



Defending Life in the Ecuadorian Amazon: At the Frontlines of the Living Forest

An Ecofeminist and Decolonial Case Study Analysis of Indigenous Resistance against The
Intersectional Violence of Extractivism

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“And finally, as Indigenous Peoples based in our cosmovision, in our rights, we propose that we begin to generate a proposal at a global and national level—not only based on rights, but based on the sacred nature of the Amazonian worldview, our territorial space—and that this model be declared a Living Forest, not a zone of national interest, but a zone of life, excluding all oil exploitation.”

Patricia Gualinga [Ecuador], Amazonian Woman, speaking to the National Assembly. Quito, October 22, 2013. Cited from Coba & Jiménez, 2020 [Appendix C.1]

Abstract

This thesis explored how the Living Forest, defended by the Indigenous Women of the Ecuadorian Amazon, exposes and resists the intersectional violences of extractivist activities enacted on nature, knowledge, and gender, contributing to increasing scholarly work on Indigenous and gendered perspectives. The extraction of natural resources in Ecuador has imposed environmental, epistemic, and gender-based harm, especially on Indigenous People and Women. Strengthened in Their resilience and agency, these impacts have fuelled powerful resistance movements, particularly those led by Indigenous Women's organisations such as the Amazonian Women. A thematic case study analysis has been conducted through the theoretical lenses of intersecting violence rooted in colonial-capitalist-patriarchal logics, decolonial ecofeminism, and the Living Forest framework as exposure and resistance. This framework reveals and counteracts the intersecting violence of extractivism as an ontology of inseparability, territory and body-territory, and a knowledge and communication system. Rooted in relationality and interdependence between humans and nature and through embodied resistance practices of forest-, territory-, and knowledge-making, the Amazonian Women and Peoples expose interconnected violences deeply embedded in extractivism. Above all, They fight for the preservation of Their ancestral epistemologies and cosmovisions, cultural identity, territorial integrity, and bodily sovereignty, all coexisting in the living, conscious, right-bearing entity of the Living Forest. By centering the experiences and ontologies of the Indigenous Peoples and Women of the Ecuadorian Amazon, this thesis highlights the importance of reimagining post-extractive futures and advocating for climate and epistemic justice.

Keywords: *extractivism, Living Forest, Amazonian Women, Indigenous Resistance, decolonial ecofeminism, body-territory, intersectionality, territorial autonomy*

Foreword

Learning about the Living Forest through reading, listening, and watching has inspired me. It has made me feel like this way of viewing and engaging with the world around us – relational, reciprocal, and respectful – is how we are all meant to live. It seems so simple, yet so impossible to reach. Engaging with the philosophies and lived experiences of the Living Forest made me admire the sense of connectedness, purpose, and belonging that is experienced and protected by the Amazonian Women. However, I had to confront myself with the fact that, from my position of comfort and distance, I was hypocritically romanticising Their way of living in my mind: not wanting Their struggles, but wishing to experience the same feeling of community and connection. That is not how it works. On the other hand, I felt a deep sadness for the disconnection so normalised here in the west that was now becoming so much more apparent to me: a disconnection from nature, thus ultimately from ourselves.

I wonder, when did we humans lose this connection, this notion of interdependence? At what point did we start believing and living like we are separate from other living beings, as though we are superior and in control? How can we possibly believe that this benefits us in any way when it comes down to it in the long term, spiritually, mentally, physically, economically, politically, socially, or environmentally? And once we finally and truly realise that this separation does not benefit us, to whom shall we turn?

Maybe the answer lies in turning to ourselves, though not to the selves shaped by individualism and dominance. Maybe the answer is, above all, to learn from other people and from nature. The tools and knowledge are there. All that is left to do is to set aside our selfishness, greed, and insecurities and start to listen. I believe we can learn, if we are open to it. From each other, from the Earth, and from those who have long been ignored or silenced. And if we forgot who to look at, perhaps it is simpler than we think. Maybe the path forward

starts by asking ourselves: who has been silenced and oppressed? Who have we forced to endure and adapt to the consequences of ecological destruction and social injustice without being heard?

The answer to this question is not unfamiliar. We know the answer, as we have defined it ourselves. When we acknowledge this, we know who we could learn from. The answer might be whoever we have deemed *less*. Women, Indigenous, Black and Brown People, and anyone unfit for westernised norms. Those whose knowledge systems are dismissed, whose bodies are exploited, and whose ways of living are deemed inferior. These are the voices we must listen to and the People we should look at with humility and respect, admitting our own limits and recognising our need for different wisdom, knowledge, and practices. Only then can we begin to join in the imaginaries of a future without oppression, exploitation, and discrimination. After all, we are all just humans. Part of a greater web of life, as the Living Forest teaches. Interconnected and equal, on one Earth. Living. Beings.

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I am grateful for the opportunity to engage with these themes and perspectives in my thesis. I would like to acknowledge the struggles, resistance, and relational philosophies of the Indigenous Women from the Ecuadorian Amazon, which have inspired this case study research. Lastly, I am thankful for the encouragement and thoughtful guidance I have received throughout this research process. This support has challenged me to sharpen my thinking, reflect more deeply on my research, and centralise the voices that matter.

Table of Contents

Abstract.....	3
Foreword.....	4
Acknowledgements.....	5
Introduction.....	8
Research Question.....	10
Contextual Background.....	13
Neo- and Green Extractivism.....	13
Latin America.....	13
Ecuadorian Amazon.....	15
Resistance.....	16
Theoretical Framework.....	18
Intersectional Violence Rooted in Colonial-Capitalist-Patriarchal Logics.....	18
Indigenous Decolonial and Ecofeminist Resistance.....	19
Living Forest as Lens of Exposure and Resistance.....	20
Multidimensionality.....	20
Political Strategy.....	20
Theory to Guidance.....	21
Methods.....	22
Approach.....	22
Source Selection.....	22
Data Analysis.....	23
Positionality and Ethics.....	26

Analysis.....	27
Living Forest as Ontology.....	27
Ontology of Inseparability.....	27
Redefining Wealth and Well-Being.....	31
Daily Practices of Reconnection.....	33
Living Forest as Territory and Body-Territory.....	35
Forest Politics.....	36
Body-Territory and Gender.....	38
Daily Practices of Territory-Making.....	41
Living Forest as Knowledge and Communication System.....	43
Knowledge Through Forest Relations.....	43
Daily Practices of Knowledge-Making.....	46
Outward Knowledge Transmission.....	47
Conclusion.....	50
References.....	52
Appendix.....	63
Appendix A. Positionality Statement and Ethical Considerations.....	63
Importance.....	63
Personal Statement.....	63
Practical Implications.....	64
Appendix B. Analytical structure.....	66
Appendix C. Original Spanish Quotations.....	68

Introduction

In 2013, the Indigenous Women from the Ecuadorian Amazon, united from seven diverse nationalities – the Kichwa, Achuar, Shuar, Shiwiar, Zapara, Waoran, and Andoa – as the Amazonian Women, adopted the *Kawsak Sacha* [Living Forest] Declaration. Their goal has been to call upon the Ecuadorian Government to adhere to its Constitution and protect the Rights of Nature (RoN), the lives of all Indigenous People from the Ecuadorian Amazon (Amazonian Peoples), and its biodiversity, territories, and cultural heritage.

Rooted in Indigenous Ancestral Knowledge, the Living Forest has guided Their way of living since time immemorial as a relational practice and cosmovision¹ (Oikonomakis, 2020). Simultaneously, it has shaped Their collective legal anti-extractivist defence, originally initiated by the Kichwa of Sarayaku people, to protect Their territory as a living, sentient being. Their ecofeminist resistance encompasses not only environmental concerns but also spiritual dimensions (Sempertégui, 2021; 2023; Mujeres Amazónicas, 2013). The context of Their defence is shaped by the environmental and political contradictions faced by Indigenous Communities on multiple levels.

Climate change, driven by human activities, is causing significant disruptions to ecosystems, biodiversity, weather patterns, and human livelihoods worldwide. Being the least responsible and yet the most exposed to its negative impacts, Indigenous Peoples bear a disproportionate burden. Predominantly Indigenous, peasant, and rural Women, and generally Women in the Global South, carry the heaviest burdens in this regard due to the historic and contemporary systemic influences of colonialism and racism. Most influential, however, is Their strong reliance on and relationship with nature for substance and well-being, which intensifies these vulnerabilities (Santisteban, 2019, pp. 7-15; Muñoz & Del Carmen Villarreal, 2019).

¹ *Cosmovision* is another term for “worldview”, meaning the way in which one understands the world around them, representing the reasons for “being and existing in the cosmos”. It involves fundamental beliefs and understandings about the nature of reality, the universe, and humanity's place within it (Amorim, 2022).

For instance, 58 million Women in Latin America live in rural areas, of whom 30 percent own agricultural land. However, only five percent of this group have sufficient access to technical assistance, while the remaining majority face severe climate-related distress, such as heatwaves, droughts, and floods, due to a lack of resources (Oxfam International, 2022). According to FAO (2024, p. 20), female-headed rural households experience approximately eight percent more income loss during heat waves and three percent more during floods as opposed to male-led households, resulting in widening income gaps between female- and male-headed households of 37 and 16 billion US dollars, respectively. Moreover, Indigenous Women's responsibilities and roles in managing natural resources, cultural practices, and caregiving in Their Communities and families are complicated by climate change (Ipas, 2024).

The diversity within these groups and geographical regions should be recognised, as experiences and resilience capacities vary widely across contexts, despite their shared vulnerabilities and challenges. Nonetheless, Indigenous Peoples and Women in Latin America have been finding ways to adapt and raise their voices in response to these disproportionate challenges for decades. They powerfully resist the intertwined impacts of climate change and extractivism (the exploitation and exportation of natural resources), advocating for sustainable, life-affirming practices rooted in Indigenous Knowledge (Muñoz & Del Carmen Villarreal, 2018).

Despite these resistance movements, paradoxical governance across Latin America intensifies extractivist activities and further exacerbates socio-ecological impacts on Indigenous Peoples, including land dispossession, environmental degradation, biodiversity loss, cultural erasure, and gender-based violence. Several countries with leftist and progressive governance, such as Argentina, Venezuela, Bolivia, Brazil, and Ecuador, have pledged to end the dependency of economic growth on natural resource appropriation since

the beginning of the 21st century. Yet, neo-extractive agendas are persistent, often masked by state-led environmental discourses (Del Nido, 2021; Sempértegui, 2020).

Ecuador offers a particularly telling example of these tensions. On the one hand, it explicitly recognises the RoN in its constitution and mandates the protection of ecosystems from harmful activities (Republic of Ecuador, 2021, Art. 73). It has adopted the Indigenous Concept of *Sumak Kawsay* [Good Living] to address the importance of community and nature in its development plans. Yet, on the other hand, extractivist development continues to dominate the national economic model, revealing the gap between constitutional ideals and material practices.

Some Indigenous People argue that Their cosmovisions have been appropriated to justify neo-extractivism. Therefore, they have returned to other concepts, such as the Living Forest, which are not as politically charged and used to legitimise extractivism. With the Living Forest, They demand acknowledgement of Their living and conscious territory as a subject of rights and wisdom (Oikonomakis, 2020; 2024; Vallejo Real & García-Torres, 2017). Their resistance targets the interconnected foundations of extractivism itself: the colonial-capitalist-patriarchal logic that commodifies nature, dismisses Indigenous Knowledge, and erodes Women's spiritual and reproductive roles. As such, They affirm life over extraction and reclaim their right to exist on Their own terms.

Research Question

The impacts of extractivism and ways of resistance are deeply sensitive and interconnected, touching upon themes such as Indigenous Autonomy, Territoriality, Environmental Justice, and ecofeminism (Sempértegui, 2020). Given this multidimensional, delicate, and complex nature, such topics must be approached with care and consideration of overlapping forms of violence and resistance. Therefore, this thesis aims to foreground the collective, daily agency and resilience of Amazonian People and Women against the

intersectional violences of extractivism out of respect for Their struggles. Thereby, it goes beyond solely mapping out structural oppressions and challenges narratives that portray Them as passive, vulnerable victims.

