Infrastructure Megaprojects as World Erasers: Cultural Survival in the Context of the Tehuantepec Isthmus Interoceanic Corridor

by
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Abstract

This article explores the meanings of infrastructural changes resulting from the *Corredor Interoceánico del Istmo de Tehuantepec* (CIIT) infrastructure project for the cultural survival of Indigenous peoples resident in the Tehuantepec Isthmus region through the lens of ontological justice. Based on interviews with affected residents in the states of Oaxaca and Veracruz, this research found that there is a strong desire for cultural continuity, collective life projects, Indigenous languages, cultural identities, beliefs, spirituality, established political and legal systems, and a solidarity economy. Contemporary megacorridors function as circulatory infrastructures that shift the life-reproducing benefits from territories elsewhere, thereby effectively imposing integration and assimilation of Indigenous peoples, Afrodescendant and *comunidades equiparables* into the dominant modern/colonial extractivist one-world world, and provoking mundicide. This article provides an empirical case for the urgency of recreating an ontodiverse world order that can guarantee the futurity of other ways of world-making.

Keywords

Land-life, mundicide, ontodiversity, ontological justice, infrastructure megaprojects

The Corredor Interoceánico del Istmo de Tehuantepec (Tehuantepec Isthmus Interoceanic Corridor, CIIT) – a mayor infrastructure project of the Mexican government under the López Obrador administration (2018-2024) – is promoted as a multimodal road and rail transport corridor that will eventually link the Gulf of Mexico with the Pacific Ocean. It is projected as a viable alternative to the Panama Canal that will increase and accelerate global trade. Central components of the CIIT infrastructure project include the modernization and expansion of the ports of Coatzacoalcos in the Gulf and Salina Cruz in the Pacific; improvement of the railway connection between both harbors; development of a new highway and widening of an existing one; laying of fiber optic cable; construction of a new gas pipeline; improvement of regional airports; installation of logistics centers; and development of industrial parks along the isthmus (Secretaría de Gobernación, 2020). The ten planned industrial parks are expected to receive industries from the automotive, agribusiness, manufacturing, transportation, and logistics sectors.

The project follows a global trend of infrastructure corridor construction, such as the China's Belt and Road Initiative; Paraguay's Corredor Bioceánico (Bioceanic Corridor); Chile, Bolivia, and Brazil's Corredor Interoceánico (Interoceanic Corridor); and the Northern Transport Corridor in East Africa between Kenya, Ethiopia, and South Sudan. These projects are directed at reducing "economic distance" – i.e., speeding up the transport of goods across

geographical distance while lowering its cost (Hildyard, 2016: 20). In the process, infrastructure megacorridors restructure entire regions into purpose-specific zones for export, logistics, transit, housing development, resource extraction, and manufacturing. They fragment geographic space, generating a distinctive reterritorialization to develop sites of capitalist growth. Anthropologist Aihwa Ong noted that under neoliberalism, nations began to treat their territories as no longer a "uniform political space" (Ong, 2006: 77), but rather redesignated national space in a distinctive way to suit capital's interests. It is evident that such "zoning" or territorial purpose assignation by the nation state directly conflicts with local, territorial governance and the life projects of Indigenous and equivalent communities (*comunidades equiparables*).[1] Megacorridors connect what Lerner (2010) called "sacrifice zones" – geographic areas where processes of natural resource extraction cause permanent environmental damage – to global circuits of capital. Across Latin America, the social and environmental impacts of extractive megaprojects and resistance against them has been widely documented (Aguilar Rivero and Echavarría Canto, 2019; Domínguez, 2015, 2017; Domínguez and Corona, 2016; Gasparello and Nuñez Rodríguez, 2021; Ibarra García and Talledos Sánchez, 2016; Pérez Negrete, 2017; Rodríguez Wallenius, 2015).

The project of a dry canal that exploits the Tehuantepec Isthmus's geostrategic location between the Atlantic and Pacific economies is not new. It was proposed by previous Mexican presidents through initiatives such as Programa Alfa-Omega (1977), Programa Integral de Desarrollo (1996), Plan Puebla Panama (2001) and Plan Istmo Puerta de América (2013).[2] The trajectory of infrastructure proposals in the Isthmus indicates a persistent ambition of administrations to access and appropriate the region's invaluable resources, including oil, wind for electric energy, water to supply cities and industrial parks, forests and jungles with their carbon sequestration capacities and biotechnological and pharmaceutical potential, and metals and minerals to supply communication technologies. The Indigenous peoples of the region, such as Binnizá (Zapoteco), Ayuuk (Mixe), Ikoots (Huave), Chontal, Chinanteco, Mazateco, Mixteco, Popoluca, Náhuatl, and Totonaco,[3] have a long history of struggle to maintain access to their natural resources and self-determination over their territories (Manzo, 2008; Zarauz López, 2018). Previous infrastructure megaprojects proposed for the Isthmus stalled due to determined local resistance, often using blockades of core transportation routes to pressure governments to the negotiating table. It wasn't until the early 2000s that the first large-scale wind energy projects were installed in the southern Isthmus, despite fierce resistance of local Indigenous, Afro-Mexican, and equivalent communities (such as Mestizos who practice traditional agriculture and fishery).[4]

This article explores the meaning of infrastructural changes resulting from the CIIT project for the cultural survival of Indigenous peoples residing in the Tehuantepec Isthmus region through the lens of ontological justice. The research was carried out between 2019 and 2022. Whenever the Covid-19 pandemic allowed, the implementation of the Interoceanic Corridor was scrutinized and accompanied ethnographically, following information campaign events, meetings, and protests, thereby gaining insights concerning participating actors, state-community relationships, and techniques of operationalization. In addition, four Mexican research assistants conducted 127 interviews across the states of Veracruz and Oaxaca with affected community members; local residents; social movement participants, leaders, and

activists; officials; civil servants; NGO workers; and relevant legal experts, journalists, artists, and academics about their perceptions and concerns regarding the CIIT project.[5]

CULTURAL SURVIVAL IN THE FACE OF THE CIIT MEGAPROJECT

Wealthy countries' aspiration to transition energy systems towards renewable sources has led to renewed raw mineral extraction. Infrastructure megacorridors facilitate, accelerate, and increase these activities across the world (Hildyard and Sol, 2017). Differentiating his Fourth Transformation (4T)[6] political project from the policies of previous administrations that promoted privatization, dispossession of natural wealth, and extractivism by large companies, Mexican president Andrés Manuel López Obrador (AMLO) insisted that the CIIT infrastructure and industrial project was a viable strategy to create jobs, reactivate the economy, and promote wellbeing for the southeastern region, which historically has high rates of poverty. This strategy, however, emerged out of neo-developmentalism, an idea tied to dependency theory that assumes the Indigenous must be helped to development, and hence, have no own feasible ways of guaranteeing economic survival and sustaining life (Azamar Alonson and Rodríguez Wallenius, 2021). Fundamentally, this idea resorts to a racist conception of Indigenous peoples, considering them and their life projects[7] deficient, even though they have sustained life over thousands of years. Currently, twelve Indigenous peoples reside in the Tehuantepec Isthmus, in addition to Afrodescendants. They comprise over half a million residents (out of 2.3 million) in the area that will experience the greatest impacts according to the government's zoning plan (Sandoval Vázquez, 2020).

