Recolonizing Ecuador’s Oriente: Oil, Agriculture, and the Myth of Empty Lands

by

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Abstract

Multi-national oil corporations, the national government, landless Ecuadorian farmers, and Ecuador’s Indigenous populations have dramatically transformed the eastern half of Ecuador (the Oriente) over the past forty years. When American oil companies Texaco and Gulf discovered viable oil wells in the region in 1968, they not only piqued the economic hopes of the Ecuadorian government, but also put into motion a massive modernization and recolonization movement. When Ecuadorian colonist Solomon Haro Valle traveled from the highland town of Ambato to the Oriente he described an inhospitable jungle, primitive living conditions, unbearable heat, and ominous jungle fauna. Yet hundreds of thousands of landless Ecuadorians moved to the Oriente during this period in order to cash in on the free land their government was giving away.

Since the Ecuadorian government was desperately trying to bring this region under national control, it eagerly perpetuated the scenario that Haro described in order to transform the Oriente into a tierra baldia, or empty land in order to then transform it into an economically productive and integrated part of the Ecuadorian Nation. Through various laws and propaganda, the government effectively erased the Oriente’s inhabitants (both Indigenous and Ecuadorian), and created the myth of the Oriente as a vacant space. It was only logical, then, to fill this empty space with Ecuadorian farmers who were willing to work towards the nation’s latest modernization project—that of incorporating the Oriente along with its burgeoning oil industry.
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Introduction

In 1968 Solomon Haro Valle, an Ecuadorian colonist coming from the highland town of Ambato, traveled northeast to what would become the oil town of Lago Agrio in search of free land and employment with the US oil companies Texaco and Gulf. In 1992, he wrote a memoir in which he reflects on his pioneering experience in Ecuador’s northeastern region. He describes “the early days of Lago Agrio” as a time “when there used to be jungle [and] wild animals.” He admiringly looks upon the contemporary city of 24,000 people and notes that it was the pioneers who made it what it is today.¹ Lago Agrio, and the entire Oriente (the region east of the Andes), certainly has been transformed, but its condition in 1968 was much more complicated. If we could have visited forty years ago, we would have seen many disperse Indigenous settlements, small missionary outposts, and Ecuadorian towns. These people were utilizing the rainforests for subsistence agriculture, small-scale ranching, and forestry, but they were not participating in the industrial-style agriculture that would come to dominate the landscape. They were simply too disconnected from the population centers in the highlands and on the coast. The trip from Quito, in the highlands, to Lago Agrio, in the Oriente, today takes eight hours on one of the numerous public buses that make the trip on a daily basis. In 1964, when Texaco and Gulf first started exploring for oil in the region (via helicopters), the trip by land would have taken weeks. It was a journey that

¹ “Esta pequeña historia desde mi juventud hasta los primeros días de Lago Agrio, desde cuando había selva, animales selváticos como dantas, sahinins, monos de toda clase, tortugas y las boas que nunca faltaban, hasta lo que hoy se ha convertido.” Translation mine. Also see pages 7, 16, and 21 for more on the colonists building Lago Agrio out of the jungle. Salomon Haro Valle, Breve Historia de Lago Agrio. (Lago Agrio: published by his son, Marco Haro, 1995), 13.
many colonists described as being “filled with suffering,” and required canoes, horses, and long distances of walking on poorly maintained trails.²

Today, driving from Quito across the Andes mountain range and over thirteen thousand foot Papallacta Pass, one begins the long descent east into the Northern Oriente. The overwhelming greenery belies the true state of the forest. As you wind your way down towards the Quijos River valley, more farms come into view and little towns become more prevalent. Cheese stores, trout farms, oil pumping stations, and a US sponsored drug control checkpoint betray the feeling of emptiness the landscape initially suggests. Eventually, the road parallels the Quijos River and each sizeable town is connected to the next by rolling hectares of farm and ranch land. If you look closely, you can still see primary rainforest on the tops of the most rugged mountains, but agriculture dominates the landscape. Also following the road and intersecting each town is a brown, rusty oil pipeline that serves simultaneously as hitching post, sidewalk, and billboard to the local inhabitants.³ This pipeline, and the oil industry it serves, was the impetus for nearly everything else that exists in the Northern Oriente today, and the road that Texaco-Gulf built alongside the pipeline did more to revolutionize the state of Ecuador’s Amazonian rainforests than anything since the Spanish conquest.

Mainland Ecuador, a small country of only 270,000 square kilometers (roughly the size of New Zealand), consists of three distinct regions: the Coast, the Sierra (highlands), and the Oriente.⁴ The Andes run north-south nearly through the center of the


³ This pipeline, which is still functional in Ecuador’s oil industry pumping 349,000 barrels of oil per day over the Andes to the Pacific Ocean, has been integrated into the daily lives of the people who live in the pipeline corridor as a “natural” part of their landscape. See figures 1 and 2.

⁴ For a map of the division of the three main regions go to http://www.uweb.ucsb.edu/~Eschniter/AMAZONIA/IMG/MECUA.JPG The Galapagos Islands, six
country neatly separating the coastal lowlands to the west from the eastern rainforests of the Oriente. Quito, Ecuador’s capital, sits in the Sierra at 2,850 meters in elevation.

Most of Ecuador’s population is concentrated in the Coastal and Sierra regions. The Oriente—the focus of this study—comprises forty-nine percent of Ecuador’s landmass, and together with Colombia, Peru, Brazil, and Bolivia constitutes the Amazon Basin. In 1974, the Oriente had a population density of 1.24 people per square kilometer with 167,860 people (or 2.6% of Ecuador’s population). As reflected by these numbers, the Oriente was easy prey for a series of national governments in the 1960s and 1970s who wished to render it a vast, empty land, or tierra baldia, in order to then transform this empty space into an economically productive and integrated region of Ecuador.

Turning the rainforest into an agricultural landscape was no small undertaking. Leonir Dall’Alba Ballardin, missionary and chronicler of life in the Oriente before 1970, explains conditions in the Oriente with this description: “everyone [the 97.4% of Ecuador’s population living west of the Andes] looked down upon it [the Oriente] as a cliché of overabundant rain, unbearable humidity, torrid heat, impenetrable jungle, wild people, jaguars, boas, spiders, abundant rivers without bridges, lacking all comforts.”

Many of the rivers now have bridges, and it is sometimes difficult to find impenetrable jungle or wild jaguars—the Oriente, in less than forty years, has undergone radical

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6 Salvador, 2.
change. While this is a history of a region—the Northern Oriente—it has implications that reach far beyond regional, and even national, borders. The Oriente’s transformation in the 1970s from what the national government conceived of as tierras baldias (empty lands) into the landscape described above was driven as much by the government’s modernizing agenda, as by the global oil market, and was carried out by Ecuador’s landless population from the coast and the highlands.

The people who physically shaped the Oriente into this agricultural landscape in the 1970s were primarily landless Ecuadorians from the western provinces who wanted the opportunities and social prestige that taking advantage of the government’s offer of access to free land would bring them. In 1964, as part of Ecuador’s Agrarian Reform campaign, the government brought back to life the 1936 Ley De Tierras Baldias (Law of Empty Lands) and remade it into the Ley de Tierras Baldias y Colonización (Law of Empty Lands and Colonization). Under this later incarnation, any unoccupied or underutilized land was “free for the taking.” Any land not being used in a way recognizable to the government (meaning half of the land had to be cleared for agriculture) could be claimed by someone else. This law was originally written to force large hacienda owners to put their land into production, but in the last quarter of the twentieth century, it served mainly to divide up Indigenous territory in the Oriente. Although little was done under this law during the first six years after its reincarnation, the oil situation in the Oriente in the 1970s would make it a fundamental component to the swift transformation of Ecuador’s eastern landscape.

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8 Salvador.
Environmental historian Carolyn Merchant makes note of the fact that New England, shortly after the Europeans arrived, went through an ecological revolution in a strikingly short period of time. She calls to our attention to the fact that, "what took place in 2,500 years of European development through social evolution came to New England in a tenth of that time through revolution."\footnote{Carolyn Merchant, \textit{Ecological Revolutions: Nature, Gender, and Science in New England}, (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1989), 1.} To help us understand the magnitude of environmental change in the Ecuadorian Oriente, I want to call attention to the fact that the time frame is again cut to nearly a tenth, and the revolutionary changes brought to the Oriente by the oil industry happened in less than forty years. To a large degree, this region of Ecuador escaped what Merchant terms the colonial ecological revolution during the Spanish occupation of South America. The Spanish colonial efforts were mostly focused on the western half of the country, and there was only a small colonial presence in the Northern Oriente. While Spanish colonialism certainly affected this region, the most profound \textit{ecological} revolution took place between 1970 and today. Because of the late date of development, the levels of technology available, and the government’s success in creating the myth of empty lands, Ecuador’s transformation of its rainforest landscape into an oil landscape—one with paved roads, hundreds of thousands of farms, heavy machinery, oil wells, separation stations, oil towns, and an overall aura of industry—was astonishingly rapid and thorough.

This revolution can be categorized as both what Merchant refers to as colonial and capitalist. It was spurred on by capitalist intentions, namely the oil industry, and both the Ecuadorian government and multinational oil companies had a high financial stake in the Oriente. But it was also colonial. Not in the sense of Spanish colonialism in South
America between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries—this was a new kind of
colonialism encouraged and enabled by the Ecuadorian government itself.11 They sought
to re-colonize the Oriente with Ecuadorians who would comply with the nation’s newest
vision of itself, which included agricultural productivity and modernity in the wake of
Texaco-Gulf’s oil discovery.12 The eight different indigenous groups living in the
Oriente—Quichua, Cofan, Huaorani, Siona-Secoya, Shiwiar, Tetete, Shuar, and
Achuar—and the Ecuadorian colonists who settled there prior to 1970, did not fit into the
new, modern version of the Ecuadorian State. They were too autonomous and functioned
too much outside the national gaze.

In the second half of the twentieth century, the oil companies (Texaco and Gulf),
landless Ecuadorians from the coast and the highlands, and the national government (first
Jose Maria Velasco Ibarra’s government and then Guillermo Rodriguez Lara’s military
government) collectively created the framework under which the decisive transformation
of the Oriente took place. Beginning in the 1970s, Ecuador set out to redraw its national
boundaries—not physically, but politically, economically, and ideologically—to include
its northeastern region. Along the way, the government erased from national memory the
existence of previous inhabitants, creating an imagined land without people—an empty
land that would become the epicenter for the government’s modernization project.
Ecuador also transformed its landless population from a nuisance into a useful tool as
colonists in the incorporation of this region. In turn, these landless people became allies,

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11 Merchant.

