



Blood of Martyrs, Seeds of Freedom: Necropolitical Security Regimes and Corporate Land Grabs along the Honduran Caribbean Coast

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“We must shake our conscience free of the rapacious capitalism, racism and patriarchy that will only assure our own self-destruction... The militarized, sieged, poisoned Mother Earth demands our action.”

—Berta Cáceres (2015)

Introduction

These words from martyred environmentalist Berta Cáceres were a call to action as she received the prestigious Goldman Environmental Prize for her work opposing the construction of a hydroelectric dam along the Gualcarque River in the traditional homelands of the Lenca people in Western Honduras. Her words reverberated across the globe as she foretold her political assassination, which occurred in her home a day before her 45th birthday in 2016. Berta’s calculated murder was one of many tragedies, a common occurrence among environmentalists in Honduras. Most recently, one of Berta’s protégés, Juan Lopez, was brutally assassinated for his work against an open-pit ore mine in the Bajo Aguán region along the Caribbean coast of Honduras. Targeted attacks against environmentalists intend to instill fear and to silence communities resisting highly lucrative and environmentally devastating extractive industries. But as a common slogan among the Honduran resistance movement reminds us: “¡la sangre de martires, semillas de libertad!/the blood of martyrs, seeds of freedom!”

Extractive industries comprise sectors of the geopolitical economy that profit from removing and exporting natural resources. The fossil fuel industry, mono-crop plantations, and open pit mining operations are just a few of the significant resource extractive industries that acquire “large volumes of raw material... profiting national or international business classes” (Dunlap and Brock 2022: 9). Dominant discourses and state policies promoting market-based economies allow extractive industries to flourish based on perspectives that historically render “nature as an exploitable commodity, and human lives as disembodied units” (Islam et al. 2024: 2). Extractive industries are



illustrative of the exploitive practices within global capitalism. They exhibit how the “conceptualization of a ‘dead nature’ only valued for its resources” (Islam et al. 2024: 6) sustains the market economy through the extraction of raw materials from natural resources in the Global South. Environmental degradation resulting from extractive industries, such as oil spills, is seen as collateral damage when securing profits for transnational corporations at the expense of local ecologies. In analyzing and seeking remedies against the capitalism-induced environmental disasters of climate change, extractivism remains “central to understanding ecological and climate catastrophe, to which the enforcement of extractive activities is integral” (Dunlap and Brock 2022: 9). To protect the profits of such environmentally exploitive industries, security regimes ensure environmentalists and concerned communities do not disrupt the everyday operations of these ecologically devastating projects.

Extractive industries uphold capitalism and colonialism as exemplified through land dispossession. As a result, marginalized communities in the Global South confront displacement, environmental degradation, assassination attempts, and social death under neo-colonial security regimes. The actors behind such exploitive resource extraction include the modern nation-state, which carries out “policies that sanction who lives or who dies, but states are never alone, as they are influenced by capital, elites, other states, and global institutions” (Sultana 2022: 5). Colonial legacies in the Global South manifest through political and financial domination by imperialist powers. Financial lending institutions like the World Bank and Inter-American Development Bank are significant actors in sustaining economic dependency among former colonies; they promote alternative energy sectors that sustain environmental and social exploitation. The industrial partnerships between governments, financial lenders, and transnational corporations continue to “wage war on ecosystems and natural environments: from increasing mineral extraction for computational and low-carbon technologies to drilling for oil” (Dunlap and Brock 2022: 3). International financial lending institutions further sustain economic dependency by promoting extractive industries as forms of development, thus perpetuating colonial divides and leaving formerly colonized nations polluted and in an inescapable state of debt.

The geopolitical economy sustains a legacy of colonial violence and exploitation through capitalist ventures, which represent “the consequence of colonization... [since] capitalism is reproduced through ongoing colonialism” (Islam et al. 2024: 6). Capitalism has been imposed on colonized lands through Western imperialist wars and sustained through economic dependency models that maintain colonial relationships. The legacy of colonialism is evident in the structural violence associated with capitalism felt “corporeally, communally, politically, economically, and ecologically” (Sultana 2022: 4) as extractive industries and accompanying security regimes assassinate



environmentalists, pollute the land, and subjugate populations to labor exploitation. Through this legacy of colonial violence, the lives of racialized people in the Global South and their beloved “ecosystems are rendered disposable and sacrificial, whereby structural forces, both historical and contemporary, fuel it” (Sultana 2022: 4). The contamination of the environment and the displacement of marginalized communities in the Global South are byproducts of exploitive industries safeguarded through capitalist development models imposed on economically-dependent and war-torn countries.

In sustaining colonial racial hierarchies, the patterns of environmental degradation stemming from capitalist exploitation reveal how the “racial logic of climate tragedies and cumulative impacts are ever-present” (Sultana 2022: 4) in the Global South. The physical and social devastation associated with extractive industries results in a form of ecocide, permanently altering and polluting the environment in the name of profit. Ecological destruction, or ecocide, persists through means that are “overt and covert, episodic and creeping whereby global capitalism articulates with development and economic growth ideologies to reproduce various forms of colonial racial harms” (Sultana 2022: 4). Ecocide is not just a strategy of conventional warfare. Instead, it results from the legacies of colonialism and the imposition of capitalist development to alter the land and to fuel the geopolitical economy.

The term ‘ecocide’ was first introduced as an analytical tool to address the “practice of scorched earth policies and environmental terrorism” (Broszimmer 2022: 75) as a tactic of war in racialized communities of the Global South. The use of the chemical herbicide Agent Orange during the Vietnam War and the burning of entire villages during the Central American wars of the 1980s are prime examples of ecocide resulting from warfare. The resulting devastation of the environment “indicates the horrifying scope and cumulative effects of the human-induced crisis” (Broszimmer 2022: 3). However, such practices of environmental degradation as a tool for domination have been commonly used against Indigenous communities over centuries. The attempted extinction of the buffalo in North America was an initial act of ecocide to alter the subsistence and cultural practices of Native communities. Such colonial practices of ecocide reveal how certain acts “intend to disrupt or destroy species development and an entire ecosystem” (Broszimmer 2022: 75). Ecocide represents a legacy of colonialism that has severely altered ecologies across the Global South through destructive practices associated with capitalist development projects. The destruction of biodiverse landscapes to create mono-crop plantations replicates forms of ecocide that destroy local ecologies for the advancement of capitalist development, which lucratively benefits economic elites.



The impacts of colonialism on the environment evidently result in altered ecologies in service of economic development projects associated with extractive industries. For example, open pit mines are constructed to supply the global demand for natural resources such as ore, copper, and lithium. Still, chemical runoff from the mines contaminates local headwaters and topsoil. Hyper-industrialization and the extraction of fossil fuels associated with legacies of colonialism heavily impact not only local ecologies but global climates. Geographer Farhana Sultana warns that this form of “climate coloniality” is intricately entwined with “racial capitalism, uneven consumption, and military domination” as market economies accompanied by security regimes ensure profiteering from the extraction of natural resources and the subjugation of communities in the Global South. Economic development projects, such as those including (but not limited to) extractive industries, represent ongoing forms of colonialism through the economic and ecological exploitation of the land and people. The environmental devastation associated with such projects constitutes “climate impacts experienced by variously racialized populations who are disproportionately made vulnerable and disposable” (Sultana 2022: 4) through legacies of colonialism. The targeted assassinations of environmentalists, along with land dispossessions of Indigenous and fieldworker communities, are aspects of “colonial-capitalist extractivism,” which utilizes “rapacious displacement and destruction, creation of sacrifice zones, and excessive exposures to harms from climate-induced disasters” (Sultana 2022: 4) among marginalized populations. Within the geopolitical economy, the “ecologically unequal exchange between the Global South and Global North, ongoing extractive capitalism, the imperial structures of global trade, and domination in setting policies and ideologies” (Sultana 2022: 4) equally compose a form of climate coloniality evident in the proliferation of extractive industries and necropolitical security regimes.

