



## LIFE IN TRAFFIC: Riddling Field Notes on the Political Economy of “Sex” and Nature

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The promise of rain hangs heavy in Peru’s mineral-rich Amazonian region of Madre de Dios as the Toyota Tundra glides along the Interoceanic Highway. It’s the last day in August 2011, and I’m traveling with four environmental engineers employed by the regional government’s Department of Energy, Mines, and Hydrocarbons. Madre de Dios, bordered by Brazil and Bolivia, is experiencing a gold rush,<sup>1</sup> and with it, the companion industry of the sex trade. As we drive, makeshift restaurants and *prostibars* (brothel-bars) flash past the window. We are headed to gold-mining camps to conduct workshops on environmental impacts. On other occasions, I enter the mines with regional health teams and sex workers turned peer educators.

This triple-frontier Amazonian zone bears the acronym MAP: *M* for Madre de Dios, *A* for Brazil’s state of Acre, and *P* for a region in Bolivia called Pando. The engineers joke that this remote area is “off the map,” home to “tribes living in voluntary isolation.”<sup>2</sup> Yet despite this off-the-beaten-track reputation, my colleagues repeat something I’ve heard frequently since crossing from Brazil into Peru along the Interoceanic Highway: the route not only enables travel and migration but also facilitates a variety of illegal economies. “All the labor trafficking in the mines? Sex trafficking? Wildlife trafficking? Gold?” Enrique, one of the engineers, asks rhetor-



Figure 1. Life by the side of the highway. Photos by Ruth Goldstein.

ically. His companions nodding assent, another engineer adds: “It’s all because of the highway.”

From October 2010 until May 2012, and for shorter stints between 2016 and 2021, I undertook multisited research along the Interoceanic Highway, examining the kinds of “life in traffic” the environmental engineers referenced. Concentrating on the seemingly disparate economies of women, plants, and gold, I conducted fieldwork with artisanal and small-scale gold miners, sex workers, Indigenous community members, environmental engineers, health-care practitioners, intellectual property experts, taxi drivers, as well as regional and central government officials in the MAP region. I found the three economies intimately intertwined: women destined for the sex trade, plants they employed for reproductive health (botanicals also targeted by biopirates for pharmaceutical potential), and the gold—which drives local to global markets. As the environmental engineers emphasized, the Interoceanic Highway supports myriad trafficking economies.

*La Interoceánica*,<sup>3</sup> as the highway is known in Peru, forms part of an infrastructural development plan to build roads across South America (Apurina 2015; Dammert Bello 2018; Gadea 2012).<sup>4</sup> Coast to coast, the highway spans some 3,500 miles between Brazil’s Atlantic and Peru’s Pacific, grazing Bolivia. It is Latin America’s longest latitudinal thoroughfare, promoted as integral for opening Amazonian areas to economic development, transporting goods (like Brazilian soybeans) to Peru’s Pacific coast and then to Chinese markets (Delgado 2008; Harvey and Knox 2015; Moore 2019). Yet the highway’s two lanes aren’t busy. Occasionally, trucks filled with timber of suspect origin rumble by. Otherwise, it’s just local traffic—



Figure 2. MAP region & Inter-oceanic Highway (Peru-Brazil) and Waterways.  
Map created by Scott Walker, courtesy of the Harvard Map Collection.

gasoline trucks (often with people, chickens, sheep, and motorcycles hitching on top), taxis, buses, and motorcycles going to and from the gold mines of Madre de Dios. The highway has not achieved the promised transnational economic integration. Rather, informal markets and deforestation proliferate (Baraloto et al. 2015; Chirif 2019).

The construction of the highway in Peru coincided with the global economic crisis, further heightening the demand for gold. The newest and most-trafficked section (completed in 2011) connects Peru's Andean capital, Cusco, with Brazil, cutting through Madre de Dios. Until the paving of *La Interoceánica*, no asphalt road had run through the region (Dourojeanni 2006; Harvey and Knox 2015). Known as the "Capital of Biodiversity," Madre de Dios had previously boasted so-called virgin rain forest. The name given to this Amazonian region reflects the long-standing presence of Dominican missionary *padres* (fathers) whose naming of the Madre de Dios (Mother of God) River would also be bestowed on the surrounding land.<sup>5</sup> The impossible duty of the virgin-mother to both reproduce and remain chaste makes for an apt description for both the rain forest landscape—riddled with mining holes and pillaged for medicinal plants—and for the sex-working women. *La Interoceánica* has only served to intensify trafficking economies in human and environmental extraction.

Back in the truck, Enrique sits in the front seat, chewing coca leaves and detailing the contentious history of *La Interoceánica's* construction and its environ-



Figure 3. Welcome to the Southern Interoceanic Highway. Photo by Ruth Goldstein.



Figure 4. Road signs. Before and After: Abandoned / Progress; Uncertainty / Future. Photos by Ruth Goldstein.

mental toll as we pass faded state-sponsored signs touting the highway's economic promise. The engineers criticize policies that single out small-scale miners for the environmental destruction. “And where does the gold go?” Enrique asks. “Here,” he taps his phone and points to mine. Peru consistently ranks as Latin America’s top producer of gold (Martinez et al. 2018; Espin and Perz 2021) and among the top ten globally. Madre de Dios contributes an estimated 25 percent of Peru’s gold exports, transformed into phones and other electronics (Buccella 2014; Tubb 2020); jewelry, and bullion in Europe, the United States, and the United Arab Emirates



(Cortés-McPherson 2019; Holland 2020). Small-scale miners are not pocketing the major earnings—buyers and traders are.

While the engineers explain the difference between informal and illegal mining to me and how to recycle the liquid mercury used in the small-scale and artisanal mining process,<sup>6</sup> Enrique decides to stop the truck. He steps out, waiting for me by the guardrail, flanked by plastic-walled *prostibulos*. As I slide out of the backseat to meet him, tar fumes burn my nose. In front of us, a large sign, paid for by a local mining company, declares: “TO TAKE CARE OF THE ENVIRONMENT IS TO TAKE CARE OF OUR LIFE.”



Figure 5. To Take Care of the Environment. Photo by Ruth Goldstein.

This is what Enrique wanted to show me, the irony of it all.

Then he asks: “What is the difference between a mine and a woman?”

Throughout the weeks, I had seen bulldozers topple trees, digging open mining pits. I had seen precious plants and animals stopped by border police, then trafficked onward along the highway. I had also seen families coming from the mines to roadside clinics, able to afford medicine, send children to school, and build a home. I’m silent next to Enrique, thinking about how this highway has created fertile ground for extracting gold, wildlife, and human labor—but also for local socioeconomic mobility. The gold goes global. Coca, maca, and ayahuasca, some of the (medicinal) plants trafficked to and from Peru, also go around the world: part of a multi-billion-dollar herbal medicine trade (Allkin 2017). The women, however, do not circulate as easily.

Because I haven't responded, Enrique repeats himself.

"Is this a bad joke about women?" I'm not sure whether to take him seriously.

"It's a riddle . . . You can't guess?" Enrique pantomimes surprise.

"I don't want to guess."

"Nothing," Enrique pauses. "Because both are for exploitation."

