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## Engaging, Standing, and Stepping Evaluating Anthropological Activism on an Amazonian Petro-Frontier

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**ABSTRACT** | Anthropologists and activists portray the lives and lands of Ecuador's Indigenous Cofán people as a case study of the damage caused by petroleum extraction. Yet during my fieldwork on the issue, I began to question the nature of the Cofán-oil encounter when the community in which I worked decided to allow oil companies onto their land. In this article, I examine my own involvements with Cofán oil politics in dialogue with Stuart Kirsch's concept of 'engaged anthropology' and Kim TallBear's call for researchers to 'stand with' their research subjects. I argue that anthropological activism is necessarily a complex and shifting affair, especially when our collaborators' perspectives diverge from our own regarding the best possible paths to their wellbeing. I suggest that the most ethical option is for anthropologists to commit themselves to continuous, co-constructed partnerships in which they are perpetually prepared to transform their most basic political and intellectual positions.

**Keywords:** Engagement; Activism; Collaboration; Oil; Amazonia

Every anthropologist's career involves ethical dilemmas. The statement is perhaps particularly true for scholars who work with the discipline's traditional subject populations, who live in some of the world's most marginalized, oppressed, and impoverished communities. Since my undergraduate days at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, I have been doing research and activism with the Indigenous Cofán people of Amazonian Ecuador. Recently, two events caused me to question the nature of my work. First, Stuart Kirsch published a review (2019) of my last book, *Life in Oil: Cofán Survival in the Petroleum Fields of Amazonia* (2018). His take was positive, but he concluded that the book offers a 'conservative' portrayal of the anthropologist as an apolitical observer rather than an engaged activist. Second, my colleagues at the University of Texas at San Antonio (UTSA) nominated me for an award for my advocacy on behalf of the Cofán Nation. The simultaneous incidents inspired a profound sense of professional schizophrenia: Am I a detached anthropologist who chooses not to compromise his objectivity with activist commitments or an engaged scholar whose activism is at the very heart of his anthropological approach?

In this article, I explore the ethical and political complexities of anthropological activism by reflecting on my own practice over two and a half decades of involvement with the Cofán Nation. My intention is not to defend my record or sing my praises. I am my own harshest critic, constantly aware of the fact that I could be doing more to promote Cofán welfare and dismantle the hierarchies that enable, sustain, and emerge from my work. And I never forget my colonial position: I am a middle-class, straight, cis-gendered, white man from the Global North who acquired his socio-economic status by publishing works on a people who have been mercilessly exploited for centuries.

Through critical self-analysis, I interrogate the ethical and political aspects of my anthropological practice in dialogue with two proposals: Kirsch's call for 'engaged anthropology' and Kim TallBear's argument for a form of inquiry in which anthropologists 'stand with' their collaborators (2014). Kirsch promotes relatively familiar forms of anthropological activism. TallBear goes further by arguing that anthropologists should put themselves in positions in which their collaborators can alter their most fundamental intellectual, political, and personal commitments.

I begin by providing a deeper discussion of the calls of Kirsch and TallBear. I then offer an account of the forms of activism I have pursued. Finally, I describe a situation in which a Cofán leader fundamentally changed my position regarding one of my central concerns: the relationship between the oil industry and Cofán suffering. I conclude with a set of reflections on some of the ways in which anthropologists can and cannot find success in their attempts to decolonize their research and mitigate its exploitative nature.

### **Engaged Anthropology and 'Standing With'**

In *Engaged Anthropology: Politics beyond the Text* (2018), Stuart Kirsch argues that anthropology must go beyond the discipline's 'writing culture' moment by extending our concerns from the 'politics of representation' to the 'politics of participation.' Such a commitment includes "participation in social movements,

collaborating with activists and nongovernmental organizations, advising lawyers, writing affidavits, and producing expert reports” (Kirsch 2018: 1).

Kirsch acknowledges the criticisms of engaged anthropology, but he does not believe they should dissuade anthropologists from activist commitments. Some critics argue that when anthropologists identify too closely with their collaborators’ projects, their accounts become ‘partial’ representations. In certain cases, engaged anthropologists ignore or misrepresent issues that cast their collaborators in a negative light. In addition, their accounts often fail to acknowledge the tensions within their subjects’ political movements. Consequently, suggests Michael Brown (2014), many engaged anthropologists fall prey to ‘ethnographic refusal.’ They produce simplistic representations that offer little insight to anyone who seeks to understand the actual challenges facing marginalized peoples.

In a related critique, some commentators suggest that when anthropologists explicitly take on activist roles, they portray themselves as the ‘heroes’ of Indigenous struggles, a deeply colonial trope (Cervone 2007: 104–106). Finally, Kirsch acknowledges the fears of anthropologists who worry that if they advocate too intensively for their subjects, powerful actors will discount their studies as biased and untrustworthy. Kirsch refutes the idea, reporting that lawyers have told him that his commitments add legitimacy to the legal documents he produces.

Kirsch’s call for engaged anthropology mirrors a long history of anthropological activism. Thirty years before Kirsch published his book, the Amazonianist Robin Wright made many of the same points in *Anthropological Presuppositions of Indigenous Advocacy* (1988). Wright, too, argues that anthropologists can support Indigenous peoples by collaborating with lawyers on legal cases, by creating fora for Indigenous representatives to air their grievances and make their demands, and by publicizing the challenges and proposals of Indigenous communities. It was largely the work of Wright and other Amazonianists that formed my understanding of anthropological activism in the mid-1990s, when I decided to pursue a doctorate in the discipline. Of particular importance was Bruce Albert’s declaration that ethnographers of Indigenous Amazonia can no longer do ‘participant observation’ but must commit themselves to ‘observant participation’ instead (Albert 1997).