Necropower, Climate Coloniality, and Necropolitical Security Regimes

Necropower, or the “power of death,” as coined by Cameroonian historian Achille Mbembe (Mbembe and Meintjes 2003: 39), describes the violence of colonialism manifest today in which “death is the ultimate power a sovereign can exert on racial others... whose biophysical elimination would strengthen the life potential and security of the dominant class” (Islam et al. 2024: 6). The extermination of communities resisting colonial violence in the form of extractive industries in the Global South exemplifies the practice of necropolitics. When applying necropower, or the “capacity to dictate who is able to live and who must die” (Mbembe and Meintjes 2003: 11) in the context of climate change and legacies of colonialism, the concept of ‘climate necropolitics’ is formulated to better understand the power structures operating through extractive industries. Regarding the broader structural violence exerted over swaths of populations, necropower enacts violence against racialized others of the Global South in the name of



protecting the dominant way of life in the Global North by reproducing practices that “benefit a few while dispossessing larger numbers of historically-impooverished communities” (Sultana 2022: 4). As a tool to control populations and dictate who shall live and die, necropower renders racialized others as savages that might “endanger (or be perceived to endanger) the sovereign’s subjects or authority” (DeBoom 2021: 902). Furthermore, necropolitics accelerates the unequal subjugation of exploitive conditions along the spectrum of “death-in-life” (Mbembe and Meintjes 2003: 21) as living ecosystems and populations are subjected to perpetual exploitation, ecological devastation, social death, and extermination.

Fellow geographer Meredith DeBoom builds upon Sultana’s analysis and applies Mbembe’s concept of necropolitics to climate coloniality. DeBoom links climate coloniality with necropolitics by describing the “violent division of planetary life that treats both the conditions of life and life itself as objects from which to extract ever more for ever fewer” (DeBoom 2022: 2). By bringing such concepts together to form a critical framework to analyze the impacts of climate change, the necropolitics of climate coloniality is understood as enabling ongoing structural violence using “processes, practices, discourses, and logics through which climate violence (death, literal and symbolic) is rendered legitimate in the name of an exclusive life” (DeBoom 2022: 2). As an extension of coloniality, climate necropolitics equally “relies on racial domination and hierarchical power relations established during active colonialism and ongoing in post-colonial spacetimes” (Sultana 2022: 4). Furthermore, climate necropolitics is evident in the distinctly varied treatment of human and non-human life forms. Whether through the exploitation of plant and marine life, or the forced displacement of marginalized communities of color in the Global South, such subjugation is “necessary to ensure the ‘life’ of the economy” (DeBoom 2022: 2) under climate necropolitics.

Another insidious aspect of climate necropolitics and its devious logic of extermination is that it “facilitates the extraction of climate solutions from those who hold the least responsibility for climate change and yet bear its highest costs” (DeBoom 2022: 2). Extractive industries are rendered legitimate as alternative sustainable solutions to climate change, yet the populations of the Global South “most affected by climate change are also among the most affected by intensified demands for the raw materials of ‘green’ energy” (DeBoom 2021: 901). Such extractive practices include the “mining of rare earth elements for solar panels and electric vehicles to the enclosure of land for biofuel plantations” (DeBoom 2021: 902). The legacies of colonialism coupled with climate necropolitics reveal the ecological violence perpetuated across territories and generations. The alternative ‘sustainable’ industries proposed as providing climate solutions continue the exploitative practice of resource extraction within racialized communities of the Global South through “international climate negotiations and targets



that control the trajectories of development in historically impoverished countries of the post-colonial world” (Sultana 2022: 5). Despite the discourses around clean energy, alternative sources from fossil fuel industries still maintain the apparatus of climate coloniality coupled with necropolitical security regimes.

The social actors, governmental mechanisms, and international power relations, along with modern technologies causing environmental devastation include “armed and policing forces [to] generate multiple forms of ecological harm, culminating in climate change, ecological degradation, and mass extinction” (Dunlap and Brock 2022: 4). Colonial tools of repression, such as police and military forces, continue to repress and discipline populations into submission. However, security regimes include a wide array of actors beyond the military and police, such as private contractors who function as mercenaries “tasked with the job of securing forms of ‘insecurity’ that threaten the reproduction of industrial and financial capitalisms across geographic space” (Dunlap and Brock 2022: 5). As governments sell off natural resources to the highest bidders and lending institutions finance alternative energy industries, security forces ensure the execution of such resource-extractive projects.

Security regimes protect the advancements of ecologically destructive projects to secure profits for transnational corporations and domestic oligarchies. Through brute force, policing and militarization attempt to silence populations by repressing dissent and by targeting environmentalists who defend nature. Harassment, intimidation, surveillance, imprisonment, and assassinations are acts carried out by such security regimes, resulting in further criminalization and persecution of environmentalists. Security forces that ensure exploitive industries remain profitable function as “knights of racial capitalism and ecological degradation, the arbiters of private property, and the guardians of extraction” (Dunlap and Brock 2022: 5). Repression by security regimes “facilitate[s] and maintain[s] ‘death conditions’” (2022: 6) that allow for the continual exploitation of the subjugated lands and peoples. Populations resisting racial capitalism and building worlds outside imperial exploitation, such as environmentalists in the case of Honduras, are made to suffer.

Environmental Violence and Resistance in Honduras

Honduras has consistently held the highest levels of poverty, inequality, and murder rates in the Western Hemisphere. In 2019, roughly half the Honduran population lived on less than \$6.85 (USD) daily, nearly half the hemispheric averages (World Bank 2019). Following the 2009 military coup, Honduras held the highest murder rate globally, peaking at 90.4 per 100,000 people in 2012 (Berg & Carranza 2015), and is known as one of the most dangerous places for environmentalists. According to a report by Global



Witness, a reputed international environmental organization, 123 land and environmental activists have been murdered in Honduras since the 2009 coup (Kyte 2017: 5), while countless others have been threatened, attacked, or imprisoned. This article will put into context the current wave of violence against environmentalists in a specific region along the Caribbean Coast of Honduras where a resistance movement continues to challenge extractive industries, the latter of which are best understood as a “tangled web of capitalist exploitation that emerges from and continues to be tethered to histories of racial conquest and colonial plunder” (Loperena 2023: 13). The state-sponsored terrorism carried out in this region functions to systematically silence dissent through tactics of intimidation, forced evictions, persecution, and political assassinations. Yet, populations in this region continue to struggle to preserve the land and all forms of life.

The principal extractive industries exemplifying the necropolitics of the region’s plantation economies are African palm oil, open-pit mining, and tourism. Over the centuries, transnational corporations have systematically extracted resources from colonized regions to secure colossal profits at the expense of the local environment and populations. As extensions of the banana republic, these industries continue the violent legacy of colonization through their exploitive nature. With its pristine beaches and lush valleys, visions for development along the Northern Coast of Honduras have been conceived through a “sketch of the north coast’s evolution from an underdeveloped rainforest conceptualized as the ‘tropics’ in the U.S. frontier narrative to a banana empire” (Portillo Villeda 2021: 33). In *The Ends of Paradise: Race, Extraction, and the Struggle for Black Life in Honduras*, Christopher Loperena describes extractivism in Honduras as a “government-sanctioned effort, nearly always aided by multinational capital, to take whatever resources it can both from a place and its people” (Loperena 2023: 3).

The Tela Bay and Bajo Aguán regions, located on opposite sides of the Caribbean coastline, have been sites of land defense struggles resisting extractive industries. Undercutting the coastline along rugged mountain ranges is the Bajo Aguán valley stretching along the lower banks of the Aguán River, which runs from the remote Moskitia region to the country’s interior. To the West, Tela Bay is an extension of the Sula Valley, which includes the industrial hub of San Pedro Sula and the export town of Puerto Cortes. With this geographical outlay, the social history of the Northern Coast has been a “site and symbol of struggle for thousands of workers” (Portillo Villeda 2021: 33). In Tela Bay, the construction of a luxury hotel complex in the early 2000s displaced Afro-Indigenous Garifuna communities of Tornabé and Barra Vieja from the land utterly integral to their livelihoods. In the Bajo Aguán region, an ore mine has been a site of conflict as the Guapinol community continuously defends local water sources against



contamination. The company removing the raw materials, Inversiones Los Pinares, has direct familial ties with the Dinant Corporation, which is one of the region's biggest palm oil producers and which commands a private army of security guards functioning as an armed paramilitary group. These extractive industries have caused irreparable damage to the local ecosystem and exacerbated social inequality through territorial dispossession of Black, Indigenous, and farmworker communities. Such extractive industries and 'economic development' projects entail the "enclosure via the privatization of communally held lands, [and] the environmentally destructive commodification of nature" (Loperena 2023: 26).

