

## Research article

# Friends of the Lake? Ontological Ambiguities and the Megacolector Conflict

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### Abstract

There is growing recognition that radical ontological difference underlies Indigenous communities' opposition to extractivist development within their territories. Scholars writing from a political ontology (PO) framework excitedly posit the possibility of the pluriverse emerging from the 'ontological openings' (de la Cadena 2015a) that these struggles are forming in the project of modernity. While such accounts are useful in elucidating how such struggles are more than 'mere resource conflicts' (Coombes et al. 2012a), they also risk reifying ontological difference and losing sight of the power asymmetries which shape its pragmatic and strategic articulation. More than just a matter of academic debate, overstating the ontological difference of Indigenous opposition to extractivism is a 'cosmopolitical risk' (Cepek 2016) that has the potential to limit Indigenous communities' particular aspirations for self-determination. As a consequence, this article suggests a way forward can be found in 'ontologizing political economy' (Burman 2016) whilst also paying closer attention to the contingent nature of worlding, as well as ontological ambiguities and 'partial connections' (de la Cadena 2015a). This article fleshes out these theoretical concerns through drawing upon my ethnographic research about an ongoing 'resource' conflict in Guatemala. Over the last few years, the Maya Tz'utujil community of San Pedro la Laguna has been strongly opposing the 'megacolector' – a wastewater megaproject being advanced as a solution to Lake Atitlán's contamination by the environmental NGO 'Asociación de Amigos del Lago de Atitlán' (Association of Friends of Lake Atitlán). Through engaging with a range of Pedrano community members, I reflect upon the usefulness of a PO framework for understanding the megacolector conflict's ontological dimensions and the motivations of San Pedro's opposition movement.

**Keywords:** Guatemala, Lake Atitlán, extractivism, political ontology, decoloniality

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## Introduction

Across Latin America, Indigenous territories are increasingly threatened by extractivist development (Rivera Andía & Vindal Ødegaard 2019; Schorr 2019; Villareal & Muñoz 2020). This assault is not limited to classic extractive activities like mining, but rather involves ‘the accelerated pace of natural resource exploitation at an industrial level and the construction of mega-projects and infrastructure intended to make full use of natural resources’ (Raftopoulos 2017: 388), including for instance the expansion of hydroelectric projects and agribusinesses.

In Guatemala’s case, this new wave of extractivism emerged as a result of a worldwide commodity boom and its coincidence with the series of neoliberal policies implemented following the signing of the 1996 Peace Accords (Mash-Mash & Gómez 2014; Way 2016; Urkidi 2011; Yagenova & Garcia 2009). This extractivist expansion has been accompanied by state policies of militarisation and criminalisation (Global Witness 2020; Masek 2021; Sieder 2017). Indigenous defenders of territory are the principal victims, and they are frequently convicted through anti-terrorism legislation (CIDSE 2021). The onslaught has been so brutal that it has been labelled a ‘Fourth Invasion’ (Batz 2017; Chivalán Carrillo & Posocco 2020), and the most significant attack on Indigenous communities’ way of life since the military’s scorched earth campaigns of the early 1980s (CEH 1999; Dearden 2012).

Worldwide, Indigenous communities have increasingly turned to a ‘rights of nature’ discourse to defend their territories (Kothari *et al.* 2017), whether this be from extractivism, industrial contamination (Surma 2021), state intrusions (Muller *et al.* 2019) or climate change policies (Ulloa 2019). In such disputes, lakes, rivers, mountains, and forests have publicly emerged as much *more than* (de la Cadena 2015a) ‘mere resources’ (Coombes *et al.* 2012a), and as sentient beings and subjects in their own right. Scholars writing from a political ontology (PO) framework have eagerly utilised such instances to make their case for the pluriverse, arguing that the radical ontological difference visibilised by these struggles is forming ‘ontological openings’ (de la Cadena 2015a) in the project of modernity. Political ontologists refer to this modern world as the ‘One-World World’ (OWW) (Law 2011), that is a world ‘that has arrogated for itself the right to be ‘the’ world, subjecting all other worlds to its own terms’ (Escobar 2016: 15).

The OWW manifests in various hegemonic beliefs, such as rationality, modern science, economic growth. Philosophically, the OWW is rooted in a Cartesian separation between humans and nature, and its anthropocentric outlook has facilitated nature’s subordination for human gain through short-sighted extractivism. Political ontologists recognise that the OWW and the universalising nature of modern knowledge not only threatens Indigenous lives and territories, but also their relational worlds. In these worlds, humans are understood to be mutually constituted through their horizontal relations with other life forms, with the assumption that ‘the relations between entities are ontologically more fundamental than the entities themselves’ (Wildman 2006: 6). Due to this understanding of humanity’s co-dependency on other living beings, Indigenous relationality is rooted in an ethics of care and reciprocity. In this way, the OWW and Indigenous non-modern ontologies are diametrically opposed on ethical, political, and social grounds. As several Pedrano interviewees put it, the former promulgates a ‘culture of death’, the latter a ‘culture of life’.

Although the OWW remains dominant, political ontologists posit that its hold is weakening. They suggest that when Indigenous communities resist extractivism through recourse to their relationality, they are forming ontological openings ‘to the

consideration of other ontologies as plausible and viable alternatives to the modern one' (Blaser 2013a: 556). As Blaser (2013a: 557) states:

*forty years ago, opposing mining, oil extraction, or the increase of agricultural land because indigenous ways of life would be profoundly disrupted would have been seen as sheer irrationality by most citizens in a Latin American country; not so now. The promise of modernization no longer appears as persuasive.*

The ecological and social planetary crises of the 'Anthropocene' are similarly acting to erode modern hegemony, if not its dominance (Escobar 2016). As a result, the OWW is increasingly reliant on coercion rather than persuasion – hence the recent upsurge in violence to enforce extractivist policies. These crises provide both the context and the rationale for PO (Blaser 2013a), which principally seeks to shed light on the 'conflicts that ensue as different worlds or ontologies strive to sustain their own existence as they interact and mingle with each other' (Blaser 2009b: 877).

PO sits within the broader 'ontological turn', in which social theorists have aimed to 'break away from the normative divides, central to the modern regime of truth, between subject and object, mind and body, reason and emotion, living and inanimate, human and nonhuman, organic and inorganic' (Escobar 2018: 63). In particular, PO evolved as a critique of political ecology's failure to adequately address the ontological dimensions of environmental conflicts. As Bonelli *et al.* (2016: 85) criticise, from a political ecology perspective:

*the differences at stake in environmental conflicts correspond to 'cultural differences', or 'cultural beliefs', or even to differences in the 'languages of valuation' of one world 'out-there'. In short, 'Nature' remains singular, culture remains plural.*

Political ontologists have argued that the multiculturalist approach of political ecology reduces nature to a matter of 'resources' (Karlsson 2018) and misses the deeper significance of 'resource conflicts' (Blaser 2009a; Coombes *et al.* 2012a). For this reason, Mario Blaser (2009a, 2009b, 2013), Marisol de la Cadena (2015a, 2015b), and Arturo Escobar (2016, 2018) developed PO to push political ecology's intent further and take different ontologies seriously (Blaser 2014).