Moreover, this interdisciplinary research draws from multiple disciplines such as political ecology, ethnography, Indigenous Thought, and decolonial ecofeminism. These fields provide both an empirical foundation and conceptual tools for a philosophical exploration of the intersecting dimensions of extractivist violence and resistance, rather than solely quantifying material harm. The Living Forest is centred not merely as a response to violence, but rather as a transformative worldview that challenges colonial-capitalist-patriarchal logics of extractivism and redefines the relationship with territory, knowledge, and life. By employing a decolonial feminist lens, the contribution of this thesis is multidimensional, intended for scholars, students, and activists who are engaged in critical debates on extractivism, Indigenous, and decolonial ecofeminist resistance for justice.

Firstly, this thesis contributes to existing literature by examining how the Amazonian Women's defence of the Living Forest functions as a territorial, epistemic, and ontological resistance to intersecting colonial, capitalist, and patriarchal violence. Previous studies have explored socio-environmental impacts, Indigenous Political Resistance, and gendered perspectives on extractivism in Ecuador individually (for instance, Svampa, 2022; Ngum & Barooah, 2023; Martínez Suárez, 2025; Vallejo et al., 2018). Moreover, the Living Forest framework itself has been researched from a legal, political, or cultural angle in relative isolation. This thesis, however, integrates diverse perspectives by examining their intersections through the lens of the Living Forest with a focused and comprehensive analysis. Therefore, it originally weaves together how this specific framework exposes and

resists intersecting violence by offering alternative understandings of relationality, wealth, autonomy, care, and knowledge.

Secondly, focusing on three specific dimensions of nature, knowledge, and gender allows for a more interdisciplinary understanding of how extractivism fragments Indigenous Worlds and how the Living Forest challenges this harm as a profound embodied counter-vision. This scope, however, does exclude other forms of violence inherent in extractivism. Instead, it highlights the key areas through which Amazonian women express their alternatives.

Moreover, this thesis contributes to feminist and decolonial research by recognising Indigenous Peoples, especially Women, as political agents and knowledge-holders. Using an inductive approach and drawing on lived experiences and resistance, it is dedicated to grounded theory methods within decolonial studies. This term means that theory is not imposed but emerging from the data itself, as further elaborated in the methodology (Dorpenyo, 2020).

Finally, this research is significant beyond academia as it supports critical social and political debates on climate and epistemic justice, environmental governance, Indigenous Sovereignty, and feminist decolonial thought. It highlights the urgency of imagining post-extractivist futures and may inform both solidarity work or academic and policy discussions, for instance, on pedagogy or culture and nature conservation. While it does not claim to advantage Amazonian People and Women directly, this thesis does hope to promote the recognition of Their resistance in broader discourses. Taking these research gaps and aspirations together, this thesis addresses the following research question:

How does the Living Forest, defended by the Indigenous Women of the Ecuadorian Amazon, expose and resist the intersectional violences of extractivism enacted on nature, knowledge, and gender?

Contextual Background

Neo- and Green Extractivism

Latin America

Nature Appropriation

Latin America has historically been, and continues to be, one of the primary global regions for extractivist activities. Currently, more than half of its export value consists of the sale of primary and manufactured products based on natural resources (Muñoz & Del Carmen Villarreal, 2019). Extractivism has been a key development strategy employed by governments to expand the forces of production and capital accumulation, dating back to the colonial domination and imperialism of Europe since the 15th century (Veltmeyer, 2022).

The struggles of extractivism in Latin America define a pattern of colonial accumulation embedded in the rise of capitalism. This appropriation of nature describes the widespread natural resource exploitation targeted at minerals and fossil fuels through mining, oil drilling, and gas exploitation. These resources are often extracted with unsustainable methods, leading to the degradation of ecosystems and biodiversity (Svampa, 2022, p. 19).

Progressive Regimes

Despite the contradictory dynamics of development and grassroots resistance that occur in various regions and contexts, Latin America presents the clearest case for understanding these forces. This is owed to its history and the relatively recent explicit politicisation of the relationship between development and extraction (Veltmeyer, 2022; Del Nido, 2021). Since the mid-2000s, the debates around extractivism in Latin America have developed around the several left-oriented and progressive political regimes that supported an extractivist economy for funding social redistribution programmes (Dorn, 2022). This new trend is referred to as the “commodities consensus”² or “progressive neo-extractivism”. It is

² The *commodities consensus* refers to the shared agreement in many Latin American countries that extraction and exportation of natural resources is important on a large scale to generate income and improve people’s lives. Natural resource extraction was thus considered a viable development strategy across different political regimes.

characterised by the notion of market-driven (neoliberal) and socialist (post-neoliberal) governments that extractivism is necessary to alleviate poverty, despite environmental and social harm (Veltmeyer, 2022; Vallejo Real & García-Torres, 2017).

Contradictions of Energy Transition

Moreover, the global transition to sustainable energy pressures the provision of natural resources such as lithium, cobalt, and green hydrogen, which are used for techno-optimist solutions. These are technological fixes for complex environmental crises, such as photovoltaic plants, wind farms, and electric vehicles. This coloniality of the energy transition describes the continuation of colonial logic in so-called solutions. It reproduces older patterns of dominantly westernised thought, knowledge, and action, also called "green colonialism" (Dorn, 2022).

To legitimise these activities and support national and regional developmental policies, Latin American governments frame extractivism as necessary and inevitable, as these "resources for the future" are necessary to combat climate change (Dorn, 2022). This attitude has resulted in the strengthened legitimacy of exploitation and global trade of natural resources as a developmental model and, at the same time, further exacerbated socio-ecological conflicts (Acosta, 2013).

In various Latin American countries, commodity-dependent, populist, and leftist administrations have succeeded in reducing their "social debts" and improving access to basic needs, which had worsened during centuries of inequalities, debt crises, and neoliberal policies. Conversely, violent displacement and the destruction of vulnerable ecosystems are increasingly impacting Indigenous Communities (Del Nido, 2021).

The generated income and wealth from extractivism would be used in social funding programmes to support causes like health, housing, and education for poverty relief and reducing inequalities (Veltmeyer, 2022; Vallejo Real & García-Torres, 2017).

Ecuadorian Amazon

State Vision of Good Living

Among all Latin American countries, Ecuador, a former Spanish colony until 1822, presents a particularly intriguing case. It is among the most commodity-dependent countries in Latin America and has experienced extreme conflicts between its leftist governments on the one hand and anti-extractivist movements on the other hand (Del Nido, 2021). The Ecuadorian Amazon has been a centre of extractive conflict due to oil and mining activities in the habitat of Indigenous Communities, which is closely linked to the political landscape. Besides the general framing of extractivism in Latin America, the Ecuadorian government has supported this model to achieve Good Living (Van Teijlingen, 2016; Vallejo Real & García-Torres, 2017).

Ecuador adopted three different approaches to extractivism from 1972 until the end of President Rafael Correa's administration (2007-2017). First, oil-based developmentalism emphasised state-led growth through petroleum revenues. Neoliberal governance followed, prioritising reducing the government's role in the economy by privatisation of state-owned enterprises and incentivising foreign investment in the national markets. Lastly, a post-neoliberal approach led by Correa aimed to regain state control over natural resources by framing extractivism as a tool for reducing poverty and increasing national independence (Del Nido, 2021).

Post-Boom Dependency

With this last ambitious and neoliberal development plan, extractivism was declared a “strategic sector” in which the government would maintain complete executive power and influence over the existing oil industry and yet underdeveloped mineral mining industry (Davidov, 2013). This further created a rift between the increasingly pro-mining Correa administration and anti-mining organisations and Indigenous Movements (Riofrancos, 2014).

Since the commodities boom³ ended in 2015, Ecuador's economy has become even more dependent on natural resources (Marston, 2022). In 2020, the mining activities had doubled. By now, Ecuador's primary export source is crude oil, which all originates from the Amazon region, generating a value of approximately 13.1 billion US dollars (OEC, 2025). Notably, of the 1.3 million Indigenous People nationally, representing 7.7 percent of the Ecuadorian population, 24 percent reside in the Amazon region, where They account for approximately 70 percent of of the area's population (Rico, 2022; IWGIA, 2025). Despite increasing resistance against extractive activities in these areas, the government has refrained from taking sufficient action (Ortiz-T, 2025).

Resistance

Recognising that resource extraction has deepened socio-environmental conflict in Latin America, it is equally crucial to introduce resistance of impact communities. In recent decades, various civil society groups and local grassroots (Indigenous) movements have actively challenged development models aiming for limitless growth based on resource depredation (Veltmeyer, 2022). For instance, the highway construction in the Bolivian Isiboro Sécure Indigenous Territory and National Park (TIPNIS) (Delgado, 2017) and the Conga Mining Project in Peru in 2011 were halted after mass protests and public pressure (Morel, 2017). Similarly, local referenda and opposition forced the withdrawal of companies in the Colombian Colosa Mine (2007–2017) (Fian International, 2022) and Argentinian Esquel Mine projects (2002-2003) (Scandizzo, 2003).

Many resistance movements have forged alliances with (inter)national NGOs, feminist collectives, and environmental justice networks. As such, They position anti-extractivism in broader discourses of justice, human rights, and decolonisation to

³ The *commodity boom* occurred from 2003 to 2014 and sparked the rise of neo-extractivism in Ecuador. High global prices enabled the Correa administration to expand state-led resource extraction to fund social programmes, intensifying conflicts over Indigenous Rights and protection (Marston, 2022).

highlight territorial protection while defending the planet (Muñoz & Del Carmen Villarreal, 2019).

In Ecuador, social movements have long been raising voices against extractive policies, rooted in their long struggle against colonial and neocolonial exploitation (Samaniego & Torres, 2024). Indigenous People, especially Women, have led political resistance through collectives such as the Mujeres Amazónicas, Confederación de Nacionalidades Indígenas del Ecuador (CONAIE), and Foro Internacional de Mujeres Indígenas (FIMI). As interpreters of the Forest's beings, Indigenous Women have taken on the responsibility of representing and protecting nature (Martínez Suárez, 2025).

Theoretical Framework

Intersectional Violence Rooted in Colonial-Capitalist-Patriarchal Logics

In this dissertation, following various scholars, I understand extractivism as rooted in a colonial-capitalist-patriarchal system, originating from western-centric thinking, that upholds hierarchies, separation, and domination between humans and nature, mind and body, men and women, and coloniser and colonised. This system appropriates not only natural resources but also the bodies, labour, territories, and knowledge of Indigenous Peoples (Del Rosario Ayala Carrillo et al., 2017; Muñoz & Del Carmen Villarreal, 2019; Grosfoguel, 2016).

The global capitalist system has historical roots in European colonial expansion, beginning in 1492. From this point onwards, many regions were burdened with natural resource extraction, while others could benefit from manufacturing and industrialisation. This historical perspective shows that capitalism and colonialism are intertwined, driving resource exploitation in multiple forms and driving carbon-intensive economies in the contemporary westernised world system, intensifying pressures on ecosystems and the climate (Herrera, 2024).

Thus, extractivism is a continuation of colonial legacies, exploiting marginalised groups and unequally distributing negative socio-environmental impacts due to historical structures of race, gender, and (internal) colonialism. Within this power structure, the violence of extractivism is intersectional: it impacts nature, knowledge, and gendered bodies simultaneously and systematically. Nature is feminised and dominated, Indigenous Knowledge is disqualified and replaced, and Women are subjected to structural gender-based violence (Del Rosario Ayala Carrillo et al., 2017; Muñoz & Del Carmen Villarreal, 2019; Grosfoguel, 2016; Vallejo Real & García-Torres, 2017).