Opposition to the CIIT project is spread across myriad actors, including affected residents, Indigenous organizations, environmentalist and human rights NGOs, as well as academics, journalists, and artists. I have detailed elsewhere the demands, strategies, and actions of these movements (Hofmann, 2020; Hofmann, 2022).[8] Common accusations against the Interoceanic Corridor denounce the region's industrialization, related depletion of water supply, environmental pollution and destruction, and biodiversity decline, but also the de facto elimination of traditional forms of life, agricultural production and trade, and Indigenous political structures. Since the project began in 2019, opposition groups have organized road and railway blockades, interregional and international caravans (El Sur Resiste, Caravana por el Agua y la Vida), information campaigns and community forums, and issued injunctions to stop planned work. Some actors demanded to become integrated into the CIIT as company associates (with the ability to gain shares),[9] to be considered for government contracts or obtain a trading site within one of the industrial parks under favorable conditions.

The Indigenous and Afro-Mexican respondents in this research expressed that the CIIT infrastructure and industrial corridor posed a threat to their cultural survival, their established, sustainable lifeways, and local governance. For many residents, economic success and social mobility are already tied to acquiescence and participation in the polluting petrochemical industries established in the Isthmus's metropolitan areas. Respondent Sofia[10] describes: "The schools and universities we have here train people to work for local companies such as CFE [Comisión Federal de Electricidad, or Federal Energy Commission],

Pemex, and Monsanto as administrators, scientists, or engineers. For your family to live well, you have to participate in an activity that destroys nature. This is very normalized here [in the state of Veracruz]." Achieving social mobility is thus closely tied to participation in and complicity with what Indigenous scholar Betasamosake Simpson (2017) calls the "extractive-assimilation system."

The harbor city of Coatzacoalcos in Veracruz hosts Latin America's largest petrochemical plant, La Cangrejera, a petroindustrial complex where products such as plastics, piping, chlorine, and agrofertilisers are made. The isthmian cities of Minatitlán (Veracruz) and Salina Cruz (Oaxaca) have oil refineries that function as important local employers since their installation in the early twentieth century and late 1970s, respectively. Respondent Carmen indicates what the establishment of petroindustries has meant for local Indigenous populations: "Those who go to Coatza and Mina return with other habits. They forget the language. It changes everything. Young people don't identify as Indigenous anymore. If they want to study, they must move to the city. There they stop buying in the local market and small shops, instead, they buy cheaper at Chedraui and Soriana. They become workers and say, 'I better sell my land.'"

In some parts of the Isthmus, the processes of industrialization, development of extractive economies, and integration into the global market have a long history (Coronado Malagón, 2009; Moreno Andrade, 2009; Prévôt-Schapira, 2009). However, each new "development" project involving largescale infrastructure construction or natural resource extraction in the region intensifies this process of cultural assimilation to a modern/colonial extractivist[11] system. Our respondents were often conflicted over their own involvement with local extractive industries, like Diego, who used to work for Pemex, the Mexican state-owned oil company. Despite having always been critical of capitalism, which he considers an "exploitative system of death" ("un sistema explotador, de muerte"), he studied chemistry with the hope of obtaining a better life and became an industrial chemical engineer. When asked to assess the possible impacts of the CIIT project in the region, he says:

> The problem is that our people settle for a sweet. They would be happy to have a job in those companies [that will populate the planned industrial parks], even if they earned a pittance. This is the serious impact on the people here. Having a steady job, a small salary that is just enough for them to eat, makes them happy and feel great, because they have a job and a salary. […] Workers begin to feel part of the company, they even feel that they are partners of the company, they feel capitalist. So that is another impact that it [the CIIT infrastructure project] would have on the population in terms of social and cultural impacts. The capitalist mentality will continue to grow.

Megaprojects like the CIIT generate profound changes to existing relationships both between humans and between humans and non-humans. They create as well as destroy ways of being in the regions in which they settle. The integration of a person into industrial production as a salaried worker comes with profound changes of subjectivity, lived experience, and relationships, all of which seriously impact established cultural systems of survival, with the possible consequence of extinction. The Marxian concept of alienation has helped us grasp the relationship changes induced by capitalist production, which affect a person's relationship with their everyday activity, the products they generate, their fellow beings, and nature (Cox, 1998; Ollman, 1976; Vogel, 1988). 1) *Labour alienation* means that we can no longer steer

our own productivity, creativity, and time; 2) *alienation from each other* results from competition and class hostility, which renders most forms of cooperation impossible, as we have become separated from our fellow beings and stopped acting in our collective interest; 3) *alienation from nature*: our relationship with the earth system has become extractivist and destructive, focused on the depletion of natural wealth for private gains.

Istmeños[12] have historically been dedicated to transforming and marketing products from the land and sea. Local and regional commerce and exchange are among the most robust ways to generate community and social ties between sellers and buyers (Cruz Velázquez and Flores Cruz, 2021). Through small-scale market trading, social, economic, and cultural exchange relations are nourished across the region. Expanded proletarianization of the population will likely put an end to family and community food sovereignty and displace the reproduction of the local economy based on traditional economic activities like diversified agriculture for self-consumption (e.g. the *milpa* system), livestock, and fishing. Istmeños uphold the cultural institutions of territorial self-governance, food-sovereignty, and *tequio*[13] practices based on community principles (Castro Rodríguez and Reyes Méndez, 2019; Consejo Dueñas, 2021; López Bárcenas, 2017, 2019, 2021; Martínez Luna, 2021; Morales and Esteva, 2019). Once inserted into an export-driven factory system, workers tend to lose knowledge and skills related to traditional agriculture, housing construction, crafts, food preparation, and herbal medicines, along with the possibility for collective self-determination and control of everyday activities and production processes. Those practices constitute part of a long-established and complex system of relations and world-making.