In *Standing with and Speaking as Faith: A Feminist-Indigenous Approach to Inquiry* (2014), Kim TallBear acknowledges the kinds of support Kirsch advocates, but she pushes them further. For her, any form of engagement that maintains the researcher-researched divide is a colonial affair. Instead, she suggests that anthropologists should work “to seek out and articulate overlapping respective intellectual, ethical, and institution building projects ... to share goals and desires while staying engaged in critical conversation and producing new knowledge and insights” (TallBear 2014: 1–2). Central to TallBear’s proposal is the notion of ‘standing with’ one’s collaborators. As she writes, “A researcher who is willing to learn how to ‘stand with’ a community of subjects is willing to be altered, to revise her stakes in the knowledge to be produced” (TallBear 2014: 2).

Standing with one's subjects is about negotiating a form of research in which our collaborators can change our deepest commitments. Such a relationship demands relating to our subjects as true colleagues and building shared social worlds with them in which we invest our political, scholarly, and emotional energies. In articulating such a form of involvement, TallBear turns to feminist ideas on how we can make 'care' central to our practice. Citing Donna Haraway (1991), TallBear advocates the creation of projects in which we become 'invested moral agents' in our collaborators' lives. If we want to transcend the colonial nature of our work, TallBear argues, we should seek such projects out and commit ourselves to them with the expectation of our transformation. TallBear echoes Neferti Tadiar's assertion (2001) that researchers must attend to the mutual enmeshment of their subjects, their studies, and themselves. In TallBear's words, we should further "the claims of a people while refusing to be excised from that people by some imperialistic, naïve notion of perfect representation" (TallBear 2014: 4).

Some of TallBear's ideas resonate with earlier works, such as Faye Harrison's classic introduction to *Decolonizing Anthropology* (1991). Harrison, like Tallbear, focuses on necessary transformations in the knowledge-production process. She identifies a set of steps to empower our collaborators and limit our authority: treating 'native anthropologists' as theoretical and ethnographic contributors rather than glorified research assistants; co-authoring and co-editing works with them; and doing public anthropology by writing in a straightforward manner, publishing in our collaborators' languages, and sharing our research in non-textual forms, especially film, which can reach broader audiences than written works.

Kirsch and TallBear advocate an anthropology in which 'engagement' is a commitment within and beyond the text-production process. It means supporting the struggles of our collaborators through political aid. It means co-constructing projects in which our subjects act as ethnographic and theoretical authorities as we work with them to produce accounts that travel beyond small academic circles. And it means true personal investment: a deep transformation of our lives such that we do not unilaterally control our work or even our intellectual, political, and personal positions.

### **A History of Engagement in Amazonian Ecuador**

I came to anthropology through activism. After reading *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee* (Brown 1970) in high school and taking a class on the peoples of South America taught by Enrique Mayer my first year at Illinois, I learned that the processes that had brought many of the United States' native peoples to the brink of disappearance in the 1800s are still occurring in Amazonia. I quickly became president of the Illinois Rainforest Action Group, a chapter of the Rainforest Action Network. In alliance with tropical forest peoples, I led campaigns, coordinated boycotts, gave public lectures, and organized protests. Through this work, I learned about the transnational oil companies that were destroying Cofán territory and devastating Cofán health.

I heard about one Cofán community that had successfully removed oil companies from their land. I wanted to understand how they did it, so I spent the

first semester of my junior year in Ecuador interviewing Cofán activists and allies about their accomplishment. The Cofán leader who coordinated the action ended our interview with a harsh critique of anthropology. He condemned anthropologists' record of exploiting Indigenous peoples as data resources and abandoning them once we secure a degree or job. The conversation had a profound impact on me. I decided that if I wanted to work with Cofán people as an anthropologist, my commitment to them had to be lifelong.

After I graduated from Illinois, I began an internship with the Indigenous support group Cultural Survival. While there, I created a global database of Indigenous peoples' organizations and devised a curriculum for high school teachers on conflicts between Indigenous peoples and oil companies. I also met Terence Turner, an anthropologist at the University of Chicago who was an Indigenous rights activist working in Amazonian Brazil. On the basis of our conversation, I decided to pursue my doctorate at Chicago with Turner and Manuela Carneiro da Cunha, a Brazilian anthropologist who is also a committed Amazonianist activist.

My dissertation explored how Cofán people mobilized to protect their way of life by forming partnerships with academic institutions, international scientists, and global conservation organizations. Its focus was the Fundación Sobrevivencia Cofán (FSC), a Cofán-managed Ecuadorian NGO. While living and working with FSC staff for two years, I learned about their struggles and helped them confront them. I wrote grants on behalf of the FSC and accompanied its employees to meetings with government officials, NGO representatives, and donor institutions. I sometimes acted as a translator for Cofán activists, whose main means of communication is A'ingae, a linguistic isolate. After beginning my professorship at UTSA, I published a book on the FSC's work (Cepek 2012). I intended it to share the lessons the Cofán had learned with a readership that included Indigenous activists, Indigenous-rights supporters, policymakers, and environmental organizations.

While in Chicago, I began to work with the Field Museum of Natural History. From 2007 to 2017, I served as an Action Fellow in the museum's program for Science Action for Community & Conservation. With the museum's support, I travelled to the Cofán homeland to work on territorial legalization efforts, community conservation programs, and collaborative research projects, some of which led to peer-reviewed articles co-authored by Cofán people (Townsend et al. 2005). I also became coordinator of the museum-supported Cofán Historical Mapping Project, an effort I devised with Cofán collaborators. The project aimed to document Cofán territorial history, to train a group of Cofán activists in research and media-production techniques, and to develop educational and political materials. The materials include a large-scale map of Cofán territorial claims and an A'ingae-language film on Cofán territory-related oral histories.

