



Grounding fire: From climate affect to imperfect alliance in La Chiquitania[☆]

Mareike Winchell 

Department of Anthropology, London School of Economics and Political Science, Houghton Street, London WC2A 2AE, United Kingdom

ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:
Wildfires
Latin America
Indigenous dispossession
Conservation
Racism

ABSTRACT

The lowland Bolivian region of La Chiquitania, straddling the Amazon and La Plata River basins, has been severely impacted by recent wildfires. Wildfires increasingly act as an extractivist method for deforesting landscapes, facilitating the conversion of land into property and of subsoil, timber, meat, soy, and minerals into commodities slated for international markets. This article explores how wildfires render landscapes disposable not only for capital but also for a set of environmental mediations that can disempower those most afflicted by climate change. For those targeted by these interventions, wildfires and conservation responses reproduce aspects of earlier histories of territorial displacement by colonial Jesuits, Spanish plantation owners, white and mestizo agro-capitalists, and anti-Indigenous conservationists. Building from collaborative research in this region, I ask how these fires elicit new reflections upon a racialized history of land dispossession to which Indigenous people have been subjected. Against presumptions of a shared atmosphere of harm—the myth of universalism underlying what I call climate affect—the allied responses to wildfire in Chiquitos that I discuss foreground the unequal harms of an ongoing but not new climate apocalypse.

1. Introduction: grounding fire

The Turubó Center for Indigenous Communities of Chiquitos sits along a wide, quiet dirt road, its surface caked in bright red clay sand. When wildfires approach the outskirts of San José de Chiquitos (Bolivia), the atmosphere takes on this red hue, producing an eerie, suffocating effect [Fig. 1]. The sun gets obscured by an orange haze, and the air turns unusually still. On such days, hand-painted signs line the road, advertising ice and “glacial beer” [Figs. 2 & 3]. In a town where temperatures regularly soar to 100 °F and air conditioning is limited to upscale hotels, ice is a precious commodity. Walking along this road one morning in August 2022, a well-kept building with red roof tiles came into view: the Turubó Center, an Indigenous organization founded in 1989 that represents some 24 communities, primarily Chiquitano and Ayoreo, in Bolivia’s eastern lowlands. Two women in their twenties stood by the door, beside a painted sign bearing the organization’s name and emblem: the mountain Turubó that rises to the east.

Inside the meeting hall behind the main building, five people sat at a table, carefully filling out financial ledgers. I lingered at the side of the

room until the President, a man in his fifties wearing a black shirt, waved me over. Feeling their eyes on me, my scripted notes fell away as I stumbled through an explanation: I was an anthropologist hoping to collaborate and learn about local responses to climate change. A woman in a red top—later introduced as Dania—nodded in agreement. President Benito said he was open to supporting my work and proposed that I contribute to projects in organic farming, nutrition, or seed cultivation. I agreed.¹ At the end of our meeting, I mentioned Bolivia’s recent political tumult—naïvely noting that I once met former President Evo Morales. I’m confronted with blank stares. I quickly clarify that my interest is not in reproducing politicized narratives about the fires, but in understanding how things are on the ground. Benito nods: “Yes, here we want to leave aside the political, because it is empty. You will learn how it really is, the truth, what we are doing here.” Three years later, I would hesitate to say I know “the truth,” but I have come to understand Turubó’s work—how it operates in service of the Indigenous communities it represents, and how this work is deliberately set apart from what many see as a divisive national politics.²

Public outrage over the Chiquitos wildfires was pivotal to the ousting

[☆] This article is part of a special issue entitled: ‘Archives of the Planetary Mine’ published in Geoforum.

E-mail address: M.Winchell@lse.ac.uk.

¹ A week later, I donated \$250 to support an organic horticulture initiative focused on fruit and medicinal plants in neighboring Dolores. In spring 2025, I secured an additional grant of £1,000 to help establish Turubó’s firefighting crew.

² Such skepticism is unsurprising, given that national parties across the spectrum (both Left and Right) have instrumentalized the wildfires in Chiquitos for political gain (Colque 2019; Loayza Bueno et al. 2021).



Fig. 1. Wildfire particles cloud the skies, San José de Chiquitos, Sept 2024.



Figs. 2 and 3. “Ice, 1 boliviano,” San José de Chiquitos, Sept 2024; “Glacial beer for sale,” San José de Chiquitos, Sept 2024.

of President Evo Morales in 2019 and the rise of Jeanine Añez’s interim far-right government (Wickel et al., 2020). The fires became a flashpoint for digital misinformation and political polarization (Loayza Bueno et al., 2021). Añez and her allies blamed Morales’s environmental and land-use policies, specifically Supreme Decree 3973, which permitted controlled burning for agricultural expansion (Zamorano Villarreal, 2020; The Guardian, 2019). Media coverage amplified these tensions, often portraying migrant Indigenous communities (*interculturales* or *Qollas*) as complicit and lowland Indigenous groups as victims, all the while sparing agribusiness elites from blame (Ormachea, 2021; Telma Jemio, 2019; Zamorano, 2020). Using racist language that referred to Morales as “a donkey” (*burro*) and ignorant (Burman, 2022), this narrative reinforced elite critiques of Morales and shifted public discourse toward blaming him for the lowland fires (Farthing and Becker, 2021; Fundación Tierra, 2020). The 21F Referendum, in which the public rejected Morales’s bid for a fourth term, was reframed as a defense of La Chiquitania (Los Tiempos Oct 4, 2019). The event, which reportedly drew over a million people, provided a platform for leaders like Luis Fernando Camacho to mobilize opposition ahead of the October 2019 elections. As the fires supplied a material and narrative backdrop to the 2019 political crisis (CEDIB, 2020), climate change became part of a vocabulary for middle-class environmentalists in Santa Cruz to express discomfort with the ascent of Morales, and subaltern Indigenous movements, in Bolivia (Burman, 2022: 195).

This article draws on collaborative fieldwork and long-term

ethnography in San José de Chiquitos and with the Turubó organization, regional fire-fighters, park rangers, and town residents to call for a methodological shift from *climate affect* to fire’s *grounding* in sensory archives and histories of place. Heeding Benito’s call for a shift away from an “empty” politics of fire, I ask how wildfires are lived, combatted, and ethically interpreted in Chiquitos. For residents, climate-related phenomena such as wildfires interact with poverty, land encroachment, political marginality, institutional abandonment, and broader environmental and economic woes.³ Such magnified harms fall away in accounts that foreground the planetary scale of climate change and the shared ethics of care it requires (Ghosh, 2016: 107–110). What is shared, or not, across burning worlds? Departing from a single-issue politics (Green, 2020; TallBear, 2013), Turubó’s efforts do not take as their starting point the shared humanity of the Anthropocene (Crutzen, 2000; cf. Davis and Todd, 2020; Whyte, 2021; Todd, 2015; Yusoff, 2018).⁴ They thereby instruct us in projects of climate justice that turn away from subsumption into the planetary—what we might term *climate affect* as a shared sense of Anthropocentric victimhood or responsibility whereby the future is configured as an object of concern (Masco, 2014; cf. Neimanis and Walker, 2013).

These questions of the “shared” or of universal humanity might seem far afield from Bolivian realities. Yet, part of the imaginary that galvanized Chiquitos as a national cause rested on invoking a shared citizenry who was collectively harmed by, and must seek justice for, the devastating fires.⁵ These sentiments drew from enduring regional imaginaries, preceding even the 2014 Territorio Indígena y Parque Nacional Isiboro Sécure (TIPNIS) conflict which initially mobilized national support for La Chiquitania (Weber, 2013). Long a place of colonial fantasies of inexhaustible wealth and natural wonder (Hecht, 2013; Saramago, 2020), the Amazon and its surrounds arise today as a key global carbon sink and as a resource frontier for agriculture and natural gas expansion. Not only did the rise of elite environmentalism in 2019 carry strong echoes of a colonial imaginary of possession over this region,⁶ but by invoking shared planetary harms from the fires, middle-class activists and opposition leaders sought to legitimize their (often-racialized) critiques of the Movimiento Al Socialismo (MAS) government as matters of universal necessity (Burman, 2022). In middle class environmentalism in Bolivia, as in colonial invocations of civilizational uplift in the name of universal “humanity,” the notion of the shared human comes to over-represent a particular class of “Man” (Wynter, 2003; Ghosh, 2016).

Building on these insights, my analysis highlights how climate crises re-entrench territorial divisions and reproduce racialized distributions of harm, blame, and neglect, but are also generating new possibilities for

³ This recalls Lesley Green’s (2020: 201) “ecopolitical approach.” While such an approach might seem at odds with existing reports, it is echoed in the 2022 UN Report about global wildfires. The report emphasizes the mutually reinforcing relationship between wildfires and climate change, noting that fires contribute to atmospheric greenhouse gases while climate change intensifies fire conditions through drought, heat, and land-use shifts (United Nations, 2022: 6–7, 14). Moreover, the report calls for attention to how wildfires and climate change become a mutually generative feedback loop, thereby highlighting what Neale et al (2019) call the “conjunctural” aspects of fire.

⁴ On elements’ “interscalar workings” and a call to appreciate the fractured quality of “humanity,” see Hecht (2018).

⁵ The galvanizing of political support via the language of shared vulnerability is echoed in Baré and Zuazo (2022), who note that surging lowland environmentalism in 2019 Santa Cruz arose as a “spontaneous emergence” following shared experiences of smoke and ecological devastation.