Isabella, who is from an Ikoots community in the southern Isthmus, discussed how the community has been affected by the refinery since the 1970s. For a long time, they even resisted the construction of a paved road to their village: "The people here are very protective of their culture," she says. But with the completion of the access road, people began to commute to Salina Cruz to work in the refinery. "Now they are workers. Many don't identify as Ikoots anymore. It led to a loss of identity. The refinery led to a loss of identity." Like many others we spoke to, Isabella is worried that the changes that accompany a largescale infrastructure project will ultimately lead to the Ikoots' cultural extinction: "I have been very worried that one day, the Ikoots will no longer be here, firstly because we are a very small people, here on this strip of land, and we are threatened by the sea getting in. Right now, with all these megaprojects as well, we might not survive." Isabella goes on to detail how Ikoots identity is closely entangled with different aspects of the people's territory:

> I am very worried that our language will be lost, that our culture will be lost, that our land will be lost. If an Ikoots does not live in this territory, well, they are not Ikoots anymore. To be true Ikoots, we need the wind, this strong southern wind, we need the smell of the hibiscus flower in the rainy season, we need all these flavors that we have, these smells here in the village. To be Ikoots one has to live and be on this land. If an Ikoots goes and lives in Salina Cruz, or lives in another place, well, they are not going to have all that we have here. Losing all this feels very ugly. The truth is, I feel very sad that they lose all that, because that is what marks us as Ikoots.

A concept such as *cuerpo-territorio*[14] that considers a specific geographical space as part of the (extended) human body is alien to Western philosophical and legal categories, therefore, addressing such grievances requires an expansion of Eurocentric justice categories and

associated conceptions of possible kinds of harm resulting from intrusive infrastructures. The harm decried by Isabella here refers to the violent termination of a "world," meaning *a particular (co-constituted) set of conditions of being and relating* to both other humans, nonhuman beings, and the earth system. This territorial identity and sense of connectedness with the territory (which in the case of the Ikoots extends to the *maritorio*)[15] and its social life and sensory experiences is reinforced through recurring ritual practices, as Isabella describes: "We know exactly the limits of our land in relation to the neighboring communities, because of the rituals that are carried out every year to request rain." Knowledge of the territorial extension is practiced periodically by going there and collectively walking its outer limits in ritual procession. Isabella is an educator who, working with young people, hopes to generate and maintain consciousness and connection with the land and Ikoots culture among the next generation.

Over the course of this research, we heard multiple stories of cultural alienation and assimilation to the modern/colonial capitalist one-world world,[16] sometimes because of outward-migration or involvement in extractive industries. In some cases, parents were fully immersed in the local petrochemical industries, but youth craved a more culturally appropriate and sustainable type of work that allowed to maintain cultural survival while improving their standard of living. After all, infrastructural industries provide few long-term and well-paid positions (Rodríguez Wallenius, 2015; Domínguez, 2015). Our research sensed a trend toward rejecting colonial-modernity with its industrial-extractive impetus, accompanied by a desire and emerging practical attempts to return to Indigenous roots, reassert Indigenous identity, and establish a different relationship with land and the earth system. In this sense, the current CIIT threat has also led to revived mobilization and cultural resistance, with actors turning to place-based politics, seeking to develop alternative models for life and infrastructures that correspond to the Isthmian peoples' cosmovisions. In the words respondent Luna: "I believe that infrastructure has to be diverse, because we are diverse. […] I believe that an infrastructure that is adequate for the cosmovisions of the peoples of the Isthmus has to be diverse, it cannot be homogeneous or imposed, but rather according to the needs of each community and must work according to their environmental, cultural, and social characteristics." Ultimately, infrastructures are contentious in the context of cultural survival, because they influence and limit the ways in which we relate to each other and the natural environment; they both emerge out of and generate culturally specific worlds.

SEPARATION FROM LAND AND COLLECTIVE TERRITORIAL GOVERNANCE AS A BASIS FOR INFRASTRUCTURAL INVASION AND EXTRACTIVISM

Having access to land, Elena – a daughter of *ejidatarios*[17] – noticeably had an entirely different relationship to land compared to her peers. Her village in Veracruz was in the media spotlight in 2022 for conflicts over one of the planned CIIT industrial parks. Arguments spiraled high on Facebook, where village youngsters without access to land complained about the stubborn opposition of local ejidatarios to the park. The landless youth hoped the park would bring work opportunities to the region. They saw their hopes for a good life destroyed

by the ejidatarios' resistance to selling the land to the federal government. Elena, who engaged with those youths on social media, explains: "They do not know the value of the land (*el campo*) and they don't understand the value that working the land has for us. Getting up at three in the morning to check your *milpa*, the land you cultivated. They are persons who do not know the value of the land nor the love for it."

This affective connection through being and working on the land distinguishes those who consider it alienable and those who consider it too precious to sell. Elena insists that ejidatarios like her father want progress for their village, but "you cannot progress at someone else's expense." In the case of this village, the ejidatarios felt the government's offer was too low. They wanted a "just price." The disputes on social media became quite offensive and the fronts hardened. Elena explains the online confrontations:

> To be honest, the discussion got very annoying, because they are kids who, since they have never dedicated themselves to working anything, they talk just in order to talk. And they cannot be compared with us, who get up early as their provider, planting the sugar cane, making the honey, the molasses, the *panela* that tastes so good. It is hard for me to sow whilst being bitten by ants and to stay up all night preparing the *panela*. How am I going to sell this *panela* to you for three pesos? I had to look after the sugar cane plant and protect it from being eaten by little creatures, I got bit by ants, I had to cut the sugar cane and take it to the stream to wash it, then I had to return it on a pack animal and mill it with the help of the animal. The three pesos you want to pay for the *panela* violates me and the mule, who is also working hard. You will not understand me if you have not done what I do. This is why you just talk. I know what I do, and I know what I suffered, but it is not me who is wrong here.

