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Rethinking Urban Land Grabbing: A Decolonial Political Ecology Perspective to Reveal a Pluriverse of Alternatives

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Abstract

This thesis employs a decolonial political ecology approach to rethink the contemporary urban land-grabbing conflict on the periphery of a medium-sized city in Mexico, highlighting the defence of communal territories as evidence of the pluriverse. Drawing on the epistemological decision of what Mignolo's defines as 'dwelling in the border'— where alternatives are possible— this thesis uses a personal reflexive process as a decolonial tool to illuminate other worlds and their territorial struggles. These struggles involve resisting, assimilating, and reproducing the modern world system amidst urban expansion while defending other ways of being, doing and thinking.

By focusing on the decolonial struggle over territory, this thesis fosters an epistemological and transversal dialogue among the different but interconnected worlds entangled in the urban land-grabbing conflict. It creates a space for co-producing knowledge and exploring alternative pathways for plural and ethical futures in this and other similar contexts, suggesting a new direction for research in this field.

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Chapter 1 Introduction

1.1 Project Presentation

In an era of accelerated urban growth, cities across Latin America are undergoing unprecedented transformations. One of these cities is City X[1], a medium-sized city in Mexico that is experiencing swift urbanisation. Between 1990 and 2010, the city's size doubled, and it's still expanding by about 3.5% each year (Anonymised authors, 2018). This local trend mirrors broader national patterns. According to the United Nations (2018) projections, by 2050, 88% of Mexico's population will reside in urban areas. Yet, the rush for land, driven by urban expansion, has led to significant challenges, particularly in peri-urban areas where *ejidatarios* and *comuneros*— communal landholders— have denounced land-grabbing tactics imposed under the guise of urban development, threatening their very existence.

The term 'land-grabbing' re-emerged during the financial, food, and fuel crises of 2008 to politically denounce the phenomenon in which powerful nations and transnational investors, who were looking for 'safe havens', began using their power to implement large-scale acquisitions in the 'Global South' (Zoomers et al., 2016). The environmental, economic, and social impacts of such strategies caught the attention of the academic community, resulting in the development of a substantial body of scholarship on land-grabbing (Yang et al., 2021). However, much of this literature has been shaped by common assumptions formed during this literature rush (Borras et al., 2011). Research has often focused on the use of the 'accumulation by dispossession' framework and concentrated primarily on specific regions and sectors— particularly Africa and the agricultural domain (Borras et al., 2011; Edelman et al., 2013; Hall, 2013; Mollet, 2016; Otsuki et al., 2023; Zoomers et al., 2017). This narrow focus has created significant analytical, geographical, and sectoral gaps, limiting the scope of inquiry to certain frameworks and, crucially, overlooking the valuable but underexplored body of work that connects long-standing power structures resulting from colonialism to land-grabbing (Mollett, 2015). Moreover, it fails to

[1] The name of the city has been anonymised for ethical considerations. For further details, see Section 4.4 Project Ethics.

recognise the widespread nature of these conflicts across different sectors and regions. Among the least represented are land-grabbing conflicts in urban areas and regions such as Latin America (Land Matrix Portal, 2023).

This project extends beyond these limitations by making significant conceptual, empirical and practical contributions. Conceptually, it critically interrogates the established literature by employing a decolonial political ecology perspective to rethink urban land-grabbing. By incorporating this framework, it not only challenges the prevailing Eurocentric paradigms that have traditionally shaped the study of these conflicts (Mollett, 2015) but also employs another "epistemological base" (Fernandes de Olviera et al., 2013, p. 303) that emphasises epistemological pluralism in understanding these conflicts. This approach enables us to explore the epistemological borderland (Mignolo, 2007) and identify the 'cracks on the border' (Walsh, 2018, p. 84), revealing what the Zapatistas described as a *pluriverse* of world-making practices— histories and knowledges that have long been maintained in the margins by enduring colonial power structures (Blaser et al., 2018; Mignolo, 2009, 2018; Sultana, 2020).

To engage with the pluriverse and situate the struggles for alternative ways of being, thinking and doing, the project draws on the insights of decolonial scholars such as Porto-Gonçalves (2001), Leff (2015), and Oslender (2019), who use a decolonial understanding of territory. This decolonial lens allows us to empirically explore the pluriverse by exploring the symbolic dimension of territory and the ways 'overlapping territorialisation processes' (Haesbaert, 2013) interact within the specific context of urban land grabbing conflict in City X. However, while scholars such as Ehrnström-Fuentes (2019), Querejazu (2016), and Oslender (2019) have embraced a decolonial approach to visit the epistemological borderland in diverse territorial contexts, only a few comprehensive accounts exist detailing its practical application (Alcoff, 2007).

For this reason, this project takes from the explicit methodology approach introduced by Rodriguez et al. (2021) to addresses this practical gap. Building from both the theorical framework and the practical experiences presented by these authors, it transparently conveys the experience of dwelling in the border

(Mignolo, 2010)— where the *ejidatarios* and *comuneros* of City X dwell— through 71 epistemological and transversal dialogues. These dialogues involve participants from three communal land territories, urban developers, governmental agency officers and social movements representatives, along with the description of the tools and materials that facilitated this exploration and the knowledge co-production process. It is important to note, however, that, the aim of this project is not to establish a static or universal methodology to address these conflicts in a "decolonial" way. Instead, it advocates for a dynamic, situated experience of dwelling in the border, framed through three key phases— dialoguing, imagining, and expanding— as a flexible transformative tool that can help others navigate their journeys.

These phases not only structure the reflexive process but also define the structure of this project, narrating how the experience of dwelling in the border offers a pathway to envisioning more ethical futures within this context and beyond. The process begins with deep internal reflection— where the decolonial practitioner critically examines their own position within power structures— towards external action, where the initial dialogue fosters collaboration with other world-making practices. Through the dialoguing phase, the project foundation opens a space for the co-production of knowledge where epistemological and transversal dialogues reveal multiple ontologies— diverse ways to produce, appropriate, claim, defend, and imagine territory. This phase also explores how each actor navigates the tension between traditional ways of life and the pressures of modern urban development. Building on this, the imagining phase takes shape, challenging the dominant and monolithic narrative about urban development and creating opportunities to envision alternatives futures. Finally, the expanding phase invites other worlds to participate in this dialogue, offering a space for new ethical alternatives to emerge. At this point, the political agenda of this project takes shape, embarking on a transformative journey that aims to impact not only on the scholarship of urban land-grabbing but also on the hegemonic power structures that dictate the urban development and threaten the existence of territories in the periphery of cities such as X.

1.2 Project Questions

This thesis project delves into four questions that define its scope and direction:

> PQ1: How can a decolonial political ecology perspective, through the lens of territory, offer an ethically grounded and theoretically robust framework for rethinking urban land-grabbing conflicts?

This first explorative question aims to explore the philosophical and theoretical intersection between the decolonial political ecology field and the territorial perspective in creating a comprehensive framework to examine the urban land-grabbing conflict. This question seeks to explore how this approach can be applied to understand the colonial legacies involved in land-grabbing in urban settings and to develop an ethical pathway to addressing such conflicts.

> PQ2: What forms of decolonial research practice uncover the pluriverse involved in urban land-grabbing conflicts?

The second question is designed to explore which decolonial research approaches can help reveal the multiple, coexisting world-making practices involved in and impacted by urban land-grabbing conflicts. It specifically asks which methods can uncover the diverse ways different worlds understand, experience, and engage with these conflicts, highlighting the plurality of realities and knowledge systems at play.

> PQ3: How do processes of territorialisation define an urban land-grabbing conflict?

The third question aims to explore how territorialisation processes shape and define the nature of urban land-grabbing conflicts. It specifically examines how the actors of each world understand territory and how these interpretations drive the dynamics of the conflict. By focusing on territorialisation, this question aims to reveal how the struggle over territory is not only about the material ground but also an epistemological battle over identity and existence.

PQ4: How does the process of making visible the pluriverse and fostering dialogue between the worlds involved in urban land-grabbing conflict illuminate alternatives for constructing more plural and ethical futures?

The last question follows the ethical objective of the project: to establish a foundation for an epistemological conversation within urban land-grabbing scholarship. To this end, this last question examines the alternative pathways born in the struggle to inspire the development of more inclusive, plural and ethical approach to addressing these conflicts, both within this specific context and beyond.

1.3 Project Structure

This project is structured to embrace a decolonial political ecology approach by transparently presenting the reflexive process of what Mignolo (2011) denominated “dwelling in the border”. By doing so, it challenges universal abstracts in the urban land-grabbing conflict through a transversal and epistemological dialogue between diverse but related worlds, while adhering to the required PhD thesis structure.

To this end, this thesis is structured in 9 chapters. The current introductory chapter provides a comprehensive overview of the entire thesis. The literature review chapter establishes the theoretical framework that underpins this thesis and identifies literature gaps that this project seeks to address. The third chapter provides the necessary background information to situate the empirical chapters within this theoretical framework. The fourth chapter introduces the reflexive process to dwell in the border as a decolonial tool to engage with the pluriverse. The fifth, sixth and seventh chapters serve as empirical chapters, presenting the dialogue with the pluriverse. The eighth chapter interprets and discusses these dialogues. Finally, the ninth chapter corresponds to the political decision of expanding the dialogue to other worlds.

However, the detailed descriptions of each chapter, specifying where each project question is addressed, are presented below:

Chapter 2 *'Literature Review: Towards a Plural and Critical Space for Re-imagining Territory in the Urban Land-grabbing Context'* presents the theoretical framework for this thesis. It critically examines the Latin American decolonial option as an alternative epistemological framework, exploring its intersection with the political ecology field and the territorial perspective. This chapter argues that this intersection creates a space to examine power dynamics and advocate for the resurgence of alternative world-making practices amidst the urban land-grabbing conflict. This chapter, therefore, constructs the theoretical foundation to answer **PQ1.**

Chapter 3 *'Project Context: Urban Land-grabbing in a Medium Sized City in Mexico'* provides a detailed historical context of the city, focusing on the urban land-grabbing phenomenon, while maintaining the city's anonymity. This includes describing the origins of the communal land territories, and the urban land-grabbing conflict, together with its significance. By exploring the historical local context, this chapter also presents the key actors involved in the conflict, their motivations and the resistance strategies implemented in past years. For this reason, this chapter represents the territorial context to answer **PQ3.**

Chapter 4 *'Beyond a Method: Reflexivity as a Decolonial Practice'* answers **PQ2** by developing a personal reflexive process to dwell in the border as a decolonial political ecology practice. This process encourages interaction with the "border" where communal territories are present, offering a critical space to challenge and reimagine dominant paradigms. This Chapter details the three main phases of this reflexive process— dialoguing, imagining, and expanding— along with the specific actions associated with each phase. Additionally, it introduces the three territories selected to represent the pluriverse and discusses the ethical implications of the project.

Chapter 5 *'Internal Dialoguing: Exploring the Impact of my Geo- and Body-politics of Knowledge'* reveals internal dialogue as an ethical act of self-critical introspection. The aim of this chapter is to transparently map my position within the Colonial Matrix of Power and explore how this has shaped the project at every stage— from its conception, through the dialogues with the pluriverse, and within my writing. This chapter starts to empirically answer **PQ3.**

Chapter 6 *'Dialoguing with Territories of transformation'* continues to answer empirically **PQ3** by presenting the epistemological dialogue with three communal land territories. The chapter presents each territory and their situated world-making practice using the five co-produced territoriality processes: producing, appropriating, claiming, defending, and imaging territory.

Chapter 7 *'Dialoguing with Hegemonic Actors'* extends the answer to **PQ3** by portraying the epistemological dialogue with the government agency employees, directors of urban development companies, and representatives of social movements. This chapter follows the structure of Chapter 6, illustrating each actor's world-making practice using the five co-produced territoriality processes: producing, appropriating, claiming, defending, and imaging territory.

Chapter 8 *'Imagining Alternative Territorial Futures'* concludes the discussion of **PQ3** by empirically presenting the pluriverse of ways to construct, appropriate, claim and defend territory amidst the urban land-grabbing conflict. Additionally, it presents the theoretical implications of the findings. This chapter also analyses the de-territorialisation tactics, and the re-territorialisation strategies implemented by the territories. Furthermore, it explores decolonial paths that illuminate alternatives for an ethical and plural future within the urban land-grabbing scholarship.

Finally, **Chapter 9** *'Expanding the Dialogue: Final Reflections to Embrace New Directions*' reviews the project's questions and main contributions. It addresses **PQ4** by articulating the ethical and political decision to frame this decolonial project as the starting point for an epistemological dialogue within the context of urban land-grabbing, aiming to envision alternative futures. This chapter emphasises the project's aim of transcending its immediate focus by encouraging other worlds to join the conversation.

Chapter 2 Literature Review: Towards a Plural and Critical Space for Re-imagining Territory in the Urban Land-grabbing Context

2.1 Decolonial Thinking: The Other Option

Paradigm is a word that identifies the philosophical assumptions that guide a researcher's thinking and practice (Creswell, 2009). Eurocentric social constructions in origin, the existing paradigms, represent a shared set of fundamental beliefs that do not need to be scientifically proven (Guba et al., 1994). They answer the main ontological, epistemological, methodological, and axiological questions: What is real? What is the relationship between knower and what can be known? How can the inquirer produce what they think is knowledge? Moreover, what is the value of what the knower defines as knowledge and the ethics behind their inquiry? (Guba et al.,1994, 2005).

Although Guba et al. (1994) identified four shared positions or paradigms: positivism, post-positivism, post-modernist critical theory, and constructivism, these paradigms are not static (Held, 2019). On the contrary, they are social constructions that interact with each other, leading to mutual evolution (Denzin, 2010; Guba et al., 1994). As a result, new paradigm inquiries and research designs can emerge, providing new perspectives by which to observe and interpret one's phenomenal world (Guba et al., 2005). For example, in 2005, Guba and Lincoln acknowledged the limitation of the constructivist paradigm in recognising experimental knowledge. Consequently, they included the participatory/cooperative paradigm proposed by Heron and Reason into their 1997 updated list of paradigm positions. A couple of years later, Mertens (2007) also suggested the addition of the transformative paradigm as a new orientation to explicitly address social justice and power issues with a social action reform agenda.

For authors such as Kuhn (1962), these paradigm shifts are essential for scientific advancement as they challenge established theories, foster innovation, and facilitate the emergence of groundbreaking findings. However, while authors such as Guba et al. (2005) envision a future where non-Western paradigm shifts are also possible— one of epistemological emancipation

where other ways of seeing the world are accepted without needing validation from academia— there is still a tendency to understand Indigenous worldviews merely as research objects (Held, 2019).

Nevertheless, in response to this systemic marginalisation, an increasing number of scholars are actively denouncing this ontological oppression and advocating for the decolonisation of knowledge (Rodriguez, 2022). This movement, spurred by the imperative to challenge dominant paradigms and amplify non-Western voices, has given rise to two main perspectives that continue to enrich each other: the post-colonial, born in the Middle East and South Asia, and developed also in Africa with significant contributions from scholars addressing the continent's unique colonial histories and resistance strategies; and the decolonial, which emerged in Latin America (Bhambra, 2014; Mignolo, 2007).

The post-colonial perspective is based on the post-structural thinking of Derrida and Foucault (Mignolo, 2007). This perspective projects a transformation within academia's boundaries (Andrade-Guevara, 2020; Mignolo, 2007). This means that it proposes a paradigm shift that calls for Western provincialization (Radcliffe, 2017) and focuses on the political, social, and cultural impacts of colonialism (Mignolo, 2007), including the enduring structures of settler colonialism that seek to remove or assimilate Indigenous presence and assert settler dominance (Wolfe, 2006). In contrast, the decolonial perspective, which frames this project, was formulated by Anibal Quijano (2000) and moves beyond the analysis of colonialism in diverse local contexts. It encourages a position of thought that delinks from Eurocentric epistemology and the modern concept of totality (Mignolo, 2007, 2009). To achieve this epistemological rupture, decolonial thinking is not based on a paradigm shift but on the construction of another epistemological base (Fernandes de Olviera et al., 2013). This is one that upholds that other worldviews do not have to follow the same labels created in the Western research world (Held, 2019). For this reason, decolonial thinking is defined as one of the "other" options or standpoints to re-think the world (Mignolo et al., 2018; Radcliffe, 2017). It represents a space for the reconstruction of histories

and subaltern knowledges, silenced by the ongoing reproduction of modern hierarchies that also have supported the universalisation of Eurocentric knowledge (Mignolo, 2009).

Quijano (2000, 2007) differentiates colonialism and coloniality. Their seminal work introduces the concept of "coloniality" as an alternative approach to analysing the impact of long-standing power structures in Latin America that result from colonialism (Maldonado-Torres, 2007, p. 243). According to Quijano (1998, p. 227), these long-standing power structures are the result of the constant impact of the Colonial Matrix of Power (CMP)— "*the entanglement of multiple heterogenous global hierarchies of sexual, political, epistemic, economic, spiritual, linguistic and racial forms of domination and exploitation*" (Grosfoguel, 2006, p.172)— in the reorganisation of the social existence. The CMP is then linked to the social transformation driven by the conquest and the beginning of a new global power pattern between the conquered and the conquerors that defines Modernity.

Therefore, it was through the establishment of the CMP that the European conquerors presented the idea of Europe as the centre of knowledge and generated a process of categorising all populations outside Western Europe as Indigenous. For Dussel (1994), when the “discoverers” arrived in America, they created in their collective imaginary the Asian-American being, referring to everything that was different as “Asian”. In Dussel’s view, the “ego conquiro” predecessor of the “ego cogito” was created at that moment, when the coloniser subdued the other, imposing their own hegemony. The dominated responded by accepting the rationality of the dominator in order to become a rational and therefore modern citizen. During the first stages of this ongoing process, the dominated surrendered their culture, values, and social traditions. When this happened, the coloniser appropriated the land and the person and promoted the labour force as the maximum expression of dominance (Montano, 2017). This new power pattern defined social roles based on race and marked new racial identities. With the new race classification and social role relationship, colonial power structures make possible the continuous dispossession of both resources and socio-historical identities.

For Mignolo (2011, p.2), who follows Quijano and Dussel's thinking, coloniality is the "*darker side of Western Modernity*". He applies Quijano's concept of the Colonial Matrix of Power to describe coloniality's reach in controlling and managing the four areas of the human experience: knowing and understanding; governance; economy; and humanness (Mignolo, 2020). The first one of these refers to the dismissal of local knowledge in favour of the that of the Western civilization. The second describes the removal of local forms of governance and the construction of the republic. The third one indicates the change from a communal land praxis of living to an economy of accumulation. The fourth refers to the reconfiguration of the human subject with the addition of racism and sexism. Agreeing with Mignolo's view, authors like Verges (2019) complement it by adding that the heteropatriarchy is central to the development of the capitalist system, and therefore to the Eurocentric view. In this way, the Colonial Matrix of Power together with its impact in each area of the human experience endures, even today, in our social constructions.

Following this line of thinking, different authors have followed Fanon's (1963) suggestion to decolonise modes of thinking as the first step towards decolonising theories and confronting power strategies in the knowledge production field. According to Dotson (2011), the epistemic side of colonialism is the dismissal or integration of subaltern knowledges to strengthen and privilege Western knowledge. In this context, non-Western epistemologies from the Global South usually face two forms of epistemic injustice: testimonial, which is linked to the credibility deficit of the subject who speaks, and hermeneutical injustice, which is linked to a historical marginalisation of interpretation (Fricker, 2007). This intentional or unintentional disqualification of other knowledges carried out during the Modernity project is considered epistemic violence (Spivak, 1988) or epistemicide (Santos, 2016).

For this reason, the socio epistemic circumstances that led to the silences and the epistemic resistance strategies produced as a mechanism of contestation must become visible to achieve social learning and construct new paths (Dotson, 2011; Medina, 2013). Medina refers to Anderson (2011) to argue the need for epistemic interaction to communicate certain groups' resistance,

experiences, and imaginations to reach the public interest. For these authors, the epistemic interaction will provide democratic communication by accommodating the heterogeneous experiences and imaginations of the diverse members of the society in the institutions' configuration. Nevertheless, for Latin American decolonial thinkers this solution falls short, they aspire to more than merely establishing a space for participation in the reconfiguration of modern institutions. They search for cognitive justice through a fundamental transformation where other ways of being, thinking and doing are as valid as the modern one (Mignolo, 2010; Rodriguez, 2022).

Quijano (2000) is clearly correct when he says that many are attempting to resist everyday coloniality and that the process of decoloniality must be a struggle involving greater solidarity. However, it is also abundantly clear that the decoloniality process must be a process born from the roots, and its feelings, times and directions must be decided by the people who suffered colonial oppressions, and whom today, with globalisation, continue to struggle. Moreover, to move forward, the coloniser's feelings of guilt must be left behind to make room for a new listening capacity characterised by the values of respect, receptivity, patience, and tolerance. This listening capacity will decolonise all our minds so as to see other alternatives as credible and "*change the terms of the conversation, not just the content*" (Mignolo 2020 p.209).

Quijano (2000) considers that Western epistemology today is in crisis and in conflict with new and diverse epistemic perspectives that question its hegemony and demand their right to narrate global history. However, this does not have to be considered a threat. These new perspectives do not look to discard Eurocentric epistemology; they look to coexist with Eurocentric interpretations and narrations (Roy, 2015; Smith, 1999). These new perspectives result from "beneficial epistemic friction" between different worldviews (Medina, 2013, p.50), acts of epistemic disobedience (Mignolo, 2009) and processes of epistemic resistance brought about by hermeneutic marginalization, unequal access to knowledge and participation practices, and testimonial injustice (Fricker, 2017; Medina, 2013). Therefore, these new

epistemic perspectives delink from the colonial knowledge and the hubris of the ‘zero point’ of complete objectivity, defined by Castro Gomez (2005) and retaken by Mignolo (2010) as untouchable because the idea of a universal, neutral, and objective scientific observation point of view, on which Eurocentrism is based, represents the systematic repression of non-Western ways of knowing (Miles, 2018).

According to Castro-Gomez (2000), this epistemological crisis of the West makes the construction of post-modern philosophies and cultural studies where the differences are emphasised possible. One of such post-modern philosophies is Dussel's liberation philosophy (1977), which proposes the utopic project named “trans-modernity" as an alternative to the theory of Modernity presented by Habermas (Ferres et al., 2014, p.352). For Habermas (1981, p.9), the project of Modernity was developed by the philosophers of the Enlightenment and “*consists in their effort to develop objective science, universal morality and law and autonomous art according to their inner logic […] to utilise this accumulation of specialised culture for the enrichment of everyday life*”. In Habermas’ view, this could only be achieved by implementing a deliberative process through which communicative rationality can be practised as a basis of mutual understanding (Tewdwr-Jones et al., 1998). Therefore, for Habermas, Modernity as an objective of the Enlightenment to enrich life with democracy and reason is not considered a lost cause but an incomplete project (Habermas, 1981).

Although authors such as Foucault have criticised Habermas’ for having overlooked the influence of power structures in shaping the conditions of communicative rationality (Ingram, 2012), Dussel’s trans-modernity project goes beyond that and presents an emancipatory desire. This project pays attention to the epistemic aspect of coloniality and calls for dialogues from the borders of Modernity, from the worldviews that have been excluded from Modernity but survive in the margin (Ahumada-Infante, 2013). A dialogue that requires a transformation in the Colonial Matrix of Power to change the one-way conversation between the West and the Global South (Grosfoguel, 2006).

For Dussel (2004), the excluded worldviews can be pre-modern but never modern. Therefore, the “trans” prefix describes the transversal dialogue that changes the locus of reason by integrating a diversity of critical decolonial answers that recognise the asymmetry between them (ibid). Therefore, the idea of "diversity as a universal project” results from the epistemological intervention of diverse subalterns that question the Eurocentric hegemony and exclusivity of knowledge (Mignolo, 2012, p.95). In this way, the project of trans-modernity challenges the dominant narrative of Western-centric Modernity and proposes a pluriverse— a world of worlds— rather than a universalisation of knowledge.

Thus, Dussel's philosophy is already decolonial because, in an asymmetrical colonial world, the transversal and ethical dialogue between worlds will be possible only if the colonial asymmetries are recognised, and this dialogue initiates from the borders of Modernity (Dussel, 2004).

2.2 The Decolonial Turn in Political Ecology

Although Quijano’s seminal work was published almost twenty-five years ago, it was, ironically, the same Colonial Matrix of Power that kept Latin American decolonial scholarship confined for over a decade to that region. A review using Scopus (2024) revealed that it was not until 2012 that the decolonial approach reached the West and began to gain academic traction. From that moment, scholars from different disciplines started engaging with the decolonial approach through different frameworks. However, amidst this excitement, the danger was that decolonisation became a catch-all term to refer to critical consciousness awareness-raising efforts aimed at identifying colonial structures in different contexts, without fully considering its transformative political agenda.

Tuck and Yang (2012, p.9) highlighted the overuse of "decolonisation as a metaphor" and its detrimental impact hindering decolonial progress while also enabling the perpetuation of colonialism through the practice of "settler moves to innocence”. These moves are defined as strategies to relieve feelings of guilt or responsibility without translating them into actions to return indigenous

land and life, disrupt the architecture of privilege or change the status quo (idem). However, the decolonisation of knowledge should be an ethical act that unveils the Colonial Matrix of Power and its impact on the knowledge production field that dominates local people's existential conditions (Leff, 2015). Likewise, this critique and reflexive process must be viewed as a means to attain epistemological and cultural emancipation towards alternative modes of being, thinking and doing for a sustainable future (Esson et al., 2017; Leff, 2015).

In the quest for a space of decolonial enunciation that could be critical, political, and practical simultaneously, decolonial thinkers found a fertile field in political ecology. This field emerged as a response to the limitations of ecological anthropology and cultural ecology, which primarily examined culture-environment relations while overlooking power dynamics, inequalities and the cultural and social fragmentation resulting from the integration of local communities into the modern system (Paulson et al., 2003; Watts 1983 cited in Peet et al., 1996). Consequently, political ecology was further developed a few years later by its relationship with political economy and its constant dialogue with critical theory. Together, these relationships opened a conversation about the economic and socio-political roots of environmental degradation and risk, focusing on constantly changing subject-nature relations (Neo et al., 2015).

Political ecology, though a broad field with diverse definitions, is marked by its dynamic evolution and autonomy to open new spaces, scales, and themes (Perrault et al., 2015). The political ecology that started by analysing the dialectic between society and land-based resources to explain the environmental concerns in ecology and political economy (Blaikie et al., 1987). However, it soon shifted to examining how those human-environment relationships shape access and control over natural resources, leading to ecological distribution conflicts (Leff, 2006; Watts, 2000). This shift in focus drove the field's evolution by explicitly considering power relations (Robbins, 2020). With the addition of power analysis, the conversation turned into a

discussion of the origin of those power differentials and how they impacted the environmental conditions (Stott et al., 2000).

As a result, political ecology differentiates itself from apolitical ecology by actively challenging interpretations of the environmental crisis and its dominant solutions that neglect or downplay political dynamics (Robbins, 2020). Therefore, this field moves away from the illusion of neutrality in ecological science and explicitly recognises the political implications of scientific arguments being made to confront the environmental crisis (Enzensberger, 1974). Additionally, it creates a space to analyse power in the politics of environmental knowledge construction (Forsyth, 2003; Paulson et al., 2003) and promotes a political agenda that advocates for more inclusive and equitable approaches to environmental management and policy.

For Perrault et al. (2015), political ecology is based on common ground. Theoretically, it is rooted in critical social theory; methodologically, it maintains approaches that emphasise empiricism; and politically, it has a social justice agenda where radical politics can be designed. However, its proponents have taken diverse approaches, expanding the field and its political directions in different ways. This diversity has been studied by Tetreault (2017), who categorised the field into three forms: materialist, post-structuralist, and materialist-post-structuralist.

The "materialist" form is a neo-Marxist structural approach associated with the Marxist political economy perspective that uses class-differentiation lenses and the global economy to understand environmental problems. Some examples are the works of Enzensberger (1974), Blaikie and Brookfield (1987) and Swyngedouw et al. (2003). Enzensberger (1974) expressed that the environmental crisis is determined by the mode of production and the social structures that prioritise profit over sustainability. In their view, “the capitalist societies have probably thrown away the chance of realizing Marx’s project for the reconciliation of man and nature” (ibid, p.31).

Blaikie and Brookfield (1987, p.1) argued that the “degradation of the environment is by definition a social problem”, which mainly occurs when the

land is poorly managed. For Blaikie and Brookfield (1987), land management is impacted by the economic capacity of the ‘land manager’. In this way, it is not the bourgeoise class who are only responsible for the environmental crisis but the peasants and pastoralists who degrade the environment while trying to maintain a production that cannot be sustained in the capitalist world in which they are also immersed.

Another materialist example is Urban Political Ecology (UPE), a direction pioneered by Swyngedouw et al. (2003) and that has attracted significant attention from researchers. It focuses on cities as a metabolism where materials, energy, and waste are continuously consumed, transformed and expelled (Keil, 2003). Furthermore, it opened the door to examine how capitalism shapes the uneven distribution of material resources within the city and the conflicts that arise in connection with these power asymmetries (idem).

The second form, "post-structuralist", criticised the severity of the materialist form for ignoring the analysis of the influence of everyday politics on the symbolic significance of natural resources (Walker, 2005). Through a post-structural lens, there should be no political ecology analysis without studying the “politics” of the nature-subject interrelations. From this perspective, nature is socially constructed by a discourse process that can be analysed using language as a tool to construct social reality (Escobar, 1996). Therefore, this perspective might employ discourse analysis to understand the social construction of environmental issues and to identify the origin and establishment of those discourses. For authors such as Stott et al. (2000), narratives about the environment help identify power relationships and assert the consequences of hegemony over and within these narratives. This new direction opened up space for “other political ecologies” that question the Anglo-American hegemony (Kim et al., 2012) and approaches that have been relegated to the margins of the political ecology scholarship. Some examples are the feminist, developmental, and post-colonial approaches where variables such as race, gender, age, and class were analysed in relation to the access, control, and distribution of natural resources and to the diverse identities that

are constituted in connection with nature (see Braidotti et al., 1994; Elias et al., 2021; Fairhead et al., 1996; Leach, 2016; Mollett et al, 2013; Peluso, 2012).

The third form of political ecology overlaps with the previous two, avoiding extreme materialism and the absolute relativism of post-structuralism (Tetreault, 2017). For Tetreault, the third form has been a promising space for epistemological reflection. Some of the examples highlighted are Delgado Ramos (2015), who uses hybrid studies to analyse conflicts over natural resources, and Blaikie (1999) who, after collaborating within the materialist form, proposed an alternative type of analysis. Blaikie suggested linking environment and knowledge through diverse and innovative ways to understand the social-natural relations towards social justice (Forsyth, 2008).

Although Tetreault (2017) mapped the Latin American decolonial turn in political ecology within the third form, where new epistemological foundations can be formulated to analyse social conflicts and resistance strategies against territorial dispossession, in this project, I advocate for its re-categorisation. This is because the decolonial turn must be understood as a radical approach that cannot be categorised under any of the three forms identified by Tetreault. After all, they represent categories originating within Eurocentric rationality. In contrast, the decolonial turn has its foundation on another epistemological base that, as previously mentioned in section 2.1, coexists with the Eurocentric worldview, but moves at its own pace and direction.

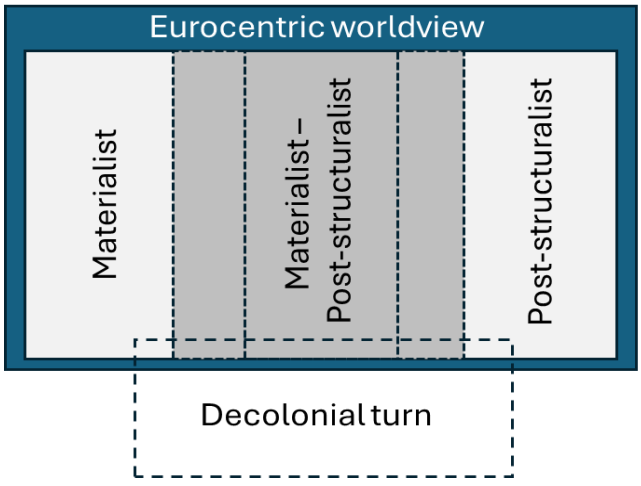

Figure 1 The decolonial turn in political ecology.

In this way, the decolonial approach is based on a new ontological and epistemological thesis toward "a politics of difference" (Leff, 2006, p.27). This politics of difference emerges when the subject's "radical difference" resists the Western epistemological hegemony and the capitalist homogenisation of their values and ways of relating with nature (Leff, 2015, p. 20).

To resist this epistemological oppression and obtain epistemological emancipation, decolonisation practices are indispensable. These practices represent the epistemic disobedience of the subject in a world where coloniality has continued to determine who can create natures and cultures (Escobar, 1998). However, for some political ecology scholars embracing decolonial thinking, the only way to truly attain emancipation is if the process of decolonisation starts within the political ecology field itself (Collins et al., 2021; Loftus, 2019; Schulz, 2017; Sultana, 2020), within the scholar's home institutions and organisations (Zanotti et al., 2020), and within its approach to praxis (Sultana, 2023; Zanotti et al., 2020). For this reason, this group of scholars have initiated a fundamental critique of the political ecology field, highlighting its foundation in Western paradigms and the use of colonial spaces of knowledge dominated by white scholars for its development (Collins et al., 2021; Schulz, 2017; Sultana, 2020; Zanotti et al., 2020).

In this way, by shedding light on the impact of the CMP and the importance of representation within the political ecology field, these scholars have recognised the decolonial option as a pathway to construct a new field in the geography of knowledge (Leff, 2006). This field showcases decolonisation practices that reveal that other world-making processes— other ways to understand reality and construct life in relation to nature— already exist. These processes, often found in the margins, struggle to be epistemologically acknowledged even within interdisciplinary and dynamically evolving fields such as political ecology (Leff, 2006, p.21).

However, it is through decolonial lenses that it is possible to construct a standpoint for denunciation that can potentially enable a shift from the margins to the centre (Sultana, 2020). By embracing these perspectives, we can transcend the traditional dichotomies often emphasised in other forms of

political ecology— such as the division between urban and rural— allowing for a more holistic understanding of human experiences (Mignolo, 2011). This is because the decolonial option is both political and theoretical-practical. It provides a political space to examine power through the impact of coloniality in all the areas of human experience while advocating for the emergence of socio-ecological practices that re-claim other worlds: other ways of being, thinking and doing that have been repressed since colonial times (Leff, 2006). Additionally, it offers a theoretical and practical space where academics can engage with activists and communities to create meaningful transformations on the ground (Sultana, 2023).

In this way, the decolonial option emerges as a catalyst for change, offering not only a space of critique but a theoretical-practical route that empowers the construction of a radical political and social transformative agenda. This agenda challenges existing power structures and systems of domination by proposing a transversal and epistemological dialogue between different but situated ways to relate with nature towards a truly ethical and sustainable future (Lang et al., 2012; Leff, 2015).

2.3 Decolonising Territory to Observe a Pluriverse of Ontological Practices

Scholars across various disciplines have increasingly turned to decolonial political ecology as an alternative approach for understanding socio-environmental conflicts and fostering transformative changes. Grounded in decolonial thought, this approach challenges the dominant knowledge systems and colonial legacies that are deeply ingrained in academic discourse and practices. By acknowledging alternatives and situated ontologies that redefine human and nature relationships (Leff, 2006, 2015), decolonial political ecology not only provides a critical perspective but also paves the way for alternative futures.

To critically situate ongoing struggles for alternative ways of being, thinking and doing, decolonial political ecology scholars have incorporated a space-based approach to engage with worlds that have been maintained at the margins (Sultana, 2023). This space-based approach has generated two

connected yet simultaneously distinct pathways to link these struggles to a specific context and nature-subject symbolic relations. For North American and Australian scholars, such as Burow et al. (2018), Liboiron (2021); McDonnell et al. (2022), and Tuck et al., (2012), and movements, such as Land Back (2024), 'land' represents the locus of meaning and power eroded since colonial times. For these scholars, land is more than a material object: it is a source of identity, culture, spirituality, and livelihood. Therefore, land rights and, specifically, the "*repatriation of Indigenous land and life*" is considered the only path towards decolonisation (Tuck et al., 2012, p.1).

In Latin America, scholars and social movements have presented the decolonised notion of *territory* as a radical spatial vision that represents another world system born from the struggle (Porto-Gonçalves in Aichino et al., 2015). Although this spatial base recognises the importance of land as one of the material grounds for constructing territory, its conceptualisation moves away from colonial practices of space-making and *terra-forming*. It presents a decision to emancipate from the confines of the State logic in order to illuminate a territory that encompasses a diverse spectrum of dimensions to present situated politics, knowledges, and subject-nature connections (Hope, 2021).

In this way, decolonising territory means opening the mind to other ways of understanding territory. It involves abandoning Eurocentric thinking and acknowledging the existence of multiple geographies— multiple ways to describe and mark complex human-nature relationships in a territory[2] (Porto-Gonçalves, 2001). These geographies have been systematically silenced by the Colonial Matrix of Power (Quijano, 2000) and, therefore, have been kept in the 'waiting room of history' (Chakrabarty in Rojas, 2016, p.373).

Decolonial advocates such as Leff (2015), Porto-Gonçalves (2001, 2009) and Oslender (2019) have found in the geographies of territories a tool to reveal other worlds. These authors have used their Latin American experience and the voices of social movements to present another signification of territory.

[2] An example of an action-oriented approach that seek to understand these complex human-nature connections is "Cuerpo-territorio" (Body-Territory). This feminist and decolonial practice engages participants in using their bodies to map their territory, drawing on personal experiences and emotions to challenge and decolonise conventional geographic narratives (Zaragocin et al., 2021).

This alternative understanding of territory allows us to understand the ontological causes of a current crisis, said to be of values and significances (Escobar, 2019). A crisis driven by the modern hegemonic living model that disrespects life (Porto-Gonçalves, 2001; Leff 2001, 2015) and attempts to be universal by dominating other social groups' ontologies (Escobar 2015).

Following this perspective, "not all spaces are territories" (Zibenchi in Streule et al. 2019, pp 108). The territory is life, body, and symbol (Leff, 2001). It is a malleable space to reproduce culture and build collective identity. It is the space where collective identities take possession of the land to stamp their own life model: its own symbolic, spatial, and economic characteristics (Ruiz-Medrano et al., 2014). Therefore, the communities' life model and the subjects' ethos are based on symbolic relations between nature and subject that creates a map of significances that brings meaning to their social and economic practices (Leff 2001). In this re-signification, territory is not only discourse, but also practice (Halvorsen, 2019). It is the process where territory intertwines with nature and subjects in a 'map of significances' (Leff, 2001, p. viii) constructing each other.

In this way, territorialisation as the social process to construct territory (Schwarz et al., 2017) could not exist without a particular map of significances. For this reason, for decolonial authors like Escobar (2017, p.246), it is clear that "things and beings *are* their relations, they do not exist prior to them", so, the territory constructed through this map of significances, makes visible other 'relational ontologies'. This means "other ways of being and becoming in a territory and place" (p.246) based on alternative and interconnected configurations of life.

Therefore, multiple territorialities and territorialisation processes can coexist, representing diverse worlds, a pluriverse of ontological practices that are interconnected and in a constant evolution (Clare et al., 2017; Escobar, 2017; Montes, 2022). However, ontological, and epistemological conflicts can become visible when concurrent territorialisation processes occur (Agnew et al., 2016). The different configurations of symbolic relations between nature

and subject create epistemological and political tension that can lead to political actions to dominate or defend their right to exist (Halvorsen, 2018).

For Blaser (2013) and Escobar (2017), political ontology is a vital subfield in critical studies' "commitment to the pluriverse" (Blaser, 2013, p. 552). It provides a critical approach to observe the inter-relations within worlds and between worlds— including more than human' worlds— and the possible conflicts that may arise when multiple worlds encounter (Blaser, 2013). This is because, during an ontological and epistemological conflict, we can find "more than resistance, re-existence" (Porto Gonçalves, 2009, p 131).

These ontological encounters take place in a context where 'territorialised powers' are inscribed on the land (Peluso et al., 2012) and in places like Latin America, defined since colonial times (Leff, 2006). Building on this foundation, authors like Clare et al. (2017) and Rodriguez et al. (2018) have described the ways in which territorialised powers are mobilised, offering complementary yet distinct perspectives that together provide a more comprehensive understanding of this power dynamics in territorial conflicts.

Rodriguez et al. (2018) and Rodriguez et al (2021) introduced the Conflict Transformation Framework, distinguishing between two types of power: the hegemonic power, characterised by domination expressed in visible, invisible and hidden ways, and the transformative power which seeks to challenge and influence the hegemonic power towards social change. Similarly, Clare et al. (2017) use the Spanish words '*Poder*' and '*Potencia*' to distinguish two diverse but related forms of territorialised power. While *Poder* (power over) is explained as centralised and potentially authoritative, *Potencia* (power to) is described as an ongoing process created locally.

However, in this context of interconnectedness, both hegemonic and transformative power can use diverse forms of power— whether *Poder* or *Potencia*— to reach their goals. Interestingly, while *Poder* is frequently linked to hegemonic domination and *Potencia* to transformative power, these two forms of power overlap in contested territories. Here, socio-territorial movements strategically use *Poder* and, at the same time, their capacity to

produce *Potencia* to demand their right to produce territory, to reconfigure unequal power relations and, in some cases, to construct other futures (Zibechi in Streule and Schwarz, 2019, p.105).

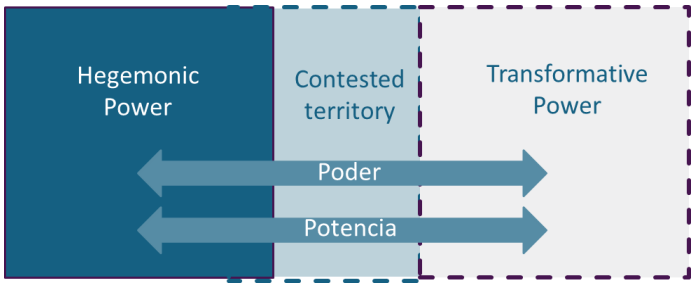

Figure 2 Overlapping powers in contested territories

For this reason, the contested territories, where both *Poder* and *Potencia* intersect, are spaces that have been often described using the territorialisation, de-territorialisation, and re-territorialisation (TDR) framework. This epistemological model has been applied in diverse ways for philosophers such as Deleuze and Guattari (1980), and DeLanda (Woods, 2014), social movements such as the Zapatistas (Urrutia, 2006), and geographers such as Raffestin (1986, 2012) to understand the connections, power dynamics, and identity processes through which territory is re/de constructed.

According to Raffestin, the TDR process is a continuous and cyclical phenomenon essential to understanding how territories are constructed and reconstructed. Additionally, this epistemological approach allows us to move beyond colonial categorisations of displacement (Lombard et al., 2023) and consider the contested territories as active spaces for knowledge production. The place where alternatives, that once were displaced by the hegemonic system, can become visible (Horn et al., 2021; Querejazu, 2016).