⁶ Within this imaginary, Chiquitos occupies a distinct position as a foundational site of Bolivian coloniality that is often invoked to affirm nationalist narratives of peaceful Indigenous-colonial coexistence (e.g., *mestizaje*) and smooth economic progress through agricultural expansion (Martínez 2018). These narratives obscure the histories of mobile, pre-colonial Indigenous collectivities, their coerced resettlement into colonial-era *parcialidades*, and their persistent resistance to Jesuit missionization (Martínez 2018:319).

addressing a vulnerable present. More specifically, I consider how *incendios* (fires) in the Chiquitos region, home to the largest remaining dry forests in the world and facing threats of massive deforestation (Mautner and Escobar, 2022:1), are transforming relations both to governance and to a racialized past. These fires unfold within the worlding of extraction (Richardson and Weszkalnys, 2014:15), here the use of fire to clear forests for cattle ranching which was first initiated by mission expansion into the region in the 17th century (Campbell, 2021; Colque, 2019a; 2019b; Hecht, 2020; WRM, 2019). As Indigenous communities in Chiquitos navigate these wildfires, they draw from long memories of territorial displacement and violence.⁷ For while capital expansion and conservation agendas might seem at odds, they share interests and exclusions. Despite *Cruzeños* centrality to new environmental activism concerning wildfires, it is largely agro-industrial elites in this region who benefit economically from the forest clearing that precedes and follows these fires (Wickel et al., 2020; Müller et al., 2014). I argue that, in the face of widespread disillusionment with formal politics, Turubó offers an emically elaborated model for what Indigenous solidarity—and imperfect alliances against the vulnerabilities and violences of climate change—might look like.

This discussion draws on seven ethnographic research trips since 2020, including 58 open-ended interviews with Turubó staff and beneficiaries, firefighters and rangers from the Parque Histórico Santa Cruz la Vieja, municipal firefighters, doctors, residents, artisans, government workers in San José de Chiquitos, agro-industry elites, cattle ranchers, and federal Search and Rescue (SAR) personnel in Santa Cruz de la Sierra. I conducted visual and content analysis of Bolivian news media and reports from NGOs such as the Fundación para la Conservación del Bosque Chiquitano (FCBC), Centro de Documentación e Información Bolivia (CEDIB), and Mongabay. I participated in daily operations at Turubó and the ranger station, attended community events and festivities in nearby villages, joined rangers and firefighters on wildfire surveys, and hiked with residents, youth, and municipal heritage staff in protected parklands. I also took part in workshops with artisans specializing in wool dyeing, weaving, mask carving, woodworking, and the revival of Indigenous culinary practices. Focus groups and workshops in seven peri-urban villages facilitated community dialogue on environmental change. Future work with Turubó includes a documentary film exploring how wildfires reshape relationships with land, animals, and ancestors.

The article opens by introducing the Chiquitano dry forests and the conditions that have enabled widespread burning, converting fire into a mechanism of extraction. Rural Chiquitos residents appear both as privileged subjects of transformation, through initiatives like environmental training, and as criminalized victims, tracked and surveilled via technologies such as aerial drones and heat maps. Next, I draw from ethnography to examine the emergence of inter-Indigenous alliances for climate justice following recent fires. Finally, I ask how wildfires take grip as powerful sites for generating alternate histories of the present, for rethinking the contagions of neo/colonial landscapes. These uneven burdens challenge the universalizing assumptions embedded in what I term *climate affect*: appeals to a generalized humanity that collectively bears the costs, but not the responsibilities, of Anthropocentric climate change. What alternative stories might be told that re-attune environmental analyses to fire's place in these differentiated, and differentiating, processes of dispossession and struggle? In lowland Bolivia such alternate stories and sensory archives proliferate as part of what I call *fire's grounding*, ones which might also offer a methodological tool to scholars who wish to write climate change differently. For while climate change magnifies harms and distributes unequal vulnerabilities, in this

case it also acts as a unifying force for reimagining the scope of the political.

2. Fire politics and conservation harms in Bolivia

The dry Chiquitano forest, spanning roughly 230,000 km² between the Amazon and La Plata river basins, is one of the largest and most ecologically significant tropical dry forests in the world. Recent environmental pressures stem primarily from “land use change” (Mautner and Escobar, 2022:1; Killeen et al., 2008) driven by the expansion of cattle ranching, soy cultivation, and extractive industries such as natural gas and mining. These pressures are rooted in a longer history of colonial intrusion and dispossession, beginning with Jesuit missionization in the 17th century. Indeed, the region's name “Chiquitos” is often attributed to 16th-century Spanish conquistador Ñuflo de Chávez, founder of Santa Cruz “la vieja,” who is said to have referred to the small doors of Indigenous straw houses (ICOMOS, 1989) with this term. Landscape changes rooted in centuries of settlement and dispossession now threaten both surface and groundwater resources (Wickel et al., 2020; Baldi et al., 2015), compounding climate change and unprecedented wildfires.

The 2019 and 2024 wildfire seasons marked turning points in the region's fire history. In 2019, over 3.5 million hectares burned, largely due to uncontrolled slash-and-burn clearing and weak enforcement of environmental regulations, in particular permissive legislation that enabled both large agribusinesses and migrant smallholders to clear land through fire (Libonati, 2024). By 2024, Bolivia had lost more than 2 million hectares to fire in just two months, with the Chiquitos region particularly affected. These fires were fueled by drought, wind, and policies that permitted up to 20 ha of fire-based clearing per family (El País, Aug 21, 2024). Agroindustrial expansion, mainly for soy and sugarcane, has increased pressure on forested lands, with agricultural growth in Bolivia increasing 291% since 1985 (Libonati, 2024). The ecological consequences of these pressures have been severe: repeated burns have degraded biodiversity, shifted species composition toward fire-tolerant flora, and disrupted water cycles (Libonati, 2024). Environmental groups and researchers have argued that the root cause lies in Bolivia's agro-environmental policy framework, which allows deforestation and land conversion to proceed with minimal accountability (El Deber, Sept 2 2025).

The Chiquitos wildfires are not isolated, nor is Bolivia exceptional in facing the accrued vulnerabilities of climate change. Over the last decade, unprecedented wildfires have ravaged varied corners of the globe: western North America, Mediterranean countries, Australia, Finland, northern Russia, South Africa, and, the focus of this paper, the dry forests of lowland Bolivia known as La Chiquitanía (Reuters, 2024). Where massive and uncontrolled wildfires have not directly plagued people, animals, and distinct ecological systems, they have taken hold as a powerful call for reckoning with human-caused climate change. In acting as a privileged “sign” of a planet under duress (Robinne et al., 2021; Latour, 2017; Marder, 2014), wildfires encourage and re-entrench regimes of environmental management, care, and recovery. But, following Haraway (2016), as highly visible indicators of a planet under duress, record-breaking fire seasons can also afford new opportunities for people to learn to live with the planet (Tsing et al., 2017). They can trouble “how we think about the landscapes we come to live in” and the methods and logics that guide that form of dwelling and response (Sutherland 2018:19).

One of the most prominent ways wildfires have prompted reconsideration of human–environment relations is through growing critiques of fire suppression (Otero and Nielsen, 2017; Weber et al., 2019; Mistry et al., 2016). Fires' workings as exchange or transformation processes are not only damaging; they also enhance soil fertility, maintain biodiversity, support traditional land management, and sustain Indigenous practices of renewal and resilience through controlled burning and landscape stewardship (Fowler, 2013; Fowler and Welch, 2018; Hecht and Cockburn,

⁷ Wildfires violate international pacts that seek to retain the Amazon's status as a place of exemplary “planetary” benefit, containing “carbon storage potential” (Mallard and Vides-Almonacid 2025). On “sovereign carbon credits” see Lang (2025).

2010; Lightfoot and Nelson, 2021). In Chiquitos fire has long been a tool of both subsistence and control. Indigenous communities historically used low-intensity, seasonal burns to manage landscapes, promote biodiversity, and reduce fuel loads (Vidal-Riveros et al., 2023). However, these practices were increasingly marginalized by colonial and republican land policies that criminalized Indigenous fire use while promoting extractive development. In the 20th century, state-led colonization programs and agrarian reforms further intensified fire use, as settlers cleared forest for agriculture using slash-and-burn techniques. By the early 2000s, fire had become a central mechanism for land conversion, especially under policies that linked land tenure to “productive use,” often interpreted as visible transformation through clearing (McDaniel, 2002).

Firefighters, rangers, and environmental engineers in Bolivia are similarly reevaluating fire suppression as a long-term strategy, turning instead to innovations informed by traditional knowledge systems (Rodríguez et al., 2023; Supayabe et al., 2022). These efforts aim to move beyond the criminalization of small-scale fire users—such as “peasant” agriculturalists (a term often used as synonymous for highland-to-lowland Indigenous migrants)—and instead focus on the broader dynamics of land conversion and biomass accumulation that intensify wildfire risks (Sorrenson, 2009; Stephens et al., 2014). When I visited in June 2024, firefighters in Chiquitos had recently completed training in controlled burning techniques. However, for a range of reasons institutional responses—both governmental and non-governmental—have largely centered on conservation,⁸ with NGOs advocating for the designation of additional parklands as a means to protect the region from deforestation and wildfires.