In this article, I examine "life in traffic" along and off the side of the Inter-oceanic Highway, where the "traffic in women" and the political economy of "sex/gender systems" (Rubin 1975) are discursively and materially linked with notions of the value and the violability of "nature," gendered female. Acknowledging the proliferation of critical scholarship engaging gender, commodification, labor (Babb 2018; Strathern 1988,<sup>7</sup> 2016; Lepowski 1993), nature (Franklin, Lury, and Stacey 2000), and language (Butler 1993, 2004)—among others—Gayle Rubin's 1975 essay "The Traffic in Women: Notes on the 'Political Economy' of Sex" remains the inspiration for this article's title and analysis, which delves into the (inter)relations that configure the traffic in women, plants, and gold.<sup>8</sup>

In her feminist critique of Claude Lévi-Strauss, Sigmund Freud, and Marxist categories, Rubin argues that the division of gendered labor is not foundational to capitalism, but rather, that all sex/gender systems emerge as capitalism's social products. Riffing on Karl Marx (and Simone de Beauvoir 1949), Rubin (1975, 158) insists that: "A woman is a woman. She only becomes a domestic, a wife, a chattel, a playboy bunny, a prostitute, or a human dictaphone in certain relations." Wrested from these relations, women are not the "helpmate" of men "any more than gold in itself is money." Rubin places women into relation with gold, but in a different manner than the roadside version of the riddle.

Calling for a "full-bodied analysis" of the production of sex/gender systems, Rubin requests redirecting attention from the political economy of material goods and their relations. Yet, I argue, "the relations of production and transport that govern food, clothing, automobiles and transistor radios" (Rubin 1975, 166)—all employed in the extractive economies—must also come under consideration. These goods require natural resources to be made. They do not remain separate from the production of gender identities, sexual desire, or classist, racist, and ableist notions of bodily availability in which ideas about feminized nature represent unspoken yet persistent signifiers of exchange value. The "traffic in women" also constitutes a traffic in nature. Comprehending the social production of sex and ideas about who and what is exploitable, a fully fleshed analysis must include

the traffic in plant, animal, and mineral life. The processes of road-building, mining technologies, and biopiracy—part of patriarchal notions of progress—inform how “nature,” gendered female and often indigenized or racialized, gains monetary value and becomes configured into global commodity chains as “natural capital.”<sup>9</sup>

Beginning with the riddle, I investigate the intersecting and emerging political economies of natural resources and (those who identify as) women, unearthing the “certain relations” that equate women and mines. The material and metaphoric entanglements of women, gold, and plants along the highway from the Andes to the Amazon comprise part of a global traffic in natural resources, discursively and materially formulated in transit. The socioeconomic relations that link women and natural resources not only become apparent when examining discursive formations; they’re also produced and affirmed—the mentality toward exploitation—through language. These entangled economies hinge on notions of sex and nature, expressed (and exposed) through speech acts like rumor, jokes, riddles, and stories. Such discursive formations represent nodes of “communicability” (Briggs 2005), denoting quick transmission, demonstrating and (re)instantiating acceptable attitudes toward the violability of natural resources *and* women. They make for “excitable speech” acts: particular “words or certain forms of address [that] not only operate as threats to one’s physical well-being, but there is a strong sense in which the body is alternatively sustained and threatened through modes of address” (Butler 1997, 5). While speech acts like the riddle may condition material possibilities and influence human actions by normalizing exploitation, they also embody possibilities for subversion.

Male gold miners may also endure exploitative work conditions, but their treatment is not related to a sexualized landscape in language or practice. Following Carolyn Merchant’s (1980) examination of metaphoric female imagery for “Nature” in Enlightenment scientific discourse, ecofeminist scholars elucidate language’s role in creating regimes of value and the reversible function of analogies that equate the exchange values of women’s bodies and “Nature’s womb” (Gaard 1997; Warren 2000). Mother Earth’s shifting status as revered or plunderable, “virgin” or “fertile,” correlates with how women’s bodies gain—or lose—socioeconomic value, and vice versa. Defined in relationship to “Nature’s body” (Schiebinger 1993), women, like Nature, can be marked as accessible—if not necessary to exploit—in the name of economic progress.

In colonial and neo-colonial Latin America, sex work often accompanies men’s labor camps built around natural resource extraction. A growing body of Latinx scholarship on sexual violence in areas of extractive enterprises ana-

lyzes how the demands of global capitalism exacerbate existing racial and gender inequalities (Cabrapan and Hofmann 2019; Pineda and Moncada 2018; Salazar Ramírez 2017; Ulloa 2016). These economies of natural resource extraction create the grounds for the traffic in women.

The export economy of Madre de Dios revolves around logging and gold mining. Agricultural production of Brazil nuts and chocolate cannot match income from natural resource extraction or sex work. Drawn to the mining boom, sex workers, miners, and traffickers travel from neighboring countries or other parts of Peru. The sex industry is a diverse one, though, where workers operate under varying conditions of consent: from outright deception, often trafficked by another woman, to intentionally planned sex-work trips to the mines (Goldstein 2014, 2019a). Resonant with forms of reproductive labor like embryo exchange, sex traffic “between women” exists (Roberts 2012); sex work often funds tuition, schoolbooks, or a family member’s surgery.

In terms of consent and types of sex work, Madre de Dios is not unique. Erotic dancing and accompanying drinking clients represent a significant portion of what is labeled as sex work, though, strictly speaking, these do not constitute sexual acts. Many sex workers did not arrive as trafficked persons either. Radical feminists often capitalize on narratives of captive (cis)women prostitutes, relying on narrow categories of agency and consent that do not allow for lived complexity or desire (Salazar Parreñas, Hwang, and Lee 2012; Kempadoo 2004; Hofmann and Moreno 2016). The concern over sex trafficking pivots on the virgin/mother opposition, clouding the sociopolitical and economic relations that create few options for narrating or actualizing womanhood (Goldstein 2014, 2019a).

Whereas the first version of the riddle has the potential to reinstate gendered notions of human and nonhuman life, riddles, like their tellers, can prove innovative, challenging structures of race, gender, indigeneity, and sexuality. It matters who is asking and who is answering. Throughout my fieldwork, sex workers (both cis- and transwomen), alongside Indigenous women leaders, rewrote the riddle in empowering ways. They raised questions about just who and what counts as a woman or a feminized entity when male miners refer to their tips, paid in gold, as *las chibolas* (slang for “girls”),<sup>10</sup> and plants like maca, coca, and ayahuasca embody powerful female identities. All three plants, commonly consumed in Madre de Dios, represent a *pharmakon*—remedy or poison, depending on the dose.<sup>11</sup> Women also spoke of a kinship with the gold mines, not because of exploitation, but rather, because they both “fight back”: rain forest mines collapse when root systems erode, claiming the lives of the men in the pits. My exchange with En-



rique and subsequent revisions of the riddle became focal points for making field notes on “life in traffic.”

### TRAFFIC LINES

Engaging what Donna Haraway (1989) calls an edifying “traffic” between the co-constituted poles of nature and culture and what socioeconomic relations enable the exchange of women and nature—relations revealed in the first telling of the riddle—I deploy *traffic* in three ways. First, in the context of quotidian commuting—its circulation and jams; second, as illegal trade. These first two engagements define traffic as act(ion)s or events that may also constitute objects of analysis. They inform the third engagement, where traffic operates as an adaptive, mobile conceptual framework and method for multisited fieldwork, often entailing multiple objects of analysis, possibly traveling at different speeds and directions—where words also travel (Goldstein 2014).