During the Banana Republic period of the early 1900s, lands were converted into plantations to develop an export economy. The frontier of economic development for corporate gain became an extension of colonialism leading to further dispossession of racialized communities. During the 1980s, guerilla movements grew in neighboring Nicaragua, El Salvador, and Guatemala as the U.S. maintained the hemisphere's most extensive military base in Honduras to train counterinsurgency forces. With the repression of military and paramilitary forces, "elite investors, with support from the state and multilateral development banks, mobilize[d] the ideology of national progress to further disenfranchise rural communities of color and to legitimate acts of violence against land and environmental activists" (Loperena 2017: 801).

The defense of natural resources as common goods rather than resources to be extracted for economic gain has always been a contention in geopolitical warfare. The northern coast of Honduras has been a site of exploitation and resistance since colonization through countless Indigenous rebellions such as those led by Tolupeán cacique Cicumba against Cristóbal del Olid (a conquistador of the Hernán Cortés order) in the sixteenth century. The resistance struggle has persisted across generations. Honduras experienced one of the region's most significant labor strikes in 1954, extending across the banana-growing coastline.

Honduras has often been referred to as a Banana Republic due to the intertwined relationship between corporate and state interests as the "state—and the banana companies—sought to dominate the territory for their national agenda, to the exclusion of Indigenous interests" (Portillo Villeda 2021: 34). Through government land concessions, the banana companies acquired vast tracks of land to produce banana crops in exchange for the construction of a railroad that would connect the northern coast with the capital city, Tegucigalpa, in the interior of the country. The railways were kept to the north shore for the banana companies' benefit, as they developed a plantation, export-oriented economy. The United and Standard Fruit Companies are long-standing banana companies that maintain a chokehold over Honduras. The United



Fruit Company controlled the Tela Railroad Company, while the Standard Fruit Company controlled the railroads established as the Truxillo Railroad Company, which ran through the Bajo Aguán region. The United Fruit Brand was later renamed Chiquita Banana, and the Standard Fruit Company now exports under the Dole brand.

Agricultural Reform and the Undoing of Environmental Protections Under Necropolitical Security Regimes

Treating Central America as a colony, these corporations—with their military safeguards—worked to ensure the future of their long-term extractive investments. In 1925, the United Fruit Co. founded a scientific research center in Tela with the initial purpose to “study the diseases of the banana plants and to analyze feasible methods by which one could manage and enhance other tropical products with immense potential value” (Bittner 2006). The valley of Lancetilla became the site for this research because of the varying types of terrain and microclimate diversity. Lancetilla Research Center and Botanical Garden compiled “over a thousand varieties of plants with economic importance, which were then studied, selected, propagated, improved and distributed” (Bittner 2006). In response to the plague of Fusarium Wilt (Panama disease), the United Fruit Company relied on scientists to develop other lucrative cash crops and the research became “a source for the seed of the African oil palm” (Bittner 2006).

In her book *Roots of Resistance: A Story of Gender, Race, and Labor on the North Coast of Honduras*, Historian Suyapa Portillo provides an in-depth analysis of the 1954 Banana Strike as a “series of worker actions... against the Tela Railroad Company that evolved into a 69-day strike” (Portillo Villeda 2021: 185). These actions culminating in a general strike would serve as an example of inspiring social movements in Honduras for generations to come. Colonial dominance and the resulting resistance led to “perilous work in the fincas, [and] traditional responses to injustice... to challenge labor exploitation and foreign and elite economic domination” (Portillo Villeda 2021: 186, 228). Following the 1954 Banana Strike, the companies introduced agricultural machinery that displaced the fieldworkers. Subsequent hurricanes and plagues worsened production on the plantations, which led to their abandonment. Those left without work returned to the fields and began to struggle to re-acquire the land that the companies left idle. Following land disputes, the first campesino organization, the National Fieldworker Federation (FENACH), was established in August 1962 (Castro Rubio 1994: 31). Frustrated with the false promises of agrarian reforms, FENACH resorted to an armed struggle in the mountains.

Siphoning the collective fervor of vibrant social movements, agrarian reforms gave minor resources to select groups to help quell further unrest. The Alliance for Progress



was a U.S. economic development project in the region designed to combat Cuban influence following the 1959 revolution that inspired guerrilla insurgency movements across the continent. Social programs seemingly addressed basic needs, but did not challenge the capitalist modes of production and hegemonic geopolitical economy. U.S. policy during the Cold War sought to advance a “set of development goals (economic growth, decreasing poverty, macroeconomic stability), as well as institutional transformations (democratic governments, agrarian reforms) that together would allegedly bring socio-political stability and undercut the communist threat” (Leon Araya 2019: 135).

Mission 105 was a working group sponsored by the Organization of American States (OAS) to suggest recommendations for land use in Honduras (Castro Rubio 1994: 32). Research began in the 1960s, with policies later implemented as the Bajo Aguán Project (BAP) in the 1970s. As an internal colonization program utilized to expand extractive industries in fertile “undeveloped” regions, BAP incentivized small farmers from across the country to relocate to the Aguán with the prospect of acquiring land. However, the project did not have the best interests of the fieldworkers in mind, as it was sponsored with financial support from the Inter-American Development Bank (Castro Rubio 1994: 7).

Agrarian reforms promoted through the Alliance for Progress and the BAP had the objective to “diversify the existing agrarian structure and attend to the polarization between latifundistas and mini-latifundistas,” or large estate owners and small plantation owners (Macias 2001: 52). The reforms did not alter the economic structure but instead extended the exploitation of farmworkers by forcing them to solely produce export-oriented crops. The first agrarian reform law, enacted in 1962, initially sought to “expropriate and nationalize the lands... not exploited to capacity” (López y Vijil Saybe 2023). The agrarian reform included the promotion of a new fieldworker organization with support of U.S. labor unions, which promoted U.S. economic policies and development projects. The National Association of Fieldworkers of Honduras established itself as part of the Alliance for Progress strategy to combat the Cuban revolution’s influence in the region (Castro Rubio 1994: 31) and to oppose more radical guerilla movements.

Through reforms promoted by the Alliance for Progress and the OAS, the Bajo Aguán region became a site for an internal colonization project that “brought landless and land-poor peasant households from different parts of the country to create a set of cooperatives oriented mainly towards the production of palm oil” (Leon Araya 2019: 134). Under BAP, the cooperatives were “born in debt, as they were expected to pay for the land that had been ‘given’ to them” (Leon Araya 2019: 317). In the 1970s, policies



were passed “to expand the internal market, exercise greater control over peasant pressure for land, and nationalize idle lands” (López y Vijil Saybe 2023). Select cooperatives created under the reform were assigned an “average of 400 hectares, divided into land for permanent crops (palm and citrus) and annual crops (basic grains)” (Castro Rubio 1994: 57).

BAP and the agrarian reform laws promoted African palm as the main production crop (Castro Rubio 1994: 42). In the Aguán valley, the cultivation of African palm was promoted due to the “climate, luminosity, soil, and temperature conditions” (Castro Rubio 1994: 81). The intent to control the use of land for African palm as a new durable cash crop was the underlying motive throughout this period. The National Agrarian Institute (INA), a government entity created through the agrarian reform laws, introduced palm to the fieldworker cooperatives. Lands initially used for banana production were converted for the cultivation of African palm due to “global industrial demand and the search for alternative combustibles” (Villafuerte Solís 2018: 324).