12 Although this region had been colonized to an extent during the Spanish colonial period, I use
the term “re-colonize” here to explain the government’s colonization scheme of the 1970s. Despite the fact
that numerous people (both Indigenous and Ecuadorian) were already living in the Oriente, the government
wanted to fill the region with Ecuadorians who were willing to engage with contemporary national projects,
namely, developing an oil industry and creating a stronger agricultural base.
for the first time, with the national government, and actively participated in the
governmental remaking of the Oriente in order to receive their own piece of this *tierra
baldía*. The oil boom of the 1970s demanded a fuller governmental control of the Oriente
and deepened the government’s notion of nation to include the agricultural conquest of
their jungle region.

Rational ordering and the subsequent control were the motivating factors in the
recolonization of the Oriente. This modernity and control, however, was predicated on
the transformation of the region into an empty land—a wild landscape in the sense of a
primitive, unruly, and savage place, much the same as people in the US construed their
“uncivilized” places in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.\(^{13}\) Because the
environmental history field is dominated by North Americans, it is easy to fall back on
the culturally constructed ideas of wilderness, and all that these ideas have signified in
North American history. But, wilderness as a category, does not work in the Ecuadorian
case, and the actors in this history do not use the term. Throughout the paper, I try to use
the language that the government, oil workers, and colonists used to express their own
views about the Oriente’s landscape. In many instances, descriptions of this region will
fit perfectly into the North American construct of wilderness in a number of its
incarnations, but I try to stay true to the specific language without superimposing the
term wilderness over very different ways of understanding the land.\(^{14}\) The Oriente as
*tierra baldía* signified to the Ecuadorian government, the oil companies, and the colonists
a clean slate upon which each group could create a new, more desirable future. It was

\(^{14}\) See Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind*, and William Cronon, “The Trouble with
Wilderness; or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature,” in *Uncommon Ground*, (New York: W.W. Norton and
Company, 1996) for discussions on wilderness as a North American construct.
upon this clean slate that the government aimed to build a modern Ecuadorian nation centered around a developing oil industry.\textsuperscript{15}

The outcome of this modernization project has been costly in both human and environmental terms. The main road that Texaco-Gulf built to facilitate their oil operations near Lago Agrio opened up a corridor-shaped frontier in northeastern Ecuador. This 340 kilometer road that connects Lago Agrio to Quito and the 289 kilometers of additional service roads, opened direct access to nearly 500,000 hectares of rainforest. Including the space of ten kilometers on each side of the road, in order to reflect typical settlement patterns, the figure comes to between 1.5-2 million hectares of rainforest “free for the taking” if people were willing to cut down at least half the forest on their land and convert it to agriculture.\textsuperscript{16} This has taken place in a region of the world that has made Norman Myers’ list of “hot spots,” meaning it is home to some of the world’s “most valuable” and endangered plant and animal species, many of which are endemic.\textsuperscript{17} Today, the Oriente’s rate of deforestation is highest of any South American country’s Amazon region.\textsuperscript{18} Additionally, between 1960 and the late 1980s (during the initial

\textsuperscript{15} Many theorists of modernity include erasure of an old past to create a new future as a key ingredient to modernization. John Jervis notes that the “past is a source for the present,” and in Ecuador’s case, the government needed to create a different, more malleable past in order to work towards their goals of a modern present. Exploring the Modern, (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, Ltd., 1998).


The Oriente's population experienced a growth rate of 5.6% per year (in the peak years 1974-1982 growth rates climbed as high as 15% per year). Today, oil has affected the traditional territories of all the Oriente's Indigenous people, and oil operations are underway or being suggested in all of the Oriente's national parks and reserves. Due to the substandard operating practices that Texaco is now being sued over, much of the Oriente's soil, water, plants, animals, and people are home to toxic levels of petroleum wastes. Instead of reinjecting petroleum wastes back into the ground after drilling, Texaco-Gulf left these waste waters in unlined surface pits that routinely spill over into adjacent waterways. Additionally, there have been over thirty reported spills from the pipeline that Texaco-Gulf built, spilling more oil into the Oriente than the Exxon Valdez spilled into Prince William Sound. As Judith Kimerling points out, "petroleum development is fueling what could become the final conquest of Amazonia." Yet, this is not a story of a region's slide down the spectrum from pristine, untouched wilderness to industrial wasteland. I do not deny the unhealthy state of today's Oriente. I do, however, wish to revise the beginning of the story. The Oriente, when Texaco arrived, was not an unspoiled tierra baldia, free from human influence as many accounts would have us believe. There was a thriving population of both Indigenous and Ecuadorian people who used the rainforest in very real ways.

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22 Kimerling, Amazon Crude, 77.
The Oriente in Existing Literature

The current state of Ecuador’s Oriente has not gone unnoticed. Although almost all of the Oriente’s Indigenous people have had contact with the Spanish or with Ecuadorians over the past five centuries, in the 1960s, many still lived somewhat autonomously from the Ecuadorian state. Due to the oil industry and the colonization of the Northern Oriente, many of these people have been forced in recent years to engage in Ecuadorian modes of functioning (mainly politics) in order to speak out against the environmental pollution and land grabbing plaguing their territories. Because of this, Ecuador has commanded much attention lately from scholars, journalists, and environmentalists. The ongoing environmental lawsuit—*Aguinda vs. CheveronTexaco*—has drawn Ecuador’s Oriente into discussions and literature around the world, even appearing in such popular magazines as *Vanity Fair* and *Outside.* This suit, which pits a political collection of Amazonian Indigenous people working together with Ecuadorian colonists (traditional enemies) against of the one world’s largest oil corporations, has raised questions not only about the environment, but also about power, culture, imperialism, and consumerism.

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24 Indigenous and Ecuadorian people from throughout the Oriente joined together in 1993 to file a lawsuit against Texaco for environmental pollution and the health hazards that have resulted from their oil operations in Ecuador. The suit was thrown out of its original venue in White Plains, New York, and finally commenced in Lago Agrio, Ecuador in 2003. The suit is still going on. Initially, Texaco and Gulf had a joint concession to explore for oil in the Oriente. In 1976, due to new demands by the Ecuadorian government, Gulf pulled out selling their share of the operation to CEPE, Ecuador’s national oil company, absolving Gulf of further responsibilities. Chevron was never directly involved in Texaco’s operations in the Oriente, but in 2000 the two companies merged, making ChevronTexaco the defendant. Peter Maas, “Slick,” *Outside Magazine,* March 2007.
Prior to this lawsuit, anthropologists, geographers, and historians took up the Oriente's Indigenous groups and focused mostly on their situation since the 1970s when the full-scale colonization of the Oriente began. The result has been numerous ethnographic studies of the Oriente's Indigenous people, studies on how Indigenous people are adapting to outside intrusions, and a number works on land-use and planning in tropical forests. There have also been many environmental studies on the ruinous activities of the oil industry, and a few pieces on the political situation in the Oriente involving the state, multi-national corporations and Indigenous people. Many of these scholars have idealized nature in their own way in order to show the Oriente’s fall at the hands of a large multi-national corporation, but have overlooked governmental idealizations of nature and empty spaces (implying absence of humans) in order to populate the region with nationally oriented Ecuadorians. These studies have been immensely useful, but most take for granted the Oriente’s incorporation into the modern nation. The process of erasing the Oriente’s past in order to start its Ecuadorian history in the 1970s is crucial to an understanding of the processes of change brought on by the oil industry.

Additionally, Latin American historians tend to study state formation and the creation of national boundaries in the context of the post-independence nineteenth century. While these processes certainly occurred in Ecuador in the nineteenth century,

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25 I do intend to imply this the 1970s colonization was of a larger scale than the Spanish colonization. Although the Spanish did make some inroads into this region, it was nowhere near the scale of infiltration that happened in the 1970s.

26 While the secondary literature is too numerous to list entirely, a few studies of note are Paul Sabin, “Searching for Middle Ground: Native Communities and Oil Extraction in the Northern and Central Ecuadorian Amazon,” Environmental History, April 1998, Francisco Pinchon, “Colonist Land-Allocation Decision, Land Use, and Deforestation in the Ecuadorian Amazon Frontier.” Economic Development and Cultural Change. Vol 45, No. 4 1997, and Judith Kimerling, Amazon Crude. See bibliography for complete list.
an entirely new notion of national boundaries materialized in the late twentieth century in conjunction with the emerging oil industry. Oil is Ecuador’s first export commodity that the state has had direct ownership of and control over. Consequently, in the 1970s, the government had to expand its political, economic, and ideological boundaries to include the Oriente—home of this oil. This outreach of a nation to try to modernize its hinterland, and the accompanying transformation of a place back to an uninhabited, primitive state in order to start its history anew are fundamental aspects of the Oriente’s twentieth century history. My environmental history approach to studying Ecuador’s twentieth century process of modernization as manifested by a rapidly changing environment reveals that the making of a modern Ecuador, of which the incorporation of its eastern region was key, depended on erasing the Oriente’s past in order to invent a new, more Ecuadorian future.


The Myth of Empty Lands

Undeterred by a contrary reality, a number of factions wished to perceive the Oriente in its pre-oil state as an empty swath of jungle untouched and unspoiled by human hands: the coastal and highland colonists because they wanted access to free land, environmentalists so they could capitalize on the damage Texaco did, and the government so they could claim it as their own. In an article about the ongoing lawsuit pitting Indigenous people and Ecuadorian colonists against ChevronTexaco, journalist William Langewiesche paints this amusing picture:

Lago Agrio did not even exist in the 1950s. It did not have a name. It was an uncharted wilderness along the Aguarico River—a forest Eden roamed by small groups of naked Indians, some of whom believed that the only real world is the world of dreams. They hunted with blowguns, drank hallucinogenic brews, made love in the jungle, and sometimes shrank enemy heads.29

Each group—government, colonists, environmentalists—took some version of Langewiesche’s “uncharted wilderness” as a platform from which to launch their own very different agendas. All groups carried this narrative forward despite strong evidence suggesting that the Oriente was far from a wilderness before Texaco-Gulf arrived.