While *traffic* connotes illegal activity, the need for camouflage (Jusionyte 2012), multidirectional or congested movement, and in/detectability (Middleton 2019) in commuter transit, it also signifies a productive movement in ideas (Geertz 1973; Haraway 1989; Lévi-Strauss 1966; Näser-Lather and Neubert 2015; Williams 1973). The meaning of the Latin *trafficare*, “to carry on trade,” derives from the verb’s literal denotation, “touching repeatedly, to handle.” The etymology stems from *transfricare*. *Trans* signifies “across,” while *fricare* means “to rub,” as in “friction,” the force that resists the motion that creates it. As a metaphor, *friction* means conflict, which, as Anna Tsing (2004) reminds us, can also manifest as generative, potentially fomenting rearrangements of power relations.

I offer an analytic and method of *traffic* as an addition to the ethnographic toolbox, not a replacement for existing theoretical or methodological frameworks. It is indebted to Haraway’s (1989, 377) edifying conceptual traffic in nature and culture and Jodi Byrd’s (2011) “cacophony,” in which the transit police’s patrol of commuter traffic delineate the boundaries of empire and modes of multiplicity do not necessarily invite harmony. *Traffic* offers a complement (and compliment) to Tsing’s (2004) interactive “friction” of opposing people and ideas about nature and culture, with the fitting description of “where the rubber meets the road.” Similar to friction, and like retellings of the riddle, *traffic* allows for lability and unlikely productive encounters, elucidating “certain relations,” their histories and linguistic packaging that create the conditions in which women become prostitutes, playboy bunnies, or gold mines—exploitable commodities or rebellious subjects of different orders. This “multi-optic” aspect of *traffic* encourages “an ethics of mutual

avowal, or open and active acknowledgment of connection with other struggles” (Kim 2015, 20). Locating interrelations among more than a single object of analysis become crucial to the conceptual framework of *traffic*, aligned with multisited fieldwork methodologies. In concert with “an ethics of mutual avowal” (Kim 2015, 20), this approach recognizes that, as ethnographers, we also “traffic”—that is, capitalize—on telling other people’s stories.

While *traffic* follows friction and the rich literature on networks and exchange, identifying co-constituting relations and nodes of connection with the intention of acting on productive aspects of synthesis and movement, it also acknowledges getting stuck and hard stops. Often, geopolitical economic relations that configure social hierarchies don’t allow for much mobility. Intrinsic to the ethical impetus of an analytical and methodological approach of *traffic*, then, is considering how automotive traffic, forced migration, and illegal trade can lead to roadkill, jams, collisions—machinations of empire where power isn’t unsettled (Byrd 2011). In such violent moments, people and things may keep going, but in disastrous directions or simply because returning or changing direction aren’t possible (Yeh 2018). While a method of traffic examines multidirectionality and subversion, reverse-ability does not always amount to upsetting the status quo. Thus, in addition to the lability that relational analysis affords, I ask what it means to seriously consider endings. In the conclusion, I return to this question.

When I began research in 2008, questions of gender, race, Indigeneity, and sexuality were central, but sex workers and gold had not yet entered the ethnographic frame. I was interested in Indigenous intellectual property rights and biopiracy, specifically the traffic in medicinal plants that the engineers noted had increased with the construction of *La Interoceánica*. Biopiracy, which entails appropriating ethnobiological knowledge in addition to biological material, has its roots in European colonial conquest (Hayden 2004; Goldstein 2019b). Plants and empire have long shared histories (Baber 2016; Cañizares-Esguerra 2006; Schiebinger 2004), accompanying transoceanic quests for precious metals. European colonial extractive economies that trafficked in gold and silver, rubber and quinine, tea and opium also trafficked in laboring bodies. These entanglements—involving people, metals, flora, and fauna—triangulated across oceans or the same land mass, persist (Bauer and Norton 2017; Hamaan 2010; Tamboli 2019). The exploitation of one life links to the global supply chain of another(s). The routes and relations that involve women, plants, and gold along *La Interoceánica* create “global assemblages” (Ong and Collier 2005), demonstrating the continuation of colonial-era quests for precious metals, exotic wildlife, and (re)producible food-stocks. An analytic and

method of traffic suggests that to intervene in one would have potentially liberating ramifications for the others, identifying where, perhaps even how, to do that. It also underscores the role that language plays in shaping human attitudes and actions.

Because I initially focused on plant trafficking, I interviewed Brazilian patent officials and biologists analyzing the pharmaceutical potential of Amazonian and Andean plants for human sexual health. The search for possible “natural Viagras” had become popular because they were certain to have a lucrative market. As a further benefit, these plants were not subject to the same IP (Intellectual Property) standards as possible HIV/AIDS or cancer drugs. But these plants were tied to Indigenous territorial claims, political sovereignty, and cultural patrimony, if not also economic markets (Labate and Goldstein 2009; Labate 2012; Pantoja 2008; Tavui 2016). When I asked how this flora made it thousands of miles from the Andes and Amazon to the cities of São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro, researchers posited the surprising response that, in addition to biopirates, sex workers—*putas* (whores), in their words—carried these plants when traveling along *La Interoceánica*.

The intertwined narrative of sex workers and plants frayed in some places and became more knotted in others. There are many ways for flora to travel. While more complicated than a factory assembly line, sex workers often carry a variety of plants for sale or their own use, including maca, coca, and ayahuasca in their mobile botanical pharmacies. Maca (*Lepidium meyenii*) is one of Peru’s most biopirated plants (Smith 2015; Tavui 2016). Coca (*Erythroxylum coca*), a sacred Andean plant, gains its notoriety from its refined cousin, cocaine. And ayahuasca (*Banisteria caapi*), a revered Amazonian vine known for its potent medicinal-psychedelic effects, has increasingly become the focus of pharmaceutical testing for depression and Parkinson’s disease (Domínguez-Clavé et al. 2016; Dos Santos et al. 2015).

As with many medicinal botanicals, dosage is key. In the sex worker’s pharmacy, maca and coca act as stimulants, increasing blood flow. Indeed, maca’s global popularity results from its reputation as a “natural” Viagra (Indecopi 2015; Neuman 2014; Ninahuanca 2014). The sex workers sell both maca and coca to male clients. The use of ayahuasca, popular with psychonauts, differs, but women reported employing the vine to facilitate childbirth. Less publicized is how women may use maca and coca as abortive substances. Increased blood flow might aid fertility and aid birth contractions or an end pregnancy—again, depending on the dose.<sup>12</sup> Such versatility does not translate into the possible reversal of all effects, however.

The trajectory of women and plants along the highway was not always straightforward, thus, neither was mine. Between 2011 and 2017, I crisscrossed

the triple frontier zone ten times. At border checkpoints waiting for inspection, I stood alongside women en route to and from the gold mines. “We carry our plants with us,” two of them explained during one border crossing. It was cheaper to self-medicate and less humiliating than going to a government-run clinic that would ask for their “carnet,” which registered sex workers were supposed to carry, demonstrating their sexual health status.