Therefore, the geography of this project is a geography that emerges from the epistemological borders of Modernity. This means, from the voices of contested territories or, as Dussel and Escobar (2015 p. 84) refer to them, “territories of difference”, territories that through their mobilisation of *Poder* and *Potencia* have developed a transformative power (Rodriguez et al., 2018). These territories are designated as such because they are the ones that resist

their homogenisation and represent an alternative, a different way to relate with nature and define their self (Dussel, 2004).

However, being a territory of transformation does not mean it does not reproduce capitalism or completely neglects modernity (Zibenchi in Streule et al. 2019). The Colonial Matrix of Power has impacted us all in different ways, and today, there is nothing entirely outside of the modern hegemonic system (Grosfoguel, 2011). Therefore, these territories of transformation are spaces of praxis, that coexist with domination and resistance processes and therefore, are located at the epistemological borderland: as a vague place in constant transition (Anzaldua, 2012).

2.4 The Path Towards the Epistemological Borderland

The epistemic term "borderland" was introduced by Anzaldua in 1987 in her book "Borderlands/La frontera: the new mestiza". In this book, Anzaldua shares an "autohistoria," or self-history, which describes their personal and collective Chicana[3] history and its intersections with colonial legacies of gender, race, class, and sexuality. In their autohistoria, Anzaldua distinguishes between the physical border and the borderland. The physical border refers to the line that separates Mexico and the USA, while the borderland is a place of emotional residue, full of contradictions and inhabited by people who, just like them, have been displaced from the modern system.

Mignolo was inspired by Anzaldua's reflexive work and, drawing on their metaphorical idea of borderland, developed the concept of "border thinking" (Mignolo, 2007). In their perspective, border thinking is defined as an epistemic tool for dwelling[4] in the border, at the limit of Western philosophy, where different yet related ontologies and epistemologies intersect (Mignolo, 2002).

The border, therefore, represents the place where other ways of thinking, doing and being are possible because they emerge from the "exteriority"—from the cracks of the modern world (Mignolo, 2002). These cracks are created

[3] Term to define someone with Mexican ancestry born in the USA.
[4] The term "dwelling" is used by Mignolo (2011) to refer to the epistemological place from which you think and construct knowledge.

by individual and collective actions resulting from colonial differences (Faria, 2013). When this happens, new articulations between internal and external borders are constructed, giving to the dweller of the border, the capacity to be critical in both directions (Alcoff, 2007).

Therefore, as a dynamic place, border thinking moves away from modern binaries that limit the subjects' capacity to imagine something outside of the border to give way to a place where "pluralistic identities can flourish" and a home of encounters that cannot take place elsewhere (Abizadeh, 2008 in Agnew, 2008, 178). For this reason, border thinking is also a form of praxis, a decolonial tool of epistemic disobedience that opens other spaces for knowledge production towards new definitions of democracy and human rights (Abdulla, 2021; Grosfoguel, 2006).

In this way, border thinking makes a shift in enunciating knowledge possible. This shift means the possibility of "bringing the space to the centre of history and letting it speak" (Porto Gonçalves, 2009, pp 22). By doing so, border thinking is transformed into an emancipatory tool that makes visible an epistemic pluralism that emerges from the colonial legacies, differences, and wounds (Mignolo, 2012, 2018)— a pluriverse of ways of producing geographies and futures.

However, although the ideas and discussions around the pluriverse and border thinking have primarily been maintained at a theoretical-epistemological level since their presentation at the beginning of this century (Alcoff, 2007; Oslender, 2019), some authors, such as Ehrnström-Fuentes (2022), Querejazu (2016), Oslender (2019), and Rodriguez et al., (2021) have risen to the challenge of visiting the borderland, to empirically encounter the pluriverse. They have presented ethnographic evidence of relational ontologies from Uruguay, Los Andes, and Colombia as examples of the pluriverse: unique ways to relate within particular worlds and between worlds.

For instance, in their paper on Uruguay, Ehrnström-Fuentes (2022) shares the narratives of three farmers who struggle against extractive operations implemented by forestry programmes. Despite representing different yet

related world-making practices, constructed in the struggle, their voices were excluded from public debate. This exclusion led to a gradual transformation of their human-nature relationship and, consequently, their world-making process (ibid.).

By the same token but from International Relations (IR) scholarship, Querejazu (2016) presents the Andean worldview as evidence of the pluriverse. This relational cosmovision illustrates the existence of diverse and interrelated worlds that are not just connected between them but also to the natural and spiritual worlds. For Querejazu, the pluriverse can allow us to experience incommensurability and overcome modern dichotomic thinking and monolithic categories and concepts in IR studies.

Oslender (2019) introduces the ontological conflict between the aquatic space and the modern world. This aquatic space is presented as an example of a territory of transformation— unique everyday patterns rooted in a deep relationship between humans and the Colombian Pacific coast lowlands characterised by their mangrove swamps connected by rivers with variable water levels. This author concludes that the aquatic space constitutes a third space to expand the geographical imagination to more-than-human geographies.

Equally important, Rodriguez et al., (2021) explore the diverse peace initiatives developed through the “School, Territory, and Post-Conflict” project in Tolima, Colombia, highlighting a ‘pluriverse’ of approaches to peace. Employing participatory research, the authors illustrate how community organisations address violence, foster resilience, and cultivate peace. Their book critically examines the peacebuilding process, inviting reflection on how these methodologies are practiced.

These four examples of local histories from a decolonial perspective share a common characteristic. They do not pretend to generalize their worlds or propose theoretical universalities. Instead, their narratives are intended to move beyond modern notions like multiculturalism, which only acknowledge

differences if they are expressed from the same ontological origin, and evidence a pluriverse of situated-ontological positions (Querejazu, 2016).

In this way and following their call to visit the borderland and reveal other ontological positions towards a plural future, this research aims to start a novel epistemological and transversal dialogue in the land-grabbing scholarship. This dialogue is based on the presentation of the pluriverse- unique ways of constructing territory that have come to light during a territorial and epistemological conflict in the periphery of a medium-sized city in Mexico. By illuminating other ontological and epistemological positions, this project aims to challenge the dominant notion of 'development' as the indispensable and sole envisioned future by exploring alternative possibilities (Murrey et al., 2023). To achieve this challenge, it seeks to disrupt the current direction of land-grabbing scholarship and destabilise the Colonial Matrix of Power embedded in urban planning practice towards more plural, ethical and sustainable futures (Miraftab, 2009; Sundaresan, 2019; Ortiz, 2023).

Having laid out the decolonial political ecology standpoint that grounds this thesis, the next section examines the importance of urban land-grabbing as a site of struggle within this context.

2.5 Urban Land Grabbing: The Struggle That Can Illuminate Alternatives

Land appropriation and dispossession is not an isolated or unique incident. Authors such as Constantin et al. (2017) find its origins in pre-colonial inter-tribal times. Even the Marxist definition of 'land-grabbing' traces its origins to 1867 to refer to the systematic grab of common lands during the English enclosure movement from the 15th century to the 18th century. However, this concept re-emerged in 2008 to describe how the large countries and corporations, who were looking for 'safe havens', began implementing large-scale acquisitions in the "Global South" to offset the financial, food and fuel crisis (Zoomers et al., 2016).

These types of large-scale acquisitions have been associated with negative social and environmental impacts, such as the destruction of ecosystems, loss of biodiversity, food and tenure insecurity, human rights violations, and violent

dispossessions (Busscher et al., 2019; Seghezzo et al., 2022). Despite these consequences, the power imbalance between the land grabber and the local peoples, often constructed since colonial times, has made it, exceedingly challenging for the latter to resist it or to create a mobilisation that could reach the public sphere (Ehrnström-Fuentes, 2019; Scoones et al., 2019).

According to Reid-Ross (2014, p.12), five conditions contributed to the increase of cases and the escalation of this phenomenon to a global level: climate change, financial speculation, the Great Recession, resource scarcities and the politics of extractivism, as well as imperialist history. In their view, the recession led the former colonial countries to engage in extractive policies in their former colonised territories; the resulting large-scale extractivism created resource scarcities, which led to a need to open new spaces in formerly colonised countries to access more resources. The acquisition of new tracts of land, often by force, to extract more resources have accelerated climate change and incremented, even more, the pressure on the remaining natural resources.

For authors such as Mancilla et al. (2023), this increased pressure over the remaining natural resources is leading to two additional forms of territory loss. The first one occurs directly through disrupted climate patterns and disasters, while the second arises indirectly through the implementation of mitigation measures in specific regions, often disregarding the affected communities' collective right to self-determination. The continuing indirect loss of territory has attracted the attention of two distinct groups of authors. The first group addresses what they term "green-grabbing" or "blue-grabbing," referring to the appropriation of land or marine resources driven by conservation strategies or so-called "green" agendas (Benjaminsen, 2012; Fairhead et al., 2012). The second group, on the other hand, uses terms like "green colonialism" or "energy colonialism" to describe how conservation models are imposed on the Global South, often reflecting a continuation of colonial dynamics (Lang et al., 2024; Sanchez-Contreras et al., 2023).

Building on these discussions of land appropriation and territorial loss, other scholars have delved deeper into the specifics of land-grabbing. These authors

focus on case studies to explore the various forms in which land-grabbing occurs, including the scale and distribution of land deals (Edelman, 2013), the types of land deals (Hall, 2011), the spheres of influence— urban, rural, or peri-urban (Feola et al., 2019; Zoomers et al., 2017)— the character, orientation, and direction of land use change (Borras et al., 2011), the actors involved and their roles in the deals (Hall, 2011; Larder, 2015; McDonnell, 2017; Wolford et al., 2013), the differentiated outcomes (Lombard et al., 2023), political reactions to the grabs (Hall et al., 2015; Khan, 2022; Obuene, 2022; Podder, 2023) and the political contestation to control land grabbing (Borras et al., 2013; Cotula et al., 2009; ILC, 2019; Kapstein, 2018).

This “literature rush” of land-grabbing publications that started in 2009 (Oya, 2013, p.1534) is known as the “first wave” or the “making sense period” (Edelman et al., 2013, p.1520). During this period, authors had a strong inclination towards the use of a political economy perspective and the Marxist concepts of ‘primitive accumulation’ and ‘accumulation by dispossession’. These concepts were employed to understand the different forms of land grabs as part of the necessary dynamic to maintain capitalism (Borras et al., 2011; Hall, 2013). However, the abundance of publications during this period generated two linked consequences. Firstly, while it helped to build an academic consensus about the phenomenon's importance, magnitude, and diversity (White et al., 2012), it also limited the time for reflection. Secondly, this situation buried significant research that proposed new directions, ultimately slowing progress in the exploration of knowledge frontiers (Yang, 2021). Among these researchers are Zoomers et al. (2017), Borras et al. (2011), Edelman et al., (2013), and Mollet (2016). They have critiqued this early body of work for its unbalanced geographical focus and its narrow emphasis on agricultural land deals, while also advocating for a broader research agenda.

For instance, Zoomers et al. (2017) emphasised the need to expand research beyond Africa and agricultural land acquisitions to include urban areas, particularly cities' peripheries in the Global South. Similarly, Borras et al. (2011) urged researchers to examine places beyond Africa, like Latin America,

where land-grabbing is taking other forms and occurring in non-food sectors. Finally, Edelman et al. (2013, p. 1715) and Mollet (2016) stressed the need to incorporate a historical intersectional perspective, urging scholars to view this current phenomenon as an outcome shaped by the past.

Although some of these papers were written several years ago, their calls did not find much echo. This oversight is mirrored in the unbalanced representation of cases reported on the Land Matrix Portal by citizens, scholars, and social movements. Since 2008, 2,638 land-grabbing cases worldwide, equivalent to 153 million hectares, have been captured on the Land Matrix portal (2023). Although the portal creates open access to report significant land acquisitions in Asia, Africa, Eastern Europe, and Latin America, the database shows an unbalanced geographical distribution of the cases. Latin America remains the region least represented, with 14% of the cases reported (Land Matrix, 2023). Additionally, the database shows an important concentration of food-centred cases and only 0.83% of the cases reported worldwide have been linked to the land speculation or real estate sector (ibid.). This limited representation, according to authors like Otsuki et al. (2023) has contributed to a lack of guidelines specifically addressing urban land-grabbing issues.

For authors like Yang et al. (2021), the literature focus on specific regions and sectors, as well as the way in which the Land Matrix database is presented, can be associated with the circumstances surrounding the land-grabbing phenomenon. These dynamics include the lack of transparency, corruption mechanisms, the participation of domestic actors and the reproduction of diverse forms of violence. On the other hand, for authors like Borras et al. (2011), the specific research settings in the literature have been shaped by the prevailing assumptions created by the same literature rush.

However, while some scholars decided to continue focusing on a specific type of grab others decided to move to the second wave or the “post-making sense period” (Edelman et al., 2013). This wave is characterised by authors who have decided to step back from the literature “hype”, move beyond established dichotomies, look past the visible results of land-grabbing, and shift away from

the need to hold someone accountable. Instead, these authors present their conceptual and methodological concerns surrounding the way land grabbing has been framed and analysed, while also proposing new directions for research and understanding (Edelman et al., 2013; Kaag et al.,2014; Van Noorloos et al., 2018).

Some of the authors who moved to the second wave are Borras et al. (2011, 2013) and Hall (2011, 2013). Their papers critically reflect on the significant role of the researchers as political agents and how their perspectives define the way land-grabbing has been framing and understood. For instance, during the literature rush, the use of the concepts “land-grabbing” and “large-scale land acquisitions or investments” denoted different political agendas. While the land-grabbing concept was used to motivate political action, the depoliticised phrase “large-scale land acquisition” was presented as a normative strategy to reduce poverty in the Global South. For this reason, these authors question the research that provides governance recommendations rather than calling into question the development paradigm that encourages land-grabbing in the first place.

German (2022) and Lombard et al. (2023) are other authors, who, while not explicitly focusing on land grabbing, have in recent years introduced new directions aligned with the critical thinking of second-wave authors, offering valuable insights for addressing this type of conflict. For instance, German (2022) explores the land dynamics in Africa, highlighting how power and knowledge, defined since colonial times, influences who controls and uses the land. However, the book does not follow a decolonial and, therefore, transformative agenda; instead, it calls for more equitable and inclusive governance mechanisms. On the other hand, Lombard et al (2023) suggests the use of the TDR (territorialisation, de-territorialisation, and re-territorialisation) lenses to understand displacement, have paved the way to understand its dual impact— both physical and symbolic in places such as Colombia. Their work also highlights the critical role of re-territorialisation in reaffirming symbolic connections with the territory. These two new directions confirm the ongoing evolution in the field, emphasising a deeper understanding

of the nature-subjects' symbolic relationships that construct territory and the impacts of displacement beyond the traditional frameworks.

For this reason, this PhD project aligns with the second-wave scholars who critically question the conceptual framework used in the land-grabbing literature whilst seeking to fill an empirical research gap. Epistemologically speaking, the project is based on a decolonial political ecology approach that challenges the Eurocentric foundation on which the current literature is based. It presents the epistemological tool of 'dwelling in the border' to observe the pluriverse: the relational ontologies that have come into light during the urban land-grabbing conflict. Additionally, by situating the project on the periphery of a medium-sized city in Mexico it expands the geographical and thematic focus of land-grabbing scholarship.

These medium-sized cities are increasingly recognised as significant sites of urban expansion, where conflicts over land control are actively unfolding but also as a fertile ground for envisioning a pluriverse of alternative futures. This is because in this context, the communal territories resisting urbanisation embody other ways of producing geographies and futures. However, today, they also serve as tangible proof of the struggle of resisting, assimilating, and reproducing the world system as the city expands and specific land-grabbing strategies, immersed in colonial power structures, lead to de-territorialisation and re-territorialisation processes. Furthermore, this project presents the adaptive reconfiguration of coloniality in response to resistance territorial strategies and how this determines land-grabbing attempts. In doing so, it speaks to the project of reconfiguring the notion of territory as a symbolic base born in the struggle and the place where ontological and epistemological emancipation is possible.

Built on a decolonial foundation and therefore, informed by a historical, intersectional perspective, this project also advances an explicit radical political agenda. It seeks to serve as a bridge for fostering an epistemological and transversal dialogue between different but related worlds involved in urban land-grabbing conflict. This dialogue— one that enacts pluriversality— offers

a pathway toward a plural and ethical future in the urban land-grabbing scholarship.

Chapter 3 Project Context: Urban Land-grabbing in a Medium Sized City in Mexico

3.1 Introduction

Since its foundation in colonial times, this medium-sized city in Mexico, hereinafter "City X", has been characterised for being a territory established in the name of capital accumulation and where de-territorialisation processes and resistance strategies are at play, leading to the constant reconfiguration of subject-nature relations.

However, it is only through the presentation of its history that the reader will be transported to this city, where coloniality can be felt with all their senses: it can be observed in the impact of the Colonial Matrix of Power shaping the social, economic and political structures that define the city expansion; it can be felt in the materials that were used to build the city; it can be heard in the sound of the end-of-shift bell that resonates in the city remembering its extractive ongoing history; it can be smelt when passing through the periphery of the city, where the firewood reminds you that it is time to go home to eat, and it can be tasted when the wind changes direction and a flavour of copper coin permeates your throat.

Additionally, by recounting the city's past through the abundances and absences of its historical sources, this chapter presents the ontological and epistemological roots that underpin the urban land-grabbing struggle. By doing so, it sheds light on the complex intersection of Modernity and Coloniality and how it continues to shape the city's present.

3.2 Significance Unveiled: Exploring History Through Land Accumulation, Dispossession, and Resistance

City X is situated in a cultural and geographical region known as *Aridoamérica* (Arid-America), characterised by its arid climate and challenging environmental conditions. On the other hand, *Mesoamérica* (middle America) comprises the central and southern parts of Mexico and is distinguished by the abundant availability of natural resources. The diverse Indigenous groups of

Aridoamérica, collectively called *Chichimecas*, faced formidable climatic constraints that not only influenced the size of their settlements but also shaped their adaptive strategies and lifestyles. These conditions are notably reflected in the descriptions provided by the Spanish, who labelled all the Chichimecas as salvages, warriors, natural hunters[5], traders, and nomads with a good understanding of their landscape, but who did not practice agriculture –a portrayal that coloured scholarly interpretations of their existence (Flores, 2018).

However, a new study focused on a specific group of Chichimecas that lived in the region of City X has called into question the assumption of a nomadic lifestyle, offering new insights into the territorialisation process that unfolded in this region. For Mellink et al. (2018), the *tunales,* the geographical spaces characterised by the presence of *nopal*[6] cacti, could have provided at least ten plant foods and 17 edible vertebrates that, complemented with hunting, create favourable habitats for a sedentary lifestyle. This new perspective calls for re-evaluating the socio-environmental dynamics and settlement patterns, and recognising the impact of the Colonial Matrix of Power in shaping the historical narratives associated with this group of Chichimecas.

The arrival of the Spanish in Mexico in 1519 marked a pivotal moment in history. Initially, their exploration focused on central and southern regions where they encountered an unexpected scenario: civilisations with political and social organisations that constructed large cities, developed writing codices, and even had an army to defend themselves[7] (Martinez,1989). Due to these circumstances and the fact that they had no means to expand their military forces or replenish their supplies, they formed military alliances with Indigenous towns that were subjected to the *Mexica* rule— a civilisation that controlled most of Mesoamerican region during the Spanish conquest (AGN, 2021). With the promise of titles, land, and privileges, various Indigenous

[5] The Spanish described the Chichimecas as legendary archers (Flores, 2018).
[6] The National Commission for the Knowledge and Use of Biodiversity (2022) explains that the name "Nopal" is the common name for a native cactus in Mexico scientifically recognised as Opuntia ficus-indica. It distributes from the centre to the north of Mexico and includes 90 different species. The nopales have nutritional, chemical, industrial, ecological, medicinal, and symbolic properties.
[7] The army of the civilisations in what is today Mexico were numerous but possessed only primitive weapons (Martinez,1989).

towns, including the *Tlaxcaltecas*, joined the Spanish in their fight against a common enemy. The Tlaxcaltecas, with their large army, played a significant role in the Fall of Tenochtitlan, the capital of the Mexica Empire in 1521 (Secretaria de Cultura, 2019).

However, it was not until after the Fall of Tenochtitlan that the Spanish attention turned northward, sparking conflicts with the Chichimecas over territorial control. The de-territorialisation battle that dismantled the Chichimeca's lifestyle lasted around 50 years and was recorded as the toughest and bloodiest of all the battles during Spanish conquest[8] in what is now known as Mexico (Anonymised authors, 2015).

Amidst this conflict, in 1546, the Spanish stumbled upon one of the richest gold and silver mines within Chichimecas territory. The discovery of this valuable resource paved the way for one of the biggest colonial extractive processes in the region. Peña (1979) describes how the Spanish started the extractive operation and transported the mineral through the Chichimecas territory. They built carts that could resist the impact of stones and arrows, and soldiers escorted each caravan (idem). At the same time, with the assistance of Catholic Orders, they sent mestizos'[9] as Spanish representatives to create peace agreements with the Chichimecas. For Anonymised authors (2015), the diplomacy, the work of the Catholic Orders, and the migration policies that consisted of moving the *Tlaxcaltecas*[10] to the border to exemplify the lifestyle[11] desired by the Spanish, were the three main ingredients to accomplish control over the Chichimecas existence and therefore, complete the de-territorialisation process.

In 1583, one of the Spanish representatives arrived in a town located southwest of City X and started the re-territorialisation process through ontological and epistemological control strategies. A few years later, the first

[8] It is important to point out that the narratives that survived this long battle are only the ones constructed by the winners (Flores, 2018).
[9] Mestizo is the term to define a person with mixed blood. In Latin America, it denotes a person with European and Indigenous ancestry (Britannica, 2024).
[10] Many Tlaxcaltecas never came back to their original land. After Tenochtitlan's fall they joined the Spanish to conquer other towns (Asselbergs, 2016)
[11] Follow the Spanish idea of how to cultivate and live in houses.

baptisms were performed. This success gave the Spanish and the Catholic Orders the opportunity to move to what is today City X and start the same process there (Peña, 1979). While this was happening, another representative, who managed to control a group of Chichimecas from the north of City X, heard about the work being done in this area and moved the defeated group of Chichimecas there (Anonymised authors, 2015). In 1591, the Viceroy sent Tlaxcaltecas families to this area and forced the group of Chichimecas to live with them to maintain the group's obedience. However, it was recorded that the Tlaxcaltecas and this group of Chichimecas lived in the same area but never integrated (idem).

The Catholic Orders persisted in their efforts in this region, successfully converting numerous individuals of the group to Catholicism. Once converted, according to local history, it was one Indigenous person who provided information about the location of minerals to a priest. The priest passed this information to the representative, who went to the hill mentioned and found gold and silver mines. With the "discovery" of mines, the Spanish started looking for a place to establish a new town to serve as a strategic base for the extractive operation.

After some consideration, the area of what is today City X was chosen as the best option; it was close to the mines and had access to water. With the intervention of the representative and following the rules that dictated that Indigenous and Spanish could not live in the same place, the group of Chichimecas and Tlaxcaltecas settled in this area "offered"[12] the territory to the Spanish and moved a few kilometres away (Galvan-Arellano, 1999). With this Indigenous "authorisation," City X was founded and its construction, using Indigenous labour and different mining techniques to extract the material from the mountains, started.

Following the establishment of the city, news about the abundant mineral resources in the region spread quickly, attracting people from neighbouring towns who were looking for residential and employment opportunities

[12] The Spanish narratives are the only ones that have survived time.

(Basalenque, 1886 in Peña, 1979). In response to the influx of settlers, the Viceroy appointed a Spanish mayor who organised the urban layout and distributed land and mines between the Spanish, the Catholic Orders and Spanish representatives that made the territory's conquest possible (Anonymised author, 2004; Peña, 1979). This land redistribution was organised into three simultaneous territorial divisions: ecclesiastic, administrative and fiscal (Anonymised author, 1983). This territorial reorganisation represents a key moment in the re-territorialisation process, as it consolidated Spanish power by establishing formal divisions of authority and control. Additionally, new authority figures were also designated to engage in evangelisation efforts and provide education to Indigenous communities (Anonymised authors, 2015). These actions are part of the re-territorialisation strategy, as they sought to reshape the Indigenous worldview and social structures to align with Spanish colonial ideals.

This new territorial organisation and the construction of social and political structures based on a caste system enabled the Spanish to maintain control over the territory— even after the mines' collapsed years later— illustrating the long-term effects of the re-territorialisation process shaping the region's social and political landscape.

For Duran-Sandoval (2015), the Spanish fear of facing another attack by this nomadic group of Chichimecas and the availability of land "without" an owner because the land was not cultivated and seemed uninhabited, created specific colonisation strategies for City X. The Spanish Crown offered large *mercedes*[13] to the Spanish people, mine proprietaries, nobles, and religious companies. They also exempted the Indigenous from forced labour and tribute payment in exchange for working in the mines. Some of the large mercedes and land concessions were transformed into *haciendas*, and when the concessions were insufficiently large, into *ranchos* (idem). On the other hand, the Indigenous communities, who accepted the Spanish Crown rules,

[13]The *Mercedes reales* were the distribution of private property by right of conquest in Nueva Espana (Fabila-Montes de Oca, 1990)

received land to establish their own towns in the periphery of City X and were allowed to maintain both authorities: their own and the imposed.

People from different places and castes migrated to City X in the following years. The Spanish usually settled in the city centre, while people from other castes looked for a place in the Indigenous' towns in the periphery of the city or in the villages within the haciendas. As a result, the Indigenous' towns grew, and the haciendas were transformed into productive units and population centres that dominated the rural landscape (Rangel-Silva, 2011). With the hacienda's robustness, a reconfiguration of the symbolic relations with nature that followed a capitalist economy logic was established, and a new territorialisation process began.

In City X, the haciendas found in the "landless" Indigenous an opportunity to increase their profits: as a labour force and as leaseholders (Escobar-Ohmstede et al., 2011). The new labour force needed a place to live and work, so they settled within the haciendas. Nevertheless, the *hacendados*— hacienda's owners— who followed a capitalist idea of land, were concerned for the possible creation of "informal settlements" within their new territory. Therefore, under the idea of protecting their territory, the hacendados created a land leasing system to formalise the Indigenous' occupancy within the hacienda (Bazant 1978). The leasing agreement reserved the hacendado's right to move the Indigenous'— now considered peasants[14]— houses whenever the hacendado decided (Rosales, 1977). This policy was a way to avoid territorialisation processes within the hacienda borders and a way to remind the peasants that the land was part of a new capitalist system and did not belong to them.

As shown, the permanent workers were part of the hacienda system; they lived and worked within its confines. Certain scholars have detailed the harsh conditions endured by peasants, highlighting the racial superiority justification employed by the hacendado to educate the Indigenous and the absence of

[14] The translation of 'campesino' as 'peasant' should be approached with caution due to its historical, social, and political connotations. As discussed in this chapter, the term 'campesino' in Mexico encompasses a diverse range of Indigenous-peasant relationships, where identity ('being') cannot be reduced to one's actions ('doing') (Zuleta Cisneros, 2015, p. 21).

political and human rights alongside escalating indebtedness (Aleman, 1966; Bazant, 1978; Peyank, 2017). Others, meanwhile, have emphasised the perceived benefits of peasant life within the hacienda, particularly the insulation from fluctuating food prices that maintained the food security of the peasants and their families (Meyer, 1986).

Nevertheless, years later, the situation started to change. The population that lived inside the hacienda grew, bolstering the peasants' collective power and making it impossible for the hacendados to relocate them at will. This newfound leverage created the opportunity for the peasants to request their right to land ownership. However, such assertions were met with heightened restrictions and evictions (Sanchez-Montiel, 2011).

During the 18th Century, the haciendas and the Indigenous towns located on the periphery of City X looked to expand their limits. The haciendas wanted to accumulate more capital, and the Indigenous wanted to gain power by absorbing more population (Benavides-Martinez, 2016). Nevertheless, the lack of clarity in the limits of the haciendas and Indigenous towns[15] and the uneven power relation between the Indigenous towns and haciendas created conflict. Although City X had less than ten Indigenous towns, they were involved in 25% of the disputes (Duran-Sandoval, 2015). This caused many complaints from both sides, which prompted the Spanish Crown to adopt a new administrative strategy, reinforcing the re-territorialisation process. In 1754, King Fernando VI introduced new "compositions". These compositions referred to a legal concept that allowed land tenure regularisation through a cadastre payment (Carrera-Quezada, 2015). Unfortunately, instead of helping, this regularisation scheme exacerbated the situation (Duran-Sandoval, 2015).

By the end of the 18th century, conflicts over Indigenous towns limits and the mistreatment of Indigenous populations on the city's outskirts gave rise to resistance strategies. While this was happening in City X, the mayor of a neighbouring city opted to enforce administrative and economic reforms that significantly impacted the local miners and peasants' lifestyles. Their

[15] The limits were usually defined by rivers and paths, but when these did not exist, they used trees and rocks that were easily moved (Escobar et al. 2011).

dissatisfaction with the imposed system brought them together, and riots started (Benavides-Martinez, 2016). Days later, the Spanish Crown sent an expelling decree against one of the Catholic Orders based in the city, accusing them of being involved in the riots. The rebels responded by taking the city and temporarily stopping the Order's expulsion. The reports of the riots reached Spain, and the Spanish Crown responded, dispatching an armed force, which arrived in City X, expelled the Catholic Order, and punished the rebels like never before (Ruiz-Medrano, 2006). The reprisals involved 56 leaders being executed, 400 rebels being sentenced to forced labour, and 18 exiled after punishment (idem). Additionally, the Indigenous towns lost their privileges of having a local representative and their title was demoted from town to *barrio* (neighbourhood). Their inhabitants were subject to perpetual fines and deprived of several privileges, such as the tribute exception, together with the possibility to be called "don"— an honorific prefix like "gentleman"— to have long hair, to live with the Spanish, to ride horses, to have guns, or even to dress like a Spaniard (Benavides-Martinez, 2016). With this exemplar punishment, the dominant structures of the Colonial Matrix of Power were reinforced.

Thirty years after the riots, the Indigenous and Mestizos request to expand their towns continued; however, although they received a negative answer, their right to have a local representative was restored (Bazant, 1975). During the following years, the land conflicts regarding the towns and haciendas limits continued, but during the independence war (1810 – 1821), the concern to resolve these issues was displaced to more urgent ones (Rangel-Silva, 2011).

After Independence, the social and economic structure constructed during colonial times did not change. This new modern system pushed for its permanence. In City X, the Spanish owners of haciendas did not leave the country after Independence; on the contrary, they invested in their production and expanded their boundaries and power (Bazant, 1975). For Rojas-Sandford (1984), the hacienda created a system where the surplus labour could be accumulated only by non-labourers, creating a small yet robust ruling class who controlled large extensions of land and their agricultural products, while

the workers would never be integrated into commodity circulation or, in other words, the market.

The uneven land distribution determined during the colonial era sowed the seeds of discontent throughout Mexico and fuelled insurgencies that were notably visible in the southern part of Mexico. For many scholars, the Mexican Revolution (1910-1917) represents the convergence of different (liberal, anarchist, agrarian and populist) social movements that caused devastation in all Mexico and exposed the enormous social inequality and the different social realities that existed in Mexico (Anonymised authors, 2015).

The social tension between the Spanish and the Indigenous and Mestizos was accentuated during the Revolution. In this region, the peasants did not participate in big battles, they waited for news from the southern parts of Mexico and implemented activities to disrupt the economy of the haciendas. On the other hand, the hacendados had to develop strategies to protect their livestock and crops from theft by insurgents while also supporting the federation with food, horses, and material (Penyak, 2007).

The agrarian fight for new land distribution with the famous phrase "*la tierra es de quien la trabaja*" (the land belongs to those who work it) concluded with promulgation of the Agrarian Law in 1915 (Secretaria de Cultura, 2019). This reform made possible, among other things, the redistribution of the national and private (hacienda) land to the peasants in the form of "*ejidos*" and the recognition of the Indigenous communities in "*comunidades*".

In City X, as in other cities in Mexico, land redistribution did not occur instantly; most ejidos were established ten years later. This delay was due to the fact that the peasants had to formally request the land and wait for the State's resolution. The requests and calls for justice were published in the State's Official Newspaper, which allows us to read their unfiltered statements and grounds for requesting land today. One statement reads: "*We have the right and want to use it so that they do not exploit us as the wicked did to our ancestors*" (own translation, Anonymised State Official Newspaper, 1936). In

this way, the statement shows the desire of peasants to have their land rights restored to be able to construct a territory free of exploitation.

Some hacendados tried to fight back against the resolution, while others chose to accept it peacefully (Anonymised authors. 2015). The most common strategy involved a legal defence, requiring the hacendados to provide legal evidence of their property ownership and the investments made in the hacienda's production system. However, despite their efforts, most of them lost their hacienda. Those who did not want to fight back made agreements with their workers to avoid difficulties (Anonymised Newspaper, 1929). The reality is that with or without the hacendados' authorisation, the haciendas were disintegrated, the capital accumulated in them was destroyed, and most of the hacendados were dispossessed from their land without any compensation. With the haciendas' disintegration into ejidos, a process of de-territorialisation finished, and at the same time, a process of re-territorialisation— the reconstruction of the map of significances— started.

In the beginning, the redistributed land in the form of both ejidos and comunidades had five important legal characteristics: it was inalienable, imprescriptible, unattachable, indivisible, and non-transferable. However, the distribution of the land within ejidos and comunidades varies. Ejidos were divided into three main areas: a communal area, an individual parcelled land area, and an urban settlement area. In contrast, all the land in the comunidad was legally recognised as communal. This redistribution created three land tenure forms in Mexico, each one with their own legislature: private, public, and social (DOF, 2020). The latter being the one that includes the ejidos and comunidades with all their subareas.

This land redistribution and its economic impact have two divergent yet interrelated interpretations. While the two interpretations acknowledge the increase in agricultural production from 1938 to 1966, the factors contributing to this increase and the following decrease have been interpreted differently. Some authors, such as Dovring (1968), have highlighted that the 1938-1965 agricultural production increase must be read cautiously. For this author, this data could be misleading if we do not consider that after the Revolution,

agricultural production between 1943 and 1938 was at such a low level that any increase was relatively simple to achieve, especially considering the availability of more arable land with the creation of ejidos and comunidades during the 1938-1965 period. However, the following decrease was acknowledged, albeit only observed in specific products and regions, and was linked to the financial crisis of 1982, the cut of federal funds to support the ejido and comunidades and, at the same time, their economic incapacity to afford all the green revolution benefits such as new technologies (Perramond, 2008). Alternatively, the State presented their reading of a 'production decrease' from 1965 to 1990 and the disparity between the growth of its rural population and the stagnation of agricultural production as a basis for calling the land redistribution a failure (Warman, 1998). For authors such as Zuñiga (2003), it was not the economic crisis but the ejidos and comunidades configuration that created a small-holding system that caused low agricultural productivity, insufficient access to resources and technology and the incapacity of the State to provide funds to such a small-scale producer.

Years later the Coloniality of Power was reasserted. The State, citing the justification of agricultural inefficiency, established a neoliberal agenda following the World Bank's recommendations. This agenda was also grounded in the colonial notion that the *ejidatarios (*right-holders in an ejido) could not manage their land efficiently (Calva 1993 in Ventura-Patino, 2008). This colonial association of the ejidatarios as uncivilised people also shaped the ejidatario's self-perception and broke most of their ancestral human-nature relations (Bonfil, 1990). A passage written by an ejidatario in the Anonymised Newspaper in 1929 illustrates the continuing impact of the Coloniality of being in the construction of the ejidatario identity: *"We are inept, unprepared and incapable of obtaining our own benefit of what God gave us because of our ancestral apathy and because of the backwardness in which we live".*

In this way and following the idea that the small-holding system was ineffective because of the incapacity of the ejidatario to produce efficiently, the World Bank recommended opening the doors to the international market. In 1992, the State announced a significant change to the Agrarian Law and three

mechanisms for integrating ejidos into the private sector were legally recognised: expropriation, the construction of mercantile societies, usually known as ejidal real state societies, and the adoption of “dominio pleno” (full dominion) (Olviera-Lozano, 2005). With the inclusion of the dominio pleno, the privatisation of the ejidatarios' parcels of land[16], without changing the legal nature of the remaining ejido, became possible (Ley Agraria, 1992). In contrast, the comunidades, because of their communal nature, first had to be transformed into ejidos to be sellable or establish mercantile partnerships with third parties (ibid). With this transformative change in the Agrarian Law, individual rights asserted prominence over communal prerogatives and aspirations. The once protected ejidos and comunidades were released to the market.

Two years after the ejidos and comunidades were released to the market, the North America Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) came into force, opening the market to agricultural imports from the US, including corn. The ejidos and comunidades were now competing against the US on incredibly uneven terrain. The implementation of NAFTA led to a decrease in corn prices, forcing the ejidatarios and comuneros to sell their entire production of corn and alter their diet to include cheaper but poor-quality corn flour tortillas (Oxfam, 2003). This incursion of transnational companies into a young rural structure that was not ready to compete in the global market increased the percentage of Mexicans living in poverty to 42% (Rello, 1986; Oxfam, 2003).

With the establishment of policies prioritising economic growth over social welfare, a process of neoliberal urbanisation began in the periphery of the cities. This market-oriented development was characterised by the establishment of housing policies that promoted housing subsidies and deregulation mechanisms (Salinas-Arreortua et al., 2018). One of the most critical deregulation mechanisms involved granting real estate companies unrestricted autonomy in making land appropriation decisions that, after the 1992 changes in the Agrarian Law, included ejidal land (ibid). These policies significantly impacted medium-sized cities experiencing rapid and supply-

[16] The dominio pleno can only be applied to parcelled land. The communal and urban settlement areas cannot use this legal mechanism (Ley Agraria, 1992)

driven growth and low urban planning capabilities to face these new challenges and safeguard the ejidatarios and comuneros rights.

3.2 Contemporary Conquests: Unveiling Urban Land-grabbing Strategies in Present-day

Amidst the tide of neoliberal policies that have swept across the rural landscape of Mexico, a remarkable statistic defies Modernity[17]: only 5.1% of the parcels of land in Mexico have adopted dominio pleno (RAN, 2017), which means that approximately 50.7% of the Mexican territory[18] (99,759,455 ha.) remains held by ejidos and comunidades (PE-RAN, 2021). However, this significance deepens when considering that 70% of the Mexico's forests and 66.6% of her hydric resources are embedded within the communal land of these ejidos and comunidades. This juxtaposition underscores the resilience of the ejidos and comunidades and calls for the recognition of the ejidatarios and comuneros as the custodians of Mexico's vital natural resources.

It is essential to emphasise that most of the 5.1% of the parcels of land that have adopted the dominio pleno are strategically situated on the urban periphery (De Ita, 2019). This resultant positioning has not only transformed the Mexican periurban landscape but has also initiated a ripple urbanisation effect within the periurban communities resulting in the annual loss of 90,000 ha of forest area (PE-RAN, 2021). This ripple effect has been studied by authors such as Olviera-Lozano (2005), De Ita (2019), Lombard (2016), and Schumacher et al. (2019), who have highlighted the impact of the Mexican State's corporatist agenda, as evidenced by the increasing number and segregation of informal and irregular[19] settlements within ejidos and comunidades in the periphery of the cities, the rise in land value, and the weakening of local policies.

[17] Defined as the epistemological frame in which the Western model of civilization is based that emerged from the colonial encounter between Europe and the Americas (Quijano, 2000)
[18] This is equivalent to 76% of the rural land in Mexico (INEGI, 2016).
[19] The National Land Policy (2020) differentiates the informal and irregular occupations. The informal occupation is defined as the land occupied in the agreement of both parties but without legal documentation that guarantees the transfer of ownership. An irregular occupation is defined as the land occupied with the agreement of both parties, but the occupation does not follow the urban development regulations.

For these authors, Mexico has followed a national social policy that promotes regularisation of land ownership, without persecuting the settlers or the opportunistic intermediaries who exploit the complexities of overlapping land tenure systems to deceive people into purchasing ejidal or communal land as private property (Lombard, 2016; Salinas-Arreortura, 2018; SEDESOL, 2010). This social policy can be illustrated using data from the Land Tenure Regulation Commission (CORETT) which shows that between 1974 and 2018, CORETT used the expropriation process and federal funds to regularise 2.5 million land polygons in Mexico (CORETT, 2021). This policy enabled informal settlers, not always identified by the State as low-income settlers, to quickly obtain private property titles with impunity, promoting the urban growth towards the ejidos and comunidades where they can access cheaper land or grab it.

These scholars' conclusions align with recent reflections by the Federal Government and today, the National Land Policy (2020) openly disagrees with the policy carried out during those years, recognising that it promoted "*a vicious circle that encourages the consolidation of the informal land market*[20] *and reproduces the model of reverse urbanisation […] (This situation is exacerbated by) the inequality prevailing in Mexico that has not allowed overcoming the advantages of the informal over the formal"* (Politica Nacional de Suelo, 2020, pp. 24, 26). Therefore, the transformation of a social programme originally aimed at providing land tenure to the most vulnerable into a profitable land business and political tool underscores the coloniality of power embedded within Mexico's political and institutional structures. By legitimising these type of land practices, these programmes reinforced the colonial power dynamics, privileging the land market over communal rights and aspirations.

Additionally, my reading of the National Land Policy (2020) highlights its recognition of relational power practices that shape and define urban development. Although the document does not explicitly define these practices as urban land-grabbing tactics, it details a range of coercive measures— including bribery, threat, or dispossession with violence— used to secure land

[20] The Secretariat of Agrarian, Land and Urban Development (SEDATU) estimates that 67% of the housing produced in Mexico is irregular or has an irregular origin (SEDATU, 2014).

control. These practices have significantly contributed to the escalation of territorial conflicts in Mexico[21] (ibid).

Such conflicts can be internal or external. Internal conflicts emerge when, after the implementation of some urban land-grabbing tactics, some members of the community agree to sell a piece of ejido, leading to conflict with the group that keeps resisting. In contrast, the external conflicts occur when there is a territorial dispute between ejidos or with another entity, often arising from the need to defend their community from urban land-grabbing tactics or attempts to sell it.

For authors such as Escalante (2001) and Borquez et al. (2003), some of the land-grabbing tactics are more subtle and may go unnoticed at first glance, but upon closer examination of what is happening within the ejidos and comunidades, they become apparent. One example is the increasing number of ejidatarios rights transferred to another person, apparently free of charge. These informal transferences have created an elite class of ejidatarios who have more than one parcel[22] and have a direct relationship with agrarian officers and real estate agents (Borquez et al., 2003). However, despite the federal government's recognition of the urban land-grabbing phenomenon in Mexico, and its academic recognition in other countries in South America (Feola et al., 2019), Africa (Neimark et al., 2018; Steel et al., 2019), and on the Australian continent (Mecartney et al., 2017), it is its opaque nature coupled with the insecurity surrounding it that contributes to the scarcity of rigorous reports and academic papers supported by empirical evidence (Velazquez-Garcia, 2017; Varley et al., 2021).