I have engaged in smaller-scale advocacy efforts as well. In 2017, I received an Engaged Anthropology Grant from the Wenner-Gren Foundation to help Cofán people create a written protocol that they can use to negotiate just, equitable, and transparent research partnerships with non-Cofán scholars. The same year, I began working with Cofán student Hugo Lucitante at Brown University on the Cofán Heritage Project, which aims to make Cofán-related historical

and cultural materials available online. Hugo and I are now in conversation with Brown librarians to help Cofán people create a digital archive of their cultural resources, including my ethnographic data, that they will be able to access and eventually control.

I also write expert reports and amicus briefs for legal cases involving the Cofán. One was for a case at the International Court of Justice that sought relief for Indigenous Ecuadorians whose health and land were under threat because of the aerial fumigation of coca crops along the Ecuadorian-Colombian border; another was for an Ecuadorian lawsuit to stop industrial mining in Cofán territory. I donate all payments and royalties from my writings to Cofán communities and organizations—more than \$7,000 to date.

Perhaps most significantly, in 2017 I was elected as President of the Board of the Cofán Survival Fund (CSF). The CSF is a U.S. 501(c)(3) nonprofit whose sole mission is to raise funds to support the FSC's work in Ecuador. As CSF President, I coordinate fundraising, manage the CSF's social-media presence, and report on Cofán challenges and accomplishments to CSF supporters. One of my main goals was to bring Cofán representatives onto the board. Last year, I recruited two of them to make sure the CSF's work reflects Cofán perspectives and aspirations.

As an academic, I am deeply committed to public scholarship. I strive to make many of my publications comprehensible for non-academic audiences by writing clearly and avoiding the 'gatekeeper' function of excessive theorizing (Lutz 1995). No matter how readable my texts are, however, I know that other media are more accessible. For this reason, I have helped Indigenous and non-Indigenous filmmakers to teach the world about the Cofán's struggles by producing documentaries, including *When Worlds Collide* (National Geographic Channel 2003), *A'i: Guardians of the Forest* (The Nature Conservancy/Zhigoneshi Collective Group 2011), and *Oil & Water* (Stir It Up! Productions 2014). I am now collaborating with Ecuadorian filmmaker Veronica Moscoso on a new documentary about Cofán leader Randy Borman.

There are three other forms of public scholarship I have produced. First, I have worked on articles for the popular press, such as a Pacific Standard story with photographer Roberto 'Bear' Guerra on oil operations in Cofán territory (2017). Second, I have arranged public speaking events in the U.S. and Ecuador. At UTSA, I organized a screening and discussion of *Oil & Water* and brought Hugo Lucitante and the film's director for the occasion. Finally, I am working with Guerra to organize photo exhibits and community meetings in the U.S. and Ecuador concerning local responses to oil-industry contamination.

As part of my research, I have trained numerous Cofán collaborators in anthropological methods. Five of them worked with me on the Cofán Historical Mapping Project, through which they learned semi-structured interviewing, audio- and video-recording, film editing, and the basics of collecting GPS points and composing maps with them. Martin Criollo, a true partner in my research on oil, graduated with an anthropology degree after the study ended and began coordinating his own academic and activist projects. Hugo Lucitante and his wife Sadie Lucitante helped me conduct the fieldwork for the ethical research protocol

in 2017. Together, we interviewed residents, conducted meetings, wrote the draft protocol, and translated it from A'ingae into Spanish and English.

After the release of *Oil & Water*, which aired on PBS and won multiple awards, I wrote letters of recommendation to help Hugo and Sadie receive full-ride scholarships to Brown University. When they graduated in 2019, I advocated for UTSA to provide them financial support to pursue doctoral degrees in our department. I also secured them a five-year grant from Chicago's Betty Lou Smith Fund to offset their living costs. Hugo, Sadie, and their daughter Asha are now living with me and my wife in San Antonio. The co-residence makes me more available to them for collaboration and mutual aid. It also follows Cofán custom, as Hugo, Sadie, and Asha are our ritual relatives; when I am in Zábalo, they house me. In 2019, I helped Hugo write an application for a National Science Foundation Graduate Research Fellowship. In 2020, he found out he won the award, bringing him one step closer to becoming the first Indigenous Amazonian person with a PhD in cultural anthropology from a U.S. university. (Sadie is an archaeologist and will apply for an NSF fellowship next year.)

Before providing critical commentary on my activist record, I want to discuss a related matter that pertains more closely to TallBear's call for anthropologists to stand with their collaborators. The incident made me question my commitments as a Cofán advocate, especially with regard to my understanding of Cofán people's history of relations with the transnational petroleum industry.

### **An Anthropologist's Alteration**

In a 2018 paper for the meetings of the American Anthropological Association, I described how a Cofán community's practical negotiations of oil's presence projected a positive future for Indigenous life in Amazonian Ecuador. My field site was the community of Dureno. Since the mid-1960s, Cofán existence has been impossible to disentangle from the work of petroleum extraction. Although oil has caused a multitude of painful transformations in Dureno, it began to take on a new valence in 2012. That year, an ambitious Cofán leader convinced Dureno's residents to reconceptualize their engagement with the oil industry. Consequently, after decades of militant resistance, they decided to allow petroleum companies into their community.