When the 1974 natural disaster of Hurricane Fifi devastated crops across the region, farmworker cooperatives were left with outstanding debts and no way to pay them. Exploiting the fieldworkers’ dire situation, the INA continued “push[ing] forward the idea that planting oil palms was the only viable option for the cooperatives to be able to keep up with their payments” (Leon Araya 2019: 137). After falling highly indebted to financial lending institutions, the cooperatives were “invited” to produce palm as the only way to generate sufficient funds to pay for the lands (Leon Araya 2017: 67). Since African palm continues to be part of the “quintessential ‘flex crops,’ with end uses that include edible oil, biofuel, and cosmetic production,” the cash crop is also marketed as a “form of tradable carbon emission reduction credits under the Kyoto Protocol’s Clean Development Mechanism” (Edelman and Leon 2013: 1707).

The militarization of the country coupled with North American presence coincided with much of the BAP (Castro Rubio 1994: 18), culminating in the counterinsurgency wars and the National Security Doctrine of the 1980s. With the Sandinista victory in Nicaragua in 1979 and the ensuing Contra War, along with counter-insurgency campaigns in El Salvador and Guatemala, Central America served as a site of proxy wars between the U.S. and U.S.S.R. As a strategic geopolitical locale between the superpowers, Honduras became a focal point for counterinsurgency campaigns as it “increasingly subscribed to the logic of Washington’s ‘National Security Doctrine,’ which held that the West was locked in an inexorable struggle with domestic and international ‘subversion’” (Edelman and Leon 2013: 1709).



Honduras thus played a central role in the Central American proxy wars through an economic-military alliance with the United States. In training counter-insurgency forces, the U.S. pushed the National Security Doctrine to “debilitate the internal enemy incarnated by the progressive and opposition movements, such as fieldworkers and unionists” (Prunier 2021: 209). One component of the National Security Doctrine was the repressive military regimes’ “contribution in setting the stage for politics of privatization and [market] liberalization” (Prunier 2021: 209). Militarization gave way to the neoliberal era of market expansions and free trade agreements as Peace Accords were signed in neighboring countries.

During the early 1990s, a Modernization and Development law was passed in the agricultural sector, which “complicated the inconclusive processes of the agrarian reform” (López y Vijil Saybe 2013). This law was promoted by the private sector with support from international financial agencies within the “framework of structural adjustment measures in Honduras, [which] allowed the sale and rental of land from agrarian reform cooperatives to individuals and private companies” (López y Vijil Saybe 2013). Essentially, small farmworker companies were formed to plant African palm fields; once they were in production, the Modernization and Development Law allowed for corporate land grabs as “cooperative lands were put on the market and concentrated in the hands of a few landlords” (Villafuerte Solís 2018: 324).

The Modernization Law promoted land privatization and the usurping of cooperative-owned lands as a legal instrument that allowed the “private titling and sales of agrarian reform lands” (Edelman and Leon 2013: 1706). Agrobusinesses prospered at the expense of the environment and laborers as “shifts in land reform hastened neoliberal systems of land management by eradicating informal land tenure arrangements and hardening an individual property rights regime” (Loperena 2017: 803). Following the Modernization Law, the “transfer of agrarian reform lands to a handful of Honduran landowners and transnational companies began to spread quickly” (Leon Araya 2019: 138) as fieldworker cooperatives were inescapably indebted and forced to sell their lands through economic coercion and intimidation.

One of the large landowners benefiting from the coerced cooperatives was Miguel Facussé. Described as an “often ruthless and enormously successful entrepreneur,” Facussé was an old-school tycoon and one of the wealthiest men in Honduras. With a nephew as president, Miguel Facussé had accumulated immense wealth and power over state institutions since the 1990s. Through his food-processing company, Dinant Corp., Facussé was able to acquire unimaginable wealth through corporate land grabs following the passage of the Modernization Law. Land grabs grew exponentially, specifically with Dinant Corporation in the Bajo Aguán region, where the company made



“millions [of dollars] manufacturing and marketing snack products, detergents and, most recently, biofuels such as African palm oil” (Wilkinson 2015).

To protect his wealth, Facussé (via Dinant) employed a private army of armed security guards who often conducted joint operations with the military and police. The coalition of state and corporate forces function as security regimes as the Honduran elites control the military. Security regimes are formed in alliance with state and non-state actors and have most recently been involved with drug traffickers. A report obtained by Wikileaks revealed through U.S. diplomatic cables that “small planes transporting cocaine for Mexican and Colombian drug traffickers were landing on [Facussé’s] farmland” (Wilkinson 2015). Facussé had been able to operate with complete immunity as his private security guards were “repeatedly accused by human rights groups of responsibility in brutal land grabs and violent clashes” (Wilkinson 2015) with dissident fieldworkers. Over a hundred fieldworkers were killed in the “vast Lower Aguán Valley... much of it controlled by Facussé and Dinant” (Wilkinson 2015); the implication of Facussé cost him “numerous World Bank loans and other international financing that he said had helped build his business empire” (Wilkinson 2015).

Environmental Martyrs

The assassination of environmentalists by security regimes is integral to sustaining the geo-political economy rooted in death and exploitation. Under the guise of economic development, extractive industries propagate at the cost of the environment and local populations. Those who speak out against such capitalist intrusions are systematically assassinated as security regimes target threats to the production of profits.

Carlos Escaleras was an environmentalist killed for his work challenging the traditional political structure in the Bajo Aguán region. Escaleras was an electrical technician and a popular union organizer who evolved into a dedicated environmentalist and critic of political corruption. Carlos, a leader of La Coordinadora de Organizaciones Populares del Aguán/Coordinator of Popular Organizations (COPA), mobilized communities against impunity, corruption, and extractive industries. He fought against the installation of a palm oil processing plant near the Guapinol River, which led to the revocation of a multi-million dollar World Bank loan to Empresa Cressida, the corporation belonging to Miguel Facussé (Provost 2014). While preparing to run for office as Mayor of Tocoa, Carlos Escaleras was assassinated in cold blood on October 18, 1997, at his place of business in the center of town (CEJIL 2018).



Carlos Escaleras's murder reflects the workings of a consortium of state actors aligned with private corporate interests eliminating any threats to profit. Carlos spoke out against corporate militarism by challenging the abuses of the military commander of a local infantry battalion who supported corporate land grabs and impeded access to water for communities in the region. Escaleras persisted in further halting the establishment of a military base near the edge of the river (CIDH 2014: 32). Weeks before his death, Carlos Escaleras received threats from Coronel Aldo Augusto Aldana, who was the commander of the 15th Infantry Battalion. According to a report by the Inter-American Court on Human Rights, elites were "angry with Escaleras because he disrupted a business deal of local politicians, Coronel Aldana, and Miguel Facussé" (CIDH 2014: 20). One of the convicted assassins later confessed that among the intellectual authors of the crime was none other than Facussé (Palacios 2009).

Escaleras's murder came just two years after the assassination of Jeanette Kawas Fernandez, who was an environmentalist working to protect endangered fauna along Tela Bay. Her advocacy for environmental protections impeded the business interests of extractive and tourist industries in the area. Fernandez was assassinated in her home on the night of February 6, 1995, due to her "opposition to the exploitation of the Punta Sal Peninsula forestlands and illegal logging in a National Park area" (Tanner 2011: 311). Kawas was a founder and president of the Foundation for the Protection of Lancetilla, Punta Sal, Punta Izopo, and Texiguat, an organization created in order "to improve the quality of life of the people who live within the watersheds of the Bahía de Tela" (CIDH 2009: 1645). Kawas sought to safeguard access to a healthy environment by improving the quality of life of the Tela Bay area's watersheds on the Caribbean coast. Kawas protested against industries threatening "the contamination of the lakes and the depredation of the forests of the region" (CIDH 2009: 2) and became an obstacle to business projects, notably a beachfront tourist project along the Tela beach. Kawas Fernandez was the first environmentalist assassinated in Honduras; "after her murder, and owing to the impunity that characterized it, a series of murders of other defenders of the environment in Honduras occurred." (CIDH 2009: 5)

Jeanette Kawas protected the environment by preserving the diversity of flora and fauna along coastal lagoons, beaches, and forests. She organized a collective effort to defend the environment from further degradation by "economic development" projects designed to exploit nature. Jeanette protested the government's granting of property titles to farmers and businessmen as "attempts by private individuals and entities to illegally appropriate" (CIDH 2009: 2) land in the Punta Sal nature reserve. A couple of days after one of her planned protests, on February 6, 1995, at approximately 7:30p.m., Blanca Jeanette Kawas-Fernández was murdered inside her home by two assailants (CIDH 2009: 2).