In the 1970s the Ecuadorian government and multi-national oil corporations set in motion a grand re-colonization movement for the northeastern portion of Ecuador. In 1977, under the direction of a recent military junta, which created the Gobierno de las Fuerzas Armadas (Government of Armed Forces) the Ministerio de Agricultura y Ganadería (Ministry of Agriculture and Ranching or MAG) passed the Ley de Colonización de la Región Amazónica Ecuatoriana (Law of Colonizing the Ecuadorian

Amazon Region), which created the Instituto Nacional de la Colonización de la Región Amazónica Ecuatoriana (National Institute of Colonization for Ecuador’s Amazon Region). As part of this, Oliverio Salvador, Ecuador’s Minister of Ranching and Agriculture, published a report on the colonization of the Oriente, in which, he states in its opening pages, “I need the young people to have faith in Ecuador’s future. I need the countryman, the student, the soldier and the journalist. I need all men and women, because the colonization of the Oriente is a national project." This sentiment, coupled with the government’s Law of Empty Lands and Colonization, which allowed Ecuadorians access to free land if they were willing to farm it, created a national fervor, both for free land, and to do one’s duty as an Ecuadorian to finally weave this region into the national fabric.

Ecuador’s military leader between 1972-1976, Guillermo Rodriguez Lara, enthusiastically encouraged the 1970s recolonization of the Oriente. His regime, which called itself, “revolutionary” and “nationalist” wanted to transform Ecuador from a little known banana republic to an important oil-producing nation. Influenced by John F. Kennedy’s Alliance for Progress, Lara was focused on modernization, industrialization, and developing a stronger export-based agricultural system; an oil industry in the Oriente, especially if it proved to be as productive as the geologists claimed, held promises

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31 “Necesito la fe de la juventud en el futuro del Ecuador. Necesito del campesino y del estudiante, del soldado y del periodista. Necesito de todos los hombres y mujeres, porque la colonización de la Región Amazónica es la obra nacional.” Salvador, ii.

towards these ends. This meant that subsistence farming, polyculture, and any other seemingly under productive system of agriculture had to be replaced by modern agriculture. Additionally, the wild aspects of the Oriente, together with the region’s perceived backwardness, had to be corrected. With Texaco and Gulf willing to finance an oil industry in the Oriente, the Ecuadorian government finally had the impetus and the financial backing to take control of its northeastern territory. Overnight, the government made colonization of this region a national priority and the task of every Ecuadorian.

Having recently lost two thirds of its Oriente to Peru in the 1942 Rio Protocol, the government was particularly wary of losing any more — especially since the land was now proving to be rich in “black gold.” Having viable roadways and population centers filled with Ecuadorians who had a stake in what happened to their country was one way to assure a more secure footing in a region of the country that the government had long struggled to gain control over. Salvador explains in his report that a major reason for colonizing the Oriente is to “maintain, unharmed, the territorial integrity of the country.” To protect the region and its natural resources (namely oil), Salvador expressed the need for “men tied to the land for their sustenance, men with their wives

34 In this instance, “modern agriculture” implies monocropping, using fertilizers, and clearing forests for large plots of agriculture.
35 Government propaganda, mostly distributed through the Ministry of Agriculture and Ranching, put the burden of colonizing the Oriente onto every patriotic Ecuadorian. Salvador.
36 In 1942, Ecuador and Peru ended their border war by signing the Rio Protocol. Peru, Ecuador, Brazil, Argentina, and the United States met in Rio de Janeiro to write the treaty. Both countries ratified the treaty, which gave Peru two thirds of Ecuador’s previous holdings in the Oriente and also deprived Ecuador of its outlet to the Amazon River. Although Ecuador’s 1942 congress ratified the treaty in order to end the war, most Ecuadorians today do not recognize the treaty. See Hiraoko and Yamamoto, “Agricultural Development in the Upper Amazon of Ecuador,” and George Maier, “The Boundary Dispute between Ecuador and Peru,” The American Journal of International Law, Vol 63, No. 1, January 1969.
37 “mantener incólume la integridad territorial de las Patria” Translation mine, Salvador, 30.
and children, with more than sufficient motivation to live and fight." High populations of landless workers have also been a long-standing problem in Ecuador, and one that the government has historically failed to resolve through land reform and redistribution measures. Suddenly, Ecuador had a use for their landless population—use them to incorporate, make productive, and protect the Oriente.

Like many Latin American countries, Ecuador still has a land system left over from the Colonial Latifundia (large land-holdings like haciendas) and Minifundia (small-holdings that support the rural population on subsistence levels) systems. Particularly on the coast and in the highlands, the majority of Ecuadorians were landless and were working in hacienda-like situations. Ecuador had avoided any major uprisings based around land redistribution, but the need for land reform was weighing on the country. In 1964, spurred on and supported by John F. Kennedy's Alliance for Progress, Ecuador passed an Agrarian Reform law that established the governmental body to regulate colonization and land redistribution—the Instituto Ecuatoriano de Reforma Agraria y Colonización (Ecuadorian Institute for Agrarian Reform and Colonization) IERAC. This law called for the abolition of precarious land tenure systems, elimination of the absentee exploitation systems, and improved living standards via access to land ownership.

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38 "hombres vinculados con la tierra que les da el sustento, hombres con esposa y hijos, con motivaciones mas que suficientes para vivir y luchar." Translation mine, Salvador, 30.
41 Redclift.
Little land redistribution occurred under this law, and the agrarian reform part largely fell by the wayside. Particularly after Texaco-Gulf discovered oil in 1967, colonization of the Oriente became IERAC’s primary concern. After Texaco-Gulf finished building the road (1972) and public buses began running from Quito out to Lago Agrio, IERAC’s job was easy; they simply had to sit back and watch the colonists pour into the Oriente. The people who traveled east on the public buses towards what they believed would be a more prosperous life also had a stake in believing that the Oriente was an empty landscape. This was an unprecedented opportunity for them to better their lives. The people that came out to the Oriente on this road came from various backgrounds. Although a few Ecuadorians who owned land elsewhere came to the Oriente for more land, the overwhelming majority of colonists in the 1970s were landless Ecuadorians from the coastal and highland provinces. Having been denied land ownership all their lives, Ecuador’s poor eagerly participated in the myth of a peopleless land, so they could finally get their share of their country.

Particularly for the government and the colonists, the fact that the Oriente was so disconnected from the western part of Ecuador made it easily construable as vacant. Prior to the “era of oil” in Ecuador, the Oriente was commonly known as a forgotten land, one in which a primitive state of nature prevails. Despite the numerous Indigenous people (estimates range from 85,000-250,000 before 1970), missionary settlements, and non-mission Ecuadorian settlements in the Oriente, it was easy and convenient for the rest of Ecuador to think of the Oriente as a desolate jungle.

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42 Both Salvador and Haro constantly use the terms, “primitive”, “forgotten”, “useless”, “provincial” to describe the Oriente before the 1970s.
disconnected from the heart of the country. The lack of transportation and communication links with this part of the country made it feel a world apart, and few, if any Ecuadorians from the coast or the highlands had ever visited this region. It made sense to use the Northern Oriente as a population relief valve and a convenient way for the government to keep the large landowners happy, while at the same time make landless Ecuadorians feel like they had an option.

Environmentalists, too, have been motivated recently to portray the Ecuadorian Oriente as a pristine wilderness fallen at the hands of big business. Both Ecuadorian and North American environmentalists have capitalized on North American ideas of wilderness to make their claims. They use the term wilderness to signify what William Cronon calls the "domesticated sublime," or nature according to its popular North American definition—inocent, anti-modern, untainted by civilization—in short, nature constitutes that realm existing outside of all that is human. Rather than the Ecuadorian government's use of tierras baldias to suggest an underutilized environment ripe with economic potential (this landscape calls out for human control), the wilderness that twenty first century environmentalists play upon has come to embody our abhorrence of the control we forced upon old wild places and a nostalgia for landscapes free of human

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44 The Sublime wilderness originally had a more profoundly religious connotation and gave wilderness the attributes of both God and the devil. In the nineteenth century in the US, as more people began retreating to wild places to escape the evils of the city, wilderness began to lose both its devilish qualities and its strong religious overtones, becoming what Cronon describes as the "domesticated sublime." This is the wilderness as we know it today: A place to rejuvenate our spirits and to escape the city and all that it embodies—modernity, progress, civilization. Cronon, "The Trouble with Wilderness; or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature," in *Uncommon Ground*, 75. Also see Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind*, and Jennifer Price, *Flight Maps: Adventures with Nature in Modern America*. (New York: Basic Books, 1999) for a further discussion on this topic.
subjugation. Wilderness, for these environmentalists, is “the last remaining place where civilization, that all too human disease, has not fully infected the earth.” In the shadow of the highly publicized lawsuit, many environmentalists have capitalized on this definition of wilderness, the definition that so many North Americans hold dear to their hearts, in order to highlight the damage that Texaco did during their oil operations, and the damage that the colonists did in Texaco’s wake.

This construction of wilderness also has its dangers. Just like the government’s use of tierras baldias, this North American construct of wilderness also serves to annihilate the Oriente’s Indigenous people and Ecuadorian colonists. If a wilderness is a place without humans, and people are fighting to restore the Oriente to a wilderness state, that leaves no room and no home for either the Oriente’s Indigenous or the colonists who have moved there. In a second instance, environmentalists’ use of Indigenous peoples’ the symbolic capital ties Indigenous people to this wilderness ideal as primitive peoples incapable of destroying the environment. Displaying Indigenous people as stewards of a better environment in the face of destructive industry often serves to portray them as “certain non-Western ‘primitives’ as innocent and free of corruption, in contrast to the West’s destructive materialism.” While allying themselves with environmentalists serves Indigenous groups, it also denies Ecuador’s Indigenous people any place in a modern world, and suggests their only home is in what many nations still see as a backward wilderness.