Both forest cover loss and the advancing of agricultural frontiers via fire have occurred with unprecedented speed since 2001 (Boston Globe, 2023; Wickel et al., 2020). By modifying an earlier law banning the use of fire for land clearing, the government now allows the use of fire to increase “productive areas” for cattle ranching and agroindustry. It also revoked the criminalization of *chaqueo* or controlled burning. The change to Law 26075 was only one of a string of legal shifts that together facilitated massive forest loss and wildfires (Barié and Zuazo, 2022: 102). Broad transformations to existing fire regulation policies during the Covid-19 pandemic enabled vast Indigenous land dispossession (for Brazil see Barreto Filho, 2021).⁹ Today, small *campesino* farmers deploy fire as a cheap method to convert forests into property, coal, gas, timber, and meat, from which they ultimately benefit very little (Campbell, 2021). As wildfires motor forest clearing, fire itself becomes a *mode of extraction* (McKay, 2017; McKay and Colque, 2022; Müller et al., 2014).

As this compressed history indicates, uses of fire in the Amazon, Chaco, and Chiquitos areas have been radically transformed by agro-industrial uses since at least the 1970s. Some scholars argue that current burning practices hold little resemblance to traditional slash-and-burn agriculture or to Indigenous (Kayapó) burning practices that were “carefully monitored by shamans” to facilitate plant succession (Hecht and Cockburn, 2010: 44; Kennard, 2002). The use of fire to clear land tracts for cattle ranching creates a firestorm (Hecht and Cockburn, 2010: 48; see Gilbert and Greenleaf, 2021). Deforestation since the early 2000s unfolds at an exponential rate, “with millions of acres of forest reduced to dust each year” (ibid). Even in this arc of transformed burning, the wildfires of 2019 (and 2024) were unprecedented. When the smoke and unpleasant symptoms reached the city of Santa Cruz in 2019, it led to a “fire crisis” (Barié and Zuazo, 2022: 100) with political costs for the MAS party. Ortiz (2019) argues that the “burnt vote”

against Morales resulted from an indignant electorate abandoned in the face of the wildfires (see also Hirsland and Strijbis, 2019). While Áñez’s government criticized Morales’s policies, it largely ignored the structural drivers of deforestation and fire—such as agribusiness expansion and land speculation—many of which were supported by powerful economic actors aligned with the interim regime (Schulte, 2023).

Existing studies survey the ecological effects of the Chiquitanos wildfires (Anívarro et al., 2019; Joint Research Centre, 2020) but less attention is paid to their social and political dimensions (CEJIS, 2019, Colque, 2019b; for Brazil see Hecht and Cockburn, 2010, 2020). Barié and Zuazo, 2022 highlight the importance of the wildfires in Bolivia in 2019, yet no studies to date consider what these wildfires mean for Chiquitos residents who are blamed for them while also unevenly shouldering their effects. Narratives of a unified Bolivian public swept up in a new ecological conscience are compelling (Barié and Zuazo, 2022), but they problematically reify Bolivia’s public in ways that, as with universalist accounts of shared planetary vulnerability in the Anthropocene, overlook the crucial question of what is shared, and what is not, across scales and within communities afflicted by wildfires. Bolivian urban elites in Santa Cruz made the MAS state’s inadequate response to the fires central to their opposition platform, even while continuing to profit immensely from lowland agroindustry and natural gas exploration that have fueled the fires (IWGIA, 2019; WRM, 2014).

As the Chiquitos wildfires become a “major conservation issue” (Hadesty, 2005), this is prompting new reflections on the racialized histories that have produced a degraded present. As elsewhere, conservation programs often re-entrench geopolitical, racialized, and classed divides (Heron, 2023; Robinne et al., 2021; Kim and Lee, 2024), recalling the history of parks as sites of recreation for white settlers in contexts like the US and South Africa (Eicher and Baumeister, 2021; Green, 2021; Cattellino, 2015; Ogden, 2011). In San José de Chiquitos, lines separate the largely non-Indigenous agro-industrial capitalists who prosper from cattle ranching, soy farming, and timber industries from the small Indigenous farmers (usually, but not exclusively, from the highlands) who deploy fire to clear land in order to secure new land rights. Further divisions separate those who visit the region’s national parks for pleasure from those who are criminalized for infiltrating its borders, including Ayoreo and Chiquitano groups who have traditionally inhabited these lands. These hierarchies dividing those who unduly bear climate change burdens and those who can off-load such burdens onto others frequently replicate colonial-era divisions of deserving from undeserving groups. Let us now examine how such inequalities are reproduced in the modes of surveillance and suspicion the wildfires generate.

3. Fire as surveillance and suspicion

Despite renewed focus on shared use park models, in practice protected areas in Chiquitos reproduce abiding racial and economic inequalities.¹⁰ Chiquitos protected dry forests are home to the continent’s largest gas pipeline, the Bolivia-Brazil (GASBOL) pipeline. As rangers of the Parque Histórico de Santa Cruz la Vieja on the outskirts of San José de Chiquitos noted, conservation parks—specifically the Parque Nacional del Gran Chaco Kaa-Iya—insulate gas infrastructures from intruders, enabling an ease of policing and surveillance. Gas industry personnel can enter this enclosed space, but the area is otherwise impassable except by helicopter.¹¹ While firefighters with whom I spoke focus on monitoring and putting out fires, they integrate new tools like drones

⁸ In Chiquitos, the argument that traditional burning still exists is contested, with many people arguing it was displaced by slash and burn agriculture (see Andrada 2022).

⁹ The state passed this law to appease agro-industrial business elites of the Comité Cívico Pro Santa Cruz, who in 2008 formed an alliance with other regional prefectures (Santa Cruz, Beni, Pando, Tarija) under the banner of the Media Luna party (Barrientos 2020:129).

¹⁰ For conservation’s slip into “green colonialism” see Dorn (2022: 137) and Bluwstein and De Rosa (2024:2).

¹¹ This conservation-military complex continues to gain legal traction. In 2024, the Bolivian government proposed a new law that dramatically increases the state’s ability to charge fire-starting as a crime with fines and jail time for up to 5 to 8 years (El Deber 2024).

and NASA hotspots that precisely track these fires' origin points, and in what Indigenous or *campesino* communities.¹²

Driving through the outskirts of protected forestland with Turubó staff and the head of a local NGO in August 2022, we approached a stretch of cleared land [Fig. 4]. The NGO head explained that it belonged to a large, established landowner, not newcomers or migrants from the highlands who received land titles through MAS's agrarian program. A few miles away, new temporary housing structures dot the road amid deforested plots. An acquaintance employed in the government's land registration office later explained that often people would build these temporary shelters to be able to claim the land as their property (see McDaniel, 2002). To gain title, the Bolivian Agrarian Reform office required they demonstrate "improving" the land through agriculture or building a residence (Winchell 2022). While in El Chaco such temporary structures have long been a part of migration patterns to sugar cane plantations or for hunting trips (Gordillo, 2014), newfound worries about migrants "invading" the dry forest have politicized these shelters as evidence of illicit land trafficking.

The concerns with migrant "invasion" and the worries about maintaining the buffer zone around this park contrast with the formal model of conservation in this region. In the Santa Cruz region, conservation is based on a participatory and multi-stakeholder framework designed to promote sustainable development while preserving ecological integrity, known as the Chiquitano Model Forest (see IMFN). The model encompasses 70% of the region, and includes five national protected areas, five municipal reserves, ten Natural Heritage Conservation Units, twenty private reserves, and Indigenous territories. According to the model's design, its aim is "a complex sociocultural mosaic" (IMFN). The region is governed by 14 municipalities and encompasses 42 settlements, home to over 200,000 people, including Chiquitanos, Guarayos, Ayoreos, Criollos, Indigenous migrants from western Bolivia (such as Quechuas and Aymaras), and Mennonite communities. Despite this participatory framework, the parkland of Santa Cruz la Vieja is largely closed off to people except, as the head ranger in 2022 explained, Ayoreo communities who have had to be "grandfathered in" (Winchell *in press*).

Downplaying the mobility of Indigenous, migrant, and Black populations across the Gran Chaco and Chiquitos forest since at least the



Fig. 4. Newly deforested terrain around Chiquitos National park's periphery, Aug 2022.

¹² Often celebrated as a new suppression tactic (Twidwell et al. 2016), drones or "unmanned aerial devices" offer evidence for how state fire management regimes and military surveillance technologies converge.

early 18th century, current conservation policy rests principally on an attempt to stamp out any "human presence" from the forest. Posted signs in the park declare "Human Settlements Forbidden" [Fig. 5]. Despite the multi-stakeholder model, in practice these lands must not only be conserved; they must be made empty. And here, as elsewhere, emptiness can imply disposability for a range of uses that may not benefit the Indigenous communities living nearby (Liboiron, 2021). For instance, "empty" land can also be seized for state purposes, recalling the ways that Spanish colonialists between the 16th and 18th centuries laid claim to "vacant lands" or *tierras baldías* in the Chaco region (Combés and Villar, 2012; Mombiola, 2011; Mendoza, 2023). Surveying parkland with Jose Carlos, a lead firefighter employed at the Parque Histórico de Santa Cruz la Vieja, in June 2023, he was alarmed to find a new sign declaring part of the park (containing three water storage pools) "military property" [Fig. 6]. Hence, it seems, land cleared of "human presence" can also be made disposable for state capture. In Bolivia, in fact, the state retains subterranean property rights over conservation lands as well as Indigenous collective lands (TCOs) (Anthias, 2018; Tockman, Cameron, and Plata, 2015).