The following investigation into her death would reveal an intricate web of corporate and state security regimes committing crimes against the environment and anyone who impedes their profits. The Kawas case reached the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, which affirmed that “the material contained in the record effectively shows solid indications to conclude that the state has direct responsibility in the deprivation of the life of the alleged victim” (CIDH 2009: 2). In attempts to cover up the assassination, “[s]tate authorities did not adopt with due diligence all the necessary measures to conduct an investigation that would achieve a concrete outcome” (CIDH 2009: 2).

In late 2003, a report was published by the Public Prosecutor’s Office, which pointed out that “an Army officer in active service was allegedly involved in planning the murder” (Hassan 2008: 1648). The report contends that Colonel Mario Amaya was the “chief suspect in ordering the killing of Ms. Kawas” (Hassan 2014: 1648). A few days before Kawas’s murder, Amaya was seen meeting with Police Sergeant Ismael Perdomo, the acting regional authority who would oversee the planned crime scene, and hired assassin Mr. Mario Pineda, who was said to be a “former member of a death squad known as ‘Mano Blanco’ and supposed protégé of Colonel Amaya” (CIDH 2009: 31). The Prosecutor’s report stated that Perdomo was “suspected of having a hand in planning the murder and alleged to have taken measures to cover up the facts and obstruct the investigation...right from the very day of the murder” (Hassan 2014: 1648). The first irregularity that prompted investigators to suspect Perdomo was his insistence that police patrols were covering a robbery attempt on one of the banks in the city of Tela. However, his story was “repudiated by the representatives of the Tela banks, who told the investigating officers that on the day the events in this case occurred, no robbery attempt had been made on any bank branch office” (Hassan 2014: 1648). As the investigation identified a couple of witnesses, Sergeant Perdomo coerced them not to testify and to instead “implicate two people who had nothing to do with the case” (CIDH 2009: 19). Inconsistencies in the witness testimony revealed the irregularities of the investigation, which “took no action to arrest the possible material authors of the murder and... on a number of occasions, it set out to sidetrack or stall the investigation” (CIDH 2009: 30). As a result, the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights concluded that “Perdomo was involved because he was obstructing justice; it is his association with Mario Amaya, then an Army colonel in active service, that lends added credence to the theory that Mario Amaya may also have been involved in the crime” (CIDH 2009: 30).

Kawas’s assassination unveiled the institutionalized power structure of entangled state and corporate interests that exalts environmental exploitation for financial gains.



Furthermore, the tainted ‘investigation’ and the resulting lack of justice reflects a broader culture of impunity, as the Kawas case “generated a context of violence against environmentalists” (CIDH 2009: 5). Following the 2009 Inter-American Commission on Human Rights decision, the government of Honduras accepted culpability for impeding access to justice for the Kawas family due to the corrupt investigation. The murder remains unsolved, with no culprits, although the acts of economically aligned security regimes in the region reveal corporate interests. The Punta Sal nature reserve has since been renamed the Jeannette Kawas National Park in honor of the environmentalist. However, corporate interests and governmental corruption led to the park boundaries being redrawn to accommodate a luxury hotel resort along the protected coastline. Following the calculated murder of Kawas, a land struggle ensued within the contested protected lands of Tela Bay, led by local Afro-Indigenous Garifuna populations.

The Los Micos Beach and Golf Resort was a controversial mega tourism project that defied the communal land holdings of the Garifuna people and the environmental protections of the National Park. The project was a public-private partnership initiative utilizing state funds to benefit private enterprise. The tourism company Desarrollo Turístico Bahía de Tela was “backed by Honduran elites and repeatedly attempted to evict the Barra Vieja community illegally” (Kyte 2017: 9). The resort was initiated in 2003 with an “investment of US\$ 4 billion for the construction of a tourist mega-complex extending 500 hectares along 3 km of coastline the project” (Kyte 2017: 9). This development project, inaugurated in 2014 as the Indura Resort, led to the destruction of wetlands within the Punta Sal National Park. What was once a designated protected area and community preserve has since been “used to market Tela Bay as an ecotourism destination” (Loperena 2023:10). The Indura hotel is now part of Hilton’s luxury “Curio collection” and has deprived Garifuna communities of access to their ancestral burial grounds and agricultural lands.

A report conducted by international human rights organization Global Witness found that “state institutions such as the judiciary, military or police force... support the interests of companies and the people who have stakes in them” (Kyte 2017: 5). The corporate interests behind the Tela Bay project included former government officials with a financial stake in the company. Political influence allowed the project to defy the boundaries of the protected ecological region. Former President Ricardo Maduro, a strong proponent of heavy-handed (*mano dura*) policing policies, was financially invested in the Indura beach resort as was the former President of the National Tourism Chamber. One of Honduras’s wealthiest banking families, the Atala family, was also an investor in the project as they continued to fund extractive industries and conduct targeted assassinations (most notably that of Berta Caceres for her work against the Atala energy company, which was behind the infamous Agua Zarca hydroelectric dam



project on the Gualcarque River in the Indigenous Lenca territory). Years after the hotel's inauguration, reports revealed that the company had laundered corrupt funds as part of Honduras's biggest-ever corruption scandal involving the Social Security Institute (Kyte 2017: 9). The hotel's business name appears in a Special Prosecutor's Office report against organized crime, leaked to Global Witness as having received funds from the Social Security Institute. In this massive corruption scandal, top officials from the Social Security Institute were found guilty of stealing US\$350 million through a network of phantom companies, which left ailing patients without access to life-saving medicines (Kyte 2017: 25).

The eco-resort tourism project, erected along pristine beaches and impeding protected environmental zones, is categorized as a form of extraction since it is an "export-orientated industry... primarily marketed to and consumed by foreigners and national elites" (Loperena 2023: 70). The overall tourism industry in Honduras along the Tela Bay and northern coast functions as a "territorial project... contingent on settler colonial expansion into rural communities of color, the alienation of land, and racialized modes of extraction" (Loperena 2023: 12). The particular site of the Indura Beach Resort is on contested land; the Garifuna communities that lay claim to that land are viewed as "potential threats to the overarching extractivist development agenda" (Loperena 2023: 67) as they seek to live in harmony with the land and are not oriented towards extracting profits from nature.

The political assassinations of Carlos Escaleras and Jeanette Kawas—as well as the overall persecution of Garifuna communities—are directly linked to their defense of the environment. The cases in the Inter-American Court on Human Rights have verified the extent of state and corporate conspiracy in the assassination attempts against environmentalists. In honor of these martyrs, land-based social movements have continued their legacy along the northern coast of Honduras. Communities have historically resisted exploitative industries from the Sula Valley to the Bajo Aguán. Violence in Escaleras's Bajo Aguán region spiked in the years following the 2009 military coup, warranting further analysis of the patterns of state-sponsored violence against land-based social movements.

Fieldworker Movements in the Bajo Aguán

During the 1990s, after decades of proposed, failed, and sabotaged agrarian reform laws, organized fieldworker families took it upon themselves to construct their collective future on the shared lands. In recovering from the devastation following Hurricane Mitch in 1998, landless fieldworkers organized themselves to reclaim contested lands under the original agrarian reform laws implemented before the 1992 Modernization



Law. Following the legacy of agrarian reforms, the farmworker enterprises were joined by the three largest national peasant federations forming the Fieldworker Movement of the Aguán (Movimiento Campesino del Aguán, MCA). Some 700 families were organized to reclaim the land used for the Regional Center for Military Training (CREM) (Edelman and Leon 2013: 1711).