Guards most often confiscated coca at the border crossings, a result of an overall crackdown on cocaine. Yet the plant was popular because it kept miners and sex workers alert during long hours, not to mention its purported circulatory effects for erection issues. When I asked Brazilian border agents about the hard line on coca (even coca candies were banned), they responded: “Mules carry more than the leaf.” Women acting as carriers, so-called mules (*mulas*)—another instance of gendered interspecies collapse—commonly serve as human vehicles for trafficking cocaine (Kernaghan 2015) and wildlife. Border authorities now receive training to recognize traits of traffickers to help catch these *mulas*. *Mulas*, the agent explained, can traffic drugs, gold, or other women—and they might also be the commodity trafficked.



Figure 6. Brazil-Peru Border: Public Safety and Military Post to Confront Human Trafficking and Biological Materials. Photo by Ruth Goldstein.

The waiting area for inspection lies between the Peruvian and Brazilian border-enforcement offices for “trafficked biological materials” and for “trafficked people.” Fines for trafficked plants and women might be paid in pieces of gold. “They all go together,” officers told me. But only so far; then they go separate ways. Estimates place illegal gold from Madre de Dios circulating in the global market at around 18 tons (Adamek, Lupa, and Zawadzki 2021). Peruvian maca ends up in Japan and China (Smith 2015; Zhou 2017), while coca for cocaine goes around the world (UNODC 2021; Zevallos 2017), and ayahuasca lands in laboratories in the Global North (Sánchez and Bouso 2015). The women stay in the rain forest mines or go back and forth to their homes. Traveling *La Interoceánica*, I recognized this highway’s centrality to meeting the global demand for gold and interrelated trafficking economies.

### ROADS AS “CERTAIN” RELATIONS

In 2016, the CEO of Odebrecht, the Brazilian company that built *La Interoceánica*, was indicted in a fittingly named corruption scandal: “Operation Car-Wash.” Indictments continue, but thus far, Odebrecht admits to bribing five Peruvian presidents to win construction contracts. Coast to coast, the very making of *La Interoceánica* rests on a foundation of money-laundering, the evasion of environmental assessments, and steamrolling over Indigenous protests. Highways like *La Interoceánica* function as border zones (Campbell 2012; Harvey and Knox 2015) between “nature” and “culture,” creating fundamental relations in configurations of capital that encourage various forms of movement on its surface. The global demand for gold that comes into play with the construction of *La Interoceánica* spawns migration to the Amazonian rain forest mines, but it also contributes to stasis. Andean and Amazonian inhabitants seeking economic opportunities find themselves stuck along the highway—in mudslides, broken-down vehicles, or conditions of debt peonage. The “encumbrances of exchange” (Winchell 2018) occur, not surprisingly, along well-worn colonial fault lines of racial, sexual, and gender difference. Border crossings reveal the transit of people and things if not also the edges of empire, where the traffic in women, plants, and gold constitute not entirely separate markets. As a physical setting, the highway also forms part of the political economy of the region, a “certain relation” that creates the conditions for the traffic in women and nature.

Standing by the side of *La Interoceánica* next to Enrique with “mines are like women” ringing in my ears, I recalled how the space by the side of the road might also function as a narrative site, “an epistemological stance” (Stewart 1996)



from which to examine the conditions of possibility for reconfiguring sets of relations—economic and ecological—that put women and gold mines into the same category of exchange value. Here, the highway functions as material, relational space as well as a narrative device. The “chronotope of the road” (Bakhtin 1981) is a time-space setting for encounters (Kernaghan 2012), ones that can result in collision, exchange, or (mis)adventure. Road trips also offer the space-time for telling and listening to stories.

As we walked back to the truck on that August day, Enrique asked about my thoughts. Was I upset about the riddle? While contentious at times, my relationship with my male colleagues generally had the tenor of sibling rivalry. Even as they teased me, they showed fierce concern for my physical safety. They repeatedly went out of their way to support my research, spending long days stuck by the side of the road because of a mudslide and heavy rains. These were the moments for cracking jokes, spinning riddles, and recounting tales.

I told Enrique I was thinking about a *Father Earth*. Would there be so many road projects? Greedy grabs for medicinal plants? Could men be like mines? Would it change the meaning of the “to-take-care-of-the-environment” roadside sign? We brought these questions back into the truck, with other engineers sharing stories of the mountain *apus*, spirits considered male. As we drove along the highway, the conversation turned to how European missionaries had shaped perceptions of gender among Andean earth deities. For my colleagues, the Pachamama was a colonial bastardization of an earth that need not strictly define as female. Gendered earth metaphors can promote care as much as they condone exploitation.

Considering a re-gendering or de-gendering of earth’s resources may reconfigure the relations that connect the “traffic in women” to a political ecology of sexual systems, including nonhuman forms of care and kinship(s). If the earth needn’t be a female virgin or a mother, it can loosen aspects of the gendered human-earth metaphoric and material entanglement. The multidirectional aspects of a conceptual traffic encourage an examination of the lability of gender assignments in humans and nonhumans, how they can be redefined and embodied. Natural resource extraction has served as the bedrock of patriarchal capitalisms, especially in the context of “the open veins of Latin America” (Galeano 2003), where land and human bodies constitute “infrastructures of extractive capitalism” (Graeter 2020) entangled in IMF and World Bank lending schemes. Madre de Dios in name and territory is emblematic of these gendered conceptions of land and the availability of nonhuman species. Infrastructure projects like *La Interoceánica* constitute the grounds from which nation-states and international organizations make claims

about bringing modernity via economic “inroads” into an “underdeveloped,” virginal Amazon.

The advent of roads in Madre de Dios was something that the North American conservationist Aldo Leopold feared. In his 1924 essay, “The River of the Mother of God,” [Leopold \(1992, 123\)](#) rhapsodized about Madre de Dios as “the perfect symbol of the Unknown Places of the earth.” This fabricated emptiness can work for and against conservation efforts. In Madre de Dios, *terra nullius* didn’t protect the land; it justified avoiding informed consent to construct the highway. While *La Interoceánica* is the first paved thoroughfare through Madre de Dios, the region was never the “empty” wilderness Leopold imagined. The Ese Eja, Harakmbut, Matsigenka, Yora/Yaminahua, and Yine, among other peoples, have long called the area home ([García Altamirano 2003](#); [Iviche 2003](#)). Archeologists date human settlement to 1000-1500 AD ([Huertas Castillo 2004](#)). Many Shipibo, who also occupy Northern Amazonian Peru, migrated south to Madre de Dios during the past century ([Cusurichi Palacios 2003](#)), though many were brought as slave labor during the first rubber boom between 1876–1912 ([Gray 2003](#)). Neither Andean nor Amazonian communities on both sides of the border were consulted about the highway project ([Apurina 2015](#); [Dammert Bello 2018](#); [Machado Coelho de Oliveira 2013](#)).<sup>13</sup>

Nearly a century before the completion of *La Interoceánica*, [Leopold \(1992, 126\)](#) lamented “The Good Roads Movement”: motorways dissecting the “Unknown Places” of the world, eliminating the possibility for men to explore “virgin wilderness.” Unaware that gold in fact lay in the soils of Madre de Dios, Leopold linked the fervor of road-building to gold fever, both of which incited a worrisome “stampede for the spilled treasures of Nature” ([Leopold 1992, 126](#)). The lure of the unknown remains in Madre de Dios, as does the image of the supposedly open road: in addition to economic need, fantasies of adventure, desire for “hot women,” and yet-to-be-discovered rain forest miracle cures drive people onto the highway and into the Amazon.

