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# Rethinking Climate Governance: Amazonian Indigenous Climate Politics and Integral Territorial Ontologies

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## **ABSTRACT**

This paper analyzes the Amazon Indigenous Initiative to Reduce Emissions from Deforestation (RIA), a climate change mitigation strategy created by the Coordinator of Indigenous Organizations of the Amazon Basin. Critical geographers have argued that neoliberal climate governance can commodify nature and perpetuate extractive development. In the context of Amazonia, they have centered on struggles over the resources and meanings of the territories. But analyses of Indigenous-led transnational and interethnic climate strategies are scarce in the literature. To analyze RIA, I further engage with the literature on ontological politics, which allows an understanding of politics that emerge from diverse lifeways and incorporate more-than-human agency. I argue that RIA is founded on what I call integral territorial ontologies, or common conceptions of territories as indivisible entities or lifeworlds that encompass multiple relationships not only between humans and nature, but also among more-than-human beings. By incorporating these ontologies and more-than-human agency, RIA effectively introduces a form of radical alterity to global climate politics. As such, RIA is tied to territorial defense and challenges understandings of forest/territorial vitality and ordering; as well as the processes that facilitate the commodification of nature. I conclude by reflecting on the possibility of decolonizing what we understand as global politics and practices to respond to climate change.

**KEYWORDS:** *Global climate governance, ontological politics, indigenous geographies, territories, Amazonia.*

## **RESUMEN**

Este trabajo analiza RIA, una estrategia de mitigación del cambio climático creada por la Coordinadora de Organizaciones Indígenas de la Cuenca Amazónica. Algunos geógrafos críticos han argumentado que la gobernanza climática neoliberal puede mercantilizar la naturaleza y perpetuar el desarrollo extractivo. En el contexto de la Amazonía, se han centrado en los conflictos sobre los recursos y los significados de los territorios. Pero los análisis sobre estrate-

gias climáticas transnacionales e interétnicas lideradas por organizaciones Indígenas siguen siendo escasos en la literatura. Para analizar RIA, utilizo el concepto de política ontológica, pues permite una comprensión de la política que emerge de diversas formas de vida e incorpora la agencia más que humana. Sostengo que RIA se basa en lo que yo llamo ontologías territoriales integrales, o concepciones comunes de los territorios como entidades indivisibles o mundos de vida que abarcan múltiples relaciones no sólo entre los seres humanos y la naturaleza, sino también entre seres más que humanos. Al incorporar estas ontologías y una agencia más que humana, RIA efectivamente introduce una forma de alteridad radical a la política climática global. Así, RIA está ligada a la defensa territorial y cuestiona entendimientos sobre la vitalidad y el ordenamiento forestal/territorial; así como los procesos que facilitan la mercantilización de la naturaleza. Concluyo reflexionando sobre la posibilidad de descolonizar lo que entendemos como políticas y prácticas globales para responder al cambio climático.

*PALABRAS CLAVE: Gobernanza climática global, política ontológica, geografías indígenas, territorios, Amazonía.*

## **INTRODUCTION AND RESEARCH APPROACH**

As fires raged across vast sections of Amazonia in Brazil, Bolivia, and Peru during the summer of 2019, Indigenous organizations from the region and beyond highlighted their role as Guardians of the Forest in the media. Only days before the fires started, the coalition found support for such a claim in an Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change special report (IPCC, 2019) suggesting that securing tenure for Indigenous communities can be highly cost effective in reducing deforestation. Studies also show that there are higher proportions of primary forest cover and carbon storage in Indigenous lands (Nepstad et al., 2006; Lu et al., 2010; Ricketts et al., 2010; Blackman & Veit, 2018). In the Amazon Basin—the largest tropical forest in the world—Indigenous territories represent more than 30 percent of carbon reserves but only 8 percent of deforested lands. Such reserves, scientists find, could be larger than

those of the entire forests of the Democratic Republic of Congo and Indonesia combined (RAISG, 2017). These findings suggest that forest protection, climate change action, and Indigenous rights can be understood as one and the same goal in Amazonia.

Because of findings such as these, climate change has become a politically significant object for Amazonian Indigenous organizations. They are thus increasingly articulating their struggles around the central role of Indigenous peoples<sup>1</sup> in climate change action and designing strategies that incorporate Indigenous perspectives. This paper analyses the Amazon Indigenous Initiative to Reduce Emissions from Deforestation (RIA), a climate change mitigation strategy created by the Coordinator of Indigenous Organizations of the Amazon Basin (COICA), and its ontological politics. COICA represents grassroots organizations from nine Amazonian countries and 500 ethnic groups. RIA is COICA's proposal for a unified Amazo-

nian Indigenous vision on climate change mitigation—one that respects Indigenous development preferences and cosmologies, and “values forests as human-nature integrating systems” (Unkuch, 2014, p. 20). As such, it is part of COICA’s strategic priorities for Amazonia that its Directive Council—i.e., one leader/coordinator from each country—defines every four years.

In representing forms of politics that go beyond the borders of nations and regions, both COICA and RIA are inherently transnational or global political spaces. RIA is also a response to a global phenomenon that stretches across all areas of the world: climate change. But while scholarly literature<sup>2</sup> is increasingly analyzing global politics as encompassing a wide variety of actors, networks, and initiatives that surpass the interplay of nation-states and intergovernmental institutions (e.g., Sassen, 2004; Santos & Rodríguez-Garavito, 2005), analyses of global environmental politics still largely focus on international negotiations and treaties (e.g., Dauvergne, 2012). This is also the case in the literature about global climate politics in critical geography, which has focused on the neoliberal climate governance regime—including Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation (REDD+) as the leading climate mitigation mechanism to be implemented in tropical forests around the world.