While PO analyses are indeed pushing academic debates in a more ontologically expansive direction, this article argues that they also risk reifying and overstating ontological difference at the expense of losing sight of the power asymmetries which shape its pragmatic and strategic articulation. As I will illustrate, this presents a 'cosmopolitical risk' (Cepek 2016) that has the potential to limit Indigenous communities' particular aspirations for self-determination. To counter it, I suggest that researchers concerned with ontological multiplicity should take a more nuanced approach with greater consideration for ontological ambiguities, as well as individuals' worlding practices and the contingent and fluid nature of ontological difference. This article will flesh out these theoretical concerns through the case study of the 'megacolector conflict' – an ongoing dispute over Lake Atitlán's future.

## Methods

This article draws upon the nine months of ethnographic fieldwork that I conducted (May 2021a) between November 2017 – August 2018 around Lake Atitlán, mostly in the town of San Pedro la Laguna. During this time, I interviewed a range of 145 individuals on both sides of the megacolector conflict – Indigenous community leaders, elders, fishermen, farmers, spiritual guides, artists, activists, scientists, NGO and governmental employees. I also participated in a variety of community meetings and assemblies, as well as NGO-led events and scientific conferences.

More specifically, this article includes quotes from ten separate interviews conducted with eight Indigenous and two non-Indigenous participants, as well as written and visual material obtained from my online discourse analysis of each side of the megacolector conflict. I further discuss various texts (poetry, hip-hop, and a children’s book) to explore Pedranos’ relationship with Lake Atitlán. Throughout the article, I also make several self-reflections on the realisation of my essentialist tendencies, exploring how this constrained my initial interpretation of the megacolector conflict’s ontological dimensions. I do so to draw attention to a rarely discussed tension in academia – the pressure on young researchers to positively reinforce the theories of established academics. As I posit later in the article, PO’s prioritisation of ontological difference is a result of researchers’ neglect of ethnographic complexities. In other words, it is a methodological issue, and I include my self-reflections as a caution against the projection of theoretical ambitions on Indigenous peoples.

Bringing to light my ethnographic erasure of Indigenous voices is also an important aspect of decolonising my research. I position myself as an activist researcher attempting to decolonise my work through entering into a deeper relationship of reciprocity with my Indigenous research participants. Since leaving the field, I have maintained contact with members of the Indigenous opposition movement, and above all, I have sought to ‘walk with’ (Sundberg 2014) Pedranos through aligning my work with their cause. To this end, following the submission of my PhD, my first move was to expose the modern/colonial dynamic of the megacolector’s imposition through collaboratively writing an article with Pedrano community leaders (May & Comunidad Tz’unun Ya’ 2021).

## The Megacolector Conflict

As the sun rose, with a bow, women would descend  
 passing on sands cleaned by your movement.  
 Before taking your waters they raised their gaze  
 to ask permission from the mother of life without equal.

Our grandmothers and grandfathers said that you are a gift  
 because a woman came from above with a fine jar  
 that suddenly fell, spilling the water that it carried  
 and you were born beautiful grandmother Lake Atitlán.

Grandmother Lake was considered a sacred jewel,  
 by those who with faith believed that you came from on high;

so that the favoured creatures did not suffer thirst,  
without selfishness I mean the Mayan descendants.

Lake Atitlán is a reason for permanent struggle,  
of those who love you and respect you with conscience,

*Extracts of the poem 'Lago Atitlán' (Quiacain Sac, n.d.) written by Don Salvador Quiacain Sac - Pedrano elder and community leader. [Author's translation from Spanish]*

Lake Atitlán is Guatemala's premier tourist attraction and the deepest lake in Central America. It is also arguably the most beautiful, surrounded by an array of volcanic peaks in the rugged Western Highlands, the Indigenous heart of the country (INE 2018). However, the lake is threatened by increasing levels of contamination. A leading cause is the basin's rapid population rise, having reached around 300,000 people (INE 2018). As a result, large volumes of nutrient-heavy pollution currently enter the lake through the combined effects of soil erosion, wastewater, and chemical fertilizer inflow (Chandra *et al.* 2013).

The lake's pollution has encouraged processes of eutrophication, which in turn produced massive cyanobacterial algal bloom events in 2009 and 2015 (Rejmánková *et al.* 2011). These blooms significantly impacted local livelihoods (Bájan Balán 2016; Valladares 2010), and although they proved not to be toxic, this remains a distinct possibility in the future. This is especially concerning for those communities which depend upon the lake as their sole supply of drinking water. These communities already face significant health risks of diarrhoea due to wastewater pathogens in their water supply.

In recent years, the lake's contamination has become the focus of a social conflict between the lake's Indigenous communities and a local environmental NGO, AALA - 'Asociacion de Amigos del Lago de Atitlán' (Association of Friends of Lake Atitlán) (Aburawa 2021; Esswein & Zernack 2019). The latter has been attempting to impose a wastewater megaproject known as the 'megacolector' on the lake's Indigenous communities, advancing it as the *only* solution to the lake's contamination problem. Plans for the megacolector were first conceived in 2013 by engineers from Guatemalan and American universities based on a similar project at Lake Tahoe (USA). They discounted the possibility of wastewater treatment plants as viable a solution for Lake Atitlán due to the purported high cost of construction and a lack of available space in the steep-sided basin (AALA 2021). The megacolector was presented as an alternative measure to prevent the wastewater from entering the lake through instead exporting it outside of the basin. This would involve two principal projects – the construction of sewage systems in each lakeside town, and then a huge, submerged tube connecting these systems together (AALA 2021). The wastewater would then be pumped southwards to a treatment plant for further processing.

The estimated construction cost of just the main tube of the megacolector is estimated at a whopping \$215.6 million (AGN 2018), and this is without factoring in high maintenance costs. There is still much speculation as to how the project would be financed, but the megacolector's proponents claim various strategies would be implemented to make the project economically sustainable, including the exploitation of hydroelectricity and biogas (AALA 2018a). Most significant is the plan to sell its nutrient-rich wastewater as liquid fertilizer to agroindustry (African palm, banana, sugar

cane, and coffee) on the south coast, where it is estimated to sustain the production of around 5,000 hectares (AALA 2018a; Bordatto 2019). It is this latter detail that hints at the extractivist dynamic beneath the megacolector's innocuous framing as just an 'environmental' project.