[Candace Slater \(2015, 3\)](#) notes that dueling “visions of the Amazon”—as an inviting, biodiverse nature or a savage, “denuded hell”—make for powerful metaphors that shape development policies, creating an understanding of place. An “empty” or “virgin” wilderness, as Leopold described Madre de Dios, differs markedly from a landscape inhabited and cultivated by people. Throughout the Americas the language of *terra nullius* has justified settler-colonial occupations in the name of development. The road-narrative and enduring visions of a wild Amazon manifest in material relations that characterize infrastructure policies, contribut-

ing to the political economy of sex and nature along *La Interoceánica*: Where there are sex-trafficked women and Mother Nature, devoid of or destroyed by man, the patriarchal state intervenes as protector.

The Peruvian state, supported by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), engages care rhetoric to justify violent evictions of gold miners and purported rescue operations for sex workers.<sup>14</sup> In these efforts, the metaphorical notions of the rain forest as a fragile mother or a virgin condition the material effects: *she* must be saved. But dropping grenades on rain forest mining equipment and sending sex workers back to violent homes fail to establish effective modes of intervention. When it comes to plant trafficking, Peruvian policymakers confronting biopiracy also engage a particular set of savior notions about care for women and nature, mobilizing different actions in the pursuit of economic patent protection. Admittedly, they have little choice but to join the dominant narrative.

### PLANTS AND EMPIRE IN TRANSIT

“If you had to choose, would you want the ‘bad girl’ or the ‘good girl’ image for your country?” Juan José Miranda Montero, head of Peru’s National Institute for the Defense of Competition and Protection of Intellectual Property (Indecopi) asks me in 2012. Indecopi came into being in 2001, a result of the Peruvian state’s recognition that from quinine (*Cinchona officinalis*) to maca (*Lepidium meyenii*), plants continue to play a major role in its economy, essential to empire-building into the neocolonial present.<sup>15</sup> Miranda Monteros had a clear message to share: “Coca is the bad girl; maca the good girl.” As one of Peru’s most notoriously bio-pirated plants, maca’s reputation consistently clashes with that of coca, not only because it is seen as the “victim” of plant trafficking but also because it takes care of men’s sexual needs. Miranda doesn’t mention the abortive qualities of either plant reported by sex workers.

The more I learned about coca, the more I wanted to investigate what it meant to be “a bad girl,” especially when the plant is a sacred component of Quechua-Aymara rituals of “payment to the earth,” propitiating the Pachamama for fertile returns. In 1567, the Catholic Church banned coca because it represented a connection to a greater-than-human power other than God. Six years later, colonial Spanish administrators petitioned for a reprieve: they couldn’t get their subjects to work in the mines without coca. The church reversed its decision and began collecting taxes on coca and the fruits of Indigenous labor—another of many examples of entangled human, plant, and mineral relations in colonial economies. Today, coca continues to feed the predominantly Quechua-Aymara laborers in rain

forest mines. Offerings to the Pachamama in exchange for gold are common as well. Cocaine, like gold, isn't consumed in the mines—it's far more valuable for export. The Ministry of the Interior "takes care" of coca(ine) through regulation or eradication. Indecopi cares for "good girl" maca, a primary patent concern.

By 2017, Miranda had retired and Andrés Valladolid assumed directorship of Indecopi. Valladolid recounts how little power international law affords countries in the Global South to bring biopirates to justice. Storehouses of maca disappear from the Andes (Neuman 2014). Coca flows across borders. Maca, pirated from Peru, now grows in China (Zhou et al. 2017). Both plants flow through networks of economic exchange, invoking different legal ramifications. As trafficked commodities, Peru's good and bad *girls* play integral roles in political economies of neocolonial trade relations. Maca is a plant, a "superfood." She becomes a "good girl" in relation to men's needs. Coca is a sacred plant. She only becomes "bad girl" cocaine in certain relations, made into a dangerous figure in narrative as much as by the natural resource economy.

Outside of the Peruvian patent office, I had several occasions to consider the versatility of plants—remedy or poison—particularly in the context of coca. The most telling episode occurred in February 2012, when I traveled with four members of the regional government's health team. We had a large supply of condoms, rapid HIV/AIDS exams, and tuberculosis tests to distribute in a mining camp called Mega Once. We parked the truck by the side of the highway: the narrow rain forest paths into the mines mean that we need motorcycle-taxis, which the head nurse quickly negotiates.

I settle in behind my driver, Miguelito, who hails from Cusco. He says the rain forest took some getting used to; at first, he missed the mountains. We chat, passing thinned rain forest, with fallen trees still smoking from a controlled fire. Ten minutes later, the trees disappear as we enter the mining zone. I ask Miguelito what he thinks about the difference between mines and women. He knows the riddle, but instead of answering, he asks me if I know the story of Mama Coca. "There once was a beautiful Quechua *ñusta*, a princess named Kuka . . . ." Miguelito begins to tell the story, saying that it explains his thoughts about the riddle because coca and women have *resistencia*, like the mines. He wishes there were more of Mama Coca in the gold that leaves Peru, harming its consumers, rather than the producers.

I'm not sure what he means, but when we arrive at the *prostíbar* that will operate as a makeshift clinic for the day, Miguelito cuts the engine to conclude Kuka's story. He tells me that the Spanish kill Kuka, but her human body trans-



Figure 7. Into the rain forest and in the mines. Photos by Ruth Goldstein.

forms into the coca plant. The story's takeaway: Kuka, now Mama Coca, won't rest until her people are free, poisoning those who colonize them and their lands. Kuka's leaves nourish the descendants of her people—high in essential nutrients and vitamins when chewed or taken as tea. But as cocaine, she is toxic.

For Miguelito, the rain forest mines, women, and coca all have the capacity to both give and take life. He repeats that he wishes the gold more resembled Kuka. The pits, after all, claim the lives of men who come from the Andes, primarily Quechua and Aymara speakers—Kuka's people. I ponder this as Miguelito disappears among tent-like structures with wooden frames and plastic walls that line wide avenues of packed sand. There are signs advertising high-speed internet, all-inclusive lunches of *lomo saltado* (salted beef) with potatoes and rice, and watermelon sold on the street. The mining town even has trash pickup—it isn't the hell described by the Peruvian state.

That day, I keep thinking about Kuka. I notice that men headed to the mines carry plastic bags of coca leaves. The health team affirms that it's coca that these men consume, not cocaine, though the state media adds cocaine consumption when promoting the profile of a criminal gold miner. I ask the health team about Kuka, telling them that her story was Miguelito's response when asked about the "mines-are-like-women" riddle.

"Kuka is a warning not to become like the colonizers," Raimunda, one of the nurses, says. She dismisses the riddle as *machismo*.



Figure 8. The Streets of an illegal Mining Town. Photos by Ruth Goldstein.

“It’s about revenge,” Juan Carlos, our head nurse, replies. “Kuka is about resistance, like your driver said. The pits can collapse, harming or killing the miners. But people need to eat. The mines provide jobs. “Your people,” he points at me, “buy the gold and the cocaine.”

The gold turns into food for their families, Nelson, another nurse, explains. No one subsists entirely on coca leaves.