Political ecologists have argued that REDD+ is premised on commodifying nature, simplifying the definitions and uses of forests, and perpetuating extractive development (Fogel, 2004; Peet et al., 2010; Bernstein, 2013; McAfee, 2016). This literature

recognizes that REDD+’s approach has clashed with Indigenous peoples’ worldviews and perspectives, and calls for the introduction of Indigenous elements in climate governance (Fogel, 2004; Reed, 2011; McAfee, 2016; Schroeder & González, 2019). However, it rarely accounts for cases where Indigenous-led organizations take the initiative in climate action. Moreover, critical literature about REDD+ has still to engage more deeply with scholarship about territorial and ontological politics. This is key in the context of Amazonia, where territorial struggles—in terms of physical access to the territories as well as their meanings—have historically been at the center of political conflicts (Hecht & Cockburn, 2010; Baletti, 2012; Lopez-Sandoval et al., 2017; Vela-Almeida et al., 2020).

Moreover, because ontologies reflect “collective assumptions about the kinds of entities that are thought to exist in the world” (Escobar, 2010, p. 56), the ontological dimension of climate/territorial politics represents the kind of world and reality that political practices—or climate solutions—want to affect or enact.<sup>3</sup> Further, since climate change is a multidimensional phenomenon that affects diverse peoples and ecosystems, it is necessary to recognize how diverse lifeways and ways of understanding and relating with the world can represent adequate responses. Studying the ontological politics of RIA facilitates that recognition, illustrating how global climate politics can also articulate these different ways of relating with the world—in this case, with Amazonian territories. This type of analysis is scarce in the literature and challenges common assumptions of the kinds of politics (and actors) that are global

and local. Critical geographers and anthropologists (Whatmore, 2002; De la Cadena, 2015; Escobar, 2015) have conceptualized ontological politics as central to analyzing ethno-territorial struggles, more sustainable designs of life, and how natural and supernatural beings participate in politics. However, they have yet to examine ontological politics at the global scale, as well as within climate politics and strategies.

In analyzing the ontological dimension of how Amazonian leaders conceptualize RIA, I start to fill those gaps and to reflect on whether we can conceive of global climate politics as “otherwise”—that is, as a politics that moves beyond Western political frameworks and builds on “practices of cultural, ecological, and economic difference for concrete projects of world transformation” (Escobar, 2007, p. 198).<sup>4</sup> I argue that RIA is a political practice for the defense of territories founded on what I call integral territorial ontologies—that is, on common conceptions of territories as indivisible entities that encompass multiple relationships not only between humans and nature, but also among more-than-human beings. I illustrate how RIA’s incorporation of these ontologies and more-than-human agency (of natural and supernatural beings, see Blaser, 2014) has effectively introduced a form of radical alterity to global forest and climate politics. As such, RIA challenges understandings of territorial planning and ordering; as well as the processes of individuation and valuation that facilitate the commodification of nature.

I support these arguments with evidence collected over twelve months of fieldwork, which took place across 2017, 2018, and 2019. I

also worked with COICA’s Women’s Council (CWC) in 2020. This research sought to apply an Indigenous methodology to center Indigenous epistemologies and worldviews (Kovach, 2010) and to apply a decolonizing research approach. This involved open-ended interviews, participant observation, and volunteering with COICA and the School of Political Training of the Organization of Indigenous Peoples of the Colombian Amazon (henceforth OPIAC School). The volunteering component had the purpose of supporting the organizations’ goals by giving back in ways that are useful to them (Denzin et al., 2008; Smith, 2013). Thus, I integrated some findings of this research into project proposals and RIA concept notes that I co-produced with COICA leaders, and into documentation that I prepared for CWC. Participants in the open-ended interviews (about 40) included Indigenous leaders/coordinators and technical professionals (men, women, and youth) and mestizo technical professionals. Interviewees were part of COICA’s Directive or Women’s Council, had leadership roles in COICA member organizations, or had been involved in REDD+ or RIA. Participant observation took place while volunteering and in spaces lead by COICA and Indigenous leaders—e.g., in assemblies or meetings. I also reviewed secondary sources (e.g., reports, declarations, Life Plans, and educational materials). As a caveat, I study the ontological dimension of a common political project, which reflects similarities across the ontologies and cosmovisions of Amazonian peoples—as identified by COICA leaders. I do not imply that ontology is the same for all peoples in the region.

In the following section, I explain how

REDD+ and RIA become relevant for Indigenous politics in Amazonia. I then discuss critical perspectives about climate governance and its relationship to territorial and ontological politics in the region. Next, I put forward the concept of integral territorial ontologies—central to understanding Indigenous political practices in Amazonia, including RIA—and explain how they integrate the agency of more-than-human beings and various spheres of life and struggle. I conclude by reflecting on the possibility of decolonizing what we understand as global politics and practices to respond to climate change.

### **REDD+ AND RIA IN AMAZONIA**

REDD+ is the main international climate change mitigation mechanism that gives financial value to the carbon stored in forests. As part of the United Nations Convention for Climate Change, REDD+ supports national-led initiatives to manage forests sustainably and reduce emissions from forested lands (UN-REDD Programme, 2019). In Amazon Basin countries, governments plan to implement it in coordination with environmental NGOs and private-sector entities. Because Indigenous territories comprise much of Amazonia's primary forest cover, REDD+ affects Indigenous communities and politics across the basin.

REDD+ proponents seek the participation of Indigenous peoples, suggesting that this can simultaneously address climate change, conservation, and poverty alleviation goals. However, political ecologists have questioned such claims, as the livelihood co-benefits have often failed to materialize in

carbon offset projects (Osborne, 2015). Additionally, there are concerns about REDD+'s potential to commodify forests (McDermott et al., 2011; Osborne, 2015) while perpetuating inequality and extractive development models (McAfee, 2016).