46 Cronon, “The Trouble with Wilderness,” 69.
47 Cronon, “The Trouble with Wilderness.”
49 Conklin and Graham, 969.
Creating Tierras Baldias

Accompanying Ecuador’s oil boom was an urgent need for the national government to remake their “backward wilderness” into something modern, civilized and, most importantly, productive. Prior to the 1970s, land use patterns varied in the Oriente. In the Southern Oriente, there were a few plantations, but they served more as large land holdings for wealthy foreigners than productive farms. Throughout the twentieth century, small numbers of people (both mission-related and not) settled in the Oriente using old colonial towns (mainly Baeza, Tena, and Archidona) as their outposts. They harvested lumber products from the forest, hunted for subsistence and trade, and grew small amounts of surplus crops (mostly yuca, cocoa, and naranjilla) to sell in Quito. People mostly farmed in a polyculture style growing many crops on the forest floor, which worked much better with the low nutrient content of the rainforest soils, but was not sufficiently productive for the new governmental ideals.

The situation was slightly different in the Northern Oriente a region that, as geographer Linda Newson explains, was “never effectively settled by the Spaniards…” Consequently, there were very few established settlements to lure colonists to make the arduous journey before Texaco and Gulf entered in the late 1960s. This region makes up a significant portion of Ecuador’s landmass (the entire Oriente is 49%), yet, due in large

51 Leonir Dall’ Alba Ballardin, Pioneros, Nativos Y Colonos: El Dorado en le Siglo XX, (Quito: Ediciones Abya-Yala, 1992)
part to its remoteness, it was not contributing economically to the nation. As Salvador explains in his report, the "geoeconomic" integration of this region was key, and that the country needed to change the fact that this region was "practically forgotten by most Ecuadorians." Integration of this region had long been on the national agenda, and in the 1970s, it seemed like it could be a reality.

Since most Indigenous groups engaged in a combination of hunting, fishing, gathering, and polyculture, their land did not appear to be "in use" as acknowledged by the government, and was therefore subject to claim by Ecuadorian colonists. Anyone willing to pack up and move to the Oriente could become a landowner under this new system. While this free land was theoretically open to anyone willing to transform it in the new national image, the colonists who took advantage of it were almost exclusively landless Ecuadorians from the coast and the highlands. Some Indigenous people also took part in the land-titling system, often claiming land to stop others (both Ecuadorian colonists and other Indigenous groups) from claiming it. There were, however, financial and logistical constraints to obtaining land titles, and both Ecuadorian colonists and Indigenous people often did not have the means to get official titles. Nonetheless, these laws, with help from the inhospitable character of the rainforests in the Oriente, were extremely successful in institutionalizing the myth of an empty land.

Salomon Haro Valle’s memoir explains how readily the early colonists’ real experiences in the Oriente in the 1970s could support the myth of tierras baldias. Many

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54 "prácticamente olvidada por la mayoría de los ecuatorianos..." Translation mine. Salvador, 15.
56 Paul Sabin, in his "Searching for Middle Ground," notes the Quichua obtaining land titles to try to legally stop incursions from the Huaorani who were being pushed out of their territory by other colonial land claims.
colonists encountered conditions in the Oriente that could easily lead them to believe they were in uncharted territory. Haro’s memoir is a unique document in the limited archives of the history of the Oriente from 1960 until today, and documents his daily struggles living in, and helping to create, the town of Lago Agrio. Before moving to the Oriente, Haro lived in the highland city of Ambato, and ran a tienda de abarrotes (grocery store). He moved to Lago Agrio in 1968 in order to get work from Texaco and to “acquire a ranch to support my grocery business.” His is the only autobiographical work from this time period written by a non-missionary and non-government employee that I found in Ecuador.

Haro begins his narrative with his arrival at Texaco’s base in 1968, and he is writing about the Northern Oriente—specifically Lago Agrio where Texaco-Gulf began their operations. Because there was no road to the site that would become Lago Agrio and Texaco-Gulf had to airlift all of their people and equipment into the jungle via helicopters, it was easy for Haro to conclude that nothing existed out there before the era of oil. Although not much may have existed where Lago Agrio stands today, and while Haro never mentions the presence of Indigenous people near Texaco’s original camps, the Huaorani, Cofan, and Secoya-Siona all utilized the forests and rivers in this area, and there was a missionary settlement with an airstrip—Santa Cecilia—only thirty kilometers away.

Despite the existence of other communities, the colonists who were enticed out to the Northern Oriente by the government’s boosterism normally met with what they could easily conceive of as a desolate, forsaken jungle. Haro explains, “the intense heat

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57 Lago Agrio means Sour Lake in English, and was named after Texaco’s birthplace, Sour Lake, Texas.
58 “hacer un rancho para poner mi negocio de abarrotes.” Translation mine, Haro, 14.
prevailed...other than the machinery of the companies [Texaco-Gulf] only solitude and sadness pass through here.”

Haro’s memoir highlights a situation that could easily make the colonists believe they were the first humans in that place; in reality, the Oriente was far from empty, but it often seemed that way to the colonists following the oil boom. Haro’s pioneering experience in Lago Agrio, which he described early on as “12 or 15 people...slowly knocking down the mountain [to build the city],” is easily likened to an exploratory frontier process during which so many American (both North and South) nationalisms have been forged.

It was this ideal of the frontier that the government capitalized on in order to make moving out to the Oriente more appealing. Although the government did not actually call it a frontier, much of the language they used set the stage for a national excitement to go out and claim the Oriente for Ecuador once and for all. This excitement also reached the colonists who were on the ground carrying out the government’s mission. Haro exclaims many times in his memoir his astonishment and admiration for the fact that the early pioneers of Lago Agrio built such a vibrant city out of such an impossible jungle. The *Himno a Lago Agrio* [Song of Lago Agrio] similarly honors the colonists who built Lago Agrio as heroes for creating the “jewel of the Oriente” out of

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59 “el intenso calor reinante...a parte de la maquinaria de las compañías, solo la soledad y las tristeza la transitaban.” Translation mine, Haro, 21.

60 “las 12 o 15 personas que hasta este momento habitábamos ahí, tumbamos poco a poco algo de montaña...” Translation mine, Haro, 21. For the process of various frontiers creating or encouraging nationalism in both the United States and South America, see David J. Weber and Jane M. Rausch, *Where Cultures Meet: Frontiers in Latin American History*, (Wilmington: Scholarly Resources Inc., 1994). In addition, Brazil was trying to colonize its Amazonian Region at roughly the same time as Ecuador. Their colonization plans were much more directed and controlled than were Ecuador’s, and many would argue, more successful. See, John D. Browder and Brian J. Godfrey, *Rainforest Cities: Urbanization, Development, and Globalization of the Brazilian Amazon*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), and Susanna Hecht and Alexander Cockburn, *The Fate of the Forest: Developers, Destroyers and Defenders of the Amazon*, (London: Verso, 1989).

61 Haro, 21, 25, 36.
nothing. Much of the pioneering character of the Oriente during the oil boom would have been lost by acknowledging the people who previously lived there. The national myth of empty lands, combined with the experiences of the early colonists, have been largely successful in erasing any early inhabitants—both Indigenous and Ecuadorian—from the Ecuadorian Nation’s memory and, as such, making colonization of the region all the more glorified.

Another factor driving the government’s blindness to Indigenous populations was the national policy of *el mestizaje*. Since independence, Ecuador has defined itself as a mestizo nation, a people of mixed heritage dating back to pre-Inkan people who lived in the Sierra. These early inhabitants’ significance in the national identity was valuable only in their mixed status. The Ecuadorian government’s notion of mestizo has evolved over its hundred and seventy-seven years of independence. As a result, ideas of who constitutes a mestizo person (Indigenous, Spanish, Afro-Ecuadorian) have varied, as has *el mestizaje*’s importance to the Nation. In the mid-twentieth century, Ecuador’s leaders had largely disregarded the importance of the mestizo to Ecuadorian nationalism, but Rodriguez Lara brought it back to prominence in 1972 after his successful military coup. In the 1970s, few Indigenous people spoke Spanish, and most did not consider themselves Ecuadorians although they lived in territory that Ecuador claimed. After the oil boom in the Northern Oriente, President Lara called for a giving up of ethnicity in exchange for nationality, and felt that Ecuadorians could only accept the goals of the modern nation once this had been achieved. For Lara, once *el mestizaje* had been

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62 “Los heroes Orientanos” and “Lago Agrio, la joya del Oriente.” Translation mine. Haro, 7.
64 Stutzman, in *Cultural Transformations*. 
accomplished, Ecuador could then move forward to “find its proper place in the modern world.”

Two national slogans served Lara’s government in the 1970s: “El Ecuador ha sido, es y sera país Amazónica” (Ecuador has been, is and will be an Amazonian country) and “El Mestizaje” (Mestizo heritage). For centuries, the Andes mountain range and the dense jungles of the Oriente formed insurmountable obstacles to Ecuador’s claim as an Amazonian country, as well as to the inclusion of the Oriente’s Indigenous into the mestizo ideology, but all this changed with oil and especially roads. As historian William Vickers explains, the government’s stance towards Indigenous people in the 1970s focused on “ethnic assimilation and an emphasis on national integration and development.” Preserving Indigenous culture and tradition did not coincide with the national agenda of mestizaje, and there was, therefore, little discussion of Indigenous ethnic rights during the formation of ideas about the Oriente. These ideas carried over into the late 1970s and were also prominent under the Government of the Armed Forces, particularly in Article 3 of their Law of the Colonization of the Ecuadorian Amazon Region. It was their complete incorporation into national life that took precedent over preserving their culture during the 1970s colonization.

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65 Stutzman, in Cultural Transformations, 69.
68 “El Estado, por medio del Ministerio de Agricultura y Ganadería, determinará los sectores territoriales destinados para el establecimiento y desarrollo de las poblaciones aborígenes, con miras a salvaguardar su cultura y promover su plena incorporación a la vida nacional,” Salvador, 39.
The Oriente Before Texaco-Gulf

Despite the government's great success institutionalizing the myth of empty lands, it did not reflect the true state of the Oriente. While their histories are not well documented, there have been people living in the Oriente for millennia. Archeologists debate the dates, but recognize that Jivaroan and Quechua-speaking Indigenous people have lived in the Oriente since between 600 and 900 A.D. Linda Newson identifies ten major Indigenous groups living in the Oriente before the Spanish arrived: the Cofan, Coronado, Quijo, Macas, Jivaro, Omagua, Tucanoans, Kandoshi, Zaparoans, and Panoans. Each group utilized a fairly large territory and had frequent contact with each other both in the form of war and commerce. The Quijo traded prolifically with the highlands due to their close proximity to this region, and beginning in the 1530s, they had even more contact with people from the western side of the Andes as the Spanish began to make serious attempts to bring this region under crown control.