This lack of reliable information drove Varley et al. (2021) to analyse the periurban phenomenon in the Metropolitan Area of Mexico City. Their findings suggest that in this context, ejidos are not the primary source of land for legal new housing developments. The urban developers prefer to avoid the conflict

[21] The Agrarian National Registry monitors 500 conflicts in ejidos or comunidades in Mexico (PE-RAN, 2021)

[22] The Agrarian Law prohibits land-grabbing within the ejido, and limits ejidatarios to owning no more than 5% of the ejido's land. However, in practice, informal transactions are in place within the ejidos (Borquez et al., 2003)

and target private land to ensure that the paperwork is in order to facilitate sale. However, despite this finding, authors such as Torres-Mazuera et al. (2021) and Mendez-Lemus et al. (2022) have called for the examination of what is happening in other, medium-sized, and fast-growing cities in Mexico, like the ones located in Yucatán and Michoacan. In their paper, Torres-Mazuera et al. (2021) present the case of Merida where 42% of the city has an ejido or comunidad origin and used to have forest cover. This is because, unlike Mexico City where the land deals and the expansion over ejidal and communal land have already been carried out[23], these medium-sized cities are still experiencing urban land-grabbing tactics that target ejidos and comunidades in the periurban areas of the city. By the same token, Mendez-Lemus et al. (2022) present the case of Morelia, where the ejidal and communal land in the periphery is being transformed in middle and lower-income housing developments. The authors focused on the collective agency capabilities created by ejidos and comunidades to adapt and resist the urbanisation process such as the formal agreement to not to sell to outsiders.

City X is also a medium-sized city experiencing urban land-grabbing tactics in its periurban area. In this city, shaped by an extractivist past and present[24], land appropriation, dispossession and resistance are deeply embedded practices, decreasing their impact on social perception of the conflict. In this context, the comunidades and ejidos that, because of their origin, were once removed from Modernity by being situated on the city's outskirts are now close neighbours. They are divided by an epistemological, but full of cracks, border that continually pushes for its expansion.

The city expansion that has been described as unplanned and fragmented (Anonymised author, 2018) is characterised by a rapid increase in population since 1985. For Anonymised authors. (2015) there were two main events that led to this increase: the relocation of people after the 1985 Mexico City earthquake, and the publicisation of the city as a regional industrial cluster from 2000 onwards. However, the trajectory of the city's growth is not solely

[23] For Salinas-Arreortua et al., (2015), in 1990, 30% of the expansion of the metropolitan area of Mexico City was over expropriated ejidos or comunidades land.
[24] Transnational mining companies continue to be present in the city. In this way, the city went from colonial extractivism to modern extractivism.

determined by land availability or tenure, but is deeply influenced by the social structures embedded in the Colonial Matrix of Power. For Anonymised author (2012), these dynamics are evident when looking at the residential segregation within the city. This is because as the city expands, a clear pattern of housing distribution becomes evident, reflecting socio-economic disparities, and community clustering constructed since colonial times.

For this reason, although urban developers continue to create commercial, industrial, and housing projects on private land, avoiding land conflicts with ejidatarios and comuneros, a notable exception arises when it comes to middle- and high-income housing developments. The demand for these highly profitable developments in a specific area of the city, which are also promoted by the same urban development, leads to land speculation and, therefore, the economic interest in acquiring this land and its natural resources. However, since it is land held by ejidos and comunidades, the privatisation process must follow the Agrarian Law. This legislation that protects the ejidatarios and comuneros causes frustration to the urban developers who, looking for a way to supply the demand, decide to use their influence to shape political outcome. These de-territorialisation strategies pave the way for a future land-grabbing action.

The response to those de-territorialisation strategies and land-grabbing actions has varied among ejidos and comunidades. While some have chosen to sell their land instead of resisting, others have maintained an opposition for over 30 years, even in the face of intimidation and the constant fear of losing their life. However, despite the decades-long resistance, the literature about their resistance is fragmented. The successful actions have rather been remembered with pride through communal storytelling and a handful of newspaper articles.

Thirty years after the first dispossession acts, the modern system flows through the communal land and pushes for its permanence. Coloniality[25] not only persists but also undergoes continual reconfiguration. The economic

[25] Is conceptualised as the colonial long-standing power structures defined by the impact of the Colonial Matrix of Power re-organising social existence (Maldonado-Torres, 2007; Quijano, 1998).

interest in the land has increased, attracting new actors with different agendas and discourses into the conflict. These power relations shape the strategies employed, leading to the implementation of more severe de-territorialisation and urban land-grabbing tactics.

Among these emerging actors is the federal government. which has decided to get involved in the conflict with a new environmental protection agenda. Presenting itself as a champion of ejidatarios and comuneros against the real estate interests, the government has declared that area of the city as a natural reserve. However, this twist in the conflict and the restrictions associated with this type of conservation action have created greater tension and, in many cases, have led to contradictions, confusion, and fragmentation of the resistance movement within the territories (Anonymised newspaper, 2022). Nevertheless, despite the complexities and tensions arising from this twist in the conflict, it is evident that the ontological and epistemological struggle persists, continually evolving and reshaping the landscape of resistance movements within these contested territories.

In this way, this Chapter offers a historical lens through which to examine the enduring colonial legacies that have survived time and continue to shape the implementation of urban land-grabbing strategies in the periphery of City X and its territorial responses. Additionally, by understanding the colonial past through its local archives, we can observe the constant impact of the Colonial Matrix of Power on the knowledge production field and how this shapes the local historical narrative and the social reconfiguration of the ejidatario and comunero.

In City X, the disparity in how knowledge is used to construct the local historical narrative is evident. The legacy of epistemic violence exercised since pre-Colonial times, persists in different forms to this day. For example, secondary sources on pre-colonial and colonial local history primarily originate from the archives of Catholic Orders and accounts from Spanish colonisers. However, this pattern does not change when it comes to the narratives about the contemporary struggle over territory. The ejidatarios and comuneros narratives

are usually shrouded in opacity, deliberately hidden, or often marginalised from mainstream discourse.

Although all local histories are complex, only by recognising the silences and uncovering the pluriverse' hidden histories, the dominant narrative can be challenged. For this reason, throughout this PhD project, the narratives of the ejidos and comunidades that inhabit not just the rural/urban fridge, but the epistemological borderland, mark the initial strides towards constructing an alternative historical narrative and inspire the envisioning of an alternative future in the urban land-grabbing context.

Chapter 4 Beyond a Method: Reflexivity as a Decolonial Practice

4.1 Introduction

Decolonial thinking cannot be and should not try to be universal (Querejazu, 2016). Instead, it enacts pluriversality, which can only come to light through the presentation of situated world-making practices that are somehow interconnected (Blaser, 2013). For this reason and following the decolonial call to interrupt the Western universal narrative (Blaser, 2013; Mignolo et al., 2018), this PhD project presents, explicitly, the experience of the personal reflexive process of "border thinking" (Mignolo, 2007, p.455), not as a method but as a decolonial practice to dwell in the border. This is the epistemological border where alternate and interconnected worlds, represented by territories of transformation— ejidos and comunidades in the periphery of City X— meet and re-configure themselves amidst the urban land-grabbing conflict.

This reflexive process and the interconnected worlds that dwell in this epistemological border can be vividly portrayed and illuminated through the decolonising power of storytelling (Ortiz, 2023). This is possible because stories do not fly freely through space and time. Instead, they are carried by voices with an identity and purpose to present an inner reality. People use stories to structure coherence, generate continuity, build identity, and communicate with others (Lieblich et al., 1998). These stories can be manifested through narratives to remember and make sense of an experience, to argue and make claims, to persuade an audience, to invite or engage with the narrator, to entertain, to mislead an audience, and to promote social change (Riessman, 2008).

However, one of the most significant experiences in which narratives are employed is to make sense of our lives and construct our selves. These narratives create a cohesive structure, connecting experiences with emotions through a storyline that shapes how we understand our existence (MacIntyre, 1984 in Gare,1998). Although there is no consensus regarding the extent of the connection between experiences and the construction of the self, authors such as Meretoja (2014) have taken the task of classifying, into two main approaches, the different but not mutually exclusive ways in which

philosophical authors understand the significance of narrative in human experience. The first approach includes the perspectives of White (1973) and Mink (1987) and defines the narrative process as a cognitive tool that allows us to give structure to our human experience. In contrast, the second approach is based on MacIntyre (1981) and Ricoeur (1986, 2006) who built on the first approach and understand narratives as ontological categories that helps us to define our human experience by creating meaning, interpreting experiences, and establishing our identity.

As a result, this PhD project and its decolonial perspective adhere to the second approach: understanding the narratives as ontological categories that represent our world-making practice (Heidegger,1962; Ricoeur, 1985). This is because, under this approach, narratives are more than just the structural presentation of events. Reality does not present itself with a structure (beginning, middle and end); we add those components to each narration to articulate our past and future (Carr, 1986; Mink, 1978; Ricoeur, 1983). Therefore, narratives shed light on how we experience the temporal nature of human existence and help construct the meaning of life.

However, these narratives that construct our selves are not constructed in isolation. They are simultaneously constructed in relation to the audience to which the narratives are being told, and to the listener's interpretation of those narratives (Ricoeur, 2006). Therefore, we construct ourselves in relation to the other. The teller of the life story is constantly reinterpreted by their audience, and this reinterpretation constitutes the subject. Parra-Herrera (2019, p396, own translation) describes this relational process as follows: "*Through the relationship with the other, I reaffirm myself; I deny myself, and I also transform myself […] without the other, I cannot exist*". In this way, our life stories are interconnected: they belong to us but also to the audience to which it is told (Carr, 1986): we are the other, and the other is us.

Therefore, through relationality, we construct our world (Robert et al., 2014) and, as decolonial advocates such as Blaser, Escobar, De la Cadena, and Maldonado-Torres would say, also the pluriverse. Consequently, this type of narrative, with an inescapable situated character (Faria, 2013), allows us to

connect our past with the future and ourselves with other human and non-human worlds (Blaser, 2013; Smith, 2021). For this reason, narratives about the construction and defence of territory are crucial. Through these narratives, the conventional Western narrative about territory is disrupted as alternate interconnections and responsibilities with other human and non-human worlds in a specific historical context— in this case the urban land-grabbing conflict in the periphery of City X— are presented.

However, to illuminate these narratives about territory that represent the pluriverse, their interconnections, and their resurgent calls for the defence of their epistemic and material ground, one must go to the epistemological borderland where these territories 'dwell'. This border thinking practice allows us to acknowledge and reflect on the impact of the Colonial Matrix of Power (CMP) in shaping relationality between worlds. It also allows us to consider its impact between the teller and me, as one of their audiences, and how it is not merely my voice but the epistemological dialogue that is represented throughout this project. For this reason, this PhD presents the experience of border thinking not as a personal narrative but as a product of the dialogue with the pluriverse through praxis.

4.2 Designing the Reflexivity Process to Dwell in the Border

Border thinking as a decolonial practice involves not only thinking *about* the epistemological border, where different yet interconnected epistemologies converge, but also thinking *from* the border itself (Alcoff, 2007). This challenge has been embraced by an increasing number of scholars who, in recent years, have included in their projects their decision to dwell in the border where other world-making practices exist (See: Ehrnström-Fuentes, 2019; Querejazu, 2016; Nassenstein, 2019; Oslender, 2019). However, while it is evident that there is no single "correct" way of practicing border thinking, the inherently reflexive nature of this process often leads scholars to refrain from presenting a comprehensive account of its practice. For example, Oslender (2018, 2019) invites the reader to dwell in the border through the presentation of their ethnographic work but does not elaborate on the personal actions implemented to achieve this immersion. This lack of explicit detail regarding

the practical application of border thinking highlights the existing literature gap, which concerns the challenges of transitioning from an epistemological framework to praxis.

Others, such as Rodriguez et al. (2021) in the field of peacebuilding, have moved away from traditional research outcomes, presenting a book that centres on how the research was conducted. Inspired by this approach, this project not only invokes a decolonial epistemological foundation and praxis, but also acts as a political project by explicitly sharing the personal and constantly evolving decolonial reflexive process, along with the materials and tools that supported this journey.

However, rather than aiming to establish a universal methodology, this project presents the reflexive process as a route to transparently present the transversal dialogue with the pluriverse. This dialogue is characterised by the narration of situated decolonial practices amidst the urban land-grabbing conflict— practices that challenge Modernity and construct pedagogies to trace new paths towards alternative futures (Walsh, 2013).

Additionally, by openly sharing the challenges encountered throughout this process, this project seeks to foster reflexivity within the academic community and encourage critical engagement with border thinking as a transformative approach to knowledge production. Consequently, and in agreement with decolonial authors such as McDowall et al. (2017), from this point, this experience will be narrated in first person to position myself and the power structures that are part of me, as part of the text.

My reflexive process of dwelling in the border began when I made the conscious decision to embark on this critical, solidaristic and transformative journey. Throughout this journey, I continuously reflect on how the Colonial Matrix of Power influences my praxis. This involves meticulously questioning each decision, action, and tool employed, as well as the underlying purpose behind their utilisation. By doing so, this reflexive process becomes a constant ethical act wherein I map my epistemic positionality and my participation in what Walsh would call “(border) crack making” (Mignolo et al., 2018, p.83).

To start this reflexivity process, I sought insights from other scholars' experiences and explored different pathways to embrace this challenging personal decision. Ortiz-Ocaña and Arias-Lopez (2019) are among the few scholars who have shared their ethical position, defining themselves as decolonial mediators. Additionally, they have delineated their decolonial reflexive journey through three key actions: communal observation, alternate conversations, and configurative reflection. Their transparency prompted me to reflect on my epistemic positionality and the actions used within my border thinking practice.

However, after reflecting on my epistemic positionality and the significance of naming in the imposition of a dominant worldview (Smith, 1999), I decided to move away from the "decolonial mediator" term. This is because this term does not describe my positionality. I understand the decolonial turn as an approach that aims for the coexistence of the worlds without the need to negotiate an agreement for their existence. Therefore, I introduce myself as a "decolonial practitioner" who, through this reflexive process, contribute to creating cracks on the border by sharing not only my experience and struggles of dwelling in the border but also my engagement in the co-production of knowledge. In this way, this involvement acknowledges that knowledge creation is inseparable from one's positionality.

Additionally, building on the decolonial literature of Chapter 2, I understand the reflexive process of dwelling in the border as a continuous process that maintains the reflection through three phases that, in my point of view, define decolonial praxis: dialoguing, imagining, and expanding. Firstly, dialoguing refers to the conversation that spans from internal reflection to external interaction with the pluriverse before returning to internal contemplation once more. Secondly, imagining involves a shared effort to de-link from Eurocentric thinking and identify possible pathways towards alternative futures. Lastly, expanding indicates the decolonial goal of opening emancipatory spaces and including more worlds in the conversation.

However, to effectively navigate the experience of dwelling in the border in a context of territorial and, therefore, ontological conflict, I engaged in six

actions, each tailored to a specific phase of this process. Informed by insights from Ortiz-Ocaña et al. (2019) and the rich tapestry of decolonial scholarship introduced in Chapter 2, I crafted these actions as a flexible roadmap to reflect the adaptability of the reflexive process as well as the constantly shifting dynamics of the conflict.

In the phase of dialoguing, I situated my locus of enunciation, participated in communal contemplation, and engaged in alternative conversations with the alternate and interconnected worlds involved in the urban land-grabbing conflict. Subsequently, during the phase of imagination, I engaged in the co-production of knowledge, elevating other narratives about territory and illuminating alternative starting points that could pave the way towards a new direction in the urban land-grabbing scholarship. Lastly, in the expansion phase, I actively worked to broaden the conversation through an open invitation to join this dialogue between worlds.

The scope of each of these six actions is described in detail below:

1. **Situating my locus of enunciation.** For decolonial thinkers, knowledge is always situated (Haraway, 1988) and unveiling the locus of enunciation— the standpoint from which the subject speaks— serves as a pivotal starting point for a radical critique (Grosfoguel, 2006, 2011). Thereby, unlike the hubris of zero point proposed by Modernity, the locus of enunciation is configurated by the geo- and body-politics of knowledge (Mignolo et al., 2006). This means "*the geo-political and body-political epistemic location in the structures of colonial power/knowledge from which the subject speaks*" (Grosfoguel, 2011, p.6). In this way, geo-political knowledge refers to the ways knowledge production, validation and dissemination are linked to geopolitical factors. On the other hand, body-politics refers to the individual ways of being and understanding linked to the subjects' race, gender, class, ideology, and sexual orientation (Mignolo et al., 2006; Tlostanova, 2017).

   Although it is important to recognise that each person's locus of enunciation is dynamic, the presentation of my geo- and body-politics of

knowledge allows me to transparently present the geographical, historical, cultural, bodily, and ideological dimensions that define my system of values and beliefs at this moment in which I am part of this reflexive process (Porto et al.,2022).

2. **Participating in communal contemplation.** Although Ortiz-Ocaña and Arias-Lopez (2019) describe a communal contemplation where both worlds observe each other without making any judgements, the decolonial perspective of this project envisions a communal contemplation that acknowledges those differences and reflect on them. Therefore, during this phase, I acknowledge and reflect on the impact of my geo- and body-politics of knowledge in my interactions with each territory.

   Additionally, this project expands the human-centred idea of the contemplation to also encompass the contemplation of other non-human worlds, acknowledging the interconnectedness between them. In this way, communal contemplation is presented as a highly visible and emotive contemplation activity in which by contemplating and being contemplated by other human and non-human worlds, I contemplate myself.

3. **Engaging in alternate conversations.** As a decolonial action, it involves consciously challenging hegemonic territorial narratives and power structures by exploring other territorial narratives that have been consistently muted. In the context of urban land-grabbing, the epistemological conversations about the production of each territory of transformation create spaces of co-production of knowledge where different configurations of life become visible, questioning established boundaries and binaries, and encouraging other ways to understand and experience life.

4. **Elevating other narratives.** This action embodies the ethical response to the epistemic injustice endured by the communal territories since colonial times. It aligns with the principles of restorative justice by

embracing the decolonial principle of pluriversality that recognises the multiplicity of worlds in which the modern is just one among many (Rodriguez, 2022). Moreover, this action encompasses a decolonial ethical commitment to practising transparently border thinking, fostering the co-production of knowledge that honours and acknowledges the knowledge originated in other worlds.

5. **Illuminating alternative starting points.** Once we have elevated other narratives about territory and the struggle of resisting their homogenisation, actual alternatives can become visible (Escobar, 2020). This is because, for decolonial scholars such as Terry et al. (2024) and Leff (2005), it is only by considering a multiplicity of pasts and alternative configurations of life that we can remove the modern ropes that blind us to see more just and sustainable futures.

6. **Opening up the conversation.** This action aligns with the decolonial objective of opening new spaces to “change the content and terms of the conversation” (Mignolo, 2020, p.209). It embodies the project goal of becoming an initial catalyst of the epistemological dialogue between worlds involved in the urban land-grabbing conflict. By sparking this dialogue, the project can contribute to a pluriversal understanding and praxis in the urban planning scholarship.

Figure 2 illustrates the reflexive process of dwelling in the border and how this evolves from deep internal reflection to external action. Additionally, the colour gradation not only represents each phrase but symbolises how each phrase builds upon the previous one, resulting in a constant reflexive process. This process does not seek to create a product but to expand its borders for an unlearning, learning and re-learning experience that leads to a political action (Fanon, 2001; Walsh, 2013).

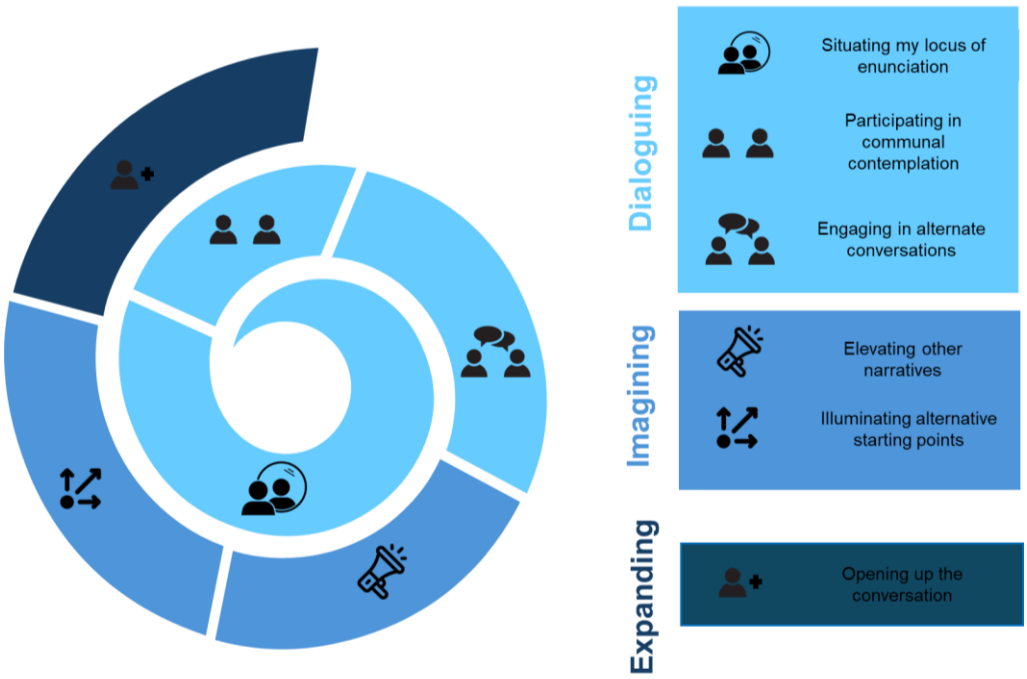

Figure 3 The reflexive process to dwell in the border

This reflexive process of dwelling in the border, with its phases and actions, also define the structure of the following chapters of this thesis. The empirical chapters 5, 6 and 7 represent the dialoguing phase. Chapter 8 embodies the imagining phase, presenting the implications and discussion arising from the dialogue, and Chapter 9 illustrates the expanding phase by welcoming more worlds to join the conversation. This structured approach ensures a coherent presentation of the dwelling in the border process and facilitates a clear understanding of its outcomes.

To further contextualise and guide the reader through the reflexive process, the following project timetable outlines the timeline for each phase and associated actions.

Figure 4 Project timetable

Additionally, to aid the reader further, a visual progress indicator will be included from the next chapter onward, providing guidance the reflexive process and helping to contextualise each stage within the overall structure of the thesis.

4.3 Navigating the Reflexive Process: Versatile Tools and Materials

In order to enrich the dialogue and imaginative journey of dwelling in the border, it is essential to have a versatile toolkit at hand. This collection, comprising an array of tools and materials, serves as a steadfast companion, aiding in the navigation of the complex phases of this reflexive process. Therefore, their selection should not be arbitrary, but rather based on their adaptive capacity to be used in processes that, like the reflexive process, are constantly evolving.

These tools and materials facilitate each action of the reflexive process while fostering the creation of what Freeman (2020) aptly termed a "*collage*"— a mosaic of information, narratives, reflections, and experiences that provoke further reflection. Within this project, the collage embodies a rich tapestry of diverse reflections that do not have to fit together to be able to portray the pluriverse.

During the dialoguing phase, my toolkit comprised historical materials, a reflexive journal, participation information sheets, an epistemological conversation guideline, and a voice recorder. Subsequently, in the imagining phase, I incorporated the NVivo software into my toolkit. The usage and the scope of each of these materials and tools will be described below, showcasing their unique contribution to the reflexive process and the creation of a vibrant tapestry of reflections.

4.3.1 Archival Sources

After completing an in-depth project foundation, I returned to Mexico in December of 2021 and travelled to City X to access local archival sources such as books, newspapers, periodicals, and governmental documents that were

not available online. These sources provided valuable insights into the socially constructed past of City X and the communal territories located in its fringe.

However, during my first week, I faced the first challenge. The archival sources I needed were scattered across different public libraries and archives, and in many cases, I needed to formally request access to the installations and wait several days for an answer. Additionally, the epidemiological status of COVID-19 in City X complicated things even more. The libraries had to constantly close due to the rise in cases, and the ones that remained open reduced their visitor capacity and controlled their opening times. These situations pressured the project timetable, as additional time was required to navigate the formalities and secure safe access to the necessary materials.

My position as a local allowed me to respond to this first challenge with two strategies. The first one was to formally request the catalogue in each library and archive to examine the list of titles in advance and reduce my time in each of their physical locations. The second strategy consisted of requesting the opportunity to meet with the city chronicler and three local history professors, each from a different local university. During these meetings, the chronicler and academics provided information to fill the gaps in the local literature and explained some local events from their own perspective. They also worked as informants and gatekeepers of historical materials by indicating and granting access to specific archival sources from their institutional libraries or private collections. Both strategies allowed me to navigate the archival sources more efficiently. Over the span of just two months, I visited four libraries, the State Archive Collection office, and the newspaper State Library.

The four libraries that I visited were affiliated with educational institutions. The trained staff and well-organised catalogues facilitated navigation through the available sources. During these visits, I accessed contemporary secondary sources, ranging from local and regional history books to comprehensive master's and PhD dissertations. These sources provided invaluable insights into the decolonial past of City X and the socio-economic and political forces at play in the territorial conflicts at the fringe.

My visit to the State Archive Collection office was a deeply moving and mysterious experience. Unlike libraries, this place was subject to more stringent COVID protocols. I had to pre-request the books I wished to access, and I was confined to a reading desk, where I had to keep my facemask and gloves on at all times. Under these conditions, I spent days immersed in the reading of old local history books and delicate documents, some of which continue to be cited by contemporary historians as the foundational texts of the local history of City X. Some books were so old and fragile, while others had not been consulted for years.

Bound by local rules, I navigated these archives, relying solely on a pencil and notebook, a testament to their local significance as a repository of knowledge that must be protected. However, it is important to note that most of the authors of these local history books were political leaders, canons and priests who had literacy skills and access to historical documents from the Catholic Church. In the State Archive Collection, there is no evidence of historical documents written by a member of any of the communal territories or Indigenous communities. These silences in the history-making of City X not only have an impact on City X past but also its future. For example, throughout Chapter 4, it becomes evident that the communal land territories situated in the periphery, despite playing a crucial role in the development of City X, have remained largely silent— a silence that persist amid the ongoing urban land-grabbing conflict.

Additionally, the selective access the State Archive Collection affords prompts critical inquiry into whose voices are privileged within these spaces of knowledge production. By restricting their universal accessibility, these institutions may inadvertently use the archives as instruments to perpetuate epistemic injustice, raising important questions about equity and representation in constructing and disseminating their local history.

The newspaper library was a new experience for me. Upon arrival, I encountered rigorous COVID measures, including a limited number of desks available for visitors, designated time slots for accessing historical materials, and the mandatory use of face masks and gloves. Despite these restrictions,

it was within the confines of this small room, brimming with historical materials, that I discovered the possibility of meaningful communication with the staff, fellow students, and researchers. Their guidance and recommendations not only facilitated access to archival sources but also profoundly influenced the breadth and depth of the materials I explored.

In this way, exploring the archives of City X was akin to embarking on a journey through time, as each of these locations that I visited transported me to a distinct historical moment, offering invaluable insights into the colonial legacies that continue to shape knowledge production and territorial dynamics in City X. Through meticulous examination of documents, maps, and various archival materials, I was able to portray the always fragmentated history of city X, incorporating its gaps and absences. Additionally, I was able to select three territories that inhabit the epistemological and physical border as a place of contradictions but also from where new futures can be envisioned.

4.3.1.1 Selecting Territories of Transformation

The territories of transformation represent alternative modes of existence, thought and action (Escobar, 2014). In City X, these territories emerge from the ontological struggle of defending their life by resisting their epistemological homogenisation during the urban land-grabbing conflict.

Although many more territories are located on the periphery of City X, this project focuses on the struggles of three specific territories and their complex interconnections with City X and other territories in defence of their existence. These territories were selected not only for their relatively lower levels of insecurity but also because their resistance to urban land-grabbing is grounded in a long-standing history, rather than emerging as a recent phenomenon. Additionally, each territory, while interconnected with City X, is shaped by unique communal histories, socio-political organisational structures, and symbolic relationships with nature, all of which provide a more comprehensive understanding of the urban land-grabbing conflict.

Given the heightened levels of violence associated with this conflict and to honour the territories and other actors' request to maintain confidentiality, the

names of the three territories will remain anonymous and they will be referred to as Territory 1, Territory 2, and Territory 3. A detailed explanation of this ethical decision is provided in section 4.4, Project Ethics. However, their main characteristics are presented below as a means to foster deeper understanding of their struggle of resisting and, at the same time, assimilating the modern world system.

The three territories share seven important characteristics:

1. They stemmed from a process of re-territorialisation after the Mexican Revolution.
2. Their communal areas compromise Mountain Forest area and water resources such as lakes and ephemeral rivers.
3. They are located in the periphery of a medium size city in Mexico.
4. They rely on City X for daily need products, education, and health[26].
5. They are facing climate change impacts that threaten their land-based future.
6. They are struggling against urban land-grabbing strategies. In each of these territories, urban land-grabbing strategies have already been executed, resulting in the loss of a significant portion of their territory.
7. They are implementing resistance strategies to defend their territory.

Figure 5 Contrasting landscapes: Mountain Forest and urban periphery
Source: Author's own

However, their historical context, scale, and collective resistance are different.

[26] The three territories have a health centre and primary and secondary education facilities within their limits, but these are managed by the State.

TERRITORY 1: It is an Ejido of approximately 2,000ha and inhabited by fewer than 150 ejidatarios(as) and their families. It is important to note that although Territory 1 is an Ejido, they do not have parcelled or human settlement area within their territory; all their land is defined as communal land. This communal land consists of two zones: a rocky, arid terrain close to the city and a forested area towards the mountains. Interestingly, despite its harsh conditions, it is in the dry, rocky region where the inhabitants reside and farm adjacent to their homes for personal consumption. However, due to the increasingly drought prone conditions and proximity to the urban area, their economic and social dynamics have shifted. Today, the men predominantly engage in construction-related activities during the daytime in the city and take care of their plants or animals in the afternoon. Meanwhile, the women primarily undertake domestic responsibilities within their households and take care of their plants and animals during the daytime.

Despite enduring past challenges, including urban land-grabbing strategies facilitated by the State and Urban development companies, they uphold a collective defence strategy, safeguarding their communal interests and preserving their way of life.

TERRITORY 2: It is an Ejido of approximately 15,000ha, housing around 300 ejidatarios(as) and their families. This territory is divided into three main areas: parcelled, human settlement and communal. Predominantly, the land is communal, comprising roughly three-quarters of the total area. This communal land is classified as forested area. In colonial times, this territory was primarily used for livestock. Since then, the local economy has been driven by both quarrying and agriculture. However, persistent drought has severely impacted agricultural activities, reducing the number of plantations and increasing the community's dependence on quarrying. As water scarcity continues to challenge traditional farming practices, some residents have resorted to seeking a job in the city or selling their *parcela* to urban developers. This situation has created a division within the territory between those who have opted to sell and the ones who want to maintain the resistance.

TERRITORY 3: It is a Comunidad of approximately 15,000ha of communal land and inhabited for around 350 comuneros(as) and their families. Most of their communal land is classified as Forest area. This territory has historically depended on quarrying since colonial times. However, due to its proximity with City X, commerce has emerged as an increasingly important economic activity. Unfortunately, the impact of urban land-grabbing strategies implemented by urban developers and the State has led to a division within the Comunidad. Some members, weary of the ongoing resistance and in need of funds, have opted to vote in favour of the Community's disintegration in order to facilitate the selling of their communal land, while others remain steadfast in their resistance and continue to vote for the Comunidad's permanence.

Figure 6 Construction machinery positioned at the outskirts of the city
Source: Author's own

In this way, these three territories of transformation in City X— with their unique historical communal ties, socio-political structures and environmental relationships— allow us to explore their interconnected struggles to protect their territory amidst intense pressure from urban land-grabbing forces. Despite shared challenges, including climate impacts and reliance on City X for resources, each territory's response to external threats varies, reflecting unique historical contexts, scales, and forms of resistance.

To delve deeper into these differences and shared challenges, this project engages in an epistemological dialogue with 15 members of each territory. Through these dialogues, the project unveils the pluriverse— a diverse

tapestry of each territory's unique ways of relating to nature and constructing their self. It is essential to recognise that as described in Section 4.1, the participants' positions within existing power structures, along with my own positionality, have shaped the dynamics of these dialogues. Therefore, to provide a fuller understanding on how participants' position within these structures have influenced both the spoken exchanges and the silences within them, Section 4.3.1.3 includes a detailed description of their gender, and age.

4.3.1.2 Selecting Key Hegemonic Actors

As outlined in Section 4.1, the pluriverse is constructed through relationality (De la Cadena et al., 2018). In this context, the territories of transformation construct their alternatives in relation to other worlds (Ehrnström-Fuentes, 2019), with the modern world— through only one of these alternatives (Escobar, 2020)— exercises significant power through its process of universalisation. Consequently, to examine the entangled worlding and its dynamics within the context of urban land-grabbing conflict, this project also engages in a dialogue with the hegemonic actors.

In this context, archival sources reveal that three key groups of actors, involved in the urban land-grabbing conflict, mobilise within hegemonic power structures: government agencies, urban development companies, and social movements, collectives, and non-governmental organisations. However, this does not mean that these actors mobilise in the same direction or share a common set of values. Instead, the interactions among these groups and other worlds have created a complex dynamic where different agendas, priorities, and values systems intersect and sometimes clash. To illustrate this complexity within the hegemonic power, the project presents the dialogue with 12 governmental employees across federal, state, and local institutions, illustrating how the conflict is perceived and addressed across different levels of governance. Additionally, the project engages with 10 urban development directors from a range of companies, including both large firms with city-level projects and mega-scale developers whose initiatives have far-reaching impacts on entire regions. Furthermore, to capture the voice of social movements, collectives, and NGOs, the project includes the dialogues with

spokespersons from four key organisations: a social movement, a research collective, an environmental NGO, and a housing rights collective, all of which are actively involved in the ongoing conflict.

It is essential to clarify that the housing rights collective is integrated by dwellers of one of the territories who ended up in the area because of successful past urban land-grabbing strategies. This means that they purchased land or houses from urban development companies either with or without knowing that the land was obtained through the implementation of urban land-grabbing strategies against the territories and, in some cases, the illegality of their purchase. For this reason, they distinguish themselves from ejidatarios or comuneros, identifying instead as a collective of dwellers seeking legal resolution and formal recognition of their unique circumstances.

In this way, it is through these 71 epistemological conversations that we can examine the politics of the pluriverse as it unfolds in the complexities of land conflicts, offering a plural understanding of how the members of each world engage with, contest, and navigate these interconnections.

Group	Number of individuals who participated in the alternate conversations.
Territory 1	15
Territory 2	15
Territory 3	15
Government agencies	12
Urban development companies	10
Social organisations	4
Total	**71**

Table 1 Epistemological dialogue engagement.

4.3.1.3 Exploring the Participants' Gender and Age

As discussed in Section 2.1, the Colonial Matrix of Power perpetuates colonial classifications of gender, which remain central in structuring and maintaining relations of domination, particularly in contexts like City X (Quijano, 2000). For this reason and in response to calls from decolonial advocates such as Lugones (2008) and Manning (2021) to expose coloniality, this project—though not framed within a feminist approach— critically examines the

intersecting structures of gender and age that shape the participants' heterogenous experiences and their agency to resist or implement urban land-grabbing strategies.

Each territory of transformation is represented through an epistemological dialogue with fifteen of its members who accepted to be part of the conversation during the summer of 2022. The members were not pre-selected; rather, they are individuals holding the title of comunero(a) or ejidatario(a) within the territory and were either randomly encountered or selected by the territory as representatives. It was ensured, however, that the sample included the president of the communal or ejidal committee, as well as a minimum of five women holding the title of *comunera* or *ejidataria*.

Incorporating women into the conversations represented a challenge, particularly in these territories where the Colonial Matrix of Power contributes to the notably sparse representation of women as titleholders (INEGI, 2022). This scarcity, along with the need to safeguarding their anonymity, added layers of complexity to their inclusion. Consequently, this under-representation inevitably influences the project, shaping the dialogues captured and potentially limiting a fuller understanding of women's unique experiences within the urban land-grabbing context. Acknowledging this impact is essential for transparent analysis and helps to identify future research opportunities, as discussed in Section 9.4.

The focus on titleholders was deliberate, given their right to vote during the Ejidal or Communal assemblies and the responsibility they hold in participating in resistance strategies. Moreover, within the Ejidos, only the titleholder possesses the authority to sell their *parcela* and participate in the assembly voting when a purchase offer is made for their communal land. Therefore, they are the individuals who, during this conflict, have endured the economic and socio-political pressures and have been involved in the definition and implementation of resistance mechanisms.

It is essential to clarify that the titleholders are primarily *ejidatarios* and *comuneros* aged 60 or older. These individuals, the grandchildren of the first

ejidatarios and comuneros, hold vivid memories of their grandfather's stories about the creation of their Ejido or Comunidad. On the other hand, the *ejidatarias* and *comuneras* (female landholders) who participated in the epistemological dialogue are middle-aged women who inherited the title from their father or late husband. For this reason, it is crucial to clarify that this project does not portray the perspectives of other adult members of the community who do not have the right to vote, nor those of children and teenagers.

In the case of the urban development companies' directors and the government agencies employees who participated in the dialogue, they were selected based on their professional roles, as central figures directly involved in the conflict and with the authority to make decisions that significantly influence its trajectory. However, it is important to note that these positions were predominantly held by men in both cases. This situation evidences the impact of the coloniality of power in these spheres. Additionally, the age of these individuals serves as another indicator of power, with most of the directors and government employees falling within the 45 to 70 age range, further reinforcing their influence within the decision-making process.

Lastly, the representatives of the social movements were also exclusively men. However, their age ranged from the 30 to75 years old, highlighting a different intersection of age and power compared to the directors and the employees of government agencies. The generational gap, in this context represents the diversity of organisational maturity and perspectives. Some organisations, represented by young individuals embody a more recent approach to the conflict, while the older representatives represent established organisations with a long history of social impact.

4.3.2 The Role of the Reflexive Journal

Reflexive journals have been used in the social sciences, predominantly by ethnographers, to record not only dates and events but also to foster constant reflection about their thinking and practice (Anderson, 2012). They also provide the opportunity to delve into introspection, providing a time and space

for reflection on their motivations, biases, and underlying assumptions (Nadin et al., 2006). This deliberate self-examination enhances the political act of the reflexive process of dwelling in the border by serving as an invaluable companion on this reflexive journey.

In this project, the reflexive journal, a humble A5 spiral notebook, played a pivotal role. It was not just a repository for thoughts, feelings, and reflections, but a compass that guided the timing and direction of subsequent actions and phases. Carried in my backpack wherever I went, it was during the nights, after a day of communal contemplation or alternate conversations, that the journal truly came alive.

During the communal contemplation, the entries focused on vivid descriptions of the territory and my interaction with it, including humans and non-humans. In this way, the reflections captured the challenging weather conditions that shaped the construction of the territory, the sensory experiences of the environment, including sounds and smells, the intricate relationship between their human inhabitants and its natural features like the mountains, waterways, and landforms, as well as the diverse flora and fauna that constitute the territory. Additionally, special attention was paid to the human-nature relationships and how these shaped the cultural, social, and economic activities in each territory.

In contrast, the entries during the alternate conversations phase encompass comments and reflections on various aspects, including my emotions before, during and after the conversation. They also detail how my geo and body-politics of knowledge and factors such as location and timing impacted the conversation. Moreover, I also recorded the instances where I perceived that one of my questions needed to be restructured or when particular responses captured my attention.

Although section '5.3 Communal contemplation' presents a detailed reflection about communal contemplation in each of the territories, this section fully illustrates the use of the reflexive journal during both the communal

contemplation and alternate conversations phases. As a result, an example of the use of the reflexive journal in each territory is provided.

It is important to note that the reflexive journal was written in Spanish, my first language, which allowed me to experiment and find my writer's voice by expressing emotions and thoughts more accurately and deeply (Kahn, 2011). However, as with all cross-language projects, it is crucial to address language differences to avoid losing the richness of this reflexive tool in translation (Erhard, 2021). Therefore, the entries are presented in both languages to preserve their full meaning and depth.

Example 1. Communal contemplation phase: Territory 1

> "*Hoy cambie la hora de mi llegada. Llegué después de la comida buscando no insolarme como ayer. De todas formas, vengo preparada con botas, manga larga, jeans y sombrero. También conseguí un palo para usarlo como bastón y en caso de que necesite protegerme de los perros. Susto me lleve ayer cuando esa jauría me persiguió y la señora de la casa blanca me tuvo que rescatar, ¿de dónde salen tantos perros? Ojalá hoy pueda verla para volverle agradecer.*
>
> *Aquí la tierra es talco, esta tan seco que cada paso que doy se levanta la tierra. Los pocos caballos que hay están muy flacos, no tienen nada que comer. El viento empieza a ventear después de las 7pm. cuando empieza el atardecer. A esa hora la comunidad cobra vida, las personas salen de sus casas y platican con los vecinos mientras que los niños salen a jugar o ayudar con algún mandado a su mamá. También es la hora en la que llegan los que trabajan en la ciudad. Es increíble como, aunque estamos tan cerca de la ciudad, te sientes tan lejos de ella…"*
>
> *"*Today, I changed the time of my arrival. I arrived after lunch, trying to avoid a sunstroke like the one I got yesterday. Anyway, I come prepared with boots, long sleeves, jeans, and

a hat. I also got a stick to use as a cane in case I need to protect myself from the dogs. I had such a scare yesterday when a pack of dogs chased me, and the lady from the white house had to rescue me. Where do so many dogs come from? I hope I can see her today to thank her again.

Here, the soil is like powder; it is so dry that every step I make creates dust. Their few horses are very skinny, they do not have anything to eat. The wind starts to blow after 7pm with the sunset. At that time the community comes to life, the people go outside and start chatting with their neighbours while the children go out to play or help their mother with an errand. It is also the time that the people who work in the City X arrive home. It is incredible how even though we are so close to the city, you feel so far from it…"

Example 2. Alternate conversations: Territory 2

Hoy llegué al territorio 2 con mi hermano. La situación en este territorio es mucha más complicada que en el territorio 1. La desconfianza y la tensión entre sus habitantes es muy alta y el conflicto ha hecho que sea muy peligroso andar caminando sola y más como mujer.

Mi hermano aceptó acompañarme por algunas horas para ver si era posible lograr alguna conversación alternativa. Yo sabía que su presencia iba a cambiar las cosas, pero lo que no sabía era que tanto. Desde que fuimos a la primera casa fue evidente el cambio. Nos presentamos y aunque el ejidatario entendió que mi hermano solo me acompañaba, el decidió tener la conversación dirigiéndose a mi hermano en todo momento…"

"Today, I arrived at territory 2 with my brother. The situation in this territory is much more complicated than in territory 1. The mistrust and tension among its inhabitants are very high and

the insecurity has made it very dangerous to walk alone, especially as a woman.

