

## **Inheriting Struggle and Forming the Future: Indigenous Education-Creation Centres in Highland Ecuador**

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### **Abstract:**

This article relates experiences with two informal education centres established in indigenous communities in Ecuador's central highlands to the dynamics and ideas of 'ecopedagogy', suggesting that the critical, reflective and cooperative actions undertaken in these centres speak constructively to the liberatory and justice-focused practices of 'Earth pedagogy,' and to the development those practices foster of skills for a just and sustainable way-of-life. It draws on ethnographic fieldwork in the region that focused on indigenous struggle, land-related conflicts and water justice, and develops the idea of 'to inherit/intend' to capture the emergent qualities of 'place' as experienced in these two particular locales. Both '*Centros de Formación*' – Education-Creation Centres – pursue conscious attempts to direct education toward a reflective engagement with place, position and struggles for social justice. In the process, they offer insights for processes of cooperation and resistance that counteract domination and marginalization.

### **Keywords:**

Indigenous movements, place, resistance, cooperation, ecopedagogy, collective action

## **Introduction**

Tucked beside homesteads and family food-gardens on the hill-slopes above San Isidro, an indigenous community in Ecuador's central Andes, you will find the *Centro de Formación Indígena 'Guamán Poma de Ayala'*. This is the 'Guamán Poma de Ayala' Indigenous Education-Creation Centre (the Centre), a community-based initiative that through voluntary labour sustains an informal and intermittent series of action-focused workshops, gatherings, classes, meetings and events. Its roles and uses are manifold: one week hosting language classes in the local dialect of Kichwa, another as rehearsal space for a pair of visiting musicians in preparation for annual winter festivities; on occasion the site of planning meetings lasting late into the night to debate and decide the relative merits of a community-wide food cooperative, led by two teenagers; at other times becoming something of an activist hub, where mobilizations with neighbouring communities were coordinated to tackle ongoing discrepancies in access to water. Often it would be taken over by a group of *jovenes*/youths, practicing crafts or music or dance, or else huddled around a TV set watching a film about environmental degradation of indigenous lands in the relatively distant Amazonian regions. Needless to say it was an active space, performing many educational and intentional roles, while being firmly rooted in the qualities and characteristics of San Isidro. In what follows, I look at the relationships between place, collective struggle and the kinds of education that a Centre such as this provides, in order to explore the links between emergent place-making practices and the construction of intentional, sustainable livelihoods and futures.

The Centre is named after someone who famously took action against the oppressors of the day, and whose historical renown not only exemplifies resistance against colonial domination, but also serves to subvert understandings of indigeneity that are imposed from elsewhere (and hence to highlight the ways in which this still happens today). He was described to me as 'hero, someone to be remembered', and his significance is wide-ranging: "Western scholars and bureaucrats were never alone in crafting indigeneity... people classified by colonial knowledge as "natives" (in its multiple synonyms) who challenged their alleged anachronism, denounced European ignorance and inhumanity [contributed] to alternative, often disparate, representations of indigeneity. For example, Guamán Poma de Ayala, a Quechua Indian, took up his pen in 1585 to detail the abuses of Spanish priests, judges, and soldiers in a 1,200 page letter to King Phillip III" (de la Cadena & Starn 2007: 7). That text, written in early colonial Peru, catalogues how colonial powers instituted relentless domination. Comprehensive historical detail is punctuated by summary reflections, for example: "Now the poor are punished the most and the rich are pardoned... and the judges and government inspectors [are] worst of all because everything they do is against the Indians" (Guamán Poma [1615]: 52, #70).

Porfirio Allauca, one of the founders of the Centre in San Isidro, added that Guamán Poma de Ayala was someone who ceaselessly and selflessly made sure he did what he could in order to sustain *la lucha* / the struggle. He also emphasized that *formación* does not only mean 'training' or education – when combined with the earth and inheritance of a place, and when directed toward securing a future for the younger residents of San Isidro, it also means 'creating', hence the term used here in English, "education-creation."

As well as reflecting on how the Centre and the actions of its participants – alongside the work of a sister initiative in a nearby community – cast light on how we might understand place and

place-making actions, I suggest there are also routes forward for further detailing links between resistance and education, and between collective action and intention. That is, by approaching ‘place as project’ and seeing place-making practices as intricately bound to the methods and necessities of struggle, we are led to reject any straightforward association of place with tradition (and, conversely, of mobility with modernity). Instead of ‘place’ conveying memory, loss and nostalgia (cf. Gupta & Ferguson 1992), we see the particularities of place – in combination with localized processes of education – as the basis for future-oriented action and as ways to explore potential and new possibilities. As we shall see in the locations concerned, indigenous education-creation is not (just) cultural revival, nor is it (just) directly instrumental. It neither limits itself to recovering cherished practices (though it may well incorporate this into its actions), nor is it restricted to preparing youngsters for particular forms of labour or providing them with specific skills for future employment. The training-education that these *centros* offer combines both of these realms, and does so in such a way that combines learning with activism.