The leader's intervention has yet to be fully realized, but it represents the possibility of reimagining the Cofán relationship with oil as a means for creating a more secure cultural, economic, and ecological future for the Cofán Nation. As an activist who had worked against petroleum production in Cofán territory for decades, the idea of oil's positive potentials was hard to accept. Nonetheless, the people of Dureno, and especially their president, convinced me that I should understand their relationship with oil in a different way. In TallBear's terms, they had succeeded in shifting one of my most deeply held positions as well as the ways I addressed it in my scholarship and activism.

As Néstor Silva remarked in his review (2018) of my book *Life in Oil*, social scientists almost always frame stories of oil in a 'declensionist' register—that is, as narratives of catastrophic decline. In Dureno, it is hard to avoid a declensionist framing when discussing oil's consequences. From the first appearance of oil workers on their land, Cofán people began to feel the substance's effects.

Company employees raped Cofán women and reportedly killed Dureno's chief. Crude spills covered rivers and the animals that lived in them. The corporation Texaco dumped billions of gallons of formation and produced waters into the region's streams. Fish and game began to carry the scent and taste of oil in their flesh. Ash from gas flares and burning waste pits rained down on Cofán gardens and bodies. People suffered serious health problems: skin and digestive ailments, birth defects, and various types of cancer, which have killed a significant portion of the village's residents. Simultaneously, the oil roads brought a massive wave of colonization by non-Indigenous settlers who expropriated Cofán territory and slashed its forests to plant crops and pastures.

Two decades after oil entered their territory, the people of Dureno began to fight back. With the assistance of Indigenous and non-Indigenous allies, they occupied and shut down a Texaco drilling platform in 1987. A splinter group of Dureno residents fled the effects of oil and created the settlement of Zábalo in the mid-1980s. When an oil company appeared on their land, they kidnapped its workers, burned its heliport, and occupied its exploratory well—acts that received global media attention and forced the company out. In 1998, the people of Dureno took over Dureno 1, the well that Texaco drilled inside their community in 1969. After weeks of tense standoffs with the Ecuadorian military, the government decided to close the well. Suddenly, the Cofán achieved international fame as both victims of and victors against oil (Cepek 2018: 165–195).

Dureno's anti-oil stance lasted well into the administration of Ecuadorian president Rafael Correa, a leftist economist who held office from 2007 to 2017. Determined to reverse his predecessors' neoliberal programs, Correa devised a comprehensive plan of social, political, and economic reform he dubbed the 'Citizen's Revolution' (Lu et al. 2017). In order to combat poverty, he reconstructed Ecuador's public infrastructure and educational and public-health systems. He financed the revolution with revenue from extractivist enterprises. Buoyed by high oil prices, Correa's revolution bore fruit; the lot of the country's poor and middle class began to improve. Yet Correa took a hard stance against any actors who threatened his programs' extractivist funding. Whereas previous administrations rarely violently suppressed Indigenous protests, Correa sent out the police and military en masse, resulting in a wave of arrests and multiple deaths. Despite his repressive stance toward environmental and Indigenous activists, Correa created institutions dedicated to using natural-resource revenues to improve the quality of life in the regions from which the resources came.

At the end of 2011, the people of Dureno elected a new community president. His name was Eduardo Mendua (Figure 1). Twenty-nine at the time, he had served in the Ecuadorian army and spoke perfect Spanish. Over the years, conversations with a wide circle of Indigenous and non-Indigenous confidants helped Eduardo hone his political-economic vision. Blessed with a fearless demeanour, a precise mind, and a gift for motivational rhetoric, Eduardo told the people of Dureno that they had to rethink their relationship with oil. Eduardo held a left-wing stance that placed him squarely in Correa's camp. Shortly after being elected, he began a series of discussions with representatives of Ecuador's state oil company, Petroamazonas.



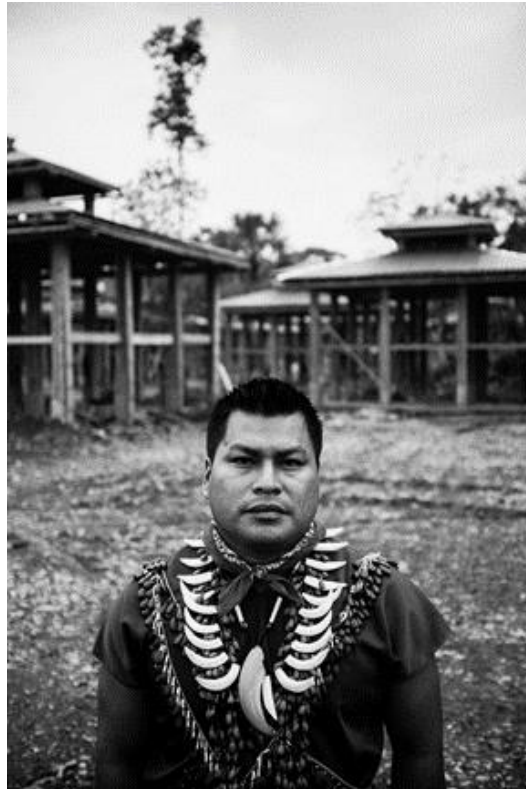


Figure 1. Eduardo Mendua in Dureno (Photograph by Bear Guerra)

Whereas Texaco only gave the people of Dureno three spoons and a bag of doughnuts in exchange for nearly three decades of contamination and dispossession, Correa promised something more. Eduardo knew that if Dureno surrendered its previous militant resistance to oil, it could secure significant benefits from a new alliance with the Correa administration. From 2012 through 2015, Eduardo's negotiations brought approximately \$10 million to Dureno—a community living in extreme poverty with ever-decreasing resources from the small forest island it still controlled.