Moreover, REDD+, and similar mechanisms such as Payment for Ecosystem Services, have faced opposition among Indigenous, peasant, and civil society groups globally (McAfee & Shapiro, 2010; Reed, 2011; Beymer-Farris & Bassett, 2012; Gilbertson, 2017). Indigenous organizations, including in Amazon countries, have argued that nature is not for sale, or that REDD+ commodifies forests and does not question neoliberal capitalism, the source of climate change (e.g., Cholango, 2011; Gilbertson, 2017). Nevertheless, some Amazonian Indigenous communities have agreed to participate in REDD+ projects. José, a Shuar Ecuadorian leader, explains that the Surui—the first Indigenous group to adopt a project akin to REDD+ worldwide—agreed to engage in carbon markets to safeguard their territory against mining and logging.<sup>5</sup> Thus, he acknowledges, there are arguments for and against REDD+ in Amazonia, and COICA—in representing thousands of communities—needs to respect all positions. This, however, while also vindicating common struggles for territorial defense and fundamental rights.

In that context, COICA began conceptualizing RIA in 2012<sup>6</sup> as an alternative to REDD+ that would represent an Indigenous vision for climate action, and that could resonate with communities and organizations across Amazonia. COICA proposed RIA, a Holistic Governance of Territories for a Full Life, draw-

ing from Indigenous cosmovisions (Unkuch, 2014)—and so that Indigenous communities would be compensated for maintaining carbon sinks in forests without relying on carbon markets. In parallel, RIA would be another strategy for territorial defense and the interrelated struggles for autonomy and collective rights. As José explains, “RIA originates from the vision of our organizations and leaders, from how we see the forest. . . . [I]t has cultural and identity aspects . . . (and interprets) concepts like REDD+” (personal communication, August 2018).

COICA also positions RIA as vital for global climate stability. RIA documents explain that Indigenous *cosmovivencia* (cosmoliving/lifeways) has guaranteed high concentrations of primary forests, carbon reserves, and biodiversity in Indigenous lands (e.g., Unkuch, 2014). As such, RIA proposes to reduce greenhouse gas emissions while conserving biodiversity, increasing carbon reserves, and implementing forest management—the same promises of REDD+. But its approach includes principles that are markedly different: respecting Indigenous development preferences, titling and consolidating Indigenous collective territories, holistically managing forests and territories, reducing direct and indirect deforestation drivers, and “valuing forests as human-nature integrating systems” (Unkuch, 2014, p. 20).

Consequently, RIA supports Life Plans, which capture communities’ visions of a good life—through elements ranging from opposition to extractive industries and strengthening Indigenous cultures to promoting income-generating endeavors. Concerning the latter, COICA often promotes RIA,

particularly to international NGOs and donors, as a project-implementation initiative. In this sense, RIA has been limited to short-lived projects with outcomes such as reports and studies about pilot sites in Peru, Colombia, and Ecuador. Only one pilot site, the Amarakaeri Communal Reserve in Peru, formally executes RIA through projects to commercialize Brazil nuts—thus apparently not departing from conventional community development.<sup>7</sup>

However, my fieldwork revealed that Amazonian Indigenous leaders also conceive of RIA differently: as the everyday relations and practices that already exist and maintain forest/territorial vitality, directly linking it to how Indigenous peoples already engage in territorial planning and organization. In other words, they conceive of RIA as a joint climate response in Amazonia that is based on continuity rather than change. To unpack what this continuity means, I introduce the concept of integral territorial ontologies, in the context of scholarship about territorial and ontological politics. I also explain how this concept relates to RIA and Indigenous climate politics in Amazonia. But first, the next section gives an overview of critical scholarship about REDD+, to discuss how RIA and integral ontologies diverge from the dominant climate regime.

## **GLOBAL CLIMATE GOVERNANCE, COMMODIFICATION, AND INDIGENOUS PEOPLES**

Analyzing the conceptions and purposes behind neoliberal climate governance

is necessary to understanding RIA as a response to REDD+ and an alternative form of global climate politics. For political ecologists, this “market-based green governance” (Peet et al., 2011, p. 7) is an international regime—comprised of institutions, organizations, principles, decision-making procedures, and interstate treaties—that facilitates nature commodification, standardization, and simplification, as well as the pursuit of economic interests in the framework of sustainability (Fogel, 2004; Peet et al., 2011; Osborne, 2015). Further, in understanding governance as the political matrix of neoliberalism, this regime would silence popular participation, power relations, as well as social transformation, justice, and conflict (Santos & Rodriguez-Garavito, 2005).

REDD+ is the main mechanism to implement this type of governance in tropical forest ecosystems. Thus, commodification remains a powerful logic behind how REDD+ conceptualizes nature, involving processes such as individuation, valuation, and privatization (Osborne, 2015, p. 67). Individuation relates to turning forests into legible and tradable carbon units by extracting them from their embeddedness in social and ecological life (McDermott et al., 2011; Osborne, 2015). Similarly, valuation emphasizes the exchange value of nature’s elements, obscuring social, ecological, and cultural values and uses (Fogel, 2004; Osborne, 2015). Privatization “gives exclusive rights of a resource to an individual, group, or institution” (Osborne, 2015, p. 67). Further, REDD+ fosters a recentralization of forest management in national governments to implement such processes, which can undermine the autonomy, rights,

and resources of rural communities (Phelps et al., 2010; McDermott et al., 2011; Osborne, 2015).

This economic valuation of nature inherent in REDD+ has clashed with Indigenous conceptions of nature in Amazonia and beyond (Reed, 2011; Shankland & Hasenclever, 2011). Consequently, it may appear contradictory that scholarly analyses focus largely on the participation of Indigenous peoples in REDD+/global climate governance and negotiations, rather than on alternative political proposals at the transnational scale. The former include analyses about integrating Indigenous knowledges<sup>8</sup> into forest regimes (Fogel, 2004), the increasing yet insufficient participation of Indigenous representatives in international negotiations (Schroeder, 2010), or the introduction of REDD+ safeguards due to Indigenous demands for rights (Wallbott, 2014). The emphasis has thus been on reforming REDD+ by including Indigenous elements, to achieve an effective implementation (Reed, 2011; Shankland & Hasenclever, 2011; Schroeder & Gonzalez, 2019).