While firefighters—both those employed at the park ranger station and those who belong to federal and municipal firefighting crews—say they are not involved in reporting illicit settlements or migrant presence in the forest, they have easy access to this knowledge. When I asked about the difficulty of tracking where a fire begins, since as scholars have pointed out it incinerates the traces of its origins (Petryna, 2022), one firefighter laughed. Naturally, the head park ranger and trained firefighter explained, we can "see the origin of the fire," using MODIS satellite thermal detection of hotspots and fires (a program run by NASA). The fire begins as a "red point that spreads." To find out where the fire started (and in what community or settlement), one needs only to "reverse the time of the imaging to the fire's ignition point." While ignition points are imperfect, facing limits of pixel size (MODIS pixel size is 1 km²), in a region with low population density such points can be sufficient to identify communities.¹³ Surveillance is a big part of firefighting, less to detect the origins of fire but to monitor whether fires have been extinguished or whether they are only smoldering, waiting for wind or hot conditions to re-ignite fully.

During fieldwork in June 2024, Chiquitos firefighters had just received two drones from the central government [Fig. 7]. We visited an outlying village some six kilometers from the town that had recently burned, carrying new drones to survey recently extinguished fires. During entry, there was an altercation with the community's Indigenous *cacique* (political leader) who informed the entering firefighters: "Aquí, yo mando" (Here, I'm in charge). The lead firefighter calmly repeated that they (we) needed to enter. When inside, a firefighter from the national crew instructed the firefighter and head ranger from the Parque Santa Cruz la Vieja in Chiquitos on how to use the drone. We later reviewed footage from the drone, which showed how far the recent fires had spread and their proximity to the community. While the firefighters assured me that they do not share data with the government and their aim is not to abet criminal proceedings, they collect data that could incriminate. Even as culpability remains a thorny problem,¹⁴ these fires occasion new modes of (racialized) surveillance that in turn generate

¹³ According to the most recent 2024 census, Chiquitos province has a population density of 9.4/sq mi (3.6/km²), that is about 3–4 people per square kilometer. Indigenous Chiquitano communities are generally clustered family structures rather than stand-alone farms, making identification of an Indigenous community easier than with a dispersed private property model.

¹⁴ My research to date cannot say with absolute certainty *who* is causing the majority of these fires, though agrobusinesses, Mennonite colonies, and migrants are all responsible in part. More broadly, as an anthropologist I wish to suspend the urge to pinpoint a single culprit, which I feel risks over-simplifying the historical relationships and broader conjunctures that elicit fire, as discussed in the introduction.



Figs. 5 and 6. A sign in protected Chiquitos forestland: “Human settlements prohibited” (June 2023). Rangers were alarmed to find a portion of the Parque Histórico Santa Cruz la Vieja newly marked as “military property.”.



Fig. 7. San José de Chiquitos firefighters review drone footage, Sept 2024.

opposition to the Bolivian state—as highlighted by the Indigenous *cacique*’s response to the firefighters’ entry onto community lands.

Yet, as I now discuss, these fires are not lived *only* as devastation or dispossession. They are also lived as opportunities to forge new ties to places, to emplace oneself in land and soil, via alternate historical narratives and the fostering of human and more-than-human relations (Winchell, 2023; Winchell and Howe, 2024; cf. Blaser, 2025). The remainder of this paper traces the contours of this politicization of fire, but it also tracks collaborative responses to climate change that have emerged since Bolivia’s 2019 coup. What do these scenes of carbon’s distribution into the atmosphere look like, from the perspective of those who experience them within the shadow of a long history of racialized land dispossession that began well before the late 1970’s? How can our analyses be grounded in specific histories of fire in ways that do not re-

enact the epistemological violence of the Anthropocene or, in the Bolivian case, of a national citizenry unified in experience of, and struggle against, the wildfires? It is to the collaborations that are growing out of these grounded negotiations of fire that I now turn.

4. Crafting inter-Indigenous solidarity at Turubó

In August 2022, I accompanied Turubó staff to the home of then-President Benito in La Comunidad Indígena Dolores, a recognized Indigenous community located approximately 32 km east of San José de Chiquitos and home to around 50 residents. The heat was intense—it was nearly 100 degrees Fahrenheit—and the thatched roof of the community building offered little relief.¹⁵ We arranged our chairs diagonally, shifting to avoid the sun’s harsh rays. After introducing myself, I distributed a one-page handout I had prepared the night before at Benito’s request. He and his colleagues had gently but firmly declined my participation solely as a researcher (see López-García et al., 2021). To collaborate with them, they insisted, I needed to contribute something tangible. And so, on that sweltering August day, I found myself leading a workshop on organic horticulture.

Following the presentation, Francesca, a woman in her early sixties who lives in Dolores, clutched the handout as she guided me and two Turubó staff members through her *huerta* (household garden). She then led us to the new community garden behind the one-room primary school, partially funded by Turubó [Fig. 8]. The handout focused on techniques for capturing carbon in the soil to enhance fertility and mitigate climate change.¹⁶ As readers are likely familiar with, energy is stored in the soil, while plowing, rain, fire, and wind expose it, releasing carbon back into the atmosphere. Yet in Dolores, *carbón* also names the leafy underbrush that fueled the wildfires—fires that had come within yards of the village, part of a global surge in wildfire activity since 2000. These fires released not only carbon dioxide but also carbon monoxide and methane. By contrast, traditional burning practices are based on allowing agricultural plots to rest or lay fallow (*barbecho*). Before planting, such controlled burns are used to manage dry undergrowth and facilitate plant regeneration (McDaniel et al., 2005).

At a community assembly earlier that day, a male member of the volunteer firefighting team (*equipo de bomberos*) described the community’s vulnerability to climate change: “We have been affected by the *incendios* [fires].” He cited water shortages, prolonged drought, and

¹⁵ Part of this ethnographic section appeared online for an essay in *The Canopy Forum*. See Winchell (2023).

¹⁶ Although fossil fuel combustion remains the primary driver of carbon dioxide emissions, deforestation, ocean release, and respiration also contribute (EPA 2025).



Fig. 8. A community garden contains a sign "Food and medicine garden." Aug 2022.

especially extreme cold as key threats, noting that "the [changing] climate makes us vulnerable," causing livestock deaths and compounding the effects of the pandemic. The community's president expanded on this, referencing the recent 350th anniversary of the community: "This community has fought to live here, for water. They brought water from 1 to 10 km away to conserve this form of life, to not abandon their community. The people here are fighters who value their Land (*su Terreno*), who struggle for their animals." She concluded, "We are Catholic. We have a sad history." Her invocation of a "sad history" and the ongoing struggle for water in the face of more frequent droughts underscores how practices of regeneration and refuge are entangled with "mourning irreversible losses" (Haraway, 2015; Mathews 2021; Winchell 2023).

In these accounts, Dolores residents situated a transformed landscape within a longer trajectory of struggle, identifying themselves as *personas luchadoras* (fighters) against human and more-than-human vulnerabilities including increasingly frequent and proximate wildfires. Others described how smoke from the fires made schoolchildren ill, causing sore throats, respiratory issues, diarrhea, and stomach ailments linked to groundwater contamination from ash, debris, and chemicals. In 2019, Dolores had been on the edge of uncontrolled wildfires that came within meters of the village, destroying crops, cutting off access to the main road and town, and leaving many children (as well as Francesca's husband) with severe bronchitis [Fig. 9]. To treat the illness, residents like Francesca turned to herbal remedies prepared from the huerta gardens that were partly funded by Turubó. Returning to the village in June 2024, I was distraught to see eight litters of piglets perishing of hunger. The ongoing wildfires had caused feed costs to spike beyond what owners could pay, leading the sows to lose their milk. That day, climate vulnerability echoed in the shrill squeaks of dozens of piglets.

Turubó's role in facilitating monetary aid to communities like Dolores reflects a broader pattern of inter-Indigenous alliances for climate justice proliferating in the region, including in communities frequently blamed for the wildfires. Since the 1980's, Chiquitano peoples have engaged in a range of development partnerships, primarily focused on technical assistance and environmental programming such as community-based forestry and sustainable resource management (McDonald, 2002: 392). However, following the catastrophic fires of 2019 and the new humanitarian aid they made available, organizations like Turubó facilitate new flows of money, food aid, water, and fire-fighting equipment into affected communities. These partnerships channel resources from urban centers to rural villages, from state institutions to local actors, and from international aid organizations to individuals like Francesca in Dolores. Yet people do unexpected things



Fig. 9. Chiquitanos dry forest a day after burning. Las Taperas, Sept 2024.

with these resources, like purchasing plants for local medicinal gardens, using food aid sent by Bolivia's Civil Defense ministry in regional holiday festivities, or to refurbish a historic church.