The CREM was a site within the municipality of Trujillo, encompassing the surrounding area of the Laguna Guaimorato, where U.S. military officials trained counterinsurgency forces from neighboring countries; soldiers from El Salvador, Guatemala, and Nicaraguan “Contra” troops were trained alongside Hondurans. Military death squads were trained there to disappear and assassinate social leaders and to diminish popular movements. After the Iran/Contra scandal forced the U.S. Congress to heavily curtail military spending to Central America, the CREM was abandoned and the “more than 5000 hectares were returned to the Honduran state for agrarian reform purposes. Before the land could be distributed, however, the municipality of Trujillo illegally sold it to local ranchers and politicians” (Edelman and Leon 2013: 1711).

In June of 1999, the MCA approached the National Agrarian Institute to confirm that the contested lands of the CREM would fall “under the provisions of the agrarian reform laws. INA determined that it did indeed meet the requirements and advocated that it be turned over to the campesinos” (Moreno 2014). Despite delays in the legal transfer of the land titles due to government corruption, “40 fieldworker cooperatives comprised of anywhere from 10 to 35 families coming from 4 provinces of Honduras were set up, each receiving legal recognition from INA” (Moreno 2014). With the pressure mounting from social movements, the government succumbed to granting land titles to the farmers in 2000. On May 14, 2000, the organized fieldworker movement comprised hundreds of families who “with their worldly possessions in tow pulled up to the barbed wire fences surrounding the CREM” (Moreno 2014) and collectively recuperated the land. From this day on, the land where the fieldworkers organized their community became known as the Guadalupe Carney community.

The site of the land recuperation was named Guadalupe Carney in honor of a Jesuit priest from Detroit, Michigan, James Carney, who was stationed in Honduras and cultivated a personal connection with the people. Carney became a naturalized Honduran citizen, and as a practitioner of liberation theology, he accompanied social justice movements. Father Guadalupe Carney, S.J. assisted farmers in organizing cooperatives “when the repressive military government was trying to crush the emergence of a rural insurgency” (Moreno 2014). Labeled a communist, Carney became increasingly radicalized by seeing how the ruling elites exploited the population. Expelled from Honduras due to his political-religious beliefs, Carney reentered the



country through Nicaragua, accompanying a guerilla combat unit that was executed by the country's military forces in 1983 (Moreno 2014). The Guadalupe Carney community has continued the legacy of resistance despite living under constant threat.

Since the CREM was no longer funded as a Cold War-era training site, military officials remained on the land and claimed it for themselves following the CREM's closure in the mid-1980s. The military officials squatting on the CREM land were reluctant to give up their controversial land holdings. One of the squatters, "and the fiercest aggressor against the campesinos, [was] Henry Osorto, an ex-military officer stationed at the CREM during the Iran/Contra days" (Moreno 2014). Henry Osorto, a high-ranking police officer, received military training from the U.S. Army at the CREM under the National Security Doctrine and became a landowning strongman. Based on the accounts of neighbors within the vicinity, the Osorto ranch had a "heavy stash of arms... [as] Henry shared with his family an apparent love for automatic weapons and grenades" (Moreno 2014). As the gun-toting Osorto squatted on the contested public lands with his family, he recruited private security forces to intimidate local fieldworkers who were seeking to advance their cooperative work models. Although INA officially sanctioned the public land to be distributed to the campesinos through the agrarian reform laws, the ranchers continued to use intimidation tactics and bribed government officials. Along with his siblings and father, Henry Osorto claimed "over 200 acres of land... within the confines of what used to be the CREM... [was] sold by the municipality of Trujillo, which had no right to sell it" (Moreno 2014).

As the MCA recuperated the lands of the CREM, another fieldworker movement arose with much prominence, the Unified Fieldworker Movement of the Aguán/Movimiento Unificado Campesino del Aguán (MUCA). The organized farmworker movement consisted of the original cooperative families whose lands were stolen due to the corporate land grabs permitted under the Modernization Law. MUCA held its first public protest in 2006 to declare justified land recuperations. What is called 'The Takeover by 5,000 Machetes' (*Toma de los Cinco Mil Machetes*) was a self-organized four-day work stoppage that halted business as usual in the region. By taking over the main bridge into the city of Tocoa, the fieldworkers stopped traffic and disrupted the transportation of exported goods. The organized fieldworkers argued that the Modernization Law allowed for a "process of buying and selling the land of the agrarian reform" (Moreno 2014) as cooperatives were coerced into giving up their lands. The legal basis for land recuperations gave "rise to the survivors of the former beneficiaries of the agrarian reform [thus initiating] the recovery of land formerly belonging to cooperatives and peasant associative companies" (Moreno 2014). Public pressure from MUCA to address the stalled land reforms led to an accord with the government.



Decree 18-2008 was an attempt to address the ongoing land conflict in the Bajo Aguán and became one of the many reasons behind the 2009 military coup. Under President Manuel Zelaya, Honduras joined ALBA (Bolivarian Alliance for the Peoples of Our America), a counterhegemonic regional institutional body opposing U.S. imperialism. The socio-economic policies of ALBA provided more equitable trade agreements in opposition to U.S. free trade impositions. In joining the regional alliance, Honduras benefited from Petrocaribe gas subsidies to support widespread social programs. Zelaya also raised the national minimum, supported communal land claims, and proposed converting the U.S. military base into a civilian airport, which threatened the economic and geopolitical interests of the United States and transnational corporations.

A few months before the passage of Decree 18-2008, Congress approved a previous decree expropriating CREM lands occupied by the cattle ranchers, since the Municipality of Trujillo had illegally sold the public lands. Organized fieldworkers recovered part of the land granted to them through this decree, but the Osorto family contested the policy. Osorto and his goons terrorized fieldworkers trying to recuperate land granted by the decree. In refusing to recognize the policy, Osorto's guards killed a member of the campesino cooperative and escalated the ongoing land dispute.

On August 3, 2008, one of the most vicious attacks came from the Osorto family's Rancho Henry, where the Osortos hired guards who acted as paramilitaries, illegally evicting campesinos by force and firing indiscriminately into houses (Moreno 2014). Osorto's guards assassinated a campesino and a confrontation ensued with the local community. Hundreds of residents of the Guadalupe Carney community went to retrieve the body of the campesino on the property of the Osortos armed with shovels and machetes. The heavily armed guards opened fire on the campesinos, who refused to be intimidated. A fire engulfed the Osorto home as the shooting sparked flames from the gunpowder and munitions maintained by Osorto in a storage room. As a result, a total of 10 people died in the house fire, all family members and guards of Osorto (Moreno 2014). This confrontation was part of a series of events between security forces and the campesino communities in the region.

On the day leading up to a constitutional referendum by Manuel Zelaya, a military coup d'état was carried out, ransacking Zelaya's home and expelling him to Costa Rica. Zelaya was flown out of the Soto Cano Air Base, which hosts joint military operations between the U.S. and Honduras. The June 28, 2009 military coup d'état in Honduras revealed the consolidation of power between the private sector and the military government. The state legislatures of the coup governments passed policies in favor of the economic interests of the business sector, utilizing the military to protect profits.



Protests against the privatization of public goods and services were violently repressed by the military. Since the coup, there has been a staggering increase in extrajudicial killings, gender-based violence, expropriation of Indigenous territories, and attacks against independent media outlets. The extermination of students, environmentalists, community organizers, and journalists has instilled a culture of fear in the population. Impunity continues to reign as justice is a distant, unknown concept under the necropolitics of a military dictatorship.

Following the 2009 coup, the military regime revoked the land redistribution process. Despite the increased militarization, fieldworkers' movements recuperated more lands. Nearly three thousand families organized under the land-based social movements of the Bajo Aguán region recuperated twenty-seven plantations, which Miguel Facussé and other landowners illegitimately acquired. From these recuperations, violent clashes ensued between fieldworkers and private security guards who worked alongside military and police forces. At the height of the violence, a set of accords was agreed upon by the fieldworker and corporate entities, mediated by the state (López y Vijil Saybe 2023).

