4 • GREEN PASSION AFLOAT

The Magdalena River

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In addition to cocaine, the conflict, football, and sex, Colombia is also renowned as one of the world's most extraordinary natural environments. From animals to flowers, insects to fruits, gorges to mountains, and rivers to oceans, a cornucopia spreads across its continental and tropical climates. We saw the appeal this has to tourism marketers in chapter 2.

But the nation's natural environment has been subjected to ruinous exploitation and repeated human-rights violations. The conquistadores relished telling heroic tales detailing their destruction of indigenous life. That devastation was also ecological—their sixteenth-century arrival brought new diseases and land use, disrupting an environment that had long sustained human and other life (Colmenares 1996).

Since that time, Colombia has been in thrall to the extractive industries, industrial farming, and the use of biopower to control populations and jeopardize the environment, all in the name of government, development, tourism—and sometimes even sustainability (Asher and Ojeda 2009; Anguelovski and Alier 2014; Rochlin 2015). Most recent armed violence has occurred in "biodiversity hotspots" rather than cities, in keeping with the tendency for post-conflict periods across the history of capitalism to see rapid and brutal economic development. With corporations itching to exploit minerals and farmland in jungle areas formerly occupied by the FARC, deforestation shot up by almost half in 2016, when the peace accord was signed (Salazar et al. 2018). Environmental defenders are assassinated in the interests of legal and illegal miners at rates beyond, for example, the deaths of British and Australian soldiers serving in wars over the same period (Butt et al. 2019). Global Witness estimates that Colombia has the second-highest number of such murders, behind the Philippines (2019: 8).

The country's extraordinary ecosystem is also under massive population pressure, with a quadrupling of residents to almost fifty million over the last three

decades (Salazar et al. 2018). The rate is faster than the regional average, with precious mangrove swamps progressively lost (Bolívar-Anillo et al. 2019). Most of Colombia's people live in the elevated Andes. With a changing climate, water shortages and unstable land plague their lives. On the coasts, higher sea levels and increased flooding are becoming a norm (Escobar 1998; Oslender 2004; Vergara et al. 2016).[1]

In reaction to developmental exploitation of the kind that produced this coming catastrophe, the nation has a significant and growing informal recycling sector and environmental movement. The particular environmental challenges faced by *campesino*, indigenous, and Afro-Colombians have seen social movements organize around collective versus individual and corporate rights over everything from biotechnology to river banks (Nemogá 2014; Velasco 2016). Protesting traditional landowners experienced firsthand the devastation thirty years earlier when a dam was built to redirect the Río. Now they face many more such interventions, as well as fracking. Two hundred thousand residents have been displaced by dams, and forced departures are accompanied by military and private-security occupation of public areas once used for sustainable fishing and relaxation (Caycedo and Aguas 2015). When the venerable yet still quaintly adolescent research and agitprop multinational Greenpeace set up shop there in 2009, rather than simply channelling global corporate campaigns, it sensitively focused on issues of particular pertinence to the nation, notably the *páramos* (moors) of the Sierra Nevadas and Andes, which produce three quarters of the water for Colombia's major cities, and are under dire threat from climate change (Ruiz et al. 2012).[2]

Our focus here, the Río Magdalena (Magdalena River), is 1,500 kilometers long. It passes through eleven of Colombia's thirty-two departments to its mouth in the Caribbean Sea, draining most of the Colombian Andes along the way. The Río "covers 22% of the surface of the national territory, is home to 80% of the population and produces 85% of GDP" (Escobar Ramírez and Barg 1990). Some call it "the homeland river" (Castro 2013). The entire area has long been subject to intense anthropocentric change: in the thirty years from 1970, more than 230,000 hectares of forest were destroyed annually in a restless search for precious metals, arable land, and grazing for cattle. By 2000, 80 percent of the tropical Andes's natural vegetation had been lost, most of it in the Magdalena's basin (Restrepo et al. 2015).

The Río already has the largest sediment yield of all South American rivers, and the tenth-highest worldwide. That sedimentation has negatively influenced fishing and the transport of goods for import and export (Peña et al. 2015; Restrepo et al. 2018). In addition, deforestation through agriculture and urbanization has produced dramatic erosion and pollution, endangering water supplies not only along the coast but in the central region as well. Climate change

and volcanism have also transmogrified the river. Its wildlife has been particularly affected by human economic exploitation, with a unique turtle threatened, fishes suffering high concentrations of mercury due to gold mining, and coral reefs and sea-grass beds imperiled. Even the OECD notes that environmental imperatives have been overrun by state-capitalist ones, because governmental institutions supposedly dedicated to preservation and sustainability have grown weak by contrast with more developmentalist agencies (Restrepo et al. 2006; Vargas 2009; López-Castaño and Cano-Echeverri 2011; Hammond et al. 2013; Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development 2014; Restrepo 2015). Yet the same OECD laments the fact that delays in "navigation projects" devised for the Río held back national economic growth in 2018 (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development 2018: 97)!

The Corporación Autónoma Regional del Río Grande de la Magdalena (Autonomous Regional Corporation of the Great River Magdalena) is responsible for managing the river in terms of energy, land use, port facilities, transportation, and sustainability. Its slogan reads: "The energy of a river that drives a country."[3] But a Chinese state multinational, Hydrochina, produced a key vision of the Magdalena's future. Embraced by the Colombian government, this model satisfies all the current clichés of privatization and power generation while in fact being promulgated by Chinese Communist Party cadres dressed as businesspeople, alongside Spanish and Italian firms ("El futuro" 2014; Ramírez and Santiago 2015). The record of PRC investment in Colombia's extractive sector is not promising when it comes to environmental responsibility (Wu 2019).