Even when well-intended, such an approach can also be problematic. Indigenous and allied scholars note that the appropriation and integration of Indigenous knowledges into policies that follow Western purposes and ideas of nature can undermine Indigenous decision-making and resource use (e.g., Nadasdy, 2003; Simpson, 2004). Additionally, formal REDD+ participation mechanisms can often serve to legitimize government agendas rather than to influence final policy outcomes (Pham et al., 2014; personal communications, 2017). Moreover,

a lack of attention to Indigenous transnational political organization and climate actions demonstrates a (colonial) assumption that Indigeneity is restricted to the local, while intergovernmental politics and institutions represent the global.

Conversely, Indigenous scholars have argued that analyses about climate change and Indigenous peoples must pay attention to self-determined climate politics and planning, while acknowledging the impacts of colonialism and capitalism (Whyte, 2017). Therefore, the purpose of this paper is not restricted to explaining how an Amazonian Indigenous climate proposal can influence or modify mainstream global politics and institutions. Rather, it is to show how that proposal represents another, self-determined form of global climate politics. As Robert, an Inga Colombian leader stated, COICA proposed RIA so that, “Indigenous peoples would be the ones who propose ... who tell their experiences, ... and show a more integral and holistic vision of the territory” (personal communication, July 2019).

### **REDD+ AND TERRITORIAL POLITICS IN AMAZONIA**

While political ecologists have focused on REDD+ as a strategy of forest carbon trading, it is now more commonly implemented through national action plans (Skutsch & Turnhout, 2020) that are part of national policies/strategies on climate change. In Amazonian countries, including Ecuador, Colombia, and Brazil, these plans promote Ordenamiento Territorial (territorial ordering/planning—henceforth OT) and seek to

reduce net deforestation by developing green markets and so-called sustainable productive activities—e.g., (monocultural) agriculture, cattle ranching, mining, and oil extraction (MAE, 2017; MMA, 2016; Minambiente, 2020). Thus, the aspects of valuating nature’s elements as commodities, and individuating them, still hold.

But additionally, this type of implementation calls for attention to the politics of territory in Amazonia, with which critical REDD+ literature can engage more deeply. This literature has started to address the concept of territory as a spatial governance unit (McCall, 2016), or a “model of collective ownership and management of vast forest areas” (Van Dam, 2011, p. 410) that REDD+ should account for to be effective. It adequately argues for “territorializing” global climate governance and REDD+ to legitimate land users’ rights and the “entitlements of forest peoples to govern their own lands” (McCall, 2016, p. 58), while recognizing the connections between territories and Indigenous rights (Van Dam, 2011). Yet, the principal focus is still on improving REDD+ as the form of governance, often through “new administration and management capacities” (Van Dam, 2011, p. 410). But territorial politics—particularly in Amazonia—have deeper histories, dimensions, and tensions that cannot simply be resolved through a different managerial approach.

Territorial struggles are at the center of political conflicts in Amazonia. These are over physical territories, but also over decision-making and territorialities—i.e., the symbolic and material meanings of space (Hecht & Cockburn, 2010; Baletti, 2012;

Lopez-Sandoval et al., 2017; Vela-Almeida et al., 2020). Within OT, territory means a space that a normative-legal authority controls and organizes around axes of resource extraction, development, and conservation (Baletti, 2012; Lopez-Sandoval et al., 2017; OPIAC, 2019). Thus, OT is a “technology of social/spatial ordering” that assembles “forces (repressive, economic, administrative), techniques (scientific, calculative, legal), and devices (property titles, credits, conservation payments)” (Baletti, 2012, p. 580). These are characteristics that REDD+ national plans share, and that reflect a “techno-industrial, statist ... scientific and environmentalist ... territoriality” that some NGOs and the private sector also enforce (Baletti, 2012, p. 578).

Moreover, some activists who participated in my interviews were skeptical about extractive activities such as monocultures, oil extraction, or mining really being sustainable, as they have many environmental and social impacts—even if they could help reduce net deforestation. Scholars further argue that agricultural intensification—one strategy to make monocultures sustainable by sparing land—can instead increase deforestation, as the “intensification of profitable land uses tends to enhance its spread rather than to confine it spatially” (Oliveira & Hecht, 2016, p. 267). Therefore, activists associate these activities with the extractivism<sup>9</sup> that is very present in Amazonia, where around 50 percent of Indigenous territories are under the pressure of ongoing or planned extractivist activities—going up to 78 percent in Ecuador and 93 percent in Guyana (RAISG, 2020). For Latin American geographers, extractiv-

ism follows a territorial logic of colonial capital that causes dispossession, violence, and profound impacts on Amazonian territories (Lopez-Sandoval et al., 2017; Vela-Almeida et al., 2020). Thus, both OT and (purportedly) sustainable productive practices in REDD+ national plans allow for the commodification of nature, as well as for state-centered and raw material-based development models (as in Baletti, 2012; Lopez-Sandoval et al., 2017).

Conversely, the responses to these extractive logics, scholars argue, show that territories are also plural spaces of resistance where “a multiplicity of forms of life and social relations may flourish” (Vela-Almeida et al., 2020, p. 267). Concerning Indigenous peoples specifically, scholars note that after land rights were (somehow) met in several Amazonian countries, claims for territory expanded to include autonomy and self-determination (Lopez-Sandoval et al., 2017). In line with this, Latin American geographers have argued that a central contradiction in Amazonia surrounds territorialities from above (i.e., those expressed in OT and now REDD+), and those from below (i.e., of marginalized groups or communities in Amazonia). This as the latter represent the plurality of Amazonia, responding to multiple territorial logics and to heterogeneous ways of making social and spatial relations (Porto Gonçalves, 2001, as cited in Baletti, 2012; Vela-Almeida et al., 2020).

But my fieldwork also showed that Indigenous territorial defense in Amazonia—and RIA—includes but goes beyond assigning a different meaning to the territories; it is also a defense of lifeways and lifeworlds. As Clemencia, a Murui-Muina Colombian leader,

explains:

The territory is the space of a community: where it lives and works, where culture was born, and sacred stories emerged. ... It is the area over which Indigenous (peoples) exercise their own law under principles of identity, the space where autonomy is applied. (OPIAC, 2019)

The next section details how the concept of ontological politics can elucidate important aspects of how territorial defense and RIA exceed the idea of territoriality. I also explain how the concept informs my analysis of Amazonian climate politics.