One of the earlier and more infamous expeditions to this region was conducted by Gonzalo Pizarro and Francisco Orellana on the 1541 expedition that would eventually lead Orellana to his “discovery” of the mouth of the Amazon River. From the sixteenth to the nineteenth centuries, Spanish missionaries (Franciscans and Dominicans) began to make inroads into the Oriente in search of El Dorado whether it be in the form of gold,
souls, cinnamon, or rubber. They were somewhat successful in the middle and southern Oriente, but constantly faced the challenge of convincing Spaniards to resettle in the region. There simply were not enough Indigenous people available for Spanish subjugation. This was particularly a problem in the northern Oriente, and consequently, fewer missionary settlements survived here than anywhere else in Ecuador.

While the Spanish did make serious inroads into this region and set up missionary settlements that are thriving towns today, the lack of infrastructure and timely communication links posed hurdles to this region’s full incorporation. The Spanish did, however, significantly impact Indigenous populations, reducing them by as much as seventy five percent in some locations. They also left behind a few towns where future Ecuadorian colonists would settle in the twentieth century (Archidona and Baeza for example). From Ecuador’s independence in 1830 to the first oil explorations in the Oriente in 1921, the region experienced periods of activity, and small numbers of people settling there. The rubber boom of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries presented the most disruptive period in this time frame. Charles Goodyear patented the process of vulcanization in 1837, which set off a mad rush to Amazonian rainforests to collect rubber. While rubber trees were the market commodity, Norman Whitten explains, “the native people were the immediate prize.” European raids of Indigenous communities and forced labor as rubber extractors was the norm until 1876 when the British Royal Botanical Gardens at Kew successfully grew a rubber tree using stolen

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73 Jorge Uquillas, “Colonization and Spontaneous Settlement in the Ecuadorian Amazon,” in Frontier Expansion in Amazonia, 263.
74 Newson, chapter 18.
75 Newson, see Part Six, Chapters 14-18.
77 Whitten, “Amazonia Today at the Base of the Andes,” in Cultural Transformations, 141.
seeds from the Brazilian Amazonian forests. While rubber hunting in the Amazonian forests slowly tapered off, Indigenous people who had sought refuge in remote areas soon faced another intrusion.

The first large scale oil expedition to the Oriente was in 1921 when Ecuadorian president Jose Luis Tamayo granted Royal Dutch Shell and Standard Oil a joint concession to search for petroleum deposits in Ecuador’s Southern Oriente. Ecuador first became home to a petroleum industry in 1878 when the National Assembly gave M.G. Mier and Company exclusive rights to extract petroleum, tar, and kerosene from the Santa Elena Peninsula on the west coast. In 1911, the first active well came online on the peninsula, and in 1917, Anglo-Ecuadorian Oilfields Ltd, which would later become British Petroleum, began operations there as well. Small operations continue on the peninsula today, but are trivial compared to those in the Oriente. Modern oil processes truly began in Ecuador in 1921 with Shell and Standard Oil.

Standard and Shell, began mapping the Southern Oriente in the 1920s, and in 1928, the Ecuadorian government signed a contract with the two companies to begin construction of a road that would link the town of Ambato in the highlands, with the town of Mera in the Oriente. Completed in 1947, this was the first motorcar road into the region, and many of the early settlers used it when they came into the Oriente. Halfway through road construction, Standard Oil fell out of favor with the government and lost their concession, but Shell stayed on. In 1948, Shell pulled out of the Oriente claiming

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80 North American Congress on Latin America, 30.
that their twenty-seven years of exploration had produced only unviable results. As the North American Congress on Latin America explains, “the circumstances of oil production on a world-scale were such that the incorporation of any new reserves could only drive down the price of oil.” This crushed the hopes of the severely indebted Ecuadorian government who believed oil would spur the country into its much-needed industrialization and be its economic savior. Shell’s declaration prompted Ecuadorian President Galo Plazo Lasso to declare that the “Oriente es un mito” (the Oriente is a myth). Nearly thirty years of Ecuador’s hopes for salvation from economic despair hinged on the Oriente’s oil potential, and this news came as a huge national blow.

After Shell pulled out of the Southern Oriente, things quieted down considerably, and all national projects in the region came to an abrupt halt. Twenty years passed before the Oriente saw any more oil action, and both the government and multi-national corporations were almost wholly absent from the region. Many Ecuadorians who moved to the region to work on the exploration teams or on road construction crews stayed behind and opened shops, kept farms or ranches, harvested lumber, and traded what goods they could. The few settlers who did stay in the Oriente pressed on with road and trail construction hoping to link the Southern Oriente more directly to Quito—the most lucrative market—but progress was slow without government or international funding.

While this region moved at a slower economic pace than the rest of the country for much of the twentieth century, it was far from the deserted landscape that the government purported it to be. This is clearly revealed through Leonir Dall’Alba

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82 North American Congress on Latin America.
83 North American Congress on Latin America, 32. Also see pages 36-38 of this paper for a further discussion of the global oil situation while Shell was exploring in southeastern Ecuador.
84 Gerlach, 33.
Ballardin’s *Pioneros, Nativos Y Colonos* which, through a series of interviews, chronicles the daily lives and the trading networks of people in the Oriente between 1916 and 1990. Ballardin, who was a missionary working with the Mision Josephina, aimed to relay the voices of the people living in the Oriente in the twentieth century who, as he explains, could not write their own histories. As he says, his book is one that “comes from below, from the people.”

Early on, through the accounts of the numerous people he interviews, Ballardin clarifies that the Oriente was not empty. It was remote, rugged, and much different from the western half of Ecuador, but it was also far from an empty land. There was a significant population in the Oriente who had a high interest in creating links with the rest of Ecuador. Hermogenes Torres, an Ecuadorian colonist living in the region in the 1950s, reports that the communities around Baeza were able to organize a *minga* (a group of people working [unpaid] on community projects) of one thousand people to work on the road that would eventually connect Quito to this region.

While it took them three days to build only one kilometer of road, the presence of the *minga* shows a significant population with an interest in integrating the region with the rest of their country.

Most of the people Ballardin interviewed moved to the Oriente for similar reasons as their 1970s counterparts—work opportunities, ties to missionary settlements in the region, or because they wanted to escape the oppression of being a landless worker in their old homes—they just did so before the government began its campaign to give away free land to those willing to be a “soldier of the nation.”

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85 “Es un libro que viene de abajo, del pueblo.” Translation mine, Ballardin, 1.
86 Ballardin, 133.
87 Salvador is constantly invoking military language in his 1977 report on the colonization of this region. He says at one point, “The entire country should prepare itself for the defense, and in this country
initial rubber boom (late nineteenth, early twentieth century), there were various settlements of importance in the Oriente. Besides the missionaries living in Baeza, Archidona, and Tena, there were a number of non-church affiliated settlers who had everything from small subsistence farms to large African Palm plantations in the Southern and Central Oriente.\textsuperscript{88} Despite these settlements, there were no roads east of the Andes until 1947, and no road connecting this region to Quito until 1972. The 1947 road connecting Ambato with Mera was quite useful as a link with the highlands, but still was not enough to integrate the Oriente. While Ambato was a sizeable town, it did not compare to Quito (farther to the north) in terms of lucrative markets. Consequently, most trade was done via a network of waterways in the lower elevations, and then on horse and foot trails to go up and over Papallacta Pass in the Andes to the markets in the capital city.

Mostly the concerns of Ballardin’s interviewees revolved around transportation—how to move their goods to the market. Most of the stories in his book involve large amounts of mud, weary pack animals, rain, suffering, and the human camaraderie that accompanies such hardships. While most people maintained a subsistence-based economy, many depended, to a certain degree, on the small market exchanges their surpluses allowed, and they all had an interest in maintaining the trails. In 1950, it was a four-day journey from Archidona in the Oriente to Quito in the highlands (just over 100 kilometers).\textsuperscript{89} Jamie Dalgo, an Ecuadorian colonist who utilized the trails, explains poor conditions on the return trip from Quito. He begins his description on the descent down

\textsuperscript{88} Ballardin, 105-115.  
\textsuperscript{89} Ballardin.
thirteen thousand foot Papallacta Pass through the village of Papallacta to the small missionary settlement of Baeza (established in 1559) on the eastern slope of the Andes: "slippery rocks make up the path towards Lake Papallacta, legendary and fearsome because of the natives, freezing weather in Papallacta, violent streams, mud without end, until Baeza, a group of houses poorly balanced on a hill."\(^90\) Despite these hardships, people made the journey on a regular basis. While this shows a population engaging with its western counterpart via small amounts of trade, it also shows how thoroughly disconnected (at least in terms of twentieth century prevailing technologies) the region was from the commercial centers west of the Andes.

\(^{90}\) "...resbaladizas rocas, el paso por la laguna de Papallacta, legendaria y temida por los nativos, la posada frigida en Papallacta, las violentas quebradas, el lodo sin fin, y Baeza el caserío mal equilibrado en el cerro." Translation mine, Ballardin, 133. Baeza was one of the earliest missionary settlements in the Oriente. Mario Hiraoka and Shoza Yamamoto, 425.
Government officials, long frustrated by this disconnect, were especially motivated to bring this region under their control in the wake of the oil boom. In his 1977 MAG report, Salvador laments that, “it is not practical that almost half of Ecuadorian territory is permanently abandoned with a scarce population.”\(^91\) Prior to the oil boom, the Oriente did not contribute to the national economy, there was no one protecting the borders, and by and large it was seen as an unruly jungle not being utilized to its potential. The national government’s goal in the 1970s was to ideologically transform this region into an unoccupied land, then physically transform this vacant space into a contributing portion of the Ecuadorian nation by bringing, “a land without people to people without land.”\(^92\) Of course, the land was not without people, but was home to eight Indigenous groups, Dominican and Franciscan missionaries and other Ecuadorians. This very notion of who encompassed a “people without land,” and who received the free land excluded those Indigenous people who would not take up agriculture in the form that the government recognized (clear-cutting the rainforest for a mono crop system of farming). Indigenous practices of polyculture and growing crops \textit{in} the forest rather than cutting it down and growing \textit{on top of} the forest fueled the

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\(^91\) “No es dable que casi la mitad del territorio ecuatoriano [sic] permanezca abandonada con una escaso población...” Salvador, 30.

government's impression that Indigenous people were tied to the land in its primitive, uncultivated state.\textsuperscript{93}

With the advent of the oil era, the Ecuadorian government needed to simplify the Oriente in order to make it easier to control.\textsuperscript{94} Getting rid of the unkempt jungle was a first step in this process. Using the Law of Empty Lands to give away land to what they hoped would be productive farmers, the government aimed to transform the Oriente into a landscape they understood as productive and recognized as Ecuadorian.\textsuperscript{95} This transformation also meant that the government would have increased control over the region; and, in a moment when oil seemed to literally be spurting out of the ground, control was key. Requiring that every Ecuadorian cut down half of the jungle on their plot of land, the Law of Empty Lands served to wipe out as much of the unruly, unknown, and seemingly unorganized jungle as possible and to transform it into an agricultural system that the government could understand.\textsuperscript{96}

In the early 1970s, both the government and Texaco-Gulf had serious motivation to bring the Oriente under their direct control. For the Ecuadorian government, the Oriente had long signified a jungle with all the word's historic connotations—savage, unruly, dark, diseased, and impenetrable—and in the 1970s, the government capitalized on this image to make their case for recolonization in order to finally overcome this jungle. In the 1970s, first nature in the form of wild, underutilized rainforests was useless


\textsuperscript{95} The Ecuadorian case also fits quite well into John Jervis' explanation of a modern society as one in which there is an "orientation to rational purposive control of the environment, both natural and social, thereby both understanding and transforming it..." John Jervis, \textit{Exploring the Modern}, 6.