The physical terrain of the region has long been a stimulus to aesthetic and political celebration and lamentation as well as exploitation. Landscape narratives of conquest and control were important to the Spaniards and to the consolidation of Colombia as an independent nation during the nineteenth century (Acosta Peñaloza 2014). The Magdalena in particular has animated contestation, comfort, fear, beauty, horror, and cultural expression. Some conquistadores believed they had found the original Garden of Eden, watered by the Magdalena (Galeano 1997: 14). The river's eighteenth- and nineteenth-century indigenous and African rowers shouted, prayed, and stomped in order to mark out their labor and connect with one another, annoying and obsessing their white chroniclers in equal measure (Ochoa Gautier 2014: 35–42).[4]

We demonstrate in this chapter that a vibrant green passion is evident in Colombian popular culture, specifically in letters to the editor covering environmental matters, notably the river. Our analysis shows that it has provoked a wide array of emotions that flow through—and sometimes flood—daily life. As per the previous chapter, we use political economy and content analysis. Prior to doing so, it is necessary to engage the nature of our current ecological crisis and its links to anti- and pro-environmental thought.

WHAT ON EARTH IS GREEN?

The world's climate is changing in ways that imperil us, our fellow animals, other forms of life, and the Earth itself. Past and present industrial processes have exposed the planet to potentially irrevocable harm as we enter what the scientific community announced in 2016 as the Anthropocene—an epoch characterized by major geological and ecological changes brought about by human activity (Subcommission on Quaternary Stratigraphy 2016).

Climate science leaves little doubt that humans have made the Earth an inhospitable place for life to flourish. The UN's Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change warns that we have about twelve years to make radical changes to our carbon-emitting ways, or disaster awaits (Watts 2018). The U.S. National Climate Assessment, a project of thirteen federal departments and agencies, reports that the country faces imminent risks from rising sea levels, wildfires, drought, floods, atmospheric warming, and a weakening of its ecosystems' ability to absorb carbon emissions and other greenhouse gases (U.S. Global Change Research Program 2018). Ninety-seven percent of scientists say humans are responsible for global warming and we must radically change our behavior to save the planet's biosphere, ecosystems, and inhabitants (Marlon et al. 2018). The message has gotten through in Colombia. Well over three-quarters of the population regard climate change as a critical challenge (Evans and Zechmeister 2018). What is the history to this growing awareness?

In the late 1960s and early '70s, the word *pollution* was in vogue to explain environmental hazards. Both a ubiquitous and a local sign, it seemed to be everywhere, yet isolable. The problems it described occurred when particular waterways, neighborhoods, or fields suffered negative externalities from mining, farming, and manufacturing. The issue was how to restore these places to their prior state: pristine, unspoiled, enduring. Pollution was about corporate malfeasance, governmental neglect, public ignorance, and how to remedy their malign impact. It could be cleaned up if governments compelled companies to do so—and would soon be over, once those involved understood the problem.

But when greenhouse gases, environmental racism, global warming, occupational health, and environmental imperialism appeared on the agenda, pollution reached beyond national boundaries and became ontological, threatening the very Earth that gives and sustains life, and doing so in demographically unequal ways.

A word was found to describe the values and forms of life that encompassed a planetary consciousness to counter this disaster, as per the utopias of world government that had animated transnational imaginations for decades: *green* emerged to displace the more negative and limited *pollution*, signifying both new possibilities and a greater and more global sense of urgency. Its purview expanded from waterways and work places to populations and the planet.

Today, *green* can refer to local, devolved, non-corporate empowerment, or international consciousness and institutional action. The term is invoked by both conservatives, who emphasize maintaining the world for future generations, and radicals, who stress anti-capitalist, postcolonial, feminist perspectives. *Green* may highlight the disadvantages of technology as a primary cause of environmental difficulties or hail such innovations as future saviors, via devices and processes yet to be invented that will alleviate global warming. It can favor state and international regulation, or be skeptical of public policy. It may encourage individual consumer responsibility, or question localism by contrast with collective action. It can reflect left–right axes of politics, or argue that they should be transcended, because neither statism nor individualism can fix the dangers we confront.

This massive, conflictual expansion in meaning has generated a wide array of instrumental uses. So green environments are promoted as exercise incentives (Gladwell et al. 2013), encouragements for consumers to use quick-response codes (Atkinson 2013), ways of studying whether plants communicate through music (Gagliano 2013), attempts to push criminology toward interrogating planetary harm (Lynch et al. 2013), gimmicks for recruiting desirable employees (Renwick et al. 2013), and techniques for increasing labor productivity (Woo et al. 2014).

In short, *green* has come to signify the good life—not merely our own, but that of our fellow animals and collective descendants yet to be born. It stands for a new solidarity that takes off from climate science to seek a better, more secure future, transcending the usual homilies and shibboleths of individual agency or investor returns.

There is a spirited and growing green youth movement around the world protesting political inaction over the eco-crisis, standing up to billionaires and politicians, insisting that they act on the science (Wearden and Carrington 2019). A generation born in an era of peak disaster from global warming will not tolerate the craven politics of world leaders beholden to barons of industry and finance, fossil-fuel giants, and technology moguls. Tens of thousands of western European school pupils went on strike in the winter of 2019 with the slogans #FridaysForFuture and "There's no Planet B" ("Children's Climate" 2019), attracting major Latin American coverage.[5] Hence also women deciding to #BirthStrike because they feel unable to guarantee climate security to future generations (Doherty 2019), and the efforts of Extinction Rebellion.[6] Their task is huge—UN secretary-general Antonio Guterres warns that the political will to combat climate change is "fading" (quoted in "Political Will" 2019). Public support for action to stem our eco-crisis remains a work in progress, building slowly as people come to grasp the urgency of a planetary problem. But there are signs of a new citizenry ready to act on their environmental commitments. *Nature* and the *British Medical Journal* alike drew inspiration from #FridaysForFuture (Fisher 2019; Stott et al. 2019).