Elena does not complain about the hardness of living off the land, but rather about the low economic value attributed to her product and lack of appreciation for her work. This was a common theme among respondents from different Indigenous communities who make a living from their territories as farmers, flower sellers, *totoperas*,[18] or fishermen. Many Istmeños share a desire to maintain traditional livelihood practices – often relying on common land –, combined with a demand for appropriate remuneration and recognition. I identify three factors that contributed to land defense and resistance against integration into the CIIT through extractivism, industrialization, urbanization, and proletarianization: 1) the land and natural world was still intact (i.e. not polluted or destroyed) to provide for survival; 2) the knowledge of how to live of the land or sea was still present; 3) collective land rights and forms of political organization existed.

The latter factor is undermined by the government's Sembrando Vida (Sowing Life) program which, in official jargon, seeks to "address the problem of rural poverty" and "contribute to the social well-being of growers through the promotion of food self-sufficiency" (Secretaría de Bienestar, 2020). This is the decisive companion program to the CIIT, in that it paves the way for implementation by destabilizing conditions for land defense based on collective, local governance. Sembrando Vida promises to support growers who own 2.5 hectares and make them available for cash crop production with a monthly payment of MXN$5,000. In addition, it includes in-kind support for production (plants, fertilizers, tools) and technical support. The stipend generates a certain security for participants, but it also subjects them to a regime of private land ownership and terminates their self-

determination over agricultural production. By agreeing to become program beneficiaries , participants become individualized small holders, relieved from the complex and time consuming collective decision-making processes, but receptive to provisions for crop selection and management (e.g. fertilizers, herbicides, and pesticides). Ultimately, the Sembrando Vida beneficiary is "freed" from the land and from collective responsibility and stewardship, having become a (dependent) salaried worker on their own plot. By turning people with access to collective land titles and collective land governance mechanisms (such as the *asamblea comunal*) into individual entrepreneurs, the program alters existing land relationships, homogenizing and industrializing agricultural production, fragmenting communities, and rendering resistance to invasive infrastructures futile.

Respondent Javier explains how Sembrando Vida relates to megaprojects like the Tren Maya[19] and the Interoceanic Corridor:

> It is planned as a counterinsurgency program, even if that is not said. They want to fragment the community, cancel mountain agriculture, and erase the territorial memory of the native peoples, because what they want is to break the resistance. […] And then what do they tell them? No, you are no longer going about your territory. Your 2.5 hectares are going to be geopositioned for me, and I am going to be controlling you from the air, so that you plant in that plot, which must be enclosed [i.e. privatized], and that it is now individual and no longer part of the *ejido*, that does not belong to the community anymore, instead, it is now yours. And at the same time, we are going to see how you can maximize the cultivation of timber and fruit trees with that.

There is increasingly evidence that the program has led to environmental damage and community disintegration. In southern Mexico, Sembrando Vida also led to a surge in slash-and-burn agriculture to make way for cash crop production (Sandoval Vázquez, 2020), some of which was left to rot, because the processing systems and export logistics were not in place for the produce to be shipped internationally.

Most detrimental for the cultural survival of Indigenous peoples in the Isthmus are the social dynamics generated through the program, which Javier describes:

> It is a program that of course is buying people, even if they don't really buy their conscience, but it's horrible because it takes advantage of the urgent need, the urgency that people in the communities have for cash, which of course resolves a lot of things for them. However, it drives them away from the core of their community, distances them from the decisions of the assembly, alienates them from the will of their friends who begin to see them with suspicion. And they themselves begin to view all those who are not in the same position with suspicion, because suddenly they have a privilege that the others do not have.

Sembrando Vida lays the foundation for the CIIT, which intends to generate economic growth through industrialization and urbanization. The Corridor therefore relies on disconnecting people from land and its collective stewardship, cutting affective ties with both land and social relations (human and nonhuman), and dismantling established collective forms of organization. Contrary to Sembrando Vida's official focus on the "promotion of food self-sufficiency," it separates growers from traditional land practices, installing a new, individualist logic that turns growers into suppliers for global agroindustry. Over time, this will lead to a decline in the diversity of agricultural knowledge, as well as to the deskilling of

growers. Overall, the program contributes to a proletarianization of growers, increasing their dependency on global food supply chains and weakening communities' abilities to achieve food sovereignty.

The affective connection to land and the meaning of territory can be difficult to understand for those who have lost or never had access to them. Indigenous Futures activists Rosa Marina Flores Cruz powerfully describes the meaning of territory:

> It is having been shaped by the wind and the sea. The Isthmus is sea, it is dust, it is strength, it is music, it is dance, it is a lot of life everywhere. In the Isthmus there is life even in the most damaged spaces that were hit hardest, and life emerges and the resistance of being a people arises. Even though they have tried to take it away from us, we are a people, and we are unity. All our ways of interacting, of responding to what happens in our own context tell us this. And this is the Isthmus, and this is what has also given us strength to resist to everything that keeps coming. And this is also territory. Territory is not just the land, it is not just the place you are standing on. Territory is going to the *fiesta* and knowing that you have to cooperate to be at the *fiesta*, and that they will receive you, and that you will be there enjoying yourself, and that *it is part of your own being* [emphasis of the author]. Territory is listening to the sound of the words that link you to a certain place, an accent, a tone of voice, the language. […] I told a friend that, when I was studying in Mexico City, and I got on the bus that was going to take me back to Juchitán. Just by listening to a lady who got on the bus, she began to speak in Zapotec, I already felt at home. The distance shriveled and I got already connected to my territory, I was already taken to that place. Territory is what you eat, it is what you wear, it is what you feel. […] It is what happens when there are catastrophes. What happens when there is an aggression that changes the life that you are developing. When a megaproject comes along that wants to set up and wants to do away with all that. This is territory. […] It is the close circle that you establish with everything that makes you who you are. And I think we all have that. It is only colonialism and racism that have intervened in us breaking those ties, and it is about trying to heal them little by little.[20]

While determined and passionate land defenders like Rosa Marina persist in the Isthmus, AMLO was the first president to effectively defeat organized resistance against invasive infrastructure in the region, which could be the onset to incisive transformations. The Tren Interoceánico (Interoceanic Train) was inaugurated in December 2023 (Aristegui Noticias, 2023). Support for AMLO's Morena party is strong in the Isthmus. Promises of economic reactivation and redistribution through social program have convinced parts of the Mexican left, the Indigenous population, and even former land defenders who had fought against the wind parks. The project's benefits were framed within a discourse of national sovereignty: while the Government granted Mexican construction companies contracts – regardless of existing corruption charges (Clavijo Flórez, 2020; Vázquez, 2021) – it raised hopes among the Isthmus's poor who are in dire need of economic opportunities and desire improvement of their material conditions.