In this, we find echoes of how ‘ecopedagogy’ comes to be defined: a liberatory perspective inspired by successful resistance and the defence of people’s ‘right to life’; a movement with its origins in the Global South, describing educational practices that are attentive to constant processes of construction, stemming from immediate needs, real-life problems, contradictions and perspectives (Grigorov & Fleuri 2012: 437). Such an approach to education means that the phrase ‘traditional ecological knowledge’ (and the worlds, plural, of praxis that it might hope to refer to) is not confined to a falsely-conceived and belittled ‘past’ (Kahn 2010: 105), but is instead used as shorthand for one element among many that members of contemporary indigenous movements, grassroots activists and radical social movements might use in affirming particular ways of being, of relating, of organizing and of acting (intentionally).

Different avenues of critical, praxis-oriented pedagogy integrate into education and life-long learning ‘the knowledge, values, and skills needed for a sustainable way of life’ (Antunes & Gadotti 2005). Among them, practices of ecopedagogy or ‘Earth pedagogy’ offer particular emphasis on the interrelationship of social and environmental sustainabilities and, in terms borrowed from Gutierrez & Prado (1998), promote education as replenishing common humanity and as learning the “meaning of things from everyday life” (Antunes & Gadotti 2005: 135). The balance of actions in the education-creation centres described below is rooted in local needs and aspirations. However, they also speak to the dynamics of ecopedagogy: attuned to the immediacy of everyday life while also consciously working toward liveable, sustainable, thriving futures. In San Isidro in particular, community-wide collective action negotiates a similar balance: that between inheritance and intentions. That is, cooperative action depends on using proximity, geography, kinship and allegiance – inherited relations – in combination with efforts to address inequality, embark on new productive projects and to mobilise in direct action – worlds of relations being intentionally created.

To inherit/intend is a dynamic made all the more feasible as a communal endeavour through appropriate education – in this case to explore how diverse forms of inheritance might influence and form future-oriented actions, and to offer guidance in techniques and strategies of building the kinds of relations you wish to create in the world. Through ethnographic material gathered over the course of 15 months fieldwork in the region, I first introduce the two Centres, then go on to explore their relation to different ways of theorizing and interpreting the specificities of

distinct places: ‘Place as Project’, ‘Place as Process’, ‘Sites of Contestation.’ These analytical approaches combine to illustrate how educational practice both learns from and contributes to collective action in these communities, and foreground the combination of efforts and relations that can be said to make up the ‘threads and knots’ of place. I conclude by highlighting the focus on justice that ‘education-creation’ both feeds from and fosters, and its impacts on rejecting imposed categories and structures of inequality.

### **Centro de Formación Indígena ‘Guamán Poma de Ayala’**

The ‘Guamán Poma de Ayala’ Indigenous Education-Creation Centre occupies the upper floor of a building that is used communally for different purposes, and which was funded initially by small donations from benefactors and the NGO ‘HEIFER International’ – a project spearheaded by a small number of interested and elected council members, and maintained by Porfirio Allauca whose family home sits on the same plot of land. Founded in 1992 and active in different ways ever since, the Centre achieved legal recognition in 2008 with CODENPE (the Development Council of Ecuador’s Indigenous Nationalities and Peoples) – gaining the protection of collective rights in the process.

During fieldwork in 2011, there were weekly Kichwa language classes aimed at youngsters older than primary-school age, and often attended by their parents – people whose own parents would have grown up speaking Kichwa, and most of whom could understand Kichwa but had since forgotten all but the basics. Though further up into the nearby hills there were communities where meetings would be conducted in Kichwa, communities with whom San Isidro frequently collaborated on projects and mobilisations, in San Isidro itself everyone spoke Spanish. Recent government programs had been designed to create bilingual education, including in the primary school in San Isidro. The Kichwa programs were chronically underfunded, whoever, and so many such ‘bilingual’ schools taught (in) only one language: that of the historical European invaders. This was a place where grandparents would recollect the transitions – only experienced when education was something they had access to. Porfirio’s mother told me, “I speak Kichwa. I spoke Kichwa. My parents spoke Kichwa. I used to speak Kichwa. Now I speak Spanish. Everyone here speaks Spanish. Only up there in the highlands do they speak Kichwa today. Hardly at all. I had to learn Spanish when the teachers came, when the school came. It was hard. It was really hard.”