### **ONTOLOGICAL POLITICS AND TERRITORIAL STRUGGLES**

Ontology is a fundamental aspect in environmental politics because it represents the kind of world(s) and reality that political practices want to affect or enact. REDD+'s processes of commodification are rooted in a dualistic Western/modern ontology (Shankland & Hasenclever, 2011). According to decolonial scholars such as Arturo Escobar (2010), this ontology enforces certain constructs, including a separation of nature and culture, the idea of an autonomous individual separated from community, and the market as a self-regulating entity that is separate from social practice. These constructs, in turn, have produced or are coherent with "socio-natural forms such as capitalism, the state, or industrial agriculture", where there is a primacy of humans over non-humans

(Escobar, 2010, p. 9). While these scholars do not explicitly refer to global climate mechanisms such as REDD+, their ideas are arguably applicable to it as well, since—as mentioned above—REDD+ is based on market-based approaches of environmental governance and emphasize nature's exchange value. In the specific context of REDD+, Schroeder and Gonzalez (2019) have likewise identified that Western ontologies are compartmentalized or fragmented, while Indigenous ontologies "see the territory as an integrated system (and) consolidate a collective identity based on ... cultural values" (p. 201).

Furthermore, RIA documents point to the centrality of ontology when explaining that forests are human-nature integrating systems rather than simply carbon stocks (Unkuch, 2014). Here, I analyze the contributions of cultural geographers and decolonial anthropologists writing about ontological politics. This is to go beyond comparisons of different ontologies in REDD+ and to explain instead how a multiplicity of worlds of humans and more-than-humans (see Blaser, 2014) enter global politics.

Ontology refers to multiple worlds and realities rather than simply different cultures or worldviews (Kohn, 2013). Ontological politics encompass ontology and politics—i.e., the processes and practices of shaping reality and the conditions of possibility (Mol, 1999). Anthropologists and decolonial scholars have explained how the relational ontologies—which "eschew the division between nature and culture"—of Indigenous, Afro-descendant, and other collectives have informed or can inform more sustainable designs (Esco-

bar, 2010, p. 56). Related to that, they employ the concept of ontological politics to illuminate how political practices can constitute strategies for the defense of life and relational ontologies (De la Cadena, 2015; Escobar, 2015). This facilitates a more textured understanding of ethno-territorial struggles in which non-humans actively participate. In an Amazonian context, Eduardo Kohn's concept of "alter-politics" similarly refers to politics that not only emerge from opposition to current systems but from "another way of being ... that involves other kinds of living beings" (2013, p. 14).

To illustrate this, Marisol de la Cadena (2015) explains that when Quechua people mobilize to oppose mining projects, they do not defend a separate nature but their relational co-existence with earth-beings (e.g., mountains). Arturo Escobar (2015) likewise explains that Afro-Colombian movements defend "worlds with a dense network of materiality and interrelations between humans and natural and supernatural beings" (p. 29). This shows how relational ontologies disrupt modern politics' ontological division between nature and humanity. Therefore, taking ontologies out of their contexts to input them in REDD+ (as some scholars suggest) would be problematic if not impossible.

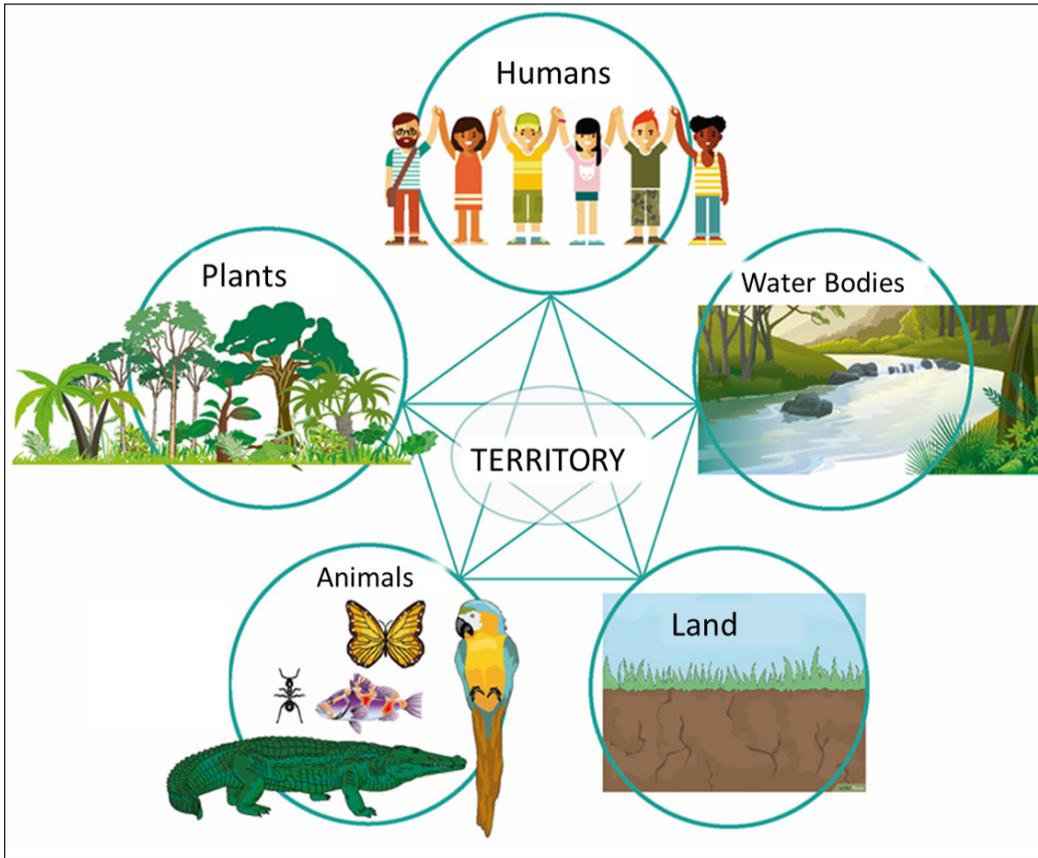
Next, I draw from and extend these contributions to put forward the concept of integral territorial ontologies. These lie at the foundation of RIA and help explain how it incorporates the agency of more-than-human beings in global and interethnic climate politics. Thus, this facilitates thinking of ontological politics beyond local scales.

