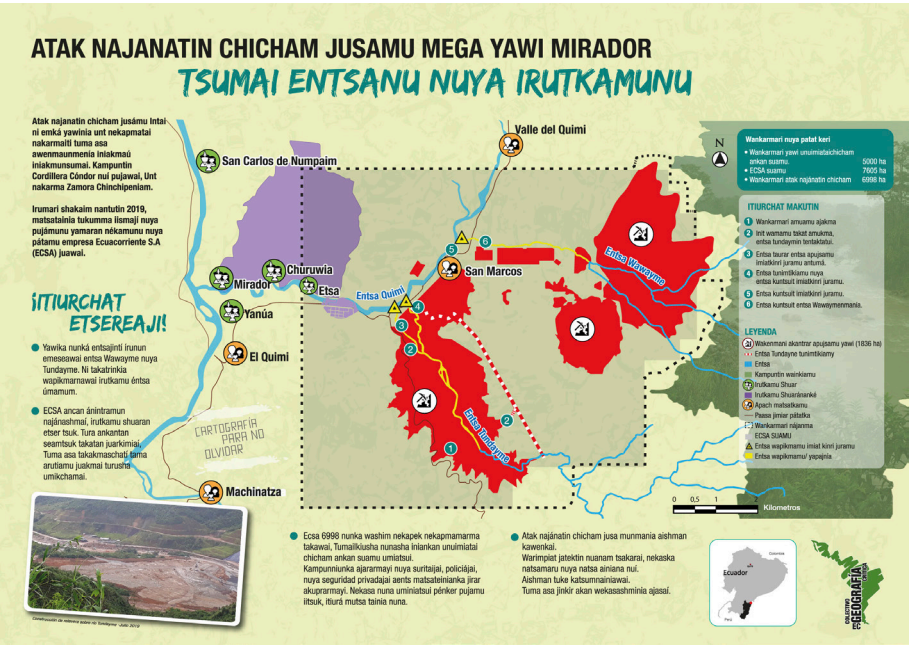

Figure 2. Water contamination and deforestation around the Mirador mine, infographic in Shuar Chicham, the indigenous language of the region.
Source: https://geografiacriticaecuador.org/2020/11/15/infografias-amazonicas-en-kichwa-wao-tededo-y-shuar/.

(Cusicanqui 2012; Cabnal 2019), such commitment extends to the very practices and relations through which knowledge is produced. It involves recognizing the geopolitics of knowledge, colonial differences, forms of extractivism and the (epistemic) injustices that are enacted in academic research – and acting against them (Van den Hout 2022). In practice, a commitment to social justice and decolonization requires a wholly different approach to conceiving of, carrying out and publishing research (Solano and Speed 2008).

A second ingredient is the very collective character of engaged scholarship (CGCE 2022). Evidently, the action/research efforts I described before would not have been possible without *el Colectivo* as a space of "collective embodiment".[1] That is, a space for collective outrage, (un)learning, political positioning and action, including all the frictions and negotiations this may entail. In such space,

1 I take this notion from the Mayan feminist Lorena Cabnal who describes *acuerpamiento* or collective embodiment as the collective action of our bodies that are outraged about the injustices experienced by other bodies. See https://suds.cat/experiencies/857-2/.

the rather paralyzing self-questioning I experienced earlier makes place for collective reflections on the relations of power that traverse our action/research and on ways to recognize and transform them. On a practical note, forming a collective subject also expands the scope of the engagement to which one can commit, of one's political leverage, and of the presence in the networks sustaining emancipatory struggles. A collective can furthermore represent a space of refuge, companionship and care when the political struggles become dense or even dangerous (Liboiron 2016; Moreano Venegas and Van Teijlingen 2021).

This leads me to a third key-characteristic of engaged scholarship: affect. Collaborations with grassroots actors in the realm of socio-environmental justice struggles generally move beyond researcher-subject relations. They are affective relations between humans based on (feminist) ethics of care, reciprocity and trust (Liboiron 2016; Hout 2022). Building such relations of affect also warrants attention to the ways in which your action/research may affect these actors, their bodies, their territories, their futures. Engaged scholarship thus also requires practicing forms of relational accountability (Naylor et al. 2018). Building affective relations or generating concrete impacts cannot be fast-tracked (Costas Batlle and Carr 2021). A fourth and related dimension of engaged scholarship is thus the importance of long-term engagements with grassroots actors and networks (Mason 2021).

So as it stands for me now, practices of engaged scholarship involve building decolonial, collective, affective, and long-term relations. I realize this is quite an idealized understanding of what engaged scholarship may look like. In practice, achieving such relations is hard and fraught with contradictions (Solano and Speed 2008). And, as I noticed when I started a job as an early-career scholar in the Netherlands, it is an even more daunting task to pursue this form of engaged scholarship within the contours of the neoliberal university. It is to this challenge I turn in the next section.