Like scientists in general, climate scholars emphasize the need for patience in undertaking and understanding their work, which relies on the steady accumulation of data. Climate is history: the average of weather (Chakrabarty 2014). These researchers face a special difficulty: the willful distortion of climate science by the bourgeois Anglo media. Corporate and state polluters and their acolytes in strategic communications and pseudo-academia feast on mundane but sensible scholarly disagreements among climate experts, which are mendaciously misconstrued as evidence that climate change is an invention (Lewandowsky et al. 2015; Maxwell and Miller 2016). Public discourse is dominated by such coin-operated ideologues, while climate-change scientists struggle to be heard.[7]

How did we arrive at this state of affairs? Latour proposes that "it is as though a significant segment of the ruling classes . . . had concluded that the earth no longer had room for them and for everyone else" (2018: 15–16). But that way of thinking has a longer history than his otherwise correct analysis might suggest.

A complex heritage underpins worldviews that focus on the interests of human beings (anthropocentrism) versus the planet as a whole (eco-centrism). Hobbes argued that as part of "the war of all against all," it is right for people to domesticate or destroy nature (1998: 105–106), their brute state legitimized via the physiocratic transformation or destruction of subjects and objects. For Bacon, "commerce between the mind of man and the nature of things . . . is more precious than anything on earth" (1620). Descartes maintained that "reason or good sense . . . exists whole and complete in each of us, . . . the only thing that makes us men and distinguishes us from the lower animals" (2007: 1). Kant deemed humans uniquely important: "through rank and dignity [they were] an entirely different being from things, such as irrational animals, with which one can do as one likes" (2006: 15). No vegan or animal-rights guy he.

A century later, Hegel celebrated human mastery of nature; it is because one can put one's "will into everything" that a place or object "becomes *mine*." People were purportedly unique in their desire and capacity to conserve objects and represent them via semiosis, and such willpower was independent of simple survival. It set humanity apart from other living things. As per Kant, the capacity to transcend "spontaneity and natural constitution" supposedly distinguished us from other animals. Semiotic abilities legitimized the destructive use of power; Hegel termed this "the right of absolute proprietorship." The corollary of this right was that "unused land cannot be guaranteed." The necessary relationship between people and nature asserted itself at the core of human consciousness as a struggle to achieve freedom from risk and want (Hegel 1954: 242–243, 248–250).

These thinkers reasoned that because people are unique in their desire and capacity to conserve objects and represent them via semiosis, a strange dialectical process affords humanity a special right of destruction. Willpower is independent of simple survival and sets humanity apart from other living things. When semiotic abilities were mobilized by civilizations intent on transforma-

tion rather than stasis, they licensed colonial and imperial adventurism over indigenous rights: "sacred respect for . . . unused land cannot be guaranteed," argued Hegel. Nature's "tedious chronicle," where there is "nothing new under the sun," is rightly and righteously disrespected and disobeyed by colonialism's drive toward progress (Hegel 1988: 50, 154, 61).

These originary contradictions of development included a heartfelt desire for transformation of enslaved nations, whether for religious or liberal reasons. The cultural policies of Spain's *conquista de América*, Portugal's *missão civilizadora*, and France's *mission civilisatrice* mentioned in the introduction informed the dogma of *terra nullius* (empty space), which denied land title to native people, imagining their ideological and pragmatic lives to be harmonized with nature and hence incapable of transforming and marking it.[8] When efforts directed at rural development failed, this was because "peoples of low social efficiency" predominated (Kidd 2009: 311). The equivalent to *terra nullius* in Colombia was the vast swath of land known in the colonial period as *baldíos* (useless or empty territories), areas largely occupied by indigenous people living beyond the hacienda system. This terrain was understood as essentially eminent domain, property of the state awaiting disposal. By the 1930s, the government recognized the right of rural workers to unionize, but declared that any land not used would be resumed (Celis González 2018: 33, 35–36). Hegelian discourse suits just such applied philosophizing: economic growth as a creed. Henry Ford argued that "unused forces of nature [must be] put into action . . . to make them mankind's slaves" (1929: 71), while Vannevar Bush celebrated the drive to release humanity "from the bondage of bare existence" (1945).

That ideology of growth has served to undo nature, with unimagined consequences. Its mythology of innovation and adoption mixes the sublime—the awesome, the ineffable, the uncontrollable, the powerful—with the beautiful—the approachable, the attractive, the pliant, the soothing. In philosophical aesthetics, the sublime and the beautiful are generally regarded as opposites. But they have blended in the "technological sublime," a totemic, quasi-sacred quality that industrial societies cathectically ascribe to modern machinery, engineering, design, and marketing, as simultaneously powerful and pretty (Nye 1994, 2006). The emergence of the technological sublime has been attributed to Japanese, western European, and U.S. industrial achievements of the post–Second World War period, when the successful provision of food, power, communications, and water allied with the emergence of new consumer products to supplant nature's capacity to inspire fear and astonishment.

ALTERNATIVES

Within the traditions that birthed anthropocentrism, wiser views have always flourished, given the reality that "we have only ever managed to philosophize

with the help of things: the turning stars, apples which fall, turtles and hares, rivers and gods" (Muecke 2008: 95). Intergenerational care has long been a centerpiece of African American environmental thought (Smith 2007), and indigenous cosmologies deny a bifurcation between humanity and the Earth (Escobar 2012).

Within Western philosophy, Plato referred to the power of natural disasters to undo social and technological advances, which he called "crafty devices." When these "tools were destroyed," new inventions and a pacific society, based on restraint rather than excess, could emerge (1972: 119–122). Even Bacon recognized that we must "wait upon nature instead of vainly affecting to overrule her" (1620). Burke acknowledged each generation as "temporary possessors and life-renters" of the natural and social world. People must maintain "chain and continuity" rather than act ephemerally as if they were "flies of a summer," thus ensuring "a partnership not only between those who are living, but between those who are living, those who are dead, and those who are to be born." This would sustain "the great primeval contract of eternal society" (1986: 192–195).

Hume maintained that animals, like people, "learn many things from experience," developing "knowledge of the nature of fire, water, earth, stones, heights, depths, etc." in addition to processing instructions as part of their domestication (1955: 112–113). Rather than being merely sensate, some of our fellow creatures apply logic through inference—what he called "the reason of animals" (1739). Bentham enquired of our duty of care to them: "the question is not, Can they *reason*? nor, Can they *talk*? but, Can they *suffer*?" (1970). Alexander von Humboldt was horrified by Hegel's anthropocentric method as much as his theory: "To a man like me,—spellbound, insect-fashion, to earth and the endless variety of natural phenomena which it contains,—a dry theoretical assertion of utterly false facts and views about America and the Indian world is enslaving and oppressive" (2009: 34).