INFRASTRUCTURES, DEVELOPMENTALISM, AND ANTI-INDIGENOUS RACISM

There appears to be a strong link between largescale infrastructure construction, a championing of progressivist modernity, and anti-Indigenous racism. Indigenous cosmovisions often clash with progressivist-industrial modernity, expressing strong affective links with land, water, landscape, nonhuman beings, and territory, and demanding self-governance and food sovereignty. Infrastructure megaprojects operate through an immense number of experts, politicians, and bureaucrats who invade a region to first promote and then implement a project, installing a new rationality, value system, economic practices, and ultimately, changing existing lifeworlds in the process.[21] The relationship between infrastructures, developmentalism, and anti-Indigenous racism was evident in some government officials' speeches and engineers' interactions with local communities in the course of planning and implementation processes observed during this research. This is unsurprising, considering that both experts and politicians are generally trained in educational institutions that have historically developed under Eurocentric, industrial-progressivist premises and influence.

Talking to women who are or have been employed in Coatzacoalcos' petrochemical-industrial complex, which will be integrated into the CIIT, a pattern of patriarchal violence and general carelessness in worker treatment emerged. Necessities such as drinking water, toilet paper, or canteens were not provided at their workplace. We were told of workplace discrimination, bullying, and sexual violence (including harassment, sexual assaults, and feminicide) followed by subsequent cover-ups and foreclosed investigations. These industries, part of the hydrocarbon-extractivist-infrastructure complex, lack practices of care, disregarding and building on top of what already exists, including established lifeworlds.

When accompanying the government's information campaign, I was asked to use my expertise, influence, and connections as anthropologist to persuade Indigenous communities and social movement activists to support the project, recognize its benefits for the region, and refrain from obstructing its implementation. Elected officials and civil servants were reluctant to acknowledge the value of the Indigenous communities' life systems. Indigenous resistance was seen as anachronistic, irrational, and a mere nuisance. Time and again, statements and implementation practices showed the anti-Indigenous racism that underlies largescale infrastructures, which operate as a de facto politics of erasure, because they rely on overriding local ways of living.

Many megaprojects do not benefit a majority of residents in the long term (Azamar Alonso and Rodríguez Wallenius, 2021; Ceceña, 2019; Cowen, 2019; Dunlap 2023; Dunlap and Correa Arce, 2022; Montalvo Méndez, 2019). Consequently, their implementation must be accompanied by authoritarian governance, repressive legislation, and state force.[22] Such projects are typically conceived, planned, and financed by political and economic elites in distant institutions and corporate headquarters.

Both classism and anti-Indigenous racism became evident in the following anecdote recounted by several participants of a neighborhood meeting with CIIT bureaucrats and politicians in the city of Salina Cruz. Residents were told that their houses were built too closely to the trainline that was going to be modernized and had to be removed. While

promises of resettlement were made, no information was given regarding how, when, and with what compensation scheme this process would occur. Señora Lucia recalls an indicative incident:

> Yes, it is violent, because they have treated us in a bad way. In on one occasion, I arranged to meet this person, supposedly a government employee, and he told us that we talk nonsense, and that, because it is very hot in the Isthmus, that's why our neurons didn't work. And on another occasion, an elderly lady said, "Where am I going to go if they throw me out of my house?" and this person answered: "Don't worry, you can build another chicken coop elsewhere and settle in there." I think that's violence. That's where the dialogue that we were supposedly going to have with this person broke off, and most of the people from the neighborhood group said: "No, we don't want anything anymore." It was then that the decision to block the road was made, to demand that they send us an earnest person who provides useful information and explains the project to us in a clear way: What are the real benefits and to what extent will it harm us? We just want information.

The community rightfully resisted being treated in a denigrating, discriminatory, and disrespectful way, and subsequently opted for more confrontational, collective methods. Since taking power in 2019, President López Obrador projected a media image as someone who is on the side of Mexico's Indigenous peoples. Even when visiting infrastructure construction sites, he is frequently dressed in Indigenous apparel, adorned with flower wreaths around his neck, and accompanied by an Indigenous leader. However, it became commonplace for his speeches to stigmatize those Indigenous actors who criticized or confronted his position and project (Sin Embargo, 2019). For instance, he denigrated participants in the "Sélvame del Tren" campaign that opposes the Tren Maya megaproject as "conservatives" and "hippies" (Infobae, 2022). While indigeneity can be instrumentalized for electoral politics and public policy support, ultimately, the multitude of Indigenous ways of world-making stand in the way of the extractivist-colonialist one-world world that is executed through the implementation of infrastructure megaprojects.

ONTOLOGICAL JUSTICE CLAIMS OR PROTECTING UNIQUE WORLDS

The justice claims brought by participants extend beyond harm to human beings or material losses to include harm to a collective lifeworld that cannot be reduced to component parts like the individual or the environment. How can such demands for justice that condemn the loss of a unique world be addressed in the face of infrastructure megaprojects? Political ecologist Audra Mitchell's (2014) concept "mundicide" describes the "destruction of worlds and of the conditions of worldliness": Mundicide is "an ontological concept, which refers to the dissolution of irreducible, heterogeneous collectives, in whatever specific forms they emerge. Moreover, it is ontological in the sense that it conceptualizes harm in terms of the loss not just of particular beings, but rather of entire, *unique ways of being-together* [my emphasis]" (Mitchell, 2014: 16). Worlds, however, are not considered bearers of harm or subjects of rights in most national legal systems, and therefore, mundicides of horrendous scope occur in the context of infrastructure megaproject construction worldwide. An

emblematic case occurred as result of the construction of the Belo Monte hydroelectric dam in state of Pará (Brum, 2014), where the peoples of the Xingú river basin lost a total of 500 square kilometers of territory to the reservoir and, with it, access to their means for reproducing life in their culturally-specific and self-determined ways.

The Indigenous peoples of the Tehuantepec Isthmus have fought successfully against invading colonial forces in the past, as remains present in local oral history today (Manzo, 2008; Zarauz López, 2018). Members from the Jaltepec de Candayoc community , for instance, remember that their ancestors paid 800 gold pesos to obtain 108 square miles of land from the Spanish crown. Respondents also remembered how, in the late 1950s, their grandfathers experienced the expropriation of 18,000 hectares of land for the Miguel Alemán dam construction and subsequent forced displacement and relocation about 200km southeast in the Isthmus.[23] The incident was a cruel harbinger of the modernist developmentalism that came to dominate governance and policy making for decades. Respondents deplored that still, there has been no compensation for the land that was lost.