Over the last few years, the lake's Indigenous communities and their ancestral authorities have mounted a growing opposition movement to the megacolector (Alcaldía Indígena de Sololá 2019; Comisión Ciudadana por la Transparencia de Santiago Atitlán 2019). Notably, in 2018 'Ajpop Tinamit' - an alliance of the lake's ancestral authorities formed to defend the lake. They frequently stage press conferences to denounce the megacolector and communicate the lake's value as a sentient being (Ajpop Tinamit 2019, 2021). The strongest opposition however has come from San Pedro la Laguna, a Maya Tz'utujil town of 14,000 inhabitants on the lake's southern shore. It is San Pedro which has spearheaded the opposition movement and thrust it into national attention. In September 2019, Pedrano community leaders delivered an *amparo* (legal injunction) to Guatemala's Constitutional Court claiming that AALA has violated their right to consultation as guaranteed by the ILO-169 Convention (Figure 1) (Ramírez 2019). After a hearing in 2020 (Corte de Constitucionalidad de Guatemala 2020), the Constitutional Court finally delivered its verdict in 2021, rejecting Pedranos' claims. However, this has done nothing to diminish Pedranos' determination, and they are now looking to take their case to the Inter-American Court of Human Rights.



Figure 1. Pedranos deliver their *amparo* (FGER 2019).



In 2019 Pedrano community leaders formed a movement – Comunidad Tz'unun Ya' to unite diverse facets of community organisation (the municipality, the Elder Council and cocodes) under one cohesive umbrella. Comunidad Tz'unun Ya' is the main platform of Pedrano opposition to the megacolector, and they coordinate anti-megacolector activities (Red K'at 2021), and frequently publish denouncements of the megacolector on their Facebook page. Through their strategic efforts, anti-megacolector sentiment has seeped into almost every aspect of San Pedro's public life (May 2021a). Consequently, the majority of Pedranos now perceive the megacolector as a serious threat to their community, the lake, and to life itself.

The lake's Indigenous communities object to the megacolector for many reasons, such as their exclusion from decision making and AALA's reliance upon various colonial strategies to push its agenda (May & Comunidad Tz'unun Ya' 2021). They also argue that the megacolector fails to sufficiently address the multifaceted nature of the lake's contamination (Ajpop Tinamit 2018; Romero 2014; Skinner 2016) and that it poses a catastrophic risk in the likelihood of its rupturing during an earthquake (Comunidad Tz'unun Ya' 2019b). However, the Indigenous opposition are most concerned with the megacolector's extractivist dynamic – the sale of wastewater to agroindustry.

Unfortunately, in Guatemala *finqueros* (plantation owners) are responsible for diverting rivers and leaving many communities without water (Alonso-Fradejas 2018; Pomadreda García 2018), and in light of a drying climate and the government's plan to industrialise the south coast (CNDU 2014), it is feared that *finqueros* see the megacolector as a means to securing a long-term water supply (Comunidad Tz'unun Ya' 2019a, 2019b). This likelihood is compounded by the fact that AALA is an elite organisation run primarily by oligarchical family networks, and whose membership includes many powerful corporations, including construction and agro-industrial firms (Aviña Escot 2020).

AALA actively plays down these connections and obscures the megacolector's intended sale of wastewater to *finqueros*, but this lack of transparency only exacerbates the opposition's suspicions. They have analysed in detail how such a water grab could occur, articulating their concerns in a recent report entitled 'The Silent Project to Privatize Lake Atitlán' (Comunidad Tz'unun Ya' 2019b) (Figure 2). Within it, it is argued that the privatisation of Lake Atitlán is likely to follow the French model of privatisation, whereby the state retains a 51% stake so as to maintain an appearance of public-private partnership (PPP). It is expected that the government will fund the megacolector through external loans from banks such as BCIE - Banco Centroamericano de Integración Económica, fears which have been evidenced by meetings between BCIE and the government's Finance Minister (AGN 2018; Gordillo 2018). As their report outlines:

*This model seeks to take water from the lake, convert it into a good and to then sell it to whomever can buy it, damaging the lake itself and its people and townships, since the sanitation and treatment of the lake will increase the cost of water for the people that depend upon it. (Comunidad Tz'unun Ya' 2019b: 12-13) [Author's translation from Spanish]*

During my fieldwork, a number of key stakeholders confirmed that the megacolector could indeed be a means to privatise the lake's water for elite interests as the opposition fears (May & Comunidad Tz'unun Ya' 2021). Despite being led by an environmental NGO, the megacolector is thus representative of a new covert form of extractivism, whose extractivist dynamic is camouflaged by AALA's multicultural virtue signalling and their insistence on the megacolector's emancipatory promise. Such morally ambiguous

conflicts seem to be occurring with increasing frequency worldwide. As the sociologist Boaventura de Sousa Santos (2014: 6) notes, it is in the contact zones between the Global North and the Global South where the discrepancy between principles and practices tends to be highest:

*more and more frequently we witness the massive violation of human rights in the name of human rights, the destruction of democracy in the name of democracy [...] the devastation of livelihoods in the name of development [...] The ideological investment used to conceal such a discrepancy are as massive as the brutality of such practices.*

The growing political prominence of human rights, ‘green growth’ and sustainable development has been accompanied by corporate virtue signalling and greenwashing initiatives which seek to co-opt and divert sympathetic energies to profit a corporate agenda (Baletti 2014; Morgenstar 2019). Take the \$7 billion megaproject ‘Mayan Train’ which is planned to promote the ‘sustainable development’ of south-eastern Mexico (Uranga 2020). Like the megacolector, it too is less about the straightforward extraction of resources, than laying out the infrastructure for their future *control* (Ye *et al.* 2020). This is a worrying trend, and one complicated by a distorted media landscape of smoke and mirrors where it is increasingly difficult to discern the discrepancy between principles and practices that Santos (2014) highlights.