For allowing seismic exploration on their land, the Cofán received \$500,000 in material and monetary benefits. For allowing Petroamazonas to recondition and reopen two wells, including Dureno 1, each Dureno family received a monthly \$100 food allotment, and the community as a whole gained university scholarships and regular visits from medical teams. The bulk of the money that oil brought to Dureno under Eduardo's leadership came in the form of an \$8,000,000 housing complex known as a 'millennium community.' It provided Cofán families with \$45,000 homes, a sewage system, and running water. Never before had the people of Dureno received such resources from anyone.

After Eduardo became president, the people of Dureno's reputation shifted. Former activist allies proclaimed them 'sellouts' who had given up their forest and culture for money. Their image as 'ecologically noble savages' or dedicated environmental stewards was gone. Not all Dureno residents agreed with Eduardo's vision; the question of allowing oil into their community created deep

conflicts between pro-oil and anti-oil factions. But in the end, Eduardo won. He did so by convincing his co-residents that with Correa as an ally, the Cofán had the power to create a new form of petroleum extraction. Even more, he made them realize that the resources brought by oil could be used to ensure the future of their way of life.

Whereas former Cofán leaders had no input into deciding the processes by which oil emerged from their territory, Eduardo assertively participated in company negotiations. The seismic exploration that occurred in Dureno under his watch was radically different than that conducted by Texaco and other corporations. It involved smaller trails, no cutting of valuable trees, enforced rules against alcohol-use and villager-harassment by workers, and employment of Cofán people in the operation, which gave them fair wages and the ability to monitor company activities. The reconditioned wells were vastly different, too, mainly because their waste streams were relatively contained. Eduardo also proclaimed conditions for any new production wells in Dureno: they would be distant from the central settlement; no new roads would be opened to operate them; the company would use barges to bring its equipment and workers into Dureno; and the wells would be ‘horizontal’ in nature, meaning that multiple lines would depart from only a few platforms, thereby limiting flaring and deforestation.

At first, I, too, was upset when the Cofán decided to allow oil into their community. But Eduardo and others convinced me that the form of extraction they demanded would paradoxically create a better environmental situation in Dureno, which already exists inside a sea of oil infrastructure. Using directional drilling, companies could build wells just outside Dureno’s boundaries to extract the oil that lay beneath it. The wells’ contamination, however, would continue to cross into the community via air and water. Hence, even if oil extraction did not occur in Dureno, its negative consequences would still plague the community. If the oil infrastructure were actually within Dureno’s borders, the Cofán would have more practical, political, and legal power to monitor and regulate it. Embracing a logic similar to that described by Timothy Mitchell in *Carbon Democracy* (2011), Eduardo argued that having oil operations occur on Cofán land would allow Cofán people to effectively shape them via strikes, protests, and blocking the entrance of barges and workers. If the infrastructure were off their land and beyond their control, the Cofán would have much less power to force companies to do what they promised.

Eduardo also insisted that keeping oil outside Dureno’s borders would not only mean a more destructive extraction process, it would ensure that the Cofán would receive none of the benefits. Community residents used company compensation to buy needed goods. The income also satisfied the desires of young men, whose poverty had led to interhousehold theft, which caused serious social tensions. In addition, Eduardo argued, being able to earn money from oil meant that ambitious youth would not have to leave the community to find jobs elsewhere. Consequently, they would maintain their ties to their homes and families, marrying other Cofán people and producing additional Cofán generations. Paradoxically, in other words, oil and the money it brought would ensure the future of Cofán culture.

An astute consumer of national media and company information, Eduardo knew that the reserves beneath Dureno would last only a few decades. Hence, he insisted that the community should embrace its inherently temporary alliance with the oil industry to gain millions of dollars. He intended to use the money to build a luxurious tourism complex in Dureno. It would be managed and staffed by Cofán people to show their forest, their culture, and their ecological knowledge to visitors from around the world—at a high price. In short, Eduardo wanted to transform the finitude of oil into a sustainable income source that would be ecologically benign, Cofán-controlled, and capable of creating enough income to keep people in the community and assure the continued existence of their lifeway.

Of course, there are many reasons to be sceptical of Eduardo's vision for reworking the Cofán relationship with oil. No matter how good the technology and oversight, oil extraction is an inherently risky process, especially in seismically active countries like Ecuador. The Correa administration is no longer in power, and no one knows whether the current or future administrations will offer the same kinds of resources and opportunities that Correa did. Perhaps the most important reason behind outsiders' scepticism toward a new Cofán relationship with oil involves its financial logic. As Jessica Cattelino argues (2008), most Westerners are convinced that an influx of money into Indigenous communities inevitably leads to their cultural decline. Such a pessimistic, reductionist assumption is more about non-Indigenous stereotypes than Indigenous experiences.

I do not know if the totality of Eduardo's vision will become reality, but his arguments opened my thinking about oil in Amazonia and elsewhere, at least for communities that already exist amidst oil infrastructure and its wastes. Eduardo convinced me that oil is not a homogenous, stable monolith. Rather, it is subject to the negotiations, interventions, and redeployments of creative agents, including the people of Dureno. Critics who bet against Dureno's plans for oil might be proven right, but they are definitely wrong to believe that they already know the story's conclusion. There is more than one future for the Cofán Nation and its relationship with oil, and few are as dismal or as fixed as many activists presume them to be. It was a hard lesson to learn, but Eduardo and the people of Dureno eventually taught me it.