\textsuperscript{96} Scott.
nature to the Ecuadorean government. That this “jungle” was also home to Indigenous people did not matter in the face of the development potential on the horizon. While these people were engaging in myriad activities including certain forms of agriculture, the manner in which they did this did not register with the government as either useful or productive.

The problem with Indigenous practices of agriculture in the Oriente was that they “failed the visual test of scientific agriculture.” Many Indigenous groups in the Oriente practiced a form of shifting agriculture, using various parts of the rainforest and growing many crops together. As James Scott explains, this shifting agriculture, “is an exceptionally complex and hence quite illegible form of agriculture from the perspective of a sovereign state and its extension agents.” The government sought to stamp out this chaotic-looking form of agriculture and replace it with a system of titled plots of monocropped land, a system more suitable to rational control and market exports. Additionally, by replacing Indigenous knowledge, practices, and space with Ecuadorean knowledge, practices, and space, the government sought to narrow Indigenous ability to exist beyond the reaches of the state.

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98 In his report on the colonization of the Oriente, Salvador explains that “la colonización en la mayoría de los casos ha significado un transplante de los vicios de la agricultura vieja.” (“the colonization in most cases has signified a transplanting of the defects of the old agriculture”) Salvador, 22-23. The main reason that the government found their methods “defective” was that they were subsistence based rather than export-based.

99 Scott, 273.

100 Scott, 282.

101 See Scott’s Chapter 8, “Taming Nature.” In the 1970s, the government also used education as a means to incorporate Indigenous people into the state. By forcing education on all people in Ecuador, the government effectively forced a national system on its inhabitants. Laura Rival notes, “schools formally linked Huaorani villages to the state...” 155. For more on the government using education as a means of state incorporation see Rival, Trekking Through History, and Ronald Stutzman, “El Mestizaje: An All-Inclusive Ideology of Exclusion,” in Cultural Transformations.
had no room for Indigenous relationships with the land. In this context, the divide
between Indigenous/wilderness and Ecuadorian/civilized grew to enormous proportions.

Ecuador was on the verge of becoming an important oil exporter, and never
before had it been so pressing for a nation to transform its wild landscape (including the
people who constituted this landscape) into something tamed, fashioned, and easy to
manage. In the 1970s, the government capitalized on popular perceptions of the Oriente
as a desolate jungle in order to remake the history of the Oriente in a modern image. By
perpetuating the notion that the eastern half of Ecuador was wasting away in a primitive
state, the government effectively erased its past and set the stage for a new epoch in the
region’s history.

As Scott argues, a key component of State projects is simplifying the landscape
(whether it be physical, political, social or economic) in order to achieve a more thorough
control. While the Ecuadorian case does not fit exactly into Scott’s model for high
modernist projects because it lacked the formal organization and was seemingly driven as
much by market forces as by state planners, many of his ideas about the functions of state
control are useful in understanding the actions that the Ecuadorian government took in
the 1970s to transform the Oriente. Yet, in order for Scott’s argument to be useful in
Ecuador’s case, there needs to be room for the immense power of global markets.\textsuperscript{102} An
examination of the forces of the global oil market, the Ecuadorian government’s policies,
oil company’s desires, and the landless population’s participation reveals the complexity
of the situation. Historian and critic of Scott, Fernando Coronil, explains that, “the
modes of objectification, homogenization, and abstraction that Scott attributes to the state

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are inseparable from the conceptual, technological, and social transformations linked not just to the constitution of modern state bureaucracies but to the development of global capitalism... To open up Scott’s model to include the global oil market makes it all the more pertinent to Ecuador’s situation, while at the same time, does not deny the government, the colonists, the oil companies or the Indigenous of their active role reshaping the Oriente in the late twentieth century.

103 Coronil, 15.
Global Oil Situation

The Oriente’s physical transformation was not solely the result of the Ecuadorian government’s policies, Texaco-Gulf’s technology, or Ecuador’s landless population; circumstances in the global oil situation we just right in the late 1960s to push multi-national oil corporations to stretch the limits of their operations and move into a remote region of Ecuador. As Haro notes from his experiences working for Texaco-Gulf when they were building their operations, “everyone knew development was the principle of the oil companies. Without foreign capital following the oil boom, the colonization of the NorOriente wouldn’t have happened in such an enthusiastic manner.” While this may be true, Texaco-Gulf never would have been in the NorOriente if petroleum situations around the world had not conspired to make it a worthwhile investment. Multi-national corporations began oil explorations in Ecuador’s Oriente in the 1920s, but no wells came online until Texaco-Gulf opened their first well and pumped the first crude out of the Oriente in 1972. In the half century between the initial explorations and production, it was not necessarily lack of petroleum deposits, technology or money holding back the industry; rather the world oil climate was not right for bringing more wells (especially expensive wells in remote regions of the world) into production.

Petroleum was crucial to the victors in World War I, and the end of this war saw a huge boom of oil consumption. The rapidly rising popularity of automobiles, combined with petroleum’s functions as a pesticide and fertilizer, caused American consumption of oil to skyrocket in the 1920s. At the same time, the US was facing a shortage in oil from

104 "Todos sabemos que el desarrollo tiene su principio en la llegada de las compañías petroleras, porque sin el auspicio del capital foráneo tras el boom petrolero, la colonización del nororiente no se habría producido en forma tan vertiginosa." Translation mine, Haro, 25.
their own fields. The high oil prices that this potential shortage commanded, combined with some early successes by individual oil seekers in what would become the East Texas Oil Fields, sent people into a mad frenzy searching for oil. Individual fortune seekers looked to Texas for this oil, while bigger companies looked abroad. In the early 1920s, at the same time that Standard Oil and Shell were exploring in Ecuador’s Southern Oriente, Walter C. Teagle, then president of Standard Oil, was conducting explorations of his own in Iraq. In 1927, Standard Oil discovered their first Iraqi “gusher.” By 1928, these Iraqi oil fields, combined with overly successful East Texas fields, created a worldwide oil glut. With this glut and these new overseas explorations, we entered into what historian Daniel Yergin calls the “age of oil, without which American civilization as we know it could not exist.” It makes sense, therefore, that Standard and Shell did not declare any early successes in their oil fields in Ecuador. It is far easier and cheaper, after all, to build roads and oil infrastructure in a wide-open desert (Iraq), than in a dense rainforest (Ecuador).

Then, the 1939 discovery of oil in Saudi Arabia sealed the fate of Ecuador’s Oriente for the next thirty years. With Saudi Arabia oil, “the single greatest prize in all of history,” there was absolutely no need for Ecuadorian oil, and Shell (by then Standard was already out) declared their long years of exploration fruitless, claiming there was no oil in the southern Oriente. Today, Maxus (after having bought Conoco’s concession) is producing oil from this region (the region that Shell earlier declared devoid of oil), and

106 Yergin.
108 Daniel Yergin, The Prize, Documentary.
their wells have proven so lucrative as to make it worthwhile for them to fight the
government to open more land (land that is protected by national parks and reserves) for
oil production. Conoco fought for years to open Block 16, which is inside Yasuni
National Park. In April of 1990, the Ecuadorian government redrew the boundaries of
the park to exclude block 16 and there are now full-scale operations there.\footnote{Judith Kimerling, \textit{Amazon Crude}.} Just as
conditions in the 1920s and 1930s made it worthwhile for Shell \textit{not} to drill in the
Southern Oriente, a different set of conditions in the late 1960s made it worthwhile for
Texaco-Gulf to drill in the Northern Oriente—arguably a more remote part of the region.

In 1956, Egypt’s leader, Gamal Abdel Nasser, nationalized the Suez Canal
Company, provoking action from the United Kingdom, France, and Israel who used the
canal, among other reasons, to transport their oil from the Middle East to its markets.
Europe was transporting two thirds of their oil through the Suez Canal, which gave them
motivation to keep control over access and tariffs. Their campaign against Egypt to win
back control over the canal was unsuccessful, marking an unprecedented victory for
Egypt. Nasser’s triumph with the Suez Canal “was a warning to the oil-consuming
West,” and gave rise to nationalism and anti-colonialism throughout the world.\footnote{Yergin, see chapter 24, “The Suez Crisis.”} Then,
in 1960, Venezuela, Iraq, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Kuwait formed the Organization of
Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) at the instigation of Juan Pablo Perez Alfonso of
Venezuela.\footnote{Yergin, 522-523.} A combination of OPEC’s objective of restricting oil production, and the
sky rocketing use of petroleum products were bringing the world oil glut to an end, and
visions of shortages were on the horizon. In the same year that OPEC formed, Dr.
Armand Hammer’s Occidental Petroleum (OXY) discovered oil in Libya and was

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\begin{verbatim}
\footnote{Judith Kimerling, \textit{Amazon Crude}.}
\footnote{Yergin, see chapter 24, “The Suez Crisis.”}
\footnote{Yergin, 522-523.}
\end{verbatim}
negotiating terms of extraction with Colonel Muammar al-Qaddafi.\textsuperscript{112} Although Dr. Armand Hammer did eventually strike a deal and begin oil operations in Libya, the contract was not on his terms. This negotiation marked the first time in foreign oil dealings that the producing country had dictated the terms with an oil company, and as Yergin points out, “the heyday of the majors was over.”\textsuperscript{113}

\textsuperscript{112} Qaddafi was inspired by Nasser’s book \textit{Philosophy of Revolution}. These two men, through their separate actions, created circumstances where multinational corporations were desperate enough to brave the Amazonian rainforests in search of oil, Yergin. Also see Matein Khalid, “Takeovers, Gaddafi and Black Gold,” \textit{Khaleej Times Online}, January 17 2005, available from http://www.khaleejtimes.ae/ColumnnistHomeNew.asp?xfile=data/mateinkhalid/2005/January/columnistmateinkhalid_January4.xml&section=mateinkhalid&col=yes accessed 25\textsuperscript{th} March 2007.