As months pass, I gain a deeper understanding of the story of Kuka, hearing bits of the many versions that circulate in the mines and among sex workers. Kuka was Quechua royalty. One day, she heard frightening news: giant men with pale skin, beards, and an appetite for gold were approaching. The conquistadores killed Kuka’s elders and took all the young women as wives. The princess herself became the property of a conquistador. Desperate to escape, she managed to send word to her love, a young blacksmith. The pair left on a moonless night, running until they could go no further. When the conquistador realized that Kuka had fled, he mounted his horse and took his hunting dog. The dog found the pair hidden under a rock. The conquistador killed the blacksmith, then tortured and murdered Kuka. He left her body on display as a warning to those who might try to rebel. That night, the conquistador sat watch. Yet in the morning, Kuka’s body had disappeared and a small bush with bright green leaves gleamed in her place. Stories circulate that Kuka now visits her people in their dreams. If you put your ear close enough, Kuka’s leaves whisper a promise to her people: she will give them strength, while exacting vengeance on the colonizers and their descendants.<sup>16</sup>

In these stories, Kuka emerges as a powerful force, exemplifying resistance in body, mind, and spirit. Kuka might be trafficked and made into cocaine, but the plant becomes part of the revenge. Her story showcases the complications of exploiting natural resources and women. It also affirms that not all plants are alike, just as gold mines and women aren’t all the same. Rubin’s “certain relations” of ex-



ploitation can be reworked in both narrative and concrete ways. The possibility of doing so, however, may entail recognizing an ending: death (with transfiguration as in the case of Kuka) or clashing worldviews.

### WHEN MINES AND WOMEN FIGHT BACK

Versions of Mama Coca and riddles about why mines or the Pachamama did or did not resemble women echoed in the mines and along *La Interoceánica*. Sometimes women were compared to gold, fickle and hard to get, sometimes women were like Mother Earth, fertile and generous. At other times still, women and mines were said to be like Kuka, seeking vengeful compensation. Whether women or “nature” were (for)giving or not depended on who was speaking.

Estrella, who chose this pseudonym so as to use neither her real name nor her working name in the sex industry, definitively upset notions of womanhood and exploitation in the riddle. She didn’t consider herself Indigenous, but the state did. Nor did she consider herself a sex-trafficked person, though, by legal standards, she was. While she was working in a grocery store, a beautifully dressed woman had approached her, offering a job as a waitress and an all-expenses-paid trip to Madre de Dios. It took Estrella months to pay off her debt to the woman, a *prostituta* owner, leaving the mining town by the side of *La Interoceánica* as fast as she could.

Estrella showed me her medley of plant-based home remedies, among them maca and coca. When she had time, she liked to go to the *chacra*, a small farm that belonged to a friend. There, she gathered plants and “got air,” as she put it. If her coworkers didn’t join her, she brought back food and medicinal plants. When I first told Estrella about the riddle comparing mines and women, she shot back with: “What is a typical woman?” That was in 2012. In the summer of 2016, we were sitting in a place that functioned as a clothing shop by day, a bar by night. Ramona, a transwoman who worked in the clothing shop, listened as we discussed “mines and women” for a second time.

Still irritated by the riddle, Estrella groaned. But Ramona jumped into the conversation with a giggle: “What is a woman? Me!” She sashayed between clothing aisles as if on a runway. Estrella playfully tossed a bottle of nail polish at her, teasing her about her popularity with male clients. Both women’s responses recall Rubin’s query, “what is a woman?” As Estrella and Ramona highlight, not all women are the same in “certain relations” of the sex trade. Many sex workers make an excellent living and don’t consider themselves exploited. In this encounter, the joking banter achieves its humorous effect because it bucks dominant ideas,

subverting social control (Douglas 1966; Yeh 2017), in this case, the category of *woman*. What it means to be a woman is flexibly subversive—and also lucrative for Ramona. Different embodiments for women, as with mines and plants, threaten to upset the political economy of exploitation.

The practice of *Pacha mamaman jaywarikuy* in Quechua is “payment to the earth” ritualizing gratitude or a request for favor. Seekers might offer coca leaves, corn, the sacrifice of a sheep or llama. But other scenarios exist. As gold miners move through the rain forest, they dig new pits, erect new mining camps, and the toxic quicksilver utilized to amalgamate gold particles leaches into the forest floor, killing root systems. When the soil collapses, burying the miners in the pits, their deaths can represent payment to the earth, in exchange for gold. The Pachamama “attacks” and the mines fight back, “eating” the miners (Nash 1979). This is another twist of relations that equate mines and women for exploitation.



Figure 9. “The Gold Queen.” Image by Marcelo Perez, reprinted with permission.

While men often perform the manual labor in the mines, women may own machinery and run mining concessions. One such woman, the infamous Gregoria

Casas Huamanhuillca Baca, known as the Gold Queen or Tía Goya (Aunt Goya), embodies the (not always liberating) power of transforming social relations. Her mining empire in Huepetuhe, traditional territory of the Harakmbut-Arasaire, has become synonymous with the legend of El Dorado, promising both riches and danger. The Gold Queen allegedly sacrifices women as payment to the earth in exchange for gold, rumors the Peruvian media savors. While Goya is a common nickname for Gregoria, some intellectuals draw a parallel to Francisco Goya's painting *Saturn Devouring His Son*. Gregoria makes for the perfect scapegoat that everyone can love to hate.

The Peruvian journalist [Ricardo León \(2012\)](#) likens the Gold Queen's life story to that of the mine-riddled landscape: "The history of informal mining in Madre de Dios is the story of Huepetuhe, but the story of Huepetuhe is the history of Goya. And each is more sordid than the other." León's reading of Goya's power roots her to the land, but in a twist on the "certain relations" that equate mines and women. As the wealthiest woman in Peru, the Gold Queen exploits mines and men. She does not need a savior.

Not surprisingly, Goya is a target of envy and outright hatred.<sup>17</sup> According to Huepetuhe's former mayor, Gelman Villegas, "She is illiterate . . . a complete idiot." Ousted by her, the former mayor now had to travel like a commoner. In November 2011, I gratefully settled into the backseat of the last taxi to depart Mazuko, a mining town and hub for human, wildlife, and gasoline trafficking. As the taxi began to leave, Villegas came running along *La Interoceánica*, yelling for us to wait. Sitting down next to me, he immediately struck up a conversation, asking what brought me to Madre de Dios. I told him I was researching the social and environmental impacts of *La Interoceánica*. He told me that I had to look at gold mining and sex trafficking in Huepetuhe and that I should interview him.

With the wind billowing through the taxi windows and *lambada* music blasting, Villegas shouted into my tape recorder. "The Baca family *is* Huepe! . . . Gregoria . . . she's the worst." He blamed her, and only her, for the environmental damage in the rain forest. I asked him about the rumors that multiple Peruvian presidents sent heavy machinery into Huepetuhe too. He shrugged, calling it "jungle politics [*la política selvática*],"<sup>18</sup> insisting that Goya was the real criminal. I pushed back: Wasn't she just more successful than the men? Irritated, Villegas blurted that Goya practiced bad magic. He couldn't conceive of a woman, a native Quechua-speaker, possibly being smart enough to operate these mines.