Indigenous Decolonial and Ecofeminist Resistance

Indigenous Amazonian Women are at the forefront of fighting extractivism. Their resistance engages with elements of ecofeminism⁴ and decolonial feminism⁵ to challenge extractivism as part of broader Indigenous Territorial Struggle (Vallejo Real & García-Torres, 2017; Coba & Jiménez, 2020; Aguinaga & Bilhaut, 2019). Indigenous Women's resistance from the Amazon has been recorded since colonial times; however, the focus on territorial struggles has shifted toward broader anti-capitalist movements, which position Women as subjects of struggle and resistance. As translators of Their ontologies and experts on Their habitat, They have transformed the anti-extractive struggle in Ecuador, especially with the Living Forest (Sempértegui, 2020; Coba & Jiménez, 2020).⁶

Although Their activism has been amplified through alliances with feminist and environmental movements, some Amazonian Women have refused to identify themselves as “feminists”. They reject the hegemonic and ethnocentric agenda of western feminism and the framing of Their allyship as something that enabled Their resistance (Sempértegui, 2021; 2022). In contrast, a decolonial feminist lens offers a reorientation of feminism that is anti-capitalist, anti-colonial, and thus anti-racist, and highlights autonomous resistance and knowledge production by Women at the margins (Vergès, 2021, pp. 4-42).

⁴ *Ecofeminism*, a movement against the oppression of nature and females, appeared first in the west in the early 1970s and 1980s. This ideology underscores the interconnection between nature and women, who face global exploitation and oppression from male dominance and patriarchy. It has been a powerful framework in resisting the oppression of nature and women collectively and defending the rights of both (Shrestha, 2024).

⁵ As described by Vergès (2021, pp. 4–42), decolonial feminism is a movement that reclaims the suppressed voices and identities of women who are marginalised, racialised, and colonised. Western feminism often ignores this dimension, emphasising that it requires a decolonial perspective. As such, decolonial feminism acknowledges the ongoing systems of oppression under colonialism, capitalism, and patriarchy, recognising that these disproportionately affect women from formerly colonised areas. As extractivism is a main example of the manifestations of these oppressions, this lens is incredibly useful to understand the violences and resistance in this area (Vergès, 2021).

⁶ In comparison to other and previous mobilisations, although built collectively by the Sarayaku People and agreed upon by organisations of all the Indigenous Peoples in the south-central Amazon, it was the Women who felt responsible for representing all these parties externally with the Living Forest proposal (Coba & Jiménez, 2020).

Living Forest as Lens of Exposure and Resistance

Multidimensionality

The Living Forest is many things at once: a philosophical concept, a political proposal, and daily practice. It is simultaneously a cosmovision, law, declaration, and an embodied way of life, which encompasses the animal, cosmic, spiritual, vegetal, mineral, and human worlds – rooted in the understanding that the jungle is a living, intelligent, conscious, and right-bearing entity (Santi & Santos, 2020). All elements, including humans, plants, animals, waterbodies, wind, and stars, have interconnected, reciprocal spirits, maintaining a complex ecological and spiritual balance (Baquero-Díaz, 2024; Ruales, 2024).

The Living Forest goes beyond a theoretical concept, it also represents a renewed relationship between humans and nature, which are inseparable (Sempértegui, 2020). Its main goal is to *“preserve the territory of Indigenous Peoples, and especially the material and spiritual relations that we establish in the Living Forest with the other beings that inhabit it.”* (Mujeres Amazónicas, 2013). Grounded in the Good Living philosophy, as theorised by Kichwa anthropologist Carlos Viteri Gualinga, it emphasises collective well-being, respect for nature, spiritual health, and community reciprocity (Viteri, 1993).

Political Strategy

The Living Forest not only represents an alternative worldview; it also inherently contradicts western ideas of material accumulation and individual wealth and exposes the intersectional violence deeply embedded in extractivist occupation. It reveals how dominant development logics rely on the commodification of life, dividing spiritual and ecological connections, and erasing Indigenous Autonomy. As such, it has become a political, anti-extractivist resistance strategy, not only for the Amazonian Women and Sarayaku Peoples, but also other Indigenous Nationalities in Ecuador (Oikonomakis 2020; Sempértegui, 2020; Ruales Flores, 2024). It also expands on the legal discourses on the RoN,

especially since the Ecuadorian state declared the territory of the Amazonian Women as a sacred, living being with rights in 2018 (Ruales, 2024).

Throughout the last decade, the proposal has gained broader support from key political actors and organisations, resulting in several legal victories (Ruales, 2024; Baquero-Díaz, 2024). It does not exclude other agendas of the Amazonian Women's Network, where each Indigenous Nationality has its specific proposal. Rather, it unites all these voices as a joint resistance against extractivism (Sempértegui, 2020). Therefore, the Living Forest serves as an epistemological and philosophical lens that reveals the violence of extractivism and fosters collective resistance against it.

Theory to Guidance

This framework brings together various theoretical lenses and concepts that, combined together, guide the research methodology and analysis. Through a decolonial and ecofeminist lens, academic articles and primary materials are approached with the understanding that resistance practices are also epistemic interventions that challenge extractivist logic beyond political acts, centralising women's perspectives. Moreover, this framework allows the analysis to focus on the relationality of three forms of violence (against nature, knowledge, and gender) and resistance, rooted in the Living Forest. This latter philosophical and political lens shapes the interpretation of selected materials, as it offers an understanding of (anti-)extractivism through a radically different worldview. As such, this thesis adds to existing literature by combining an ontological, territorial, gendered, and epistemological perspective on Indigenous Extractivist Struggles in Ecuador.

Methods

Approach

This research is designed as a case study of the Indigenous Women in the Ecuadorian Amazon using the Living Forest as a tool of resistance. Using a case study for research has various advantages. According to Yin (2014, pp. 119-122), they allow for triangulation⁷, enhancing the research credibility and depth of the analysis. Flyvbjerg (2006) adds that case studies provide deep, context-dependent insights, valuable generalisations (especially when properly contextualised), and challenge dominant theories. These strengths make the method well-suited to the aims of this research.

The Ecuadorian Amazon presents a compelling context due to its unique combination of a significant biodiverse natural environment, intense extractivist pressures, and Indigenous-led Resistance. Furthermore, scholarly attention to the Living Forest framework has been relatively limited. By focusing on this case, this study highlights broader patterns of resistance and resilience that align with other ecofeminist and Indigenous Efforts in the Global South. It is also personally motivated by a fascination with the philosophical and political depth of the Living Forest. Therefore, this case offers a profound understanding of anti-extractivist resistance rooted in Indigenous Worldviews while recognising that writing about Indigenous People is one of the greatest challenges in contemporary academic research.

Source Selection

The majority of the selected materials range from 2013 until 2025. This range starts with the Declaration of the Living Forest, a vital moment in formalising Indigenous Ecofeminist Resistance, making this year a logical starting point. The endpoint ensures the inclusion of the most recent developments in anti-extractive conflict and mobilisation.

⁷ *Triangulation* is the term that describes the allowance of a diverse selection of sources of evidence from various perspectives and methods to investigate a research topic, which increases the flexibility, credibility, and validity of the research. For instance, it could be combining sources such as academic articles, interviews, legal documents, reports, speeches, news, and other media (Yin, 2014).

Source triangulation in this case study is achieved through the selection of the following material [Table 1].

Table 1

Selected Research Material and Source Triangulation

Primary sources	Speeches, declarations, (TED)talks, and testimonies from Indigenous Women leaders like those in Mujeres Amazónicas or CONAIE <i>(example: the Declaration of the Living Forest from 2013)</i>
Ethnographic and scholarly literature (secondary material)	Academic works and peer-reviewed articles regarding the resistance in the Ecuadorian Amazon, which interpret the philosophy and political strategy of the Living Forest
NGO and media reports, news websites	Organisations such as Amazon Watch, IWGIA, and other national outlets which provide information on environmental conflicts in local or regional Ecuadorian areas

Various keywords were used to find these sources on Google (Scholar), Smartcat, and YouTube, such as “Living Forest”, “Indigenous Women”, “Ecuadorian Amazon”, and “extractivism” in both English and native languages to diversify the source collection and ensure inclusion of local perspectives. Moreover, following reference trails from academic studies (snowball sampling) led to valuable sources.

Data Analysis

A thematic document analysis has been conducted by identifying, organising, and interpreting recurring themes in this case study. The purpose of a thematic document analysis review is to synthesise qualitative secondary sources and literature around specific themes and concepts, allow them to speak in Their own terms, and build situated knowledge.

The steps of this type of review are to establish the specific research question, to familiarise oneself with the sources, and lastly, to evaluate and organise the sources based on

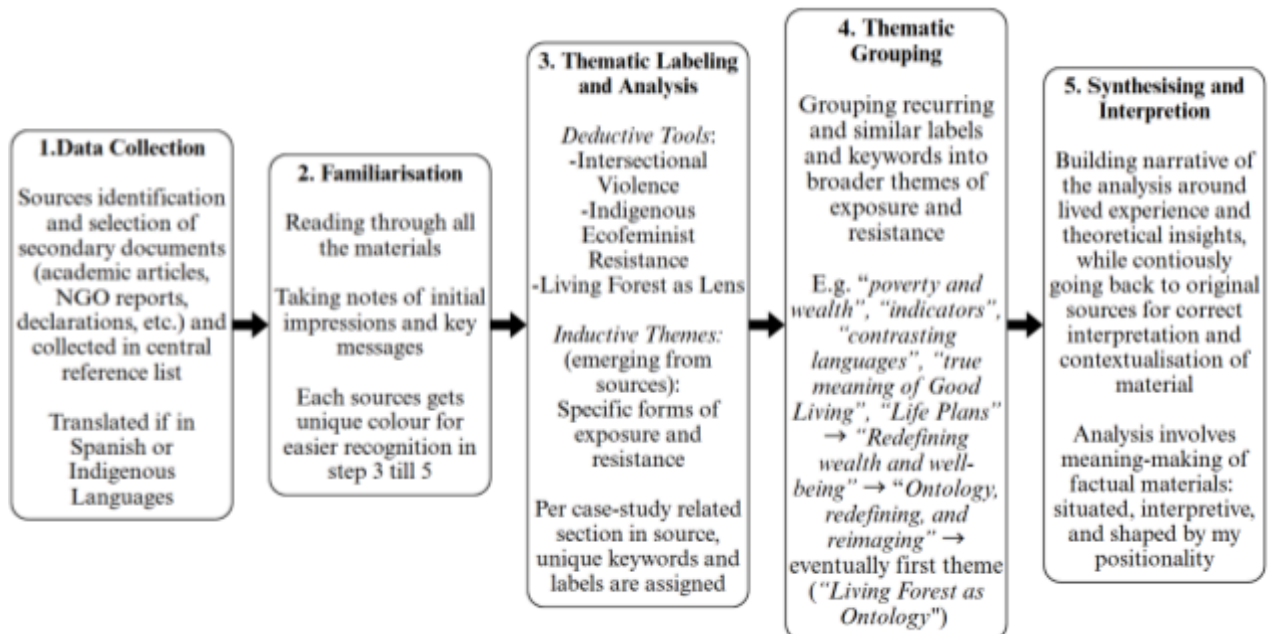
specific predefined theoretical concepts. The findings are subsequently grouped into categories and themes – the ways of exposure and resistance – which are not pre-defined [Appendix B]. Lastly, gaps and potential areas for future research will be identified (Paperpal, 2024; Hofmann & Duarte, 2021).