Even Kant acknowledged our fellow animals' capacity for reflection (2000: 15). He wrote vivid descriptions of the natural world as simultaneously beautiful and sublime, aesthetic and awesome—a terrifying place where "the shadows of the boundless void into the abyss before me." This horrifying specter risked an apocalyptic vision that one day we may realize there is nothing left, nothing else, nothing beyond (2011: 17)—akin to William James noting that "nature is but a name for excess" (1909: 63). Such anxieties obliged Kant to recognize that the objects of natural science had a history; and hence, perhaps, a limited future. But he remained anthropocentric, convinced that "to know the human being . . . deserves to be called *knowledge of the world*, even though he constitutes only one part of the creatures on earth" (2006: 3).

Horkheimer dolefully regarded "man" [*sic*] as a "rapacious race, more brutal than any previous beasts of prey; he preserves himself at the expense of the rest of nature, since he is so poorly outfitted by nature in many respects" and must

survive through violence (1996: 32).[9] Schopenhauer saw himself "as a mere temporal product of nature that has come into being and is destined for total destruction" (2015: 16); Spinoza understood that "men, like all other things, are only a part of nature" (de Spinoza 2016: 14); and Charles Babbage, the mythic founder of programmable computation, noted in 1832 the partial and ultimately limited ability of humanity to bend and control natural forces without unforeseen consequences:

> The operations of man . . . are diminutive, but energetic during the short period of their existence: whilst those of nature, acting over vast spaces, and unlimited by time, are ever pursuing their silent and resistless career.

It took Engels to recognize the fundamental truth of environmentalism: that "nature does not just exist, but *comes into being* and passes *away*" (1946: 9). He noted anthropocentrism's peculiar faith in "the *absolute immutability of nature*. In whatever way nature itself might have come into being, once present it remained as it was as long as it continued to exist . . . everything would remain as it had been since the beginning" (1946: 6). In that context, Luxemburg criticized "bankrupt politicians" who "seek refuge and repose in nature" without observing that its very existence was compromised and shortened by industrial capital (1970: 335). And Marcuse realized that

> the demands of ever more intense exploitation come into conflict with nature itself, since nature is the source and locus of the life-instincts which struggle against the instincts of aggression and destruction. And the demands of exploitation progressively reduce and exhaust resources: the more capitalist productivity increases, the more destructive it becomes. This is one sign of the internal contradictions of capitalism. . . .
>
> [Nature] is a dimension *beyond* labor, a symbol of beauty, of tranquility, of a nonrepressive order. Thanks to these values, nature was the very negation of the market society. (1972: 11)

In Engels's words, the appearance of human beings marked the evolutionary point where "nature attains consciousness of itself" (1946: 17). Despite this debt to Hegel, he realized that people therefore had the ability and responsibility to observe and speak for those without voices, and protect those without power. For while our fellow animals can transform their living conditions, they do so without an evident, deliberate, and elaborated codification of what that achieves or means. The distinction does not make us and our interests superordinate; with special abilities come special responsibilities.

William Morris's call for the art world to recognize its links to everyday life insisted on the need to re-create beautiful surroundings as a precondition for beautiful creations following the devastation of the Industrial Revolution: "Of all the things that is likely to give us back popular art in England, the cleaning of England is the first and most necessary. Those who are to make beautiful things must live in a beautiful place." Put another way, the semiosis so prized by Hegel is only sustainable in a state of nature, so humans must "abstain from willfully destroying that beauty" (Morris 1884).

Heidegger argued that technology makes "the unreasonable demand" that nature "supply energy which can be extracted and stored," bending seasonal rhythms to the demands of work, growth, and competition (1977: 288, 296, 299). For Baudrillard, "the human race is beginning to produce itself as waste-product, to carry out this work of waste disposal on itself" (1994: 78). Latour says that "while we emancipated ourselves, each day we also more tightly entangled ourselves in the fabric of nature" (2015: 221). Here again, the impact of technology is not merely a human problem, but one shared by all inhabitants of Earth. There is a duty of care to the weak on the part of the strong as denizens of shared space—and a recognition that the ultimate technological fix to counter ecologically destructive conduct may not be found.

The lesson is clear. Nature's duality—that it is simultaneously self-generating and sustaining, yet its survival is contingent on human rhetoric and despoliation—makes it vulnerable. But nature will strike back, sooner or later, in mutually assured destruction. Without it, there can be no humanity, as changes in the material world caused by people and their tools compromise the survival of the planet's most skillful and willful, productive and destructive, inhabitant (Marx 2008). Latour explains:

> From the time the term "politics" was invented, every type of politics has been defined by its relation to nature, whose every feature, property, and function depends on the polemical will to limit, reform, establish, short-circuit, or enlighten public life. (2004: 1)

Beneath this lofty philosophy, more mundane social-science accounts of the environment proliferate. They are dominated by three discursive formations:

- Economics, to assess exchange value
- Psychology, to evaluate individuals
- Sociology and anthropology, to comprehend societies

Environmental economics focuses on climate change as a consequence of the supposed absence of pure market forces (Ostrom 2000). Dutifully obeying the *données* (set beliefs) of reactionary fans of an imaginary capitalism, it argues that

once prices are placed on such negative externalities as pollution, everything can be put to rights through the operation of supply and demand (Hardin 1968).

Ecological economists dissent from their monotheistic parent discipline, calling for restraints on growth via governments limiting unbridled impacts on our future and the use of varied forms of thought to comprehend and counter climate change. They evaluate the technologies and materials that can support human populations and nature, with the goal of avoiding undue stress on all participants. Their "Ecological Footprint" instrument measures environmental value rather than monetary exchange, and prioritizes sustainable life over productivity and profit. It calculates global environmental capacity by hectare and judges numerical sustainability (Martínez-Alier 2012).