My brother agreed to accompany me for a few hours to see if it was possible to achieve an alternative conversation. I knew that his presence was going to change things, but what I did not know was how much. Since we went to the first house the change was evident. We introduced ourselves and although the ejidatario understood that my brother was only accompanying me, he decided to have the conversation but directed his remarks exclusively to my brother…"

Example 3. Alternative conversations: Territory 3

"Hoy ha sido uno de los días más difíciles emocionalmente. Durante la conversación reímos con las anécdotas de la comunidad, pero también estuve a punto de llorar varias veces. No es nada fácil oír la tristeza y desesperación. Me ayudó mucho tener a mi papá a mi lado; me dio fuerza y tranquilidad para seguir la conversación. Fueron dos horas que se pasaron tan rápido como quince minutos. Ellos dirigieron gran parte de la conversación porque desde un principio aceptaron y entendieron el proyecto profundamente. Ellos hasta lo describieron como "Un proyecto para ayudarlos a sobrevivir". Al final me entregaron una estampa de su Santo Patrono para que me protegiera durante mi proyecto. Aquí la llevo en mi mochila…"

"Today it has been one of the most emotionally challenging days. During the conversation we laughed when hearing the community's anecdotes, but I was also close to tears several times. It is not easy to hear their sadness and despair. It helped me a lot to have my father by my side; he gave me the strength and peace of mind to continue the conversation. It was two hours that went by as quickly as fifteen minutes. They led much

> of the conversation because, from the beginning, they accepted and deeply understood the project. They even described it as “a project that would help them survive”. At the end, they gave me an image of their Patron Saint so he could protect me during this project. I carry it with me in my backpack…”

The reflexive journal, in its unique way, allowed me to sustain the reflexive process throughout the project. It provided the platform for me to reflect on my initial reflections, deepening my understanding of the impact of the Colonial Matrix of Power on shaping relationality between worlds but also between the teller and me, as one of their audiences. Additionally, the use of the reflexive journal also enabled the addition of non-verbal interactions to the narrative of the epistemological dialogue with each of the territories, highlighting the emotional impact of this territorial and epistemological conflict.

4.3.3 Using a Variety of Tools to Support Alternate Conversations and Their Reflection

Initiating an epistemological conversation poses its challenges. Effectively engaging in such discussions requires not only mutual willingness to walk into the unknown (Eschenhagen, 2017) but also the skill to navigate the dialogue towards deeper insights where the ontological dimension of the narratives about territory can be expressed.

In order to achieve this challenging conversation, two support tools were created. The first one, in line with my ethical commitment, ensured informed, voluntary, anonymous, and confidential participation in the conversation. The process of obtaining this consent consisted of providing and reading aloud the participant information sheet (For an example please see Appendix 1) to all potential participants. This document presented the ethical decision to explain the project, the objective and duration of the conversation in their own language, in this case, Spanish (Marzano, 2012). It also emphasised their freedom to decline or decide, at any moment, to stop the conversation. Moreover, it described the use and handling of the conversation record and

assured confidentiality and anonymity to all participants. The direct anonymisation as well as the anonymisation of the city to avoid deductive disclosure were presented as ethical mechanisms to protect participants from harm (Heggen et al., 2012). The detailed description of the ethical measures is described in the next Section 4.4 Project Ethics.

The second tool, the conversation guideline (see Appendix 2), was designed to facilitate the territorial and epistemological dialogue rather than following a strict questionnaire format. This guideline comprised a set of questions divided into three distinct sections, each representing a fundamental aspect of our approach to understanding and engaging with the world from a territorial perspective. These sections corresponded to the core dimensions of our world-making practice: being, knowing and doing.

The ‘being’ section explored the subject’s identity by questioning their self-perception as a production of their past and future self. For example, the question: “What does it means to be an Ejidatario?” allowed the Ejidatario to reflect about their identity and how this has been shaped by their historical experiences, future aspirations, and the economic and socio-political context in which they live.

The ‘knowing” section delved into inquiries about knowledge and the subject relationship with nature. For instance, the question “What gives value to land?” opened the conversation about the environmental significance of land, land tenure systems and moral responsibilities associated with the land use and ownership.

The “doing’ section focused on the elements that allow the subject to construct territory and the actions and resistance strategies implemented to defend it. One example is the question “Have you had to protect your territory? How?” This question allowed the subject to describe the actions that had to implemented to protect their territory, shedding light into the communal significance of this actions and their results.

By organising the guideline in this way, I maintained flexibility in each conversation, which positively impacted the knowledge co-production process.

This approach facilitated the illumination of the pluriverse— different ways of understanding and constructing territory— and the political struggle between worlds.

The narratives that emanated from the epistemological conversation were, if accepted, recorded with a voice recorder, and were securely stored using pseudonyms to ensure the ethical principles of respect and confidentiality (Heggen et al., 2012). If the conversation was accepted but the recording was not, I used the reflexive journal to write down my reflections after the conversation. The recording and its following transcription allowed me to revisit the conversation repeatedly, fostering deeper reflection each time.

To effectively organise the narrative files in a flexible manner, I used the NVIVO software, known for its capacity to store, manage, analyse and visualise qualitative information (Dhakal, 2022). However, the use of the software depends on the epistemological foundations of the project, type of data, and the communication strategy (Jackson et al., 2019). In this case, the software was used not only as an organisation tool but as a catalyst for a deeper reflexive process. This software allowed me to visualise the epistemological dialogue and their interconnections in a way that it would be difficult to discern through traditional methods. Additionally, it enabled me to select segments of the conversations to emphasise arguments, reflections, and emotions during the writing process of this project.

In this way, each of these support tools facilitated the epistemological dialogue that explores the core dimensions of our world-making practice and allowed us to illuminate the pluriverse and the political struggles between worlds during the urban land-grabbing conflict the in periphery of city X.

4.4 Project Ethics

This decolonising project seeks to bring ethics into practice. Built on a decolonial foundation, it follows an ethical framework that emphasises understating human existence through a transversal dialogue with the ‘other’ where the power asymmetries are recognised (Dussel, 2004). Therefore, this framework presents the transversal dialogue as a practical tool that must be

based on mutual respect, active listening, collaboration, flexibility, and communal construction of knowledge. By adhering to these principles, this project fosters interactions between both sides of the border and promotes the re-education as a pathway to envision, construct and achieve collective good (Leff et al.,2002; Hernandez-Montero, 2018).

This proposal of dialogue and articulation of knowledges challenges universality, advocating for a communicative practice that opens our minds to a pluriverse of possibilities (Dunford, 2017). This practice creates a new and common space where different worlds, with their diverse cultural values, can meet (Hernandez-Montero, 2018). Therefore, through this dialogue, ethics are not merely proclaimed and pursued but genuinely heard and felt, prompting a re-evaluation of life values and our reasons for living (Leff, 2006).

Moreover, this political project emphasises the importance of this dialogue as a space where the pedagogies born in the urban land-grabbing struggle are acknowledged and valued in the construction of alternative futures (Walsh, 2013). By doing so, it seeks to provide a new direction in the urban land-grabbing scholarship where the decolonial political ecology approach can provide a theoretical lens to understand urban land-grabbing conflicts and envision ethical and plural futures.

However, creating this plural and common space for an epistemological dialogue in the borderland can be challenging. This is because borderlands, as dynamic epistemological spaces, are usually contested due to the inherent tensions and conflicts that arise when different worlds intersect in an unequal field (Anzaldua, 1987; Nasser, 2021). In places such as City X, where high levels of insecurity exist, the epistemological struggle amidst the urban land-grabbing conflict has accentuated this reality.

In this local context, the exact number of people who have been threatened, disappeared or murdered in direct relation to this urban land-grabbing conflict is not officially recorded. However, members of the territories of transformation, governmental employees, and NGO representatives have all

come forward to denounce this situation and express the fear and insecurity that they are forced to endure.

Although I was assured that my presence did not exacerbate the conflict, the conflict itself has violently evolved in the last two years. Around a year after my visit, I received information that one of the participants, who was actively involved in the conflict, had been murdered. The assassination and the uncertainty about the actual circumstances of the incident contributed to the escalation of the conflict. For this reason and in order to protect the participants' identities beyond the direct anonymisation measures, I decided to anonymise the city and the territories of transformation in all publications related to this project. Additionally, I have removed any information that could create deductive identification of the participants, territories or city.

Although COVID-19 cases had decreased during summer 2022, when visits to all three territories were conducted, I implemented all necessary precautions and a "praxis of care" (Cîrstea et al., 2024, p.7) that prioritised wellbeing, responsibility and care throughout my visit. I respected and adhered to local COVID-19 guidelines and followed the epidemiological traffic light system implemented in Mexico. Additionally, I consistently wore facemask and gloves, maintained my physical distance, and tested myself every week to ensure I did not contribute to the spread of the infection.

Regarding the territories of transformation consent protocols, I followed cultural procedures and requested access to the leaders before engaging in any communal contemplation or dialogue with their members. In these meetings, I accepted to follow verbatim the leader's instructions and the participant's anonymisation was agreed upon. The participant information sheet in Spanish (For an example, please see Appendix 1) was presented and to ensure that the leader and potential participants all had access to the information, I read it aloud. This practice was essential because a significant portion of the potential participants are illiterate. Authors such as Marzano (2012) have argued that presenting written informed consent in context like this one could evoke memories of social injustices, exacerbated existing social

disparities and reinforced colonial power structures between the participants and me.

Therefore, if a member of the territory decided to participate and consented to be voice recorded, I repeated, and voice recorded the consent agreement before each dialogue. I also addressed any questions they had about my background, motivations for conducting the project as well as the objectives and limitations of the project. If a participant appeared unsure to join the conversation, I respectfully withdrew myself and expressed gratitude for their consideration. Throughout this process, I maintained a critical awareness of my position within power structures— as a white, heterosexual woman from a socioeconomically advantaged group, representing a Northern university— and avoided pressuring or exploiting any power imbalance with participants.

Although the impact of my positionality in relation with the territories of transformation and the hegemonic actors is expressed in detail in *Chapter 5*, it is important to note the ethical implications of my gender during my visit in each territory. This is because due to my placement as a woman in these power structures and the insecurity in the region, I found it necessary to be accompanied during certain interactions by my brother in Territory 2 and my father in Territory 3.

'Accompanied fieldwork' has been referred to the practice of conducting field research with the presence of children or spouses, influencing the knowing production process within the project (Korpela et al., 2016). In this case, the presence of my brother and father played an important role in the epistemological dialogue. Their participation enhanced my sense of security and increased the participants' comfort. However, it opened my private life to the participants, reinforced traditional gender hierarchies, dictated the schedule of the conversations to align with their agendas, and influenced the conversation dynamics and outcomes of the dialogue.

Their collaboration on the project also enriched our family conversations. Dinner time become a reflective space where we all shared our perspectives and feelings. They also raised thoughtful questions and offered feedback to

enhance our interactions with members of each territory. For example, my father advised me on respectfully approaching the older ejidatarios, my brother identified possible dangerous situations and suggested ways to improve my safety and my mother and sister, although they did not go with me to visit the territories, participated by providing feedback about my interactions with the members of other worlds. In this way, my family played an important role shaping the knowledge production during my time in Mexico.

It is important to note that the ethical considerations extended beyond the completion of the dialogues. The designed decolonial reflexive practice ensured ethical scrutiny throughout the subsequent stages of the process. This practice included measures to prevent potential harm to participants by ensuring their confidentiality and anonymity throughout the project.

Additionally, by framing these interactions as dialogues, the project acknowledges the impact of my geo- and body-politics of knowledge during both the dialogue and my subsequent writing. This approach highlights my role and the challenges I faced structuring and presenting the pluriversality of the dialogues with rigorous anonymity measures and adhering to a structured thesis format designed to align with the linear Eurocentric research framework.

One of these challenges was the need to structure the epistemological dialogue with the pluriverse into chapters, ensuring it could be read in a coherent and progressive manner. To achieve this, an artificial split was introduced between the dialogue with the territories of transformation (Chapter 6) and the dialogue with hegemonic actors (Chapter 7). However, is important to note that this division was only created to align with the structural requirements of the thesis and does not reflect a true separation between the actors. As explained in Chapter 2, 3, and 4, their existence is deeply interconnected, and the boundaries between them are fluid, often overlapping and influencing one another in complex ways. Moreover, it is crucial to highlight that these chapters, that are the product of the dialogue with the pluriverse, are presented without adding extra theoretical interpretations. This approach was deliberately chosen to allow the reader to analyse the impact of my geo- and body-politics of knowledge in each of my analytical interventions. By

refraining from overlaying theoretical frameworks, I aimed to make visible the ongoing analysis and critical engagement that shaped each phrase of the project. In this way, the writing of these dialogues is presented as an active and reflective process where territorial meaning is co-constructed in dialogue with the pluriverse. The theoretical implications of these dialogues with the pluriverse are presented in Chapter 8, while Chapter 9 presents a proposal for their further expansion.

The proposal to expand the dialogue represents the ethical and political decision of using this project as a platform to initiate a critical epistemological dialogue that can open new spaces and directions within the urban land-grabbing scholarship. This initiative will be reflected in the project's publications. To ensure equitable engagement, I will ensure that the work is also published in Spanish-language journals from Latin America and that can be accessed by the territories of transformation and the hegemonic actors. This decision aims to directly engage with the audience involved in this type of conflict and to contribute to Latin American political ecology scholarship. Additionally, it aligns to the political goal of changing “the terms of the conversation, not just the content” (Mignolo, 2020, p.209) in the land-grabbing discourse, fostering the envisioning of alternative ethical futures.

Chapter 5 Internal Dialoguing: Exploring the impact of my geo- and body-politics of knowledge

5.1 Introduction

The foundation of any decolonial reflexivity process lies in internal reflection (Mignolo, 2010; Smith 1999; Quijano 2000). This process must start with an act of epistemic disobedience by dwelling in the border, critically examining the impact of the Colonial Matrix of Power, and envisioning alternative ways of being, thinking, and doing (Mignolo, 2010). For this to happen effectively, the reflexive process must begin with ourselves, mapping how our position within the Colonial Matrix of Power shapes our lives and, consequently, this project.

Therefore, this chapter delves into this internal dialogue as an ethical act of self-critical introspection. It aims to recognise the rejection of the zero point of neutrality (Castro-Gómez, 2005) and to expose the biases and assumptions that have influenced this project at every stage— from its conception, through the dialogues with the pluriverse, and in my writing. The goal is not to mitigate these biases, but to present and reflect on them, thereby bringing reliability, rigour and validity to this decolonial practice.

To achieve this, this chapter presents the first two actions of the “dialoguing phase” in the reflexive process to dwell in the border, representing the internal dialoguing: “Locus of Enunciation” and “Communal Contemplation”. The first section explores my positionality within the Colonial Matrix of Power, while the second section examines how my position within these structures influenced my interaction and dialogue with the pluriverse.

5.2 Locus of Enunciation

Since the beginning of this journey of reflexivity, I have started to question my place in the Colonial Matrix of Power. This is not an easy task; however, this reflexive process allows me to externalise my internal struggle, which is part of me and will continue to be after finishing this project.

During my PhD first year, I found discomfort in describing my geo- and body-politics of knowledge from my point of view. The question of how I could

present my position within these power structures without reinforcing power asymmetries and unequal opportunities to make judgments stayed with me and accompanied me when I visited each of the territories of transformation, the Government employees' offices, urban development companies and NGO headquarters or cafes where we met.

In struggling with this question, I decided to ask the members of other worlds to describe me at the end of our conversations. Nevertheless, the answers to this question were not what I had anticipated. The Colonial Matrix of Power, intricately woven with the cultural dimension, was evident in each answer. With responses like "a person who is nice and polite" and "a person who is very interested in this topic," the Mexican socio-cultural dimension that shapes social interactions was manifested. However, other comments during our dialogue such as "what can I know if I didn't go to the school", "what can I know that you don't know" or using the term "la güerita" to refer to my person due to my light skin, manifested the power asymmetries that exist and my privileged position within them.

I agree with Mignolo (2017) when they say that we cannot observe the Colonial Matrix of Power from the outside because there is nothing outside of it. The pluriverse is constructed under power asymmetries, and I, with the struggle that represents being immersed in those power structures, present my locus of enunciation:

I was born and raised in a geopolitical periphery in what is called the "province" of Mexico. However, I write this project from the centre, from a university office in England. I am a white and Latina heterosexual woman in her thirties. My parents, both Mexicans, have European ancestries and today, I am conscious that most of my education was based on Eurocentric epistemologies. My studies represent this privilege. I studied my formative years in a catholic private school and later attended universities in Mexico, the United States of America, Germany, and now, the United Kingdom.

Despite having worked for six years in Mexico prior to embarking on the PhD programme, it was not until I arrived in England that I was introduced to the

decolonial option and its potential scope. This revelation, which I consider a life-altering decision, has been a guiding force throughout this project, fuelling my commitment to decolonial thinking.

For this reason, today, I write from the border, where the Ejidatarios and Comuneros dwell. This is a complex place in constant struggle, where the colonial power structures and the modern-world system face a heterogenous and irregular resistance. This is because it is in this border where coloniality is resisted and assimilated simultaneously, happening at all times, but at their own pace and in their own way.

Writing from the border is complicated because it is an emotionally charged political act. I do not write with just my body and thinking in the border; I do it with emotion because the dwellers of this borderland are members of my community. This complex place is home. Nevertheless, borderlands are heterogeneous: sharing the struggle does not mean we struggle in the same way or share the same experiences. Coloniality also affects us internally, defining internal power structures. Therefore, during this project, I constantly reflect on the impact of my body- and geo-politics of knowledge in the way I interact with the territories I have chosen to represent the pluriverse.

Additionally, this reflexive process and my fluid (Gair et al., 2011) insider-outsider political representation or “ambivalence” (Bukamal, 2022, p.328) have driven me to try to move away from simple dualisms (Sultana, 2007) and present the ontological struggle over territory as a decolonial struggle inseparable from the (re)configuration of the modern project. Therefore, to observe this struggle over territory, this project presents the epistemological dialogue with the communal territories’ dwellers but also with the actors that operate within hegemonic power structures that have been defined by the historical processes of modernity and coloniality. These are the government agency employees, social organisations representatives, and urban development companies' directors.

This is because it is from this borderland— where different yet interrelated worlds meet— that an epistemological dialogue and the co-production of

knowledge about alternative ways to understand territory can emerge. This epistemological and transversal dialogue has the potential not only to bridge multiples worlds but also to explore and cultivate alternative and coexisting futures in the urban land-grabbing conflict.

5.3 Communal Contemplation

Communal contemplation involves active and highly visible observation (Ortiz Ocaña and Arias López, 2019). However, in a conflict area, this can be challenging. Since I can remember, there has been land conflict and insecurity in this region. However, the level of tension is variable, and we, as locals, like to believe that we know how to read the signs to avoid being in difficult or dangerous situations.

I relied on my local knowledge and family and friends' support during this project. With their help, I drew a map to navigate this complex situation. The route had three clear objectives. First, I wanted to avoid misinterpretation and misuse of my presence, especially in the territories of transformation. To achieve this, I needed to prevent possible State or social organisations' interference during the communal contemplation and alternate conversations phases. Second, I wanted to avoid attracting too much attention for my security. A misinterpretation of my project could put me in a risky situation. Students and newspaper reporters have disappeared while working in the field in Mexico (Amnesty International, 2024). Third, I wanted to respect all the internal power structures in each territory and, simultaneously, the new power relations created with social organisations, urban development companies, and government agency employees.

With this goal in mind, I decided to start communal contemplation in the territories of transformation before contacting government agencies, social organisations, or urban development companies. Once in each territory, the first planned activity was approaching their leader to demonstrate respect for their local authority and ask for permission to be on their territory and have conversations with their members.

However, the process of contacting and creating the appointment with the leader was different in each territory. Although Territory 1 did not have established offices, getting an appointment with the leader was quick and easy. The same people from the community pointed me to the leader's house. However, it was the same leader who, after a few days, informed me that he had contacted the State officials to let them know about my presence and gather information about me. Additionally, the leader also used the territory WhatsApp group to notify the community about my presence. With both actions, the leader demonstrated his power, influence, and networking skills. Simultaneously, this action illustrates how communal contemplation is reciprocal, providing space and time for the territory to contemplate and investigate me as well.

The process in Territories 2 and 3 was completely different because the leaders had established offices to serve the community. In Territory 2, the leader demonstrated his power by leaving me on a three-week waiting list. Once I got the appointment, I was received by a gatekeeper who, after our meeting, arranged the actual meeting with the leader. On the other hand, in Territory 3, I presented myself at the offices, and it was the leader who, at that moment, allowed me to present myself and the project.

My presentation to each of the leaders and my geo- and body-politics of knowledge generated two types of responses. The leaders of Territory 2 and 3 never mentioned a time limitation for my visit. Still, after three weeks, they started to show discomfort and question my presence in their territory. On the other hand, the leader of the Territory 1 limited my welcome time to two weeks from the beginning.

Once I had the leader's permission, I started to walk around the territories, and more importantly, I let them see me walking, contemplating. I visited the convenience stores, the tortillas, and the church. I sat on the benches in the main square and observed the daily life. Due to the city's proximity and high levels of insecurity at the time, I limited my visits to each territory to daytime hours only. However, during the day, the extreme heat also restricted the daytime hours in which I could stay outdoors. Most of the days, I had to go

back to the city after 1 pm and come back at 4 pm, to avoid the peak temperatures. On the days that I decided to stay during those hot hours, I could not walk around as I intended and ended up leaving early because of heat exhaustion. These time restrictions due to insecurity and climate impacted on my understanding of the social dynamics, activities, and behaviours of the territories during those times.

It is important to note that, following the COVID-19 measures at the time, I maintained my distance from the members of the territory and consistently wore a facemask. While wearing a facemask enhanced my safety, it also reinforced power asymmetries with the communal territories where more than half of the population lacked the means to purchase facemasks to protect themselves from COVID-19. Most of the population in these territories had no choice but to accept their fate and the possibility of getting sick in the future.

Although authors such as Saleh (2021) have noted that wearing facemasks can demonstrate the researcher's commitment to community safety, in this case, the inability to show my complete face significantly slowed down the trust-building process in all territories. The facemask acted as a barrier impeding me from showing my identity in a context where high levels of insecurity are an everyday challenge.

In this scenario of conflict, walking around alone creates multiple interpretations. Doing that as an 'outsider' and woman also generates concern. To avoid confusion about my motives, I wore a hoodie with the University name and logo and the student ID card with the University lanyard daily. While this strategy enhanced my security, it also sparked confusion about the involvement of a northern university and my "true" origins.

Despite making my motives visible, concerns about the gender I represent persisted. It was the sorority of women from all the territories that created the first conversations. They expressed their concern about my safety by reminding me of the insecurity in which we live. Some even recommended that I go home early and said they would find people to talk with me during the day. This sorority created a trust link between us. After a few days, they started to

greet me on their way home, and a couple of weeks later, I engaged with their fears, concerns, and hopes.

The water crisis was visible everywhere I went. Although in this region there has been an increase of almost 4 centigrade degrees in its maximum and minimum temperatures since 1970 (Anonymised source, 2018), during the summer of 2022, the region faced the worst drought in 500 years. The temperatures reached close to 40 degrees Celsius. The hot and dry weather couple with the lack of funds to build their own water infrastructure, has made it extremely difficult to farm the few arable lands or raise livestock.

In many of these territories, water infrastructure was built within their boundaries many years ago. However, this infrastructure is controlled by the State to supply the city, making it inaccessible to the local inhabitants. As a result, the inability to access water for farming has forced many members of these territories to seek employment in City X or migrate to the United States of America. Over the past decade, these circumstances have significantly shifted the socio-economic dynamics within the territories.

For instance, during the day in Territory 1, I could mainly find women, children, and older people. The women accompanied their children to school and returned home to cook or take care of their few animals and plants. Most of the men left in the morning to work in the secondary sector and returned close to sunset to work a couple of hours in their "milpa" [Nahuatl word to refer to a cultivated parcel using a polyculture traditional agricultural system] or take care of their animals and vehicles until night.

In Territory 2, the dynamic was different. During the day, the territory was primarily populated by older people. The children were at school, and most of the young men and women commuted to the city. However, many of the middle-aged men worked in the quarrying industry inside their territory, and only a few of them went to the arable lands and worked in their parcela. Here, most of the members had a family member working “en el otro lado” (“on the other side”, phrase to refer the other side of the Mexican-US border) and

sending money with regularity. At night, all the members of this territory returned home to spend time with their families.

In contrast, Territory 3 is bustling with small businesses. The human settlement of this territory, located next to the city, maintained a vibrant atmosphere during the day. Although the children attended school, most of the men and women worked in the city or in their family business selling stones, construction supplies, artisan products, plants and daily need products. At night, they all returned home and spent some time with their family.

Regarding the visual representations of the conflict, in Territory 1 I noticed only one walled piece of land indicating a private ownership within the territory. However, in Territory 2 this practice was more common, and in Territory 3 it was particularly prevalent, especially in the human settlement area. In Territory 2 and 3 I could also find hand painted sales promotion in certain lots but at the same time, painted resistance phrases in other walls. During my time in each territory no one approached me to ask about my intentions to buy land. However, this situation changed when my brother accompanied me. In Territory 2 he was approached by another man who inquired if he was looking to purchase land. While the man's intentions— whether to sell or protect the land— remained unclear, this incident highlights the gender dynamics at play in the land market sector. The fact that my brother, a male, was directly engaged in such conversation, whereas I, a female, was not, suggests a gender bias in who can be a potential buyer in this industry.

Furthermore, it is important to add that the communal contemplation described in the previous text only applied to the territories of transformation. This process could not be applied in the same way to the hegemonic actors who were also part of this epistemological dialogue. Most of these actors, deeply attached in the city's dynamics, reside there and conduct decision-making activities within their office spaces. Due to logistical constraints, I only had access to their offices on the day of our scheduled meeting. Nonetheless, I am conscious that my body- and geo-politics of knowledge influenced the way my presence and the epistemological dialogue were accepted and engaged with. My previous work experience as urban planner fostered a trust bond with the

Governmental employees, as people frequently perceived me through that professional lens. At the same time, advocacy efforts by friends and family members help establish trust with urban development companies and social organisations. Additionally, most of these actors reported that they had inquired about me with their industry peers. In this way, the direct communal contemplation implemented with the communal territories transitioned to an indirect inquiry with the hegemonic actors

As a result, communal contemplation in its both forms— direct or indirect— provided an opportunity for mutual contemplation and the time to critically reflect about the impact of my body- and geo-politics of knowledge in the things I see, hear and feel. My positionality as a woman and the high levels of insecurity restricted my ability to walk alone in certain areas and limited my visit times to daytime hours. Additionally, my race, socioeconomic status, and representation as a student from a northern university often generated initial confusion and mistrust.

For example, in Territory 1 my student ID created some confusion, particularly around why a student affiliated with an English university was inquiring about the conflict. At one point, there was even uncertainty about my nationality and whether English representatives were interested in purchasing land. This misunderstanding initially delayed the trust building process and represent how my body-politics of knowledge impacted during the project.

For this reason, this phase of the reflexivity process is instrumental in addressing ethical concerns by acknowledging and transparently presenting the asymmetries that impacted my interactions and the following epistemological dialogue with the members of other worlds.

Chapter 6. Dialoguing with Territories of Transformation

6.1 Introduction

To achieve the alternate conversations in the territories of transformation and make visible the pluriverse, I faced additional challenges that influenced even more the trust building process. These challenges included political turbulence, high levels of insecurity, elevated temperatures, and the COVID-19 health crisis during the summer of 2022. However, my fluid position as insider-outsider allowed me to have a better understanding of the political situation, weather patterns, and to use our shared verbal and non-verbal language to establish a trust bond even when wearing a facemask.

Sharing the language enabled me to understand the figurative language, idiomatic expressions and subtle meanings used by the members of each world. Additionally, it allowed me to adjust my opening ontological questions when somebody challenged them, identify dangerous situations, and understand when a person felt uncomfortable or engaged with our conversation.

Once in each territory, the leader's involvement in the project, my condition as a woman, my race, and the class I represent impacted differently in all my conversations. In Territory 1, my presentation to the leader did not produce enough trust to start a conversation. It was the women who, after days of communal contemplation, started the conversation and invited more members of this world to join in the conversation. In this territory, the conversations were one-to-one and generally in the afternoon. The members preferred their own space to talk. However, while the women selected open spaces close to their houses, the men selected open spaces near their homes and often in proximity of their wives. This choice helped to avoid any potential misunderstandings about the nature of our conversation.

In Territory 2, the leader decided to arrange the first conversations. These conversations took place in places within reach of the leader’s eye. The leader’s proximity and the possibility of inviting another member to the conversation presented the opportunity to build trust. However, another part of

the conversations was achieved with the accompaniment of my brother as a male figure. Although my brother's presence brought tranquillity to the male members of this world and opened the door to one-to-one alternate conversations away from the leader's eye, it also changed the conversation dynamics. The ejidatarios preferred to direct their answers to my brother, especially when describing the challenging economic situation in which they live, possibly because they believed that, as a male, he would understand their circumstances better than I would. Additionally, the wives appeared more at ease seeing that I was accompanied by a male rather than talking alone with their husbands.

In Territory 3, my presentation with the leader created trust with just one group. But, unlike Territory 2, my brother's presence did not help to build trust with the other group. It was their own proposal for group conversations and my father's presence— a 65-year-old male adult— that created the trust bond. While the first group conversation was created using the leader's contacts inside the communal offices, the second group conversation was achieved with the help of one member of this territory who advocated for the project. His invitation and my father's presence generated an open and friendly environment for the conversation. The conversation took place away of the leader's eye, under a tree in a fenced field, with machetes on the ground but also with Coca- Cola bottles— a social symbol to express a friendly welcome.

These different alternate conversation modalities— whether in groups or individually— significantly influenced how the Ejidatarias(os), Comuneras(os) and I engaged in the conversations, as well as their scope and direction. Group conversations provided a comfortable communal environment for collaborative learning and clarification from each other. However, this modality also maintained their social dynamics and interpersonal relations, shaping the answers as well as the type and degree of participation of the members. On the other hand, the individual conversations provided a private and confidential space to reflect on the meaning of territory while steering the conversation at their own pace without interruption. Nonetheless, some members exhibited stress and discomfort during individual sessions. They manifested the need to

ensure their peers were aware of their responses and the reasoning behind them.

In the following sections, the epistemological dialogue with each territory is structured using five territoriality key processes: producing, appropriating, claiming, defending and imaging territory. These processes emerged organically from the co-production of knowledge initiated through critical reflexion and shared geographies among communal landholders. The diverse narratives that arose from these dialogues collaboratively shaped a more nuanced and inclusive understanding of territory, reflecting the pluriverse in which we live on. By engaging in this co-production process, the project seeks to illuminate how these territorial processes represent alternative ontological dimensions of territory.

It is important to reiterate that the distinction between territories of transformation and hegemonic actors is an artificial construct introduced to align this decolonial project to the thesis structure requirements. Similarly, as previously mentioned, the dialogues as a space of encounter are presented without additional theoretical interpretations. This is to allow the reader to understand the impact of my locus of enunciation in each activity of the co-production of knowledge process. The theoretical implications are addressed in Chapter 8.

To maintain anonymity of the participants of this dialogue, codes have been used to represent different participants. For example, ‘T1’ denotes ‘Territory 1’, followed by a letter that corresponds to the specific member of the community or organisation. For instance, T1-A would refer to the first participant form Territory 1. This coding system ensures confidentiality while allowing readers to follow the narratives of different participants. Additionally, to maintain transparency, authenticity and acknowledge the situated production of knowledge, segments of the narratives are presented in both the original language and translated into English.

Code	Territory	Land tenure type	Estimated area (hectares)	Estimated number of land right holders
T1	Territory 1	Ejido	2,000ha	150
T2	Territory 2	Ejido	15,000ha	300
T3	Territory 3	Comunidad	15,000ha	350

Table 2 Territories of transformation overview by code

6.2 Territory 1

6.2.1 Producing Territory: Si no Tenemos Tierra, no Tenemos Nada (If We Do Not Have Land, We Have Nothing)

What does land mean? The Ejidatarias and Ejidatarios would repeat the question, open their arms and smile. For the Ejidatarias and Ejidatarios of Territory 1, the land is everything. T1-B describes it as follows:

> "*La tierra significa el agua, significa las plantas, significa el aire ¡significa todo!, ¡todo! Todo lo que te da para vivir, entonces si no tienes tierra no vas a poder vivir. No podemos vivir así nada más. Para mí es todo, la tierra es todo".*
>
> "Land means water, means plants, means air, it means everything! Everything! Everything that gives you to live, so if you do not have land, you will not be able to live. We cannot live just like that. For me it is everything, the land is everything."

In this way, the land is their guarantee for their family's well-being. It is their livelihood. It is life, and as T1-A says, it is the future. This relationship is emphasised by T1-I who says that without land, they have nothing.

> *"La tierra yo creo que es lo mejor que puede tener cualquier persona […] es la misma vida que nos da lo poco o a lo mucho que aquí logramos tener, es a través de la tierra ¿verdad? porque si no tuviéramos tierra no tendríamos nada"*

> "The land I believe is the best that a person can have […] it is the life itself that gives us the little or much that we manage to have here, is through the land, right? because if we could not have the land, we have nothing."

Unlike men, the women opted to express their spiritual and affective connection with the land using phrases such as *"bendita tierra, bendito lugar"* ("blessed land, blessed place") (T1-E). By using this motto, the women manifest their gratitude to the land and their responsibility to cherish and protect it. This duty must be carried out with the same affection with which a daughter takes care of her mother (T1-B).

Therefore, it is from these subject-nature relationships that the territory is constructed. For the Ejidatarias and Ejidatarios of Territory 1, the land transforms into territory when the community takes possession of it. We need land to create territory (T1-D), and when this happens, the responsibility rests on the community (T1-B). "*Territorio es Ejido*" ("Territory is Ejido") (T1-D). Therefore, the territory is considered patrimony; it is unique and represents a place where you feel good because it is home (T1-G, T1-E, and T1-H). It is the kind of home where you breathe freedom (T1-I). Ejido as territory embodies freedom: *"Es libertad, libertad de la sierra, libertad a nuestra gente, libertad a nosotros, es una libertad bonita"* ("It is freedom, freedom of the mountains, freedom for our people, freedom to us, it is a nice freedom") (T1-D).

6.2.2 Appropriating Territory: The Responsibility of Being an Ejidatario/Ejidataria

For the Ejidatarias and Ejidatarios of Territory 1, becoming an Ejidatario involves inheriting the land rights that their ancestors left them. This right allows them to work the few arable lands in the territory for self-consumption and to preserve the rest. Yet, due to the climate change and insufficient financial resources for water storage infrastructure, this right offers little financial benefit. As one Ejidatario (a) notes: *"Es más caro trabajar aquí que irse […] pero tenemos un gran amor por la tierra"* ("It is even more expensive

to work here than just leave […], but we have a deep love for the land") (T1-G).

Despite the financial challenges, preserving the land is seen as a continuation of their parents' work (T1-F). Being an Ejidatario is, therefore, a commitment to their ancestors to cherish, protect, and look after the land. It is a constant responsibility (T1-D). As one member explains:

> *"Conservar porque nuestros antepasados nos han venido dejando, nos han venido dejando esa herencia ¿verdad?, es una herencia que nos han venido dejando y para nosotros es importante defenderla, tenerla" (*T1-*G)*
>
> "Preserving what our ancestors have been leaving us, they have been leaving us this inheritance, right? It is an inheritance that they have been leaving us, and for us, it is important to defend it, to have it" (T1-G)

Another adds:

> *"Para nosotros es el… es cuidar tu tierra, es amar, no solamente cuidar, es amar tu tierra, es respetar el medio ambiente, lo que hay" (*T1-*B)*
>
> "For us is… is taking care of your land, is to love, not just take care, it is to love your land, it is to respect the environment, what there is" (T1-B)

Therefore, to fulfil these responsibilities, the Ejidatario must protect and defend the land. They must become *"guardianes de la tierra"* ("guardians of the land") (T1-D and T1-B). This responsibility and the struggle to maintain the land *(tal y como es"* ("as it is") is shared in a communal understanding (T1-B and T1-D). In this way, in the Ejido, *"todos vivimos para lo mismo, para cuidar lo que tenemos, si, la tierra que tenemos, y queremos seguir conservando"* ("we all live for the same, to take care of what we have… yes, the land that we have, and we want to keep preserving it") (T1-I).

In essence, being a Ejidatario or Ejidataria is expressed as a deeply rooted responsibility, characterised by inheritance, love, preservation, and communal guardianship over their territory.

6.2.3 Claiming Territory: Nos Están Asfixiando (They Are Suffocating Us)

Territory 1 is highly dependent on the city and State. Economically, the Ejidatarias and Ejidatarios are cash dependent. They do not have the capital, support, or modern technology to become a modern farmer. Therefore, they depend on their patronage relationship with the State, which provides support through different social programmes to overcome the impact of the social and economic exclusion processes they face every day. Additionally, they depend on the city's economic development to complement their diet and buy daily-need products, to access additional job opportunities, secondary education, hospitals, transportation systems, and for political-administrative purposes.

Territory 1, as discussed in Chapter 3, operates under a governance framework established by the Mexican government which outlines their rights and responsibilities. One of those rights is their right to be governed by an assembly composed by all the right holders of the territory and to create their internal regulation. All the decisions must be determined collectively, even the decision of who integrates the Ejido or Comunidad committee, the group of ejidatarios or comuneros who have the job of implementing the decisions taken by the assembly, and the commissioner, who serves as a link between the Ejido and the State.

In this way, their unique origin, governance mechanisms, and historical distance from urban centres kept Territory 1 and similar Ejidos and Comunidades largely insulated from the urban logic of capital accumulation. However, today, everything is changing— the city has arrived at their front door. They can observe one of the major urban infrastructure projects from their houses. This project surrounds and crosses the Territory creating physical barriers: *“Nunca pensamos que… que fuera ser posible… de que se destruyera cerros, es horrible, ¿lo ves?”* (“We never thought that… that it could

be possible… to destroy hills, they destroyed them, it is horrible, can you see?") (T1-D).

The project impacts on their subject-nature relation. *"Nos hirieron con el proyecto"* ("They hurt us with the project") (T1-C). Several Ejidatarios describe how this unwanted project deforested the area and has restricted the mobility inside the Territory, attracted contamination and insecurity, and shrunk their few arable lands. Yet, it is not only new urban infrastructure projects that are creating tensions in their constant production of territory. New large housing developments are being built next to their borders, where other Ejidos used to live, increasing the pressure to sell their land.

> *"(El gobierno trabaja en) destruirnos, en traernos fraccionamientos hasta acá, porque eso es lo que nos está pasando, son fraccionamientos que ya nos vienen rebasando, nos vienen prácticamente ahorcando" (T1-D)*
>
> "(The government) is destroying us, bringing here the housing developments, because that is what is happening, the housing developments are bigger than us, they are suffocating us" (T1-D). "
>
> *"Lo único que si no me gustaría es que, pues, nos comiera la ciudad" […] al rato no va a haber Ejidos porque mira "X" ya no tiene Ejido ya vendió todo, "X" ya no tiene Ejido, ya ¡se acabó! (T1-B)*
>
> "The only thing that I wouldn't like is that, well, that the city would eat us up" […] soon there will not be Ejidos, because look, "X" they do not longer have Ejido, they sold everything, "X" does not have Ejido, that is it, it is over! (T1-B)

Seeing how their neighbours could not survive has been creating anxiety among the Territory: *"(las desarrolladoras) nos siguen invadiendo […] buscan a las personas humildes que no puedan decir no"* ("(the urban development companies) they keep invading […] they look for humble means people who cannot say no") (T1-A). However, it was not just the poorest, the ones who sold their land in the neighbouring Ejidos. Some Ejidatarios with "*ambición de*

dinero" ("money ambition") (T1-G) accepted the offer and left their territory. *"Ahora no tienen nada"* ("Now they have nothing") (T1-G). Their neighbours' selling experience is repeated among members of the Territory to show how they got fooled into selling their land.

The children, as the future of the Territory, are also part of this conversation; particularly in this moment, when the Territory's natural resources and localisation increase their speculated economic value and, therefore, the pressure to sell. For the Ejidatarios, it is clear that their territory will be destroyed if they sell: *"Quieren vivir donde está la naturaleza, pero en cuanto llega, la destruyen"* ("They want to live where nature is, but once they arrive, they destroy it") (T1-B).

> *T1-C: "Pues yo creo que, por lo mismo, su valor que tiene […] ya ve como están metiendo, los fraccionamientos, más que nada es lo que quieren hacer ahorita, comprar para eso y es lo que nosotros queremos defender para que no se metan, todavía, quien sabe al rato nuestros hijos si van a permitir" (voltea a ver su hijo(a) con mirada educadora).*
>
> *L: (al niño(a)) ¿qué dices tu? ¿Si o no?*
>
> *Nino(a): ¡no! (hace ademan con la cabeza)*
>
> *T1-C: (risa orgullosa)"*
>
> T1-C: "I believe that is because of the same, because of its value […] you see how they are invading, the housing developments, that is mostly what they want to do now, to buy because of that and that is why we want to defend, so they cannot enter, yet, who knows in a while if our children will allow it" (turns around to make eye contact with her child)
>
> L: (to the child) What do you think? Yes, or no?
>
> Child: No! (nodding)

T1-C: (proud laugh)"

Today, they cannot trust anyone. Big interests call for more interests. During this conflict, the government also expressed interest in the land. They proposed to transform the land into a Protected Area. However, the initiative that was created to push away the urban development companies was not well received by the Territory either.

> *"¿Por qué área protegida? ¿Por qué ahora? Si siempre la hemos protegido ¿no querrán robármela? […] al firmar un documento voy a ser Ejidataria, pero solo de nombre, de papel, pero ya no voy a ser, porque la tierra ya no va a ser mía, prácticamente va a ser del gobierno y si en un futuro el gobierno quiere decir, porque como siempre, que por progresar y la madre, voy a atravesar la carretera, ¿Qué va a hacer el gobierno? ¡Pues la va a travesar! ¡Pues al cabo es de él" (T1-D)*
>
> "Why to create a protected area? Why now? If we have always protected it, do they want to steal it from me? […] because once I sign the document I am going to be Ejidatario but just by name, in paper, but I will not really be because the land is not going to be mine, it will be the government's land and if in the future the government want to say, like always, that because of progress and stuff like that, they need to cross the land with a Highway, what are they going to do? They will do it! because they own it" (T1-D)

As a result, Territory 1 is surrounded by multiple interests. *"Estamos en medio, porque todo alrededor nuestro está vendido, entonces como estamos en medio, por eso recibimos los ataques, precisamente por eso, porque quieren esta parte"* ("We are in the middle, everything around us is already sold, so we are the middle, and that is why we receive the attacks, precisely because of that, because they want this part") (T1-B). As a result of this newfound and escalating market value, the land has become a prime target, prompting frequent invasions from other Ejidos, urban development companies, political

organisations, and individuals. This relentless pressure serves as an everyday strategy to coerce the Territory 1 into selling.

6.2.4 Defending Territory: Esta es la Última Batalla ¡Porque Morimos en la Lucha o la Ganamos! (This Is the Last Battle: Because We Die in the Fight, or We Win It!)

Territory 1 has managed to stay together and reject all the buying offers. This territory is proud of being "*luchones"* ("fighters") (T1-C). Nevertheless, Territory 1 is fighting alone. They have not joined any international network, and although family relationships and courtesy gestures such as allowing the use of internal roads for specific tasks are shared between Ejidos, they usually have a history of boundary conflict between them. Because of this reason, the Ejidos prefer not to interfere in other Ejido's problems and maintain their isolation.

As a result, Territory 1 has created a plan to fight, with its own resources, against the *"Elefante enorme"* ("Big Elephant") (T1-D), the animal they have chosen to describe the power asymmetry they are experiencing. So far, this plan has moved away from violence and is structured around four local actions. The first action relates to the revolutionary motto, "*la tierra es para quien la trabaja"* ("the land is for the ones who work it"). With this idea, the Ejidatarios have increased the number of conservation activities in their territory. By *"cuidando la tierra"* ("taking care of the land") with activities such as reforesting, the Ejidatarios reaffirm their purpose and produce a reterritorialization process. The second is the establishment of a vigilance group that patrols all the territory during the day and night. The third action implies the physical presence of the community to push away the invaders once they are inside the Territory. Finally, the fourth action is the legal defence. They have resorted to federal appeals for protection and lawsuits against land grabbers.