Ayuuk researcher Carolina María Vásquez García writes that in cosmovisions of Ayuuk and Binnizá – cohabitant peoples in the Isthmus – a broader notion of land exists. Land is conceptualized not as a passive object, but as something palpable, that is lived, worked, sensed, and felt. It also includes a spiritual, emotional, and symbolic dimension, and the sensual stimuli of tastes, smells and colors. Through living on, with, and of the land, it becomes part of people's body and collective life. Ayuuk women's everyday work and crafting, such as garment embroidery, represents an interaction with the elements of the land and is part of a continuous dialogue with it (Vásquez García and Ramos García, 2019). In doing so, an awareness is maintained that land is both the source of food and knowledge that guarantees human survival. According to Ayuuk thought, land is considered living philosophy of life, and humans learn the meaning of equality from living on it, because human beings are neither more nor less than other beings in the territory. Each of the elements of the earth system (which Euro-American cultures reduce to "nature") fulfils a necessary function within the whole, and this "wholeness" is core to all other aspects of human life. For the Ayuuk, it is therefore not possible to separate the atmosphere from the soil, nor the soil from the subsoil, Vásquez García insists. This idea of "land-life" (*tierra-vida*) she contends,

> is expressed in practice, in the work for food production –the planting of corn–; in individual and collective rituals and ceremonies, in gratitude to the land-mother as life-giver [*la tierra-madre como dadora de vida*]. For this reason, a large part of the manifestations of the rites and ceremonies are visible in the symbolic geographical places within the territory, what we call *Tunääw kojpkääw* (mountains or sacred geographical places) (Vásquez García and Ramos García, 2019: 59-60).

Departing from the notion of land-life, Indigenous peoples in the Isthmus have defended their territories (Castañeda Olivera, 2020; Cruz Rueda, 2011; Jiménez Maya, 2011; Flores Cruz, 2018; Manzo, 2008; Ibarra García and Talledos Sánchez, 2016; Vázquez García, 2021; Zarauz López, 2018) from the intrusion of modern/colonial capitalist ontology,[24] which considers land a commodity, an object to be exploited. Different Latin American scholars have called this non-instrumental relationship with land "relational ontologies" (Escobar, 2020) or "extended ontologies" (Gudynas, 2015). Following the idea of land-life, the seizure

of land through the imposition of megaprojects is an attack on existing lifeworlds. The fact that mountains, rivers, lagoons and everything that inhabits the territories are seen as inert objects that can be molded or destroyed, interrupts the cycles that allow the reproduction of life in its multiple forms (Cariño Trujillo, 2019). In the current civilizational crisis, which is characterized by the growing construction of invasive megacorridors intended to facilitate intensified natural resource extraction, it is key to begin a debate about ontological justice.

Breaking with the anthropocentric approach of modern/colonial western ontology that attributes superior value to humans, relational ontologies recognize the existence of worlds in relation. This means that the biophysical, human, nonhuman, and supernatural worlds are not considered as separate entities. Instead, complex, non-hierarchical links of continuity are established between them. Hence, to destroy the land-territory is to destroy the intricate web of life that sustains the pluriverse. This implies not only the destruction of other worlds that already exist in those territories, but also the denial of the possibility of the existence of those to come. As Escobar (2018: 73) points out, territories are “vital spaces” that “ensure survival as a people and living culture.” Territories are collective spaces in which the cultural existence and modes of subsistence can be reinvented, and are therefore vital for the r-existence[25] of Indigenous peoples and equivalent communities and their life projects.

Resistance against the one-world world is motivated by imagining and struggling for the conditions that will allow continued existence of distinct worlds (Escobar, 2020). Territory defense and local governance is therefore de facto an ontopolitical practice. By preventing the intrusion of developmentalist, globalizing infrastructure projects, rejecting the dominant ontology of colonial-modernity, and resisting integration into the one-world world, many Indigenous, Afrodescendant, and equivalent communities are advancing ontological struggles. The erupting land defense struggles against invasive infrastructural and extractive projects are in fact a struggle against “ontological occupation” (Escobar, 2020). The defense of territory, life, and the commons are therefore the same thing: they signify an insistence on the futurity of other ways of world-making.

Research on Indigenous legal systems reminds us that all justice systems emerge from distinct lifeworlds. Canadian Indigenous scholar Aaron Mills writes that legal orders are “genealogical, storied, and entirely wrapped up in culture” (Mills, 2016: 652). Anishinaabe law, for instance, looks to land for its principles for judgement: Animals, rocks, and plants are conceived of having principles of law embedded in them (Mills, 2016). A legal order is a framework of proper judgement that can only be learnt through immersion in the respective lifeworld (e.g. learning to speak the language, taking part in ceremonies), thereby gradually understanding the principles for judgement and criteria for decision-making. In distinction to Eurocentric forms of land tenure based on exclusive usage rights, Algonquin notions of property, for instance, are based on a legal order of care that is committed to all existing creatures that live on the land (Pasternak, 2017). Legal property regimes are generative of specific ontologies, especially when relating to land. Pasternak emphasizes that the Algonquin jurisdiction of care cannot be replicated through the bureaucratic regimes of ownership, as Eurocentric legal orders disrupt communities from their established relations of reciprocity with the land.

Law has been among the core design elements of the continuation, extension, and defense of the one-world world. There are few examples in which Indigenous peoples have

had their relations with the nonhuman world recognized and upheld in law within Western, liberal, democratic legal systems. In New Zealand, the Maori view that the natural environment should be treated as a person – indeed, as *a relative* – rather than simply a resource was integrated into national law in the 1980s (Iorns Magallanes, 2015). We have seen similar attempts to incorporate Indigenous cosmologies into national law in Latin America (Apaza Huanca, 2019; Tola, 2018). Since 2006, the rights of nature have been recognized by the governments of Ecuador and Bolivia. However, Ecuador and Bolivia continued to pursue an extractivist model, and assertions of national sovereignty over natural resources have tended to override earth jurisprudence and environmental conservation (Humphreys, 2016). The continued pursuit of this model has two reasons: First, while recognized by international soft law, earth jurisprudence does not disrupt the most important aspects of Western epistemology (Apaza Huanca, 2019) but is de facto in conflict with mainstream legal systems, which have evolved historically as anthropocentric, granting rights only to humans and human constructs; second, cases concerning extractivism in Ecuador and Bolivia have demonstrated that the newly established norms of rights of nature collide with national economic development priorities that imposed by the global configurations of power that remain weighted towards extractivism and the commercialization of the natural world.