\textsuperscript{113} Yergin, documentary.
Texaco-Gulf in the Oriente

While Ecuador's government had a nationalistic agenda of its own, its conditions were far more amiable than those of Qaddafi. The Ecuadorian government was in a major debt crisis and saw oil revenues as the savior of their country, but did not have the means to develop an industry on their own. The government published posters exclaiming "With Oil is Progress!" in order to share its hopes of a modern Ecuadorian future with its citizens.\footnote{"Con el Petróleo, el Progreso." Translation mine, Haro, 30. Many other Latin American countries went through similar modernizing processes centered around certain exports. For examples of Peru and their Guano exports and Colombia and their cocaine exports see Paul Gootenberg, Between Silver and Guano, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989) and Cocaine: Global Histories, (New York: Routledge, 1999). For the Brazilian case see Dean, With Broadsax and Firebrand.} Texaco-Gulf, realizing that the world was on the verge of an oil shortage, and seeing relations in Africa and the Middle East quickly becoming more complicated, took the late 1960s as an opportune time to reopen explorations in Ecuador's Oriente. The government, with their own economic interests in mind, became a willing, but not overly accommodating negotiator.\footnote{Texaco-Gulf had negotiated an original exploration contract in 1964 with Ecuador's military government. This initial contract was fairly generous as the military government wanted to jump start Ecuador's economy. After Texaco-Gulf discovered viable oil wells, democratically elected President Velasco Ibarra wanted a new contract (more favorable to the Ecuadorian government), which he drew up in 1969. This new contract cut Texaco-Gulf's concessions by two thirds. Then, after Lara's military takeover in 1972, the companies again had to renegotiate. Under the new government's decree 430, oil royalties went up to 16% (up from 11.5% under Ibarra), foreign companies had to pay a 15% tax on all petroleum exports, and an Ecuadorian oil company CEPE (which would later become PetroEcuador) was created and bought 25% of Texaco-Gulf's operation. While many other oil companies left Ecuador at this point, Texaco-Gulf stayed on having already invested $300 million in the oil fields and pipeline. Gulf, however did not last long and in 1976 sold their share to CEPE giving the State-run company the majority ownership with 65.2%. North American Congress on Latin America and Gerlach, Indians, Oil, and Politics.}

The late 1960s presented, for the first time in almost half a century, the right set of conditions, both for the Ecuadorian government, and for the foreign oil corporations to pour massive amounts of money and energy into developing an oil industry in Ecuador.
Consequently, the Oriente as everyone knew it in the 1960s was about to change. The Ecuadorian government had long had their eyes on the Oriente, and negotiating a contract with a US oil company to build both the infrastructure necessary for oil operations (wells, refineries, and an oil pipeline) and a road to access it all was a perfect and unprecedented opportunity to finally integrate this region into the modern Ecuadorian State. In turn, Texaco and Gulf, seeing the impending world oil shortage, and the deteriorating conditions of business in other parts of the world, turned to South America, and particularly Ecuador who, until this episode in their history, did not have much of an oil industry, as a place to begin anew with more favorable contracts and working conditions. In the midst of this time of seemingly inviting conditions, neither the government, nor the foreign companies could afford to have previous inhabitation of their projected region interfere with the development that was to ensue.

When Texaco and Gulf arrived in the Northern Oriente, the region consisted of many bustling, if disparate, communities. Due to lack of transportation, most people in the Northern Oriente traded with Peru and Colombia via the rivers, which provided easy transportation. But Texaco-Gulf’s oil infrastructure would soon change the way that everyone in the Oriente interacted with each other. These two companies built a 312-mile long oil pipeline from their wells in Lago Agrio up and over the Andes to the port town of Balao on the Pacific Ocean. In the process, they also built the Oriente’s single most important road—the road connecting Quito to Lago Agrio via Papallacta Pass. This is the road that the majority of the Ecuadorian colonists living in the Oriente today used to access the free land their government was giving away. This road also greatly facilitated trade between the Oriente and the capital city. Ecuador’s national oil
production went from five thousand barrels per day to over two hundred thousand barrels per day in a matter of years.\textsuperscript{116} Gulf got out of Ecuador in 1976, but Texaco stayed on and continued to be the major player in developing Ecuador’s multi-billion dollar oil industry. Although Texaco also left Ecuador in 1992 when their contract expired, it is a rare household in the Oriente that does not have an old Texaco oil barrel—a reminder of their region’s industrial transformation.\textsuperscript{117}

Salomon Haro Valle was part of this revolutionary process in 1968 when he left his home in the western part of Ecuador headed for what he later called “The Island of the Condemned.”\textsuperscript{118} He flew into the missionary settlement of Santa Cecilia in the northeastern part of Ecuador, and from there he traveled by canoe down the Aguarico River for thirty kilometers to a site he described as a “marshy jungle where primitive flora and fauna predominate.”\textsuperscript{119} This place was not actually an island and the people who went there were trying to escape their condemnation as landless Ecuadorians. The inhabitants of the “Island of the Condemned” were mostly landless Ecuadorians who were lured out to this remote region of their country by promises of work from Texaco and free land from their government. In less than five years, this “island” would become the oil town of Lago Agrio, and Ecuador would become Latin America’s third largest oil exporting country.

At the moment that Haro traveled into the jungle, Ecuador was on the verge of a national transformation. “Black gold” was to save the country from its ever-worsening...
debt and put Ecuador on the map as a player in the international oil community. For reasons of progress and modernization, the government supported individuals, like Haro, willing to go out and colonize the region. Though the government gave little monetary support to the colonists, it did lend its support in the form of creating a popular image of the Oriente as a barren space in need of Ecuadorian care and habitation. The fact of previous habitation did not mesh with the ideals that an empty Oriente represented—free land, salvation from economic despair, El Dorado—and so had to be erased from the national memory. With Texaco-Gulf in charge of building an Ecuadorian oil industry, the government set about convincing its landless population to take control (via settlement) of the empty land.
The Oriente Today

James Scott points out that all truly high-modernist schemes will fail because of what he calls the four ingredients for “full-fledged disaster:” the administrative ordering of nature and society (simplification and erasure of local knowledge), an unbending faith in science and technological progress, an authoritarian state willing to use its power, and “a prostrate civil society,” namely one that will not resist state plans. Coronil would add to this list fluctuations in market forces. Although the transformation of Ecuador’s Oriente was predicated on both global oil circumstances and long-standing governmental desires, certain aspects of the massive changes in the landscape fit both Scott’s and Coronil’s models. In 1972, Ecuador was ruled by a military leader who thought an oil industry would lead his country towards progress and modernity. This regime also wanted to turn the Oriente into an economically productive region via oil and market-oriented agriculture. A large portion of Ecuador’s population was landless and would eagerly accept “free land,” and the world was willing to buy Ecuador’s oil. But did Ecuador’s project fail?

One clear result of this combination of the government’s laws, landless Ecuadorians seeking a better life, Texaco-Gulf’s infrastructure, and the world demand for oil is that the Oriente was transformed in very real ways. But the winners and losers and successes and failures of this project are not always obvious. Salvador explains in his MAG report that “The Oriente is only an address, the Amazonian Region is a reality. The Spanish searched for El Dorado, the Ecuadorians found it. Black gold of oil, green

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120 Scott, 4-5.
gold of the jungle, and blue gold of the rivers constitute our Dorado.” Here Salvador points both to the national pride involved in colonizing the Oriente, and he distances the modern Ecuadorian nation from its colonial ties. But today, in 2007, the black gold and the colonization efforts that followed have nearly destroyed the green and blue gold of the Oriente.

Many colonists who thought they were getting free land and a free ticket to a better life ended up living next an oil well spewing oil into all nearby waterways, or near separation stations that burn oil wastes twenty-four hours a day. Many colonists in the Northern Oriente have no access to clean water, and have no choice but to drink from oil-laden ponds and streams. Their crops and animals are sick from the contamination, as are they and their children. Most colonists north of the town of Lumbaqui live in the thick of the oil industry, and while they got their free land, they contend with polluted waterways, polluted soil, polluted air, and live with much higher than average cancer rates. Stories of colonists hired by oil companies for five dollars a day to scoop oil by hand out of contaminated lakes are common.

Some of the Ecuadorian shop owners, farmers, and ranchers between the towns of Baeza and Lumbaqui found their personal colonization to be successful. They got their free land alongside the main road to Quito, and live far enough away from the oil

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121 “El Oriente el solo una dirección, la región amazónica es una realidad. Los Españoles buscaron el Dorado. Los Ecuatorianos lo hemos encontrado. El oro Negro del petróleo, el oro verde de la selva, y el oro azul de los ríos, constituyen nuestro Dorado.” Translation mine, Salvador, i.

122 Most works coming from environmentalists about Ecuador right now take up this topic of environmental contamination. A few examples are, “Amazon Watch” which gives current updates on the situation in the Ecuadorian Amazon http://www.amazonwatch.org/amazon/EC/, Judith Kimerling, Amazon Crude, and Peter Maas, “Slick” from Outside Magazine.


operations to avoid their ill effects. Haro, who lived in Lago Agrio—the center of Ecuador’s oil universe—until he died, had numerous successes intermingled with defeat. He never mentions oil pollution or ill health. He owned ranches, opened hotels and groceries, and tried desperately as an administrator to reign in the unruly character of his frontier oil town. Yet, today, Lago Agrio is infamously known as a dangerous, dirty, discontent oil town, embodying wild characteristics much more than modern and civilized attributes.