Turubó supports a wide range of community initiatives in the region, including shared huerta gardens, the repair and expansion of a 1717 Jesuit church [Fig. 10], local apiary projects designed to generate income without deforestation, and guidance for Indigenous leaders (*caciques*) negotiating contracts with mining and gas companies as well as land titling and state recognition processes. In contrast to national narratives that often frame climate disasters through blame and division, these localized projects resist rigid political and ethnic binaries, as I discuss below. Turubó's organizers position themselves as a connective hinge—defending Indigenous interests while facilitating relationships with external actors such as regional NGOs, church and school groups,



Fig. 10. Project "extension and repair" of the original Jesuit Church, Dolores, Nov 2024.

municipal governments, and even the World Bank. These alliances challenge scholarly assumptions that Indigenous organizing remain separate from non-Indigenous political or economic systems (Carroll, 2014), or that development aid inherently depoliticizes local struggles (Ferguson, 1990; Escobar, 1995; Kline and Wade, 2017). The communities impacted by the wildfires that Turubó represents often welcome these new flows of aid, which bring much-needed resources to impoverished areas and help them shore up communities against external encroachments.¹⁷

Conversations with Turubó leadership suggest that such alliances are carefully crafted, purposeful endeavors set against what Benito had called the “empty” quality of divisive party politics. As the vice-President of the organization explained, this is why they carry the name Turubó [Fig. 11], named after the mountain to the East, which also graces their figurehead [Fig. 12]: “We will always be here. Nothing can fragment us. We are solid, we are one.” Efforts to overcome bureaucratic inertia came into view in September 2024, when Turubó, frustrated with delays from the municipal government, took it upon itself to organize the distribution of emergency food aid to Indigenous communities afflicted by wildfires. After weeks of delay, the organization arranged the pick-up of dry goods from a train car, and over three grueling days, Turubó staff (and the anthropologist) unloaded, transported, and stacked containers of oil, sugar, and flour [Fig. 13]. These supplies were then distributed directly to community leaders.

Such practices suggest that wildfires are lived not only as devastation but also as opportunities to craft Indigenous attachments to land against the encroachments and erasures of capital but also of a divisive nationalist environmental politics. Notably, the lowland Indigenous communities that Turubó represents include Indigenous Chiquitano and Ayoreo groups as well as newcomers from the highlands, AfroBolivians, migrants from neighboring Paraguay and Brazil, and white settlers who have left Mennonite colonies. These mosaic communities are at odds with far-right media accounts that pit *Camba* lowlanders against *Qolla* highlanders. More broadly, while carbon may escape into the air, the attachments that ground these communities are not so easily dissolved. Rather than marking an inevitable shift away from geographic formations or existing modes of community as many theorists had predicted of atmospheric harms generated by energy transition (Marder, 2017), here wildfires and their atmospheric harms also invite purposeful efforts to *conserve* collectivity and place, to keep together in times of lived calamity.¹⁸ Grounding here affords a methodological approach that refuses to separate concepts from their material conditions of emergence, and in this way allows for new attention to the “contingent practice” of worlding at play in such collective relations to climate change (Haraway, 1997: 113).¹⁹

The mountain Turubó acts as an emblem for the organization. Today, this mountain serves as a religious sanctuary, home to the Gruta de la Virgen del Carmen at its summit that is locally known as Monte Carmelo. Each July 16th, pilgrims visit the site, often combining the journey with the harvesting of *coca camba*, an herb used in baked goods. The name Turubó, meaning “solitary” in Chiquitano, is said to refer to a mythic titan—neither divine nor mortal—who tried to lift the earth until

he reached the gods with whom he sought to be equal. One god, the God of childhood, sent a snake to bite his thigh as punishment. And although he died on the spot, his name was given to (came to “baptize”) the mountain he raised beside the people of San José de Chiquitos (see Pica Bolivia, 2021). While this story might warn against human hubris, it also honors perseverance and steadfastness. As interpreted by Turubó’s sub-president, discussed above, “solitary” does not imply isolation but rather a unified, enduring project. In fact, as another staff member explained to me in September 2025, the coupling of Turubó to a single party is explicitly “forbidden by our charter.” This, according to the staff member, is what had allowed the organization to weather the political ups and downs of dictatorship, socialism, and now whatever Bolivia’s October run-off election will bring.²⁰

This highlights how Turubó staff embed their wildfire responses within an emically grounded vision of Indigenous solidarity that resists political divisiveness and emphasizes imperfect alliances. Hence if environmental narratives “reconstruct the witness as subject, while foreclosing other subjectivities” (Vaughn and Fisher, 2021: 390), what modes of perception might withstand such translation? At Turubó, crafting response-ability under such conditions is not neutral or risk-free, but rather requires navigating hierarchies, imperfect allies, or even “oddkin” (Haraway, 2016: 2). Emergent solidarities like these refute the racialized distributions of life and death long yoked to fire as a project of reform, transformation, and uplift. By refusing to treat climate change as a single-issue politics, Turubó organizers disrupt the co-optation of conservationism within a polarized nationalist milieu (Loayza Bueno et al., 2022). These alliances challenge the framing of ‘climate’ as a problem of Nature alone, instead situating the wildfires within earlier Indigenous land dispossession, continued economic marginality, and governmental neglect. By contrast, indifference to these historical, and deeply racialized, dimensions of wildfires lead to what Benito called an “empty” discourse about the fires.²¹

These inter-Indigenous alliances that Turubó cultivates disrupt dominant portrayals of the Chiquitos region as disordered, anomic, and backward, depictions circulated by Bolivian environmental NGOs. Like the fantasy of the “Old West,” La Chiquitania is often cast as a place of lawlessness in need of order. In a 2024 interview, NGO director Gonzalo Colque described the area as a chaotic frontier where agricultural companies, cattle ranchers, and “peasant” (highland-to-lowland) migrants “chaotically coexist in a territorial place plagued by illegalities,” likening it to the American “Old West” where “adventurers, outlaws, migrants of all stripes, and fugitives of the law settle accounts in death duels” (El País, Sept 13, 2024). Such accounts criminalize fire and cast local inhabitants as unruly and blameworthy. What Bachelard (1977) famously termed fire’s “psychoanalytic complex” here becomes a political strategy of erasure: by associating fire with primitiveness, mystery, and self-inflicted destruction, urban Cruzeño elites and opposition party politicians escape accounting for their own uneven complicities in generating the conditions for these fires.

Turubó’s carefully crafted alliances rewrite this settler-colonial story about Chiquitos, highlighting relations there as structured by uneven solidarities rather than anomie. Historically, this region has been a place of intercultural transmission, from its role in the Jesuit Missions (est. 1697) to its position as a point of entry for those fleeing Portuguese colonial rule in Brazil. Escaped slaves, state defectors, bandits, and Indigenous subjects avoiding tribute duties once mingled here (Martínez, 2018). This history of fugitivity and marginality resurfaces in contemporary media accounts, with figures like Colque invoking the

¹⁷ A 2025 report found that over 90% of Indigenous families in the San José de Chiquitos region experience food insecurity, and many face additional challenges related to income, migration, and access to basic services (Vargas, Méndez and Benavides 2025).

¹⁸ As a hinge for facilitating relationships across organizations and collectivities, Turubó’s work expands environmentalist portrayals of Indigenous people as helpless victims of unrelenting devastation or as saviors whose alterity offers escape from self-devouring capital. On romanticized Indigeneity, see Cusi-canqui 2012, Kauanui 2017, Mayanthi Fernando 2017, and Winchell 2023.

¹⁹ This is not simply a call for positionality against objectivism; it is rather a way to attend to how material worlds impinge upon while also generating the conditions of emergence for concepts (Winchell, 2019; Diamanti, 2021; Haraway, 1997:113).

²⁰ As elsewhere, this is a project of Indigenous sovereignty that recognizes entanglements with non-Indigenous organizations and governments as sources of power rather than weakness (Dennison 2017).

²¹ In fact, agro-industrial and political elites in Brazil and Bolivia often invoked the supposed ‘naturalness’ of wildfires to deflect scrutiny and avoid accountability (Campbell 2021).



Figs. 11 and 12. Turubó mountain is visible to the east of San José de Chiquitos (Sept 2024). Turubó figurehead: the nearby mountain and its founding date 1989 (Sept 2024).

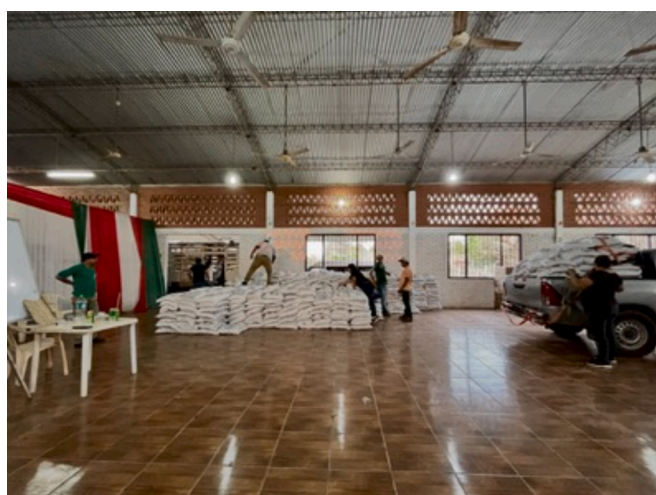


Fig. 13. End of a long day of transporting emergency food aid at Turubó (Sept 2024).

familiar trope of the “Wild West” and portraying wildfires as opaque and uncontrollable. Yet such narratives obscure what many recognize as an open secret: agro-industrial expansion relies on fire as an extractive tool, often wielded by precarious newcomers. Turubó’s engagements name these causes directly, rejecting fugitive chaos in favor of a diagnosis of the multiple sources of marginality and of possible action. As Turubó’s work reveals, it is reductive to characterize these lives solely through sacrifice or necropolitics; despite being placed in harm’s way, this is a place where life unfolds in and with fire.