Undertaking a critical genealogy of the international legal order, and inspecting its ideological foundations, legal scholar Anna Grear (2015: 242) highlights that "aggressive anthropocentrism" was one of the core features of international law, designed to secure European imperial hegemony. Contemporary legal orders (both national and international) are ill suited to protect multiple worlds. Available international mechanisms enshrined in the ILO Indigenous and Tribal Peoples Convention No. 169 and the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) – the latter not legally binding – have proven insufficient for effectively protecting the different life projects and territories of Indigenous peoples from encroaching largescale infrastructure projects or resource extraction (Åhrén, 2014; Scott, 2020; Cruz and Flores Cruz, 2013; Dunlap, 2018a; Baker, 2013; Fontana and Grugel, 2016; Franco, 2014; Rangel González, 2020; Zaremberg and Torres Wong, 2018). In the context of substantial political and economic asymmetry between state, corporate, and elite interests, and Indigenous communities, Free, Prior, and Informed Consent (FPIC),[26] a specific right granted to Indigenous Peoples recognized in the UNDRIP, has been susceptible to multiple legal and procedural infringements. FPIC consultations about previous megaprojects in the Isthmus have been performed as "regional consultative" or "citizen" assemblies, which are not recognized normative instruments in Indigenous communities, the *asamblea comunitaria* (community assembly) being the only legitimate decision-making instance (see Cruz and Flores Cruz, 2013; Rangel González, 2020). The FPIC consultation process helped create an illusion of dialogue and negotiation, simulating Indigenous participation and consent, thereby de facto undermining true Indigenous self-determination. In a context of the coloniality of contemporary, extractivist capitalism, full sovereignty of Indigenous peoples over their traditional territories conflicts with national and international interests in exploiting natural wealth.

Countering the promise that accompanies the construction of largescale – often now labelled "critical" – infrastructure projects, Canadian First Nation scholar Anne Spice

emphasizes that they "destroy Indigenous life to make way for capitalist expansion." Such infrastructure installs new epistemological and ontological relations to land, nonhuman beings, and the earth system. Rather than being "creative/productive," this infrastructure is "regressive/destructive" and "embedded in a capitalist system that is fundamentally at odds with the cycles and systems that make Indigenous survival possible" (Spice, 2018: 41). Current projects like the CIIT, Tren Maya, and more act as world erasers (Dunlap and Jakobsen, 2019),[27] effectively making other worlds impossible. A recuperation of the possibility of multiple ways of world-making, and with it a fundamental change of relations with the nonhuman world, will only emerge through the recognition of Indigenous jurisdictions and the return of full authority over land and territories to Indigenous peoples, Afrodescendants, and equivalent communities. World-making is a product of design and political choice. A pluri-worldly politics allows us to recognize, value, and forge alternatives to extractivist and colonial ways of world-making and to end the reproduction of the one-world world. The elimination of a hierarchy of worlds and world-making practices is not only a question of historical, ontological justice, but might well be our lifeline for protecting the earth system in times of catastrophic depletion, pollution, and biodiversity loss.

CONCLUSION

The modern/colonial extractivist one-world world relies on a zoning of geographies that prevents territorial politics and Indigenous, Afrodescendant, and equivalent community self-determination, rendering makes impossible alternative ways of being and world-making. The CIIT will eventually reclassify and redesign territories, turning *milpas*, forests, lagoons, local markets, and sacred places into industrial parks, factories, seaports, logistics centers and waste disposal sites. Largescale infrastructural projects geared to reproduce industrial production and global circulation impose integration into the one-world world, leading to the erasure of other lifeworlds and the assimilation of Indigenous peoples and Afrodescendant and equivalent communities. A core element of the imposition of the CIIT is the companion program Sembrando Vida*,* which initiated the farmers' detachment from land and dissociation from their communities, turning them into individual players in global agroindustry. All this constitutes an ontological capture that many respondents deplore and resist. Contemporary infrastructure projects have many of the same characteristics and functionality as colonial infrastructures: They enable a system of reproduction premised on dispossession, extractivism, and accumulation. Circulatory infrastructures shift the life-reproducing benefits away from territories and return or leave behind useless waste products that deplete the territories. Megainfrastructures are the technopolitical structures that organize dispossession, eliminating possibilities of being, inevitably resulting in mundicide. Alternative worlds require alternative infrastructures, sociotechnical systems that allow for sustenance and reproduction, built to serve community survival rather than colonialist extraction and accumulation.

The Indigenous peoples and Afrodescendant and equivalent communities in the Tehuantepec Isthmus desire to generate infrastructures that are culturally appropriate and aligned with their collective life projects and relational models.[28] Land and territory are the

fundamental elements within which collective identity is inscribed for Isthmian peoples and communities. Beyond guaranteeing physical survival, territories are places in which complex symbolic relationships are formed that constitute collective identity. Respondents in this study desired continuity of their collective life projects, language, cultural identity, beliefs, spirituality, established political and legal systems, and a solidarity economy. In both bureaucratic processes and outcomes, the CIIT is functioning as a worldeater – or technology of erasure – of other lifeworlds. Ontological justice should be a core consideration in all so-called development and infrastructure projects. Considering the history of colonial oppression in Latin America, it is paramount to not perpetuate cycles of extractivism, ontological occupation, and erasure, and instead to reestablish the conditions that allow other ways of world-making, embracing the futurity of Indigenous life projects and those of Afrodescendant and equivalent communities, and permitting place-based connections based on mutuality and stewardship.

