

Velásquez, Teresa A. 2022. *Pachamama politics: Campesino water defenders and the anti-mining movement in Andean Ecuador*. Tucson: University of Arizona Press. ISBN 9780816544738. US\$55.00.

Reviewed by Kristal Natera. Email: [knatera "at" arizona.edu](mailto:knatera@arizona.edu)

Pachamama Politics follows the rise of the anti-mining protests during Rafael Correa's government in Ecuador (2008-2010) and examines changing state discourses under neo-extractive policies. It centers on the political role of *campesino/a* water defenders and the ways in which they relate to and bring forth Andean cosmovisions in their defense of water and life. Water has historically been a point of contention in the parishes of Tarqui and Victoria del Portete, because unequal land distribution limited small-scale farmers' access to water for agriculture and led to the creation of a community irrigation water system. Water access was again threatened with the arrival of a foreign mining company after the discovery of metal in the area. Teresa A. Velásquez argues that, as part of the anti-mining movement, "water emerges as a catalyst for political action... and a vernacular right to local autonomy rooted in arduous histories of the construction of community water systems" (p. 7). As water defenders come together in their political fight against the state and mining operations, they set forth and redefine their connections with the Pachamama—or 'Mother Earth.' Velásquez engages in critical discussions about neo-extractivism, non-human entities, social movements, multicultural governance, and Indigeneity to illustrate how water is more than just a material substance and serves as the foundation of the anti-mining movement in Ecuador, "a new brand of Indigenous cosmopolitics that brings together activists across lines of race, class, gender, and political ideologies" (p. 7).

Chapter one lays the foundation of the anti-mining movement in Victoria del Portete and Tarqui, two parishes located in Ecuador's Azuay Province home to *campesino/as* of Kañari and Kichwa descent. Water became a central element in mining disputes and brought together farmers from different social classes following the arrival of a foreign mining company in 2005. Issues arose because of the company's water quality tests of the Iruquis River. Based on these tests, the mining company publicly framed dairy farming—the area's main economic activity—as a central cause of water pollution and "posited farmers as...a population in need of an improved water supply" in order to validate the company's presence in the area (p. 38). At the same time, community members grew suspicious of the company's exploratory operations and their impact on the watershed. This started a series of disputes with the newly established leftist government, who failed to validate farmers' concerns and conceded to mining operations. Velásquez explains that "contradictions of neoliberal 'green' governmentality—resolving environmental problems through water quality studies that do not address the political dimensions of watershed management—reconfigured local water conflicts" (p. 28). This is an important example of how neoliberal states, even those that claim to be more progressive, fail to recognize local realities and employ tools that do not address local knowledges and the historical relations of communities with their environment. By siding with the mining company based on the water quality tests, Correa's government disregarded the greater significance of water in the community.

Chapter two focuses on the criminalization of female *campesina* water defenders as the Mining Mandate and the Mining Law were passed from 2008 to 2009. *Campesinas*, excluded from most leadership roles in the anti-mining movement, were particularly targeted by the government and by male farmers as they came together to form a Pachamama women's defense group. In their anti-mining discourse, they centered the Pachamama "as a life-generating entity to be defended with everything one can muster in collective struggle"—a discourse that would later be adopted as part of a nationwide movement to defend water (p. 57). Paradoxically, while the new Mining Law integrated Andean cosmovisions—Indigenous concepts and beliefs—acknowledging the Pachamama as an entity with rights, it also diminished local autonomy and directly criminalized water defenders. Thus, "the Rights of Nature became compatible with state and multinational-led mineral extraction" (p. 83). This chapter provides insight into women's specific experiences within environmental movements and shows how neoliberalism adopts local values only to benefit larger economic interests limiting local autonomy.

Chapters three and four follow the formation of a national movement for the defense of life amidst Correa's Water Law proposal from 2009 to 2010, which centralized state power over water resources and threatened the central role of local communities in managing water systems. Different groups, including farmers, environmental defenders, and Indigenous organizations, with the support of the Catholic church, came together to demand the protection of local water autonomy by implementing a Pachamama discourse. For

Velásquez, "Andean cosmovisions helped activists frame water as a site of life and an ethical substance to which to construct a new cosmopolitical movement" (p. 86). The failure to address these demands in a new draft of the bill contradicted the constitutional recognition of Ecuador as a plurinational country, generating more conflict. While Ecuador's constitution ensured the rights of nature and referenced *Sumak Kawsay*, or 'Living Well,' Correa's policies led to the centralization of government resources and the removal of local control. This illustrates how funding for post-neoliberal projects in countries like Ecuador and Bolivia "is based on governments' increased abilities to capture capital from natural resource exploitation" (Lu et al., 2017, p. 89). While this is not a new phenomenon in Latin America, it does demonstrate how corporate interests and neo-extractive interests continue to plague the region.