Figure 1 introduced the specific methodological process applied to this thesis, being both deductive and inductive. This thesis largely follows an inductive approach by identifying recurring topics and patterns that naturally emerge without pre-established themes or codes that are expected to be found, aligning with grounded theory methods for decolonial research (Dorpenyo, 2020).⁸

⁸ *Grounded theory* refers to a flexible method that allows focusing on the data as the foundation for analysis, categorisation, and theory development. This inductive approach aims to construct knowledge from its foundation. Namely, when universalising and applying western theories, concepts, and ideas to study colonised contexts, this perpetuates imperialism and colonialism through epistemic injustice: local and Indigenous Epistemologies can easily be silenced, overpowered, or even erased. Moreover, such approaches tend to oversimplify or stereotype cultures, focus on dominant or national cultures rather than local diversity, usually serve industry needs rather than social justice, and lastly, universalise specific values. Therefore, decolonial methods and research approaches are needed in international, intercultural, and cultural contexts to reclaim suppressed identities and foster the decolonisation and empowerment of colonised people (Dorpenyo, 2020; Smith, 2012). It should aim to emphasise Indigenous Epistemologies and Worldviews, which have been systemically marginalised. This marginalisation has been particularly evident in extractivist projects within Latin America, and specifically in Ecuador (Herrera, 2024).

Figure 1

Methodological Process of the Thematic Case Study Analysis of Selected Materials



This research faces several methodological limitations. Firstly, some of these materials are in English, while a significant portion had to be translated from Spanish or Indigenous Language. To address bias and misinterpretation in translation, care was taken by prioritising contextual meaning, cross-referencing and comparing translations from different translation machines, and preserving Indigenous terms. Yet, interpreting these Indigenous Language and Concepts may have flattened or distorted meanings. Moreover, this research heavily relies on publicly available materials such as articles and videos and especially on secondary sources. The first may lead to an over-representation of certain voices, excluding Those who do not engage with formal media or academia. The latter often presents knowledge that is often already processed, thereby limiting this thesis' capacity to fully capture the context of events and narratives. Moreover, it implies dependence on formally documented, published, and digitalised information, which are historically privileged methods of knowledge transmission. This excludes oral, embodied, and localised knowledge, which would be valuable for this research.

Positionality and Ethics

The complete positional and ethical statement is included in Appendix A.⁹ However, for transparency and reflexivity, I shortly state my acknowledgements. As a White, non-Indigenous, Dutch undergraduate, I acknowledge that my background and the systems in place afford me unearned privilege and inevitably influence the research process, despite my commitment to reflexivity. I aim to engage with the Amazon Women's struggle by emphasising Their resistance and resilience from Their perspective, while recognising that I cannot speak for them. I prioritise sources written by Ecuadorian authors and critically assess the context in which they are produced. I acknowledge my limited understanding of complex concepts and aim to remain reflexive during my research, especially regarding language and interpretation.

⁹ According to Homan (2023), positioning one's identity is crucial for decolonising research and knowledge production. This involves considering how one's experiences and social identities, such as gender, race, or geographical background, can shape and result in biased understandings of the world. Such critical reflection fosters transparency and ethical integrity, demonstrates diversity and inclusion, and decentres one's position as the norm. Thus, paying attention to positionality and reflexivity is essential for conducting ethical and decolonial research (Sultana, 2007). For the full positionality statement and ethical considerations, the reader is referred to Appendix A.

Analysis

How does the Living Forest, defended by the Indigenous Women of the Ecuadorian Amazon, expose and resist the intersectional violences of extractivism enacted on nature, knowledge, and gender?

Living Forest as Ontology

The Living Forest, as defended by Amazonian Women, holds philosophical, political, and practical dimensions. This section explores the first main theme: *Living Forest as an ontology*. The first subtheme delves into the meaning of the *ontology*¹⁰ – the philosophy of *being* – of *inseparability* of humans and nature, and centring kinship¹¹, relationality¹², and reciprocity. Moreover, the subthemes *redefining wealth and well-being* and *daily practices of reconnection* are explored as exposure and resistance. The majority of the citations refer to interpreted Traditional Knowledge, produced in Ecuador by Indigenous People and Women, mostly from the Sarayaku People. These are cited in Gualinga (2023), De La Cruz & Bastidas (2022), Oikonomakis (2020; 2024), Herrera (2024), Ruales Flores (2024), Dávalos (2020), Coba & Jiménez (2020), Santi & Santos (2020), Sonetti-González et al. (2023), Vallejo Real & García-Torres (2017), Laura Salas Witness (2020), Ruales (2024; 2025), Sempértegui (2020), Minoia et al. (2024), and Mujeres Amazónicas (2013; 2016; 2023).

Ontology of Inseparability

Contrasting Ontologies

At its core, the Living Forest is grounded in the relational philosophy that humans are interconnected to all other beings in the forest, bound by a mutual, inseparable, and reciprocal

¹⁰ *Ontology* refers to the “study of being”, coming from *ontos* [being], and *logos* [study, science, discourse, or theory]. This study focuses on the nature of being, existence, and reality and emphasises how societies have subjective and objective representations of the world around them (Dávalos, 2020).

¹¹ *Kinship* is about moral and social relationships within spheres of a family, community, or other beings outside of the community and is extremely context- and territory-specific (Santos-Granero, 2007; Dávalos, 2020).

¹² *Relationality* is a term to describe relationships as constitutive of being, meaning that one exist because of processes and encounters of their relationships with all beings, human and more-than-human. It goes beyond kinship by including cosmic, spiritual, ecological, political, and epistemological relationships. This ontological understanding makes the social and ecological realms inseparable and allows for a pluriversal view on living and being (Sonetti-González et al., 2023).

relationship (Santi & Santos, 2020). Inherently, this ontological “inseparability” of human nature presents the first subtheme and challenges western dichotomous worldviews that separate nature from humans, society, and culture (also referred to as naturalist ontology), forming a foundation of extractivist violence.

In western thought, nature is often conceptualised as “Indigenous”, “feminine”, and “Other”. The Amazonian Women aim to dismantle this tension with the ontology of the Living Forest, exposing the harms at various levels. The forest is more than this minimalist conceptualisation: it is an “anthropogenic” space where diverse beings coexist, each serving the reproduction of life (Coba & Jiménez, 2020; Denning, 2019; Vallejo Real & García-Torres, 2017).

Environmental violence directly becomes visible in the anthropogenic forest as ecosystems are threatened by natural resource extraction. According to the Living Forest ancestors, the interconnected ecological units of *sacha* [jungle], *allpa* [land], and *yaku* [rivers] shape the ecosystem as a whole. However, when humans disrespect *Pachamama* [Mother Earth], this creates imbalances in the ecological system. “[...] *Mother Earth will protest*” in response, explains Nina Gualinga, Amazonian Women spokesperson and Indigenous Woman defender of the Sarayaku People (De La Cruz & Bastidas, 2022).

And it does: the Ecuadorian Amazon, part of one of the most biodiverse countries, holds an extraordinary range of ecosystems and species and is being threatened. Oil extraction blocks cover almost 70 percent of its Amazon, including nineteen ecosystems and numerous diverse species (Lessmann et al., 2016). This has resulted in the risk of extinction for 286 species due to unsustainable extractive practices such as deforestation, disturbance of the construction of infrastructure, and river sedimentation (Roy et al., 2018; Svampa, 2022, p. 25). Additionally, Indigenous Communities frequently suffer from oil spills from pipelines, contaminating water and food (Mujeres Amazónicas, 2023).

The biodiversity of the Living Forest can be understood as a complex co-production of humans. However, conceptualisation in terms of “biodiversity”, likewise the terms “biosphere” or “biological corridors”, risks framing it as a resource to be used and exploited, omitting its relational, spiritual, and ontological dimensions. It turns nature into an object – touchable, extractable, and separate from humans. In many Indigenous Languages, there is actually no term for “nature”, as humans are seen as inseparable from it (Herrera, 2024; Oikonomakis, 2020; 2024). This reductive conceptualisation is an example of how capitalist conceptualisation objectifies nature, reinforcing the legitimization of productive and profitable exploitation (Denning, 2019).

Violating this relational ontology is also harmful in bodily and spiritual ways, as highlighted by Nina Gualinga’s testimonies.¹³ Extractivism, from this perspective, disrupts the spiritual and cultural connection with other beings: it removes not merely trees, but family, including Their knowledge and spiritual connection. Especially Women, who build on the social processes of kinship and relationality in Their daily lives through caregiving and providing for Their livelihoods, are harmed by these extractive practices (Herrera, 2024; Vallejo et al., 2018).

Nature as Subject: Equal and Alive

The Living Forest as an ontology not only exposes the violences rooted in a colonial-capitalist-patriarchal system and dichotomous worldviews, but also resists it by offering a strong alternative way of relating to and engaging with nature, turning it into a

¹³ An example of these personal testimonies illustrating the deep spiritual relationship between nature and ancestral presence is given in her video. She explains: “*When our elders pass away, we don’t understand that as someone dying and disappearing, but Their spirit goes to the big trees. [...] So what happens is that they are still there with us, with our big Ayllu¹² [...]. So what happens when oil companies come and mining companies come and they cut down these big sacred trees, they’re not just cutting down sacred trees, they are actually killing our ancestors, They’re killing our elders, they’re killing our relatives.*” (Gualinga [Ecuador], 2023, 3:00). This personal story highlights how the forest embodies both ecological and spiritual value, holding the spirits of family members and ancestors.

¹⁴ *Ayllu* is the Kichwa term used to describe the community or family of humans, the more-than-humans, the animals, the plants and everything that is alive (Gualinga [Ecuador], 2023).

subject instead of an object. As an animist¹⁵ and multi-naturalist¹⁶ ontology, it understands all natural beings as having personhood and subjectivity and belonging to a socio-cosmic community (Vallejo Real & García-Torres, 2017). The jungle and its hills, lakes, waterfalls, and mountains are not living beings in themselves; rather, life exists inside them and makes its presence visible through perceived actions. Thus, it is a social and spiritual world, as well as a natural one.

“We defend life, the rights of nature, and all living beings because to us it is clear that if there is deterioration of the environment in the world, the human species on the planet would go extinct.” (Community member of Sarayaku People [Ecuador], Laura Salas Witness, 2020, 2:57) [Appendix C.2]

This ontology, moreover, implies a collective management, ownership, and conservation of land. Everything is inhabited and has protective beings (both human and more-than-human) that should be taken care of (Santi & Santos, 2020; Oikonomakis, 2020; Sonetti-González et al., 2023). Thus, it shapes not only a conservationist ideal for a way of living, it also functions as a call for people around the world to learn about their abilities to reconnect with Mother Earth, and an offer of real organisational and governmental solutions beyond western natural sciences. Due to Their interconnection with nature, the Amazonian People have a deep understanding that adhering to the Living Forest is the basis for conceiving, building, and spreading Good Living in our world, which is currently facing a global ecological crisis (Santi & Santos, 2020; Ruales Flores, 2024).

According to Patricia Gualinga, *“it is not only the Living Forest, but also the living Arctic, the living Congo Basin, and any other living place in the world”* [Appendix C.3]. She

¹⁵ *Animism*, as described by French anthropologist Philippe Descola, is the belief that all elements of the natural environment are alive and have spirits, personalities, consciousness, or agency (Vallejo Real & García-Torres, 2017).

¹⁶ *Multinaturalism*, a term from Brazilian anthropologist Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, refers to the notion that all beings have intentions and are social and cultural. However, They perceive the world differently depending on their species and bodily form. For instance, both a jaguar and human might perceive themselves as “people”, but live very differently because of their distinct bodily shapes and functions (Vallejo Real & García-Torres, 2017).

explains that disconnection from these places creates imbalances, which is precisely what is happening to the world regarding climate change and environmental destruction (Personal communication, Ruales Flores, 2024). By offering an alternative way of living and being in harmony with the environment, the Living Forest aims to solve the crises of climate, pandemics, biodiversity loss, and extractivism (Herrera, 2024; Minoia et al., 2024).