### **Self-Critique**

Given my history, I think it is fair to say that many of my efforts qualify as 'engaged anthropology' according to Kirsch's use of the term. I have participated in the forms of support politics he advocates by working on legal cases and aiding Cofán-directed organizations. Nonetheless, my own contributions have been minimal compared to the work put in by Cofán activists. In addition, I have not been as successful as I would like in a struggle not emphasized by Kirsch: fundraising. Although I have written grant applications, issued social-media pleas, organized crowdfunding initiatives, and sung the merits of Cofán proposals to donor institutions, I have never succeeded in netting the FSC the multi-million-dollar endowment it needs to fund its work in perpetuity. What many Western activists do not realize is that many Indigenous political projects need money—and lots of it.

One of the most successful FSC efforts was the Cofán Park Guard Program, which succeeded in limiting deforestation in legalized Cofán territory to zero during its time of operation. Yet to be truly effective, the program requires at least \$250,000 each year for supplies, equipment, legal work, logistical operations, and wages for Cofán rangers, who need to support their families while they are cutting boundary trails and battling miners, loggers, and settlers for months at a time. As CSF president, I have made it a personal challenge to create the endowment that will resurrect and maintain the program. I am now at work with FSC and CSF collaborators on a multi-million-dollar grant application to the Norwegian Forest and Climate Initiative that would re-mobilize the Cofán park guards, but I do not know if it will be successful.

My record of public scholarship is not as strong as it could be. I know that non-academics read my books, but I am not sure what practical effects they have. I was happy when I saw that one donor institution's announcement of a \$500,000 grant to the FSC included near-plagiarized passages from my first book, which apparently provided academic validation for the FSC. The documentaries to which I have contributed have reached broader audiences, but their effects, too, are hard to trace. I am convinced that *Oil & Water* alerted Brown University to the stories of Hugo and Sadie Lucitante and helped them secure scholarships. My own involvement with the film, though, was minimal compared to the work of the director, producer, and subjects.

My most important failing as a public anthropologist is that nearly all my writings cannot be read by Cofán people, who do not speak English with the exception of a few students and leaders. Thankfully, at the end of 2019 the Facultad Latinoamericana de Ciencias Sociales published *La Supervivencia del Pueblo Cofán en los Campos Petroleros de la Amazonía Ecuatoriana*, a Spanish translation of *Life in Oil* (Cepek 2019). I will bring dozens of copies to Dureno when I next return. I am both excited and nervous to hear the reactions of the community's leaders and youth, many of whom speak and read Spanish.

Perhaps my attempts to stand with my Cofán collaborators have been more successful. Eduardo Mendua convinced me that his plan to bring oil into Dureno was a wise move for his community. During the two decades before I met him, I never would have imagined supporting such a proposal. It went against everything I had learned about the role of oil in Cofán life. I have heard many activists criticize the people of Dureno for their decision. I hope that my second book, and this article, will convince them to reconsider their position.

Although I did not discuss the matter here, Randy Borman, the Cofán leader and central figure in my first book, convinced me of his vision for the most effective path toward Cofán empowerment in communities beyond Dureno. Rather than hit-and-run project assistance, he explained, peoples such as the Cofán need permanent political-economic partnerships with Western scientists and environmentalists, and they need to be paid in perpetuity for their conservation work on their own land. The idea contradicted my own assumptions regarding the role that money and self-sufficiency play in Indigenous struggles for sovereignty and wellbeing, but I am convinced that Borman is right. I have done my best to promote his vision in my writings and engagements with donors and activists.

Individuals such as Eduardo Mendua and Randy Borman have taught me a tremendous amount. I expect Hugo and Sadie Lucitante to do the same. As they live with me and pursue their degrees, they will become the foremost experts on the culture and history of their people. They already know more about Cofán life than I do. I must admit that the idea of ‘advising’ them is intimidating, as I am sure their interpretations will depart from my own in significant ways. But helping our collaborators to challenge our representations in academic and non-academic fora is essential to decolonizing our practice.

According to TallBear, however, standing with one’s collaborators demands more than simple shifts in perspective, even if the long-held positions one surrenders are at the heart of one’s academic and activist practice. In ways that mirror TallBear’s and Haraway’s suggestions, I have attempted to construct and inhabit a shared social world with my Cofán collaborators—an attempt that is uncomfortable to put into words, especially for an academic audience.

I return to Cofán territory and live with Cofán families every year. Over the past two decades, five of them asked me to become their ritual relative. The lifelong ties mean that I must support their children with advice and material resources. For their part, the families are obligated to host me whenever I am in their communities. The relationships are supposed to be emotional rather than transactional. Having no biological children of my own, my Cofán ritual children inspire a profound sense of care, affection, and obligation in me and my wife. We send them money each month for schooling, health care, and other necessities.

More generally, my closest Cofán collaborators have become some of my best friends. In *Decolonizing Solidarity: Dilemmas and Directions for Supporters of Indigenous Struggles* (2015), Clare Land advises Indigenous-rights activists not to look for friendships with the people they support. As a general rule, it is good advice. Some Westerners want to help Indigenous communities not out of a basic concern with social justice but to assuage their settler guilt in a far-too-superficial manner. And they seek Indigenous friendships as part of an unacknowledged colonial desire to ‘go native’ by making Indigenous individuals into social familiars. I certainly did not begin my relationship with the Cofán Nation as a search for friends. Yet after knowing Cofán people for 25 years, it is impossible to deny how much they mean to me. Quite simply, I have come to care for them in ways that exceed any academic or economic interests I might have.