5. Concluding thoughts: resisting the allure of the unpeopled map

The Chiquitania wildfires offer points of revelation about a history of dispossession but also instruct us in other methodologies that ground our environmental analyses of climate change in the lived experiences of sensing bodies in place, and history. Fires, despite incinerating their originary causes, carry sensory archives (Zografos, 2019; cf. Savage, 2012). This article proposes that our analyses learn from a method of

grounding in order to de-ontologize our theoretical concepts. Doing so unsettles the claim that climate change is equally borne; wildfires are amalgams of overlaid histories whose storying in place continue to divide the saved from the damned, sites of (future) vitality from zones of sacrifice. Situating the wildfires’ vulnerabilities squarely in the sphere of mestizo and settler colonial history and geopolitics, organizers at Turubó contest the refusals of responsibility enabled by a language of climate change alone, one that posits a generalized Anthropos as culprit and an ahistorical nature as victim.

As we have seen, in La Chiquitania, wildfires emerge from extractive histories that convert dry forests into capital—grazing land, property, meat, carbon, timber, and soy. In fact, firefighters report that deforested land feeds a growing charcoal market, linking burnt landscapes directly to carbon monoxide emissions, as shown in a map published days after Bolivia declared a national emergency [Fig. 14]. These fires transform forests into property and wood into carbon, generating profit for some while deepening harm for others. Yet we would be mistaken to see wildfires only through the tempting allure of this carbon map, which after all erases people (and the transnational beneficiaries of these extractive processes) from the portrait of a region going up in flames. This erasure overlooks a key set of differentiations, including enduring divisions between those who benefit and those who must be put in harm’s way for life in other places to retain the guise of normalcy without interruption while others confront proliferating violence from climate change (Heron, 2023).

Struggling against the map’s seduction—its image of an unpeopled continent bleeding smoke—this article has foregrounded the erasures embedded in Anthropocenic visions of a shared humanity weathering a civilizational crisis (Whyte, 2021; Ghosh 2016; Yusoff, 2016). Taking seriously these violently unequal distributions of harm and hope demands vigilance: our methodologies must not replicate fantasies of sameness. Climate change is global, yes—but our interpretive tools, like the carbon monoxide map, risk obscuring the uneven burdens borne by communities like those in La Chiquitania. Residents of Indigenous villages like Dolores breathe smoke and live the water shortages generated by earlier waves of successive land encroachment, new incursions from “intercultural” others, Criollo agriculturalists and expanding Mennonite farms, and ever more devastating water shortages and fire seasons. Despite this, the organization does not close itself off to alliances and aid work with such others. In San José de Chiquitos in September 2024, the scent of orchids after the first rain is masked by smoke. A child’s first

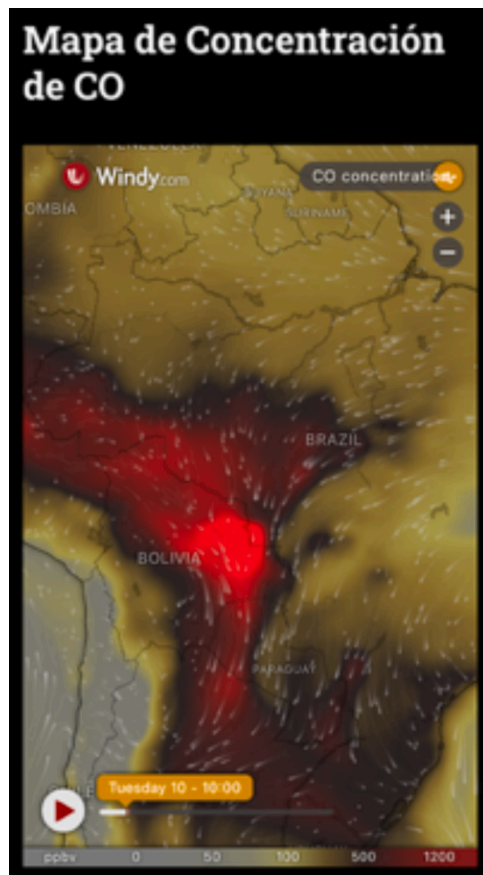


Fig. 14. Carbon monoxide emission map, published in the Bolivian newspaper *El Deber*. Sept 11th, 2024 (Author screenshot).

birthday is spent on a hand-held oxygen ventilator. Heads ache, lungs cough, eyes water; smoke settles on lips, tongues, teeth. Children fall ill from contaminated water. A methodological shift from shared *climate affect* to one of *grounding fire* in place-based commitments can offer urgent attention to the disparities—but also imperfect alliances—of burning worlds.

CRedit authorship contribution statement

Mareike Winchell: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Methodology, Investigation, Data curation, Conceptualization.

Declaration of competing interest

The author declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Acknowledgements

This article builds from ongoing collaborative research with the Center for Indigenous Peoples of Chiquitos Turubó, as well as fieldwork with state forestry officials, park rangers, firefighters, and affected citizens and residents of San José de Chiquitos and surrounding towns and villages. I am immensely grateful to President Carlos Alba and Vice-President Zora Taborga of Turubó, whose support has allowed me great insight into the important work of this organization in advocating for Indigenous Chiquitano peoples. Before them, President Benito Augilar and Dania Masabi graciously accepted my proposal to build a research project with the Center. I would also like to thank staff at the

Ranger Center of Santa Cruz la Vieja park for their assistance learning about the Chiquitano dry forests and the threats these forests face today. In San José de Chiquitos, I would like to thank Aidee Ortiz and Johan Espinoza Mader for their immense generosity and assistance in coordinating early fieldwork days and for welcoming me into their family. Zora Taborga, Claudia Ochoa, and Luis Moreno Ramos have made San Jose begin to feel a bit more like home. This article has benefited from insightful questions and comments from audiences at the University of California Berkeley, Universidad de los Andes, University of Cambridge, Goldsmiths University, University of Edinburgh, University College London, University of California Los Angeles, St. Gallen University, and Colby College's Summer Institute for Environmental Humanities. Additionally, I would like to thank Stefania Pandolfo for her suggestion that fire's criminalization be linked to histories of the Protestant Reformation stigmatization of burnt offerings, Susana Hecht's insistence that wildfires be placed within a longer history of land use change in the Amazon, and Natalia Buitron's suggestion that I take seriously the forms of Indigenous dispossession enabled by state land titling in the region. I owe a special thanks to Marisol de la Cadena for insisting that I think with the specificity of *incendio*. Over the years, this work has benefitted enormously from conversations, seminars, and workshops about wildfires with Andrew Mathews, Adriana Petryna, Stine Krøijer, Jordan Thomas, Jessica Carey-Webb, and Daniel Fisher.

Data availability

The data that has been used is confidential.

References

- Andrada, D. (2022). El chequeo de la opinión pública. In *Mediaciones de la Comunicación* 17(2).
- Aníbarro, R., Húascar Azurduey, O.M. & Markos, A. 2019. Diagnóstico por teledetección de áreas quemadas en la Chiquitanía. Fundación para la Conservación del Bosque Chiquitano (FCBC).
- Bachelard, Gaston. 1977. *The Psychoanalysis of Fire*, Alan C. M. Ross, trans. Boston: Beacon Press.
- Baldi, G., Houspanossian, J., Murray, F., Rosales, A.A., Rueda, C.V., Jobbágy, E.G., 2015. Cultivating the dry forests of South America: Diversity of land users and imprints on ecosystem functioning. *J. Arid Environ.* 123, 47–59. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jaridenv.2014.05.027>.
- Barié, C.G., Zuazo, M., 2022. Plurinational state and ecological conscience in Bolivia. *Eur. Rev. Latin Am. Caribbean Studies* 114, 89–114. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2307/48712110>.
- Barreto Filho, Henyo Trindade. 2021. Amazon Forest Peoples and the Deadly Synergistic Effects of the Pandemic. *Cultural Anthropology Hotspots*. <https://culanth.org/fieldsights/a-tale-of-ruination-amazon-forest-peoples-and-the-deadly-synergistic-effects-of-the-pandemic>.
- Barrientos, M.R., 2020. Bolivia, ocaso del 'proceso de cambio'. *Política Exterior* 34 (193), 126–137. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2307/27197283>.
- Blaser, M., 2025. *For Emplacement: Political Ontology in Two Acts*. Duke University Press, Durham.
- Bluwstein, J., De Rosa, P., 2024. Political ecologies of the future: Introduction to the special issue. *Geoforum* 153. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.geoforum.2024.104023>.
- Bolivia, 2019. Human Rights Report. US Department of State. Electronic resource: <https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/BOLIVIA-2019-HUMAN-RIGHTS-REPORT.pdf>.
- Boston Globe, Bolivia's Amazon is Burning, July 17, 2023. <https://www.bostonglobe.com/2023/07/17/opinion/bolivia-amazon-is-burning/>.
- Burman, A., 2022. A taste for ecology: class, coloniality, and the rise of a Bolivian urban environmental movement. *Lat. Am. Caribb. Ethn. Stud.* 17 (2), 193–218. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17442222.2021.1918841>.
- Campbell, Jeremy M. 2021. Fire, Property, and Anti-Indigenous Policies in Brazil. *Cultural Anthropology Hotspots*. <https://culanth.org/fieldsights/fire-property-and-anti-indigenous-policies-in-brazil>.
- Carroll, C., 2014. Native Enclosures: Tribal National Parks and the progressive politics of Environmental Stewardship in Indian Country. *Geoforum* 53, 31–40.
- CEDIB (2020). DOSSIER #1: LOS INCENDIOS EN LA CHIQUITANIA 2019. POLÍTICAS DEVASTADORAS, ACCIONES IRRESPONSABLES Y NEGLIGENCIA GUBERNAMENTAL. https://www.cedib.org/biblioteca/dossier_1_los_incendios_en_la_chiquitania_2019_politicas_devastadoras_acciones_irresponsables_y_negligencia_gubernamental/.
- Colque, G. (ed.). (2019). *Fuego en Santa Cruz: Balance de los incendios forestales 2019 y su relación con la tenencia de la tierra*. Fundación Tierra.
- Colque, C. (2019, October 20). Fuego en Santa Cruz: cifras, causas y consecuencias. Fundación Tierra. <https://ftierra.org/index.php?view=article&id=927:fuego-en-santa-cruz-cifras-causas-y-co>.