Many colonists in the Oriente had to give up their original plot of land after soil nutrients ran out. As Laura Rivel comments, soils in the Oriente are “renowned as the least fertile in Ecuador.” The government’s original intent was that this region be farmed with “the use of fertilizers and the employment of management technologies suited for tropical conditions.” The government failed to provide any real agricultural extension services, and few, if any, colonists had the means to buy fertilizers or mechanized farm implements. Colonists did learn quickly that, under the conditions, polyculture farms producing subsistence plus a little surplus was a much more lasting type of agriculture for the Oriente than the governmental ideal of large-scale market-oriented agriculture. Few farms produce surpluses larger than what farmers can load on the roof of a bus. Overall, the Oriente did not live up to its expectations as an agricultural paradise.

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125 Rival, xiv.
126 “Pueden mejorarse los pastos mediante el uso de fertilizantes y el empleo de técnicas de manejo adecuadas a las condiciones tropicales...” Translation mine, Salvador, 6.
128 Blankstein and Zuvekas.
129 The one exception to this is that a few wealthy Ecuadorians were able to consolidate large enough plots of land to start African Palm plantations in the Northern Oriente. These people have the
Many colonists who tried to stay the course with large monocropped agriculture exhausted their soil’s fertility in a matter of years and were forced to abandon their land. Salvador acknowledges this trend in his report saying, “it is normal in a new colonization zone for the original landowners to abandon their land after one, two, or three years.” But, rather than explaining this in terms of soil fertility, Salvador attributes this abandonment to a lack of agricultural aptitude. The reality, however, is that the shallow soils and poor nutrient content are meant to support complex ecosystems of nutrient exchange (the rainforest) rather than open fields of commercial crops. In many cases, farmers who were forced to abandon their land lived in heavily colonized areas where there was no longer free land up for grabs. In some instances, this has allowed wealthier Ecuadorians to consolidate the exhausted land for large cattle ranches or palm plantations supported by fertilizers, meanwhile relegating those who had to give up their land back to the landless wage laborers they were before.

The Oriente’s Indigenous people have lost more territory over the past forty years than in any other period. They have lost land to Ecuadorian colonists taking advantage of the land their government was giving away, to the oil companies for drilling sites, separation stations, road throughways, cities, and to national parks and reserves meant to safeguard the region’s endemic biodiversity from intruding oil companies and

money to use large amounts of fertilizers and buy mechanized farm equipment, both of which are beyond the reach of ninety-nine percent of the Oriente’s inhabitants. D.A. Eastwood and H.J. Pollard note that, “The only significant penetration of large-scale single enterprise farming is the plantations of *Palma Africana.*” in “Amazonian Colonization in Eastern Ecuador: Land Use Conflicts in a Planning Vacuum.” *Singapore Journal of Tropical Geography,* Vol. 13, No. 2 1992.

130 “Es normal además que en una zona nueva de colonización los primeros posesionados abandonen las tierras, luego de uno, dos o tres años.” Translation mine, Salvador, 25.

131 Salvador, 25.
colonists. \textsuperscript{132} But the story is more complicated. Not all Indigenous people have been losers to the government’s colonization scheme. As a reaction to these numerous “modern” intrusions upon their lives, Indigenous people from the eight different groups created the \textit{Confederación de las Nacionalidades Indígenas de la Amazonia Ecuatoriana} (the Confederation of the Indigenous Nationalities of the Ecuadorian Amazon) \textsc{CONFENIAE}. In 1990, this group successfully secured the largest governmental grant of Indigenous territory in Ecuadorian history. 960,000 hectares was awarded to the Huaorani, and while they have still have to fight to physically keep colonists and oil companies out, this was a huge ideological victory for Indigenous people throughout Ecuador.\textsuperscript{133}

Over the past ten years, the Ecuadorian government has earned forty percent of their income from the oil industry—both in terms of revenue from PetroEcuador and from royalties and taxes placed on foreign companies who are still operating in Ecuador. Especially in the burgeoning years, Ecuador’s oil industry was extremely successful. Ecuador’s oil production began at a uniquely opportune time. Just one year after the first crude traveled over the Andes, the Arab-Israeli war broke out leading to an Arab oil

\textsuperscript{132} See the following websites:
http://www.uweb.ucsb.edu/%7Eschniter/AMAZONIA/IMG/oilblkmap2.jpg Both shades of red represent oil producing and/or oil exploration areas, they show where Texaco-Gulf had their operations. The yellow represents strictly exploration areas, and the purple represents pending concessions. Many of the oil concessions in the Oriente overlap with Indigenous territory.
http://www.uweb.ucsb.edu/%7Eschniter/AMAZONIA/IMG/MPOPDEMO.jpg The green shaded areas represent Indigenous territory, the blue represents areas of heavy colonization, and the red represents areas where both Indigenous and Ecuadorian colonists live together. This map is misleading in the amount of Indigenous territory. If you look at both the “Oil Concessions” map and the “Protected Areas” map, the amount of Indigenous land that is superseded by these two other entities is huge.
http://www.uweb.ucsb.edu/%7Eschniter/AMAZONIA/IMG/mprotectarea2.jpg

The green represents National Parks, the yellow represents Natural Reserves, and the purple represents areas under consideration for protection.

embargo to the US in 1973.\textsuperscript{134} Due to this major supplier void that Ecuador helped to fill, Ecuador’s oil industry met with fortuitous success in its early years, and between 1972 and 1974, Ecuador’s economic output increased 233 percent, primarily owing to oil exports.\textsuperscript{135}

While parts of the country experienced the promised progress and modernity that accompany oil, this was mostly concentrated in the highland and coastal regions. Few towns in the Northern Oriente have sewage treatment, many just got access to electricity in the twenty-first century, and many do not have running water or access to medical care. Colonists and Indigenous people affected by oil pollution have to take the bus to Quito to see a doctor. But, Ecuador has not lost anymore Amazonian territory to its neighbors. Hundreds of thousands of previously landless Ecuadorians have gained access to land (often at the expense of Indigenous land). Additionally, a mostly paved road now runs from the capital city to Lago Agrio giving this region a transportation link with the rest of the country.

Texaco, who recently merged with Chevron, is embroiled in a bitter lawsuit against the Indigenous and colonists suffering in the “oil zone.” Ecuador, because of oil developments in the Northern Oriente, has some of the most polluted rainforests of any Amazonian country.\textsuperscript{136} In reaction to this, many disparate Indigenous groups have teamed up with their normal enemies, the Ecuadorian colonists, to form a political front against this foreign polluting body. Their lawsuit has been going on for fourteen years,

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{134} Yergin, documentary.
\item \textsuperscript{135} Gerlach, 36.
\item \textsuperscript{136} Laura Murphy, Richard E. Bilsborrow, Francisco Pinchon, “Poverty and Prosperity Among Migrant Settlers in the Amazon Rainforest Frontier of Ecuador.” \textit{Journal of Development Studies}, Vol. 34, 1997. Many other South American countries now look to Ecuador as a case study in what NOT to do from a development standpoint. Their environmental record is one among the worst in Latin America. Judith Kimerling, “Disregarding Environmental Law.”
\end{itemize}
and more and more it is looking like the Indigenous and colonists might have a chance. It would be a historic victory if they win, and an unprecedented loss for a major corporation. The plaintiffs are not after personal monetary gains; they want Texaco to clean up its mess so they can enjoy their state-granted right to a clean and safe environment. Texaco left Ecuador in 1992 when its contract was up turning over all operations to Ecuador’s state run oil company PetroEcuador. PetroEcuador is still operating and holds some of the country’s largest and most lucrative concessions around Lago Agrio.

How long Ecuador’s oil reserves will last, the outcome of the lawsuit against Texaco, and the sustainability of what agriculture is taking place in the Oriente still remain as unknown factors in this, Ecuador’s latest attempt to incorporate the Oriente. The government’s only sign of remorse in this recolonization project is in the form of the few concessions they have made to Indigenous groups and the national parks and reserves they set up to protect what remains of the region’s biodiversity. The borders of these concessions and reserves, however, are flexible and poorly guarded, suggesting that development and progress at any cost is still the government’s guiding principal. Moreover, the Ecuadorian state still employees the rhetoric of modernization, suggesting that this has not yet happened. In 2000, President Gustavo Noboa stated that, “Ecuador is not a banana republic. We are going to modernize and change this country both politically and economically.”

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Ecuador still considers itself an Amazonian country. Now, since their number one export comes from this region, this claim has more legitimacy. The reality, however, is somewhat contradictory. Ballardin, in his 1991 summary of the Oriente, had this to say about it:

We are an Amazonian country, we who discovered the grand river. We proclaim this with pride. But the pride remains only in this grandiloquence. For almost all Ecuadorians, the Amazonian Oriente is the last place they would choose to live and they look upon it with certain contempt, or with compassionate admiration for those who were born and live there.  

Only four percent of Ecuador’s thirteen million people live in this region. This number is far higher than it was in 1960, but certainly does not reflect a region incorporated. There is a network of roads connecting this region to the Ecuadorian center—Quito. The population has increased five-fold since the 1970s, and Ecuador’s number one export comes from the Oriente. Yet, it still considered Ecuador’s hinterland by the majority of the population. Today the Oriente exists in a kind of national, modern purgatory where it is still largely seen as an unruly jungle, only now people associate it with oil; and with this oil they see money, power, pollution, and controversy.

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139 “Somos un país amazónico, nosotros que descubrimos el gran río! Proclamamos con ufania. Pero la ufania se queda en esa grandilocuencia. Para casi todo ecuatoriano el Oriente amazónico es el último lugar que desearía escoger para vivir y mira con cierto desprecio o con admiración compasiva a los que nacen y viven allí” Translation mine, Ballardin, 429.
Note the burro tied to the pipeline behind the red truck. People also use the pipeline to post political advertisements, dry laundry, and as an elevated place to walk to keep them out of the mud. Photo by author, 2007.

This single-walled pipeline runs above ground for the entire length of the road between Papallacta and Lago Agrio. On the right side of the photo is one of the many oil heating and pumping stations that the pipeline needs to keep the oil moving up and over the Andes. Photo by author, 2007.
Figure 3.
The Texaco barrel in the center of this photo is a typical attribute for households along main road between Papallacta and Lago Agrio. Photo by author, 2007.
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