In this battle, gender determines participation in the decision-making and the physical involvement during the resistance actions to protect the territory. As outlined in Section 4.3.1.3, in Territory 1, just a few women are Ejidatarias (land rights holders). However, the Ejidatarias reported having to play a dual role:

being a mother-wife and Ejidataria. They are expected to manage domestic duties, care for their family, attend very long assemblies, engage in communal activities, which sometimes include physically demanding jobs, and actively participate in resistance efforts. This complex situation results in limited participation during the Ejido assemblies, where critical votes and resolutions occur. In terms of physical involvement in communal activities and resistance actions, the women usually rely on the support of their husband or son, who takes their place during these engagements.

Later, in Section 8.4, we will delve into the women's political agency and their evolving role in the resistance actions to protect their territory.

6.2.5 Imagining Territory: Cuando la Lluvia Empezó a Cambiar. (When the Rainy Season Started to Change)

In Territory 1, the people remember how their grandparents and parents worked the land. They used to have two harvest seasons using just rainfall, and with that, they *"sobrevivían"* ("survived") (T1-A). They had food all year round. They were entirely devoted to agriculture and transmitted their knowledge to their children. Nevertheless, this knowledge can no longer be applied because the rainy season started to change.

> *"Antes la gente conocía, ¿y que conocía? El temporal, el temporal de la lluvia ¿verdad? El temporal de la lluvia y la gente comenzaba a sembrar todas esas milpas que tú ves ahí, eran sembradas, toda esa parte de aquel lado, eran sembrada, pero ya no […] la lluvia empezó a cambiar" (T1-H)*
>
> "They had the knowledge. What they knew? The seasons, the rainy season, right? The rainy season, so the people worked those milpas that you can see there, those were planted, all that part on that side, but not anymore […] the rainy season started to change" (T1-H).

Territory 1 is facing one of the worst droughts in 500 years. Nevertheless, 20 years ago, the rainy season started to change, and the rivers began to dry. Five years ago, the last river dried up. For the Ejidatarios, this has been a

"curse" and is socially linked to the economic crisis of 1994 and the neoliberal agrarian reform in 1992: *"Todo empezó desde Carlos Salinas de Gortari que nos dejó en bancarrota […] fue como una maldición […] Desde ahí para acá"* ("It started since Carlos Salinas de Gortari who left us in bankrupt […] it was like a curse. From that point to today") (T1-A). The impact of the water crisis has resulted, for most of the Ejidatarios and Ejidatarias, in the inability to work the land. Nevertheless, a few Ejidatarios and Ejidatarias are taking the risk, trying to build their own wells to continue with the agricultural tradition.

Today, the Ejidatarios are losing hope. They have requested help from the government to create water reserves, but this has not been granted. Consequently, some of them have decided to find jobs in the city or leave their territory and migrate to the USA. However, others maintain their relationship with their territory and express their affection for it during these challenging times: *"Hace poquito venían unos chavos de "X" y decían que allá llovía mucho y que está muy verde y muy bonito, pero me también les gustaba este lugar […] primeramente Dios vuelva a llover"* ("No longer ago, some young people from "X" came and said that they had rain and that their territory was green and beautiful, but they also liked this place […] First of all God, we hope we have rain again") (T1-B).

In the struggle, the women maintain the resistance through preservation. They are considered by their fellow Ejidatarios as the ones with more awareness about the value of the land: *"Un hombre por decirlo así, que es un tomador, pues se echa una, dos, tres copas y ya dice, sabes que, te vendo la tierra o te dejo la tierra, pero la mujer no, nunca lo haría […] la mujer te dice: ¡estás loco!"* ("A man, let's say, who is a drinker, he will have one, two, three drinks and will say, you know what? I will sell or leave my land. But the woman, they will never do that […] they would say: you are crazy!") (T1-A).

It is also the women who talk about the history of their territory and repeat the question: what do you want for our children? Using this question, the women hope for a better future for their families. A future where the territory resists. *"Yo solo espero que conservemos nuestros Ejidos, que conservemos nuestra cultura, que conservemos nuestra unidad que hay en esta comunidad, una*

comunidad que no es lo mismo que la ciudad" ("I just hope we can keep our Ejidos, our culture, our unity that we have in this community, a community that is not the same as the city") (T1-B)

6.3 Territory 2

6.3.1 Producing Territory: Tener Tierra es Tener Vida (To Have Land Is to Have Life)

For the Ejidatarias and Ejidatarios of Territory 2, the land is life (T2-D), and as long we have land, *"¿qué más podemos pedir?"* ("what else can we ask for?") (T2-N). In this conceptualisation, the land produces life and sustains our life through the practice of different land-based livelihood production systems. In this way, for Territory 2, where most of its members live off the land (T2-G), taking care of the land is essential to continue living (T2-O).

The gratitude for the land is present in the Ejidatarios' daily discourse. With phrases such as *"vivimos gracias a la tierra"* ("We live thanks to the land") (T2-G) or *"gracias a la tierra aquí andamos… viviendo"* ("thanks to the land we are here… living") (T2-O), people in Territory 2, expressed their strong connection and dependency on land and its natural resources. This connection is rooted in an agricultural tradition that, contrary to Territory 1, it has been diversified into new land-based activities such as quarrying: *"y así es como se va logrando la vida, de cualquier piedra"* ("and that is how we make a living, from any rock") (T2-H). In this diversification, the value of land has incorporated a productivity meaning: *"Si trabajamos la tierra pues nos da que comer y sino, está la tierra nomas parada"* ("If we work the land, it will give us to eat, if not, the land will be just there, dormant") (T2-K)

However, in this dry climate that affect all the region, the constantly evolving notion of land and its productive meaning is quickly related to water availability. This relation is explained by T2-I as follows:

> *"El agua es nuestra madre y la tierra nuestra abuela".*
>
> "The water is our mother and the earth our grandmother".

In this construction, the Spanish word "Tierra" transforms its English meaning from "land" to "earth" to explain the spiritual connection to mother earth, which provides water to give life. As such, the water and land represent the connected elements that allow us to live and produce food: *"Si sembramos, si tenemos fe en Dios que nos ayude con la lluvia, que si haiga un buen temporal, pues si hay productos, si hay buena cosecha"* ("if we plant and if we have faith that God will help us with rain, with a good rainy season, then we will have good products, we will have a good harvest") (T2-M). In other words, *"sin agua, no hay pastura para que los animales coman"* ("without water, there is no pasture for the animals to eat") (T2-B), and without water, the corn will dry up (T2-A). Therefore, Territory 2 and their family's future depend on their land and water availability to survive (T2-D).

It is under this subject-nature relation that territory is constructed. For Territory 2, the territory is defined as an extension of land (T2-N) that represent the essence of a group of people (T2-G). Because of this, territory *"es parte de lo nuestro, de nuestras vidas"* ("is part of what is ours, is part of our lives") (T2-G). Therefore, *"territorio es nuestro Ejido"* ("territory is our Ejido") (T2-F).

6.3.2 Appropriating Territory: The Pride of Being a Ejidatario/Ejidataria

For the Ejidatarias and Ejidatarios of Territory 2, being an Ejidatario(a) is important, but it is even more important to know what it means to be an Ejidatario(a) (T2-H). In this sense, Territory 2, just like Territory 1, continuously remembers and celebrates their history in every conversation. As T2-F expresses: "*Es un orgullo ser Ejidatario. Ser humilde como nuestros ancestros"* ("It is a pride to be Ejidatario, to be humble like our ancestors").

Today, they are the third generation to hold the Ejidatario(a) title. This land title represents their ancestors' fight: *"Ellos nos defendieron y por eso estamos aquí"* ("They defend us, and that is why we are here") (T2-K). "*Ellos defendieron nuestra libertad"* ("They defend our freedom") (T2-L). Then, the Ejidatario(a) *"apreciar el derramamiento de sangre que hubo en aquel tiempo para las tierras volvieran a sus legítimos dueños, los que vivíamos aquí"* ("must value the bloodshed that took place at that time so that the lands returned to

their rightful owners, those of us who lived here") (T2-K). In this way, the land and its fight define the Ejidatario(a) identity: *"Esta tierra es la razón por la que somos Ejidatarios"* ("This land is the reason why we are Ejidatarios") (T2-F).

In Territory 2, the title of Ejidatario(a) is not just a right— it is a gift from their ancestors (T2-K) and a blessing (T2-I) that affirms their land rights. Unlike ordinary peasants, this social and legal recognition grants them land and the power to defend it (T2-J, T2-F). In addition to this, for Territory 2, just like Territory 1, this title is also a binding promise from their ancestors to work and protect the land. For this reason, in order to keep the land and pass it to the next generation, they feel the moral obligation to work and care the land as with the same dedication as their ancestors (T2-B, T2-G, T2-H).

The knowledge of how to work the land is part of the Ejidatario(a)'s pride and identity. This invaluable knowledge is passed from generation to generation, ensuring the survival and prosperity of their way of life. As T2-H reminded me: The land will only produce to those who know how to work it. For the children of Territory 2, their future wellbeing depends on preserving this knowledge.

> *"La tierra da frutos a quien sabe trabajarla […] solo hay que saber dónde está y que es lo que necesita para que dé fruto"*
>
> "The land bears fruits to the ones who know how to work it [..] you just have to know where it is and what it needs to bear fruits."

However, contrary to Territory 1, the senior Ejidatarios(as) in Territory 2 view preserving the agricultural tradition as a responsibility not only to their families but also to the country. In this way, the communal way of living is extended beyond the Ejido, linking it to the broader nation:

> *"Sino sembramos ¿pues que va a ser de aquí en adelante?" (T2-B)*
>
> "If we stop working the land, what is going to happen from here on?" (T2-B)
>
> *"Si no hay tierra no hay comida ni para la ciudad, si nosotros sembramos y levantamos cosecha ya no somos un peso para la*

> *nación. La nación luego tiene que traer granos básicos de otras naciones porque no es autosuficiente ¿verdad? Si nosotros sembramos ya le quitamos un peso a la nación; que nos mantengamos nosotros y nuestra familia de lo que nosotros mismos producimos, o si vendemos algo ya ayudamos al equilibrio de la comida nacional ¿verdad? (T2-I).*
>
> "If there is no land, there is no food, not even for the city, if we plant and harvest, we are no longer a burden on our Nation. The Nation must bring basic grains from other nations because it is not self-sufficient, right? If we harvest, we already take a load from the Nation; if our family and we support ourselves from what we produce, or if we sell something, we already help to balance the national food, right?" (T2-I).

As a result, this double responsibility, with their family and nation, shapes the mission of the Territory 2 Ejidatario(a). It influences their daily practices and the processes of claiming and nurturing the land, as they engage in land-based activities that reinforce their connection to both their heritage and their broader social duty.

6.3.3 Claiming Territory: Nos Atacan por Todos Lados (They Attack Us from Everywhere)

Territory 2 is enclosed. The city has rapidly expanded in the last 20 years, and today, Territory 2 is surrounded by large high-income gated communities. This type of housing development has segregated them. The Ejidatarias and Ejidatarios point at the big walls while explaining to me which gated communities are already inside their territory: *"Nos están invadiendo"* ("They are invading us") (T2-N). *"Con la ciudad más cerquita, se van apoderando de más y más"* ("With the city so close, they grab more and more") (T2-O).

Territory 2 feels the effects of its proximity with the city. The new urban developments have created new road systems and attracted supermarkets, petrol stations and other services such as public and private transport systems. Although these new services have not targeted them, their proximity allows them to use them. Today *"es más conveniente para nosotros"* ("It is more

convenient for us") (T2-L). The Ejidatarias and Ejidatarios of Territory 2 do not have to go to the city centre to buy daily-need products, and their children can easily commute to secondary school (T2-L, T2-K).

On the other hand, the challenges have multiplied: *"Estamos tan cerca (de la ciudad) […] y como dice el dicho, tan cerca de Dios y tan lejos de él"* ("we are so close to the (city) […] and as the saying says, we are so close to God and yet so far away from him") (T2-G). Similarly to Territory 1, the water injustice has been accentuated. Territory 2 can observe the water reservoirs from their houses, but they cannot access them. This is because the water reservoirs and water infrastructure system were constructed to serve the city and the new housing developments but not Territory 2. However, contrary to Territory 1 where they have managed to build small wells, Territory 2 rely on the local government to send tank trucks with drinking water every 15 days, but even this is not always guaranteed. Consequently, they often resort to purchasing overpriced drinking water from private companies. Additionally, because of its localisation within the city, the land's real estate speculative value has increased and with this, the interest in Territory 2's land. As a result, Territory 2 is struggling. They are being attacked at all times and from different fronts.

> *"Esta complicado defender el Ejido porque te atacan por todos lados, te ataca el gobierno local, te ataca la gente, te ataca el mismo gobierno federal […]nos hemos enfrentado con personas que quieren abusar de la misma gente como Ejidatarios y quieren, este, hasta cierto punto, ¡arrebatarte la tierra!" (T2-D).*
>
> "Defending the Ejido is complicated because we are being attacked from all sides, the local government attacks us, the people attack us, and now the federal government also attacks us […] we have faced people who want to take advantage of the Ejidatarios, and they want to certain extent to grab our land!" (T2-D).

Just like Territory 1, they are also battling urban development companies that seek the land for new housing developments, while the local and federal governments aim to establish a protected area. The government involvement

with this new conservation discourse has also created anxiety about the future of the Territory 2 Ejidatarios(as).

> *¿Por qué áreas protegidas? ¿Si nosotros siempre hemos estado protegiendo? Cada que llueve estamos fortaleciendo, aquí es el beneficio del pueblo, donde sacamos para sobrevivir […](pero) los empresarios le dicen al gobierno es que queremos esa zona, a ver cómo le haces para que se la quites y ahí te va lana" (T2-H).*
>
> Why protected areas? If we have always been protecting? Every time it rains, we are strengthening the land, this is the benefit of the community, where we produce to survive […] (but) the businessmen tell the government – we want that area, I do not care how you must grab it from them, here is the money-" (T2-H).

However, in contrast with Territory 1, the water crisis, the government involvement, and the dispossession strategies carried out by urban development companies have caused confusion and deepened the internal conflict that has persisted since the formation of the Ejido (T2-N, T2-L, T2-O, T2-A2). Today, Territory 2 is divided into three distinct groups, the ones who want to protect their Ejido, the ones who wants to sell, and those who are torn between conflicting directions (T2-A2).

This separation has created distress among the Ejidatarios(as). The Ejidatarias cried when describing the internal land conflict and its familiar repercussions: *"Somos familia, pero al mismo tiempo unos tienen mucha avaricia"* ("We are family, but at the same time, some of us are greedy") (T2-N). *"No puedo creer que vivamos así de desunidos"* ("I cannot believe we live like this, so disunited") (T2-K). The Ejidatarias know that the internal conflict and the decisions taken by the different groups also have familiar consequences in the future. They worry about where their children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren will live (T2-L). Nevertheless, gender defines the opportunity to express their feelings and concerns about the decisions taken by the different groups: "*Como mujer, ¿cómo vamos ir atrás de ellos?"* "As a woman, how can we go after them?" (T2-A2) *"Como mujer, a*

veces, no la toman en cuenta porque el hombre tiene más valor" ("As a woman, sometimes, they do not take us into account because the man has more value") (T2-K). As a result, the Ejidatarias are silenced and observe as outsiders the external and internal conflict that will directly affect their families' lives.

6.3.4 Defending Territory: No Queremos Vender, Pero uno Anda Entre la Lumbre sin Zapatos (We Do Not Want to Sell, But We Walk Through the Fire Without Shoes)

The dry weather and lack of water produce different responses to the city's expansion and the land-grabbing strategies implemented by urban development companies and the government. In Territory 2, only some of the Ejidatarias and Ejidatarios can maintain hope and resist the pressure to sell.

The Ejidatarios(as) understand why their fellow Ejidatarios(as) have decided to sell. The internal conflict has created a new individualistic and competitive attitude that is displacing the communal living model. Today, working the land under these socio-economic conditions is not a business, "es un sufrimiento" ("it is a suffering") (T2-J). The Ejidatarios(as) face constant crop robberies, and most of the times, the Senior Ejidatarios(as) do not find anyone who can help them work their piece of land (T2-A2, T2-M). This is because their children have decided to work in the city and the other Ejidatarios take care of their own piece of land. This situation has created a hopeless feeling that pushes some Ejidatarios(as) to sell.

However, selling is not an easy decision, and the federal law is clear regarding ejidal land selling agreements. They must look for someone within the Ejido to buy their land so the land can stay within the same community. Nevertheless, the Ejidatario(a) needing to sell their land finds it difficult to find someone within the Ejido with the capital to buy him/her out. This situation leaves them just one alternative, to sell to an outsider. T2-H explains this situation:

> *"Tenemos que vender a la gente que tiene dinero, nosotros que hacemos si no tenemos dinero, hay que venderles a los que vienen… así empezaron a vender…es como decimos… y es como todo cada*

> *vez… uno anda entre la lumbre sin zapatos, es como le digo yo, yo tengo esto, este terreno es mío, es de lo que me dejo mi papa que soy Ejidatario(a), pero hay unos diez o quince o varios que ya no tienen nada […] esta carajo la vida" (T2-H).*
>
> "We have to sell to people who have the money. What can we do if we do not have money? We have to sell to the people who come here, that is how they started to sell, it is how we say, and it is like everything, we walk through the fire without shoes, is like I say, I have this, this land is mine, is what my dad left me, that I am Ejidatario(a), but there are ten or fifteen or more that they have nothing […] life is fucked up" (T2-H).

However, the Ejidatarios(as) who have sold their parcela to outsiders feel that they have been deceived: *"Ellos vieron la necesidad que tenía […] y le dieron una bagatela de dinero, casi nada, y la tierra vale, de que vale, vale, y nos dieron cualquier nada"* ("they saw the need he had […], and they gave him just some money, almost nothing, and the land has value, it has a value, and they gave us almost nothing") (T2-C). The selling agreement did not follow the promise of becoming a millionaire. The money was just enough to buy used vehicles (T2-J).

Nowadays, most of these vehicles are gone and they have been left with nothing. *"y él se quedó, como dice, pelón y viejo […] le dieron tres camionetas y hoy anda a pie como yo y sin dientes como yo"* ("He is now, as the people say, bald and old […] he got three pick-up trucks, and today he goes on foot like me and has no teeth like me") (T2-L).

Gender also defines a higher vulnerability to resist the land grabbing strategies. The senior Ejidatarias in Territory 2 struggle to maintain their titles. Some of them are widows, cannot work the land, and need money to survive. Others are struggling against their children's wishes to sell and leave the community at any cost:

> *"Amiga no sueltes… te va a mandar a la tiznada, no "X", es tu hijo y tú lo quieres, pero papeles no" (T2-L).*

> "My friend do not give it away, he is going to fuck you over, no "X", he is your son, and you love him but do not give him the papers" (T2-L).

Some Ejidatarios(as) have decided to sell just one part of their land and keep the rest. They hope to be able to leave behind a piece of land for their children. Other Ejidatarios(as) are fully resisting. In previous years they resisted using social demonstrations such as mass protests and road and governmental offices blocks (T2-M). Nowadays, the strategy has changed. They, just like Territory 1, have found in the legal defence a powerful ally.

> *"Las defensas ahorita no son como antes, ahorita son con las leyes, con los documentos que uno tiene, que es lo que le da a uno certeza que esto es mío, esto es mi territorio" (T2-G).*
>
> "The defence strategies are not like they were before, now is with the law, with the documents that we have, that provide us certainty that this is mine, this is my territory" (T2-G).

This strategy changes and the participation fatigue in different governance mechanisms have created a complete dependency on solicitors and paperwork presentation in the Agrarian Attorney offices (T2-J, T2-K, T2-H). The dependency on solicitors have created an unequal power relation between the Ejidatarias(os) and the solicitors who, must of the times, have taken advantage of the Ejidatarias(os): *"Los abogados son iguales. No puedes confiar en ellos"* ("The solicitors are the same. You cannot trust them") (T2-H). Consequently, the Ejidatarias(os) of Territory 2 who want to resist are fighting alone (T2-I) and live in uncertainly: *"Quién sabe qué pasará con nosotros"* ("who knows what is going to happen to us") (T2-M). The hope for a better future is the only thing left.

6.3.5 Imagining Territory: Education as the Only Hope

Territory 2 dreams of the day their community will have water and sanitation systems. They do not understand the social injustice they are living in, and no one seems to care. Their new neighbours have all the services that have been denied to them. Because of this reason, the Ejidatarias(os) have started to

raise their voice. They do not want to see future generations suffering like them because they do not have water (T2-D). They want an *"future parejo"* ("equal future") (T2-O).

The Ejidatarias(os) are fighting for a future with water and, therefore, where the Ejido can survive. However, they hope their children will continue their dream.

> *T2-M: "Quiero dejarle un futuro a la familia y que ellos también sepan responder."*
>
> *T2-L: "Pero ¿si no lo aprovechan? Pobrecitos de aquellos padres." (T2-L)*
>
> T2-M: "I want to leave a future for my family, but I hope they can also respond."
>
> T2-L: But if they do not make the most of it? Unfortunate parents."

Their children have education as a tool to achieve even more extraordinary things. The Ejidatarios(as) of Territory 2 believe in the education system and are proud of their children's educational achievements.

However, the new generation has been focused on School and does not feel so attracted to working the land as their parents. Some of them have never worked the land. Their parents worked double so that they could have a different future. Therefore, the new generation expressed a different dream. In the case of staying in Territory 2, they want to use farming equipment. They want to become modern farmers. Others expressed their hopelessness and the search for a better future in the city.

6.4 Territory 3

6.4.1 Producing Territory: Territorio es Mi Historia (Territory Is My History)

T3-B sits next to me and goes back in time to explain the meaning of land, territory and 'Comunero'. For this territory, these conceptualisations are intertwined with the history of this ancestral land. Today, they honour their

ancestors for their sacrifice to hold on to their land by continuing its defence. In this way, the land represents a shared struggle that connects their past and their present.

> *"Nosotros como Comuneros nos sentimos muy orgullosos de nuestras tierras y de nuestros orígenes (…) nosotros como venimos desde mucho antes de los españoles y pues definitivamente nosotros somos muy diferentes a un Ejido ¿sí?, porque el Ejido lo dota el gobierno federal, sus tierras lo dota el gobierno federal y nosotros nos sentimos muy orgullosos porque es nuestra tierra, fue comprada a los españoles a pesar de que se la quitaron a nuestros antepasados, nuestros antepasados hicieron el esfuerzo de volverlas a recuperar y fueron pagadas con monedas de oro para poderlas recuperar. Por eso nosotros nos sentimos muy orgullosos de nuestros antepasados y el estar aquí es muy muy importante, es sumamente importante porque quiere decir que eran los terrenos de nuestros antepasados y nosotros queremos seguir representándolos de esa manera […] para mí la tierra es muy importante porque haz de cuenta de que yo estoy viendo, por decir a mis antepasados" (T3-B)*
>
> "We, as Comuneros, we feel very proud of our land and our origins […] we come from long before the Spanish and well, we are definitely very different from an Ejido, right? Because the Ejido is an endowment from the Federal Government, their land is an endowment from the Federal Government and we feel very proud because it is our land, it was bought from the Spanish even though they took it from our ancestors, our ancestors made the effort to get it back and it was paid with gold coins to get it back. That is why we feel very proud of our ancestors and being here is very, very important, it is extremely important because it means this was the land of our ancestors and we want to continue representing them in that way […] for me the land is very important because it is like I am looking at my ancestors" (T3-B).

For the Comuneros, the land's value lies in its origin (T3-A, T3-B) and in the Comunero's capacity to maintain it in good condition (T3-D). Therefore, the

land history translates into a profound *"valor emocional"* ("emotional value") (T3-A) that cannot be measured and *"es difícil de expresar"* (*"*it is difficult to express") (T3-D) when words are not enough to describe this feeling. However, T3-A takes some time and express it in this way:

> *"La tierra es mi vida, mi vida en cuestión. Simplemente de pararse, de ver un amanecer en la sierra, de respirar, te comunicas, te sientas, eres parte de él, es un sentimiento que no lo puedo explicar, que se siente super bien. Simplemente al respirar que se oxigene el cerebro y le da tranquilidad, si significa mucho" (T3-A).*
>
> "The land is my life, my life in question. Simply to stand up and see a sunrise in the mountains, to breathe, you communicate, you sit, you are part of it. It is a feeling that I cannot explain but it feels so good. Simply by breathing you oxygenate your brain, and it gives you peace of mind, it means a lot" (T3-A).

They also repeat their history to emphasize that they are indisputable landowners by having purchased back their land (T3-A, T3-B, T3-D). Unlike Territories 1 and 2, they have the power to govern their land autonomously, and by doing so, they exercise their land right, which is also defended as a fundamental human right (T3-K). The right of living in their land, in their own way.

Nevertheless, like Territories 1 and 2, they are often compelled to defend their heritage and land from outsiders, and when they do so, the land transforms into territory. For the Comuneros, the concept of 'territory' is not a static noun but a spatially delimited action verb –a continuous process of defence (T3-A). In this view, territory is *"donde nosotros estamos, a la defensa"* ("where we are, defending") (T3-B). For this reason, this Comunidad is not just a place; it is a territory, a land in struggle since colonial times, a land in constant defence.

6.4.2 Appropriating Territory: Comunero es Conocimiento (Comunero Is Knowledge)

This place is not rural but is not urban either. You can hear the busy city roads but also the chickens and cows. Territory 3 has created its own road layout to connect its human settlement to the city. However, they must do it in a topographically challenging place without financial assistance. Their human settlement is located on a moderate concave slope, and due to the lack of financial resources, their roads are not paved and do not have the basic infrastructure.

It is noon, so I look for a seat under a tree next to one of the Comuneros' houses at the foot of the mountains. In this rocky place, the vegetation is dominated by bushes and cacti, but you can feel the fresh wind that this higher altitude provides. On one side, I have the city; on the other side, I have the bluish-green mountains due to the presence of oaks and pine trees. T3-H sits next to me, and while we wait for more Comuneros, he explains the history of this specific place.

We are where their ancestors used to meet before going to the city. In this place, they would change their clothes because they were not allowed to wear traditional clothing in the city. T3-H still remembers how his grandfather would come down from the mountains and change his clothes for trousers just to be able to go to the city to sell coal.

The comuneros listened attentively to T3-H's memories and laughed when hearing the family anecdotes. This environment created a trusting space to reflect on the meaning of being a Comunero. This denomination, as discussed in Chapter 3, was created by the government to define a communal landholding that has Indigenous roots. However, despite the official recognition of the Comunidades, their internal composition remains contentious.

Many years ago, the Federal Government published a census of the Comunidad. In this census, the Federal Government identified the titular Comuneros; this means the Comuneros with land rights in the Comunidad. Nevertheless, most Comuneros believe the census was not carried out

ethically. They left out families with a long history in the Comunidad and added outsiders to control the voting system and therefore, the decision making inside the Comunidad (T3-C, T3-G, T3-K). Legally, the Comunidad cannot sell their land like the Ejidos do. They must create mercantile societies or become an Ejido. These two actions must be voted during the Assembly. For this reason, the administrative procedure carried out by the government years ago lies at the core of the ongoing internal conflict (T3-C).

Today, the Comuneros that are not legally recognised as such challenge the authorities with a communal understanding of Comunero. Their answer moves away from the legal definition. For them, being a Comunero means *"dar el tiempo y espacio para escuchar lo que la comunidad piensa"* ("to give the time and space to listen to what the community think") (T3-K), and mostly, it means knowledge (T3-D, T3-H, T3-J, T3-K), the knowledge of knowing *"saber dónde estan plantados, por donde caminar"* ("where do you stand, where you must walk") (T3-J) and that is learned from generation in generation. This connection between Comunero and knowledge is explained by T3-H when talking about the meaning of being a Comunero:

> *T3-H: "Ayyy pos para mi mucho, mucho, mucho que ser dueño de unos derechos, pero primero que nada conocer de que, de donde a donde, es primero conocer bien ¿no? ya cuando dicen soy Comunero es porque ya sabe bien, entonces, yo me pase en la sierra X años, toda mi juventud y conozco toda la sierra, toda la sierra, yo le pregunto ¿dónde está el "X"? ¿Cuál horno? Donde los indios le pagaron la venta de la sierra "X"*
>
> *T3-I: ósea la compra*
>
> *L: si*
>
> *T3-H: los indios y ¿a quién se la vendieron? ¡A los indios de "X" que somos nosotros! ¡A los indios!"*
>
> T3-H: "Oh, for me it is a lot, a lot, a lot to be the owner of some rights, but first of all, is knowing what do you own, from where to where, first,

> we must know well, right? Now when you say 'I am Comunero' it is because you already know it well. So, I spent "X" years in the mountains, all my youth, and I know the entire mountains, the entire mountains. I ask you, where is the "X"? What oven? Where the Indians paid for the sale of the "X"!
>
> T3-I: means the purchase
>
> L: yes
>
> T3-H: the Indians! and who did they sell it to? To the Indians of "X"! who we are! To the Indians!"

This knowledge cannot be learned elsewhere; it comes from their ancestors: "yo *siento que se nos quedó inculcado de lo que mi abuelo nos dijo […] porque se trasciende ese amor"* ("I feel like everything got implanted from what my grandfather told us [...] love transcends") (T3-J). The Comuneros learn to love, work and fight for their land in every conversation with their grandparents and parents. They know their ancestors struggled to hold on to the land and they are proud of them. They gave everything for this land. They *"tuvieron que empeñar hasta los pantalones para pagar la contribución"* ("even had to pawn their trousers to be able to pay the contributions") (T3-G). For this reason, this land is their ancestors' legacy, and today, they must protect it (T3-D). Even if they are not legally recognised as a Comunero (T3-K).

Nowadays, they feel manipulated and undervalued when asked to teach this knowledge during workshops to the outsiders who were added to the census list as Comuneros: *"Nos andan preguntando que se siembra en la milpa (risas). ¿Cómo es posible? ¡Si se supone que son Comuneros!"* ("They ask us what to plant in the milpa (laugh). How is this possible? if they are supposedly Comuneros!") (T3-K). This situation has accentuated the conflict between these two groups. The Comuneros would like their knowledge to be respected, acknowledged, and cherished, not just as essential knowledge for living within the Comunidad but also as the knowledge that has surpassed the Comunidad and was an essential part of the city's construction. The city could not have

been built without the water from the mountains and their ancestor's knowledge of how to work the land and rocks (T3-C).

6.4.3 Claiming Territory: The City Sprawl and the Large Wildfire

The Comuneros remember when they used to work the land as a way of living. They observe the city sprawl from their doorsteps and, pointing to the nearest neighbourhoods, explain how the city "ate" most of their land destined for agricultural purposes because it was their only land localised on the valley (T3-C). The invasions to their agricultural land started more than 50 years ago. T3-K remembers when they lost most of the communal farming land: "*Ellos (el Estado) mandaron máquinas para tumbar las siembras. Ya estaban los maicitos ahí […] A mí me toco ver como las maquinas los tumbaban […] en lugar de que apoyen las causas de los campesinos, las desbaratan"* ("They (the State) sent the machinery to remove the plants. There was already small maise planted [...] I saw how the machinery removed them […] instead of supporting the peasant cause, they destroy it") (T3-K).

Today, what once was agricultural land is full of houses and community services for the city. Inside the Comunidad, only a few Comuneros continue to work their milpa next to their houses. These adventurous Comuneros continue the farming tradition while facing climate and socio-economic changes (T3-C). In today's modern system and without water infrastructure to irrigate their milpas, they cannot survive as peasants. Therefore, the Comuneros that have decided to continue with the agricultural tradition usually do it for personal use and depend economically on another job in the city. Proof of this was this year's drought. Without rain, *"ni los gorgojos salieron de la tierra"* ("not even the weevils came out of the land") (T3-A), and the Comuneros who planted maize lost everything.

With the drought, the "large wildfire" memory is present in every conversation. The Comuneros are afraid this kind of disaster could happen again: *"Yo tengo miedo, nosotros lo vivimos, nosotros lo vivimos muy de cerca"* ("I am afraid, we lived that, we lived that closely") (T3-D). The wildfire devasted more than 12 000 ha (Metropoli, 2019) of forest that belonged to different Ejidos,

Comunidades and private parties. For Territory 3, the wildfire meant losing large tracts of forest and their houses and families were in great danger. Also, some of the Comuneros were burned in their attempt to put out the fire.

The wildfire was a vivid memory of the power of nature but also of the social injustice that they live with every day. They are so close to the city but also so far away when it comes to the same opportunities to protect their land and families from this type of natural hazard. The Comuneros reflect on the epistemic injustice they experienced during the disaster. Their deep knowledge of their land was not considered for developing the wildfire action plan (T3-C, T3-D, T3-E). Additionally, their vulnerability was exacerbated when the state workers diverted the shoes and tools donated by citizens and private companies for their personal use. As one Comunero shared: *"Ellos apartaban todos los zapatos nuevos para ellos"* ("They separated the new shoes for them") (T3-C), while other recalled how they had to rely on their own resources to protect the Comunidad: *"Tuvimos que cargar nuestra herramienta de aquí— un azadón, me lo llevo, una cuchilla, me la llevo— de aquí, ¡no nos dieron nada!"* ("We had to carry our tools from here— a hoe, I will take it, a blade, I will take it— from here, they did not give us anything!") (T3-E).

The Comuneros have been reforesting the area devastated by the fire in the mountains. The fire did not benefit anyone. The new federal law protects the land from arson as a strategy to displace people. The burned land cannot be subject to land use change for 20 years after the fire. Nevertheless, the city sprawl continues, and the pressure to sell the land closer to the city, where the vegetation is scarce and the fire did not reach, is increasing daily.

The Comuneros need to be everywhere at once to protect their territory, defending not only from weather-related threats but also from potential invasions. Like Territory 2, this situation makes them feel they are in the *"el ojo del huracán"* ("hurricane's eye") (T3-A). With this reference, they describe their Territory as the centre of the conflict and surrounded by great forces. Therefore, while they are in this spot and 'under siege', they must be constantly alert, protecting themselves and preparing for the worst.

6.4.4 Defending Territory: ¡Nos Dicen que Estamos Locos! (They Said We Are Crazy!)

T3-G moves in this chair and turns up their head to speak. Their eyes are already full of tears.

> *T3-G: Yo me quede con una pregunta que quisiera cooperar. De que es el sentir de Comunero.*
>
> *L: claro*
>
> *T3-G: bueno, soy chillón eh. Para mí, siento que desde nuestros abuelos nos inculcaron sentimientos de que este, nos inculcaron de palabra ¿no? porque en los documentos dicen que es una tierra o un documento que va pasando de generación en generación […] pero este pedacito, este pedacito le costó mucho dinero a mi papa, no fue una herencia […] por eso este pedazo para mi es mucho, porque representa mucho para mí, porque yo aquí nací, yo aquí nací, entonces que me vengan y que me digan te lo voy a quitar, véndemelo, ¡no señor! El señor de aquí ha venido aquí y se me para ahí y me dice, me hace ojitos su terreno y pues si señor, yo he estado a punto de decirle: ¡Pues cuídese! Porque de ojos se han muerto.*
>
> T3-G: I was thinking about a question, and I would like to cooperate. It was about the meaning of being Comunero.
>
> L: sure
>
> T3-G: I am a crier huh. For me, I feel that our grandparents, they inculcated to us feelings, they inculcated them by word of mouth, right? Because in the documents they say that it is land or a document that is passed down from generation to generation […] but this piece of land, this little piece, it cost to my father a lot of money, it was not an inheritance […] that is why this piece it is a lot for me, because it means a lot to me, because I was born here, I was born here, so when they come and say to me I will take it away from you, sell it to me, no sir! The man from here has come here and he stops there and says to me: I

> have got my eye on your land. So well, yes sir, I was so close to tell him to be careful, because for eyes like those people have died.

The Comuneros must fight against all odds. This task is not easy. They are defending their land and their existence: "*Simplemente porque existimos y avanzamos debemos de seguir una historia. Nuestra historia y nuestra vida vale*" ("Simply because we exist and move ahead, we must follow a history. Our history and our life matters") (T3-J). However, the Comuneros, just like Territory 2, have found resistance inside the same Comunidad: *"La Comunidad es muy bonita pero muy difícil porque hemos sufrido muchos despojos"* ("The Comunidad is beautiful but difficult because we have suffered many dispossessions") (T3-E). For the older Comuneros, the younger generations have different interests because they do not know the history of the Comunidad (T3-K) and have become *"monetarios y ajenos a la problemática que se vive en la Comunidad"* ("monetary and oblivious to the problems that the Comunidad are experiencing") (T3-G). Others are tired of resisting: *"Ya no hay lugar para sembrar, todo se invadió y hasta aquí llegamos"* ("There is no place to work the land, everything has been invaded, this is as far as we go") (T3-D).

This situation has created a challenging social atmosphere in the Comunidad. The resisting Comuneros have an extra responsibility. They must convince their fellow Comuneros to fight against invasions and the outsider group to protect their traditions and culture because *"si perdemos nuestras tradiciones y cultura, entonces nos retrasamos para atrás"* ("if we lose our traditions and culture, then we are walking in reverse") (T3-K). This exhausting task has made other members of the Comunidad and people from the city refer to them as 'crazy people'. Nevertheless, the Comuneros who have assumed this responsibility say that they are not affected by those words and that maybe, the people who are not defending, are the ones who are crazy for not having knowledge (T3-K). Crazy or not, the resisting group of Comuneros say they will resist and fight for their land *"hasta el final"* ("until the end") (T3-E).

The Comuneros want to avoid taking up arms. They just want to use the dialogue as a weapon (T3-K). For this reason, like territories 1 and 2, they have

pursued a legal defence. However, unlike these other territories, they have actively sought national and international attention for their fight. This visibility has been essential, as external actors have helped expose abuses and invasions of their land. Yet, it has also drawn new actors who seek to use the conflict as a political platform. The involvement of these outsiders has sown division within the territory, leading the Comuneros to now request that all external parties stay away. They simply ask that their land be respected (T3-D).

Today, although they are involved in agrarian trials and have presented legal requests to defend their land to the State and Federal Court, they have yet to receive answers (T3-K). Deputies and Senators have denied their help. They do not want to be involved in the conflict. For this reason, the Comuneros must pay solicitors with their own resources and present their formal requests in Mexico City by themselves. However, like those in Territory 2, they face the challenge of finding an ethical agrarian solicitor amidst a conflict where significant amounts of money are at stake. The Comuneros express their disappointment when the agrarian solicitors do not have a genuine love for the land. As one explained: *"Hay algunos que no nacieron para ser abogados agrarios, más bien deberían de haber sido en comercio porque comercializan lo que se supone que deben de defender"* ("They were not born to become agrarian solicitors. They should have been commerce solicitors because that is what they do; they trade what they are supposed to defend") (T3-J).

6.4.5 Imagining Territory. Un Futuro Parejo (An Equitable Future)

The Comuneros close their eyes to start imagining their future. When they open their eyes, they breathe and smile. They describe a future where they are respected and do not have to fight for their land (T3-A, T3-B, T3-C, T3-D). In this future, they are not segregated from the city. But, on the contrary, they share the desire to prosper equally.

The Comuneros may have different goals than the city, but something is clear, they do not want to be presented as the ones pushing the city back or as the ones who do not want to live with the basic infrastructure (T3-A, T3-B). On the

contrary, like Territory 2, they want to live with sanitation, electricity, and water supply (T3-A, T3-B, T3-C, T3-D). The Comuneros *"no vamos a estar rezagados, como dicen, con el huarache y el taparrabos […] queremos evolucionar con ellos, pero también siempre y cuando se nos respete"* ("do not have to be behind, like they say, with loincloth and sandal […] we want to evolve with them, but only if we are respected") (T3-A).

They want to see their children enjoying what they cannot. T3-C expresses their hope to see their children playing in their recreational area and learning about their land. The Comuneros have many ideas. They are rich in land but not in money (T3-A). The necessary capital to carry out these ideas is out of their reach. The State has some social programmes that can be applied in the Comunidad. However, they do not align with their goals. They wish the State would help them to protect and revive the Comunidad (T3-J). Nevertheless, communication with the State has been challenging. For this reason, they can only dream of a future where no matter how different we all think, the opportunities to create each territory's future are even (T3-C).

Chapter 7 Dialoguing with Hegemonic Actors

7.1 Introduction

Navigating alternate conversations with government agency employees, social organisations' representatives, and urban development companies' directors proved to be a different process. While the advocacy of friends and family facilitated direct contact with the hegemonic actors, scheduling the appointments posed a significant challenge. Typically, I had to wait two or more weeks to secure a spot in their busy agenda. However, once scheduled, the hegemonic actors demonstrated openness and active participation in our dialogue.

The arena and participation dynamic for the conversation differed for each actor. The conversations with the government agency employees took place in their workplace during office hours. However, while the high-level employees preferred a one-to-one conversation, the mid-level employees usually invited another employee to contemplate the conversation. Meanwhile, the urban development companies' directors and social organisations' representatives choose their office, or cafes close to their projects as an arena for the one-to-one conversation.

As an arena for alternate conversations, the office impacted differently on the participants. The representatives of social organisations and directors of urban development companies demonstrated feeling comfortable in their office or the cafe place chosen by them and, therefore, in control of the space. These locations created the opportunity for an open and reflexive conversation. On the other hand, for the government agency employees, the office was a constant reminder of their professional role and the political discourse they must follow. Most employees expressed their ontological and ethical conflict during the conversation with phrases such as "I will talk as a person" and "what it is or what should it be?" The struggle between the political and personal ontological views was present during all the conversations.

Additionally, unlike the communal territories, most of the government agency employees, urban development companies' directors, and social

organisations' representatives expressed their surprise when I started to ask them ontological questions to open the conversation. At the end, they categorised the conversation as “philosophical” or “poetical.”

The following sections present the epistemological dialogues with the hegemonic actors— like the communal territories— around five co-produced key territoriality processes: producing, appropriating, claiming and defending territory. To ensure confidentiality, the coding system used with the communal territories is maintained throughout this chapter. Employees of government agencies are represented by the letter “G” following the letter that corresponds to the specific member of the organisation. For example, G-A refers to the first government agency participant. The participants of the social organisations are represented by the letter “S” and urban development directors by the letter “U”. Likewise, it is important to recall that the theoretical implications of these dialogues are discussed in Chapter 8.

Code	Actor	Subcode	Main characteristic
G	Government Agencies	G-A, G-B, G-C, G-D, G-E	Federal level
		G-I, G-J, G-K, G-L	State level
		G-F, G-G, G-H	Local level
S	Social movements, collectives and non-governmental organisations	S-A	Housing right collective
		S-B	NGO
		S-C	Social Movement
		S-D	Research collective
U	Urban development companies	U-A, U-B, U-C, U-D	Mega-scale urban development companies

		U-E, U-F, U-G, U-H, U-I, U-J	Large-scale urban development companies

Table 3 Hegemonic actors overview by code

7.2 Government Agencies

7.2.1 Producing Territory: Between What Is Defined and What Is Temporal

'Would you like a bottle of water?' The personal assistant asked me while opening the door to the office.