I fear that my words about my personal connections to Cofán people ring sentimental and romanticizing. But to the best of my understanding, they reflect the reality of the situation. Cofán people appreciate my company, and I appreciate theirs. It helps that they are tremendously generous, caring, and funny. Perhaps I am lucky to work with people I like so much. Although it might sound delusional, I feel as if we inhabit an emotionally rich, co-constructed world, whether in San Antonio or Ecuador, and whether through face-to-face conversations or interactions through telephone calls, emails, or WhatsApp and Facebook messages. I think about them many times a day and interact with them almost as much.

Some Cofán people have told me I have become one of them. I am heartened by their words, but I would never claim their Indigeneity. Nonetheless, I think we have created a relatively permanent relationship in which our health and happiness matter a tremendous amount to each other. After I almost died in

2015 because of an illness, I watched Cofán people cry a year later as they pondered my suffering. When I hear about the sicknesses and deaths of my Cofán friends and collaborators, I find it equally devastating. At this point, it is impossible for me to imagine stepping away from my Cofán relationships. It would mean giving up my life as I live it, every day. Thankfully, my Cofán friends and collaborators allow me to continue this life, whose maintenance depends on their willingness as much as my own.

### **Conclusion: Confronting Exploitation**

Everything I have written so far ignores an important fact: given my socio-economic position, I have tremendous power to decide whether Cofán people and I get to maintain our relationship. They do not have the resources that would enable them to come to San Antonio to visit me. In addition, obtaining the funds that allow me to travel to their homes depends upon my academic productivity and thus my tenured professorship. Without proposing projects and writing publications that I justify in terms of their intellectual contributions, I would lose my job or at least fail to earn any ‘merit-based’ raises. I also would not secure the grants that make my research in Ecuador possible.

Furthermore, I cannot deny that I derive deep satisfaction from the academic aspects of my work. I love teaching, theory, and ethnography, and I am fascinated by Cofán culture, history, and politics in ways that only sometimes match the interests of Cofán people. And like most professors, my ego feeds off my intellectual accomplishments and my peers’ recognition of them. So yes, I have deep personal relationships with Cofán people, and I do activist work alongside them, but I remain a traditional, instrumentalizing academic in many ways.

I think the idea of anthropologists’ exploitation of Indigenous peoples as props for academic careers misses an important point, however. In regions such as Amazonian Ecuador, no researcher can begin a project without the explicit permission of a community and often an ethnic federation. And that permission depends upon an anthropologist’s ability to supply material resources and non-material aid to the people with whom she hopes to work. Perhaps their poverty makes Indigenous peoples’ openness to collaborating with anthropologists less freely chosen than we would prefer. But ultimately, the choice is up to them. Viewing them as naïve dupes with no say in the matter is deeply dehumanizing. They are knowledgeable actors who carefully consider the costs and benefits of any proposed study. Before I begin a project, I spend at least a month talking to Cofán individuals privately and in public meetings about the kind of work I would like to do. Only after much discussion do we reach a consensus, which we then formalize with a signed, binding agreement.

At this point in my life, I do believe that Cofán people are happy when I arrive to their homes for the simple reason that they enjoy my company. Before I depart his community to return to San Antonio every year, my ritual brother in Dureno tells me he will miss me because he laughs much less when I am away. But our relationship is the consequence of a long history of keeping promises and bringing resources. Even now, no Cofán person would agree to work on my projects if I did not compensate them. After all, they know that I myself derive income from the projects, at least indirectly because they help me keep my job. In

addition to the thousands of dollars in royalties I have returned to their communities, I have supplied many thousands more for Cofán people's collaboration on my studies. Some Cofán individuals are aware of my roles in their political projects. But for many reasons, it is hard to understand the complex consequences of anthropological activism. Cash is a much more immediately comprehensible benefit, especially for people who are so impoverished.

Of the nearly \$25,000 I secured in grants for my oil project, more than \$19,000 went to the people of Dureno for working with me as assistants, subjects, and hosts. With the grants I received to fund my current project in the community of Duvuno, I am paying shamanically knowledgeable elders \$1,000 a month to teach me about their practices. I pay research assistants \$500 a month to help me arrange, transcribe, and analyse interviews. And I pay individuals \$20 for each hour of interviews they do. In addition, I have given the community \$7,000 to disburse among its residents—including those who do not work on my project—and to buy communal goods. And I agreed to return 100% of any royalties that result from project publications to the community. All these amounts are the results of long negotiations with the people of Duvuno regarding the funding I would seek and how I should use it if my applications were successful.

If you ask most Cofán people who know me whether I am a ñotssi a'i or 'good person,' they will probably say yes. They will likely mention my annual returns to their communities, my obvious happiness in their homes, my interest in and respect for their knowledge, and my ability to joke and laugh with all of them given my self-deprecating demeanour and proficiency in A'ingae. And they would definitely stress the economic resources I provide. Material reciprocity is a necessary condition for building shared lives across deep geo-political and socio-economic divides. From my perspective, there is nothing wrong with that. I provide Cofán people with resources that few others offer them. And they provide me with opportunities that both intellectually interest me and supply me with the conditions for maintaining my employment and securing the grants that allow me to spend time in Ecuador.

Although I know the income I direct to Cofán people is just a fraction of what they need, I am proud of my contributions. In *Custer Died for Your Sins: An Indian Manifesto* (1969), Vine Deloria argues that not only should anthropologists secure formal community permission before they begin a project, they should provide at least as much money to the community for its own uses as they spend on their study. By doing so, Deloria writes, 'Anthropologists would thus become productive members of Indian society rather than ideological vultures' (1969: 95). Yet even today, many scholars who work with Indigenous and other marginalized communities refuse to make economic reciprocity a foundation of their research partnerships. In two recent commentaries on my book *Life in Oil*, Juan Javier Rivera Andía critiques my work's contribution to the 'monetization' of Cofán life (Rivera Andía 2019: 656), and Michael Watts declares it 'shocking' that I pay my collaborators (Watts 2019: 670). Clearly, many academics still find it difficult to confront the economic exploitation that undergirds anthropological practice.

