



Kristina M. Lyons, *Vital Decomposition: Soil Practitioners and Life Politics*, Durham: Duke University Press. 2020. ISBN: 9781478008163 (paper); ISBN: 9781478007692 (cloth); ISBN: 9781478009207 (ebook)

Using soil as a metaphor for vitality, resistance, and the overall struggle for a dignified life, Kristina Lyons explores the ability of Amazonian farmers (and the soils they tend) to endure (*aguantar*) as they cultivate life in cooperation with death. *Vital Decomposition* documents the “robust fragility” of rural communities in Putumayo, Colombia amidst state sponsored violence, paramilitary occupation, and the forced eradication of suspected coca plantations through non-discriminatory aerial fumigations of the herbicide glyphosate. Using nearly four years of ethnographic fieldwork in the region, Lyons describes a small group of farmers living in harmony with the *selva*,¹ operating in opposition to the perpetual threats of violence as well as the extractive processes of neoliberal capitalism. These “*selvacinos/as*” (borrowed from the Spanish word *campesinos/as*) engage in decolonized, regenerative agriculture through the practice of farmer-to-farmer knowledge networks, native (*criollo*) seed sharing systems, and the nurturing of soil through the decomposing litter layer (*la hojarasca*). Using a holistic and relational understanding of the forest, the farmers can subvert the technoscientific knowledge of agroecologists and transition away from production-focused conventional agriculture and illicit coca growing activities.

As the title suggests, the primary conceptual thread throughout the book is the “ontologically complex object” – soil (p.172). Lyons explains that soil can be best understood as an “operational boundary” that cuts across the socially constructed dualisms of nature and

¹ *La selva*, which roughly translates to jungle in English, is a contentious term often associated with wild, untamed spaces. Historically, this narrative is frequently employed for the colonization and expropriation of land from Native peoples. However, in this book, *selva* should be understood as a “concept, a relational set of practices, and an existent or living force” (p. 8).

culture (p.46-47). Soil is both living/dead, biological/geological, renewable/non-renewable, and finite/continuous. The “betweenness” of soils has created a transdisciplinary void which has left a fully integrated study of soil difficult to explore. This brings to mind the work of María Puig de la Bellacasa (2014), which argues that soil is the “bioinfrastructure” of life and yet it is often made invisible. On the other hand, when soil is made visible by agronomists, it is a political act which often commodifies and markets soil as a depleted, finite resource in need of managing (Puig de la Bellacasa 2014).

Soil is also made economic and political through the incorporation of Marxist theory which describes soil (along with the worker) as “original sources of wealth” (p. 52, quoting Marx’s *Capital*). The commodification of land and soil is demonstrated through the use of state mandated soil maps which inform municipal zoning plans and development strategies across scales and are even employed to assign value in private property appraisals and tax assessments. Additionally, the detailed soil maps allow for the appropriation of rural “under-utilized” lands for development by the oil and gas industries. This system of classification and inherent hierarchy brings to question the capitalist values ascribed to “desirable” soils which prioritizes fecundity and productivity over everything else. Additionally, the classification of “good” soils implies the existence of “bad” (or even illicit) soils. Using a standardized classification of soil types, Amazonian soils are relegated to the label of “unproductive” due to their high levels of acidity and mineral deficiencies which require “correcting” through chemical inputs. Yet, these technoscientific conclusions are not well substantiated by the proliferation and unparalleled, biodiverse plant life supported by the Amazon rainforest. Lyons explains that when technicians claim that this region cannot sustain agricultural livelihoods, “what they are really saying is that one cannot sustain a colonizing, extractive, and neoliberal agricultural livelihood” (p.134).

In a more nefarious way, the classification of soils as “undesirable” can also represent the criminality of nature as well as those who most closely dependent on it. Using the example of small-scale coca farmers, it is presumed that impoverished soils (and people) exhibit an “inherent

propensity for illegal activities” (p.77). When viewed through the framework of Mbembe’s (2008) necropolitics, the question becomes that of sovereignty, agency, and power. Who has the right to a dignified life and death? Lyons provides the example of the common practice of paramilitary groups dismembering and disposing of corpses in rivers as “a kind of ultimate deterritorialization of bodies from soils and souls” (p.106). She puts these unconscionable acts against humans in conversation with counternarcotic eradication policies for illicit crops which both rely on violent uprooting. The criminality of the entire ecosystem and way of life is a primary reason for *selvacinos/as* to operate outside of the formal aid systems of the US Agency for International Development (USAID) crop substitution programs, and against the recommendations of state agronomists.