**Figure 2.** The Silent Project to Privatize Lake Atitlán (Comunidad Tz’unun Ya’ 2019b).



## An Ontological Conflict?

Despite its innocent environmental rhetoric, Lake Atitlán's Indigenous communities credibly see the megacolector as an extractivist threat being advanced by private interests. These circumstances go some way in explaining their motives for resisting the megacolector, but not entirely. Take for instance the contrasting statements below from AALA's website and Pedranos' *amparo* against the megacolector:

### LAKE ATITLÁN IS THE MOST IMPORTANT AND VALUABLE WATER RESOURCE IN GUATEMALA.

*Lake Atitlán is a cultural and natural icon that inspires everyone who visits. It is one of the most symbolic destinations in the country and a source of water for over 300,000 people that live on its shores [...] It is undoubtedly the most important natural attraction in the country and is one of the main economic sources, as it attracts national and worldwide tourists.*

*(AALA 2019)*

*Our legal action seeks to depart from the vision of the world that considers certain human beings the centre of the universe, and place on the discussion table **that the Lake/water is alive, that it makes claims, that it has rights and requires valorisation, respect and protection.** Without this recognition, any project can threaten Lake Atitlán. **Our Lake is much more than water, it is a living being.***

*(Comunidad Tz'unun Ya' 2019a: 2) [Author's translation from Spanish]*

While AALA values the lake as an economic resource, Pedranos claim the lake as a living being, a disparity which hints at the deeper ontological complexities of the megacolector conflict. As Blaser (2013a: 548) states, ontological conflicts involve 'conflicting stories about what is there', and the contrasting statements above suggest that the megacolector conflict is also an ontological conflict over what the lake actually is. As well as in public communications, these ontological dimensions could be discerned in my interviewees' statements. Take the words of Eduardo Aguirre, the megacolector's project manager:

*What's really going to happen if there's no more lake, [do] you know how much it represents to Guatemala? One third of all international tourists say they would come to Guatemala because of Lake Atitlán [...] So if you do your math [...] that's 400 million dollars that comes to Guatemala because of Atitlán [...] so that's at stake for the whole country.*

In person, Eduardo Aguirre mirrored the language of AALA's website through emphasising the economic value of Lake Atitlán for the tourist industry. In contrast, when I questioned Pedranos about the lake's significance, they typically responded that 'el lago es vida' (the lake is life). Take the statement below by a young female activist:

*Atitlán is the force that keeps us alive, it is as if you had no air, you cannot survive. For us, it is like that. If the lake is not there, we could not survive, it is a vital element. (Maggie Garcia – Indigenous activist) [Author's translation from Spanish]*

These contrasting valuations of the lake are striking. In fact, when I first encountered them during my fieldwork, they led me straight into the arms of PO. As Cepek (2016: 632) states, ‘Many Westerners are quick to wish for and accept the “truth” of any indigenous statement that describes the earth and its features [...] as sacred, agentive beings’, and in my case, I had entered the field enthused with de la Cadena’s (2015a) notion of ‘earth-beings’, that is, the Indigenous understanding of mountains as selves in their own right. As a result, I initially set out to prove Lake Atitlán’s existence as a similarly ‘other-than-human’ entity, and the megacolector conflict as a straightforward clash of rival ontologies. I was drawn to Pedrano public discourse presenting the lake as a sentient being, and older Pedranos’ references to the lake as ‘Qa Tee’ Ya’ - ‘Nuestra Madre/Abuela Lago’ (Our Mother/Grandmother Lake):

*The lake to me is sacred, she is a very great mother who cares for us and gives us life. (Manuel Chavajay, Pedrano contemporary artist) [Author’s translation from Spanish]*

However, over time as I interviewed a larger range of Pedranos, it became evident that this earth-beings hypothesis grazed against the ethnographic reality of San Pedro. Some Pedranos referred to the lake in explicitly Christian terms, whilst younger Pedranos would usually describe it as a modern resource:

*These days youngsters don’t see [the lake] as the mother, they see it as a lake, a beautiful lake yes, to look after it, yes. But not like in previous years. (Carlos Francisco- 18-year-old photographer and shop worker) [Author’s translation from Spanish]*

*I will be very sincere about the lake. The lake for us is a resource to generate money [...] For me, I think of the lake as if it were a product to generate money for the town. (Otoniel - young graphic artist) [Author’s translation from Spanish]*

Conversely, the lake was not so clearly a modern resource for all of the megacolector’s proponents. AALA’s Indigenous employees for instance expressed a relational view of the lake, and even some of its non-Indigenous employees described the lake as something more than a resource for tourism:

*For me, the lake signifies peace, life, it signifies tranquillity, and above all, it gives me energy. (Haydee Marroquín González – non-Indigenous AALA employee)*

Such examples unsettle PO’s favoured notion of a neat divide between a non-Indigenous modern ontology and an Indigenous relational ontology (Law & Lien 2018). As Killick (2017: 5) states, approaches focused on ‘ontological difference are undermined by their inability to move beyond the distinction that they draw’. Ontologists often end up reifying the boundaries between modern and non-modern worlds in their ‘rush to reclaim truly different difference’ (Bessire & Bond 2014: 443–444). This issue has been criticised by the recent work of a number of scholars who have instead stressed the fluid and contingent nature of ontology (Bovensiepen 2021; Cepek 2016; Mézáros 2020), as well as its hybrid forms in everyday living (Killick 2017; Rivera Cusicanqui 2012).

I first realised the significance of ontological ambiguities when I encountered Rudy, a 24-year-old Pedrano municipal trash collector. During our interview, he was quick to declare that his generation had entirely abandoned ancestral understandings of the lake.

However, when I asked him whether the lake was dying as is often reported in the media (Felipe & Julajuj 2017; Sáenz 2016), his answer left a different impression:

*Me: Is the lake dying?*

*Rudy: I would say no, because we cannot see life of a grand power that the spirit or the energy has allowed. We cannot see the life of that lake so big, simply it's God that knows [...] Imagine that I am not able to see how long you will live, that maybe you will live a lot longer and I won't. Between us, we are both people, but we still can't tell. [Author's translation from Spanish]*

While Rudy may not understand the lake as a mother/grandmother, he expresses a reverence for its vitality (through the medium of Christianity) implicating it as something *more* than a modern resource. A relational understanding can be detected in his comparing of the lake's unknowability to the lifespan of a person. In attempting to categorise Rudy's ontological perspective as either modern or relational we see the limitations of focusing on ontological difference. His more ambiguous perspective fails to fit into either ontological category neatly.

These circumstances find congruence with some recent analyses of ontological multiplicity in other parts of the world. For example, in Mészáros's (2020) research on Sakha relationality with lakes in Siberia, he describes a 'fuzzy, messy and incongruent' local ontology, a mixture between modern and traditional ontologies. As he states, 'Contemporary practices and enactments at lakes cannot be squeezed into a single ontology' (Mészáros 2020: 15). Likewise, in Timor Leste, Bovensiepen (2021) highlights how individuals would express the significance of their spiritual connection with the land in one context but doubt and scepticism in another.