The mid-level employees would be waiting for me in the meeting room. This would normally consist of a large table with 8 to 12 chairs. They would sit at the head of the table, reinforcing their power and authority, and I would wait for the indication of which place to take. Normally on one of the lateral chairs. They would usually be accompanied by another employee, and they would leave the door open, indicating to their fellow employees that they do not have anything to hide.

On the other hand, the high-level employees would be waiting for me in their personal office. They would be behind their large desk full of papers, and I would sit on the other side of the desk while their personal assistant would stay during the interview or would be going in and out of the room constantly to check if the official needed some kind of assistance.

Once they agreed to participate in the conversation, I started an alternate conversation by asking them about the meaning of being a government agency employee. This value-based question allowed me to create a place of trust and reflection where the mid and high-level employees from local, state, and federal governmental agencies involved in urban or rural development topics could present their vision of their role and working ethos.

It means *"servir a tu patria"* ("serving your motherland") (G-F) and *"tu gente"* ("your people") (G-A, G-D, G-E), the employees replied proudly. When describing their working ethos, most of the employees wanted to take the opportunity to disassociate themselves from the traditional corrupt bureaucrat image. They described themselves as facilitators who allow changes to

happen (G-L, G-J) and their role as an opportunity "*aportar lo aprendido en la Universidad"* ("to apply their knowledge acquired at the University") (G-D) and *"contribuir a nuestra gente"* ("contribute to our people") (G-C) by *"haciendo las cosas bien"* ("doing things well") (G-H).

When discussing land and territory, concepts related to their daily job, most employees quickly claimed a difference between these two concepts. The 'land' was described as a general concept (G-B, G-J, G-K) that belongs to everyone (G-C), but, as living beings, we all must take care of it (G-D). It is our mother earth, on which we depend (G-A, G-E) because it is the base of all products (G-I, G-J). It is also a concept that *"viene del corazón"* ("comes from the heart") (G-F) because *"es nuestro hogar, donde nos permite de alguna manera existir"* ("it is home, where we live, where we are allowed, somehow, to exist") (G-H).

Territory, on the other hand, was referred to as a space within the land (G-H, G-A) with limits (G-C, G-D, G-L, G-J) determined by man (G-C). In this way, it was defined as a technical concept (G-F) that defines jurisdictions in our existing legal system (G-E) and, therefore, can be conceived for some people as an imposition (G-G). However, other employees would define a different territory, one that is a *"construcción social"* ("social construction") because it is *"como tú te apropias de la tierra y como la desarrollas"* ("all about how you appropriate the land and how you develop it") (G-H). For this reason, it also includes physical elements (G-B), and its value will be given by the people who create it (G-J). Therefore, a territory belongs to whoever occupies it (G-K, G-L) or whoever works that specific area of "land" (G-J).

Nevertheless, when asked about the name or location of their territory, most of the employees showed confusion and difficulty in trying to place it. Some decided to define their territory as a geographic space, such as the city, state, or country where their work has impact (G-A, G-G, G-I, G-L). Others, like G-E and G-J, reflected that they may not have a fixed territory: *"Donde estoy es momentáneo, es temporal […] puede ser mi espacio pero no mi territorio […] creo que no tengo un territorio"* ("Where I am, it is momentary, it is temporal

[…] it can be my space but not my territory" […] "I believe I do not have a territory") (G-J).

7.2.2 Appropriating Territory: Who Has a Place at the Table to Talk About Land Values and Territory?

The Governmental agency employees are conscious of different ways to understand land and territory. However, when asked about what gives value to the land, there were two primary responses. One group associated land value with the availability and feasibility of natural resources (G-B, G-H, G-L). In other words, as G-J said, *"Depende de su uso y su potencial de explotación"* ("It depends on its use and its exploitation potential") and *"El conflicto surge cuando algunos grupos le dan un valor diferente, a veces equivocado"* ("The conflict arises when other groups give it a different value, sometimes incorrect") (G-J).

The second group also expressed the idea of localisation or land use as the characteristics defining the land value, but they also manifested their internal conflict in measuring land values under these economic parameters: *"Depende de donde te encuentres […] pero creo el valor debería ser independiente de donde estes […] porque de la tierra somos ¿verdad? entonces ¿Cual valor, si dependemos de ella? Porque por ella, aquí estamos, por la tierra y el agua, de esos elementos depende nuestra vida"* ("It depends on where it is located […], but I think the value should be independent of where it is located […] because we come from the land, right? So, what value if we depend on it? Because of it, we are here, because of land and water, those are the elements that depend on our life") (G-A). For G-F and G-G, the land value should also move away from the modern perspective and be determined based on its history, including past and future. It should be determined by the capacity to live well and leave something good for one's children and grandchildren (G-G) because, as G-F indicated, *"la tierra en sí no es nada, pero mi tierra lo es todo"* ("the land by itself is nothing, but my land is everything") (G-F).

The Governmental agency employees recognise that the communication between different ways to understand and construct the future is challenging.

The official participation mechanisms are the only spaces legally recognised for having any kind of conversations between the interested parties. Employees cannot have private conversations with actors involved. This regulation has been implemented *"para evitar cualquier tipo de corrupción o mal manejo"* ("to avoid any type of corruption or mismanagement") (G-C). However, these mechanisms, such as worktables and councils, do not work (G-H) or work only partially (G-L) mainly because of three challenges that arise in their implementation.

First, the determination of the topic and actors involved in each participation mechanism have created a contradictory scenario where *"son muchos actores, con muchas variables. Es mucho el esfuerzo que se tiene que hacer"* ("there are many actors, with so many variables. It is much effort that must be made") (G-J). At the same time, other actors are not invited to all the conversations or prefer to not participate. For example, employees believe that the Ejidatarios sometimes do not participate because *"ellos sienten que un Ejido no entra dentro de la sociedad, son como una especie de embajada de algún país extranjero"* ("they feel that their Ejido is not inside the society, they are like a type of embassy of a foreign country") (G-F). Regarding Indigenous groups, employees are aware they are not usually invited to all the conversations about the future of the city and when they are just there *"para la foto, los usan para embellecer un evento"* ("for the picture. They are used ornamentally") (G-K).

A second challenge was the misinformation and interests that exist around the urban development future. Today, there are a large number of '*coyotes,' "personas que lucran con los tramites del campesino*" ("the people who profit from the administrative procedures that the peasants have to do") (G-E). They provide different and sometimes inaccurate information to the ejidatarios and comuneros, thereby generating conversation obstacles (G-A, G-E).

Third, although the participation mechanisms are there and are planned, the conversation is not really implemented. Sometimes the employees have different instructions, and they do not have a margin for a conversation or negotiation: *"Nos mandan ya cuando el conflicto lo tienes encima y nunca te*

avisan, ya solo al final te mandan y casi casi quieren que seas un sicario para ellos y pues no, eso es imposible" ("They send us when the conflict is already there, and they do not notify us about anything. They just send us, and they almost just want us to be like a hitman for them, and that is impossible") (G-F). For mid-level employees, the conversation cannot take place *"por la visión de la gente que toma las decisiones, ellos tienen otros intereses, ellos prefieren, más que nada, el lado económico"* ("for the vision of the people who take the decisions, they have another interest, they prefer, more than anything, the economic side") (G-L).

With all these challenges, the employees feel drained. Some of them, such as G-L, have a technocratic view and believe the citizens should be involved only in some governmental decisions to move forward and achieve goals. Following this idea, the 'experts,' people with technical knowledge, can present more helpful feedback because, for example, in the case of urban development, *"pues ¿qué le preguntas a la gente?"* ("What do you ask the people?") (G-H).

Others, like G-J, express the opinion that the participation is not easy, but they must have empathy with all the actors involved in the worktables because *"todos tienen ideas distintas, todos tienen formas de trabajar distintas, todos han tenido éxito de manera distinta y lo que debemos de tratar de transmitir, que es muy difícil, es hacer entender que tu manera de llegar a conseguir éxito en tu parte profesional no es la única, ni la verdad absoluta […] mientras más abierto estes a escuchar cosas distintas, a entenderlas y ponerlas en práctica, en conjunto con lo que tu aportas, más rápido y de mejor manera llegas a la meta"* ("we all have different ideas, we all have a different way to work, we all have had success in different ways and what we must transmit, and is the most difficult part, to understand, that your way to reach success in your profession is not the only one, is not the absolute truth […] and as open you are to listen to different things, understand them and put them in practice, together with what you contribute, faster and better you reach the goal").

7.2.3 Claiming Territory: Urban Development and the Challenge of Being a Government Agency Employee

As discussed in Chapter 3, G-A explains the actual urban scenario in medium-sized cities in Mexico as follows:

> *"Las ciudades siguen creciendo y siguen creciendo en territorios de regímenes Ejidales o regímenes Comunales. Si fueran propiedad pues no hay problema, ahí se regularizan de otra forma. Pero el problema es que las ciudades se están creciendo en territorio que es régimen Ejidal o régimen Comunal que no siguen los procedimientos para que todo eso vaya ordenadamente" (G-A).*
>
> "The cities keep growing, and they keep growing over Ejidal or Communal regimen territories. If those were private property it would be no problem. In that case, it can be regularised differently. However, the problem is that the cities are growing over Ejidal or Communal regimen territories and are not following the procedures to do it in a planned way" (G-A).

According to the employees, the Ejidatarios' and Comuneros' economic situation, the power asymmetries in the city, corruption, and the climate change impacting their livelihood have induced the implementation of land-grabbing strategies that are illegal or do not follow moral standards (G-A, G-E). G-E describes this process as follows:

> *"Anteriormente simplemente el campesino con mirar al cielo el campesino sabía cuándo era el tiempo y donde para sembrar, sabia cuando iba a ser el momento idóneo que iba a llover, sabia prácticamente todo, y ahora esa sabiduría ha cambiado porque también hemos cambiado con la destrucción que llevamos con el mundo […]ahora la necesidad provoca que el Ejidatario venda y no al mejor postor, sino a quien le dé, a quien le dé, el vende. Y desafortunadamente los procedimientos cuando se hace una venta no son los idóneos, no son los idóneos, pero prácticamente, quienes aprovechan esa oportunidad son los que tienen, así que de alguna*

> *manera yo estoy visualizando que estamos volviendo a los momentos del latifundio, el que tiene más, va a comprar más, y el campesino, entre más, más se va a quedar con menos" (G-E).*
>
> "The peasant used to know, just by looking at the sky, they knew when it was the time and place to plant, they knew the exact moment it was going to rain, they knew practically everything, and now that wisdom has changed with the destruction that we bring to the world […] and now the necessity causes the Ejidatario to sell, and not to the highest bidder, but to whoever gives him money, they sell. Unfortunately, the procedures when a sale is made are not ideal, they are not ideal, but practically, those who take advantage of the opportunity are the ones who have more, so in some way, I am visualizing that we are returning to the latifundio times: the one who has more will buy more, and the peasant, with this, will be left with less" (G-E).

This situation has created "Much disagreement from the landholders because this has been done, taking advantage of them" (G-A). The employees, aware of the situation, describe how the large-scale acquisitions are achieved. One of the most common strategies used by the mega projects companies is commonly called 'divide and rule': *"Mañosamente agarraron de uno en uno […] de esta forma es ventaja para quien va a negociar porque de manera individual es más fácil convencer a uno por uno que a toda la asamblea"* ("they cunningly grab one by one […] In this way, they take advantage in the negotiation because it is easier to persuade one by one than the whole assembly") (G-K). Some Ejidos and Comunidades are already divided because of this strategy. In those territories *"tienes a los radicales de, hacemos lo que se nos da la gana porque somos ejidatarios, y están, los que están vendidos a los urbanizadores. Si son los radicales de hacemos lo que queremos y además están vendidos con los urbanizadores, la cosa se pone bien fea, bien fea, son muy difíciles de tratar, son muy inestables, se matan entre ellos"* ("you can find the radicals; they do whatever they want because they are Ejidatarios, but you also have the ones who are already sold to the urban developers. If you have radicals that do whatever they want but, at the

same time, they are sold to the urban developers, everything gets ugly, very ugly, it is very difficult to understand, they are very unstable, they kill each other") (G-F). With this type of strategy, other cities in Mexico have entirely absorbed Ejidos and Comunidades (G-A). Once the city absorbs them, the people assume the Ejidatarios or Indigenous will be happy working in the industrial zone like ordinary citizens, but they do not necessarily want that. They would prefer to continue with their traditions and artisan professions (G-K).

The mid-level employees operate within the heart of the conflict, but they feel their voice has not been listened to because *"las decisiones son más políticas que técnicas y a veces igual los aportes que podemos hacer como técnicos no trascienden más allá […] primero lo económico después lo ambiental, esa es la regla"* ("the decisions are more political than technical. Sometimes our technical contributions do not transcend […] the economical goes first, then the social and the environment. That is the rule") (G-D) and *"los ejemplos abundan*" ("the examples abound") (G-C), and most of the time, the person who comes to the office looking for help leaves angry. However, "ellos tienen que entender que la resolución no está en mis manos" "they need to understand that the resolution is not in my hands" (G-F).

However, high-level employees also face challenges. They cannot stay in the same post for more than three or six years depending on their level (municipal, state, or federal), and the conflict is so significant that they cannot resolve it in that time frame (G-K). They feel that the task is *"imposible"* ("impossible") (G-K) because while they are trying to understand the citizen's needs, *"tenemos que mostrar resultados"* ("they also have to show results") (G-A) with "*reducciones presupuestarias"* ("reduced budgetary capacities") (G-I). Furthermore, the Ejidos and Comunidades in the periphery of the city are also on the border of two legislations, the agrarian and the urban. This situation makes the employees follow some rules that not always go according to the citizen's needs (G-A) and when the legal instruments do not match, they do not have the time to modify it because the day-to-day problems absorb their time (G-H). The Mexican legislation is *"excesivamente sobrada, tenemos leyes*

para todo, pero de todas no creo que logremos una ley realmente buena y aplicable. Ese es el problema, al final del día, al tener leyes en cierto momento tan ambiguas y tan extensas, pierdes la capacidad de aplicación" ("excessive, we have laws for everything, but we do not have one good and applicable law for all of them. That is the problem, at the end of the day, when you have laws for everything, but they are so ambiguous and extensive, you lose their application capacity") (G-J). This legislative problem *"hace que una serie de injusticias ocurran porque ¿cómo dicen? a los que no son mis amigos la ley y a los que son mis amigos ¡la ley y gracia!"* ("means that a series of injustices occur because like the people say: the law to the people who are not my friends, but to my friends, the law and grace!") (G-H).

7.2.4 Defending Territory: The Territorial Defence from the Desk

G-K described how the people from different communities defend their territory: *"Aparte de las acciones legales […] lo han defendido con su cuerpo, con su vida, al estar oponiéndose a que se haga algo, a que se lo quiten, que los despojen a ellos"* ("Apart from the legal actions […] they have defended it with their own body, with their life, by being against something being done. To being taken from them. To being stripped from them") (G-A). Nevertheless, when asked if they have had to defend their territory, the employees needed time to answer. For some employees, their public role includes the responsibility to defend the territory their role influences (G-B, G-C, G-D, G-E, G-L). They do it from where they are sitting, in their daily workday, when using their technical knowledge to find the best solution and alternatives to the problems the territory is facing (G-B, G-E), or when using their technical knowledge to determine which permits must be granted and which projects must be authorized. (G-C, G-D).

On the other hand, other employees, such as G-A, G-H, and G-F, do not feel a need to defend their territory. Nevertheless, they feel that their territory, broadly speaking as citizens, is at risk. They feel it is at risk *"por los mismos desarrolladores, por quienes compran y venden la tierra y por los que quieren sacar de cualquier modo provecho de ella"* ("because of the urban developers, the people who buy and sell the land and because of those who want to take

advantage of the land") (G-F). This feeling affects them personally (G-A) to the point that some of them, such as G-H, have acted by joining social protests, not like public official but as a citizen.

Defending the territory from the desk is difficult when you live with job and personal insecurity. The governmental agency mid-level employees know they must follow instructions and discourses they do not like (G-H), or their job can end anytime. Fear, more than ignorance, define their actions most of the time and the information that they present to higher-level employees or institutions. In their daily workday, taking decisions based on their values or field knowledge can lead to real problems. G-F describes the pressure with which they work:

> *"Un día me lo dijeron, tu mide lo que vas a hacer porque un día va a llegar alguien, te va a dar una patada en el trasero. Nunca te van a agradecer lo que hiciste. Y si, yo ya una vez termine metido en broncas por hacer mi trabajo como debía de ser y pues ya surgió otra amenaza" (G-F).*
>
> "Once they told me: 'Measure what you will do because one day somebody else is going to arrive and is going to kick your ass. They will never thank you for what you have done,' and that is true, once I ended in problems because I did my job as I was supposed to do it and I got another threat" (G-F).

7.2.5 Imagining Territory: Are We Allowed to Dream?

For G-A and G-B, it is clear that the urban sprawl will continue, the conflicts will increase in the periphery of the city, and eventually, the Ejidos and Comunidades closer to the city will be absorbed by it. This undeniable reality is treated in two different ways when imagining the future. The first group of employees is integrated by the ones who imagine a future where the current urban process stops. For example, G-B imagined a future where this process is postponed for an extended time, reducing the negative impact of this displacement. G-L pictured a future where urban development is according to actual needs and no economic trends. G-K described a future where we could

boost our culture by creating human settlements exclusive for Indigenous groups, and G-L imagined a future where the Ejidos and Comunidades can develop a tourism sector to survive.

On the other hand, the second group believes that we must be realistic and understand that many obstacles prevent us from having a beautiful future (G-E). For example, we do not know how to live as a community, we always put our personal interests first (G-J), and the pressure that exists over the natural resources (G-C) makes us live in a "*no-ciudad, la ciudad promovida por el gobierno"* ("no-city, the city promoted by the government") (G-F). For this reason, G-F, G-G, and G-J dream of a more inclusive and greener city where we can walk and use other transportation systems. However, G-A and G-C believe that if we cannot stop the city expansion, at least it should be done in a planned way. This planning can only be achieved if we respect the urban development plan and create fairer and more transparent laws (G-E, G-H, and G-J). *"Nuevas leyes que permitan, al inversionista, poder llevar a cabo desarrollos o proyectos que tengan obviamente una utilidad económica pero que vayan acorde a las necesidades y crecimiento ordenado"* ("The new laws could allow the investor to be able to carry out developments or projects that obviously have an economic utility but in accordance with the needs and orderly urban growth") (G-J). However, G-H believes that better instruments can foster a transparent, efficient, and equal public administration. At the same time, G-H critically reflects on the State's modern vision, which seeks to standardise societies through an increasing number of laws and regulations for urban development— imposing a way to live regardless the local context: "*Yo creo que ahí hay una contradicción porque lo que buscamos es que la gente acceda a las mismas oportunidades y al mismo tiempo como que le quitamos lo individual a cada una ¿no? […] y como dijo Le Corbusier: cuantas cosas no se han hecho en nombre de la modernidad que de repente se destruye el patrimonio y cosas pensando que son las mejores ideas. Yo creo que por ahí va"* ("I believe there is a contradiction there, because we want the people to have access to the same opportunities and, at the same time, we take them away their uniqueness, right? […] and how Le Corbusier said: how many things have been made in name of Modernity that suddenly the

patrimony and other things are destroyed thinking they have better ideas. I believe is like this").

7.3 Social Movements, Collectives, and Non-Governmental Organisations

7.3.1 Producing Territory: Organised Reactions to Shape and Mobilise Territorial Discourses

'Thank you for taking the time'. I told the activists when I was received into their offices, in a space within the State University or in cafes.

Their offices were challenging to find. Although they had a strong media presence, their office addresses were private or would not match with the real location. Once they provided me with the right location, I would arrive to an ordinary house which would not have any logo or door nameplate to recognise it as the social organisation headquarters. The 'offices' were not spaces exclusively designated for administrating and implementing the social organisation's operations. They were spaces where the activists would mix their professional and activist activities. Inside the office, the insecurity in which they live was evident. Recording cameras were placed next to the maps or close to phrases posted on the walls. Examples of these are: "La sierra no se vende" ("The mountains are not for sale"), "la sierra es nuestra agua" ("The mountains are our water"), "todos somos la sierra" ("we are all the mountains").

In contrast, two of the activists would propose to meet in public places such as the University and cafes due to the lack of an official space or because of security concerns. For this reason, I looked for quiet locations in the University or cafe, such as tables on corners but, at the same time, within the public eye. This space for conversation helped to build a trusting bond between us.

The four local social organisations have different origins, worldviews, missions, and goals. However, they all actively participate in the conflict, creating temporary alliances and mobilising and shaping narratives around the territories' production, appropriation, claim, defence, and future. Their diverse background and activities define how they understand their role as activists and construct their understanding of land and territory.

For the four activists, their notion of activism is closely interlinked with the nature of their activism that should be always “para el beneficio de la sociedad” (“towards the benefit of society”) (S-B). For S-A, who created a grassroots organisation to advocate for housing rights, being an activist *“es una forma de reaccionar ante diversos problemas que nos pueden afectar individualmente o colectivamente y una forma también de accionar de forma colectiva […] (un activista) es una persona que tiene la capacidad de accionar voluntades colectivas hacia una misma causa”* (“is a way to react to diverse problems that can affect us individually or collectively and is also a way of acting collectively […] (an activist) is someone who has the capacity to activate collective wills towards the same cause"). For S-C, who is part of a social movement whose primary roles are grassroots organising, advocacy and lobbying, and direct action to defend the territory, the environment, and the human right to water, being an activist means actively participating in social organisations. This involvement is seen as a vital way to drive change. Similarly, S-D, who participates in a service-oriented and research analysis collective, creating academic resources to impact policies changes, understands by the term ‘activist’ the person who actively listens to the concerns and voices of the people and accompanies them in their look for a different future. Therefore, these varied perspectives of activism highlight its multifarious nature and reveal the diverse ways in which each individual engages with social change efforts and particularly with the urban land-grabbing conflict.

From an ethical perspective, S-A, who advocates for housing rights, their activism is driven by a strong sense of justice and belief that social inequalities must be confronted and rectified. In S-B’s ethical worldview, a real activist should challenge capitalism's profit-oriented nature by working full-time or part-time on the cause but without chasing a profit. S-C ethical framework centres around the principles of justice but also collective well-being as a *“situación de conciencia”* ("conscience matter"). For S-D, the key virtue lies in compassion and their capacity to emphatically amplify their voices and concerns through their activism.

When asked about the meaning of land, the activists were proud to present a conceptualisation learned in the field. For S-A, the land is *“una forma de vida, una forma en que nos conectamos con muchos seres, no nomas humanos sino también naturales”* ("a way of living, a way in which we connect to other beings, not just human but also natural”). S-B replied articulating the indigenous worldview: *“La tierra es la madre, el cielo es el padre. Así de sencillo. Ahí nacimos, de ahí nos sostenemos y ahí vamos a acabar”* ("The land is the mother and the sky the father. It is simple, we were born from there, we need it to live, and we will end there". S-D also described their vision as *“holística”* ("holistic"), explaining that *“nosotros formamos parte de la tierra. Todo lo que hacemos, estemos conscientes o no, estamos implícitos dentro de todos estos procesos, entonces, más bien la tierra es parte de mí y yo soy parte de ella*” ("we are part of the land. Everything we do, conscious or not, we are implicit in its process, and because of this, I am part of the land, and the land is part of me").

However, S-C argued that as an activist, they should not understand land using emotion: *“no podemos ser sentimentales en este tipo de cosas, es un asunto económico, es un asunto de justicia e injusticia, es un tema de equilibrio […] si hay que verlo con cariño, discursivamente, pero hay que tener en claro que hay una serie de normas y de reglas que hay que quebrar, hay que combatir, hay que modificar para que tu puedas seguir detentando tu posición y propiedad de manera justa y digna”* ("we cannot be emotional with these things, because it is an economic issue, it is a justice and injustice issue, it is a matter of balance […] we can see it with emotion, but just discursively, we must have it clear that there is a series of norms and rules that must be broken, must be challenged, must be modified so you can continue holding your position and your property in a fair and dignified way"). In this way, S-C mobilises a particular land discourse to present and legitimise the collective direct-action measures to influence policy changes.

The notion of territory was also understood in diverse ways. For the first understanding of territory is associated with the idea of ownership of designated spaces. For S-C, the territory is a *“circunscripción […] es una*

conjunción de la tierra y sus propiedades" ("circumscription […] the conjunction of the land with the proprieties"). S-B also used the idea of ownership but perceives territory as a spatial entity that extends beyond mere human ownership recognising the existence of diverse forms of life that can also produce territory. In this idea, a jaguar can also produce territorialisation processes to control the access to natural resources that are indispensable for its survival. On the other hand, S-A and S-D acknowledged the modern conceptualisation of territory but also described another way of understanding this concept. For S-D, the territory is *"un fenómeno local […] (porque) lo hacemos las personas, en función al clima, topografía, el lugar y de los recursos que hay"* ("a local phenomenon […] (because it is) produced by the people, depending on the climate, topography, the place, and the resources"). In other ontologies, *"la tierra es donde se puede fincar el territorio y entonces si sumas la tierra con la memoria pues prácticamente formarías territorio"* ("the land is where the territory can be established, so if you add land and memory, you can create territory") (S-A). However, like the governmental agency employees, although they all described the Ejidos and Comunidades as territories, the activists struggle to find their territory: *"no, no me siento como en un territorio en particular"* ("I do not feel like I have a particular territory") (S-D), or they would define their territory "*(los lugares) en donde me muevo"* ("as the places where I move") (S-B).

7.3.2 Appropriating Territory: The Collective's Discourse and Its Legitimation

The four social organisations justify their project's spatial delimitation based on their mission, objectives, and the positive impact they aim to create in society. Additionally, their achievements are promoted to legitimise their work and justify other activities in those territories or to expand their impact on other territories.

S-A narrates how their collective that seeks to improve housing rights started. This collective is the only one born within one of the territories. It was born in Territory 3, but Comuneros do not integrate it. The collective is integrated by the people who live inside Territory 3 in neighbourhoods created after the first land grabbing strategy promoted by urban developers, the State and the bank

more than 20 years ago. The families maintain that they did not know about the illegality of the urban development and that they even bought their houses using credits provided by the bank. Today, they are still in the middle of the conflict between the bank, the State and the Comuneros.

S-A explains how, at the beginning “the Comuneros wanted their land, the bank their money and us, in the middle, our houses”. After many years of resistance and social demonstrations, the Federal Government recognised that the land was communal and proposed an expropriation mechanism as the only way to take control of the land, economically compensate the comuneros for their land and legally sell to the families their land where their houses were built. However, the recognition of the land as communal meant that the families did not have to pay to the bank for land that was not private. Consequently, the bank started a legal battle to demonstrate that the land was private and against the families who decided to stop paying their mortgage while they were waiting for the government resolution. However, the families have been waiting and claiming for a final resolution for more than eight years but every time someone tries to fix the problem, the irregularities and corruption in which the land grabbing and urban development took place are revealed, and the process stops. Therefore, the collective, integrated with the families affected by this land grabbing, have appropriated the territory by finding land security and identity in a legal battle that claims justice and housing policy reforms to stop illegal housing developments to happen.

S-B does not live on any of the territories, but they narrate the NGO foundation and its mission to defend the environment through a personal story. This need to defend the environment started when, as a child, they were taken to the mountains to spend weekends with friends and family. It was during those weekends that they fell in love with the place. However, years later they started to see how the city grew in that direction, putting the environment in danger: *“me di cuenta que había cacería furtiva, que los rancheros entraban y tumbaban los árboles a diestra y siniestra sin mayor cuidado o conciencia de los que sucedía […] entonces madure la idea de que teníamos que protegerla […] y di con la idea de que tenía que ser un área natural protegida”* ("I realised

there was poaching, the ranchers used to go to cut trees willy-nilly, without caring or conscious about what they were doing […] so I developed the idea that we needed to protect it […] and I came up with the idea that it had to be a protected area"). Therefore, S-B promotes and is part of an organisation which appropriates the territory based on a moral environmentalism vision.

S-C is an essential member of the social movement, and unlike S-A and S-B, they have no specific personal story attached to one of the territories or the mountains. S-C has been involved in the agrarian struggle in other localities, and today, the social movement has expanded its impact by working with more than 35 Ejidos and Comunidades while engaging with leftist political parties where some of their members hold roles within the public administration. The social movement work *"no se restringe nada más a un tema de territorio, sino también a un tema de desarrollo urbano en el sentido de la planeación que hace el estado y municipio y bueno, la federación, en términos generales. Ahora está la incorporación del tema ambiental y vuelvo a hacer hincapié en el tema del agua, porque finalmente es creo que lo que también esta ahorita moviendo en buena medida los procesos de desarrollo en (nombre de la ciudad), en México y en Latinoamérica"* ("is not only restricted to the territory theme, but also the urban development theme in the sense of the planning that the Local, State and Federal government does in general terms. Additionally, we are incorporating the environmental concerns, with a particular emphasis on water, which I believe plays a crucial role in shaping the development process in (name of the city), as well as in Mexico and Latin America". Following this mission, this social movement promotes, using legal mechanisms, environmental protection decrees. Additionally, it demonstrates its power and political capital with different direct actions as a strategy to keep the urban developers away from the territories and protect the environment and the human right to water.

Like S-B and S-C, S-D is not a dweller of the territories struggling to keep their land. S-D is involved in a collective that provides academic expertise and creates research for the social movement to support their claims. For S-D, the problems the territories face are complex, and only a multidisciplinary

approach can solve them. However, they, as academics, need to cooperate with social movements and NGOs to have access to the territories and their political network. This cooperation allows them to create spaces to communicate their research and raise awareness about environmental issues. In this way, their technical expertise and academic principles justify their presence and the geographical delimitation of their project's impacts.

In this way, the four social organisations present different ways to legitimise their discourse. While S-A finds validation addressing specific societal needs and justice. S-B justify their actions from their role of saving the environment. S-C drive their justification form their role as advocates and catalysts for social change and S-D in their role providing academic material to larger social movements or NGOs. By understanding the diverse ways to legitimise their discourse, the diverse ways of appropriating a territory or territories are visible.

7.3.3 Claiming Territory: Who Has the Responsibility to Protect the Environment?

Although S-B and S-C work towards environmental protection, the spatial delimitation of the territory to protect and their claims in the conflict differ. S-C is incorporated into a larger social movement that seeks social justice without being attached to a specific territory or conflict. For this reason, their mission is to promote and strengthen their social movement through social organisation to build political power. The social movement's political power is associated with the organisation's size and reach, which enhance its influence and impact on reforming policies. However, in these territories, their claim is based on the asymmetrical power relations between the Ejidatarios and Comuneros and the urban developers that the land market, created by capitalism, promotes. In their perspective, this mercantile way of understanding the land *"(ha roto) totalmente con el concepto más socialista que tenía la propiedad ejidal y comunal en la etapa de la revolución"* ("(has broken) completely the socialist concept that the communal land had in the revolutionary time") (S-C), benefiting the more powerful by making them even richer and have left the Comuneros and Ejidatarios even poorer: *"Mi ejemplo son siempre las tienditas, en las tienditas los dueños son ejidatarios que ya*

vendieron todo, que no tienen nada y que dicen, bueno, pues si, tuve 10 años que me gaste la lana, 5 años y ya no tengo nada, y ¿Qué les vas a dejar a tus hijos? Pues mi tiendita, y ¿estas arrepentido? Dice pues sí, se me cae la cara de vergüenza. Fue un fracaso, fracaso para ellos, para sus familias y para su identidad" ("My example is always the little convenience stores, the owners of those stores are the Ejidatarios that sold everything, they do not have anything and say, all right, yes, I have ten years spending the money, or five years but now I have nothing, and, What will you leave to your children? Just my convenience store. Do you regret it? They say yes, and my face drops with embarrassment. This was a failure, for them, their families, and their identity").

For S-B, the spatial delimitation of the territory to protect is defined by their social responsibility to map the availability of important natural resources. In this view, *"el recurso natural es de todos los seres vivos y su administración a los que tengan capacidad de hacerlo"* ("the natural resources belong to all living beings and their management to the ones with the capacity to do it"). For this reason, their NGO, integrated by professionals with technical knowledge, has created technical documents that define the trees as the important elements to protect and the area next to the city, with the presence of bushes but no trees, as the one with the possibility to develop. Their claim is based on the idea that it is impossible to protect all the mountains and, if the urban developers do not move away the Comuneros from their land and develop the area next to the city, the Comuneros and Ejidatarios could develop their communities in the mountains. If this happens, the city will have *"un montón de casitas, en 20 años, un subdesarrollo terrible en todos los cerritos como ves en Latinoamérica, los cerros llenos de casitas sin drenaje, sin calles, y es un desastre […] ¿Qué prefieres? ¿eso? ¿O una ciudad ordenada pero que del encino para adentro se proteja?"* ("a bunch of little houses in 20 years, terrible underdevelopment in all the little hills as you see in Latin America, the hills full of houses without sanitation, without streets and it is a disaster […] what do you prefer? That? Or a planned city that would protect from the oak to inside the mountains?") (S-B).

As S-C, S-D work with different territories developing research and academic publications to support larger social movements' claims. However, in these territories that are being *"avasallados y asediados por grupos de interés política y económicamente muy fuertes"* ("overwhelmed and besieged by very strong political and economic interest groups") (S-D), the social movements teach the territories how to organise against the interest groups and, the collectives like theirs, can provide the territories technical support not like an imposition but as a way to *"acelerar el proceso de conocimiento"* ("speed the knowledge process") (S-D) so the communities can take advantage of their land and natural resources and face the adverse circumstances in which they live. In this view, the social movements and collectives have the social responsibility to teach organisational strategies and provide technical support to the communities that, without their support, are not able to survive.

On the other hand, S-A claims housing rights and justice for all the families involved in the conflict. However, as a dweller of one of these territories, S-A has an insider-outsider perspective of the land-grabbing conflict: *"Me tocó pues ver este proceso un poco casi desde adentro […] la conformación de un grupo pro-desarrollador, unos en medio y los que estaban en resistencia"* ("I saw this process almost from the inside […] the conformation of the group pro-urban development, the groups in the middle and the ones in resistance"). At this time, *"surgieron muchas contradicciones porque surgieron demasiados actores"* ("many contradictions arose because too many actors arose"). However, S-A questions, *"¿Quienes tienen el argumento para defender esa protección y sobre quienes recae esa responsabilidad?"* ("Who has the argument to defend the protection of the mountains and on whom does that responsibility lie?"). In S-A's view, this situation is unfair, and some of the collective's and NGO's environmental discourses are contradictory:

> *"Me parece un poco injusto que la ciudad, tan mal administrada, tan insostenible que es, tan contaminante que es, tenga que depender de unas pequeñas personas de comunidades y ejidos que han sufrido lo peor de la desigualdad social para adjudicarles a ellos la responsabilidad de defender algo que no defendimos como ciudad por*

mucho tiempo[…] me parece muy contradictorio que ese equilibrio social, ese peso está recayendo en una área concreta y en personas muy concretas y que no existan pues otros incentivos para que ese equilibrio de responsabilidad sea más justo. Y pues también cae, mucho en lo que se le ha criticado al proteccionismo ambiental como si fuera el medio de ambiente, de aquí para allá lo más importante y de aquí para allá no".

"For me, it is a little unfair that the city, so badly managed, so unsustainable, so polluting, has to depend on a few people from Comunidades and Ejidos, who have suffered the worst of the social inequality and assign responsibility to them to defend something that we have not defended as a city for a long time […] it seems very contradictory that the social balance, that weight is falling on a specific area and particular people and that there are no other incentives so this balance of responsibility could be fairer. Moreover, it also falls, in what has been criticised about environmentalism, the idea that the environment is from here to there the most important things, and from here to there not".

In this way, S-A as a dweller of one of the territories, critically observes the involvement and the "external's" territory claim in the conflict and questions their power to control and decide about the future of territories to which they do not belong.

7.3.4 Defending Territory: Visibility Strategies, Defence Mechanisms, and Networking

S-A, S-B and S-C remember the large fire as the event that raised the visibility of the environmental and social conflict in the mountains to the people in the city. S-B describe how the city started to grow, the rivers were paved, and the connection between the city and the mountains was lost. Consequently, a social transformation took place, and they stopped teaching the city's connection with the environment at home and school: *"Se empezó a olvidar a los maestros enseñarlo, a los papás motivarlo, y pues los alumnos, la gente*

va creciendo así nomás" ("The teachers forgot to teach it, the parents forgot to motivate it and the students, the people, they grew just like that") (S-B). S-B illustrates how, before the fire, the people in the city were disconnected from their environment: *"La gente no tenía idea, le hablabas a los chavos de universidad, ¿Cuál sierra? No, pues quien sabe cuál es"* ("The people did not know, we even talked with people in the university. Which mountains? I do not know which ones are those". Therefore, for these activists, although they, as social organisations, were promoting their protection years before the fire, the large fire produced the re-visibility of the mountains in the collective imaginary and the debate about their protection.

However, each social organisation has created its own visibility strategies, defence mechanisms and networking to amplify its voice and reach its goals. S-A explains how the families started to organise themselves and the strategies taken to reveal the injustice they were living. They got off with a strong start with marches and meetings with the State Government. However, after some years without resolution, their relationship with the government started to deteriorate to the point that the Government officials "*apagaban las luz cuando llegaban para no tener reuniones porque sabían que era un tema que involucra muchos poderes"* ("Turned off the lights of the building as soon they arrived to avoid having the meeting because they knew the conflict involved many powers") (idem).

Therefore, they collaborated with other actors in decisive moments to amplify their impact. They worked with other neighbourhoods in the same situation and with the Comuneros in their search for the State's recognition as communal land where the urban development and their houses were established. However, maintaining a good relationship with other actors is complicated during a land-grabbing conflict. The Comuneros started to divide themselves in three different groups: "*Los que no quieren urbanizar su tierra tienen una forma y argumentos para defenderlo en base al territorio, en base a sus ancestros, en base a que esos terrenos ni siquiera les pertenece a ellos, lo que me parece muy interesante, sino que esos terrenos les pertenecen a generaciones pasadas y futuras […] los que quieren urbanizar, su argumento*

principal es que son dueños de la tierra y nadie más externo tiene derecho a decidir sobre lo que quieren hacer con su tierra […] y el tercer grupo está en como en medio, quieren urbanizar pero no así y pues también quieren defender, entonces están en medio" ("The ones who do not want to urbanise their land have a way and arguments to defend it based on the territory, based on their ancestors, based on the idea that the land does not belong to them, for me this is very interesting, the land belongs to past and future generations[…] the ones who wants to urbanise, their main argument is that we are the owners of the land and no one external has the right to decide about what they want to do with their land […] and the third group is in the middle, they want to urbanise but not like that, they want to defend so they are in the middle") (S-A). The age of the Comunero is an important factor in their decision to join one of these groups: *"los de mayor edad son los que de alguna forma tienen una conexión muy directa con la sierra […] y están siendo representados por X […] un activismo que usa herramientas de golpeteo social […] este (discurso) crea un movimiento automático de convocatoria de personas y artistas incluso […] ellos (el movimiento social) llegan a las asambleas con carteles y mantas ya hechos"* ("the older ones are the ones with a stronger connection with the mountains […] and are being represented by X […] an activism that uses tools of direct-actions […] this (discourse) create an automatic calling for people and even artists […] they (the social movement) arrive to the assemblies with banners already made") (S-A). However, this kind of activism has generated different reactions. While some groups support their cause and their protests, other groups, who collaborate with the State, and with higher visibility such as the UN have shown their disapproval. S-A remembers with disapproval how the resistance group arrived at a government event where the UN representatives were invited with banners promoting the protection of the mountains, and the UN representative response was *that "esas no son los formas de protestar"* ("those were not the ways to protest").

Consequently, the social conflict inside the Comunidad has made it impossible for families to create robust collaboration mechanisms with the Comuneros. This situation added to the years of protests with no resolution from the State, and that the legal defence has been individual, the families' organisation

started to deteriorate. Today, some families have lost their legal battle against the bank and have been evicted from their houses. Others keep struggling, looking for help in all the government offices and even sending letters to the President. Other families with more economic resources have decided to pay the bank their mortgage even when they know they will not have tenure security with this action. In this scenario, the organisation has a new defence idea: they have started to build a collaborative relationship with the local government by participating in governance mechanisms while recovering local histories to understand the roots of the land-grabbing conflict and find a solution.

S-B reflects on the NGO's relationship with the local government and the defence mechanisms they have implemented. S-B narrates how, in a beginning, the State opened their doors to the NGO, but this was a strategy to *"para tenernos controlados, para saber que estábamos haciendo, que decíamos y hasta donde queríamos llegar"* ("control us, to know what we were doing, what we were saying and how far we wanted to go") (S-B). In this way, the State maintained tokenism practices until the NGO started to have more significant contact and acceptance within the Ejidos and Comunidades. At that moment, there was a change in their relationship, and an adversary's relationship began. The local government and urban developers started a strategy to suppress the NGO's communication possibilities: *"El bloqueo en medios. Era dificilísimo poder darnos a conocer; no nos entrevistaban en la tele"* ("They block us from the media. It was very difficult to make ourselves known; we could not get any interview on TV") (S-B).

From the S-B perspective, the State has always protected the urban developer's interests because they are the ones who economically support the political campaigns. However, this situation did not stop their activities or change their mission to protect the environment by creating a naturally protected area. They implemented diverse environment conservation workshops in all the Ejidos and Comunidades that they defined had important natural resources to obtain the consent of all the Communal Territories to create the protected area within their territories. For S-B, their success, after

working all those years with the communities, was that they managed to stop the urban developments from being built in the mountains.

The social movement is involved with the Ejidos and Comunidades in diverse ways and topics. S-C describes the reason they are involved in the territories closer to the city: *El tema de la apropiación de las tierras de la zona conurbada de los municipios de las ciudades, este proceso de apropiación del territorio, si es una cuestión que si ha agraviado, que si ha golpeado, que si ha pulverizado la identidad de los Ejidos conurbados. Aparte hay una parte de gente que dice no, hay una parte de los núcleos de población que luego se convierten en gente marginada entre los propios Ejidos" (*"The situation of the appropriation of the land on the outskirts of the city, this process of appropriation of the territory, it is an issue that has aggrieved, has harmed, and crushed the identity of the Ejidos closer to the city. Additionally, there is part of the people who say no, and there is a part of the population that become marginalised within the Ejido") (S-C). For this reason, the social movement provides legal advice and support for the Ejidatarios and Comuneros that have decided to resist.

The resistance movement uses all its power and legal knowledge to make its claims visible. S-C narrates how they pressure the local and federal government using official participation mechanisms. During the last consultation process promoted by the local government, the social movement actively participated with more than 2000 requests. Even during COVID, the social movement maintained its activism: "*El tema de la pandemia se convirtió en un elemento que pues burocratizaba un poco la participación de la gente porque decía que teníamos que hacer en algunos casos por red ¿no? en el caso de la federal, en el caso del municipio había que hacerla de manera personalizada usando unos formatos un poco cuadrados […] obligamos al municipio de X a que modificar la estructura de la consulta para que la opinión pudiera ser mucho más amplia […] también hicimos correos a los compas de los Ejidos"* ("The pandemic issue became an element that bureaucratised the participation of the people a bit because we were told to do it in some cases online, right? In the case of the federal government, in the case of the

municipality, the social participation had to be in a personalised way using a fixed form […] we forced the local government of (name) to modify the structure of the consultation so the opinion could be broad […] we also created emails accounts for our friends from the Ejidos") (S-C).