Lyons often returns to the conceptual divide between naming Amazonian farmers *campesinos/as* vs. *selvacinos/as*. The farmers featured in *Vital Decomposition* elaborated on their perspectives on these differences, particularly focusing on the practice of *campesino/a*² farmers to clear the forest in favor of open pasture farming. This more conventional approach to farming is supported by the categorization of the soils as degraded which also leads to deforestation of the plots. The clearing of the forest is also a common method used to establish ownership of land in rural Latin American contexts. This practice also generally incorporates *campesinos/as* into a capitalist system. To compete with the market values set by larger plantations the pastoral farmers are reliant on altered and GMO seeds distributed by USAID or state agronomists. The dependence on purchasing modified seeds thus threatens the seed sovereignty of the *campesinos/as* (Shiva 2016). This is exemplified in the following quote from an interviewed farmer: “We stopped being farmers once we started buying all our seeds, which they sell to us at any price”

² The Spanish word *campesino/a* has several translations in English. Generally, it is understood as “farmer” or “peasant”, but more literally it translates to “person of the *campo* (pasture/country)”. Lyons uses this more literal translation to distinguish farmers that live in harmony with the forest (i.e. *selvacinos*) from those that clear an area for pasture (i.e. *campesinos*).

(p.106). The reductionist and extractivist relationship expressed by conventional pasture farming contrasts with the decolonized agriculture of the *selvacinos/as*.

The central site of the informal *selvacino/a* farming network is “La Hojarasca”, a teaching farm which borrows its name from the litter layer. The sharing of the living knowledge of the forest as well as the criminalized *criollo* seed varieties are attempts to both decolonize expert-driven agroecology recommendations and recolonize home gardens with the native plants and creatures of the *selva*. The main principles of the farm are described as *ojos para ella* (“eyes for her”) or, in other words, living in harmony with the jungle. While generally this could be understood as a traditional ecological knowledge (TEK) perspective (see Kimmerer 2011), Lyons instead describes this learning and unlearning as “agro-life processes”. These practices are exemplified by the farmers’ methods to leave *la hojarasca* intact, showing reverence for the transformational nature of soil where “death decomposes into life” (p.136). The regenerative farming strategies of the *selvacinos/as* is that of minimal-to-no intervention on pests or natural processes, successional intermixed planting, cultivation through experimentation, and a focus on abundance over productivity. Through the sharing of these farmers’ stories, Lyons does not advocate for the adoption of agro-life processes into agroecology or other structured agrarian movements, but instead wants to replace discourses of criminality regularly assigned to this region with those of life and vulnerability.

A prevailing theme throughout the book is best captured by that Spanish word *aguantar* – to endure. As Lyons describes it, the agrarian movement in Colombia is “quiet” and “imperceptible” – this is its strength. While not mentioned by name, *aguantar* could be understood as a form of socio-ecological or community resilience. Community resilience, as defined by Magis (2010: 402), is the “existence, development, and engagement of community resources by community members to thrive in an environment characterized by change, uncertainty, unpredictability, and surprise”. This closely aligns with the *selvacinos/as* (and their “integral gardens” or *huertas integrales*) ability to thrive in a location often threatened by

poisoning and violence. The term resilience could also be applied to the Amazonian soils, which despite their “poor”, “unproductive” nature, support the highest degree of biodiversity of plant and animal life in the world.

This exciting and innovative ethnography centers the often invisible, yet ubiquitous, materiality of soil. The book will, I hope, generate a renewed interest in the political ecology of soils and encourage future studies around human-soil relations within the social sciences. While Lyons employed classic anthropological methods (mixed with poetic and visual storytelling), her attention to place-specific narratives, bio-political underpinnings, and the conceptualization of soil into a broad socio-ecological framework represents a geographical approach. Her work also showcases how narrowly divided the fields of modern anthropology and geography are; indeed, they are often overlapping. In closing, I present the following excerpt of a poem written by Lyons (p.103-104) to demonstrate the artful writing present in *Vital Decomposition* as well as overall theme of life amid poison in the Colombian Amazon:

Further Reports from Putumayo

A hundred years from now, you might
wonder how they turned the butterflies against us,
how the graceful flight of such creatures
came to circle overhead
like a flock of angry birds.
Wings grinding together,
the screech of metal contraptions,
these moving metal contraptions sucking
the life out of everything.
The leaves of banana trees,
hen feathers,

scraps of human hair,
even mushroom caps that crept across our rooftops
(this so-called second experiment) ...

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