NOTES

[1] *Comunidades equiparables*, or "equivalent communities" in English denotes social groups whose cultural identities, like those of Indigenous peoples, are closely linked to their territories and the natural resources where they live.
2. For a comprehensive history of the past infrastructure proposals in the Tehuantepec Isthmus, see: Torres Fragoso (2017), Martner Peyrelongue (2012), and Martínez Laguna, Sánchez Salazar, and Casado Izquierdo (2002).
3. Where there are two names, the term assigned to the people differs from their self-designation. The first term stands for the autonym.
4. The installation of the wind parks in the southern Isthmus and the resistance struggle local movements developed is beyond the scope of this article. See: Barrera, Howe and Boyer (2015), Flores Cruz (2018), Dunlap (2018b), Jiménez Maya (2011), and Quintana (2018).
5. This project was intended to be performed using focus groups of Isthmus residents, assessing CIIT impacts and implementation, as well as identifying knowledge gaps and pathways for meaningful and effective collective action in the interest of the communities. However, the Covid-19 pandemic forestalled this endeavor. While confined to remote, desk research from the UK, I recruited four Mexican researchers through my existing networks in the region, three of whom resided in the Isthmus. Over the following twenty-four months, they conducted structured and semi-structured interviews (initially digitally, later in person) with residents affected by the megaproject. The interviews were performed in two rounds: the first included questions on demographics, arrival of the megaproject, impacts and collective action, security impacts, existing grievances, and state provision of redress and justice. The second was developed based on insights gained and knowledge gaps identified in the first round. Where possible, second interviews were conducted, and additional first-time interviewees were also recruited. The second round included questions on the meaning of infrastructure, strategies to protect Indigenous lifeways, possibilities and limits of land defense, and hopes for the future. A shorter interview guide in simple language was conceptualized for community members with little formal education, with separate guides

devised for professionals like civil servants, politicians, NGO workers, and social movement leaders. Ethnographic data was obtained over twelve months of fieldwork before and after the pandemic, providing provided contextual understanding of the physical environment of the infrastructure project and of core actors, grass roots organizations, government officials, and other stakeholders, including their interactions and relationships. I thematically analyzed descriptive and analytical field notes, transcribed interviews, and research assistants' reports that included their reflections on the process and experience with the software QDA Miner Lite. I completed two cycles of grounded coding, leading to over 100 codes in thirteen categories including cultural survival, land defense, infrastructure, legislation, project impacts, and justice. I also reviewed sources including newspaper articles, non-profit research; government materials, and social movements' audio-visual materials and declarations. Each different combined method and source added breadth and depth to the final analysis, generating not a single, uniform image or truth, but a kaleidoscopic one.
6. Referring to other major historical periods of change in Mexico: Independence, liberal reform, and peasant and popular revolution.
7. A life project is an idea of a collective way of life based on a shared cultural history and principles. This generally includes guidelines for the stewardship of the natural world and the ordering of the territory inhabited by a particular people. Core to Indigenous life projects across the Americas are principles of balance and reciprocity between the beings that make up the territory, as well as striving for conditions that generate collective benefit and shared abundance. A life project includes forms of political organization, jurisdiction, and authority.
8. Arredondo Fitz (2022) outlines a typology of resistance against the megaprojects of the 4T government. See Montalvo Méndez (2019) for an insightful analysis into how the category of '*los afectados*' can be instrumentalized in the context of project implementation.
9. The government ultimately refused this option.
10. All respondent names were changed to guarantee anonymity.
11. Extractivism is an economic model involving the largescale extraction of natural resources commonly destined for export (Gudynas, 2013). The term emphasizes a local perspective, drawing attention to affected communities and altered ecosystems.
12. The term *istmeño* refers to residents of the Tehuantepec Isthmus, as such it is does not refer to a particular race or ethnicity.
13. Community work expected by each member.
14. On *cuerpo-territorio* discourses, see Leinius (2021) and Cruz Hernández and Bayón Jiménez (2020).
15. The concept of *maritorio* was developed by Chapanoff to highlight the common omission of the maritime as an identity space which is deeply rooted in culture and foundational of established ways of living. See Herrera and Chapanoff (2017) for more.
16. By using this term, I merge the conceptual work of Mignolo (2002), Grosfoguel (2002), and Law (2015). The "One-World World" in Law (2015) stands for "Euro-American metaphysics," exported through colonialism, development policies, and globalization.
17. People with access to social (collectively held) property.
18. Women who make *totopos*, a clay oven-baked *tortilla* with holes, which is an Isthmus specialty.

19. An ongoing infrastructure project that is intended to boost the economy of the Yucatán peninsula by establishing conditions suited to mass tourism. Approximately 1,500 km of train tracks will be built to connect the states of Tabasco, Campeche, Chiapas, Yucatán, and Quintana Roo.
20. Listen to the full interview in episode 12 of the Infrastructure (Re)Worldings Podcast titled "Climate Crisis, Wind Energy and Community Resistance" (Padua Uscanga, 2022).
21. A lifeworld is the ontological, epistemological, and cosmological framework co-created by a collectivity.
22. I have written elsewhere about the increasing militarization of infrastructure, see Hofmann (2023).
23. For more, see (Ojarasca, 2009).
24. I use "ontological" following Mario Blaser's (2019) term of "political ontology," which refers to the power-laden practices involved in bringing into being a particular world or ontology. The concept gained relevance at our current historical moment as destructive anthropocentric practices like intensified extractivism and the expansion of long-distance infrastructure construction erase the possibility of a pluriverse, i.e. a world of many worlds (Blaser and De la Cadena, 2018). The term political ontology illustrates the moldability of worlds constructed by human design and practices and emphasizes existing resistance against ontological occupation.
25. This neologism (a fusion of resistance and existence) was coined by Carlos Walter Porto Gonçalves to emphasize the existential affirmation that inhabits all forms of resistance (Porto Gonçalves and Pereira Cuin, 2016).
26. FPIC is aimed at guaranteeing Indigenous peoples' universal right to self-determination. It allows Indigenous peoples to provide or withhold or withdraw consent at any point regarding projects impacting their territories. It is intended to provide an opportunity to negotiate over the design, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation of infrastructure, resource extraction, or development projects that may impact them.
27. See also LaDuke and Cowen's (2020) legendary figure of the "Wiindigo," a giant monster and cannibal, and Dunlap and Jakobsen's (2019) term of the "capitalist worldeater" as attempts to describe the destructive capacities of an economic system based on accumulation and dispossession.
28. Find more information on community visions in Hofmann (2022) and detailed life plans in Consejo Dueñas (2021) and Morales and Esteva (2019).

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Acknowledgements

I am immensely grateful to my assistants Rita Valencia, Astrid Chavelas, Gemaly Padua Uscanga, and Mayra Nohemi Zeferino García who enriched this research with their committed work and valuable insights. This article is a produce of the "Gender Violence and Security in the Interoceanic Industrial Corridor of the Isthmus of Tehuantepec: A Critical Examination of Policies and Practices" research project, and has received funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation program under the Marie Skłodowska-Curie grant agreement No. 844176.