## **INTEGRAL TERRITORIAL ONTOLOGIES AND RIA**

We said: We are territory, we are trees, we are river, we are gorge, we are land. This is, there is a coexistence of biodiversity with Indigenous peoples. Then, we could not accept, by any means, that things would go separate. That the State would commercialize the part of the forest while Indigenous peoples, as always, would not receive any benefits. (Alonso, Tacana Bolivian leader. Personal communication, January 2019)

When I asked COICA leaders about the significance of a climate proposal like RIA, responses like Alonso's often emerged. While assessments of RIA's significance varied among my interviewees, a common theme crosscut their answers: An important problem with REDD+ was its focus on—and conceptualization of—trees and carbon as separate from the territory. That is, REDD+ ignored the relationships that exist between trees and animals, rivers, and humans. This view of forests—which equates them with carbon deposits—also facilitated their commodification, according to COICA leaders. Instead, within RIA, forests were not just carbon stocks, but represented the peoples' ancestors or spirits (COICA Amazonica, 2017).

Moreover, RIA is a conservation alternative that views forests and territories as integral systems. Here, I explain how those integral systems are conceived and how that influences understandings of territorial vitality and ordering. While research participants



**Figure 1.** Life groups in Amazonian Indigenous thought (source: OPIAC, 2019).

represented various Indigenous peoples/ethnic groups and nine Amazonian countries, all of them argued that what brings them together is the struggle for the territory and what it represents for them and their communities. This was also similar for men and women—even though women referred more to territorial relationships that sustain nourishment and culture. Thus, my fieldwork revealed that the main unit of concern for Indigenous leaders was not the forest but the territories, which contain forests among many other elements. As Clemencia explains:

The territory is integral: (it is where)

the work to reproduce the material culture (agriculture, hunting, fishing, gathering) takes place, the place that our creators left for us to live in. ... [I]t comprises ... the spaces that the non-Indigenous cannot see, the worlds which are below and above the Earth, which are inhabited by the owners of the jungle, of the animals, of the waters. ... (OPIAC, 2019)

This does not only mean that Indigenous peoples in Amazonia have a distinct, or spiritual relationship with nature, which some scholars have criticized as an essentialist view

(e.g., Raymond, 2007). As leaders communicate, territories are indivisible entities or systems that contain forests (or trees), biodiversity (or animals/plants), humans, sacred sites, water, underground resources (e.g., oil), supernatural beings, and other elements. Territories also comprise worlds that transcend the tangible one, often referred to as worlds of “above and below” or with names such as “yellow world” or “water world.”<sup>10</sup> In these multiple worlds, there are other beings—natural and supernatural—who maintain and rely on territorial vitality, such as the owners of different territorial elements. It is thus difficult to understand forests and trees without relating them to other elements or to the entire territory. Moreover, territories comprise a vast network of relationships among their different elements. As Figure 1 illustrates, life groups such as plants and animals are also connected to one another in the territory, as it “is constituted by the relationships between all life groups (including) functional relations (habitat, nourishment) as well as spiritual ones” (OPIAC, 2019). These particular ways in which Indigenous leaders conceive of territories constitute what I call integral territorial ontologies.<sup>11</sup>

As mentioned above, the literature about ontological politics (De la Cadena, 2015; Escobar, 2015) uses the concept of relational ontology to speak of worlds with a dense network of interrelations among humans and natural and supernatural beings. My concept of integral ontologies seeks to take that concept further, to account for the wholeness of territories as life worlds. Territories, as leaders communicate, are simultaneously all-encompassing and a single

entity—because everything is integrated (personal observation, January 2019). In these lifeworlds, humans and nature are not ontologically separated, and neither are natural—and supernatural—elements. This further reflects a non-anthropocentric, multi-species perspective in which “interactions between different non-human species are not necessarily mediated (only) through their interaction with humans” (Smart, 2014, p. 3). This also assumes that all beings are constitutively semiotic (Kohn, 2013) and that it is in their relations and communications that the vitality of the forest/territory lies.

Consequently, there are at least two ways in which integral territorial ontologies intervene in RIA and climate politics. First, one of RIA’s central premises is maintaining forest/territorial vitality, with the objective of “keeping the forest standing.” This is akin to initial proposals of REDD+ that focused on avoiding emissions from deforestation by maintaining forest sinks in various types of conserved landscapes (Hecht, 2011)—rather than on fostering “zero net deforestation” productive activities. For Indigenous leaders, this vitality is not feasible without the intervention of more-than-human beings and the fundamental relationships that exist in the territory.

For instance, for Joanne (Kali’na leader in Suriname) singing and talking to the spirit of the forest is necessary before cutting down a tree or taking a part of it. This because the forest keeps negative things away—e.g., poison—and so it is necessary to respect it. Similarly, supernatural beings can be associated with forest damage and deforestation. As Alonso describes, the Jichi are gnomes or

forest owners who get angry when deforestation or excessive hunting or fishing happen, so they can abduct those responsible for such activities. Likewise, other activities, such as food provision and the relationships that mediate them, sustain that vitality. Cecilia (a Guajajara Brazilian leader) explained that nourishment is possible when following the rules about singing and asking Mother Earth for permission to plant. For her, the enchanted are the ones who protect people and territories, bring seeds and plants, and teach people how to cultivate. Maira—a god or enchanted—brought fish and staple foods such as sweet potatoes or maniocs, so people do not eat “senselessly” (personal communication, April 2019). This shows how supernatural beings, like the Jichi or enchanted, can have direct relationships with natural or nonhuman beings, such as manioc plants. Those relationships are independent from their subsequent relationships with humans.