Redefining Wealth and Well-Being

Communitarian Life

The second subtheme, based on this ontology, concerns the different meanings given to wealth, well-being, and life, enacting a politics of care. This redefinition resists capitalism's extraction logic, legitimising the commodification and appropriation of nature. One way to do so is by breaking the “metaphor of production” (which claims reproduction only occurs as long as production exists). Instead, the Living Forest promotes a communitarian rule of life¹⁷ that fosters well-being of the community and nature, or in other words, Good Living (CFCTF, 2014; Oikonomakis, 2020; Ramírez-Cendrero et al., 2017). *“The Living Forest proposes another way to think about wealth”*, which shifts away from western-centric views and centres the Living Forest as the pathway to achieve a good life in harmony with nature (Mujeres Amazónicas, 2013). Only the coexistence with the Living Forest can lead to Good Living, and vice versa: it cannot exist without each other (Herrera, 2024; Coba & Jiménez, 2020).

In essence, Good Living has three fundamental dimensions, also called Life Plans, all with distinct wealth and poverty indicators, systems, and implications: 1) *Sumak Allpa* [fertile land and soil] (about sustainably managing and conserving environment, natural resources, and territory without contamination); 2) *Runaguna Kawsay* [living in community] (regarding

¹⁷ As described by Ramírez-Cendrero et al. (2017) in their case study on the role of communitarianism in the Ecuadorian Amazon, specifically in the Community of the Sarayaku People, resources (animals and plants) should exclusively be made use of for the sake of the community's life. The priority is not a maximum of production but rather to not harm nature with any kind of harmful and invasive work activities.

economy, health, organisation, and mingas¹⁸ in solidarity to ensure physical, political, cultural, and spiritual well-being of families); and 3) *Sacha Runa Yachay* [knowledge and wisdom of the forest people] (concerning ancestral forms of medicinal, spiritual, and productive knowledge and technologies) (Santi & Santos, 2020; Minoia et al., 2024; Oikonomakis, 2024).¹⁹ Essentially, it is about revitalising ways of life for all beings in the territory through collective decision-making, gender participation, providing health services, and sustaining sovereignty (Ruales, 2024; Oikonomakis, 2024).

Languages of Wealth and Poverty

The Good Living framework embodies a decolonial redefinition of wealth and poverty: wealth is not measured by material accumulation, but by the quality of nature's health, collective harmony, and social relationships. Poverty, in contrast, is defined by indicators rooted in capitalist-colonial cultures, such as individualism, loss of cultural identity, modernity, racism, imposed knowledge, alcoholism, human exploitation, and economic dependency (Oikonomakis, 2020; 2024).

The ontological differences become particularly clear through the types of questions the Amazonian Women are asked about the financial alternatives to oil extraction, framed by dominant political imaginaries. As They explain that oil wealth has never benefitted Indigenous Communities, and instead They promote the Living Forest and ecotourism as an alternative pathway, a contrast emerges between two languages: one of relationality, collective well-being, and ecological integrity, and one of viable economic alternatives – that keeps being challenged (Sempértegui, 2020).

¹⁸ *Mingas* are communal work efforts that allocates labour organised through a system of solidarity, cooperation, and reciprocity, shared by all community members. This system is common in the community of the Sarayakua People and other Indigenous Cultures in the Andes and Amazon, especially in Ecuador, Bolivia, Peru, and Colombia. These can be *minga del pueblo* (managing and constructing communitarian spaces), family mingas (reciprocal communitarian work for a family in which other families of the *Ayllu* help), or special occasion mingas (communitarian work for celebrations or ceremonies) (Oikonomakis, 2024; Ruales et al., 2025).

¹⁹ Due to spatial limitations, Santi & Santos (2020), Oikonomakis (2024), and Minoia et al. (2024) are suggested to be reviewed for further explanation of the meaning and implementation of the Life Plans.

Daily Practices of Reconnection

Social Relationships

“[...] It is a way of understanding, it’s a philosophy, it’s a concept, but more than anything, it is something that is practised.” (Gualinga [Ecuador], 2023, 2:00)

The Living Forest functions not only as an abstract ontology; it is also lived, performed, and enacted in daily life through cultural, spiritual, ecological, and political practices. This third subtheme explores social relationships and practices as experiences of kinship and interconnectedness – forms of everyday resistance embodying the ontology of inseparability.

As Isabel, Indigenous Woman of the Sarayaku People, explains: *“living the daily life in Sarayaku, [...] the work we do as Women within agriculture, the planting of cassava, and also teaching our sons and daughters this connection”* fosters respect, protection, and care for nature (Personal communication, Herrera, 2024). Various practices, such as agriculture, hunting, plant consumption, and art, foster social relationships between humans, animals, and other forest subjects in the forest.

Notably, there is a cosmological division between the forest, the domain of men and *Amazanga*²⁰, and *chakra*²¹ [cultivated forest or crops], associated with Women and *Nunguli*²². Women, who are responsible for providing daily food and are experts in cultivation, are especially crucial in establishing a relationship with the chagra (Santi & Santos, 2020). These social relationships become evident through behaviour of and ways of engaging with the habitat, grounded in the relational ontology. Every entity in the Living Forest is inhabited by

²⁰ *Amazanga* is the masculine spirit who has the wild and untamed forest as its domain. His main roles are protection the forest and its beings, hunting, shamanic work (see footnote 9), navigating the forest, and spiritual healing (Dávolos, 2020; Santi & Santos, 2020).

²¹ *Chakra* refers to land parcels in traditional rotation systems that grow subsistence crops, such as cassava and plantain (Ruales, 2025).

²² *Nunguli* is the feminine spirit of the chacra, governing cultivated and domesticated nature. Her main roles are care-giving, and reproduction and transmission of feminine knowledge (Dávolos, 2020; Santi & Santos, 2020).

a protective *supay* [spirit] or master who maintains a relationship with the shaman²³ and must be treated respectfully. Therefore, disruptive behaviours, such as shouting, laughing, or cutting trees without permission, can evoke protests from nature, such as a heavy and sudden rainstorm. However, extractivist activities violate these relational codes and kill these masters, resulting in environmental destruction, such as drying and contaminated lakes (Dávolos, 2020; Oikonomakis, 2020).

Practices of Reconnection

To resist these violences, the Living Forest also offers alternative forestry practices²⁴ rooted in ancestral agricultural systems that support human stewardship of nature and minimise exploitation. These practices aim to reduce soil destruction and deforestation and protect biodiversity (Mujeres Amazónicas, 2013; Herrera, 2024). Moreover, in Sarayaku, hunting is regulated, monitored, and only permitted for subsistence (no commercial) purposes, a concept introduced as “hunting well”. This is especially necessary as wild animals are becoming scarcer and the human population is growing, making sufficient hunting more challenging (Ruales, 2024; 2025).

These hunting and farming practices also counter the promoted notion of consumer economies that the world exists to serve human needs. It actively challenges the disconnection from the food system in most modern societies, where people have moved to processed foods, are unaware of where their food originates, and are ignorant about the exploitation of animals (Herrera, 2024).

Other ways of integrating the inseparability of nature and society in daily life are through practices of reproduction²⁵, personalisation, and “forest-making”, as described by

²³ A *shaman* is a spiritual healer, guide, and mediator between worlds with cosmological wisdom, who is crucial in maintaining the balance between humans and the spiritual and ecological world. This is often done through rituals, spiritual journeys, usage of plants, or music (Dávolos, 2020).

²⁴ Examples of non-alternative, modern, intensive agricultural practices are, for instance, forests for wood products, non-wood products, slash-and-burn agriculture, and intensive cattle raising (Herrera, 2024).

²⁵ The term *reproduction* encapsulates the sustenance, regeneration, and nourishment of human and more-than-human life forms through generative, relational, and embodied work that is both material and symbolical (Sempértgui, 2020).

Sempértegui (2020). For the Amazonian Women, these practices combat Their portrayal as mere “guardians” of a mythical place, positioning them instead as reproducers and defenders of life (Sempértegui, 2020). Sharing myths, such as *muskuykuna* [discussing dreams], is crucial in defining interconnectedness between humans and other entities (Dávolos, 2020). Moreover, treating the soil and plants as living beings – by speaking, chanting, or singing to them – shapes the course of events and reveals their different characters and purposes²⁶ (Gualinga [Ecuador], 2023, 9:00; Sempértegui, 2020).

Additionally, stewardship, caregiving, and connection with nature are strengthened by consuming plants and natural medicine. In the Ecuadorian Amazon, sacred plants, such as the hallucinogenic ayahuasca, are vital for cultural heritage, (preventive) healing, and sustaining a connection to other realities (Herrera, 2024). Furthermore, the idea of “heartfelt thinking” is encouraged through art-legal mingas, which put ontology into practice. These mingas allow various participants to express the destructive impacts of extractivism through art while relating to nature playfully through senses and integrating eco-centric normativities (Ruales et al., 2025).

Living Forest as Territory and Body-Territory

The Living Forest is more than an ontology; it is lived through land. Beyond resisting the colonial dichotomy between humans and nature, it further combats the separation of body and territory, and men and Women. As territory and body-territory, the second main theme, discusses the subthemes of *forest politics*, *body-territory and gender*, and *daily practices of territory-making*. In addition to previously mentioned sources, interpreted Traditional Knowledge from the Ecuadorian Amazon is cited in TEDx Talks & Gualinga (2018), Aguinaga & Bilhaut (2019), Cruz (2019), Martínez Suárez (2025), and Sempértegui (2021).

²⁶ Examples given of such purposes are construction, beauty, or health (Gualinga [Ecuador], 2023, 9:00).

Forest Politics

Territorial Struggles

This subtheme explores the Living Forest as a territory by reflecting on the legal and political contestations over the meaning and rights of the forest and its People beyond a physical space; hence the focus on *forest politics*.

This habitat of the Amazonian Women has been marked by a longstanding, strong anti-colonial and anti-capitalist resistance (Oikonomakis, 2020). In the past, attempts to reclaim the legitimacy of land rights have often led to further ecological degradation and the displacement of Their territorial spaces. This process of territorial displacement is strengthened by the infrastructure needed for extracting natural resources through mining, oil, and gas extraction, and the agribusiness of monocultures, for instance, due to the installation of pipelines and roads (World Rainforest Movement, 2024).

As a result, many Indigenous Amazonian Peoples are forcefully relocated to urban marginal areas suffering from socio-economic inequalities (Dávalos, 2020). This is paired with violence, especially to those who actively resist; for instance, Global Witness (2023) found that the Amazon accounts for one-fifth of all murders of environmental defenders reported globally.

Usually, the government does not conduct any informed consultations with Indigenous Peoples before entering these territories for extractivist activities, even though these consultations are legally binding and mandated by the Inter-American Court of Human Rights (IACHR). Women in particular are often excluded from these governmental consultation meetings, as elaborated on later. Moreover, deceptive and misleading methods are employed to obtain signatures of consent, such as offering money, withholding information about the projects, or making false promises, which further undermines the

legitimacy of the consultation process (Mujeres Amazónicas, 2016; Santi & Santons, 2020; TEDx Talks & Gualinga [Ecuador], 2018).

Law-Making

These forms of violence reflect the extractive logic that treats land as a resource to be extracted and exploited. In contrast, the Living Forest understands its territory beyond a physical space, defending its existence, culture, and cosmovisions (Coba & Jiménez, 2020; Ruales Flores, 2024). Territories are fundamental political and cosmological spaces for reproducing practices, ancestral knowledge, and community life (Minoia et al., 2024).

Therefore, the Living Forest proposes a legally protected and recognised territory that goes beyond obtaining environmental autonomy by advocating for rights for all beings within the forest, both visible and invisible. It aims to assert the RoN and specific Indigenous Rights. In doing so, it has become a philosophical-ecological concept and a political-legal framework through which the Amazonian Women have articulated and coordinated Their political resistance. Thus, as a territory and law, the Living Forest forms a unifying ground for its multiple versions as a philosophy, a space inhabited by living beings, and a living being in itself (Oikonomakis, 2020; Ruales, 2024).