Focusing on individuals like Rudy suggests ontological boundaries should not be overstated (Cepek 2016). Owing to this variation between individuals, in reality there is no such thing as a 'Pedrano relationality' with the lake. At most, there are recognisable trends within certain segments of the population, with younger Pedranos leaning more towards a *modern* ontological ambiguity and older Pedranos towards a more *relational* ambiguity. My research thus supports Bovensiepen's (2021: 39) claim that PO 'does not sufficiently theorise how conflicting ontological assumptions co-exist within the same context, group, or individual'. This is not to say that we should avoid highlighting ontological difference, but it should not be overstated.

There is, however, a concept within PO itself which can help address such ontological ambiguities. De la Cadena (2010, 2015a, 2015b) introduces the notion of 'partial connections' to describe the connections which exist between different worlds in spite of ontological disagreements, describing them as 'a complex formation, a historic-political articulation of more than one, but less than two, socionatural worlds' (de la Cadena 2010: 347). Despite its usefulness, this concept of partial connections is under-utilised by de la Cadena herself, and I agree with Bovensiepen's (2021: 30) contention that PO's emphasis on multiple worlds 'nevertheless leads to an analytical over-prioritization of difference'.

Similar circumstances apply to PO's central concept of 'worlding', that is the process of enacting a world/ontology (Blaser 2014; de la Cadena 2015b). This concept is rooted in the notion that ontologies are 'done and enacted rather than observed' (Mol 1999: 77), and it is useful because it helps account for the fluid nature of ontology. Its utilisation enriches analyses of ontological conflicts through shifting emphasis away from abstract

declarations of ontology to concrete worlding practices. For example, when applied to the megacolector conflict, it allows us to interrogate the ontological claims Pedranos make about their relationality with the lake.

This relationality can be understood as being worlded into being through respectful acts of devotion to the lake. In the past, this occurred through very obvious ritualised interactions, as the Pedrano elder below describes:

*On approaching the lake they would offer a great respect, including before touching, taking or carrying the water home, the elders would ask for permission from God and mother nature, kneeling and kissing the lake. (Don Feliciano Pop – sculptor and former mayor, aged 91) [Author's translation from Spanish]*

Such worlding practices have since disappeared, making Pedranos' relationality with the lake less discernible, and as one Pedrano criticised, more easily falsified:

*Our grandparents [...] were respectful. When they wanted to cross the lake, they had to ask for permission first, and they kissed the lake. Nowadays many say, "Our Mother Lake", but what do they do? Where they got that term from, I don't agree, it's an invention of many people to go through the motions, or just for protagonism. (Juan Quiacain Navichoc – employee of the Academy of Mayan Languages of Guatemala) [Author's translation from Spanish]*

Juan's cynicism is well justified, as I will explore in the next section, Pedranos do strategically politicise their relationality with the lake in the megacolector conflict. However, the loss of these former worlding practices does not necessarily imply the disappearance of Pedranos' relationality with the lake. Worlding simply takes place in new and sometimes less obvious 'transmodern' (Dussel 2012) forms. As Dussel (2012: 43) emphasises, transmodernity is not hostile to modernity, but rather seeks to assume its 'positive moments' along with 'critical elements' adopted from the non-modern cultures themselves in order to create a 'rich pluriversity'

A notable example of this is the children's book 'The Goddess of Lake Atitlán' (Figure 3), written by a Pedrana for a regional literary competition. The book tells the story of a little girl who is cured by the lake, implying that the lake needs to be respected and protected from harm. Within the book, the ancestral mother/grandmother lake has been transformed into a Disney princess-like character to appeal to young children's modern sensibilities. This modernisation is only superficial, as the lake's personhood as a life-giving being remains intact. Another example exists in the form of Sanick, a young Pedrano rapper who I saw perform the song 'Ati't Ya' - 'Grandmother Water' (Sanick 2017) at a festival in Quetzaltenango (Figure 4). The song is a call to action for people to change their attitude and start respecting the lake. Within it, the lake's personhood shines through, as Sanick repeatedly addresses the lake directly, subject-to-subject. Afterwards, Sanick explained to me that the lake instructed him to write the song in a dream, thereby implicating 'Ati't Ya' as a song not *about* the lake, but *of* the lake. Despite being a globalised modern import, hip-hop is the transmodern vehicle by which Sanick enacts a radically different world.

On a wider community level, the most notable example of Pedranos' continuing relationality with the lake occurred during the massive cyanobacterial algal bloom event of 2009. In response, hundreds of Pedranos gathered on the shore to cleanse the lake - physically pulling out algae with baskets, and burning *pom* - a type of incense, as Juan's anecdote relates below:



Figure 3. 'The Goddess of Lake Atitlán' (photo by author).



Figure 4. Sanick (Juun Ajpu 2019).

*People began to put incense around the lake in boats. They started to conduct Mayan ceremonies, and the cyanobacteria disappeared. Why? [...] Pom is like a natural ingredient, we can say in Western terms, it was the medicine for the lake. The lake, for the first time in a long time, sensed the scent of the connection. It's the first time that I saw San Pedro united. The community joined together and began to use pom around the lake. Everybody, including Evangelicals. (Juan Quiacain Navichoc—employee of the Academy of Mayan Languages of Guatemala) [Author's translation from Spanish]*

The act of collective cleansing that Juan describes can be understood as a 'worlding event' (de la Cadena 2015a) in which Pedranos, when confronted with the threat of the algal bloom, demonstrated a continuing relationality with the lake. In spite of the



community's modernisation, they rallied to its defence through a sense of kinship and social obligation:

*[The bloom] was very sad, I was frightened. I thought that it was the end of the lake. At the same time, I knew that the lake had life, the lake was a being, it needed help. That year everyone was **obliged** to cure the lake. For my part, I went with a group of women to clean it. I participated in many ceremonies, calling on the positive energies to cure our lake. (Clara – middle-aged homemaker)*  
*[Author's translation from Spanish]*

Bovensiepen (2021) suggests that threats of this nature do not just reveal the ontological difference, but that they actually produce it through a sort of 'defensive animism' as the spiritual potency of a place in crisis is accentuated. The same situation may be true of the megacolector's ongoing threat to the lake, as the community comes together to protect it from private interests. As Bovensiepen explains, during extractive conflicts the performances that groups stage to show who they are 'momentarily fix people's assumptions about "what is"', and in turn, this 'informs how actors want to be seen by others – even if such representations are not necessarily stable' (Bovensiepen 2021: 11). Accordingly, even Pedranos with a more modern ontological outlook could come to recognise the lake's personhood as a result of their participation in the opposition movement. The opposition movement may be a worlding event in its own right.

Blaser (2013a: 551) claims that ontology is a storied performativity which is 'always in the making', but both he and PO analyses more generally have been accused of neglecting cultural change and the processes by which worldings are reproduced and adapted by younger generations (Revilla-Minaya 2019). Blaser (2013a: 558) points out that 'Radically different worlds are being enacted in front of our noses, even if they now involve computers and the internet', but this is not something he chooses to focus on. Nor does de la Cadena's (2015a) account, which neglects young people's perceptions of earth-beings and the effects of the recent development of shamanistic tourism (Hornborg 2017).