Though language classes had been difficult to maintain, they were one way to encourage youngsters to spend time in the Centre, which had been carefully decorated over the years. The walls were adorned with craft works and the tools of those crafts – visible, tangible examples of what was recognised as *patrimonio de la sabiduría cotidiana* (patrimony of everyday wisdom). These included a couple of *higras* or *bolsas tejidas con fibra de cabuya* (bags knitted from agave-plant fibres) – the embodiment of *destrezas*/skills that could be learned in situ. These were not just museum pieces, however. The physical threads, put to use in various *habilidades*/crafts and abilities, include those made from the *fibra*/fibre of the *penko*/agave plant. During community meetings, which would often last all evening till the latenight hours, there would usually be at least a handful of women working away, throughout the discussions they were a part of, making *higras* of different colours and sizes. These *bolsas* would be coloured with *tinturas*/dyes purchased in the weekly market in Pujilí (where the weavers also sell their bags) or, sometimes, dyed at home with the juice of fruit (e.g. *mora*/blackberry) or with charcoal and

water. Other people made the *cureda*/rope you could see looped over a metal beam in the Centre: also made from *penko* plants, and used to attach straw to the wooden frames of thatched roves, themselves lashed together with the same kind of rope.

Miriam, who had recently been elected (the youngest woman as) community vice-president, had grown up attending events and often haphazardly scheduled classes in the Centre. Following Porfirio's lead, she addressed a group of youngsters: "learning Kichwa is not just about translation: we need to learn, to re-learn the culture too – what was it like preparing food without fridges? Go and ask your grandparents, 'what did we eat before?' ...we need to re-learn our culture where time is cyclical – returning, returning, returning – our culture is not hurried, is not rushed, rather it follows a natural rhythm...". Attempts to revive local practices were also pragmatic steps: a form of 'place-making' that seeks to better understand the challenges being faced in a situation (Mooney-Melvin 1999: 9), and to put local resources to use in counteracting forces that otherwise exert a marginalizing and/or discriminatory force.

Another reflection of the pragmatism of how education-creation was conceived of and practiced came in the form of a collaboration with the formal education system. As part of their weekend credit-earning 'Environmental Education' program, a group of 50 *colegio*/high-school students from Pujulí had been recruited to plant over 3000 'native' trees and plants through the course of their weekly voluntary work on Saturdays. The trees stood on the steep-sloping land above San Isidro belonging to the Centre, and were critical in preventing (and hopefully reversing the effects of) deforestation. Some of San Isidro's primary school pupils had also attended, encouraged to be a part of the enterprise and to see the fruits of their efforts.

Annual festivities provided moments of focus in the Centre. How to involve as many people as possible this year in the *Finados* (All Souls' Day) celebrations? How to add to the number of cousins and aunts/uncles who would gather, usually at least 20 in number, to make *colada morada* (festive blackberry and maize-based drink)? Later that same year (2011), Tía Lorena (Porfirio's sister) had been nominated as the *danzante* (lead dancing figure) for the annual winter *fiestas*/celebrations at the start of December. To complete the dance, a further three accompanying elders and four youths would need to be found. No one in San Isidro owned the costumes anymore – featuring large headdresses that incorporated mirrors, statuettes and mesh masks – and the musicians would also come from elsewhere, but Lorena was honoured to be given the role, and vowed to practice the requisite dance steps every chance she got. This was made more complicated by the fact that Lorena lived and worked as a teacher in the coastal town of La Maná, and so only visited 'home' in San Isidro every two to three weeks. Nonetheless, she was committed to the festive preparations, and to the Centre as a whole, which she once described as a "mission".

Don Jorge Llumiquinga and Sra Pastora Guamán were both currently on the 'board' of the Centre – and so for the annual general meeting had to be in attendance (according to the constitution that qualified the Centre for legal support, should it be needed, through the government body CODENPE). Both were experienced community organisers. Porfirio and his family had been involved since the start, and had played a leading role, but were continually and consciously working to minimize their participation. There were some people in the community who were suspicious of the Centre, who saw it as being 'private' – to which Porfirio countered: "but it is very much *not* a private place, it is meant for everyone" – but not everyone was so

quickly convinced. Within the family too, tensions would flare up. Porfirio's brother, Raúl, would sometimes bemoan the spells of inactivity that the Centre witnessed. At root, however, there seemed to be significant overlap in Raúl's and Porfirio's concerns: both were keen to engage with visitors, and the wider, 'global' population. Porfirio did this through discussions and 'workshops' (as a visiting anthropologist I was encouraged to publicly present/share my reflections on life in San Isidro with community-members). Raúl, meanwhile, has told me how he thinks the community council should be more proactive in seeking "international help... make links with those working in the fight against Global Warming – because that's (another) thing we are doing here, through reforestation."