- Combés, Isabelle and Diego Villar. 2012. Las tierras bajas de Bolivia: miradas históricas y antropológicas. Santa Cruz de la Sierra: El País - Museo de Historia UAGRM.
- Cusicanqui, S.R., 2012. Ch'ixinakax utxiwa: A Reflection on the Practices and Discourses of Decolonization. *South Atlantic Quarterly* 111 (1), 95–109.
- Davis, H., Todd, Z., 2020. On the importance of a date, or decolonizing the Anthropocene. *ACME* 16 (4), 761–780.
- Dennison, J., 2017. Entangled sovereignties: The Osage Nation's interconnections with governmental and corporate authorities. *American Ethnologist* 44 (4), 684–696.
- Diamanti, J., 2021. *Climate and Capital in the Age of Petroleum*. Bloomsbury Press.
- Dorn, F.M., 2022. Green colonialism in Latin America? Towards a new research agenda for the global energy transition. *Eur. Rev. Latin American Caribbean Stud.* 114, 137–146.
- El Deber, 2024. Arce retorna a La Paz y deja a 9 ministerios al mando en la lucha contra los incendios. Sept 13, 2024. <https://eldeber.com.bo/pais/arce-retorna-a-la-paz-y-deja-a-9-ministerios-al-mando-en-la-lucha-contra-los-incendios-384667>.
- El Deber, Gobierno propone elevar penas por quemar y crear delito de 'incendio forestal', Sept 11, 2024. <https://elpais.com/america/2024-09-13/bolivia-lucha-contra-mas-de-3000-focos-de-incendio-y-suspende-las-quemas-controladas-de-tierras.html> Accessed 9/13/2024.
- El País, August 21 2024. "Más de dos millones de hectáreas de campos y bosques se queman en Bolivia en dos meses." <https://elpais.com/america/2024-08-21/mas-de-dos-millones-de-hectareas-de-campos-y-bosques-se-queman-en-bolivia-en-dos-meses.html>.
- El País, 2024. Bolivia lucha contra más de 3.000 focos de incendio y suspende las quemas controladas de tierras. September 13th, 2024. <https://elpais.com/america/2024-09-13/bolivia-lucha-contra-mas-de-3000-focos-de-incendio-y-suspende-las-quemas-controladas-de-tierras.html>.
- EPA (United States Environmental protection Agency). 2025. "Carbon Dioxide Emissions." <https://www.epa.gov/ghgemissions/carbon-dioxide-emissions>.
- Farthing, L. & Becker, T. (2021). COUP. (1st Ed.). Haymarket Books.
- Fowler, C.R., 2013. *Ignition Stories: Indigenous Fire Ecology in the Indo-Australian Monsoon Zone*. Carolina Academic Press.
- Fowler, C.T., Welch, J.R., 2018. *Fire Otherwise: Ethnobiology of burning for a changing World*. University of Utah Press.
- Fundación Tierra. 2020. "El TIDN resuelve que los incendios del 2019 fueron un Ecocidio ocasionado por la política de Estado y el agronegocio." <https://www.ftierra.org/>.
- Gilbert, D.E., Greenleaf, M., 2021. Introduction: Earth Aflame. *Cultural Anthropology*. Hotspots. <https://culanth.org/fieldsights/introduction-earth-aflame>.
- Gordillo, G., 2014. *Rubble: the Afterlife of Destruction*. Duke University Press.
- Green, L., 2020. Rock | Water | Life: Ecology and Humanites for a Decolonial South Africa. Duke University Press.
- Haraway, D., 1997. enlightenment@ science_wars. com: A Personal Reflection on Love and War. *Social Text* 50, 123–129.
- Haraway, D.J., 2015. Anthropocene, capitalocene, plantationocene, chthulucene: making Kin. *Environmental Humanities* 6 (1), 159–165.
- Haraway, D.J., 2016. *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*. Duke University Press, Durham, NC.
- Hecht, G., 2018. Interscalar vehicles for an african anthropocene: on waste, temporality, and violence. *Cult. Anthropol.* 33 (1), 109–141. <https://doi.org/10.14506/ca33.1.05>.
- Hecht, S., 2020. Why the Brazilian amazon burns. *Current History* 119 (814), 60–65.
- Hecht, S., Cockburn, A., 2010. *The Fate of the Forest: developers, Destroyers, and defenders of the Amazon*. The University of Chicago Press.
- Heron, K., 2023. Capitalist catastrophism and eco-apartheid. *Geoforum* 153. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.geoforum.2023.103874>.
- Hirsland, A.S., Strijbis, O., 2019. 'We were forgotten': explaining ethnic voting in Bolivia's highlands and lowlands. *J. Ethn. Migr. Stud.* 45 (11), 2006–2025. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2018.1492371>.
- ICOMOS, 1989. International Council on Monuments and Sites. *Jesuit Missions of Chiquitos*. Advisory Body Evaluation No. 529. UNESCO.
- International Model Forest Network. 2019. "Chiquitano Model Forest." <https://imfn.net/regional-networks/chiquitano-model-forest/>.
- International Working Group for Indigenous Affairs (IWGIA), 2019. Beyond Brazil: Who Benefits from the Wildfires in Bolivia's Amazon? Electronic resource. Accessed July 2025.
- Kauanui, J.K., 2017. Sovereignty: An Introduction. *Cultural Anthropology* 32 (3), 323–329.
- Kennard, D.K., 2002. Secondary forest succession in a tropical dry forest: patterns of development across a 50-year chronosequence in lowland Bolivia. *J. Trop. Ecol.* 18, 55–66.
- Killeen, T.J., Guerra, A., Calzada, M., Correa, L., Calderon, V., Soria, L., Quezada, B., Steininger, M.K., 2008. Total historical land-use change in eastern Bolivia: who, where, when, and how much? *Ecol. Soc.* 13 (1), 36. <http://www.ecologyandsociety.org/vol13/iss1/art36/>.
- Kim, J., Lee, S.-O., 2024. Fragmented, materialized, militarized geopolitics of wildfires in the inter-korean border. *Geoforum* 155. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.geoforum.2024.104077>.
- Latour, B., 2017. *Facing Gaia: Eight Lectures on the New Climatic Regime*. Wiley, New York.
- Liboirn, M., 2021. *Pollution is Colonialism*. Duke University Press.
- Libonati, R., 2024. Megafires are here to stay-and blaming only climate change won't help. *Nature* 627 (8002), 10–10. <https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-024-00641-4>.
- Lightfoot, K.G., Nelson, P.A., 2021. The eco-archaeological investigation of indigenous stewardship practices on the Santa Cruz Coast. *J. Calif. Gt. Basin Anthropol.* 41 (2), 187–205.
- Loayza Bueno, Rafael, Andrés Martínez Crespo, Salvador Romero Ballivián, Mario Cuba Villarreal, Xavier Murillo Sanchez, and Andrea Mancilla. 2021. *Mediación viral: comunicación política, fake news e información en las elecciones de 2020*. Universidad Católica Boliviana. IDEA Internacional. Plural.
- López-García, D., et al., 2021. Building agroecology with people: challenges of participatory methods to deepen the agroecological transition. *J. Rural. Stud.* 83, 257–267.
- Los Tiempos 2019, October 4. Cabildo cruceño define medidas en defensa del 21F y la Chiquitanía. Aguilar, W. Los Tiempos. <https://www.lostiempos.com/actualidad/pais/20191004/cabildo-cruceno-define-medidas-defensa-del-21f-chiquitania>.
- Marder, M., 2014. *Pyropolitics: When the World is Ablaze*. Rowman and Littlefield, London.
- Martínez, C., 2018. La más pobre entre los pobres. Para una crítica de los estudios sobre la Chiquitanía (oriente boliviano). *Rev. Antropol.* 61 (1), 298–328.
- Masco, Joseph. 2017. The Crisis in Crisis. *Current Anthropology* 58(S15). <https://www.journals.uchicago.edu/doi/full/10.1086/688695>.
- Mathews, Andrew. 2021. Wildfires and Ghosts: Pathogen Epidemics and Agricultural Abandonment in Italy. *Cultural Anthropology Hotspots*. <https://culanth.org/fieldsights/wildfires-and-ghosts-pathogen-epidemics-and-agricultural-abandonment-in-italy>.
- Mautner, Marina and Marisa Escobar. 2022. Chiquitanía rural water supply: Considering decentralized water infrastructure and land use change in hydrologic analysis. Stockholm Environmental Institute. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep39738>.
- McDaniel, J., 2002. Confronting the structure of international development: political agency and the chiquitanos of Bolivia. *Hum. Ecol.* 30 (3), 369–396.
- McKay, B.M., 2017. Agrarian Extractivism in Bolivia. *World Dev.* 97, 199–211. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.worlddev.2017.04.007>.
- McKay, Ben M., Gonzalo Colque. 2022. Dinámicas extractivas en el sector agrario de Bolivia. In *Extractivismo agrario en América Latina*. CLACSO.
- Mendoza, M., 2023. Bolivian settlers and Toba peoples: appropriation of Indigenous lands on the Chaco Plains in the 1800s. *Historical Encounters* 10 (2), 38–51.
- Mistry, J., Bilbao, B.A., Birardi, A., 2016. Community owned solutions for fire management in tropical ecosystems: case study from indigenous communities of South America. *Philos. Trans.: Biol. Sci.* 371 (1696), 1–10. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/24768805>.
- Mombiola, Anna Guiteras. 2011. A propósito de las leyes bolivianas de colonización de tierras baldías: La construcción de la Sociedad beniana y el avance de la frontera interna (1880-1920). In *El Estado en América Latina: recursos e imaginarios, siglos XIX–XXI*, edited by P. García Jordán.
- Müller, Robert, Pablo Pacheco, and Juan Carlos Montero. 2014. The context of deforestation and forest degradation in Bolivia. Center for International Forestry Research. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep02226.9>.
- Neale, T., Zahara, A., Smith, W., 2019. An Eternal Flame: the Elemental Governance of Wildfire's Pasts, Presents and futures. *Cult. Stud. Rev.* 25 (2), 115–134.
- Ormachea, E. (2021, September 10). Interculturales y tierras bajas: ¿quiénes son y qué buscan? Erbol. <https://erbol.com.bo/opinion/interculturales-y-tierras-bajas-%C2%BFqui%C3%A9nes-son-y-qu%C3%A9-buscan>.
- Otero, I., Nielsen, J.Ø., 2017. Coexisting with wildfire? Achievements and challenges for a radical social-ecological transformation in Catalonia (Spain). *Geoforum* 85, 234–246.
- Petryna, A., 2022. *Horizon Work: At the Edges of Knowledge in an Age of Runaway climate Change*. Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ.
- Pica Bolivia. December 8th 2021. Facebook video "Leyenda del Turúbo—Leyenda de los Montañas." Electronic resource.
- Reuters 2024. Continent Ablaze: South America Surpasses Record Fires. September 12, 2024. <https://www.reuters.com/world/americas/continent-ablaze-south-america-surpasses-record-fires-2024-09-12/>.
- Richardson, T., Wesszkalns, G., 2014. Introduction: resource materialities. *Anthropol. Q.* 87 (1), 5–30.
- Robbin, F.-N., Mimbrenro, M.R., Kim, Y.-S., 2021. Fire\$, or the economics of wildfires: State of play and new contributions. *Forest Policy Econ.* 133. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.forpol.2021.102610>.
- Rodríguez, I., Inturias, M., Masay, E., Peña, A., 2023. Decolonizing wildfire risk management: indigenous responses to fire criminalization policies and increasingly flammable forest landscapes in Lomerío, Bolivia. *Environ. Sci. Policy* 147, 103–115.
- Savage, C., 2012. *A Geography of Blood: Unearthing Memory from a Prairie Landscape*. Greystone Books, Vancouver.
- Schulte, E. (2023, September 6). Agribusiness giant Cargill is in activists' crosshairs for its connections to deforestation in Bolivia - Inside Climate News. Inside Climate News. <https://insideclimatenews.org/news/06092023/agribusiness-giant-cargill-is-in-activists-crosshairs-for-its-connections-to-deforestation-in-bolivia/>.
- Sorenson, C., 2009. Potential hazards of land policy: conservation, rural development and fire use in the Brazilian Amazon. *Land Use Policy* 26 (3), 782–791.
- Stephens, S.L., Burrows, N., Buyantuyev, A., Gray, R.W., Keane, R.E., Kubian, R., Liu, S., Seijo, F., Shu, L., Tolhurst, K.G., van Wagendonk, J.W., 2014. Temperate and boreal forest mega-fires: characteristics and challenges. *Front. Ecology Environ.* 12, 115–122.
- Sutherland R.C. 2018. Remembering and Igniting Fires: Prescribed Burning as Memory Work. RCC Perspectives. Rachel Carson Center. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2307/26511169>.
- Telma Zmorio, Miriam. 2019. Bolivia's forest fires and the rise of beef exports. Dialogue Earth. Electronic resource; <https://dialogue.earth/en/forests/29875-bolivia-for-est-fires-and-the-rise-of-beef-exports/> Accessed July 2nd, 2025.
- The Guardian Oct 13 2019. Youkee, M. Bolivia president feels election heat amid anger over wildfires. The Guardian. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/oct/11/bolivia-president-feels-election-heat-amid-anger-wildfires-evo-morales>.