"She's an *India perdida* [a lost Indian]," Villegas continued, his voice rough. He expressed views akin to the "encultured racism" that [Marisol de la Cadena \(2000\)](#)

critiques in Peru, where luminaries like author-politician [Mario Vargas Llosa \(1990\)](#) believe that the uneducated and unassimilated Indians hinder the development of a modern Peru.<sup>19</sup> This racist sentiment prevails throughout regions beset by questions of natural-resource extraction. Villegas presented himself as a member of the Cusqueño elite, an educated man. Gregoria, to him, lacked intelligence because she spoke Quechua better than Spanish. Villegas's comments demonstrate how language operates as political tool. Spanish stands as the gatekeeper to "civilized" society, where, according to Villegas, Gregoria doesn't belong. Furthermore, unlike an *Indio permitido* (authorized Indian) who toes the line for the state ([Hale 2004](#))—which in Peru means performing a Machu Picchu Incan heritage as a cultural-environmental steward—Gregoria supposedly buries Hupetuhe under mining sludge, killing the earth. "They [the Bacas] are . . . sucking the richness from the land. . . . Goya is a *pishtaco*."

Peruvian colleagues would refer to the mining operations and the Brazilian-led initiative to annex Peru via *La Interoceánica* as "raping the Pachamama" or "being *pishtaco*," sucking the life out of the land and the people. But calling Gregoria a *pishtaco* surprised me. She didn't fit the description in Andean cosmology: usually white, male, raping or sucking on the fat of Indigenous bodies. The conquistador who killed Kuka more fits the image of a *pishtaco*, a nefarious figure who often appears in narratives of trauma ([Salazar-Soler 1991](#); [Theidon 2012](#); [Weismantel 2001](#)). To Villegas, Gregoria's power can only be attributed to masculine *pishtaco* magic; otherwise, she doesn't make sense to him.

The figure of the *pishtaco* appeared outside of Andean communities, surfacing in my conversations with Shipibo Indigenous leader Juana Payaba Cachique. Payaba served twice as the president of her community, during which she referenced the "*pishtaco* effect" in Madre de Dios. Since the paving of *La Interoceánica*, miners and loggers have increasingly overrun her community. She couldn't stop them; the state wouldn't. So, she installed a tollbooth on the unpaved road that the loggers built and miners used. The unpaved road branches off *La Interoceánica*. Payaba charged the equivalent of \$0.50 for a motorcycle taxi and \$1 for a car or truck. In comparison to the amount of gold and timber trafficked, this amounted to nothing. The loggers and miners, however, took her to court. They won with what turned out to be falsified documents. She videotaped police tearing down the community buildings she had funded with the toll money.<sup>20</sup>

Payaba decided to fight back, contacting the Social Action Commission, which then took her case to the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR). The IACHR helped Payaba win her case in Peru, which initially seemed

like a major victory. When I visited again in 2016, Payaba again served as president. Miners and loggers were still present in a divided community, but she had managed to install a Brazil nut processor, to provide alternatives to joining extractive mineral industries.

For good reason, Payaba remains cautious. She knows that her community's battles and the larger struggle to protect their land from the *pishtaco* effect are not easily won.

Back in 2012, when I ask her about the riddle, she laughs.

"Ask me what the difference is between a mine and woman," she demands.

I ask.

She responds: "Nothing." She sees my disappointment. "Ask me why."

I do as she says.

"Because both fight back," she replies.

Juana reminds me how the mines kill, how many peoples' worlds have ended since European colonialism in Latin America. Hard stops. She knows she cannot halt mining or logging in her community or change the world economy; she simply hopes to shift the dynamics. "Even if we know we won't win, we still fight back." Despite intimidating challenges, Payaba is one of a few Indigenous leaders who chooses such battles. She emphasizes how women can be *pishtacos*, Kukas, gold mines, and more. Though she isn't motivated by a belief that a new world order hovers on the horizon, she urges me to remember her answer to the riddle: "Riddles can have more than just one answer." Like the social relations they reflect, riddles can be reworked. Women, like mines, Mama Coca, and Mother Earth only become exploited commodities in "certain relations."

## CONCLUSION

As Aldo Leopold predicted, neither the river nor the region of Madre de Dios have disappeared from the world map. Rather, the Interoceanic Highway has left a definitive cartographic mark, highlighting the trajectory of human and environmental traffic. While the Amazonian triple-frontier zone and the 3,500-mile highway have geographic and political specificity, the growing network of roads characterizes transnational development schemes that sidestep prior consultation with local communities and environmental assessments. The intertwined traffic in women, plants, and gold form part of a gendered, racist logic of (post)colonial progress, rooted in the proposed necessity of natural-resource extraction.

Bringing together the highway, the riddle and its versions, and an approach of “traffic,” long-standing entanglements of interrelated political economies of sex and nature become clear when analyzed through discursive and material relations. Conducting a “full-bodied analysis” of the traffic in women in Madre de Dios entails examining other “life in traffic,” taking “*everything* into account: the evolution of commodity forms in women, systems of land tenure, political arrangements, subsistence technology, etc.,” because “sexual systems cannot be understood in complete isolation” (Rubin 1975, 209). This means, however, including automobiles and radios, not leaving them aside, as Rubin suggested. Their manufacture requires natural resources, essential to the “certain relations” that create the traffic in women. And where the traffic in women also constitutes a traffic in nature, one must understand how and to what effect earth becomes a mother and nature a virgin. “Excitable speech” acts (Butler 1997) provide a window.

The first version of the riddle articulates entrenched notions about exploitation in relation to feminized human and ecological bodies that (re)produce life. Yet instances of linguistic revision can produce, not just reflect, social and material change. Take Estrella and Ramona who questioned the fixity of sex/gender systems. They may not be overturning patriarchal extractive capitalism wholesale, but they embody womanhood in dynamic, subversive, and possibly powerful ways. If not every sex worker identifies as a ciswoman or as trafficked, the equation of the metaphoric riddle changes. Then there’s Kuka, whose message carries import for those who struggle against the (neo)colonial plunder of their land and people. Such stories nourish hope and purpose.

When it comes to the Gold Queen, the twist on the riddle multiplies. Her purported lack of care for the land and for other humans has given her the reputation of a monster: masculine, somehow “less Indian,” and altogether less human. I do not wish to make light of the environmental damage caused by her manner of gold mining. Rather, I wish to underscore the potential reversal of gendered relations—of who is exploiting whom, how, and why. Juana Payaba represents the antithesis to the Gold Queen, and her narrative choices reflect her material options. Payaba plays within the riddle’s form to change the outcome, as she does within the Peruvian legal system. She seeks structural opportunities to rewrite power relations, recognizing her limits and the impossibility of dismantling the global economy. For my part, I function as an ethnographic relation, packaging other people’s stories and riddles, and retelling them, which for me entails avowing a concomitant responsibility in their struggles.



Anthropological categories of *nature* and *culture* have long operated as opposite poles for analyzing who and what counts as human. The conceptual traffic between them is dynamic, as one needs the other to exist. The space by the side of the road can indeed afford a viewpoint from which to examine “life in traffic” of three different orders: conceptual traffic, commuter transit, and illegal exchange. Roads produce mobility, but they also contribute to jams, crashes, and collisions, ending lives. *La Interoceánica* is grounds for, and part of, a set of relations that create different and sometimes fatal conditions for human and nonhuman life in Madre de Dios and beyond. The highway is fundamental to a political economy of sex and nature.