The government-mediated resolution was between MUCA and Miguel Facussé's La Exportadora del Atlantico (López y Vijil Saybe 2023) between 2010-11. Through the accords, ownership claimed by way of corporate land grabs under the Modernization Law was recognized as legitimate and furthermore provided a payout at exaggerated rates exponentially more significant than their initial land acquisitions (Irias 2011: 31). Through this accord, the fieldworker organizations would "buy the occupied lands from the 'legal' owners (mainly Facussé), at a price defined by both the government and the private owners, and the government would act as both the loaner and the fiduciary guarantor" (Leon Araya 2019: 141). The renewed fieldworker movements were once again trapped in an economic scheme to undermine their potential by having "15 years to pay back the loan to the state, with a five-year grace period and a 6% rate of interest" (Leon Araya 2019: 141). In signing the accords, the lands no longer contested as owned by Miguel Facussé became recognized by all parties, and the fieldworker movements would pay to the agribusiness elites "over \$28 million for the former agrarian reform lands that had cost them less than \$2 million in the 1990s" (Leon Araya 2019: 141).

The first of these accords led to a split in the land movement with a dissident group choosing to take a different route in achieving their goals. The cooperatives involved in the land recuperations who did not sign the accord created the Authentic Renovating Fieldworker Movement of the Aguán/Movimiento Auténtico Reivindicador Campesino del Aguán (MARCA). The member cooperatives that formed MARCA did not agree with



the accord on a legal basis, as they did not recognize the corporate entities as owners of the lands. MARCA would eventually regain their lands on this legal argument.

The accords were signed while the region was under siege by security regimes through a state of exception, which suspended civil liberties and the freedom of circulation. Targeted political assassinations, violent evictions, and forced disappearances further coerced the organized fieldworkers to sign the accords to temporarily halt the ongoing persecution, as more than “123 assassinations and 6 cases of forced disappearances” were registered between 2008 and 2013 (López y Vijil Saybe 2023). Almost all the acts of violence were exerted over fieldworker communities by the local security regimes composed of police, military, and private security guards.

The Necropolitics of a Narco-Dictatorship

The 2009 coup emboldened a culture of impunity as nearly all political assassinations remain unpunished despite striking evidence implicating the intellectual and material authors of such crimes. On November 15, 2010, a massacre unfolded as another conflict arose between fieldworkers and Miguel Facussé. Facussé’s private guards murdered five farmworkers from the Guadalupe Carney rural community as they entered his contested hacienda grounds, known as El Tumbador (FIDH 2011: 35).

Amidst the ongoing post-coup violence, fieldworkers in the Aguán were not the only targeted dissidents. Journalists and legal workers were also victims of state repression and censorship, some paying the ultimate price of their lives while practicing their professions in the name of social justice. Nahum Palacios Arteaga was an outspoken journalist about the 2009 military coup and reported on the evolving dynamics of the fieldworker movements in the Bajo Aguán. In 2010, Nahum and his girlfriend, Dr. Yorlenny Sánchez, were fatally shot, receiving more than 20 gunshots from an AK-47 in front of their home. Palacios was from the Rigores community, which was the site of an ongoing land struggle, and he reported on the corruption and abuses of power by military and political officials tied to drug trafficking rings (Galvez 2018).

Antonio Trejo Cabrera was another social advocate targeted for his work as a lawyer representing the dissenting land-based social movements of the Bajo Aguán. Trejo successfully challenged the land claims, with the Honduran courts ruling in favor of MARCA. Trejo Cabrera was also one of the legal workers fighting against the corporate land grabs of the Charter Cities initiative, now known as the Zones for Employment and Economic Development (ZEDE). The ZEDEs are contemporary land grants that allow for free reign and autonomous corporate governance on sovereign territory. Essentially, ZEDE is a land grab project that “entail[s] the systematic expropriation of Black and



Indigenous Peoples' lands, as well as their erasure, ultimately, from the ultramodern and prosperous future that these audacious proposals will purportedly generate" (Loperena 2023: 50). As a lawyer for MARCA and a leading figure in the legal battle against the ZEDEs, security regimes targeted Trejo for his work supporting land-based social movements. After receiving numerous death threats, Trejo Cabrera "publicly declared that if anything happened to him, Facussé was responsible" (Wilkerson 2012). On September 22, 2012, as the lawyer finished officiating a wedding in Tegucigalpa, two gunmen ambushed him and pumped six bullets into his body. Miguel Facussé later commented on Trejo Cabrera's murder and openly said, "I probably had reasons to kill him, but I'm not a killer" (Wilkerson 2012). The politically motivated assassinations and impunity around cases such as that of Nahum Palacios and Antonio Trejo persist and are not limited to the Bajo Aguán region.

Further west of Tela Bay, in the Sula Valley, the political assassination of Margarita Murillo eerily connects to the many other targeted attacks against social advocates involved in land-based movements. Margarita Murillo was a campesina organizer who helped with the political foundations of the Popular National Resistance Front (FNRP) as it evolved into the Refundación y Libertad (LIBRE) political party. Margarita had been deeply involved with social movements throughout her lifetime from the tender age of 13, participating in fieldworker mobilizations and eventually helping establish the National Center of Fieldworkers (CNTC) and the FNRP (Milla 2022). Due to her rebellious activities with the Partido Revolucionario de los Trabajadores Centroamericanos, she was kidnapped and tortured by the Battalion 3-16 of Gustavo Alvarez Martinez under the National Security Doctrine.

Returning to the land, Murillo led the Asociativa Campesinos de Producción Las Ventanas (Windows Farmers' Association for Production), which comprised peasant families involved in a legal battle over disputed land. On August 27, 2014, Margarita was assassinated in the Sula Valley as she was walking to tend to the land her cooperative had been in the process of recuperating, located within the municipality of Villanueva, outside the industrial hub of San Pedro Sula. As she was arriving to her land parcel, she confronted three men wearing ski masks; her body was later found lying beneath a mango tree by members of the organized campesino group (Desinformemos 2014).

The Prosecutor and lead investigator in the Murillo case were also assassinated in cold blood. Prosecutor Marlene Banegas was the former coordinator of San Pedro Sula prosecutors and coordinator of the Prosecution Office for Crimes Against Life, and Olga Patricia Eufragio served in the Prosecution Office of the Environment. Banegas and Eufragio were assassinated by hitmen while on their way home from work. Banegas had received many death threats leading to her assassination and was assigned a security



detail consisting of four police members of the elite COBRA force. Her security personnel, however, were removed when her job with the Public Prosecutor's office changed (CIDH 2014).

The mainstream media constructed a narrative that the murder was ordered from within the inside of the San Pedro Sula prison in retaliation for the guilty verdict obtained by Attorney Banegas against gang members responsible for a massacre at a shoe factory. However, the assassin died under "mysterious circumstances in the interior of a police unit utilized as a prison for gang members" (Proceso Digital 2015); he was found in the showers of the highly secured Special Operations Command (COBRAS) of the National Police Force (Proceso Digital 2015). A few years later, in 2017, two former police officers affiliated with Mara Salvatrucha (MS-13), were sentenced to 13 years for their connection to Banegas's killing (Proceso Digital 2017). At the time of her assassination, Banegas was also reviewing the details of an extensive corruption case, and, according to subsequent testimony from the trial of drug trafficker Geovanny Fuentes Ramírez, she was one of two individuals given a copy of a video (Blume, Meza, and Heath 2023) linking the convicted Narco Dictator Juan Orlando Hernández and his brother Tony Hernandez to the trafficker. This evidence led to the conviction of the Hernandez brothers, but the attempted suppression of such material and the assassination of Marlene Banegas and Olga Patricia Efragio reflect the extent of impunity and the necropolitics of a fallen narcodictatorship.

Another breakthrough case shedding light on the extent of trafficking rings within the coup government is that of the Rivera Maradiaga brothers, also known as the Cachiros, who operated out of the Bajo Aguán region. Devis Leonel Rivera Maradiaga is a reputed drug trafficker alongside his brother Javier, who started their business as cattle ranchers, growing and distributing marijuana among their crops. Their regional distribution routes expanded through their connection with Colombian traffickers (Moreno 2015). With Honduras serving as a significant drug trafficking corridor, the Cachiros evolved to have over \$1 billion in assets, most of which were seized upon their extradition to the U.S. for drug trafficking charges.