- Tockman, J., Cameron, J., Plata, W., 2015. New institutions of self-governance in Bolivia: between autonomy and self-discipline. *Lat. Am. Caribb. Ethn. Stud.* 10 (1), 37–59.
- Todd, Z., 2015. Indigenizing the anthropocene. In: Davis, H., Turpin, E. (Eds.), *Art in the Anthropocene: Encounters among Aesthetics, Politics, Environment, and Epistemology*. Open Humanities Press, London, pp. 241–254.
- Tsing, A., Bubandt, N., Gan, E., Swanson, H.A., 2017. *Arts of living on a Damaged Planet: Ghosts and Monsters of the Anthropocene*. University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, MI.
- Twidwell, D., Allen, C.R., Detweiler, C., Higgins, J., Larney, C., Elbaum, S., 2016. Smokey comes of age: unmanned aerial systems for fire management. *Front. Ecol. Environ.* 14 (6), 333–339.
- United Nations, 2022. Spreading like Wildfire: The Rising Threat of Extraordinary Landscape Fires. Report <https://www.unep.org/resources/report/spreading-wildfire-rising-threat-extraordinary-landscape-fires>.
- Vargas, Zorel Gómez, Mónica Mariscal Méndez, and Jean Paul Benavides. 2025. "Compendio Socio-económico productivo de comunidades indígenas Chiquitanas e Interculturales del Municipio de San José de Chiquitos." Universidad Católica Boliviana & IISEC.
- Vaughn, S., Fisher, D., 2021. Witnessing Environments. *HAU: J. Ethnographic Theory* 11 (2), 387–394.
- Vidal-Riveros, C., Souza-Alonso, P., Bravo, S., Laino, R., Bieng, M.A.N., 2023. Review of wildfires effects across the Gran Chaco region. *For. Ecol. Manage.* 549, 121–143.
- Weber, K., 2013. "We are all Chiquitano": struggles over territory and sovereignty in lowland Bolivia. *J. Latin Am. Caribbean Anthropol.* 18 (2), 314–336. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jlca.12022>.
- Weber, D., et al., 2019. Are we ready for bushfire? Perceptions of residents, landowners and authorities on lower Eyre Peninsula, South Australia. *Geoforum* 107. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.geoforum.2019.10.006>.
- Whyte, K., 2021. Against Crisis Epistemology. *Handbook of Critical Indigenous Studies*. Edited by A. Moreton-Robinson, L. Tuhiwai-Smith, C. Andersen, and S. Larkin, 52–64. Routledge.
- Wickel, B., Fernandez, J., Escobar, M., 2020. The Chiquitania fires: the role of water resources in forest restoration plans. Stockholm Environmental Institute. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep28406>.
- Winchell, M., 2019. Ética. *Debates do Ner* 2 (36), 191–199. <https://seer.ufrgs.br/debatesdoner/issue/view/3969/showToc>.
- Winchell, M., 2022. *After Servitude: Elusive Property and the Ethics of Kinship in Bolivia*. Univ of California Press. <https://www.ucpress.edu/book/9780520386440/after-servitude>.
- Winchell, M., 2023. Critical ontologies: rethinking relations to other-than-humans from the Bolivian Andes. *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 29 (3), 611–630. <https://rai.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/1467-9655.13962>.
- Winchell, Mareike. In Press. "Disruptive Weather, or Climate and the Nature/s of Racial Justice". In *Habitable Air: Living on the Frontlines of Climate Change*. Edited by Kerry Chance, Berghahn Books.
- Winchell, M., Howe, C., 2024. Unsettling extractivism: Indigeneity, race, and disruptive emplacements. *The Journal of Latin American and Caribbean Anthropology* 29 (3), 201–207. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jlca.12734>.
- WRM (World Rainforest Movement), 2019. Fires and Agribusiness: deforestation drivers in the Bolivian Amazon. Electronic resource. <https://www.wrm.org.uy/bulletin-articles/fires-and-agribusiness-deforestation-drivers-in-the-bolivian-amazon#:~:text=These%20entrepreneurs%20who%20illegally%20cross,our%20culture%20and%20ancestral%20knowledge.%E2%80%9D>. Accessed July 2025.
- Yusoff, K., 2018. *A billion Black Anthropocenes or None*. University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis.
- Zamorano, G., 2020. Indigeneity, race, and the media from the perspective of the 2019 political crisis in Bolivia. *Journal of Latin American Cultural Studies: Travesía* 29 (1), 151–174. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13569325.2020.1785406>.
- Zografos, S., 2019. On Fire. In: *Architecture and Fire: A Psychoanalytic Approach to Conservation*. UCL Press, London.