Chapter five examines the reclamation of an Indigenous identity as part of local struggles against neo-extractivism. The anti-mining movement, with a central focus on Andean cosmovisions, allowed many *campesinos* to reclaim their Indigenous identity as many "came to embrace an assimilationist policy that promised upward mobility by shedding cultural markers of Indigeneity" (p. 145). Specifically, Velásquez observes how male farmers—even those not perceived as Indigenous—reclaimed their Indigeneity as part of their political fight for the Pachamama, while most female farmers continued to identify themselves as *mestizas*. However, this rejection—part of the specific gendered experiences they faced in the anti-mining movement—does not reflect their connection with Andean cosmovisions as they maintain their relationship to the Pachamama "through their everyday work as *campesinas*" (p. 162).

Chapter six centers on the continuity of struggles to protect local autonomy through the use of *lo nuestro*, an expression adopted by water defenders that references "a vernacular right to water autonomy rooted in the suffering of parents and grandparents who built the original water system" (p. 171). Through the imposition of new technical regulations, the Water Law of 2014 allowed a public utilities company to gain more control of the local water system in Tarqui and Victoria del Portete, which was built and managed by the community. Through this dispute, water defenders began to reference *lo nuestro* to recall the collective labor in building and managing the water system and their daily efforts as part of the national anti-mining movement.

Velásquez concludes with present-day changes resulting from the anti-mining movement in Ecuador where people, even those in urban centers, reflected their continued interest to protect the Pachamama through voting. While the anti-mining movement did not stop extractive operations, it united water defenders and opened the space to reconfigure the meaning of Indigeneity in Ecuador and *campesino/as*' larger connection to the Pachamama as part of their political struggle. Velásquez connects Ecuador's experiences with neoliberal governance and with 'pink tide' countries, focusing on the contradictions of so-called progressive governments that maintain a colonial legacy of extractivism and systematic violence.

The book captures the complexity of such a heterogeneous social movement in Ecuador through a critical lens. Not only does Velásquez map the history of racial and socio-economic differences in the country and how such differences shifted and evolved throughout the anti-mining movement, but they also bring important insights into how water defenders redefined—and rejected—Indigeneity as part of their political fight with a specific focus on *campesinas*' gendered experiences and their crucial contributions to the movement. The participatory and activist research methods employed such as the author's presence in protests and meetings, conversations with *campesino/as*, and interactions with officials portray a vivid image of the larger movement and local experiences. Furthermore, Velásquez translates these experiences into a highly accessible ethnography that is approachable for political ecologists as well as non-experts in the field. This book will help Latin Americanists to understand a more nuanced picture of neo-extractivism and resource management in Ecuador, and to introduce students to political ecology, ethnography, and Latin American politics.

The title *Pachamama Politics* speaks to one of the central discussions of the book: how nature becomes a political tool, both used and transformed by the state and environmental defenders for different purposes. Particularly, Velásquez shows the contradictions of integrating the Pachamama and Andean cosmovisions into the Ecuadorian constitution and jurisprudence, because states can shift their discourse to limit the definition of what is protected, what is meant by protection, and most importantly who has agency in such decisions. Velásquez' work is an important contribution to political ecology because it demonstrates the complexity of environmental struggles in Ecuador, where the rights of nature intertwine with identity politics creating new spaces for the redefinition of Indigeneity and plurinationality.

References

Lu, F., Valdivia, G., & Silva, N. L. 2017. *Oil, revolution, and indigenous citizenship in Ecuadorian Amazonia*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Velásquez, T. A. 2022. *Pachamama politics: Campesino water defenders and the anti-mining movement in Andean Ecuador*. University of Arizona Press.

Kristal Natera holds an M.A. in Latin American Studies from the University of Arizona, where she researched the security environment and migrant experiences in the Colombia-Venezuela borderlands. She currently works as the Instructional Design and Support Facilitator at the Center for Latin American Studies, also at the University of Arizona.