Both Blaser and de la Cadena have attempted to defend themselves from accusations of essentialism, stressing that their ontological accounts are drawn from particular experts and are not representative of social groups as a whole. Blaser (2013a: 553) emphasises that ontological attributions 'go hand in hand with specific practices and not with a specific group'. Even so, I agree with Revilla-Minaya's (2019) assertion that their ontological claims sometimes appear to extend beyond their informants. Blaser's (2009a) 'non-modern Yshiro ontology' is for instance based only on Yshiro traditionalists (Bessire & Bond 2014), whereas de la Cadena (2015a) relies on just two male ritual specialists to construct her entire earth-beings hypothesis (Canessa 2017).

The issue here is that when ontologists 'cut and paste' complex contexts for use 'as building blocks for grand theories' (Ramos 2012: 488), Indigenous peoples have little agency over their own representation. Instead, 'the intrinsic incoherence of indigeneity is reduced to a telos of order imposed [...] by authorized nonindigenous experts' through 'a targeted erasure of ethnographic evidence and an artificial standardization of alterity itself' (Bessire & Bond 2014: 443). This process risks fixing Indigeneity and obscuring its dynamic processes of cultural change (Hunt 2014; Revilla-Minaya 2019). As Chandler and Reid (2020: 12) state, through such representations 'Indigeneity is transformed into a fictive way of being and knowing that has nothing to do with the

rich plurality of the lived life of Indigenous groups, and everything to do with the imagination of its white Western author?.

In terms of my own research, it took me a while to recognise how my essentialist pursuit of radical difference had led me to erase the messy contractions of the megacolector conflict. It was only on later reflection that I realised how my commitment to PO had clouded my understanding of the megacolector conflict and led me to ‘interpretive excesses’ (Ramos 2012). Although I doubt de la Cadena and Blaser ever intended for their ideas to be adhered to in this way, the tendency toward ‘vulgar replication’ (Ramos 2012) of academic heavyweights is nonetheless a temptation for inexperienced doctoral students when confronted with the daunting prospect of ethnographic research.

This is not to negate the usefulness of ontological concepts like ‘earth beings’ as heuristic devices for thinking through complex realities. Yet, their utilisation should not come at the price of ethnographic integrity (Vigh & Sausdal 2014). As Ramos (2012: 489) states, ‘the more extensive and deeper ethnographic knowledge is, the less arrogant we become and the more clearly we perceive the folly of projecting our theoretical ambitions on indigenous peoples’. When I rewrote the second draft of my thesis, I attempted to undo my earlier ‘cutting and pasting’ by reinserting the ethnographic complexities and dissonant voices which unsettled a clean ontological narrative. This also required a closer examination of how ontological difference was being mobilised in the megacolector conflict. As Cepek (2016: 625) states, ‘Pragmatic functions and performative context are neglected when anthropologists distil alterity-affirming content from their collaborators’ statements. Indeed, Revilla-Minaya (2019) contends that both Blaser and de la Cadena ignore the possibility that the Indigenous ontologies they describe are a form of strategic representation, assumed as a homogenous image in order to pursue political goals.

## Mobilising Ontological Difference

In the case of the megacolector conflict, in various instances during community meetings, I became aware of how Pedranos community leaders were strategically essentialising their own relationality with the lake for political advantage. This was something that I was initially reluctant to draw attention to, given the possibility that my discussion could be used to undermine the ontological basis of Pedranos’ opposition to the megacolector. However, to blindly accept Pedrano public discourse without paying attention to their pragmatic function would, as Cepek (2016: 625) suggest, fail ‘to relate to our subjects as critical intellectual agents whose analytic capacities are just as powerful, vexed, and complex as our own’.

Still, when discussing strategic essentialism, it is critical to consider power relations. As Blaser (2013a: 558) states, ‘many indigenous politicians find few avenues to contribute to [...] protecting their worlds other than through the use of (“our”) widely available categories and symbols of alterity’. This is certainly the case for Pedranos, who are constrained by the state’s multicultural neoliberal governance which places strict limits on Indigenous economic and political aspirations (Hale 2006; MacNeill 2014). Framing their opposition to the megacolector around their relationality with the lake is thus a savvy strategy to appear less threatening. Furthermore, Pedranos are well aware of the efficacy of the cosmopolitical ‘rights of nature’ discourse on the

international stage. Indeed, Bolivia's 2010 'Law for Mother Nature' (Vidal 2011) often entered discussions during community meetings. Articulating their opposition to the megacolector through an essentialised Grandmother Lake narrative thus appeals to outsiders' multicultural sensibilities, and the identity expectations of the global audience (NGOs and international media etc.) that yearns for "authentic" cultures (Coombes *et al.* 2011).

AALA have also played on Indigenous relationality with the lake promote the megacolector to the public. Through a strategy of 'cosmetic multiculturalism' (Bastos 2012), the megacolector's communication campaign and marketing material often stress the lake's sacred role as a mother (AALA, 2018b; Jaguarpromociones 2019). AALA have additionally hired several Indigenous promoters to conduct Mayan ceremonies for the megacolector and speak about the lake's sacredness during public events. Yet this stands at odds with the modern rhetoric at the heart of AALA's advancement of the megacolector. The clearest demonstration of this occurred with the megacolector's relaunch in October 2017 when AALA organised a massive scientific conference and press event in Guatemala City called 'Xocomil Científico' (Figure 5). In this space, non-modern ways of knowing the lake were completely side-lined by AALA's overwhelming emphasis on the megacolector's Western scientific expertise:

*AALA [has] worked to deepen the proposal together with several local and international universities. In 2017, together with additional world experts on the subject, they celebrated Xocomil Científico that concludes in a great technical/scientific consensus (AALA 2021).*