S-C is proud of its social movement public policy and political influence. Today, they cooperate with the state-level government: “Entonces nos reunimos dos días a la semana en el Congreso del Estado” ("We meet twice a week with the State level congress"), and they also do workshops and videos to promote participation and explain the actual situation. However, at the same time, they continue the legal battle, which is sometimes against the same State and demonstrates their power by archiving the destitution of corrupt government agency employees. With this double relationship, the social movement creates a constant negotiation relationship with the State.

Like S-A, S-D narrates how the generational difference in the Ejidatarios and Comuneros' way of understanding and valuing their territory has caught their attention. For S-D, the resistance and the age of the Comunero or Ejidatario are interlinked: *“Las personas que más defienden X son en general los adultos mayores porque a ellos les toco como esta transición muy fuerte entre lo urbano y lo rural […] ellos han visto como poco a poco los territorios tradicionales y ciertas áreas de captación de agua han ido desapareciendo, entonces sienten un apego más fuerte a la tierra y a la necesidad de defenderlo. He visto gente muy joven que también trae esa visión pero como que las generaciones de en medio como que se quedaron un poco entre lo rural y urbano y pues les llama más la atención lo urbano porque lo ven como sinónimo de progreso”* ("The people who defend the most in (name) are the elderly because they lived that transition between the urban and the rural […] they have seen how the traditional territories and the water catchment areas have disappeared, so they feel a greater attachment to the land and the necessity to defend it. The young people also have that vision, but the generations in the middle stayed between the rural and the urban, and they feel more attracted to the urban because they see it as synonymous with progress") (S-D). For S-D, this resistance can only be achieved if the

Comuneros and Ejidatarios are informed, organise themselves and join other resistance groups. The Comunero or Ejidatario cannot survive and resist alone. For this reason, S-D is defending the territory by creating academic resources that promote knowledge and awareness, strengthening local capacities and expertise in the communities so the Ejidatarios and Comuneros can identify problems and find solutions, and generate evidence-based knowledge that can inform policy and advocacy efforts, usually promoted by the social movement.

7.3.5 Imagining Territory: A Challenging Urban Development Scenario

For S-B, S-C and S-D, the water will determine the city's future. They observe with critical eyes the new development model that attracts industry and high-income housing projects to benefit the high-ranked industrial employees: *"Quieren poner una zona industrial más grande de la que tenemos, ya tenemos una grande, pero quieren hacerla más, necesitas meterle casas para que los directivos y toda esa gente se venga para acá […] quieren poner una zona (habitacional) de muy alto nivel, la parte alta, abajo se queda la raza […] viéndolo de ese modo es una excelente idea pero viéndolo desde el punto de vista de sustentabilidad y de una ciudad dices… ¡chispas! […] el agua que tenemos en X según estudios de (nombre) no da para más de 30 o 40 años"* ("They want to build a larger industrial cluster, we already have one, but they want to make it larger, and with this, you need to supply houses for the managers and all the people who will arrive […] they want to create an area for high-income households in the mountains and below, will be the normal people […] if you see it in that way is an excellent idea, but if you see it from a sustainable point of view and, from a city's perspective, you say damn![…] the water that we have in X according to the studies of (name) is not for more than 30 or 40 years") (S-B). However, each of them imagines a different future for the city.

For S-B, the environment-protected area can protect the mountains and the water catchment area. Nevertheless, their success is a toss-up. It will depend on the new presidential candidate to define if all the mountains will be protected

or if, for political reasons, the area next to the city will be released to the urban developers.

S-C reflects on the problem and questions if the housing demand is not artificially created from an *"necesidad artificial de empoderamiento de niveles de vida"* ("artificial need for empowerment of living standards"). For this reason, S-C imagines a future where an analysis of the territorial reserve is carried out to know where those areas are and where the city's expansion affects less the environment and the water system. For S-C, in those areas, a mixed urban development model can be promoted, a model where the buffer areas could have environment-protected areas with support and incentives for a housing model that respects the environment and provides a way for the people who own those territories, to be part of a planned consolidation process with the city.

S-D imagine a change of development model where the city would change the industrial model for one that promotes knowledge production: *"Que X fuera como un clúster de conocimiento porque no tenemos los recursos para sostener una industria que es altamente consumidora de agua, de recursos naturales, simplemente porque no los tenemos ni para consumo humano, entonces estarle dando prioridad a la industria es irracional"* ("X could be a cluster of knowledge because we do not have the resources to sustain an industry that needs a lot of water and natural resources, simply because we do not have them for human consumption, so giving priority to the industry is irrational") (S-D).

Unlike S-B, S-C and S-D, S-A think the city's expansion over communal land will continue because the actual urban plan is permissive, and there are no incentives for the communal property or to create an attractive natural protected area. Additionally, contrary to the other activists, S-A questions those who imagine a future with environment-protected areas as the solution when the federal government is cutting the actual protected areas' budgets: *"¿Qué incentivos ofrecemos todos los ciudadanos para que esa área realmente sea protegida y conservada e incluso regenerada? Si el gobierno federal cada vez recorta más presupuestos para las áreas naturales*

protegidas, pues bueno ¿Qué va a pasar?" ("What incentives do we offer like citizens so this area can be really protected, conserved, and even regenerated? If the federal government cuts more and more the budgets for the protected natural areas, well, what will happen?"). For this reason, S-A visualise a future where if we assign this responsibility to the Ejidatarios and Comuneros, to the people who "*han sufrido lo peor de la desigualdad social"* ("are living the worst of the social inequality") at least, as a society, we should be involved and coordinate actions, so the inequality the communal land dwellers suffer is not increased.

7.4 Urban Development Companies

7.4.1 Producing Territory: The Land as a Mercantile Opportunity

- *¿Qué significa ser desarrollador urbano?* (What does it mean to be an urban developer?)

U-H laughs, moves away their two mobile phones that were on the table, and relaxes in the cafeteria's chair – "*Esa es una muy buena pregunta. Me imaginaba una conversación distinta"* ("That is a very good question. I imagined a different conversation").

Like the other urban developers, U-H's answer is related not only to the scope, complexity, and potential impact of their daily work but also to their aspirations:

> *"Al principio como que empecé muy animado a hacer proyectos que fueran como muy ya sabes, te enseñan a hacer como sustentables, hacer las casas un poco más o sea que dejen un beneficio más no solo para la familia que las van a ocupar, sino como para todo el entorno ¿no? […] pero si te soy sincero, como que luego ya te empiezas a empapar más de toda la reglamentación, te empiezas a dar cuenta de que cada vez hay muchas trabas sobre todo a en este país, en esta ciudad y pues ya como que, más bien es, […] desarrollar un espacio para familias que no tienen […] tienes que ser responsable con eso, de cuando menos brindarles un espacio lo suficientemente digno dentro de tus posibilidades porque al final, es un negocio, entonces tienes que hacerlo rentable, para ti también".*

> "I started very enthusiastic in the beginning, designing projects that were very, you know, they teach you to design in a sustainable way, to make things better, that could leave a benefit not only for the families that will occupy the development but also the environment, right? […] but if I am honest, you then start to understand the rules, you realise that there are many obstacles in this country and city, and you realise that [being a developer] is to create a space for families who do not have it […] you have to be responsible with that, to at least provide a decent space for the people within your possibilities because, in the end, it is a business, so you have to make it profitable for you too".

Like U-E, U-F, U-G, U-I and U-J, U-H is an important large-scale urban developer. This categorisation means they are involved in significant projects, creating housing and industrial developments that can transform or create neighbourhoods. They mainly focus on large affordable housing developments and medium size industrial buildings. For this reason, they see their role as creators of “espacios habitables” ("living spaces") (U-J) and *“desarrollos útiles para nuestros clientes”* ("useful (housing) developments for their clients") (U-F). They also idolise the mega-scale developers and wish they could be like them; real collaborators in the city's “development” (U-G).

On the other hand, U-A, U-B, U-C and U-D are considered mega-scale developers. They are major players in the city, and their projects, such as master-planned communities, have local and regional impact. Therefore, for them, being an urban developer is more than building housing developments for their clients. They see their role as the opportunity to “colaborar en el desarrollo económico del estado y del país” ("cooperate in the economic development of the state and country") (U-A) and to create and improve the city (U-B and U-C) by leaving a “huella” ("footprint") (U-C) that will create “mejores ciudades para el futuro” ("better cities for the future") (U-D). In this way, because of their economic and political influence, they see themselves as shapers of urban landscapes and catalysts of progress.

Nevertheless, when reflecting on the meaning of land, both the large and mega-scale developers differentiated between the meaning of land for them as persons and as urban developers. As a person, they described land as our motherland (U-E). Our home (U-B, U-C), where we all live and prosper (U-F). In this view, land is what allows us to belong to this world (U-G), because as U-A said: *“Es el lugar de existencia, el lugar de arraigo, el lugar donde puedo tener elementos para ser feliz”* (“It is the place of existence, a rooting place, the place where I can have the elements to be happy").

The second meaning is *“totalmente mercantil, es importantísimo también porque de eso depende mucho el desarrollo de la ciudad, de su gente, su manutención”* ("totally mercantile, which is also very important because the development of the city, their people, and their income depend on it") (U-E). In this conceptualisation, the land is their "livelihood" (U-J), an *“oportunidad”* ("opportunity") (U-F and U-H) to build and create development and jobs (U-C). With this *“materia prima”* ("raw material") (U-C), they can provide to their clients the possibility of having a patrimony, something of their own, a safe place where they can live or simply use (U-G). In this way, the urban developers must move from their personal conceptualisation of land to its modern idea, where land security and property are interlinked and immersed in a capitalist world.

Following the modern idea of land, the concept of territory is defined as the division of land (U-A, U-B, U-H, U-J) because, unlike the land in general, it has an owner (U-B, U-F, U-H, U-I). In this thinking, a territorial delimitation is a political act (U-G) because the territory is where you have *“control”* ("control") (U-C) or *“autoridad”* ("authority") (U-G) over the territory's access and management. For this reason, and the power dynamics allocated to their role, when questioned about their territory, they quickly referred to their properties or their house as the places where they have control and authority and, on a broader perspective, the city or country (U-B, U-C, U-F, U-G, U-H, U-I).

7.4.2 Appropriating Territory: Urbanisation as Development

The urban developers are proud of how their projects are not only fixing and renewing the city but also driving the economic growth in the city and region (U-B, U-C, U-D). The urban developers narrated stories about how some of their projects have increased the quality of life in different parts of the city and created direct and indirect jobs in the area: *"Generas empleo de todo tipo, desde el ingeniero residente, la empresa, la señora que vende tacos ahí en la mañana, o sea llegas a mover un tema económico de todos los niveles con solamente empezar a pegar ladrillos"* ("You create different kinds of jobs, from the resident engineer, the company, and the lady who sells the tacos in the morning, in this way, you develop the economy in all levels by just moving a brick") (U-C). In this way, they observe a very clear and obvious relationship between urbanisation and development and therefore, their role as promoters of that progress and their relationship with capital.

For this reason, they described their contribution to the economic development of the city when their projects increase the land value and attract more business to the city. However, the land value is understood differently by the large and mega-scale developers. For the large-scale developers, the land value is defined by its localisation in relation to the city, possible use and how desirable that land is (U-F, U-G, U-H, U-I). On the other hand, the mega-scale developers stated that the value is not only increased but created by speculative actions: *"Un ejemplo clarito es Las Vegas ¿no? está en un desierto y de no tener nada, lo convirtieron en una super ciudad"* ("A clear example is Las Vegas, right? It is in a desert and from having nothing they created a great city") (U-B). These speculative actions involve the commercial vision of the developer, the developer's reputation, social trends, and the idea of capital gain in the future. In this city, the mega-scale developers use this strategy to attach desirable attributes to the land that drives the market and increase its value: *"(Nosotros vendemos) que el valor de la tierra es el valor de la exclusividad"* ("(we sell) so that the value of land is the value of exclusivity") (U-D).

In this way, with the idea of urbanisation as development, the urban developers follow a modern idea of progress and appropriate the territory. They appropriate it with a moral conviction that reflects the urban developer's sense of responsibility towards the community and environment: *"Todos los desarrolladores, todos, aportamos algo a la ciudad"* ("All the urban developers, all of us, we are contributing to the city") (U-C). This contribution can be seen in the use of good materials, the construction of wider streets, the planting of more trees than required by regulations, and by bringing innovation and technology to the city (U-A, U-C, U-D, U-J).

They want to transform the city; however, the lack of long-term planning and extensive regulations and paperwork make their dream impossible: *"(Nuestra) creatividad urbana viene también a topar con un ámbito normativo […] quisiéramos hacer más, quisiéramos que el ritmo del desarrollo urbano con el aporte de cada desarrollador fuera más uniforme"* ("(Our) urban creativity stops with the normative framework […] we would love to do more, so the urban development rate and the contribution of each developer could be uniform") (U-B). In this way, without regulations, they could create better things. However, today, "*justos pagan por pecadores*" (the innocents pay for the guilty) (U-J), with the guilty being the capital- driven urban developers who don't follow urban development regulations (U-J).

7.4.3 Claiming Territory: The Need for Land to Lower the Market's Housing Prices

For urban developers, the increase in the economic value of the land and the land-grabbing strategies are interlinked. In the last years, the increase in the economic value of the land in the city has impacted the housing industry, especially in the sector destined for the construction of low-income houses. However, the cause of the shortage of low-income houses and its relationship with large-scale land acquisitions are perceived differently by the large and mega-scale urban developers.

For large-scale urban developers, the roots of the problem are in the distribution and access to the land. The city has been growing, and now, the

only land available in the city or close to the city that is not communal land is controlled by just a few hands (U-G, U-H, U-I and U-J). This situation has concentrated the power and wealth in a very small elite: *"Son tan pocos que se pueden ir a una borrachera y ponerse de acuerdo, poner los precios y ya al día siguiente suben todo el costo"* ("There are so few that they could go for drinks and decide to raise the price of the land the next day") (U-J). For this reason, the large-scale developers have two options: buy the land from the mega-scale developers or to try to buy land on the city's outskirts from the Ejidatarios or Comuneros. However, their lack of power and economic capacity has led them to buy the land from mega-scale developers. The large-scale developers do not have the economic resources to start a land-grabbing strategy against the Ejidatarios and Comuneros and then urbanise the territory from scratch (U-F, U-G, U-H and U-I). Implementing land-grabbing strategies and urbanisation requires time, money, and political power. U-F and U-H describe these circumstances:

> *U-F: "De hecho nosotros no le entramos a más, preferimos el sobrecosto de comprar ya tierra ya escriturada porque es muy desgastante, muy, es muy corrupto también el tema y te topas con treinta mil asuntos, entonces no somos tan grandes como para estar buscando esas cantidades de tierra para que desquite la inversión de tiempo y de esfuerzo".*
>
> U-F: "In fact, we do not go there, we prefer the extra cost of buying already private land because it is very exhausting, very, very corrupt, and you come across thirty thousand issues, so we are not big enough to be looking for those amounts of land to repay the investment of time and effort."
>
> *U-H: "No soy una empresa demasiado grande, entonces básica, sí de por sí es difícil y es tardado desarrollar un proyecto cuando ya tienes el terreno con los servicios […] yo no tengo la capacidad económica para esperar y dejar digamos ahora sí que enterrados ahí una equis cantidad*

> *de dinero, este en lo que se empieza a urbanizar la zona y demás, pues sí, yo ya dependo de que de comprarle a algún tercero".*
>
> U-H: I am not a very large company, so basically, if by itself, it is difficult and takes time to develop a project when you already have the land with the services […] I don't have the economic capacity to wait and leave a big amount of money buried there while I start urbanising the area. I depend on a third party to buy the land".

For this reason, house prices are higher than in other cities, and large-scale developers cannot lower them. They have already bought overpriced land using bank loans: *"Si este señor dice, voy a bajar los precios […] se van a encender los otros porque van a perder todos mucho dinero"* ("If a Sr says, I am going to lower the prices […] the others will be angry because they will lose much money") (U-E). Consequently, some large-scale developers are involved in fierce competition and feel incapable to lower their prices without compromising their companies. Others, looking for a higher profit margin, have stopped developing low-income housing projects and moved to the high-income housing market or industrial sector (U-I).

On the other hand, the mega-scale developers reflect on the origin of the land value and control conflict. For the mega-scale developers, the direction in which the city has been growing has a historical social class footprint. U-B explains this historical class distribution that is still present today:

> *"Las formas en que fue en que se asentó la comunidad de "X", ya desde ahí se veía sectorizada a clases, no nos gusta, nos gusta tanto de un mundo incluyente, pero también tenemos que ser realistas que muchos de estos temas vienen desde mucho antes o sea por qué el barrio de X está al X de la ciudad ¿verdad? o al o al X, porque el barrio de X es de la clase pudiente o sea históricamente así viene, así ha venido creciendo […] entonces aunque se haya querido o se ha estado proponiendo un mejor desarrollo también para otras áreas de la ciudad, el estrato socioeconómico medio alto, alto, está sectorizado al (dirección) ¿sí?"*

> "The way the community of “X” settled, since that point, the social classes were divided; we do not like it, we like an inclusive world, but we must be realistic, many of these issues come from a long time ago, I mean, the (name) neighbourhood is at (direction) of the city, right? Or to the (direction), because the neighbourhood (name), is the one for the high-income class, that is how historically happened, that is how it (the city) has grown […] so even though a better development has been wanted or has been proposed for other areas of the city as well, the middle and high socioeconomic class is located at (direction) right?"

In this way, the mega-scale developers are moved by the social pressure to develop middle- and high-income housing in specific city locations. Nevertheless, the only land that today is available is the one from Ejidos or Comunidades because remodelling old buildings or houses inside the city is more expensive than building a new one from scratch (U-B). Therefore, to continue to grow their business, they must start a process to acquire this communal land.

The large land acquisition process can take more than five years, and time means money (U-G). So, if they want to reduce this time, they must create different types of strategies that push the boundaries of illegality and informality to acquire the land. U-C describes how their company had to make a special agreement with the leader of one of the territories in the periphery to become Ejidatarios and be able to participate in the assembly and be considered buyers. All this while maintaining a low profile so the other Ejidatarios would never know they were not real Ejidatarios. However, this strategy could never be achieved without the participation of the leader and the Ejidatario who is willing to sell: *“Al final de cuentas el mismo ejidatario te ayuda, es el que necesita venderlo, necesita el recurso, entonces el busca la manera de ayudarnos a nosotros para hacernos del predio”* ("In the end, the Ejidatario is the one who will help you, he is the one who needs to sell, needs the money, so he will look the way to help us to become owners of their land") (U-C).

However, U-D also reflects on the land conflict, how it is related to the strong relationship between the Ejidatario and the land and the actions that have had to be implemented to break this relationship:

> *"Es algo muy interesante […] como los seres humanos defendemos más la tierra que otra cosa, que incluso tu propio negocio, el sentido de la tierra es un tema, porque es algo donde tu estas, tu perteneces, tú puedes defender la tierra hasta con tu vida […] ellos defienden su casa, aunque no haya nada […]pero sí creo que también ha habido un abuso terrible social sobre la gente del campo, sobre las comunidades y sobre los ejidos y esa parte es compleja, esa parte ha generado dolor, ha generado heridas"*
>
> "It is something very interesting […] the human being, we defend the land more than anything, more than our business, the meaning of land is a big topic because it is where you are, you belong, you can defend the land with your own life […], and they defend their house even when they have nothing […], but I do believe that it has been a terrible social abuse against the rural people, against the Comunidades and Ejidos and that part is complex, that part has generated pain, have generated wounds."

However, the mega-scale developers do not see another way to acquire land for housing developments. Their experience acquiring the land from the Ejidatarios differs significantly from the one social and environmental activists presented. For U-E, it is the presence of the activists and the social structure of the Ejido that create internal conflict because they do not allow the Ejidatarios, who need to sell, to sell and mix different land tenure regimens in the same territory: communal and private. In this way, U-D also describes how the participation of the environmental activists greatly impacted the increase of land prices in the city and, therefore, the economic stability of the low-income population. For this mega-scale developer, the environmental activists advocated for the creation of a protected environmental area in a region where multiple developers had long been using bank-founded land-grabbing strategies for years. Since these developers relied on borrowed money rather

than their own, failing to secure the land left them scrambling to repay the loans used to finance these strategies. This situation intensified the real estate pressure on the remaining available land, forcing developers— who had lost money in failed land-grabbing efforts— to raise the prices of the remaining land in an attempt to recover their investments.

In this way, large and mega-developers are pushed by the real estate market to pursue land-grabbing strategies and acquire land to continue the urbanisation process of the city because, if these large-scale acquisitions are not achieved, the pressure over the remaining land in the city will increase their price impacting on the economy of the ones who have less.

7.4.4 Defending Territory: Participation as a Political Act

Urban developers have a seat on the table when the State implements participation mechanisms to discuss the city's future. However, when reflecting on these participation mechanisms, the urban developers described the workshops as *“mesas de trabajo para la defensa de intereses particulares”* ("workshops for the defence of particular interests") (U-D), where each urban developer defends their projects by mixing politics with urban development. For this reason, for U-G, the phrase: "*El interés tiene pies"* ("the interest has feet" to express that if you have an interest, you will go after it) describe the urban developer’s participation and the participation process in those workshops.

In this type of working environment, where all the urban developers look for their interests and the government agencies do not have the power to control the meeting (U-A), the meeting is transformed into a "*cena de negros”* ("dinner for black people" - a racist expression used to describe a moment of confusion and disorder where no one understands each other) (U-D). Intrigue, conspiracy, and special treatments are usually present (U-E). There is no communication, the objective of the meeting is commonly lost (U-B), there are no accurate conclusions to resolve the problems (U-A) and the last word is always held by the same people, leaving the others as simple participants (U-

I). This intended or unintended situation opens the door for corruption between the urban developers and the government employees.

Therefore, the urban developers consider that the only real objective for these types of meetings is to provide a space for a political exercise where the government agency employees look for economic support or sponsorships to reach their political career goals (U-F). For this reason, U-F, U-G and U-H do not like to attend these meetings, and they prefer to push their projects in each governmental department individually or to join associations of urban developers to gain power and visibility.

In the urban developer's view, the only way to make this type of participation mechanism work is if they were facilitated by outsiders without bias. Those outsiders, unlike the local government agency employees (U-J), should be people with technical and scientific knowledge (U-D) or from the federal government (U-G) with will (U-E) and strong ethics towards their job (U-I).

However, although the participation mechanisms do not work as expected, the urban developers gain political visibility in each meeting. They do not need to attend these meetings to defend their "personal" territory. This territory is not and has never been at risk (U-A, U-C, U-F, U-G and U-J) and if another developer desires their "personal" territory, they will feel stalked, but in the end, they will play the market game and wait for the best offer (U-G and U-I). They also do not see these workshops as spaces to resolve particular problems in cases where their "company's" territory is at risk. The urban developers understand the defence of their "company's" territory as an indirect cost of their projects. They must spend money designing and building strategies to defend their reserve lands from invasions or natural hazards such as floodings or new geological faults (U-C and U-H). On the other hand, the current projects need to be defended from organised crime and their constant visits to the construction sites.

In the case of organised crime, the urban developers need to add private security, cameras, and join real estate associations to gain more power against them and sometimes pay "*derecho de piso*" ("protection racket") (U-I and U-J).

Alternatively, to prevent invasions, they must build fences or walls around the perimeter of their land and, sometimes, add private security. Not doing so can lead to years of social conflict to regain their land. This type of conflict is expensive, dangerous, and emotionally exhausting: *"Ellos (la organización social) ponen niños y mujeres, poco hombre […] no puedes reaccionar violento contra un hombre, pero cuando ponen niños y mujeres si hay más sentimientos. ¿Como llegas duro? o ¿cómo mueves a una señora o niños que están jugando ahí? […] para moverlos necesitas una orden judicial y todo es inversión de dinero, inversión de tiempo y desgaste. No es fácil"* ("They (the social organisation) leave kids and women, there are just a few men […] you cannot react violently against men, but when they are children and women, there are always more feelings involved. How do you move a woman or a child who is playing there? […] To move them, we need court orders, which are an investment of money, time, and wear. Is not easy") (U-C). Therefore, during these meetings with the government, they raise their voices to defend their land, advocate for their project proposals, and present their vision for the city's future (U-A, U-B, U-H and U-J)

7.4.5 Imagining Territory: A First World City.

The urban developers are worried about the future of the city. They do not see how the city's expansion could stop (U-A and U-F). The anarchy in the city is complete (U-E) and the Ejidatarios and Comuneros, at some point, want and need to sell their land and become part of the city (U-H). At the same time, the idea of a vertical city proposed by the government to stop the expansion and the pressure over the Ejidos and Comunidades has not been well received by the city's population or the urban developers (U-C and U-H). The people do not want to invest in flats and the city's physical infrastructure cannot support the projected re-densification of the city centre (U-B, U-D and U-I). Therefore, urban developers believe there is no other way; the vertical city must wait for the government to invest in improving the urban infrastructure and for new generations, with an affinity for living in flats, to grow old and push the market for this type of development (U-C, U-D and U-G). The urban developers alone cannot absorb the cost of improving the infrastructure network and cannot

change the social perception of living in vertical buildings (U-H and U-I). They can only mitigate their infrastructure impacts up to a couple of blocks away from their projects and wait for the market to request vertical developments (U-B).

Nevertheless, U-H and U-I are *"soñadores"* ("dreamers") (U-I), they imagine a future where all the city works together and shares responsibility. For example, U-I would be willing to stop all their projects while a comprehensive study of the city is developed. In the same way, U-H believes in the possibility of an agreement where the government will do their part improving the infrastructure and building open spaces and, at the same time, the urban developers will follow all the regulations at verbatim (U-H).

However, for the mega-scale developers, this kind of thinking is utopic because, most of the time, citizens are the ones opposed to the urban development. They do not understand about urban planning and do not know how to *"el juego de la ciudad"* ("play the city's game") as they do (U-C). People must put their interests aside and work for the common good (U-B). For instance, the people need to understand that, in order to improve the city's mobility, some properties must be demolished (U-B) and that we do not have water in this city, so the citizens must create a real strategy to save water as industry did (U-A).

In this way, and like other urban developers, U-E does not like to feel that this city is *"quedarnos atrasados mientras el mundo se va moviendo"* ("falling behind while the world keeps moving"). However, for U-C, the direction in which the city should grow is easy to find: *"No hay que inventarle mucho; simplemente ver otras ciudades. ¿Cómo lo hizo? ¿Cómo le salió bien?"* ("You do not have to create new things; just look the other cities. How did they do it? How did they get it right?"). With this idea in mind, U-J looks up to London and U-C to New York and they imagine a city like these. They want a vertical and greener city. However, this can only be achieved if we create a planned city (U-J) with better mobility (U-A and U-B), land uses and job centres distributed around the city (U-A and U-D) and if we take advantage of the city's location to expand its potential because today *"la zona industrial está cerca en*

transformarse en el monstro que todos queremos” ("the industrial area of the city is close to transforming in the monster that we all want") (U-F) and with this, the city is close to achieving one of its economic development goals to become the largest industrialised city in the region.

Chapter 8 Imagining Alternative Territorial Futures

8.1 Introduction

This chapter builds upon the narratives presented in Chapters 6 and 7, delving into the ontological and epistemological dimensions of this urban land-grabbing conflict. By examining the conflict through territorial lenses, this chapter re-thinks urban land-grabbing disputes in places such as City X, highlighting the struggle of the territories of transformation defending both an epistemic and materially ground position, where coloniality is an everyday struggle. In addition, the presentation of the narratives of hegemonic actors allows us to move beyond simple dualisms and explore the "politics of the pluriverse" (Escobar, 2020, p. xix) in the re-configuration of Modernity (Mignolo, 2011). This approach fosters an epistemological and transversal dialogue among the diverse, yet interconnected worlds entangled in urban land-grabbing conflicts.

To accomplish this, the chapter employs the TDR framework—Territorialisation, De-territorialisation and Re-territorialisation— an epistemological framework applied by geographers such as Raffestin (2012) and other authors such as Lombard et al. (2023). This framework enables an in-depth exploration of overlapping territorial processes within urban land-grabbing. To achieve this, this Chapter builds on the five co-produced territorialisation processes that structured the epistemological dialogues presented in Chapter 6 and 7: the production, appropriation, claiming, defence, and imagining of territory. By examining this conflict through this territorial lens, this chapter also demonstrates how local re-territorialisation processes are re-shaped through decolonial pedagogies, charting new decolonial pathways within land-grabbing scholarship.

8.2 Elevating Other Narratives About Territory: An Alternative Way to Produce and Appropriate Territory

For decolonial political ecology advocates, territory can indicate the social process through which collective identities construct and defend their existence (Leff, 2001, 2006; Porto Gonçalves, 2009). In places such as the

periphery of City X, where different worlds meet amidst the urban land-grabbing conflict, we can find what Agnew et al. (2010, p. 191) termed 'overlapping territorialities'. Here, diverse yet interrelated ways of understanding territory intersect, challenging the modern, hegemonic, static, and top-down place-making conceptualisation established by the State (Clare et al., 2018; Halvorsen, 2020).

One of these overlapping territorialities is the alternative understanding of territory formulated by the territories of transformation Ejidos and Comunidades located in the periphery of City X. It is here where these 'territories of transformation' produce and defend another type of territorial concept, one that is not defined as a *product* of multiple actors (Raffestin, 2012) but as an *active communal practice,* which is always in the process of becoming.

In this context, territory as a communal practice is characterised by six key attributes:

1. **Interconnectedness:** This understanding of territory represents an interconnected web of life where the subject and nature interact and construct each other. For instance, the phrase "they hurt us with the project" (T1-C) or "it is like they cut me an arm or a hand" (T3-A) referring to invasions or infrastructure projects that have had an environmental impact, describes a holistic way to understand territory as an interdependent system.

2. **Collective agency:** Building strongly on insights from previous chapters, territory is understood as belonging to the people who exercised, are exercising, and will continue to exercise it. Therefore, it involves the active intergenerational agency of the community. Through this practice, community members reinforce their connection not only with nature but with their ancestors and future generations. For example, in Territory 3, Comunero (a) "B" described this deep intergenerational connection by stating that when they look at the territory it feels like they are looking at their ancestors.

3. **Dynamic nature:** It is also dynamic. This means that it is constantly changing and evolving over time. These changes are related to significant alterations in weather patterns and environmental conditions, ongoing resistance processes and interactions within the territory and other worlds. For instance, in Territory 2, the Ejidatarios (as) are facing the worst drought in centuries, but they continue to make their living “from any rock" they can find (T2-H).

4. **Meaning and identity:** Territory imbues life with profound meaning and serves as the foundation for collective identity. This identity provides security and structure to the life of ejidatarios and comuneros, reinforcing their cultural and social bonds. In this way, for the ejidatarios and comuneros territory is home (T1-G, T1-E and T1-H), and territory is Ejido/Comunidad (T1-D, T2-F, T3-A, T3-B).

5. **Shared responsibility:** Territory is a constant shared responsibility. By being produced by the members of the community, they share ownership and the commitment to maintain and defend it "until the end" (T3-E). This continuous shared responsibility fosters a strong sense of unity and mutual support within the community, ensuring that the territory is preserved and protected for future generations.

6. **Emancipatory Potential**: It is an emancipatory space. It is where community members free themselves from the confines of modernity’s homogenisation influence, producing their own “map of significances” (Leff, 2001, p.viii) to define their own lives. For example, territory 1 described territory as “freedom, freedom of the mountains, freedom for our people, freedom to us, it is a nice freedom” (T1-D).

Therefore, territory as a constant communal practice is a continuous political act that transcends the definition of mere physical boundaries to encompass a dynamic social process of epistemological connection that defines life. In this way, territory and territorialisation— understood by Lombard et al. (2023) as

the process of producing territory— are, in this context, synonymous. Territory is a constant and sometimes contradictory territorialisation process where the community forges deep connections with nature, ancestors and future generations, while assimilating and resisting the homogenising influences of Modernity and the impact of the Colonial Matrix of Power in the knowledge production field.

For this reason, it is evident that while spaces can serve various purposes, not all of them are territories (Zibechi, 2019). However, it is equally important to recognise that by being a co-production process, not all individuals have territory. Contrary to Velez Castro's (2022) position that, over time, relationships and interactions within a space can foster a sense of territoriality, in this project, the modern city fails to instil such a sense of territoriality. Instead, it merely offers a space for individual ephemeral navigation (G-J, G-E, S-D, S-A). For example, G-J illustrates this phenomenon by stating: "Where I am, it is momentary, it is temporal […] it can be my space but not my territory […] I believe I do not have a territory". This assertion highlights how the subjects' interactions within the modern urban environment are not deep enough to establish connections that can construct territory, resulting in a fragmented spatial experience. This distinction underscores the complexity of territorial conflicts like this one, where the actors interact from different ontological and, therefore, territorial bases.

8.3 De-territorialisation Strategies for Urban Land-Grabbing

Aligning with Blaser's (2013) notion that the pluriverse is constructed through interconnected and relational dynamics, territory in this local context is not merely a communal practice produced in isolation. Instead, it emerges through a relational process involving the modern and other worlds. This dynamic, which is deeply entrenched in the Colonial Matrix of Power, is vividly portrayed in the narratives of the urban land-grabbing conflict. These narratives illustrate how territories of transformation utilise the modern and state-driven definition to differentiate themselves. For example, T1-B introduced their narration with the following statement: "A community is not the same as the city; let me explain it to you". Meanwhile, local hegemonic actors recognise and

understand these decolonial practices despite observing them from a distance, but do not always validate them: "The conflict arises when other groups assign it a different, sometimes incorrect, value to territory" (G-J). For this reason, most of the hegemonic actors view this overlapping and contradictory decolonial practice as an ontological conflict that disrupts the stability promised by the modern conceptualisation, producing political struggle and legal challenges.

Thus, within this local context, coloniality empowers certain hegemonic actors to use their *Poder* (power over) to strategically seek to mitigate or prevent overlapping territorialisation in order to facilitate a land grab and, consequently, reinforce the status quo and the colonial structures that benefit them. The strategic actions produced by hegemonic actors can be examined using the De/Re Territorialisation framework (TDR) (Haesbaert, 2013; Oslender, 2004; Lombard et al, 2023). This flexible framework allows us to explore the dynamic nature of territory and surpass conventional territorial categories to build an ontological understanding of de-territorialisation that goes beyond mere physical displacement (Lombard et al, 2023).

In this way and through this territorial lens and context, de-territorialisation can be understood as deliberate or unconscious interlinked actions aimed at disrupting territory towards urban land-grabbing.

These interlinked actions can be categorised in three interconnected groups:

1. **Epistemic actions:** These focus on severing the community's ontological and epistemological connection with nature. They include:
    - Generating environmental destruction: Deliberate actions such as arson aimed to instil fear and destroy vital natural resources. For example, in Territory 3, wildfires caused by arson have burned large forest areas, destroyed homes and harmed community members who tried to protect their territory. Today, the memory of large wildfires causes a pervasive sense of fear: "I am afraid of having to live that again" (T3-D).
    - Imposing water restrictions: establishing restrictions on water availability impacts territory survival. For the communal

territories' water is not a commodity but an element for their survival: "The water is our mother (…) without water we cannot live" (T2-I) "we need water to survive" (T2-D).

- Perpetuating green-coloniality: Authors such as Hultgren (2015) and Sasa (2023) have identified the use of green discourses to justify exclusionary practices. In this project, green coloniality is considered as a green discursive practice that reinforces colonial asymmetries in the knowledge production field to facilitate urban land-grabbing.

  This concept builds on the concepts of green-grabbing, green imperialism, green-colonialism and eco-coloniality discussed in section 2.5. Green-grabbing refers to land grabs driven by green agendas (Fairhead et al., 2012). In contrast, the interconnected concepts of green-imperialism, green-colonialism, and eco-coloniality explore how environmental discourses and practices intersect with colonial power structures. However, they differ in focus and the specific mechanisms they emphasise. Green-imperialism and green-colonialism examine how conservation and decarbonisation efforts can reinforce geopolitical hierarchies between the Global North and South (Lang et al., 2024; Grove,1995). Meanwhile, eco-coloniality specifically addresses how environmental protection practices are used to sustain and reinforce environmental racism particularly in contexts like the UK-French border (Davies et al., 2024).

  Green-coloniality incorporates these concepts and, as Davies et al. (2024) suggests, uses the term 'coloniality' to highlight the ongoing influence of colonial power structures in contemporary environmental extractivism. For example, a representative of one local NGO noted: "The natural resources belong to all living beings and their management to the ones with the capacity to do it" (S-B). This perspective, however, often masks the continuation of exploitative practices under the guise of environmental stewardship, perpetuating epistemic violence by

reinforcing the dominance of those deemed “capable” of managing resources.

2. **Structural actions:** These interventions utilise the State apparatuses to break down territory and undermine communal rights:
    - Providing confusing information: For Proctor et al. (2008) ignorance can be deliberately maintained or manipulated to uphold power structures. In this context, the governmental and bureaucratic systems facilitate the production and dissemination of misleading information about land rights, which in turn allows the proliferation of *coyotes*. The *coyotes* are described as external promoters with personal connections inside the governmental offices who exploit the confusion. They are known for “profiting and taking advantage of the peasant’s lack of legal knowledge about their land rights, providing information that benefit only themselves” (G-E). This strategic use of ignorance leaves the territories of transformation more vulnerable than before.
    - Establishing barriers to agricultural subsidies: Structural obstacles prevent communities from accessing agricultural subsidies. Federal and State programmes are tied to water infrastructure, and without this infrastructure, these territories cannot participate in these programmes (G-I, G-J). Currently, no programme specifically addresses the construction of this vital water infrastructure in communal territories, perpetuating a cycle of inaccessibility to agriculture subsidies.
    - Enforcing bureaucratic violence: Historical territorial records, crucial for legal defence, are preserved in Mexico City and can only be accessed in person during specific hours, with no option for copies or photographs. For individuals like T3-K, who struggle with reading and writing, this restriction means that they can only read a small piece each day and must try to remember it to narrate to the community.

- Tampering with the land-title holders list: The governmental officials facilitate the legal recognition of outsiders as ejidatarios (as) or comuneros (as) to manipulate the voting system within the territory. This action of “legally becoming ejidatarios or comuneros to ensure a future sale” (U-C) is considered by the communal territories as a criminal way of dispossession (T3-C).
- Implementing environmental protection plans: Involve the use of the governmental apparatus to promote “green coloniality” through neoliberal conservation policies. These policies encourage ecotourism while restricting local practices crucial for community livelihoods, such as infrastructure development or even agriculture if they are not following the “sustainable agriculture” guideline determined in the decree. For this reason, the communities perceive this practice as adjuvant to dispossession: “Once I sign the document, I am going to be Ejidatario but just by name, in paper, but I will not really be one because the land is not going to be mine, it will be the government’s land” (T1-D).

3. **Direct actions:** These confrontational and manipulative measures target subjects in resistance directly through fear, abuse or monetary tactics:
    - Providing economic incentives: Refers to the use of monetary rewards to shape behaviour. In this context, economic incentives are offered in exchange for voting in favour of the sale or a partnership with urban development companies. However, these actions only benefit the “holder investors, (who) accumulate immense wealth" (S-C).
    - Engaging in harassment and violence: These are aggressive behaviours intended to intimidate and coerce community members into supporting land sale initiatives. For instance, in Territory 3, T3-G narrates how an individual approached them and said: “I have got my eye on your land”, directly impacting their sense of security and ownership

The three types of de-territorialisation actions do not imply that they are being uniformly implemented, nor are they applied consistently across all territories or to the same extent and intensity. While the three territories expressed having experienced all three types of actions, the amount, degree, and extension of those actions can be related to their real estate land value, the natural resources within their territory, and the period of time the territory has been resisting. For example, although the three territories represent real estate hotspots and have important natural resources, Territory 3 has been resisting for longer and has therefore experienced a higher number and more severe epistemological and structural de-territorialisation actions.

The following table presents an overview of how hegemonic power is experienced in each territory through de-territorialisation actions within the urban land-grabbing context.

Manifestation of hegemonic power in the urban land-grabbing context			
Territory	**De-territorialisation actions**		
	Epistemic	**Structural**	**Direct**
1	Perpetuating green-coloniality	Establishing barriers to agricultural subsidies Implementing environmental protection plans	Engaging in harassment and violence Providing economic incentives
2	Imposing water restrictions Perpetuating green-coloniality	Providing confusing information Establishing barriers to agricultural subsidies Enforcing bureaucratic violence	Engaging in harassment and violence Providing economic incentives

		Implementing environmental protection plans	
3	Generating environmental destruction Imposing water restrictions Perpetuating green-coloniality	Providing confusing information Establishing barriers to agricultural subsidies Enforcing bureaucratic violence Tampering with the land-title holders list Implementing environmental protection plans	Engaging in harassment and violence Providing economic incentives

Table 4 De-territorialisation actions experienced in each territory

It is important to note that the epistemic violence, manifested through epistemic de-territorialisation actions, underpins and defines most of the structural and direct de-territorialisation actions implemented in each territory. In this case, hegemonic actors have leveraged their *Poder* to propagate internationally recognised environmental discourses to justify their actions. These discourses, purportedly aimed at the common good, present the structural and direct de-territorialisation actions as necessary for advancing the city's modernisation project. For instance, the State and some NGOs advocate for a green future where environmental protection is prioritised, framing the conservation agenda not as a de-territorialisation effort but as a tool to protect the natural resources within these communal territories. Other actors who have used widely accepted environmental discourses are urban development companies. They emphasise the necessity of land for housing development, arguing that their financial capacity allows them to build sustainable urban developments on peripherical land, thereby potentially lowering house prices

by reducing pressure on the limited number of available lots within the city and, at the same time, improving the environment.

Furthermore, in some territories, epistemic de-territorialisation efforts have been applied simultaneously to reinforce the power asymmetries in the knowledge production field. For example, in Territory 3, some hegemonic actors have portrayed the comuneros as both unable to protect the environment and as the primary culprits of the environmental degradation within their territories. This widely repeated narrative is well documented in the literature on violence and conservation (Bocarejo et al., 2016). However, in this local context, the narrative has been further solidified by arson wildfires. During these disasters, local inhabitants have been described as negligent, and their knowledge has been ignored in the firefighting strategies. This convergence of epistemic de-territorialisation actions is illustrated when T3-D claims: “Our people know the mountains, our people know the points to enter and exit the mountains […] but they didn’t care, they didn’t support us”. As a result, coloniality and the historical epistemic violence carried out throughout the history of City X is re-shaped and perpetuated through the use of epistemic de-territorialisation actions.

This strategic use of epistemic de-territorialisation actions has profoundly shaped the dynamics of the conflict. The dominant conservation narratives have effectively persuaded the urban public who actively participated in the consultative meetings convened by the State and NGOs (G-F; S-C). However, the contradictions within conservation narratives have highlighted the politics of the pluriverse and have sowed confusion around the sustainable benefits of urban land-grabbing. This confusion has even led some involved actors to question the true identities of the key players and their motives behind the use of epistemic de-territorialisation strategies. As S-A noted: “too many contradictions arose because too many actors emerged… and suddenly I did not know which version represented the truth”.