Achieving legal recognition of the Living Forest as a territory still involves challenges and internal complexities. Since it embodies a pluriverse world including all human and more-than-human beings, consensus is inherently challenging, even among different Indigenous Nationalities (Sempértegui, 2020). Although the Indigenous Women of Ecuador have succeeded in uniting a variety of voices and worldviews in Their declaration, each forest and community is different, and not all Indigenous Peoples agree with it (Ruales, 2024). Moreover, recognition of this law necessitates an ontological shift in Ecuadorian law, and even that legislation could be rapidly undone at any point (Oikonomakis, 2020). These challenges highlight deeper confrontations between incompatible worldviews and underscore

the fragility and conditionality of legal achievements in a system still shaped by colonial-capitalist-patriarchal logic.

Body-Territory and Gender

Union between Nature and Body

“Historical and oppressive violence exists both against my first territory—the body—as well as my historical territory—the land.” (Cabnal, 2010, p. 23, cited from Martínez Suárez, 2025) [Appendix C.4]

Connected to the Living Forest as a political forest and law is the second subtheme of *cuerpo-territorio*, or *body-territory*, developed by Indigenous and decolonial feminists, especially the Amazonian Women. The body is the union between nature and the subject, yet this relationship is increasingly harmed by extractivist activities rooted in western development models. Placed in this position of inferiority, the Amazonian Women voice the aggravated violence enacted on Their bodies, territories, and knowledge due to patriarchal and capitalist oppression. With the body-territory concept, They assert Their resistance against racial-ethnic, class-based, and geographic power, combining gender, territorial, and epistemic justice (Aguinaga & Bilhaut, 2019; Sempértegui, 2021; Vallejo Real & García-Torres, 2017).

Extensive research has touched upon the meaning and importance of the body-territory.²⁷ As thoroughly analysed by Cruz (2019), focusing on the body, particularly the feminised body, is crucial, as this is the centre of capital production and new forms of territorial domination. It has been argued that the appropriation of feminised bodies and Their knowledge has enabled capitalism to expand. The violence against Women is historically and structurally linked to the violation of territories, affecting Their daily lives and bodies

²⁷ This thesis does not aim to provide a full conceptual analysis of the body-territory, as it is beyond its scope; it would not do right to the topic. In this theme, the term is referenced and summarised in this section in a context-specific way, related to the case study of the Living Forest and Amazonian Women, as part of broader ecofeminist resistance.

(Martínez Suárez, 2025). This forms the foundation for the notion that the body is not only a physical and natural construct, but also socially, cosmologically, and politically formed.

The metaphor used by the Amazonian Women, “*contaminated water invades from within*”, explains well how environmental destruction affects not only the natural territory, but simultaneously also directly Their bodies (Cruz, 2019). Therefore, the body-territory rejects the dichotomy between body and land, arguing that territorial sovereignty cannot exist without personal and bodily sovereignty and autonomy (Sempértegui, 2021; Martínez Suárez, 2025). Thus, the Amazonian Women pledge for the recognition of rights of the Living Forest grounded in the understanding of the relationality and interconnectedness of the reproduction of forest and bodies, rather than basing this on isolated, individual entities (Coba & Jiménez, 2020; Martínez Suárez, 2025).

Oppressions of the Body-Territory

To understand how Amazonian Women defend both Their land and body-territories, it is vital to grasp the discriminatory impacts of extractivism They face. The majority of Amazonian Women have faced gender-based violence due to extractivism in Their body-territories. For instance, in Pastaza²⁸, almost 70 percent of the Women have experienced gender-based violence (Coba & Jiménez, 2020). According to the Amazonian Women, extractive activities damage and pollute the environment (example of contaminated water), harm nature and bodies, and “*generate machismo and socio-cultural problems, such as alcoholism and domestic violence*” (Personal communication, Sempértegui, 2021).

This highlights the broader issue of the interconnectedness between extractivism, gender, and health (Ngum & Barooah, 2023; Cirefice & Sullivan, 2019). Women also face greater exposure to infectious disease and reproductive burdens, revealing structural violence

²⁸ Pastaza is a province in the eastern jungle of Ecuador. It is the largest province of the country and the one with the highest biodiversity rate.

(Cielo & Coba, 2018). Moreover, the militarisation²⁹ and masculinisation manifested through male-dominated labour forces, increased surveillance, and the sidelining of Women's traditional roles create an environment of domination that heightens Women's exposure to bodily and epistemic violence, including sexual violence aimed at dispossessing bodies that reproduce life, wisdom, and knowledge (Vallejo et al., 2018; Aguinaga & Bilhaut, 2019; Cruz, 2019; Ngum & Barooah, 2023).

In contrast to western, individualist, and hierarchical understandings of gender, many of the Indigenous Societies in Ecuador follow a relational gender system, shaped by spirits of the masculine Amazanga¹³ and feminine Nunguli¹⁵. This shapes the division of gender roles in labour: women cultivate crops and collect vegetables, while men provide meat (Dávalos, 2020). Extractivism disrupts these traditional roles, contributing to food insecurity and weakening Women's ties to land and spiritual practices. Moreover, as extractivism advanced under neoliberal reforms, families became more dependent on market production, further reducing Women's time for cultivation (Vallejo et al., 2018; Herrera, 2024; Ngum & Barooah, 2023).

Furthermore, women now face increased dependency on men, worsened by the invisibility of reproductive labour, impacted gender roles, and unequal access to extractive-sector employment (Turner & Brownhill, 2006; Cirefice & Sullivan, 2019).³⁰

Indigenous Women in the Ecuadorian Amazon work on average twenty-eight hours per week

²⁹ *Militarisation* in the context of extractivism means the increased presence and involvement of military or armed forces to facilitate the entry of extractive companies. This often goes hand in hand with violence, intimidation, surveillance, and threats to the Indigenous People (Vallejo et al., 2018; Aguinaga & Bilhaut, 2019).

³⁰ The under-representation of reproductive works refers to the fact that Women's employment is often under-represented from a capitalist perspective, especially the labour involved in sustaining life, care, and daily well-being. Feminists have been voicing this injustice since the 1970s, arguing that the work They put in providing for Their livelihoods and sustaining life is not considered work (Turner & Brownhill, 2006; Cruz, 2019). This under-representation determines gender relationships between men and Women, which is specifically impactful in oil-producing countries with extractive development models. Especially in Ecuador, where ten percent of the employment positions are filled by Women, the dependence of Women on men is increasing, as men can access formal jobs more easily in this system due to their privileged positioning in the regional oil economy (Cielo & Coba, 2018). As such, Women also have much more limited access to the benefits of extractivism in terms of employment, as employees in the sector are primarily men (Cirefice & Sullivan, 2019).

more than men, mainly in caring and reproductive roles to support Their communities, nature, and local territories (Aguinaga & Bilhaut, 2019). However, the under-representation of Their work and favour of male labour in the sector results in more limited access to employment benefits of extractivism (Cirefice & Sullivan, 2019).

Not only are gender roles pressured economically, but also politically and legally; decision-making and leadership over Their territories have been masculinised by governmental organisations and corporate interests (Cielo & Coba, 2018; Cruz, 2019). The normalised, traditional gender roles have also created obstacles for them to be politically active, as trying to combine these causes causes personal stress (Mujeres Amazónicas, 2016; Coba & Jiménez, 2020). In resisting through the body-territory, Amazonian Women have protested this exclusion from the Indigenous Movement Agenda, combined with the exclusion of Indigenous Peoples in Latin American feminist moments – symbolised by the 2003 Sarayaku protest³¹ – asserting Their right to be heard in decisions about Their territories (Coba & Jiménez, 2020).

Daily Practices of Territory-Making

Territorial Activism

“What happened after that march? These Women began to receive threats, they began to be attacked, persecuted, and publicly humiliated [and] insulted in the media”
(TEDx Talks & Gualinga [Ecuador], 2018, 11:29) [Appendix C.5]

The last subtheme in the Living Forest concerns the embodiment and *daily practices of “territory-making”*. In Their daily lives, the Amazonian Women actively fight for Their Living Forest and body-territory rights through marches and conferences, held since the 1990s. Their activism itself inherently exposes and challenges patriarchal and colonial

³¹ In 2003, some of these Women practically fought back by not providing food or having sex anymore. They surrounded the army with Their weapons in the presence of the national press to demand inclusion in decision-making about extractivism in Their territories, reaffirming Sarayaku and the Amazonian Women as symbols of resistance (Coba & Jiménez, 2020).

extractivist systems: it provokes acts of violence as continuous attempts to further silence. Their resistance to the systems in place, as highlighted by Nina Gualinga's personal story above (TEDx Talks & Gualinga [Ecuador], 2018).

Women, considered leaders of resistance and thus traitors to Their nation, face threats and persecution, including to Their families (Cruz, 2019). Throughout 2018, Amnesty International had recorded various attacks against female human rights in Ecuador, such as Amazonian Women members Patricia Gualinga, Margoth Escobar, Nema Grefa, and Salomé Aranda (Amnesty International, 2019). Perpetrators often go free, while Women who raise Their voices face persecution, harassment, discrimination, and sexual violence, including rape (Cruz, 2019; Lugo, 2020). Regardless, the Amazonian Women persist, effectively connecting and voicing intersectional acts of violence through Their political resistance. Despite the challenges, They frequently leave Their homes for some days, reconcile Their various responsibilities, and publicly resist through protests, declarations, media appearances, and participation in (inter)national forums (Coba & Jiménez, 2020; Sempétegui, 2023).

Unity through Forest-Making

The cultural and spiritual practices of the Amazonian Women and other Indigenous peoples, as introduced and analysed in *Daily Practices of Reconnection*, are essential for reaffirming Their relationship with Their environment. However, they are also meaningful as daily embodied practices of political and ecofeminist resistance to making territory. Sempétegui (2020) conceptualises these multidimensional "forest-making practices" as a means of marking territories and safeguarding cultural identities, passed on by Elders and Women.

An example of such a specific practice is singing, which is actively done and recorded in the Living Forest itself. The Amazonian Women often also use singing as a form of political protest during conferences and public interventions. For Them, the emotion

expressed through such songs is essential to feel empowered personally and to create unity and strength in resistance among Their People (Sempértegui, 2020). Moreover, these songs are expressions of existence and literal calls for all beings' rights in the Living Forest (Ruales, 2025). Another example is face-painting, for instance, with pigment of Wituk fruits. This practice is often done in combination with singing, not only for emotional and bodily healing, but also as act of political resistance to protect Their territory, bodies, culture, language, and traditions from extractivism (De La Cruz & Bastidas, 2022).

Living Forest as Knowledge and Communication System

The Living Forest has been explored from an ontological and political-legal perspective. The third prominent theme that arose was its function as a *system of knowledge generation and communication*. This section explores how the defence of the Living Forest as a knowledge and communication system exposes violence against the environment, gender, and especially knowledge, while also challenging these oppressions. It discusses the subthemes of *knowledge through forest connections*, *daily practices of knowledge-making*, and *knowledge transmission*. No additional sources beyond those previously mentioned cite interpreted Traditional Knowledge from the Ecuadorian Amazon.

Knowledge Through Forest Relations

Local Wisdom to Global Relevance

In the Living Forest, knowledge comes from the environment. This ancestral knowledge and wisdom are passed through communicational practices between humans and more-than-humans, such as plants, animals, and spirits (Aguinaga & Bilhaut, 2019; Ruales Flores, 2024). Passed down from generation to generation, it is shared through oral practices, dreams, and other ways (Herrera, 2024). According to the Indigenous Peoples of the Amazon, this knowledge is rich and advanced due to Their deep relationship with nature. However, this also makes it more challenging for people who lack this connection to

understand (Herrera, 2024). A key area of knowledge is about the forest' biodiversity, which is preserved for environmental protection and preservation of Their cultural identity (Aguinaga & Bilhaut, 2019).