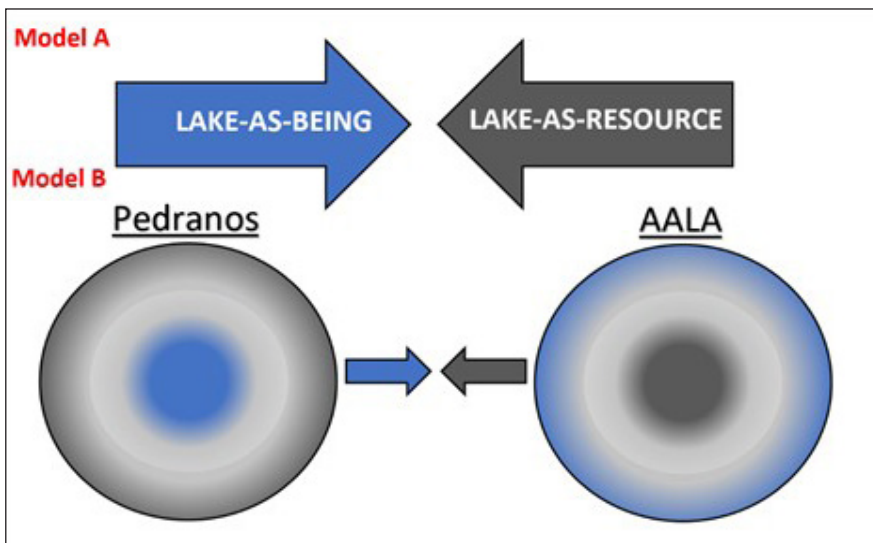


**Figure 5.** Xocomil Científico – 'The most renowned scientists on the planet with only Atitlán in mind' (AALA 2017).

To counter the megacolector’s modern rhetoric, the Indigenous opposition too have sought out Western scientific experts (Aipop Tinamit 2018; COCODES & Elder Council 2018). They have utilised their expert knowledge to support their alternative solutions to the megacolector, suggesting that dry-sanitation technology (biodigesters and dry latrines) would be a more appropriate solution for the lake’s contamination. The resulting dispute thus occurs not between AALA and the Indigenous opposition, but rather between AALA and the opposition’s intermediary scientists. In this discursive space, the lake’s agency as a sentient being is totally absent. Instead, arguments are articulated in wholly modern terms, with each side disputing whose technology is the most ‘advanced’.

Such instances reveal the ontological ambiguities hidden beneath the ontologically rigid public discourses exercised by each side of the megacolector conflict. Model A in Figure 6 below depicts this simplistic clash of ontologies, whereas Model B takes account for its truer complexity. As I have demonstrated in this article, the ontological positions of Pedranos and AALA are not homogenous. Accordingly, whether the megacolector is an ontological conflict depends very much upon the individual you speak to. On the one hand, many Pedrano community leaders do adhere to the notion of the lake as a sentient being, and their public discourse always refers to it as such. However, many younger Pedranos see the lake as a modern resource, and there are also those more ontologically ambiguous Pedranos who sit somewhere in-between both positions in a ‘partially connected’ state (as represented by the ‘ch’ixi’ grey in the model (Rivera Cusicanqui 2012)). Similarly, AALA always references the importance of the lake as an economic resource in its public discourse, despite the relational or more ontologically ambiguous views of some of their employees.

There is also AALA and Pedranos’ respective mobilisations of ontology to consider. Pedranos rely on the support of scientific experts who oppose the megacolector on modern grounds. Conversely, AALA relies on a strategy of ‘cosmetic multiculturalism’ (Bastos 2012) and their employed Indigenous promoters to indicate the megacolector as mindful of the lake’s personhood. The strategic mobilisations of each party thus



**Figure 6.** The ontological dimensions of the megacolector conflict.

provide an ontological coating at odds with their core ontological discourse. Under closer examination then, my research suggests that Model B is a more accurate conceptualisation of the ontological dimensions of the megacolector conflict than Model A. However, it is important to recognise that Model B was drawn largely from the opinions that individuals expressed during interviews, but more important than what an individual *professes* is what they *do*. A stated opinion does not necessarily align with an individual's performance, and this performance 'is the key process we must attend to in evaluating whether we should treat a conflict as ontological or not' (Blaser 2013b: 25).

Finally, since the ontological difference is produced as well as revealed in extractive encounters (Bovensiepen 2021), ontological conceptualisations of the lake may also shift as the conflict progresses. For this reason, the ontological dimensions of the megacolector conflict should be understood as fluid, and Model B should only be read as a snapshot in time. The reason why the megacolector conflict is more easily recognisable as Model A rather than Model B is due in no small part to Pedranos' strategic essentialism, which manages to obscure some of the ontological ambiguities which I have outlined.

## The Coloniality of Reality

In this article, I have shown the importance of the wider political context in influencing the mobilisation of ontological difference in the megacolector conflict. However, as Yeh and Bryan (2015: 539) argue, 'some ethnographies of indigenous ontologies seem to ignore or downplay situated histories and geographies of war, capitalist penetration, colonialism, state policies, development, and trade to define an abstracted indigenous ontology'. Hornborg (2015) likewise argues that apolitical musings of multiple ontologies obstruct the urgent theorizing of capitalism and global power inequalities. For this reason, some researchers avoid the PO framework altogether. In his ethnographic analysis of the Palawan in the Philippines, Theriault (2017) for instance rejects PO on the basis that we must 'avoid treating the world-making practices of state interventions as separate from or impervious to those of Indigenous peoples' (125).

While I sympathise with Hornborg and Theriault's concerns, I am more inclined to agree with Yeh & Bryan's (2015: 539) contention that 'attention to different worlds need not elide an analysis of state power or capitalist extraction'. Furthermore, as Bovensiepen (2021: 29) points out, 'political ontologists are arguably better attuned to the importance of politics, history and emergence than their more metaphysical ontological cousins'. A role model, in this case, is Burman's (2016, 2017, 2019) proposal to investigate the 'coloniality of reality' through ontologizing political economy and politicising the ontological turn, thereby providing the critical tools necessary to challenge ontological *and* political/economic power asymmetries simultaneously. In his own words:

*critical attention to power asymmetries as expressed for instance in unequal ecological exchange within the capitalist world-system may be fruitfully combined with a critical attention to the ontological power asymmetries, that is, the coloniality of reality, underpinning such unequal material flows, since the former are a condition for and a justification and naturalization of the latter, and the latter are a material expression of the former (Burman 2016: 92).*



Advocating closer attention to the coloniality underpinning ontological conflicts beneficially ‘reveal[s] dynamics of colonial domination that go deep into the very nature(s) of reality and being(s)’ (Burman 2016: 77). In the case of my research, it allowed me to see how Pedranos’ opposition to the megacolector connects to wider processes of revindication, that is efforts to reclaim San Pedro’s epistemic and political autonomy. Comunidad Tz’unun Ya’ is a clear example of this. Although it was founded to oppose the megacolector, it has become much more than a single-issue organisation. It has also coordinated community efforts against COVID-19, as well as recent anti-government protests (May 2021b). It has in effect ‘becom[e] the center of communal action against the State and other agents, as well as the space from which the community imagines its future’ (Bastos Amigo 2020: 10).