In Amazonia, extractive economies, like sexual systems, cannot be understood in isolation. If this rain forest, dubbed “the lungs of the earth” and “nature’s pharmacy,” is an oxygen-creating, life-sustaining ecosystem for the globe, then the ramifications of road-building and trafficking in natural resources is planetary. Echoing climate scientists: controlling rising temperatures means confronting the finite relationship for life on a hot earth. Recognizing this or endings of any sort may not produce a restructuring of global power, but following those like Juana Payaba, it supports an ethical impulse to fight back, grounded in the knowledge that even distant ecologies affect all our relations.



Figure 10. The Madre de Dios River. Photo by Ruth Goldstein.

## ABSTRACT

*Engaging ethnographic fieldwork and archival research conducted between 2010 and 2021 along Latin America's Interoceanic Highway in Peru's mineral-rich Amazonian region of Madre de Dios, this article begins with a riddle that equates the exploitation of gold mines with that of women. I follow the riddle—revised and (re)told in rain forest mines, on the highway, by sex workers and Indigenous women leaders—through its different iterations to argue that the traffic in women and the political economy of sex/gender systems are discursively and materially linked with notions of the violability of feminized “nature” and associated racializations. The traffic in women also becomes a traffic in nature when economies of natural resource extraction create the grounds for the sex industry. Traffic as a methodological and analytical framework identifies the social, political, and economic interrelations and linguistic articulations that create (im)mobility, while also promoting reverse-ability. At the same time, this approach acknowledges collisions and jams, the realities of hard endings. Drawing inspiration from subversive retellings of the riddle, the concept of traffic underscores that while discursive framings can condition material possibilities and influence human actions by normalizing exploitation, they need not cement them. [gender and sexuality; political economy; traffic; race; nature-culture; language]*

## RESUMEN

*Integrando datos etnográficos recogidos en campo e investigación de archivo realizados entre 2010 y 2021 en el ámbito de la Carretera Interoceánica Sur, enfocando en la región de Madre de Dios de la Amazonia Peruana, este artículo parte de una adivinanza que equipara las minas de oro y las mujeres. Yo sigo la adivinanza —revisada y (re)contada por trabajadoras sexuales y lideresas indígenas en las minas de la selva y en la Carretera a través de sus diferentes iteraciones para argumentar que la trata de mujeres y la economía política de los sistemas de sexo/género están discursiva y materialmente articulados con nociones de la explotación de la “naturaleza” feminizada y sus racializaciones asociadas. La trata de mujeres es también es un tráfico de «naturaleza» cuando la economía de la extracción de recursos naturales genera las condiciones para la industria sexual. El tráfico como marco metodológico y analítico identifica las interrelaciones sociales, políticas, y económicas y las articulaciones lingüísticas que crean (in)movilidad, mientras promueven la capacidad de revertir. Al mismo tiempo, este enfoque reconoce colisiones y nudos, las realidades de conclusiones inmutables. Desde las versiones subversivas (re) contadas de la adivinanza, el concepto de tráfico destaca que mientras los marcos discursivos pueden condicionar las posibilidades materiales e influenciar las acciones humanas al normalizar la explotación, ellas no deberían consolidarse. [género y sexualidad; economía política; tráfico, trata de personas; raza, naturaleza-cultura; lenguaje]*

## NOTES

*Acknowledgments* I benefited greatly from anonymous reviewers' comments and the editorial guidance of Chris Nelson. Stefanie Graeter, Jimena Díaz Leiva, Patricia Álvarez, Liz Roberts, and Evan Hepler-Smith all contributed valuable insights. I am grateful to gold miner, engineer, sex worker, and Indigenous colleagues for their support. A Wenner-Gren Fieldwork Grant #8274 and an NSF CNHS-2 Award #1924148 made this article possible.

1. Demographic information does not exist for miners, even in 2021. Estimates range from 10,000 to 100,000 (Damonte 2016; Valencia 2014).
2. Pueblos Indígenas en Aislamiento y Contacto Inicial (PIACI).
3. *La Carretera Interoceánica* or *La Interoceánica Sur* (short for *suramericana*).
4. I follow other roadolgy scholars in taking *roads* as a general term for motorways (see Kernaghan 2012; Harvey and Knox 2015; Uribe 2019; Zhou 2015).
5. Amarumayu is the Quechua-Aymara name for what is now known as Madre de Dios. The name's constituent parts, *amaru* (serpent) and *mayu* (river), attesting both to the reach of the Inca Empire in this region of the Amazon before Spanish contact and explaining why missionaries hoped to replace the cosmological significance of serpents with the Mother of God.
6. This difference makes for a complex politico-legal topic. See Díaz 2021 and my forthcoming book, *Life in Traffic: Women, Plants, and Gold along the Interoceanic Highway*.
7. Marilyn Strathern's *The Gender of the Gift* offers a respectful critique to Rubin's engagement of Levi-Strauss's assertion that women circulate as tokens of men's transactions. In her Melanesian analysis, Strathern (1988, 331) observes that men's identities are tied to those of women.
8. Rubin's analysis of Lévi-Strauss and Lacan also has relevance to the human-nonhuman kinship relations discussed in this article, but that element lies beyond the scope of these pages. I do, however, examine other aspects of Rubin's argument in my forthcoming book.
9. Marx (1968, 1973) considered nature to be free when underscoring the injustice of condemning the poor for "stealing" fallen wood in the forest for subsistence. He didn't consider nature to be without exchange value (Foster 2018). Far from Marx's ecology (Foster 2000), the concept of *natural capital*—for example, timber, minerals, or water energy as commodities—became popular in the 1980s when the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) advanced natural capital as loan-repayment options for fledgling nations.
10. Thanks to Jimena Díaz Leiva for clarifying the many meanings of *chibola* during summer 2021 fieldwork. In suction-based mining technologies, the last of the gold processed from the sluice comprises men's tips, amalgamated separately from the rest of the gold, which tend to be spent on women (and beer). See Díaz 2021.
11. In "Plato's Pharmacy," Jacques Derrida (1981 [1972], esp. 65–75, 97–117) deploys the Greek definition of *pharmakon* as both remedy and poison to think about the ambivalence of writing, speaking, memory, and meaning. See also the anthropological engagements by João Biehl and Amy Moran-Thomas (2009).
12. These uses are not investigated by Western medicine.
13. Maria Fílmia Machado Coelho de Oliveira's 2013 documentary *Me Voy (I'm Leaving)* features footage taken on July 15, 2011. I joined her in interviewing Indigenous protestors who explained the lack of consultation.
14. Operation Mercury began in February 2019.
15. See Londa Schiebinger's (1993, 2004) work on gendered plants, sexuality, and empire.
16. For a written version of this tale, see Carranza 2000.
17. On January 7, 2022, Gregoria Casas Huamanhuilca (she divorced her husband, Cecilio Baca and would eventually drop his name) died from injuries that she sustained from an automobile collision on the Interoceanic Highway, traveling between Cusco and Madre de Dios. Few people believe that this was an accident.

18. While I agree with Kristina Lyons (2016) on the colonial residue of *jungle* in translating *selva*, in Villegas's tirade, he refers to a postcolonial hangover.
19. de la Cadena (2000, 314) notes that Llosa's views echo the expression common among the Peruvian elite before the 1969 agrarian reform that an "*Indio leido*, *Indio perdido*" (A literate Indian is a lost Indian). Oddly, this is not Villegas' point, as he believes Gregoria to be illiterate. She is a "Lost Indian" woman because she does not care for the environment.
20. Interviews were conducted in October 2011, March 2012, and July 2016.

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