Indigenous Ecological Knowledge is not only valuable for Their local environmental stewardship and sustainable biodiversity conservation, but could also have implications globally. Regionally, Their knowledge has proven crucial in combating environmental concerns that cause biodiversity loss. Research has shown that natural spaces considered spiritually significant by local and Indigenous Communities are generally consistently better conserved than sites without that status (Oikonomakis, 2024; Herrera, 2024). Similarly, studies conducted by Sze et al. (2021), Ceddia et al. (2015), and Fa et al. (2020) – as synthesised by Herrera (2024) – have shown that territories managed by Indigenous Peoples have a significant positive impact on the maintenance of the forest: Their expertise contributes to protecting, growing, and regenerating forest ecosystems, including the health of trees, soil, and even entire forest landscapes.

These findings underscore that the ecological knowledge of the People in the Living Forest effectively sustains biodiversity and mitigates natural degeneration, exacerbated by climate change and extractivism. Thus, as will be further discussed in the subtheme of knowledge transmission, this could have implications on a global level by forming a pathway to transform our relationship with nature into a more conscious and sustainable one.

Silenced Knowledge

Rooted in colonialism, capitalism, and patriarchy, (gendered) Indigenous Ancestral Knowledge has often been overlooked, stolen, or misinterpreted through Eurocentric lenses. Despite increased awareness, these injustices are still perpetuated (Herrera, 2024). As explored in *body-territory*, the disposition of Women's bodies and territories not only involves direct physical gendered and environmental harm, but also the silencing of Their

knowledge – embodied in Their daily practices and responsibilities – leading to the erasure of Their identities (Cruz, 2019; Herrera, 2024). Additionally, in scientific research, Amazonian Knowledge is frequently unconsidered or dismissed as anecdotal evidence (Herrera, 2024).

Moreover, Indigenous Knowledge continues to be dismissed in decision-making, despite formal consultation rights.³² Townsend & Townsend (2020) explain this as epistemic violence and marginalisation, manifesting in testimonial injustice. Their Sarayaku People case study shows that testimonies rooted in the Living Forest to protect Their territories against this state-led extractivism are often reduced to expressions of a “cultural identity” and “worldview” rather than legitimate environmental claims and knowledge. Conversely, expert testimonies according to westernised, scientific norms – presenting impacts of extractivism on vegetation, water bodies, soil, and erosion – were taken more seriously. This calls for communicative justice, meaning that Indigenous Knowledge and statements are deemed equally worthy.

Lastly, various research studies and Indigenous Peoples’ experiences touch upon the erasure of knowledge through the academic system imposed by the Ecuadorian State, which favours large-scale and centralised education models. This type of education risks reproducing heterogeneous and rational knowledge outside of diverse, lived experiences. Moreover, it also disconnects young people from Their ancestral lands and locally produced knowledge, making it more challenging to preserve knowledge (Herrera, 2024; Minoia et al., 2024)

³² The Ecuadorian Government has officially and legally granted rights of consultation to its Indigenous Peoples through the Court and Commission on any decisions about extractivist policies that will affect Their communities and livelihoods. For the Sarayaku People, this happened in 2012 through the Inter-American Court decision. However, Amazonian Women and Peoples have actively reclaimed Their position on international platforms, research shows that Their knowledge is still undervalued, misused, and misinterpreted (Herrera, 2024; Townsend & Townsend, 2020).

Daily Practices of Knowledge-Making

Ritual and Healing

This section explores the second subtheme, regarding the manifestations of the Living Forest as a knowledge and communication system in the daily life of Ecuador's Amazonian Women and Peoples. Minoia et al. (2024) describe these manifestations as “knowledge-making practices”, which are ways of producing, sharing, and maintaining knowledge through daily activities such as storytelling, rituals, and arts. Firstly, sharing traditional myths within communities, as explained in the first theme, is also vital in preserving knowledge. Nevertheless, these practices are increasingly neglected between generations, as younger Indigenous People are less invested in them, associated with the appeal of globalised modernity and technology (Dávalos, 2020).

Moreover, as highlighted, consuming plants and natural medicine is essential for the Amazonian Women and Peoples to maintain a reciprocal relationship with all living beings of the Living Forest. Additionally, it is also an integral part of Their ancestral knowledge: Their expertise about these plants and medicines helps them cure diseases and maintain better health (Herrera, 2024; Ruales Flores, 2024).³³ However, extractivism and climate change lead to the loss of plant and animal species, which directly threatens this knowledge production (Herrera, 2024; Ruales Flores, 2024). Thus, the Amazonian Women plead to protect and reproduce this knowledge in the Living Forest framework. For instance, the cultivation of medicinal plants in botanical gardens contributes to the preservation of Their ecological knowledge (Ruales, 2024).

³³ As seen in interviews with Indigenous Peoples, plants and natural medicine are crucial for Their well-being, for instance, as highlighted by this quote: “*Here we Indigenous people live with medicinal plants that have been preserved for years, and the company comes and cuts them down. We do not have hospitals, pharmacies like the mestizos*” (Indigenous Community member of Sarayaku People in Gualinga Eriberto [Ecuador], 2017, quoted in Ruales Flores, 2024) [Appendix C.6]

Education

In addition, learning-orientated activities and education are vital to the knowledge system of the Living Forest. *Daily Practices of Reconnection* mentions harvesting crops, hunting, and fishing as tools for spiritual reconnection. However, as highlighted by Ruales Flores (2024), young people in the Indigenous Community learn about these practices from Their elders and perform them daily, preserving Their ancestral knowledge and communicating Their cosmovision about living in harmony with the forest through daily practices.

According to Minoia et al. (2024), the pedagogical connection between humans and more-than-humans is crucial to regenerating knowledge connected with Mother Earth. Alternative teaching and learning methods in public spaces and educational institutions are critical to combat the loss of knowledge, especially in younger generations. For instance, schools organise mingas, body-painting, ceramics, *guayusas*³⁴, and *uyanzas*³⁵. These “place-, experimentally- and Indigenous Knowledge-based” activities are critical to Indigenous Education and provide an inclusive curriculum. Importantly, this knowledge should come from the Indigenous People themselves, rather than about them, to protect the Living Forest respectfully as a living knowledge system (Minoia et al., 2024).

Outward Knowledge Transmission

Documentation and Communication

The Living Forest serves not only as a knowledge system for its own People but also as a way of transmitting this knowledge and wisdom to the outside world (Herrera, 2024). In previous subthemes, the political practices and acts to defend the Living Forest as ontology and (body)-territory have been analysed, including according challenges faced and overcome.

³⁴ A *guayusa* is a ceremony that involves consuming a mixture produced from the leaves of the Ilex Guayusa trees, which originate in the Ecuadorian Amazon. During this activity, participants are sharing dreams, memories, stories, and legends in conversation, and purifying the body and mind (Minoia et al., 2024).

³⁵ *Uyanzas* (also known as *jista*) are traditional celebrations which involve travelling to the forest for walking, hunting, and fishing activities (Minoia et al., 2024).

This last section touches upon various communication practices and challenges in this process, focusing on widely disseminating the knowledge of the Living Forest.

The Amazonian Women and People have utilised communication to spread Their knowledge on the Living Forest, mainly through audiovisual technologies. Movie productions and documentaries have been extremely valuable in transmitting Their views on the Living Forest to the rest of the world as a way to fight globalisation and keep Their territories alive. Moreover, spoken word and speeches are essential communicational forms of resistance (Ruales Flores, 2024). In addition, cultural practices such as wearing traditional clothing or body paint are performed in political and public spaces as ways to transmit Their knowledge and cultural identity (Oikonomakis, 2020).

Challenges

However, specific challenges need to be overcome in transmitting the knowledge of the Living Forest to the outside world. One of these challenges is that dominant western epistemologies keep counteracting Indigenous Ancestral Knowledge when these are deemed incompatible, sometimes leading to attempts to convince Indigenous People to change Their views (Oikonomakis, 2020). Additionally, Indigenous Knowledge is frequently idealised and romanticised.

For instance, Herrera (2024) discusses the increasing popularity of ayahuasca among western audiences, often stemming from the idealisation of these Indigenous Rituals. This can lead to dangerous situations, negatively impact shamanism, and increase injustices (Herrera, 2024). Moreover, when the aforementioned cultural practices are shared publicly in non-Indigenous contexts, they risk being exaggerated, decontextualised, or misunderstood, possibly resulting in perpetuated harmful stereotyping. Therefore, understanding such practices of resistance in Their cultural context and critically reflecting on knowledge transmission is crucial (Oikonomakis, 2020).

Developing the Living Forest proposal necessitated translating what is evident to Amazonian Women into terms legible to academic, legal, or philosophical languages for the non-Indigenous outside world. Converting the forest's spirituality and multidimensionality into comprehensible political law calls for "intercultural" and "intercosmic translation"³⁶ (Ruales, 2024). This process involved linguistic and communicational limitations and required much research for Them and involved challenges, such as language translation and appropriate terminology. Comparison of concepts across different knowledge systems requires attentiveness to controlled equivocation^{37,38}. Thus, it is not only the Amazonian Women who must articulate Their worldviews to others. Above all, self-reflexivity and curiosity are necessitated from everyone, including researchers, activists, and policymakers, who truly aspire and commit to learning from these valuable views, knowledge, and experiences. This is essential to honour and protect life in the Living Forest – and ultimately, in any other place across Earth (Santi & Santos, 2020).

³⁶ Ruales (2024) has given the term *intercosmic* or *intercultural translation* to the translation and transmission of worldviews, realities, values, and cultural values into a different framework and context.

³⁷ *Controlled equivocation* is an anthropological concept as described by Eduardo Viveiros de Castro in 2004, especially prominent in the process of translating non-western or Indigenous Worldviews and knowledge into academic language. This process describes the acknowledgement and coping with differences in meaning without pretending that the concepts mean the same thing for both native and non-native sides when comparing the two, whilst being in the translation process of concepts. Examples of such terms are "culture", "nature", or "ritual". While translation inherently assumes an equivalent, there always remains a gap between the actual meaning within Indigenous Context and the description or used term that makes sense in academia. This means we should embrace and accept communicating through differences, without assuming there are none and thereby erasing or silencing them (Santi & Santos, 2020).

³⁸ An important note to the reader: Indigenous Terminology and Language have also been employed in this dissertation, intending to explain Their worldviews and concepts that, although widely used, may carry meanings shaped by dominant western epistemologies and normativities. This forms a methodological and epistemological limitation of the research. For instance, the term "territory" could conventionally be understood as a geographical and physical space. However, the meaning of such a word is context dependent: in testimonial epistemologies shared by the Amazonian Women and other People, and as understood and intended in this research, "territory" refers to the entire living and relational space and being (Santi & Santos, 2020). Therefore, it is essential to acknowledge that these words have context-dependent meaning that cannot be fully translated into western academic language and research structures.

Conclusion

This thesis has explored how the Living Forest, as defended by the Amazonian Women, exposes and resists the intersecting environmental, gendered, and epistemic violences of extractivism. Its original contribution lies in foregrounding the Living Forest as embodied resistance, uniting decolonial and ecofeminist struggles, in a world-making project. The analysis followed three main identified themes, *ontology*, *territory and body-territory*, and *knowledge and communication system*, each explored through subthemes [Appendix B]. They showed how the Living Forest reveals forms of violence, not as isolated harms, but as interlinked effects of extractive logics that deny Indigenous Ways of Being. Simultaneously, it presents a framework of resistance and alternatives rooted in relationality, care, and territorial autonomy.

The Living Forest as *ontology* represents a relational philosophy that inherently rejects the western separation of humans and nature. Moreover, it redefines wealth by centring planetary and community well-being. The Amazonian Women embody this through daily spiritual forest-making practices of reconnection that sustain important social and gendered relationships with nature. As *(body)-territory*, it highlights the protection of land beyond territorial boundaries, combating the disproportionate extractivist harm enacted on female bodies, knowledge, and cultural identity. Despite gender-based violence, Their persistent daily activism unites communities through territory-making. Lastly, as *knowledge and communication system*, it shows how knowledge-making – the production and transmission of Indigenous Ancestral Knowledge – is challenged, protected, and enacted through various intergenerational and outward-facing communicational practices. As such, the Living Forest combats epistemic erasure and contributes to biodiversity and ecosystem conservation both locally and globally.