Feminist economists have also called for a reconsideration of elements not generally assumed relevant by neoclassicists, because they transcend market pricing. These critics seek to bring the body as a sensate entity into analyses of environmental impact (Perkins and Kuiper 2005; Nelson 2009). As part of an ongoing dispute with binaristic divisions between nature and culture, feminist theory more generally has interrogated the notion of progress as productivist and accumulationist (Soper 1995; Conley 1997). Some strands posit an essential distinction between men and women that finds the former responsible for the theory and practice of environmental destruction, and the latter conversely blessed and cursed with unshakeable connections to the Earth, due to their enhanced experience of reproduction and caregiving (Sandilands 1999; Thompson 2006). Others look at the gendered politics of labor and differences between the Global North and South, with religion, class, and indigeneity important factors (Goldman and Schurman 2000: 571–574).

For their part, environmental anthropology and sociology struggle against both extrapolations from the magical mechanics of supply and demand and the latest incarnations of the "Human Exceptionalism Paradigm" that emerged from Kant and Hegel. As we have seen, that regrettably influential declaration allocates to us and us alone the right and the capacity to exercise sovereignty over the Earth (Catton and Dunlap 1978).

It is under challenge. For while early modernity was dedicated to establishing national power and producing and distributing goods and revenue in a struggle for the most effective and efficient forms of industrialization, with devil take the hindmost and no thought for the environment, today's risk society involves enumerating, euphemizing, and managing those dangers (Beck 1999). It is now clear that developed modernity produces new, trans-territorial risks, beyond the scope of traditional governmental guarantees of collective security and affluence (Goldman and Schurman 2000). Populations face crises brought on by deliberate policies, for example, nuclear energy, genocidal weaponry, biotechnology, and industrial pollution—"professional miscalculations and scientific discoveries hurtling out of control" (Kitzinger and Reilly 1997: 320). Despite their

chauvinism, feelings of national patrimony can persuade people to transcend consuming desires and think about heritage and legacy, as citizens who think backward and forward rather than just contemporaneously (de-Shalit 2006: 76).

Environmental Marxism ties nature to capital and labor. It favors the regulation of business and work to comply with ecological principles (Benton 1996; O'Connor 1998), while deep ecology presents the most venerable and severe challenge to social-science and public-policy anthropomorphism. Arne Naess summed up his basic eco-centric precepts like this:

1. The well-being and flourishing of human and non-human life on Earth have value in themselves (synonyms: intrinsic value, inherent worth). These values are independent of the usefulness of the non-human world for human purposes.
2. Richness and diversity of life forms contribute to the realization of these values and are also values in themselves.
3. Humans have no right to reduce this richness and diversity except to satisfy vital needs.
4. The flourishing of human life and cultures is compatible with a substantially smaller human population. The flourishing of non-human life requires a smaller human population.
5. Present human interference with the non-human world is excessive, and the situation is rapidly worsening.
6. Policies must therefore be changed. These policies affect basic economic, technological, and ideological structures. The resulting state of affairs will be deeply different from the present.
7. The ideological change will be mainly that of appreciating life quality (dwelling in situations of inherent value) rather than adhering to an increasingly higher standard of living. There will be a profound awareness of the difference between bigness and greatness.
8. Those who subscribe to the foregoing points have an obligation directly or indirectly to try to implement the necessary changes. (1995: 68)

There are problems with this perspective, notably the insistence on restricted population growth and zero pleasurable consumption, and its assumption of a capacity to sidestep propaganda. Deep ecology requires a mixture of millenarianism, hope, and activism that sometimes veers closer to religious mind control than democratic science.

Sen proposes a compromise between anthropocentrism and eco-centrism:

> The impact of the environment on human lives must be among the principal considerations in assessing the value of the environment. To take an extreme example, in understanding why the eradication of smallpox is not viewed as an

> impoverishment of nature (we do not tend to lament: "the environment is poorer since the smallpox virus has disappeared"). (2009: 248)

As noted earlier, human beings are the most powerful and destructive creatures on Earth, and we have a special responsibility to speak for and defend others; to support a world given to us that may hold unthought-of benefits to our descendants, if only it is maintained for them (Sen 2009: 251–252).

Most of these philosophers and social scientists remain shy of phrasing the real question, the one that haunts both neoclassical chorines and dutiful Marxists, who are equally dedicated to the triumphant march of development—namely, the requirement to limit consumption, restrict the generation of need and the exploitation of scarcity, and hence bind the twin arms of capitalism in a controlling embrace. How can this be achieved, given the growth evangelism of state, capital, and the bourgeois media?

Social psychology and neuropsychology indicate that people who do not regard themselves as directly affected by climate change may adopt environmental values when stimulated to think beyond their own lives and consider, albeit anthropocentrically as per Burke, the lives of those yet to be born (Zavall et al. 2015). Longitudinal studies suggest that people familiar with climate-change evidence are confirmed in their beliefs by personal experience, while those with less knowledge can be stirred to commitment when directly confronted by environmental events (Myers et al. 2013). Such strategies align with research on environmental frames, ideology, and political partisanship (Lakoff 2010).

Media coverage and public-service announcements usually frame environmental risk via moral arguments about social harm and care, especially following disasters of epic proportions (Pantti et al. 2012). Such stories resonate with progressive readers. When pro-environmental approaches evoke purity and disgust, they resonate with conservatives (Feinberg and Willer 2013). Progressives can be appealed to by social- and self-awareness, conservatives through risks and rewards (Schreiber et al. 2013). Conservatives react to repellent imagery of environmental disaster in pro-environmental ways when it elicits horror or poses threats to bodily purity, such as contaminated water from the Magdalena.

Emotion discourse has also proven effective in educational settings for stimulating environmental awareness (Reis and Roth 2009). The Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives notes that "people are more likely to engage with stories about people and ecosystems (and polluters) that are close to where they are" (Cross et al. 2015: 40). So green persuasion should include a liberal emphasis on the aesthetic and moral values derived from nature, in combination with frightening photos of habitat destruction and oil-slimed waterways. As we shall see, a spectrum of the Colombian population is deeply committed to "their" river—a suitable and necessary case for environmental commitment and activism—and express their concern as vividly as one can imagine.