Moreover, more-than-human agency and territorial relationships influence territorial ordering or planning. Leaders mentioned that some of the elements of the territory—and what they communicate—are used in territorial decision-making, including plants like ayahuasca (or yagé), guayusa, and tobacco. Further, the manuals of the OPIAC School (2019) explain that the territories are ordered according to rules established in cosmovisions—i.e., involving the different worlds that are part of the territories—or in the peoples’ ancestral laws, which humans need to follow and respect. In the words of a Letuama leader:

Territorial organization happens

through the “own”<sup>12</sup> government ... which relates to the rest of the Indigenous world: ... with nature’s beings (including) the owners of the trees, of the animals or of the rivers ... all of them relate through knowledge (and) thought. ... Therefore, concerning territorial ordering, we cannot only talk about how an ethnic group must order itself, but (rather) about how the traditional thought runs through special sites (to understand how territories are ordered). (OPIAC, 2019)

This contrasts very sharply with governmental OT—which organizes the territory according to interests to extract resources, drive development, or delimit conservation areas. This further illustrates how leaders include other worlds and natural and supernatural beings when referring to territorial ordering and planning.

Second (and related to the first point), all leaders expressed that territories are integral because they represent several spheres of life, including nourishment, medicine, and spirituality. As such, they are the space where Indigenous peoples can fully practice their cultures and lifeways. Women leaders further argue that territories are unitary because territories, bodies, and knowledges can be considered a single thing (personal observation, January 2019; see also Ulloa, 2016; or Vela-Almeida et al., 2020). For this reason, the slogan of the first Indigenous women’s march in Brazil was “Territory, our body, our spirit” and women leaders see the violence to the territories as interconnected with the violence inflicted upon women’s

bodies. Territories thus represent both the physical and cultural survival of Indigenous peoples.

In this sense, Jorge (a Venezuelan Curripaco leader) and Enrique (a Brazilian Manchineri leader) explain that Indigenous peoples cannot exist as such without the territories, so defending the territories is a matter of life and death. They see territorial defense as necessary because “if they (territories) end, Indigenous peoples end” (personal communication, April 2019). Therefore, it would be impossible to restrict the value of the territories, or of their different elements, to their exchange value, as in REDD+. Concerning this, Robert said:

We don't see the territory as a separated or fragmented unit, but holistically. ... [T]herefore, affecting a medicinal plant ... can affect the life of many peoples and ... condemn them to extermination. This has not been understood in the West ... so governments ... draw (oil) blocks and give concessions to transnational companies without understanding the vision of Indigenous peoples, (and thus they are) affecting our ... survival. ... (These actions) can affect the whole system, the whole Amazon Basin. (Personal communication, July 2019)

Therefore, territorial security—one of the purposes of RIA—does not only mean ensuring the access of Indigenous communities to their territories, or property rights, but also guaranteeing collective rights and life itself. For COICA leaders, the latter

are threatened by the investments of states and corporations in big enterprises, which include hydro dams, mining, agribusinesses, and oil extraction, among others. Therefore, because RIA is inherently linked with this defense of the territories, it embraces resistance or social conflict against extractivism—instead of silencing it. This contrasts with several REDD+ national plans, where extractivist activities are often made invisible—e.g., when they identify agriculture as a main driver of deforestation without specifying which types of agriculture or other underlying drivers, such as road building and oil extraction (Skutsch & Turnhout, 2020; personal communications, 2017).

Altogether, integral territorial ontologies have a profound significance for forest protection and climate initiatives. As leaders explain, “RIA is an integral part of all Indigenous peoples, it is not separated. ... RIA is water, it is forest, it is the underground, it is integral,” (personal communication, January 2019). Thus, diverging from the individuation present in REDD+, RIA recognizes the embeddedness of carbon in the territories as social and ecological life. Conversely, in simplifying trees and forests as legible carbon units (McDermott et al., 2011; Osborne, 2015), mechanisms like REDD+ are neglecting all these relationships and beings, which are fundamental in explanations of territorial health and integrity. Moreover, RIA's approach departs from the fragmentation that is inherent in REDD+ and neoliberal governance, which facilitates commodification (Osborne, 2015; Shroeder & Gonzalez, 2019). By incorporating the territories, RIA is exceeding the possibilities of mainstream

governance (as in De la Cadena, 2015), while introducing radical difference (as in Blaser, 2014) to global forest/territorial politics.

It is true that many external actors, such as international organizations and donors, still read RIA as a project-implementation initiative. This may be because this form is more legible, as it is more “amenable to the technical requirements of capital” (Osborne, 2015, p. 75). Thus, it might be complex for RIA, and Amazonian Indigenous organizations, to present a more visible confrontation to neoliberal governance.<sup>13</sup> But RIA already represents a form of global climate “alter-politics,” in emerging from other ways of being and involving “other kinds of living beings” (as in Kohn, 2013, p. 14), which must be recognized. RIA makes visible both a different way of conceiving politics, and an important response to climate change. This can deeply change what we understand as global climate politics and the actors who partake in them.

## CONCLUSION

This paper has analyzed the ontological politics of RIA, a climate change mitigation strategy created by COICA, the Coordinator of Indigenous Organizations of the Amazon Basin. This initiative seeks to place Indigenous lands, cosmovisions, and politics at the forefront of climate change action. I have further questioned how RIA can challenge the premises of the—much criticized—neoliberal regime of climate governance, while engaging with and extending discussions about territorial and ontological politics in Amazonia. While doing so, I have

accounted for, centered, and amplified the perspectives of Amazonian Indigenous leaders.