Thus, the Living Forest is not only a response to the intersecting violence of extractivism on nature, gender, and knowledge. It is also a powerful philosophical and political strategy for reimagining life beyond extractivism and other forms of exploitation and oppression. Thus, this thesis concludes with highlighting the Living Forest as world-making, holding ecopolitical implications for climate, epistemic, territorial, and gender justice for Indigenous Peoples and Women.

This research faced various limitations. Misinterpretations of Spanish and Indigenous sources and concepts due to language and translation may have reflected bias and flattened or distorted meanings.²⁰ Moreover, Indigenous Worldviews, such as the Living Forest, inherently refuse the compartmentalisation that western epistemologies and academia generally impose. This made structuring the analysis a significant methodological and ethical challenge, risking fragmentation. Lastly, there may have been an over-representation of prominent activist voices in publicly available materials, excluding Those outside formal activism or research.

Future research could explore other forms of violence, such as economic, physical, or mental health harm. Moreover, it could investigate the connection between legal resistance strategies and RoN. A recurring theme was the Amazonian Women's challenge of streamlining resistance within the Living Forest, complicated by diverse territorial contexts, languages, and visions. Future research could examine specific obstacles in concept translation and engage with other cosmovisions through an anti-extractivist lens.

This research has invited its audience to engage with Indigenous philosophies as essential alternatives to dominant extractivist systems and to honour the Living Forest by taking collective action and rethinking life, wealth, and well-being. Ultimately, we must all take responsibility to recognise, learn from, and support Indigenous Resistance, challenge the systems that perpetuate social and planetary injustices and protect life in all its forms.

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Appendix

Appendix A. Positionality Statement and Ethical Considerations

Importance

According to Homan (2023), positioning one's identity is crucial for decolonising research and knowledge production. This involves considering how one's individual experiences and social identities, such as gender, race, ethnicity, or geographical background, can shape research and result in biased understandings of the world. Such critical reflection fosters transparency and ethical integrity, demonstrates diversity and inclusion, decentres one's position as the norm (particularly when coming from a White coloniser-settler background), and prevents readers from having to make any assumptions about one's identity. Thus, according to Sultana (2007), paying attention to positionality and reflexivity is essential for conducting ethical and decolonial research.

To pursue this as well as possible, I have also reviewed various sources regarding Indigenous research methods. Examples of these sources are Wilson's *Research is ceremony: Indigenous research methods* (2008), *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples* by Smith (2012), and some practical guides such as the University of Alberta's *Indigenous Research Guide* (2025), and the Indigenous citation guide from James Cook University Australia (2025). These guidelines together emphasise the importance of positionality, relationship-building (in the case of fieldwork research), and ethically appropriate citation, such as the NorQuest-style format for the APA 7th citing edition.

Personal Statement

As a White, non-Indigenous, female undergraduate student from the Netherlands, studying Global Responsibility and Leadership at the University of Groningen, I acknowledge that my personal and academic background and the systems and structures in place afford me unearned privileges. I also recognise that my identity inevitably influences

the research process to some extent, despite being committed to maintaining reflectivity and reflexivity throughout the research process and improving my understanding of decolonising research, guided by feminist, Indigenous and decolonial perspectives. I aim to engage with the struggle for environmental justice in a way that emphasises the resistance and resilience of the Indigenous Women in the Ecuadorian Amazon and to understand this from Their perspective as much as possible, while recognising that I cannot speak for them.

Practical Implications

Sources and Citation

In practical terms, this means that my engagement with sources is done carefully and with a high sense of responsibility. I prioritise sources in which Indigenous, Latin American, and Ecuadorian Scholars, activists, and organisations are either the authors or directly quoted to ensure correct representation of Their perspectives and experiences. I aim to avoid overly relying on interpretations of western scholars. Moreover, when using quotes from Indigenous Women, I critically assess the contexts in which they are produced and published to ensure this is done ethically and with consent.

As the used sources are often about specific ancestral Indigenous Knowledge, it should be clear in citations that the research is building on Traditional Knowledge, including where this knowledge comes from and who exactly has produced it (University of Alberta Library, 2025; James Cook University Australia, 2025). To maintain flow and readability and avoid repetitiveness, not every source is cited as (Traditional knowledge, in [cited source]). Moreover, not every Indigenous Source includes the location, Indigenous Community, and language for the same reason: this would repeatedly state that the Traditional Knowledge is produced and shared in Ecuador by Indigenous People, mostly from the Sarayaku People. Instead, it is stated in the analysis chapters that certain sources require this reference, and the reference list includes more detailed information about Indigenous Sources. Moreover, to

increase transparency on the source and context of certain quotations used from interviews produced and published by activists and other researchers during fieldwork, the original Spanish interview texts are included in Appendix C.

In addition, I understand that engaging with Indigenous Struggles, worldviews, and resistance goes beyond ethical usage and citation of sources. I acknowledge my limited understanding of these complex topics, which should not be reduced to western epistemologies. Despite this being challenging, I aspire to let the philosophies and frameworks of Indigenous Peoples, such as the Living Forest, guide how I frame Their resistance, rather than fitting them into academic models. Lastly, during my writing process, I aim to maintain reflexivity by questioning whether and how my language use and interpretation might reflect unconscious and westernised bias.

Usage of Help Tools

In this dissertation, AI tools have been used as limited as possible to support critical thinking, original writing, and ethical research. When reviewing the documents for the analysis, ChatGPT has been utilised on several occasions to explain a complex, situated concept to improve my personal understanding of it, which was insufficient to research externally with other search engines. Additionally, as mentioned, DeepL has been used as a translator machine for Spanish sources. However, as this programme can only take limited text, ChatGPT has assisted in giving a literal (non-interpretative) translation of texts of specific Indigenous Words when necessary. Moreover, in the writing process, Grammarly Pro and QuillBot have been used to improve grammar, spelling, paraphrasing, and overall sentence structures of complex sentences to enhance the overall readability, conciseness, and coherence.

Appendix B. Analytical structure

Main theme	Subthemes	Sub-subthemes (extensive versions of headings)	Labels/keywords
Ontology	1. Ontology of inseparability	1. Contrasting ontologies 2. Nature as subject: equal and alive	Relationality, kinship, relationship, interconnectivity, reciprocity, personhood, dichotomy, language, terminology, conservation, extinction, biodiversity, ecosystems, climate change, ecological crisis, equal, subject, living beings, human-nature
	2. Redefining wealth and well-being	1. Commonality of life, labour, and goods 2. Imaginaries and languages of wealth and poverty	Commodification of nature, appropriation, exploitation, commonality, labour, mingas, market, Good Living, Life Plans, soil, wisdom and knowledge, gender participation, health services, solidarity, community, harmony, indicators, wealth, poverty, languages, political imaginaries, economic alternative
	3. Daily practices of kinship, relationality, and reconnection	1. Meaning of social relationship 2. Practices as spiritual experiences of reconnection and interconnectedness	Respect, protector, inhabited spirit, transspecies entities, feminine, spirituality, forestry practices, Women's responsibility, reproduction, agriculture, farming, fishing, mythology, hunting, plant consumption, medicine, regulations, preventative health, characters of beings, art
(Body-) Territory	1. Political forest: territory and law	1. Territorial struggles and violence 2. Defending territory beyond a physical space in law	Autonomy, legitimacy, defending territory, Indigenous territory, legal protection, law, legal framework, recognition, cultural identity, displacement, lack of consultation, different forests
	2. Body-territory and gender	1. Meaning of body-territory and the union between nature and subject 2. Oppressions and	Capital production, bodily knowledge, systematic violence, dispossession of territories/bodies, ecofeminism, historical/structural exploitation,

		resistance of the female body and territory	hierarchy, self-determination, racialisation, machismo, masculinisation, domestic violence, sexual violence, domination, health, militarisation, gender roles, spiritual-economic tasks, reproductive work, exclusion from decision-making, stigmatisation
	3. Daily practices of territory-making	1. Territorial activism in everyday life 2. Emotion, existence, and unity through forest-making practices	Mobilisation actions, persecution, activism, threats, mitigating responsibilities, forest-making practices, song, unity, emotion, crying, expression, body-painting, call of existence
Knowledge and communication system	1. Knowledge through forest connections	1. Sources and implications of knowledge in nature 2. Silenced and erased (gendered) knowledge	Indigenous ancestral/traditional/ecological/ecological/conservational knowledge, generational transmission, political strategy, communicational relationship, protecting the environment, silenced knowledge, international platforms, epistemic injustice, testimonial injustice, education system, derooting youth, misinterpretations, academia
	2. Daily practices of knowledge-making and communication	1. Ancestral knowledge through myths, plants, and health 2. Educational and learning-oriented practices	Myths sharing, plant/medicinal knowledge, initiatives for knowledge preservation, learning-oriented practices, alternative teaching/learning methods, educational activities, rituals, celebrations
	3. Transmitting knowledge to the inside and outside world	1. Documentation and communication practices 2. Struggles in transmitting knowledge: translation and contextualisation	Documentation, technologies, communication practices, cinema, documentaries, contextualisation, romanticisation, idealisation, cultural performances, communicational obstacles, knowledge transmission, translation, differences in meaning/concepts, languages

Appendix C. Original Spanish Quotations

Appendix C.1

“Y por último, como pueblos indígenas basados en nuestra cosmovisión, en nuestros derechos, proponemos que empecemos a generar una propuesta a nivel mundial, a nivel de país, no solamente basada en derechos, sino basada en lo sagrado que es para nosotros el mundo de la cosmovisión amazónica, nuestro espacio territorial, y que ese modelo sea declarado selva viviente, que no sea declarado zona de interés nacional, sino que sea declarado zona de vida, excluyendo toda explotación petrolera.” (Patricia Gualinga [Ecuador], Amazonian Woman before the National Assembly. Personal communication. Quito, October 22nd 2013, cited from Coba & Jiménez, 2020)

Appendix C.2

“Y vemos la vida, los derechos de la naturaleza, los derechos de todos los seres vivos porque estamos muy claros que si hay un deterioro del medio ambiente en el mundo el género humano en el planeta estaría extinguiendo.” (Laura Salas Witness [Ecuador], 2020, 2:57)

Appendix C.3

“(…) Por lo tanto, el Kawsak Sacha tiene que ver con que esa destrucción de la selva viviente, del bosque viviente, del ártico viviente, la cuenca del Congo viviente, de cualquier lado del mundo que esté viviente, esa desconexión genera un desequilibrio en el que si destruyes y matas, matas de donde está generándose la vida y fluyendo el equilibrio, y esa regeneración no se puede dar.” (Patricia Gualinga [Ecuador], Amazonian Woman. Personal communication. December 15th 2023, cited from Ruales Flores, 2024)

Appendix C.4

“Las violencias históricas y opresivas existen tanto para mi primer territorio cuerpo, como también para mi territorio histórico, la tierra” (Cabnal, 2010, p.23, cited from Suárez, 2025)

Appendix C.5

“Que pasó después de esa marcha? Estas mujeres empezaron a recibir amenazas, empezaron a ser gredidas, perseguidas, y públicamente humilladas [y] insultadas en medios de comunicación” (TEDx Talks & Gualinga [Ecuador], 2018, 11:29)

Appendix C.6

“Aquí los indígenas vivimos con las plantas medicinales que han sido guardadas por años, y la compañía viene y las corta, nosotros no tenemos como los mestizos hospitales, farmacias ni nada” (Indigenous Community member of Sarayaku People [Ecuador]. Published in Gualinga Eriberto, 2017, cited from Ruales Flores, 2024)