Carving Out Spaces for Engagement Within the Neoliberal University

When I moved back to the Netherlands and started a job as postdoctoral researcher at Radboud University in 2020, my journey into engaged scholarship took a turn. Trying to give new substance to my commitment to emancipatory struggles in Ecuador, my participation in *el Colectivo* transformed into a combination of online meetings and lengthy yearly stays in Ecuador. However, as I carve out this new form of engaged scholarship while kickstarting my career in Dutch academia,

I stumble upon various constraints. Many of these can be related to the "neoliberal university" (Richter et al. 2020; Rasch et al. 2022). This term refers to the university governance structures and academic culture in which neoliberal traits of productivity, competition, efficiency and measurability become guiding principles. In the vast literature on the topic, the neoliberalisation of the university has been associated with increased individualization, precarity, a publish-or-perish culture, and fierce competition for funding and tenured positions – conditions that particularly affect female, racialized or low-class scholars (Richter et al. 2020). Despite attempts to curve this trend and value academics in more diverse ways, it seems that these neoliberal values have taken strong root in Dutch academia (Berg et al. 2016).

So there have been numerous occasions in which my attempts to maintain and cultivate the type of relations I described earlier were at odds with the neoliberal university. A decolonial research practice, for example, would ideally mean that research agendas are crafted in collaboration with grassroots allies (Solano and Speed 2008). However, this is difficult to combine with the competitive funding schemes available to early-career scholars in the Netherlands. Such projects have a low probability of being funded (as low as 6%), rendering it troublesome to ask allies to invest time in preparing them. Many funding schemes, moreover, do not allow collaborators to receive funding. The Dutch Research Agenda (NWA) scheme, for example, requires the participation of societal partners but does not finance their activities. This clearly frustrates collaborations involving marginalized grassroots organizations, and reinforces their position as providers of cheap raw data to privileged (Western) academics (Cusicanqui 2012). Such conditions, furthermore, make it hard to take decolonization of research beyond the level of metaphor (Tuck and Yang 2012).

Similar complexities may arise in the face of the metric-oriented audit culture, where the quality of a researcher is defined by publications and journal rankings. This creates a 'straitjacket' into which early-career scholars should fit in order to be hired, get tenured or obtain funding – that is, to continue in academia. The publication list of an engaged scholar, with typically more co-authored outputs in non-English and non-Q1 journals catering for non-Western and non-academic audiences, does not fit seamlessly into this straitjacket. During a recent grant application, for example, my application was not selected since my profile did not show the required scholarly excellence. According to the reviewers, particularly my publication list was considered "less academic" since "the choice to publish in rather specialized journals affects the scientific impact".

The neoliberal and neocolonial notions of what makes a 'good academic' that pervade these statements, encourage many non-tenured early-career scholars like me to be more 'productive' and 'time-efficient'. This often occurs to the detriment of affective, caring relationships, since they require engagement in 'reproductive' rather than 'productive' labor (Rasch et al. 2022). I have spent countless hours participating in assemblies, mediating internal conflicts, and organizing acts of resistance or solidarity when allies got in trouble – all to nurture relations of interpersonal reciprocity. Assuming these activities are not part of my university job as they do not produce measurable outputs, I undertake them at night or in weekends. Silly but true: even *then* I sometimes feel like I am wasting time (Costas Batlle and Carr, 2021), since these hours could be used more efficiently to write articles for Q1 journals and wrestle myself into the straightjacket.

Finally, the mobility, versatility and broad geographic scope that is often seen as an asset within the neoliberal university promotes 'helicopter research' and 'quick wins' over place-based and long-term engagements (Mason 2021). During a recent interview for a tenured position, I got the remark that there was "a lot of Ecuador" on my CV, followed by the question to what extent I considered this a limitation. In another interview, I was asked if I would be willing to change my focus "to Africa" in order to diversify the geographic coverage of my work – something I refused. Obviously, I did not get the jobs.

Concluding Remarks: The (Im)possibilities of Engaged Scholarship

That night in Tundayme, back in 2015, I probably did not realize that the evictions of the peasants of San Marcos formed the beginning of an ongoing journey towards an engagement in the power struggles at the Ecuadorian mining frontier. Yet, they were precisely that. In this essay I reflected on this journey and what it has taught me so far about engaged scholarship. Based on my experiences working with the *Colectivo de Geografía Crítica del Ecuador*, I outlined the type of relations I consider important for engaged scholarship: decolonial, collective, affective and long-term relations. And while this envisioning of engaged scholarship admittedly comes with a dose of utopianism, I still prefer this to guide my decisions – and not the push and pull factors provided by the neoliberal university.

This is not easy, though. Through a series of personal anecdotes, I showed how it is precisely this type of relations that are under increased pressure within the neoliberal university. Although these anecdotes may read as just another lament

of a millennial struggling with rejection in academia, I hope they provide for more than that. Not the least because my account echoes the experiences of others as it comes to the difficulties (if not impossibilities) of building this type of relationships within the neoliberal university (Mason 2021; Rasch et al. 2022; Bell and Lewis 2022). I therefore hope this reflection is also read as an incitement towards a new "collective embodiment" (after Lorena Cabnal) among academics, that provides us with the courage to resist the neoliberal university and reimagine one in which utopic visions may well become real possibilities.

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