I argue that RIA is founded on what I call integral territorial ontologies. In these ontologies, territories are indivisible entities or lifeworlds that contain forests (or trees), biodiversity (i.e., animals/plants), humans, sacred sites, water, underground resources (e.g., oil), supernatural beings, and others. Territories further comprise a complex network of interrelations not only among humans and natural and supernatural beings (as in Escobar, 2015), but also among non-human beings. These territorial ontologies and interrelations intervene in RIA in at least two ways: First, they are fundamental in how RIA and its proponents understand forest/territorial vitality and territorial ordering. Second, they inform an approach that does not separate forests—and carbon—from the territories as the spaces that secure Indigenous peoples’ cultural and physical survival. As such, RIA’s conceptualization challenges the processes of fragmentation, individuation, and (economic) valuation that are part of REDD+—and mainstream climate governance—and that facilitate the commodification of nature. It also challenges top-down forms of territorial ordering (or planning), which often prioritize extractive activities and developmentalism. Additionally, RIA embraces—rather than silences—territorial struggles such as those against extractivism.

Moreover, by incorporating integral territorial ontologies and more-than-human agency (see Blaser, 2014) in RIA, COICA effectively introduces a form of radical alterity to global forest and climate politics. This

should encourage scholars to decolonize our thinking to see beyond hegemonic governance and consider global politics that emerge from other ways of being. It should also encourage scholars and technical professionals to understand climate change mitigation in tropical forests in a more integral way—one that considers other ways of living, other explanations of how to keep forests standing, and other knowledge-based practices. Additionally, this paper problematizes and sheds light on the limits of instances such as REDD+ safeguards and its participatory spaces, which seek to introduce Indigenous elements to REDD+ while separating them from their broader contexts. As a caveat, a challenge remains for Amazonian Indigenous organizations to implement RIA fully in accordance with these holistic territorial ontologies while also responding to the ever-changing and diverse realities in the region, as well as to the requirements of international organizations and donors upon which they often rely. This is an aspect that the scholarly literature should explore in more depth.

Finally, to fully understand RIA's possibilities, a more in-depth analysis of its epistemic and socioeconomic aspects is necessary. I do this in other papers. Additionally, it is

essential to recognize that RIA is only one strategy for defending the territories. There are multiple other political practices—e.g., actions rejecting oil and mineral projects—that share the same purpose of defending those integral ontologies, and so, life itself (as in Escobar, 2015). These practices are unfolding at all scales of Indigenous political organization, and, directly or indirectly, confront the threats that climate change and other factors pose to the territories' integrity. There are also other political initiatives at the global scale that confront climate change, such as the Global Alliance of Territorial Communities (which involves COICA and organizations in Indonesia, Brazil, and Mesoamerica); and other Indigenous spaces of resistance to extractivism that have had a global character, such as Standing Rock (Estes, 2019). Thinking about these spaces, and RIA's role in relation to them, calls into question what we understand as global climate politics, beyond the dominant climate regime. Therefore, further research is necessary for a more complete understanding of Indigenous climate politics—and those of other marginalized groups—to open the possibilities to consider everyday practices to engage with the territory and political action to face climate change in a more holistic way.

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## NOTES

1 I use the term “peoples” because Indigenous leaders across Amazonia prefer this term when referring to their ethnicity and identity. Other preferred terms include “nationalities,” although they are not so widely used. Terms like “tribes” can be considered inappropriate. “Peoples” can also encompass non-Indigenous groups such as Black collectivities.

2 Particularly in the field of global studies.

3 This applies to all political practices, whether they are Western and belong to mainstream climate governance, or if they are put forward by non-Western or marginalized groups such as the Indigenous organizations that this paper refers to. Ontologies underlie Western and non-Western political practices, as this piece describes, and as Schroeder and Gonzalez (2019) also detail with respect to REDD+. As Arturo Escobar (2010, p. 56) explains, “[T]he modern ontology... has produced socio-natural worlds of particular kinds (e.g., plantations, genetically modified organisms) which have tended to be destructive of the biophysical integrity of the planet. Some relational ontologies, on the contrary, have informed—or can inform, in principle—more sustainable designs.”

4 Decolonial scholars define politics and knowledges “otherwise” as those that are articulated as alternatives to both neoliberal and Marxist understandings of democracy, anticolonialism, modernity, capitalism, ontology, or epistemology. Otherwise is “to start from values that are outside modern Western frameworks, while not hesitating to relocate selective features of the older frameworks within the new ones. It is to create a world in which other worlds exist” (Harding, 2016, p. 1,078, drawing from Escobar, 2007).

5 While this case was considered successful for many years, it is currently suspended due to several obstacles and increasing deforestation. COICA does not consider the Surui project as part of RIA.

6 Drawing from previous proposals by AIDSESEP, the Peruvian Amazon's Indigenous organization.

7 Amaraeri projects are funded by international NGOs and other donors (they are not market-driven). Likewise, the operations of the OPIAC School are currently funded by Norwegian cooperation. COICA similarly aims to gain more support from international NGOs, international cooperation, and global climate funds to carry out RIA and other climate initiatives. There are challenges and contradictions that emerge from collaborations with such international donors. However, detailing them goes beyond the scope of this piece, so I explore them in other work. Still, as this article also explains, there are elements of RIA, such as the existing relationships in the territory that maintain territorial vitality, that do not necessarily require funding—but rather, aspects like formal land rights or governments' respect for communities' self-determination (as RIA documents also recognize).

- 8 I use knowledges in plural to refer to the plurality of knowledge and the diverse cultures that are present in the Amazon Basin. Scholars such as Escobar (2007) use the plural as well.
- 9 The term “extractivism” relates to activities that remove large volumes of non-processed natural resources, particularly for export. This can include minerals, petroleum, and agricultural, forest, fishing, and touristic activities, among others (Acosta, 2017).
- 10 In the case of the Shipibo peoples, as Marta, one of my interviewees explained (personal communication, April 2019).
- 11 Due to the diversity of Indigenous cultures in Amazonia, I use “ontologies” to denote the plurality of ways in which this shared view of territories as integral entities can take shape.
- 12 I translate “propio(s)” as “own” for lack of a better word, but the Spanish meaning and use rather denote something characteristic of a group of people.
- 13 And this presents several challenges to COICA’s operations, which I will explore in future work.

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