This is because in urban land-grabbing conflicts such as this one, where the capitalist system assigns monetary values to the land and its resources, a large number of actors emerge seeking to benefit from the grab. Banks,

intermediaries, informal brokers, housing development companies, government agencies, non-governmental organisations and even academics are among the political actors that, immersed in hegemonic power structures, are pushed to use de-territorialisation actions to maintain or increase their *Poder* and interests. Others do not have enough money and *Poder* to produce the de-territorialisation strategies by themselves (U-F, U-H). For this reason, they have created temporary strategic alliances to reach common goals. For example, in Territory 3 the social collective of homeowners— whether aware or unaware of the illegality of their property purchases— have temporarily united with the State for a resolution. Another example involves the academics who have created alliances with the social collectives to influence policy decisions that often advocate for the priorities of these groups. However, the opaque nature of the actions, coupled with informal alliances and the varying epistemic foundations underlying each actor's actions, obscures the attribution of the de-territorialisation efforts to specific individuals or groups.

Furthermore, the territorial narratives reveal that the scope, intensity, and extent of de-territorialisation actions significantly influences the territory's ability to sustain a united resistance front. In this context, it is important to recognise that some of the communal land dwellers, having already undergone de-territorialisation, have been incorporated into Modernity and formed alliances with hegemonic actors to facilitate further de-territorialisation actions within their territory. These collaborations have altered internal power structures, creating internal opposition groups that promote the benefits of land sales and encourage the incorporation of the territory into the modern system. This situation is particularly evident in Territories 2 and 3, where de-territorialisation actions have fostered significant hopelessness among some members. In these territories, the exhaustion and despair of keeping alive the map of significances that produce territory have fragmentated the community. This disintegration along with the emergence of internal groups with specific interests, has obscured even more the true initiators behind each de-territorialisation action, making it increasingly difficult to identify who is orchestrating each action.

8.4 Re-territorialisation Strategies: Decolonial Responses to Claim and Defend Territory

In territorial and ontological conflicts such as this one, de-territorialisation actions are not simply received, but vigorously contested through processes of re-territorialisation. In this context, re-territorialisation encompasses not only the establishment of new spatial configurations (Yang, 2019), but also the decision to adopt an epistemological disobedience by reinforcing the situated map of significances that produces territory.

Amidst the urban land-grabbing conflict in City X, territories of transformation respond to the de-territorialisation strategy using their transformative power that includes political and insurgent practices aimed at defending their existence. But these practices are not solely defensive; they also serve as proactive measures to reclaim and redefine territory. Therefore, the process of re-territorialisation produced by the territories of transformation represent a decolonial response to the coloniality of power, knowledge and being that defines their existence. They symbolise the “pedagogies” born in the struggle that emerge from the “exteriority”— from the cracks of the modern world (Walsh, 2013, p.32). Nevertheless, these actions cannot be homogenous or continuous and should not be romanticised; they are shaped by coloniality. Each territory produces their own re-territorialisation strategy based on its place in the Colonial Matrix of Power and the temporary alliances it forms. This re-territorialisation strategy involves a variety of interconnected actions designed to address the specific de-territorialisation challenges and to strengthen their capacity to mobilise their transformative power within the hegemonic structures defined by the modern world.

In this context, the two interconnected forms of power, *poder* (power over) and *Potencia* (power to) (Clare et al., 2018), define the territory’s capacity to initiate re-territorialisation actions and ensure their success. While *poder* is obtained through the legal recognition of the ejidos and comunidades and the land rights associated with them, *potencia* is mobilised through the everyday struggle to preserve territory. Consequently, the territories generate re-territorialisation actions designed to enforce their *poder* and cultivate *potencia*. This production

of re-territorialisation actions utilising both forms of power often surprises the hegemonic actors. This is because from their epistemological standpoint, they struggle to understand why territories of transformation are sometimes reluctant to join the modern project and become beneficiaries of the market.

These re-territorialisation actions can be categorised as follows:

1. **Epistemic actions**: These measures exemplify the epistemological decision to employ, reinforce or protect collective knowledge to strengthen the map of significances that produce territory. They include:
    - Teaching practices: Through this process, communities ensure that collective knowledge, tradition, values and norms are nurtured from one generation to the next. In the three communal territories, women and elders are considered the custodians of knowledge and the embodiment of “deep love for the land” (T1-G). This deep connection “transcends” (T3-J) generations through intergenerational teaching.
    - Preserving territorial praxis: This represents the continued practice of intertwining the subject-nature relations that produce territory. The practice includes perpetuating agricultural traditions and implementing reforestation campaigns to reaffirm the territorial identity and purpose. As the members explain: “It is a feeling, a need to take care of all” (T1-D) because “"if we lose our traditions and culture, then we are walking in reverse" (T3-K).
    - Employing traditional knowledge to identify outsiders: This involves leveraging the deep understanding of the environmental synergies with the community to distinguish between those who truly belong to the community and those who do not. In Territory 3 outsiders are quickly recognised when they ask for help with planting, prompting locals to question, “How is this possible? if they are supposedly Comuneros!" (T3-K).
    - Adopting epistemic refusal: this refers to the decision to abstain from being part of the modern city development agenda. By

choosing not to take part in discussions or governance activities— such as meetings on new urban development plans— individuals actively protest these initiatives, preserving their autonomy and integrity. Some governmental officers have acknowledged that, in the past, the communal territories' participation has been used "ornamentally" (G-A). However, this epistemic decision often leads to confusion among other hegemonic actors, who struggle to grasp the rationale behind it. They perceive the communal territories as "an embassy of a foreign country" (G-F) highlighting the difficulty in reaching an understanding between different ontological bases because it is as if they do not speak the same language.

2. **Structural actions:** These interventions harness the structural power of the territory for its defence. They involve the following actions:
    - Calling for regular community assemblies: This involves a constant periodicity in the call to the community assemblies. During these assemblies, the territories document the de-territorialisation actions and formulate collective responses "for the common good" (T3-B).
    - Maintaining a legal defence: This includes claiming their communal land-rights in order to mount a legal defence protecting their territory against conservation plans and invasions. However, finding a solicitor in whom they can trust is very difficult (T2-H) because they are perceived as "commercial solicitors, because that is what they do; they trade what they are supposed to defend" (T3-J).
3. Organising rallies and protests: This involves public demonstrations to express their strong objection to new policies or to highlight de-territorialisation actions that are being experienced by the territory. The communal land dwellers are sometimes accompanied by other social collectives during the implementation of those actions (S-A). **Direct actions:** These actions aim to foster resilience and ensure the safety of community members. They include:

- Cultivating hope: This serves as a communal motivational tool to support each other and resist de-territorialisation actions. In this context, the communal territories hope they will "have rain again" (T1-B) so they can "keep their territories" (T1-B)
- Creating a vigilance committee: This represents the integration of a communal patrol that watches over the territory during the day and night as a defence mechanism against invasions, environmental destruction, and the criminal use of their territory by external groups. However, this action is not easy, "the terrain is all mountains, with canyons" (T1-D)
- Occupying territory: This involves inhabitants using their bodies to discourage the destruction of the environment or the physical invasion. Sometimes it includes the use of armaments or the presence of women and children to make the cost of invasion too high for the invaders. This situation is explained by (U-C): "when there are children and women, there are always more feelings involved. How do you move a woman or a child who is playing there?"

The following table presents an overview of how transformative power is experienced in each territory through re-territorialisation actions within the urban land-grabbing context.

Manifestation of transformative power in the urban land-grabbing context			
Territory	**Re-territorialisation actions**		
	Epistemic	**Structural**	**Direct**
1	Teaching practices Preserving territorial praxis Adopting epistemic refusal	Calling for regular community assemblies Maintaining a legal defence Organising rallies and protests	Cultivating hope Creating a vigilance committee Occupying territory

2	Preserving territorial praxis Adopting epistemic refusal	Calling for regular community assemblies Maintaining a legal defence Organising rallies and protests	Cultivating hope Occupying territory
3	Teaching practices Preserving territorial praxis Employing traditional knowledge to identify outsiders Adopting epistemic refusal	Calling for regular community assemblies Maintaining a legal defence Organising rallies and protests	Cultivating hope Creating a vigilance committee Occupying territory

Table 5 Re-territorialisation actions experienced in each territory

Among these actions, maintaining a legal defence have proven to be the most effective across the three territories (T1-D, T2-G, T3-K). This is because this strategy directly strengthens the territories' *poder* during periods when their *potencia* is struggling to develop. Additionally, they have found that legal strategies provide the only means to match the *poder* exercised through de-territorialisation actions by the State, bank, social movements, and urban developers. However, is important to note that, in some cases, the pursuit of *poder* through legal channels has led to internal conflicts, primarily because not all members of the territory can equally contribute to legal fees (S-A).

Furthermore, although this project is not critically analysed through a feminist approach, it is important to recognise how the gendered colonial difference shapes both de-territorialisation experiences and participation in re-territorialisation strategies. The gender dimension in environmental conflicts has been explored by authors such as Rainey et al. (2009), who emphasise the crucial role of women as the driving force behind the environmental justice movement. However, statements that universalise women's empowerment, as

well as those that portray all women in the Global South as vulnerable and without political agency, should be approached with caution (Lugones, 2008). For this reason and in line with decolonial perspectives of Lugones (2008) and Manning (2021), this project illustrates the women uniquely way to navigate the border between contemporary challenges and traditional values within a patriarchal gender system defined by the Coloniality of Power. It is important to note, however, that these insights are only based solely on the experiences shared in Territories 1 and 2, as in Territory 3, where the dialogue was organised in groups, the women did not described gendered differences.

As discussed in Section 6.2.4, the women who participated in the dialogue in Territory 1 expressed having to navigate this border. They described their dedication to fulfilling their traditional roles— caring for their families by preparing meals, attending children, and maintaining the household— while also desiring to engage in additional time-consuming resistance activities beyond these responsibilities. However, balancing both was often impossible, so they frequently sought the support of their husbands or sons to participate in structural or direct re-territorialisation actions. Despite these challenges, they expressed having found in the epistemic actions of teaching land values and preserving the territorial praxis a meaningful way to contribute to re-territorialisation. This unique form of participation has fostered admiration among their fellow ejidatarios, who observe this complex interplay between traditional roles and evolving dynamics in the community as a key force driving the Ejido's resilience and resistance.

In contrast, as discussed in Section 6.3.4, most of the women who participated in the dialogue in Territory 2 were widows, sharing the profound impact of their unique situation. These women, unable to seek support from their husbands and with children already immersed in the modern world and pushing for the sale of land, face, without family support, the Coloniality of Power. In response, the women have formed a support network with others in similar situations, striving to maintain an epistemic refusal. However, without additional support, only time will tell how long they can continue developing this re-territorialisation action.

This individual resistance, however, is not isolated but is part of a broader colonial dynamic that impacts re-territorialisation efforts across the territories. Despite facing three distinct types of de-territorialisation actions, these territories have not formed a network to bolster their re-territorialisation actions against land grabs. Influenced by their colonial past and historical conflicts between territories, they tend to maintain individual resistance, refraining from involvement in the politics and issues of other territories. However, this fragmented approach may prove insufficient. In 2017, the UN (2017) presented the "Urban Development Tendencies in Mexico" and, although they did not focus on the urban land-grabbing phenomenon, the report estimated that by 2030 real estate companies will control the periphery land of the cities. Following this, in 2021, the Mexican Government acknowledged the increasing pressure on communal land located on the periphery of all Mexican cities and its negative impact on social welfare and food self-sufficiency (SEDATU, 2021).

8.5 Building an Alternative Starting Point: Imagining Other Futures Where We Can All Survive.

The territorialisation processes co-produced through the alternate dialogues— producing, appropriating, claiming, defending, and imaging territory— outlined in Chapter 6 and 7, alongside with the re-territorialisation actions described in the previous section emerge from what Gloria Anzaldua (1987) calls "the border", as a form of "peripheral epistemology" (Fernandes et al., 2024, p.6). This signifies conceptualisations and responses for their defence based on knowledge systems that embody not only a geographic space but an epistemological one (ibidem). Consequently, these re-territorialisation actions represent the ontological struggle inherent in living on the epistemological border and the pedagogies that emerged from the need to defend their existence amidst the urban land-grabbing conflict.

Viewing these re-territorialisation actions as pedagogies offers a critical framework to question the modern system and reflect on the ongoing impacts of coloniality (Walsh, 2013). By approaching these actions through a pedagogical perspective, we can begin to see the margins not merely as sites

of pain, but also as spaces of desire and possibility (Tuck, 2009). In doing so, the hegemonic and monolithic narrative about urban development is disrupted, opening up a space for imagining new alternatives.

In this local context, the alternate dialogues opened a space for collective reflection and for the co-production of the territorial processes that define their existence. Within this space, all the parties involved in the urban land-grabbing conflict were invited to critically examine their map of significances that construct territory and its relationship with the modern urban development model. It was during this critical reflection that transformative elements began to emerge.

Across the three territories, the ejidatarios and comuneros expressed their gratitude for the rare opportunity to discuss their existence, history and “love for what surrounds us” (T1-D). For many, this was a significant moment of validation and recognition— an opportunity to reflect on their identity and to reaffirm their connection with the land. However, the reflection sparked by the project did not conclude with these initial conversations. In Territory 2, ejidatarios expressed their desire to continue the conversation with fellow members of the community, emphasising how the project reminded them of the importance of reflecting on their shared values, especially during such uncertain times. Meanwhile in Territories 1 and 3, ejidatarios and comuneros voiced a similar desire to extend the experience, but with a particular focus on involving future generations. Their intergenerational vision also led to discussions about writing their own local history— a project that would allow them to document their experiences, values, and relationship with the land in their own words. This effort was seen not only as a means of preserving their existence and knowledge for the next generation, but also as a tool to be included in the construction of the history of City X. In this way, with this reflexive and co-production process, the ejidatarios and comuneros not only discussed their past but started to develop strategies to increase their transformative impact.

Hegemonic actors also found in the epistemological dialogue a space to reflect about the impact of the Colonial Matrix of Power in the conflict. For example,

S-A, a representative of a social collective, contributed to this conversation by highlighting the unequal distribution of the environmental responsibilities in achieving the modern city model, stating: "For me, it is a little unfair that the city, so badly managed, so unsustainable, so polluting, has to depend on a few people from Comunidades and Ejidos, who have suffered the worst of the social inequality and assign responsibility to them to defend something that we have not defended as a city for a long time". Similarity, an urban developer commented on the impact of power structures on the communal territories: "I do believe that it has been a terrible social abuse against the rural people, against the Comunidades and Ejidos and that part is complex, that part has generated pain, have generated wounds" (U-D). In this way, both reflections represent the importance of the pedagogies not only as processes that strengthen territory but also as catalysts for a reflexive process that, as decolonial scholars like Walsh (2013) and Mignolo et al. (2018) suggest, create cracks in the borders of dominant frameworks.

These "cracks", as expressed in these reflections, manifested in the form of "personal identities and reflections", especially among governmental officers. These actors found in this mode of reflection a way to describe the contradictions they experienced when navigating the border between their professional roles and personal values. In this sense, these cracks allowed the hegemonic actors to move between borders, initiating a dialogue about the potential for alternative futures.

Through this collective reflexive process, many of those involved in the conflict have come to realise that the future promised by the modern system is not one they desire. While territories of transformation perceive their engagement as a "last battle" against an existential threat (T1-D), the hegemonic actors perceive the urban land-grabbing as an inevitable outcome of market forces benefiting only a few (S-A, S-B, S-C, S-D, U-A, U-F, G-J). For these actors, the city's trajectory is driven by an unstoppable economic machinery where the global economic trends and political imperatives rather than environmental or social needs, dictate the local urban development (G-H, S-B). This dynamic leads to artificial housing demands (G-H, S-C) and universal housing models that fail

to align with the needs and desires of the local population (U-B, U-D, U-I, U-G). The result is the standardisation of the different ways of living (G-H) and the development of a "non-city" (G-F), characterised by increasing fragmentation and speculative interest that domine over the real needs of the residents.

However, it is through this reflexive critique— challenging the "immanent" notion of urban development— that "geographies of hope" begin to emerge. These alternate territorial futures arise from the struggle of communal territories (Hazlewood et al., 2023) and embody geographies of hope that, for the first time, are "descending from the mountains (where the communal territories dwell) to the valley (the city)" (S-D). This brings with it a vision of hope for a different future— one that is not colonised by modernity (Arora et al., 2020).

While these geographies of hope arise from distinct situated contexts, they share a common desire: the communal aspiration for a future where their territories remain spaces of emancipation and collective practice for the generations to come (T3-C, T1-B, T2-L, T2-M). Yet, they assert that this emancipation from the modern system should not come at the cost of basic infrastructure and services (T3-A, T3-B, T2-D, T2-O, T1-D). Following their own future do not mean that they want to live segregated or in deprivation "with loincloth and sandal" (T3-A). Instead, they aspire for a future where the diverse worlds can coexist harmoniously, each of them evolving in its own way through a respectful exchange of knowledge and experiences (T3-A, T3-B, T3-C, T3-D, T2-O, T1-B, T1-D).

As these geographies of hope reach the city, they spark a new phase of plural conversations among hegemonic actors. In this emerging dialogue, some actors have expressed a preference for maintaining the status quo, arguing that there is no need to imagine new possibilities when cities like London or New York already serve as exemplary models (U-J, U-C). Others, however, after this critical reflection, have started to explore the possibility of alternative futures, questioning whether we can pause the relentless pursuit of the modern city to allow time for a communal reflection (U-I) and, more importantly,

whether we can envision a new model of city based on a shared environmental responsibility and respect (S-A, U-H, U-I). This emerging engagement suggests a growing openness to be part of new conversations to rethink urban development towards a more ethical and sustainable future.

Therefore, by integrating the decolonial political ecology perspective, this project leverages the ontological dimension of the urban land-grabbing conflict as the starting point for an epistemological and transversal conversation between different, yet related, ways of constructing territory. This new conversation taps into the epistemological power of hope to articulate not only knowledges but futures. Such a new framework should not be confused by a governance strategy, which, as discussed by the different actors in Chapter 6 and 7, have maintained the colonial power structures that created the conflict in the first place. Rather, it represents a decolonial practice with the potential to transform the urban land-grabbing scholarship by fostering a new understanding of the conflict and by envisioning futures that honour and respect the unique trajectories of each world.

Chapter 9 Expanding the Dialogue: Final Reflections to Embrace New Directions

9.1 Introduction

As this project comes to its final chapter, it is essential to reflect on how the initial questions have been engaged and the paths they have opened up for further thought and action. This chapter will take the opportunity to revisit the project's main inquiries, key contributions and insights, while emphasising its decolonial vision by extending an open invitation to other worlds to join and expand the epistemological conversation initiated here.

The first section, 'Revisiting the Project Questions', will address the initial theoretical, methodological, empirical, and speculative questions. Following this, 'Key Contributions and Insights' will highlight the conceptual, empirical, and practical contributions of the project, showing how it advances our understanding of urban land-grabbing conflicts and offers new ways to think about territorial struggles. The section 'Academic Next Steps and Future Possibilities' will outline potential avenues for further research and action. Finally, 'An Open Invitation', will present the project as a starting point for a broader epistemological dialogue

In this way, this chapter aims not only to summarise the work completed, but also to pave the way for ongoing reflection and collective effort.9.2 Revisiting the Project Questions

PQ1: How can a decolonial political ecology perspective, through the lens of territory, offer an ethically grounded and theoretically robust framework for rethinking urban land-grabbing conflicts?

This project draws on the decolonial shift in political ecology as an alternative epistemological foundation to re-think the world (Walsh,2018; Mignolo et al., 2018) and analyse environmental struggles emphasising how the colonial power structures continue to shape our being, thinking and doing (Maldonado-Torres, 2007; Mignolo, 2011). By grounding the project in this foundation, it creates a space to critically address the epistemic side of coloniality— the

systemic marginalisation and silencing of alternative knowledge systems and relationships with nature— and how this action has affected the very existence of subaltern groups (Quijano, 2000; Maldonado-Torres, 2007; Mignolo, 2011).

To further illuminate these alternative knowledge systems and their relationships with nature, the project draws on the work of decolonial scholars such as Porto-Gonçalves (2001), Leff (2015), and Oslender (2019), who use a decolonial understanding of territory. This perspective moves beyond colonial practices of place-making and introduces situated world-making practices born from the struggle. In doing so, the project contributes to the unveiling of the pluriverse— a multiplicity of territorial and therefore, ontological practices and worldviews that challenge the dominant colonial paradigms.

The originality of this project lies in the way it integrates these decolonial frameworks with the study of territorial conflict in Mexico, specifically urban land-grabbing. By connecting the decolonial political ecology and territorial lens with the empirical analysis of urban land-grabbing, the project offers a novel grounded case through which to challenge the dominant notion of 'development' as the indispensable and sole envisioned future. It also reveals the pluriverse in action— diverse but interconnected ways to construct territory. Additionally, by bringing ontological narratives from the margins to the centre (Spivak, 1988; Sultana, 2020), the project allows for the inclusion of historically suppressed worlds— alternative ways of being, thinking, and doing— within a "transversal dialogue" that bridges diverse knowledge systems and practices (Dussel, 2004).This dialogue, which acknowledges the asymmetries between worlds, is crucial for destabilising the Colonial Matrix of Power embedded in urban planning practice. It promotes collective well-being and prompts a re-evaluation of life values, working toward the creation of more sustainable and ethical urban environments (Dussel, 2004; Leff, 2006, Sundaresan, 2019; Miraftab,2009; Ortiz, 2023)

PQ2: What forms of decolonial research practice uncover the pluriverse involved in urban land-grabbing conflicts?

As described in Chapter 4, this project, grounded in decolonial principles, moves away from the traditional Eurocentric research paradigm and the need of constructing universal methodologies. Instead, it engages in epistemic disobedience by embracing pluriversality, fostering a reflexive process to 'dwell' in the borderland where diverse world-making practices coexist (Mignolo, 2007).

Drawing on examples of the pluriverse from diverse territorial contexts— Uruguay, the Andes, Uganda, and Colombia— explored by decolonial scholars Ehrnström-Fuentes (2019), Querejazu (2016), Nassenstein (2019), and Oslender (2019) respectively, this approach responds to their call for further empirical exploration of the pluriverse. By doing so, it expands the analysis of social conflicts, such as urban land-grabbing, to an ontological level, to present alternative and more just pathways that have long existed but remained at the margins (Sultana, 2021). However, unlike these scholars, who primarily offer conceptual frameworks for their decolonial practices, this project goes further by transparently revealing the reflexive process that actively engages with it in practice. Specifically, this project explores the pluriverse within the context of urban land-grabbing in a medium-sized city in Mexico, highlighting the ontological implications of this decolonial engagement for both theory and practice. For theory, this engagement demands a revaluation of the traditional framework and the incorporation of alternative perspectives, the geographies of territories from the margins— specifically, those of communal landholders located at the skirts of the city. For practice, it starts a transversal and epistemological dialogue between all the actors involved in this conflict to create transformations in the urban planning practice.

To achieve this, the project introduces three key phases that shape its decolonial praxis: dialoguing, imagining, and expanding. These phases mark a progression from deep internal reflection— where the decolonial practitioner critically examines their own position within power structures— to external action, where dialogue fosters collaboration with diverse world-making practices. The dialoguing phase opens spaces for dialogue between multiple ontologies— multiple ways to produce, appropriate, claim, defend and imagine

territory; the imagining phase encourages envisioning alternative futures, while the expanding phase amplifies the collective and political impact of this project. This approach not only aims to critique the traditional Eurocentric paradigm but also transform the way urban land-grabbing conflicts are approached, decentring mainstream urban theory by positioning the pluriverse as a vital analytical and practical framework.

By creating spaces for reflexive engagement, this project offers a decolonial practice-based approach to urban land-grabbing conflicts, advancing the field by demonstrating how decolonial research can move beyond conventional notions of 'development' toward more ethical and just futures. By practically engaging with the pluriverse, the project also opens new directions in urban land-grabbing scholarship, offering alternative ways to address power imbalances in both research and practice.

PQ3: How do processes of territorialisation define an urban land-grabbing conflict?

In Chapters 6 and 7, this project delves into the dialogue between diverse world making practices, examining how each territory of transformation— represented by the communal land territories— and actors immersed in the modern world produce, appropriate, claim, defend, and imagine territory. By highlighting what Agnew et al. (2010) and Halvorsen (2018) refer to as ‘overlapping territorialisation processes’, the project explores the urban land-grabbing conflict as an ontological struggle, where multiple constructions of territory converge within an asymmetrical field shaped by the enduring presence of colonial power structures. This dynamic can be observed in the growing tension between traditional and modern understandings of territory and urban development, where universalist and traditional models interact and shape one another.

One of the ways in which these overlapping territorialisation processes interact— and thus define the urban land-grabbing conflict— is through the implementation of de- and re-territorialisation processes (Haesbaert, 2013; Shwarz et al., 2017; Lombard et al, 2023). In this context, actors immersed in

the modern world engage in de-territorialisation actions— whether epistemological, structural or direct— to disrupt the territorialisation process produced by communal land territories and facilitate land-grabbing. These actions, described in greater detail in Section 8.3, depend on factors such as real estate land value, the availability of natural resources, and the capacity of the territory to resist. Moreover, the project reveals that by disaggregating the de-territorialisation actions in these three categories, we can observe how epistemic actions often underpin many structural or direct actions. It also demonstrates that different epistemic actions can be applied simultaneously, reinforcing power asymmetries in the knowledge production field, creating confusion among the actors involved, and, in some cases, facilitating the incorporation of communal landholders into the modern project.

However, in ontological conflicts such as this one, most de-territorialisation actions are contested through processes of re-territorialisation that seek to reinforce the map of significances that produces territory. In this context, these actions— also categorised as epistemological, structural or direct and described in greater detail in Section 8.4— are viewed as decolonial responses that emerge from and respond to coloniality. Consequently, they aim to mobilise their communal *poder* (power over) and *potencia* (power to) in order to confront the challenges posed by these modern dynamics. Through the exploration of these re-territorialisation actions, the project explores how the use of structural actions, such as the legal defence, serve as mechanisms to enhance their *poder* when the potencia struggles to develop due to de-territorialisation impacts. It also examines how the historical colonial dynamics limit their ability to create networks among territories, and how gender dynamics influence the implementation of various actions. For example, women across all the territories are recognised as the driven force behind most of the epistemic actions. However, they face challenges in participating in direct actions, such as vigilance patrols.

Moreover, the project positions the re-territorialisation process as a generator of decolonial pedagogies that challenges the universal conceptions of urban development, encouraging dialogue between worlds. This dialogue can pave the way toward more ethical futures in the urban land-grabbing context.

PQ4: How does the process of making visible the pluriverse and fostering dialogue between the worlds involved in urban land-grabbing conflict illuminate alternatives for constructing more plural and ethical futures?

The process of revealing the pluriverse in urban land-grabbing conflicts serves as a powerful mechanism for generating plural and ethical alternatives to contemporary urban development models. As discussed theoretically in Chapters 2 and 3, and examined empirically in Chapters 6, 7, and 8, the pluriverse is revealed through alternative ways of producing, appropriating, claiming, defending, and imagining territory. In this sense, the idea of the pluriverse, which refers to a world composed of many worlds, challenges the hegemonic territorialisation concept associated with modern urban planning, which tends to privilege the Western worldview while marginalising others.

Following decolonial thinkers presented in Chapter 2— such as Escobar, Dussel, Mignolo, and Quijano— this project frames the dialogue between these diverse world making practices as a fundamental decolonial act. This epistemological and transversal dialogue creates a critical and plural space where alternative pedagogies can be explored— not merely as defensive reactions to external threats, but as proactive processes for imagining and constructing alternative futures (Walsh, 2013). In this context, the communal land territories involved in this conflict engage in a pedagogical form of resistance, re-territorialising their spaces through epistemological, structural, and direct actions that reinforce their distinct worldviews and values. As such, this space of learning offers a critique of the ontological assumptions underpinning the modern, colonial, and capitalist systems of urban development.

As Chapter 8 empirically demonstrates, the dialogue fostered by these interactions does more than merely manage conflict; it transcends it, creating a new communal space for collective reflection and action. These spaces not only expose the colonial asymmetries between worlds but also offer the opportunity to critique the idea that modern urban development is the only superior path. Therefore, through these conversations, other possible

futures— described by Hazlewood et al. (2023) as “geographies of hope”— are illuminated. These futures, shaped within communal territories at the periphery, not only in a physical sense but epistemologically, are gradually descending from the mountains to the city. This process broadens the horizon of what is considered possible in urban development challenging dominant paradigms and making room for more inclusive, equitable, and ethically grounded alternatives. By embracing diverse ways of knowing and being, these alternatives reimagine urban theory and practices in ways that are more attuned to plural and collective values.

9.3 Key Contributions and Insights

This project has made original contributions to the literature reviewed in “Chapter 2: Literature Review Towards a Plural and Critical Space for Re-imagining Territory in the Urban Land-grabbing Context” in three distinct ways: conceptually, empirically and practically. These contributions are detailed in the following subsections:

9.3.1 Conceptual Contribution

This project makes a significant conceptual contribution by explicitly applying a decolonial political ecology framework to rethink the urban land-grabbing conflict. By integrating a decolonial lens, it not only challenges the prevailing Eurocentric paradigms that have traditionally shaped the study of these conflicts (Mollett, 2015) but also applies a new “epistemological base” (Walsh, 2018) from which to understand them.

This new epistemological base emphasises epistemological pluralism and presents a new space for to reconstruct histories and knowledge that have been silenced by enduring colonial power structures (Mignolo, 2009). From this base, the project re-examines the concept of territory, shedding light on alternative ways of relating to nature (Porto-Gonçalves, 2001; Hope, 2021)— ways that have long existed on the margins but remained obscured within the context of urban land-grabbing.

By using the concept of territory as a symbolic base, this perspective shifts the understanding of urban land-grabbing from being merely an economic (Hall, 2016; Mbiba, 2017) or environmental issue (Fairhead et al., 2012; Lazarus, 2014;) to one that is fundamentally ontological and has an historical root (Edelman et al., 2013; Mollett, 2015). Consequently, this project's conceptual contribution lies in its ability to rethink urban land grabbing through a decolonial political ecology perspective. By creating a transformative space that incorporates alternative knowledges, it fosters more ethical approaches to understanding and addressing these types of conflicts.

9.3.2 Empirical Contribution

This project seeks to broaden the understanding of land-grabbing by presenting empirical evidence from a conflict in the urban periphery. By shifting the focus from the traditionally examined, food-related cases in rural settings (Land Matrix, 2023), it highlights often neglected land-grabbing actions driven by urbanisation (Zoomers et al., 2017). This focus is particularly relevant as small to medium sized cities are frequently overlooked, being typically analysed as part of a broader urban process (Ruszczyk et al., 2024) rather than sites where the current urbanisation trends result in territorial dispossessions.

Additionally, in line with the recommendations of Borras et al. (2011), Kaag et al. (2014) and Zoomers et al. (2017) this project challenges the prevailing assumptions of the existing literature, which often emphasises Africa while overlooking other regions such as Latin America. Specifically, this project is situated in the periphery of a medium-sized city in Mexico, contributing to a more balanced perspective in the land-grabbing scholarship. This is because as in other parts of Latin America, medium-sized cities in Mexico have been overlooked (Cabrera et al., 2023). However, they are increasingly attracting the attention of organisations such as the United Nations (2017) and the Inter-American Institute for Cooperation on Agriculture (IICA, 2021). This growing interest is driven by projections that estimates that in countries such as Mexico, the rapid migration into cities is expected to transform 30% of the medium-sized cities from 2010 into larger cities by 2030, accommodating the 30% of

the Mexican population (UN, 2017). In this context, medium-sized cities play a crucial role linking the urban with the rural and connecting these emerging centres with the global economy (IICA, 2021; Mendez-Lemus et al. 2025). This capacity to articulate different scales and regions makes them attractive targets for real estate companies seeking to acquire large tracts of land and expand their capital. Consequently, as these cities continue to grow, their role will be pivotal as they are likely to become the primary focus of urban land-grabbing conflicts. Unfortunately, this tendency has not been matched by corresponding research in urban land-grabbing scholarship (Zoomers et al., 2017; Scopus, 2024).

Moreover, the urban land-grabbing conflict addressed in this project, particularly over communal land territories, offers a unique opportunity to apply a decolonial political ecology lens. This approach allows for an empirical exploration of the ontological dimension of the conflict and facilitates a co-constructed process of dialogue and engagement with the pluriverse. Through this participatory exchange, diverse actors present alternate ways of producing, appropriating, claiming, defending, and imagining territory within a local context shaped by the Colonial Matrix of Power. By introducing this dialogue into the urban land-grabbing scholarship, the project represents a novel approach to illuminate plural and ethical alternatives and chart a new course in this field.

9.3.3 Practical Contribution

By adopting a decolonial political ecology perspective, this project transcends traditional methodological boundaries, offering a reflexive approach that challenges universality and promotes pluriversality. While the reflexive approach to dwelling in the border has been epistemologically formulated by Mignolo (2010) and embraced by decolonial scholars such as Ehrnström-Fuentes (2019), Querejazu (2016), Nassenstein (2019), and Oslender (2019), a comprehensive account of its practical application has been omitted (Alcoff, 2007). In response, this project transparently documents this personal reflexive process, along with the materials and tools that supported this journey

and the epistemological and transversal dialogue that emerged from this practice.

Additionally, this epistemological and transversal dialogue is situated in City X, responding to the pressing need to critically address this type of territorial and, therefore, ontological conflicts and their tangible and intangible impacts. Although the project has taken anonymisation measures to ensure the protection of all the voices involved in this dialogue, their narratives maintain a practical contribution by transforming how these conflicts are understood and approached. This line not only offers new pathways for approaching such conflicts but also has the potential to influence urban planning practices in Mexico and other similar contexts.

9.4 Academic Next Steps and Future Possibilities

Based on the experience and results of this project, I propose four main avenues for further reflection. First, is to focus on the transformational outcomes of the epistemological and transversal dialogue initiated by this project. This analysis should be conducted a few years after the publication of this project to allow time for a broader dialogue to unfold, thereby enabling the resulting transformations to occur. By assessing its impact on transforming the hegemonic power structures, this new direction can offer valued insights. Specifically, it can reveal whether the pedagogies developed amidst the urban land-grabbing conflict have transformed institutional structures, legal frameworks, the political agency of the territories, and worldviews— key elements of Rodriguez et al.'s (2018) conflict transformation framework.

Second, while gender dynamics were addressed in this project, a more in-depth exploration of these dynamics presents a valuable avenue for future reflection. A feminist decolonial political ecology approach such as Cuerpo-Territorio (Body-Territory) can provide a critical perspective on the complexities of gender patterns within these territories and their impact on the production, appropriation, claim, defence and imagination of territory. Additionally, feminist methodologies can offer an innovative approach to

incorporating women's bodies, narrations and knowledge of the environment (CSW, 2023), which are continuously pushed to the margins (Sultana, 2020).

Third, the ongoing urban land-grabbing conflict in city X has led to several medium-sized land grabs for housing development over the years. As a result, there are neighbourhoods within these communal territories that are classified as informal settlements. Despite having access to essential services and often being categorised as middle- or high-income neighbourhoods, these neighbourhoods lack formal land tenure due to their land-grabbing origin. While this project acknowledged the existence of such communities and their role in the broader conflict, a more in-depth examination of these communities could offer valuable insights into both concepts of urban informality, as well as the practices of urban planning needed to address their unresolved land tenure. Such an exploration could also forge new connections between the fields of urban land-grabbing and informal settlements, offering potential pathways to resolve land conflicts and promote more equitable urban development.

Fourth, although this project highlighted the impact of climate change— specifically the increasing severity of droughts in recent years— on the ability of the territories of transformation to maintain their agricultural practices, it also recognised how these climate vulnerabilities have been leveraged by other actors to facilitate land-grabbing. However, a more focused and detailed exploration of this issue is necessary to fully grasp how climate stress exacerbates land dispossession and undermines the resilience of these territories.

9.5 An Open Invitation

The epistemological and transversal conversation that this project started, and the future academic directions presented in the last section should not be seen as the culmination of its objectives, but rather as the starting point for a larger and ongoing dialogue. This conversation holds the potential to not only challenge existing frameworks but to unveil a larger number of pathways for plural and ethical futures. By fostering a space where diverse worlds can

converge, this dialogue encourages critical reflection and collective exploration of new possibilities in both within this context and beyond.

As we continue with this phase of expanding the reflexive process to dwell in the border, the project extends an open invitation to the pluriverse— encompassing other territories and actors involved in the urban land-grabbing conflict— to choose hope and join us at the border to be part of this ongoing epistemological and transversal conversation. Consequently, it also calls upon those already engaged in the conversation to welcome and support the participation of new voices and perspectives that from the margins are moving to the centre. These two actions are essential to maintaining the decolonial foundations and objectives of this project, which are rooted in the pursuit of epistemological justice.

This project is thus presented as a dynamic tool to dwell in the border, expected to evolve over time based on participants' experiences and processes of knowledge production. The transparency with which this tool has been presented ensures that all participants can fully understand the origins of the dialogue, critically reflect on the asymmetries within the Colonial Matrix of Power, and actively contribute to rethinking and addressing urban land-grabbing.

Furthermore, the incorporation of other worlds into the conversation helps to establish the legitimacy of the conversation and its outcomes. Also, it can promote a vigilant participation to safeguard against the emergence of new forms of oppression during this conversation and to sustain the transformative agenda of the project. This agenda calls for a real impact on the hegemonic power structures and relations that not only dictate the urban development but also determine the very existence of territories in the periphery of cities such as X.

In this way, this project challenges the predetermined structure of the PhD thesis and presents the reflexive process to dwell in the border as a journey that began with the inception of this PhD but is not intended to conclude with the completion of my writing.

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Appendix

1. Participant Information Sheet Example

SOLICITUD DE CONSENTIMIENTO

ENTREVISTA "ENTENDIENDO EL TERRITORIO"

Gracias por la oportunidad de ser entrevistado como parte de este proyecto de investigación. La Universidad de Nottingham sigue procedimientos éticos muy rigurosos para asegurar que todos los participantes han aceptado explícitamente ser entrevistados y conocen como será utilizada la información.

¿Cuál es el objetivo de esta entrevista?

Tiene como objetivo conocer las diferentes formas de entender el territorio y el impacto de la colonialidad en ellas. Esta información nos ayudará a crear teoría urbana incluyente y ética.

¿Quién está llevando a cabo este trabajo de investigación?

La escuela de Geografía de la Universidad de Nottingham en Reino Unido a través de la Mtra. Luisa Aldrete, candidata a doctorado, con la supervisión de Prof. Sarah Jewitt, Dr. Thom Davies y Dr. Arabella Fraser.

¿Por qué lo invitamos a participar?

a. Porque es un ejidatario o ejidataria de algún ejido en la periferia de la ciudad

¿A que lo estamos invitando?

A contestar una serie de preguntas lo mejor que pueda. No existen respuestas correctas o incorrectas solo nos importa conocer su

opinión para entender mejor el territorio. Así mismo, le aseguramos que todas sus respuestas son confidenciales y la información recopilada es anónima.

¿Existe algún riesgo asociado a esta entrevista?

No existen riesgos previsibles.

¿Se puede retirar y no contestar las preguntas?

Si, su participación es completamente voluntaria. Si acepta participar, en cualquier momento puede detener la entrevista sin dar algún motivo. Abandonar la entrevista no genera ninguna repercusión negativa.

¿Que pasara con sus respuestas?

Sus respuestas serán analizadas en conjunto con las respuestas de otros participantes y solo será utilizada con fines académicos por los investigadores antes mencionados de la Universidad de Nottingham. Sus respuestas serán guardadas en formato electrónico no identificable en una base de datos segura de la Universidad de Nottingham en Reino Unido por 7 años y después serán destruidas.

¿Con quién se puede comunicar si tiene alguna inquietud o queja?

El estudio ha sido aprobado por el Comité de Ética en la Investigación de la Escuela de Geografía de la Universidad de Nottingham. Si tiene preguntas o inquietudes asociadas con los aspectos prácticos de su participación en el proyecto o desea plantear una inquietud o queja sobre el proyecto, puede dirigirse a la Mtra. Luisa Aldrete por correo electrónico Luisa.Aldretefloresdaran@nottingham.ac.uk o a la Profesora Sarah Jewitt por correo electrónico sarah.jewitt@nottingham.ac.uk. Las

quejas o inquietudes se tratarán de manera confidencial y se investigarán a fondo. Se le informará del resultado.

Se le leerán las condiciones de su participación y usted podrá marcar cada casilla con un “Si” o “No”, o aceptar o negar utilizando su voz.

Declaración	Si	No
Me han leído la página de información sobre el proyecto y he tenido la oportunidad de hacer preguntas		
Después de conocer la información sobre el proyecto, acepto participar en esta entrevista		
Entiendo que mi participación es completamente voluntaria y que soy libre de detener esta entrevista en cualquier momento sin dar alguna explicación. Detener la entrevista no generará ninguna consecuencia negativa.		
Entiendo que mis respuestas se mantendrán completamente confidenciales. Nunca será utilizado mi nombre o el nombre de mi comunidad, ni ninguna otra información que podría relacionarme con mis respuestas.		
Acepto que mi voz sea grabada durante la entrevista. Entiendo que la grabación sólo será utilizada por el equipo de investigación para		

analizar la información de forma académica.		
Acepto que mis respuestas en forma completamente anónima sean utilizadas con fines educativos en conferencias académicas y para la publicación de artículos académicos.		

Fecha_____

2. Conversation Guideline Example

Existence (being)	S. ¿Qué significa ser ejidatario? E. What does it mean to be an ejidatario? S. ¿Me podrías describir a un ejidatario? E. Could you describe me an ejidatario? S. ¿Cuál es la diferencia entre ejidatario y ejidataria? E. What is the difference between an ejidatario and an ejidataria? S. Como te gustaría que fuera tu futuro? E. How would you like your future to be?
Subject-nature relationship (knowing)	S. ¿Qué significa la tierra para ti? E. What does it mean land to you? S. ¿Qué le da valor a la tierra? E. What gives value to land? S. ¿Como utilizas en tu vida diaria los recursos naturales? ¿Quién te enseño? E. How do you use natural resources in your everyday life? Who taught you? S. Me podrías decir una frase que refleje tu relación con los recursos naturales? E. Could you define in one phrase your relationship with natural resources? S. Crees que el desarrollo urbano te ha afectado? ¿Como?

	E. Do you believe the urban development have affected you? How? S. ¿Crees que tú y tus conocimientos son parte de la ciudad? E. Do you believe that you and your knowledge are part of the city?
Defending territory (doing)	S. Para ti, ¿Cuál es la diferencia entre tierra y territorio? E. For you, what is the difference between land and territory? S. ¿A quién le pertenece la tierra y a quien el territorio? E. Who does the land and territory belong to? S. ¿Crees que está en riesgo tu tierra o territorio? ¿Por qué? E. Do you believe your land or territory are at risk? Why? S. ¿Has tenido que defender tu tierra o territorio? ¿Como? E. Have you had to defend your land or territory? How?
Power relation	S. Me podrías describir? E. Could you describe me?