In conclusion, I am not sure what an anthropologist in my position could do to improve the ethics of their practice except to reflect persistently and ruthlessly on the structures that enable it and to engage their collaborators in

continuous discussions on the matter. My relationship with Cofán people remains unequal and exploitative. It depends on my institutionally required academic productivity, which I can only sustain by collecting data from Cofán people. By using the data, I have secured my own socio-economic welfare while Cofán people remain as precariously positioned as ever. But the relationship also involves deep personal ties, a lifelong commitment to maintaining them, joint activist projects, and the provision of material resources to Cofán communities.

Ultimately, Cofán people do have significant power over me: as soon as they no longer find satisfaction in our relationship, they can end it. Prohibiting me from entering their communities would be easy to do. I hope that never happens, though, as it would mean the end of a life I find practically demanding, and often guilt inducing, but also meaningful in complicated but tremendously rewarding ways.

### **Coda: Standing and Stepping**

No matter what their intentions and understandings, anthropologists can never be certain that they are standing with their collaborators. I am confident that my portrayal of Eduardo's vision for oil in Dureno is an accurate representation of how he felt during my research in his community. And I am happy with some of the effects my account has had. One senior officer at a major environmental NGO told me that after reading *Life in Oil*, he decided that a wise use of the organization's money would be to extend legal training and aid to Indigenous communities that have decided that negotiating with extractivist enterprises is their best option. Finally, I hoped, Western activists and donors might no longer condition their support on purity tests that are little more than fanciful, external impositions.

Two years after my study ended, however, Dureno changed. The schisms that developed during Eduardo's tenure became more and more intense. At the moment I am writing this article, a political faction allied with Eduardo is attempting to split Dureno into two legally separate communities. In personal conversations and widely circulating social-media posts, Eduardo's allies have accused the Cofán leader who succeeded Eduardo as Dureno's president of being corrupt, inept, and without collective support. In short, Eduardo and his followers are refusing to be represented by Dureno's democratically elected leader. Because they lack sufficient allies to vote the current president out of office, they are trying to carve out their own community so that Eduardo and his faction can lead it.

Such conflicts should be familiar to anyone who lives or works in communities facing intense ecological and economic pressures. What makes the matter particularly problematic in relation to my work, though, is that in many posts aimed at Indigenous-rights supporters and environmental activists, Eduardo's group is 'demonizing' their opponents with one central assertion: that they favour oil development in Dureno. Eduardo and his allies, in contrast, claim that they are committed to keeping the industry out of the community to ensure the integrity of Cofán culture and territory. I do not know whether Eduardo's modified rhetoric on oil is earnestly felt or purely strategic. I have my own thoughts on the matter, but it is not my place to share them here.



My account of Eduardo's pro-oil politics is especially consequential because the Spanish translation of *Life in Oil* is now available in Ecuador. Given how jargon- and theory-free the book is, almost any Ecuadorian, including government officials, environmental activists, and Indigenous leaders and allies, can read it. It contains an entire chapter that explains the logic behind Eduardo's decision to invite oil companies back into Dureno and the community tensions that surrounded the issue (Cepek 2019: 205–240). When I was researching and writing the chapter, Eduardo was not just sharing his vision with me, he was proclaiming it to anyone who would listen, whether they were Cofán or non-Cofán, powerful or powerless. I am convinced I wrote an accurate and sympathetic account of his position. My text also includes many of his verbatim statements. He even sent the first book copy I gave him to a confidant who could read English, and he appeared satisfied with their reaction. After doing so, he asked me to help him write his own book about his philosophy as an Indigenous leader.

In short, my widely available and academically vetted account of oil in Dureno directly contradicts Eduardo's new portrayal of his oil-related stance, which he is using to justify a contentious political campaign. While doing fieldwork, I changed my own position on oil by listening to Eduardo with an open mind and a profound appreciation for his intellect and insight. I believe he was happy that he transformed my understandings so thoroughly. In today's circumstances, however, I am not sure what he thinks of my work given its clash with his current self-representation. I hope we can have a long, if difficult, conversation about the matter. He might ask me to disavow or edit what I have published. If he does, I am not sure how I will respond; to the best of my knowledge, his initial plans for oil still reflect Dureno's majority position, which was the result of Eduardo's own arguments and actions.

An anthropologist can never stand in place with their collaborators. Changing circumstances demand stepping in new directions. Complete consensus is a rare thing for any community, Indigenous or otherwise. When it endures for years or decades, it is even rarer. Yet the representations in our articles, books, and films remain. No matter how careful we are to avoid writing in the 'timeless ethnographic present' or overgeneralizing the perspectives of our subjects, our audiences are unlikely to understand the nuances of our representational techniques, especially if we write for readers outside the academy.

Yet as I constantly tell my students, we cannot let the inevitability of such contingencies free us from the obligation to strive to make our anthropological practice as ethically responsible as possible. We can never give up our efforts to be careful and accessible in our writing, to be collaborative, transparent, and equitable in our research, and to maintain an honest, critical, and consistent dialogue with our subjects so they can affirm, contest, or change how we feel, what we write, and what we do, whether we are acting as academics, as activists, or as both.

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