THE MEANING OF THE MAGDALENA

Orlando Fals Borda's analysis of the people who inhabit the Río's banks found "communities immersed in a world that seemed to have stopped in isolation, but which suffered from . . . the tensions of the great modern society to which they belonged" (1986: 16a). Their amphibious culture presented a "complex of behaviors, beliefs, and practices related to the management of the natural environment," replete with "ideological elements . . . prejudices, superstitions, and legends" (1986: 21b). One of the most famous legends, which has also appeared in music, concerns the alligator man. It tells the story of a fisherman from Plato Magdalena who becomes an alligator with the help of a magic formula so he can spy on women bathing in the river without being discovered. One day, the white liquid that enables him to return to his natural shape disappears in the water. A few drops fall on his face and he is permanently transformed into half man, half alligator—a hybrid beast that women fear and men hunt (1986: 26b).

The sense of a spirit incarnate in the Magdalena has influenced artists, writers, filmmakers, curators, and composers alike,[10] often identified with the very nation itself, as in Marco Aurelio Álvarez and Óscar García's song "Puente Pumarejo."[11] J.A.M. Gómez counts sixteen Colombian and four foreign feature films, three videos, fifty-six short movies, and four television series about the river (n.d.).[12] For example, the video artist Carolina Caycedo works with anti-extraction groups to record the destruction wrought by damming (Gómez-Barris 2017).

It can be no surprise that the country's astonishing variety of wildlife, scenery, and tragedy went on to stimulate the celebrated and passionate literary genre, *realismo mágico*. Its most noted rhapsodist was of course García Márquez. Because most Colombians have lived in the basin formed by the river, Gabo could not think of a more fitting background to the magical lives of his characters than the natural scenery and human welfare it provided (Salazar et al. 2018). He based his description of the region's exuberant fauna and flora on observation; knowledge of untold numbers of adventurers, migrants, traders, and romantics; and an interpretation of nineteenth-century artworks that represented zones which were already subject to malevolent ecological transformation at the time he wrote (Williams 2013; Anda 2015).

In contrast to García Márquez's imagined village of Macondo, the river was real. The protagonists of *Love in the Time of Cholera* (1988) travel it to heal the pain in their hearts. *The General in His Labyrinth* (2015) explains the meaning of the river in detail for the people who lived on its shores, and the suffering they and other creatures experienced as a consequence of its deterioration: "fish will have to learn to walk on land because the water will end." Gabo described how "alligators ate the last butterfly, and gone are the maternal manatees, parrots, monkeys, peoples" (1988: 55, 185). Elsewhere, however, the Magdalena is reborn through the power of love; life is always stronger than death. Gabo's fantasy of

returning to his youth was about living in a boat on the river, because he learned more on it than he had in school, and more profoundly. He thought of it as dead yet capable of renewal—but it would take a century of reforestation from the disasters of private ownership and pollution, both to restore the river itself and to make life palatable for those who relied on its supply of water, long contaminated (García Márquez 1981).

In response to the Magdalena's evident decay, citizens' letters to newspaper editors in Colombia have told stories, made appeals, and launched critiques of those responsible for the great river. Their imaginative prose and passionate concern index both the legends summarized by Fals Borda and Gabo's *realismo mágico*. We look next at the lineaments of that genre and its place alongside the cultural meaning of the river, inquiring into organically emergent audience emotions, rather than those sought by advocates and social scientists. Popular responses to the horrendous contamination of the Río Magdalena show a passionate rejection of hyper-consumption—and the persistence of violence.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

It is easy to write off, so to speak, letters to the editor as of minimal significance—venues for slightly dotty retired British army officers to claim sightings of spring's first cuckoo (Gregory 1976) or places where readers with too much time and newsprint on their hands offer pedantic corrections to stories. Journalists are notoriously dismissive of these letters, regarding them as little more than minor sources of market intelligence (Wahl-Jorgensen 2002; Raeymaeckers 2005; da Silva 2013; Craft et al. 2016). The letters-to-the-editor section can also be rarefied. It appeals to minorities of the population and can stimulate conspiracy theories, while its results in terms of science are ambivalent, with anti-evolutionary ideology prominent (Karlsson et al. 2015; Silva and Lowe 2015; Slavtcheva-Petkova 2016). And under authoritarian regimes, such letters can be sources of problematic legitimation (Fielder and Meyen 2015).

In addition, they tend to exclude the least powerful in societies. Even though the technology gap in urban Colombia is not huge—most citizens have access to cellphones and a significant percentage participate in social media—racial and class barriers in everyday life translate to the virtual world, which is generally used by the popular classes to meet and express feelings interpersonally rather than collectively. It is not seen as a route to political participation or expression. This is due to the exhaustion that racial minorities experience in a fundamentally unequal, segregated society where civic participation has been systematically denied them (Barrios 2016; Salcedo 2016). We saw in chapter 2 how an online campaign was essentially an intra-elite dispute at play.

But letters to the editor, albeit unrepresentative of societies, do form part of the democratic process. Consider the serious, sensuous, fascinating debates

between readers and journalists that occur in, for example, the *Economist*'s letters page: this venerable genre might be a guide to the participatory ethos of so-called social media. For what was once the only way of replying to a newspaper's reports and claims is also a model for Twitter, comment strings, and other forms of popular gossip and critique (Ihlebæk and Krumsvik 2015). Rasmus Kleis Nielsen describes letters to the editor as

> a fragmented contentious zone between politics, the media, and the private life of the limited number of citizens who get a chance to express themselves through the concrete operations of one of the institutions that gives the abstraction "the public debate" whatever reality it has. (2010: 21)

He identifies three tendencies: "storytelling, criticism, and appeal." Together, they enable letters to the editor to help constitute a potentially vigorous environmental counter–public sphere, especially when coverage of activism and critique are loaded toward anthropocentrism, as is the case in South America (Pinto et al. 2017).