Pedranos’ opposition to the megacolector cannot be isolated from the wider process of Indigenous resurgence currently unfolding across Guatemala (CODECA 2021). In recent years, numerous ancestral authorities have been re-established throughout the country (Abbott 2020), including San Pedro’s own ‘Council of Elders’ in 2017. These ancestral authorities are highly active in the growing Defence of Territory (DOT) movement, and in 2021 they led national strikes demanding greater Indigenous self-determination and a Plurinational Constituent Assembly (Batz 2021; May 2021b).

A closer examination of Pedranos’ actions in response to recent developments also demonstrates how their ambitions extend far beyond the megacolector’s opposition. In 2012 the government drafted a bill, ‘Iniciativa (Initiative) 4526’ (Congreso de Guatemala 2012), to legally establish Lake Atitlán as national heritage. Nothing came of it at the time, but in February 2020 the bill was once again debated by the government. In response, Comunidad Tz’unun Ya’ (2020a) immediately published a press statement outlining their opposition to the initiative. Since then, Pedrano community leaders have been working on their own draft law to protect the lake from threats like the megacolector.<sup>1</sup> In this draft, they mirror the wording of their *amparo* against the megacolector, claiming to recognise the lake ‘as a sacred and life-giving grandmother’. In this sense, they are performing an ‘ontological disobedience’ (Burman 2016) to the state’s modern ontological conceptualisation (and valuation) of the lake as a resource through Iniciativa 4526.

In drawing Grandmother Lake into the political debate in this way, Pedranos strain the state’s multicultural limits and oblige lawmakers to acknowledge the *otherwise*. In doing so, they also provide an ontological opening ‘to the consideration of other ontologies as plausible and viable alternatives to the modern one’ (Blaser 2013a: 556). The lake thus emerges as the ontological site for political negotiation, and this ‘ontological disjuncture’ (Yates *et al.* 2017) grows with every press statement and news article which visibilises the lake as being *more than* just a resource (de la Cadena 2015a). In this sense, Pedranos’ draft law is ontologically radical, but it is important to recognise that it is also significantly anchored in a modern human rights discourse. It appeals to both the ILO-169 Convention and the UN’s Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, as well as various articles within Guatemala’s constitution and cases of the Inter-American Court of Human Rights. In this way, their draft law appears as an instance of ‘border thinking’ (Grosfoguel 2011), a transmodern blending of ontologies.

Most importantly, the draft law appears to be primarily motivated by the issue of political exclusion. The law demands the creation of a new state-community authority that would be responsible for the lake’s protection and restoration. It seeks to replace the existing governmental body – AMSCLAE – ‘Autoridad y Manejo Sostenable de la

Cuenca del Lago de Atitlán y su Entorno' (Authority for Sustainable Management of the Lake Atitlán Basin and Surrounding Areas) with a more representative form of governance, since none of the lake's Indigenous communities are currently represented on AMSCLAE's board of directors. This is a point which Pedranos' also raise explicitly in their report 'The Silent Project to Privatize Lake Atitlán' (Comunidad Tz'unun Ya' 2019b: 10):

*AALA and CAMTUR [Association of Tourism] are two private structured organizations that have a seat, voice, and a vote within the structure of AMSCLAE, [...] But [...] the people living in the towns and communities around the lake [are not allowed] to voice their opinions and concerns; they are left without participation. [Author's translation from Spanish]*

Owing to my essentialist tendencies, when I first read the draft law, I was immediately drawn to its alterity-affirming content to the neglect of this more mundane political context. Yet this political context is key, since the defence of San Pedro's sovereignty is what unites *all* Pedranos, whereas their relationality with the lake only motivates *some*. Cepek (2016: 625) warns against focusing on 'the bare content of abstract propositions while paying little attention to their pragmatic function'. With this in mind, it is notable that within the law, Pedranos' claims are made less on the basis of an ontological difference than a modern discourse of rights.

## Conclusion

With the draft law and Pedranos' opposition to the megacolector more generally, one is immediately drawn to Pedranos' emphasis on their relationality with the lake. But Pedranos also *always* condemn their exclusion from decision-making. Beyond preventing the megacolector, it is clear that their other main goal is to be included in the lake's management (Figure 7). Accordingly, overstating Pedranos' ontological opposition to the megacolector risks understating the extent to which they 'are enmeshed in the very systems that oppress them, and lack the means to put alternatives into motion' (Copeland 2018: 17). It is a 'cosmopolitical risk' (Cepek 2016) which could elide the pragmatic functions of Pedranos' opposition, most notably their pressing desire for political inclusion and self-determination.

As Copeland (2018: 16) states, 'Discourses that ignore spiritual connections to territory [...] lose sight of a valuable organizing principle and rhetorical tool'. Pedranos have realised this and capitalised on their relationality with the lake to defend their sovereignty. There are however dangers to their essentialist strategy. As Coombes *et al.* (2011: 475) caution, 'Indigenous peoples are not always able to control the outcomes of their activism... self-identification as "authentic" can sometimes miscarry and its benefits are indefinite'. Pedranos have made their claims for political inclusion contingent on a *fixed* notion of relationality with the lake, but if this becomes a normative standard (Killick 2021), there is potential for Pedranos to be politically disenfranchised (Conklin & Graham 1995; Hope 2017; Pieck 2006). The megacolector conflict is likely to continue for many years, and whilst many community leaders currently understand the lake as *Qa Tee Ya'* (Grandmother Lake), the situation of the younger generation is quite different. Strategic essentialism is useful now, but it could prove an oppressive straitjacket in the future (Tănăsescu 2020). As Coombes *et al.* (2012b: 693) state, 'rather



**Figure 7.** 'THE HEALTH OF THE LAKE is discussed with the people, not with a club of friends'. Facebook post of Comunidad Tz'unun Ya' (Comunidad Tz'unun Ya' 2020b).

than romanticising their connections to nature and community, it is Indigenous peoples' negotiation of the hybrid present which offers cause for optimism'.

In this article, I have shown how the prioritisation of ontological difference can obscure the very power asymmetries fundamental to shaping its articulation in the first place. Consequently, my research proves the importance of keeping ontological analyses grounded in ethnography, and putting them into closer conversation with political economy, that is to 'ontologize political economy' as Burman (2016) suggests. My research findings support an emerging trend in the ontological literature advocating for greater consideration of 'individuals' (often transmodern) worlding practices, and the contingent and fluid nature of ontological difference (Bovensiepen 2021; Cepek 2016; Killick 2021; Mézáros 2020). The concepts to achieve this already exist in PO's toolkit, but they must be more comprehensibly applied. A more nuanced approach, inclusive of ontological ambiguities, is necessary to better understand extractivist conflicts and to move abstract discussions closer to the dynamic and entangled realities of Indigenous lives.

## Endnotes

1. This was shared with me privately and is not yet publicly available.

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