Indicted on extensive trafficking charges, Maradiaga began cooperating with U.S. federal prosecutors to expose a more comprehensive network linking drug trafficking to public officials. With the testimony and material evidence provided, Mr. Rivera helped charge "seven police officers from Honduras's national force, along with the son of the country's former president and several members of a prominent Honduran banking family" (Goldstein and Weiser 2017). A prosecutor in the case argued that, given the evidence provided, the situation in Honduras showed "nothing short of state-sponsored drug trafficking" (Goldstein and Weiser 2017).



Working to ensure their safe passage through major drug trafficking routes, the Cachiros paid the president elected following the coup, Porfirio Lobo, over \$500,000 in exchange for political protection from law enforcement investigations. President Lobo also ensured Honduran government agency contracts were awarded to money-laundering front companies controlled by the Cachiros. The president's son Fabio was designated "as a middleman who would be able to protect... the Cachiros" (U.S. DOJ 2017). Rivera Maradiaga built a strong allyship with Fabio Lobo, who personally helped escort loads of drugs with members of the Honduran military, police, and other political officials. Beginning in 2013, the Drug Enforcement Administration captured some of Lobo's drug trafficking activities on tape after the Cachiros started to provide covert information and assistance to the United States government. Lobo, along with seven Honduran National Police officials, were indicted by a grand jury in the Southern District of New York for firearms and drug trafficking offenses (U.S. DOJ 2017).

Devis Leonel Rivera Maradiaga admitted to being behind around 75 murders, including numerous political assassinations, as a hired gunman. Among his paid assassinations was the previously mentioned television and radio reporter Nahum Palacios. Another signature assassination of the Maradiaga brothers was against the former drug czar Alfredo Landaverde, who spoke out against the police force, saying it is "rotten to the core." The widow of Landaverde, Hilda Caldera, stated in an interview that her husband had been "willing to declare what few others would say publicly: that traffickers had infiltrated the police and military" (Goldstein and Weiser 2017). However, traffickers did not "infiltrate" the police and military; the state forces *are* the very security apparatuses that protect the interest of private corporations, which function as criminal rings to exploit and traffic the country's natural resources for economic gain.

Death and Persecution of Land Defenders in the Bajo Aguán and Tela Bay Regions

Following the coup, a 2011 business conference by the name "Honduras is Open for Business" was hosted by the government, which opened the floodgates for land concessions granted to extractive industries. One of the mining projects that benefited from coup concessions was that of Inversiones Los Pinares, owned by Lenir Perez, Miguel Facussé's son-in-law. The iron ore open pit mine is situated along the Guapinol and San Pedro rivers in the Bajo Aguán region, outside Tocoa. Nucor Corporation, the largest steel producer in the United States, and Olin Corporation, a leading ammunition manufacturer, both directly benefit from the land concessions through the extraction of raw materials for their products. Several communities—campesino groups, parishes, and local organizations in the municipality of Tocoa, led by the Municipal Committee for



the Defense of Common and Public Goods (Comité Municipal por la Defensa de los Bienes Comunes y Públicos)—oppose the operating license issued to the mining company in the Carlos Escalera National Park.

During the initial stages of the mining project, local community members mobilized to halt the worksite in protest against the environmental exploitation in the core zone of a protected area, which provided vital water sources for residents. Confrontations with security personnel and state forces ensued, and environmental defenders were unjustly held hostage by the state. In total, 32 defenders were criminalized for opposing a mining project by the private company Los Pinares. Most criminalized defenders were released after a couple of weeks, and the remaining eight political prisoners were released after a couple of years. The original charge against them was the allegation that the protest blocked the road during an attempted eviction. One of the charges against community members invoked the Illicit Association law, which mandates preventive detention. Other charges, including usurpation, robbery, and aggravated arson against the company and illicit association were added. These defenders and communities have been further stigmatized and persecuted along with solidarity organizations such as Carlos Escaleras's COPA, the Catholic Church-affiliated San Alonso Foundation, and the Tocoa Parish.

The defenders would eventually gain freedom from state bondage, but the persecution has not ceded. Upon the release of the Guapinol political prisoners, targeted attacks against community members have continued. Guapinol environmental defenders Aly Domínguez and Jairo Bonilla were murdered by armed assailants in northern Honduras on January 14, 2023, as they were returning home from work on a moped. Domínguez and Bonilla were co-founders of Guapinol's anti-mining resistance and were falsely accused of crimes by the mining company and local authorities. Orquellí Domínguez, brother of Aly, was also involved in the land defense movement and was assassinated within a few months of Aly in 2023. The Domínguez's mother was also injured in the latest armed attack in front of their home in which Orquellí was assassinated. This attack occurred just a few days after the Los Pinares mining company laid off hundreds of employees for unknown reasons, further provoking an environment of fear and risk for defenders in the region.

Around the same time as these attacks, fieldworkers from the Panama community of the Bajo Aguán region faced brutal acts of violence by paramilitary forces terrorizing the growing social movements. The Gregorio Chavez Fieldworker Cooperative arose after the assassination of its namesake, Gregorio Chavez, in 2012. Gregorio was a modest fieldworker who was not involved in social movements but was simply working on his plot of land, which neighbored Dinant palm plantations. An outspoken fieldworker who



believed in equitable approaches to land for communal well-being, Chavez angered the security guards that terrorized his community. His body was later found in a clandestine cemetery not too far from his own home. Since this event, the community rose up and forced out Dinant. However, relentless persecution has forced many into hiding or has compelled them to migrate for their own safety. Those who choose to continue the struggle over land face the constant threat of assassination. One of the founders of the Gregorio Chavez Fieldworker Cooperative, Santos Hipólito Rivas and his teenage son Javier, were killed in 2023 by paramilitary forces known to terrorize the community. This assassination is unfortunately one in a long line of targeted attacks against land defenders and is one of the most recent additions to the growing list of martyrs.

In Tela Bay, Ricardo Arnaúl Montero was a Garifuna land defender assassinated around the start of the 2023 New Year for his work with local Land Defense Committee in the community of Triunfo de la Cruz. This same community is the site of a 2020 case of forced disappearance of four Garifuna community leaders. The men were “violently abducted from their homes and forced into three unmarked vehicles. The assailants [dressed in police uniforms] had bulletproof vests and brandished weapons” (Loperena 2023: 170). As with countless other cases of extrajudicial killings and forced disappearances involving security forces, the “government, as expected, has categorically denied any involvement” (Loperena 2023: 170). The disappeared community leaders were members of the Black Fraternal Organization of Honduras (OFRANEH), whose general coordinator has also received relentless threats.

Miriam Miranda has been leading a recuperation project of ancestral Garifuna lands just east of the Bajo Aguán valley. The organization has been developing a coconut farm on lands formerly occupied by drug traffickers. In a recent interview, Miriam expressed her vulnerability as a land defender following the assassination of her close colleague Berta Caceres. Regarding the ongoing threats of extractive industries and the targeted attacks against land defenders, she relates how “in the name of development, nature’s resources are destroyed, and the defenders of the territory are accused of wanting to go against development. This model leads to the massive destruction of our people and the planet” (Enebral 2018).

Whether through African Palm plantations, open-pit mining, or tourism, security regimes in Honduras have been strategically aligned with extractive industries to maintain the economic structure of resource extraction. Environmentalist and land-based social movements are viewed as threats to the monetary gain of oligarchical elites that utilize state and paramilitary forces at their whim. The seemingly endless list of martyrs continues to grow as media and legal workers are also increasingly targeted for their work exposing government corruption and speaking out against injustices. The



legacy of the Banana Republics persists through the varied extractive industries that have evolved into emerging markets beyond the agricultural sector. Honduras has historically served as a strategic geo-political location for the imperialist forces invading the region and has long been a labyrinth for extractive projects. Yet, resistance against global financial institutions, transnational corporate infiltration, and corrupt security regimes exhibits an ongoing, generational struggle for land and life.

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