The depth of feeling experienced and expressed by letter writers incarnates their potential commitment, sometimes in response to disasters that are sudden and prominent, sometimes as reactions to more subtle stories beyond the headlines. We examined their language in highly charged discussions of the difficulties confronting the Magdalena and its inhabitants, via content analysis of 5,425 letters to the editor between 1999 and 2008 in the *El Tiempo* and *El Heraldo* newspapers. In accordance with their respective circulation figures, 90 percent of the data came from *El Tiempo*.

Our unit of analysis was the paragraph, because the letters frequently referred to more than one theme. Using QDA Miner software, we put keywords associated with the environment in context and carried out simultaneous searches focused on climate change. Categories emerged organically from the data (Ryan and Bernard 2003; Guest et al. 2012). Over 650 paragraphs were organized in a database. They mentioned risks, accidents, collapses, rainy seasons, floods, rivers, creeks, water, badlands, mountains, disasters, the natural environment, emergencies, the Red Cross, civil defense, and relief.[13]

The letters had four main political-economic themes: citizenship, domestic policy, international policy, and the production of newspapers (Barrios 2013, 2017). Many writers were very emotive in their accounts of the conflict, and a number focused with equivalent passion on the environment and climate change—595 letters expressed views on sensitive ecological issues to do with the Magdalena.

The research discloses a mixture of emotions and expectations about the river, indicating its salience and importance to readers—a nostalgia for its original condition and an embrace of its national significance. The "great river

TABLE 2. Percentage of key words in paragraphs, 1999–2008

	El Tiempo		*El Heraldo*		Total	
Keywords	Paragraphs	%	Paragraphs	%	Paragraphs	%
Water	93	14.3	64	9.8	157	24.1
River	89	13.7	39	6	128	19.6
Risk	52	8	17	3	69	11
Natural Environment	40	6.1	13	2	53	8.1
Accident	40	6.1	9	1.4	49	7.5
Emergency	25	3.8	6	0.9	31	4.8
Rainy season	19	2.9	8	1.2	27	4.1
Rain	12	1.8	14	2.1	26	4.0
Magdalena River	6	0.9	17	2.6	23	3.5
Bogotá River	16	2.5	0	0	16	2.5
Creek	1	0.15	14	2.1	15	2.3
Mountains	10	1.5	5	0.8	15	2.3
Disaster	9	1.4	3	0.5	12	1.8
Sierra Nevada	6	0.9	0	0	6	0.9
Red Cross	3	0.5	3	0.5	6	0.9
Relief	2	0.3	3	0.5	5	0.8
Collapse	4	0.61	0	0.0	4	0.61
Badlands	4	0.6	0	0	4	0.6
Civil defense	1	0.2	2	0.3	3	0.5
Flood	3	0.46	0	0	3	0.46
Total	435	67	217	34	652	100

Magdalena" was a prominent saying, along with frequent expressions of sadness and disappointment at the negligence of the authorities and the apathy of citizens—and joy at projects that gave the Río the importance it deserves. Consider this text:

> A letter from our incomparable poet José Asunción Silva to his relatives in Bogotá says, "I'm on a train from Calamar to Cartagena. . . . I think of Cartagena as Colombia's golden gates and Calamar as the nation's lobby, because everything that comes into the country enters through Cartagena, then by train to Calamar before being transported along the Río Magdalena for all of Colombia to enjoy, including Barranquilla," as there were no highways in those days. (*El Heraldo*, November 20, 1999)

Another letter, a decade later, said:

> One Sunday in December 1966 . . . [,] peeking through a small window, I spotted a large flamingo in the Caño de la Auyama, a tributary to the River Magdalena. It

> had long legs, a long neck, a downturned beak, and pink plumage. . . . Today, forty years later, I no longer see these beautiful birds—just rotten waters full of excrement. (*El Heraldo*, June 2, 2008)

These texts have a literary tone that describes the river as a spoiled but still creative force; it has clearly inspired ordinary writers as well as Gabo. Hope for recovery of the river awakens joy in readers, who express approval for initiatives that seek to solve the problems besetting it:

> Barranquilla and the Caribbean coast in general welcomed the River Avenue project.[14] It met a yearning across generations of people who did not think of the area as a national tourist attraction. It is a great pleasure to watch the sunset and the dawn between the murmur of waves and currents, to bear witness to the ephemeral idyll noted by the poet Julio Flórez, and the perennial kiss that the river shares with the sea. . . . [C]leaning up the river is primordial: the morning glory and the hyacinths that form on its banks are cleaned or sanitized to avoid unpleasant odors. . . . God willing, we shall see the realization of desires that course through our beloved Barranquilla. (*El Heraldo*, July 7, 2006)

> The Great Pact for the Recuperation of the Río Grande de la Magdalena must become part of our national purpose, with the full backing of political leaders. This is the only way to return the River Magdalena to its glory as the engine of development in the region and a place where Colombia unites. *El Heraldo*'s participation in this noble campaign to create citizen culture and consciousness about the river is a significant contribution that further embellishes this important publishing house. (*El Heraldo*, November 29, 1999)

> If Bogotá could control the river that bears its name so that its rubbish only contaminated Sabana [de Bogotá], we could say that this was a problem for the capital and the province. But because these effluents flow into the Magdalena and adversely affect other regions, they become a national issue, originating in the capital. It's a great pity that resources that could improve the state of the Magdalena have been cut. (*El Tiempo*, February 18, 2008)

Letter writers lament the lack of potable water and basic infrastructure in towns on the banks of the Magdalena and other tributaries:

> I congratulate our Governor for including in his plans a particular priority. As he put it, "I'll give special treatment to the water problem." It is inconceivable—inexplicable—that the inhabitants of the banks of the generous River Magdalena must endure grievous water scarcity when they live so close to this precious, sacred liquid. (*El Heraldo*, May 19, 2004)

People living by other major rivers, such as the Amazon, report similar deficiencies in the supply of drinking water:

> I had the wonderful experience of spending a year in Puerto Nariño, the principal municipality in Amazonas province, and I dare to denounce the neglect of this place and its people: they do not have drinking water, and they line up both to drink from and to pollute the river, with all the health problems that entails. They have three phone booths, which only function during office hours, and weather permitting (a rarity in Amazonas). But what concerns me most is electricity; they have only one plant, and in addition to making monstrous noises, it only works for a few hours in the afternoon—when the Mayor's office has the money to buy fuel, and when it's not damaged (which is the case several times a year). In the afternoon, with the temperature above 40 degrees and 80 percent humidity, you can't eat, work, or even rest. I hope the Government takes action to counter this abandonment of its people, given there is sufficient infrastructure to export energy to other countries. (*El Tiempo*, July 10, 2004)

This recurrent problem is addressed in the following letter:

> How can it be that we have an abundance of water through two oceans, the Magdalena, Amazonas, and underground currents, but half our inhabitants lack access to this vital and irreplaceable resource? Twenty-five million of our countrymen consume poor-quality water. The remainder enjoy pure, uncontaminated water, much of which they waste. (*El Tiempo*, January 15, 2000)

Numerous letters appeal to the government to find permanent solutions to the environmental problems affecting vulnerable populations, especially those living on the river's banks:

> I do not know whether hidden interests have constructed our forestry legislation. It certainly assists multinationals. When laws are passed without great scrutiny or analysis of their costs and benefits, that inevitably excites suspicion. It makes one sad to think that the nation's leaders do not concentrate on the need to protect its future. Why is there such a lack of environmental consciousness when the rest of the world acts to protect its ecosystems and water resources? Without a credible opposition, politicians just do what they want. Now they are looking to privatize water. (*El Tiempo*, December 19, 2005)
>
> The lack of official solidarity with coastal peoples who must deal with a harsh winter season is amazing. Poor people have always lived there. Their difficulties are not of their making: we have invested in massive development that has

> polluted the River. Again and again, we fail to apply the resources necessary to solve, once and for all, problems with rivers and dykes that arise every year. (*El Tiempo*, March 20, 2008)

> If we do not end deforestation . . . if we fail to reform our land use, starting with the highlands where our rivers begin, we will be left with regular, devastating flooding. Putting levees in lower Cauca is useless. I hope that next year I shall not feel obliged to write these words yet again. (*El Tiempo*, January 5, 2000)

The Magdalena and other waterways have been casualties of the conflict as well as industrialization, because the *guerrilla* used them as battlefields and weapons to pressure the government. They bombed sections of the country's oil pipelines, such as Transandino, causing major environmental disasters—massive oil spills that killed uncountable numbers of species. Letters to the editor indicate readers' anger and grief. They call for the exclusion of natural resources and underprivileged communities from armed conflict:

> How can we say everyone should respect everything, when we have birds without forests? Rivers without fish? Land without crops? Crops without water? Pets with brutal owners? Riverbeds without rivers? People who must use oxygen masks to breathe? Where children have no fathers, no brothers—no family at all? What will become of the children without friends? Should we have freedom without order? God said about the world: I welcome you all; you can live in peace. (*El Tiempo*, December 17, 2005)

> The ELN, with all the arrogance that characterizes it, has made a very unclear proposal. They speak of a bilateral truce. Is this a real cease-fire, where they release hostages and end kidnapping, extortion, laying mines, burning vehicles, destroying pipelines, and poisoning rivers? Or is it a truce so that our Army will leave them alone so they can continue their war against the Colombian people? (*El Tiempo*, July 13, 2004)

> It would be good to compile all the atrocities committed by the terrorists of the FARC over the past 40 years. . . . Likewise, the number of gas cylinders launched to destroy barracks, schools and health centers; the amount of spilled oil that has polluted our rivers and fields; the tons of exported drugs. (*El Tiempo*, May 31, 2014)

CONCLUSION

As Martha Nussbaum says, "Emotions directed at the geographical features of a nation are ways of channeling emotions towards its key commitments—to inclusiveness, equality, the relief of misery, the end of slavery" (2013: 2). In this case, readers' letters aim to push their compatriots and decision makers to pre-

serve natural resources in general, and rivers in particular. Veritable rivers of emotions surround these citizens' criticisms and appeals for drinking water and sewage services for populations on the banks of the Magdalena. Many letters call for urgent action to stop the contamination caused by mining, industrial waste, and the conflict. The expressions of emotion amount to a local yet telling instance of how Colombians relate to "their" river.

The kind of environmental mobilization needed across conservative and progressive thinking alike is exemplified in these passionate engagements. Given global-warming forecasts, and absent major mitigation, the likely future for Colombia is for a hotter and more arid country (Salazar et al. 2018). That is the responsibility of countries far beyond the Magdalena, of course; but local efforts to halt untrammelled development are crucial—hence the violence done to traditional owners of Colombian territory by enforcers hired by multinationals that seek maximal mining and agricultural opportunities and minimal democratic regulation.

The degradation of land by farming and mineral extraction must be stemmed. Ideas of ethical consumption pale beside such crucial interventions:

> We were able to think we were modern only as long as the various ecological crises could be denied or delayed. . . . When the first tremors of the Apocalypse are heard, it would seem that preparations for the end should require something more than simply using a different kind of lightbulb . . . a timid appeal to buy new garbage cans. (Latour 2009: 462)

The Magdalena River has triggered popular writers' affection for the nation, reaffirming some core social values and collective goals. We see great value in such commentaries, alongside other ways in which the discourse of emotions is applied to ecological crises. Given the significance of such commitments for developing and maintaining environmental consciousness, letters to the editor even model readers communicating with media outlets via newer platforms.

Perhaps none of these writers has produced imagery of the quality of Gabo, but they express a commitment as great as his to a precious world under threat from the violence of capital, the state, and the *guerrilla* alike. If their commitments can blend with those of scientists and traditional owners, a new, post-development force may mobilize to protect the Magdalena and other natural resources against the attacks of development and conflict.