Despite the tensions – the kinds of friction that tend to be an intricate component of any collective endeavour – activities in the Centre continued, and continued to vary greatly. One evening we watched the 'Taromenani' documentary I had bought at a gathering in the capital Quito, with a workshop-discussion afterwards. Pachacutic, 15 years old at the time and someone who had spent a lot of time in the Centre, was familiar with the 'school' version of the film (which focused on the pioneering elements of the YTT Yasuni initiative to keep oil in the ground, less so the killing of Indigenous peoples), and commented that this version of the story seemed more honest. Another film screening involved a 60-minute documentary on the life and work of "Mons. Leonidas Proaño", founder of the 'Foundation for Indigenous Peoples of Ecuador' and outspoken advocate of Vatican II-type action (an illustrative quotation: "Christ was not satisfied with change on the individual level, he sought to deliberately bring about structural change"). Porfirio picked up on his emphasizing the need for 'the spiritual' in daily life, and suggested that this Centre could and should provide just such an outlet and source for 'spirituality', "though not in the sense that we are familiar with from the church – here, it would be a spirituality based in sharing and respect... this Centre is a space where we, where visitors, where everyone – where we can share our ways of thinking: *this* is spirituality, sharing in the lives and thinking of others...".

### **Centro de Formación de Sabidurías Ancestrales “Herederos de la Pachamama”**

Head south from San Isidro along the largely single-track Pujilí-Cusubamba road, and within just a few minutes you'll pass through the small community of Cinco de Junio. Here you will find The "Mother Nature's Heirs" Education-Creation Centre for Ancestral Wisdom, run by Esmeralda Yasig. It was Esmeralda who first introduced me to San Isidro and its residents. Her work with women and children in the Alpamalag valley – particularly around native crops and encouraging farmers to support local soil-types and ecosystems by planting a range of what this biodiverse region had traditionally offered (and which was being steadily marginalized by large monocultural broccoli plantations) – had brought her into contact with the 'Seed Guardians Network'. This was an activist group based in Quito who supported such efforts nationwide.

For the Centre, though, Esmeralda had worked initially with very little outside support, creating it from scratch. An unfurnished building with walls and a roof when I was there, it is a building that is added to, nudged closer toward completion, as and when funds, volunteers, and any extra support is available. Though unfinished, its design is discernible and recognisable. Its exterior walls form the shape of the ancient Indigenous Chacana symbol, the 'Andean Cross' and symbol of pre-Incan life. Esmeralda had converted the roadside room of her house into a small shop, sweets, cigarettes, bottled drinks and some household items, cleaning products, crisps. In front of

the ‘shop’ there was a small, dusty patch of ground where a passing pick-up truck might park whilst stopped to purchase said items. This looked out onto the fields that Esmeralda and her parents worked, and where the Centre had been built. Some days she would have to split her time between taking care of customers, and keeping an eye on a group of youngsters mixing cement to decorate a window-frame in the nascent building.

This Centre was a place where every Saturday children from nearby homes and communities would wander dusty cactus-lined tracks to gather at the Centre, and where Esmeralda engaged them in new ways to see, feel, and find out about the world and what’s in it. Specifically this local land, this soil, these crops. Doing things. Digging, planting, watering, witnessing that baffling, tasty transformation from pod to plant to fruit to licked lips and standing on each others’ wobbling shoulders to pick the highest cherries from old, old trees. The day might be spent weeding – playful toil in the hot midday sun, and multi-generational as neighbouring parents and grandparents came by to chat and to contribute.

These were moments for youngsters to get excited about the endlessly-giving Sun. About varieties of seeds, plants, flowers, crops, potatoes that grow only here in this valley, that aren't found anywhere else. About the mystery of our own genes – the ancestors we share blood and soil with, as Esmeralda put it to me. To feel moved by the landscape by moving in it, through it, with it. To enjoy there being time in this ‘learning environment’ to chuck mud at each other, to laugh as brothers, sisters, cousins, neighbours, and friends – and to charge downhill through the tall grass and wild flowers and fall over before getting to the guinea-pig hutch at the bottom of the hill. These were formative experiences. To feel food in your fingers, washing around your palette, and to feel something of the rain and earth and toil that made it. To laugh some more, at anything, everything. To spit out the seeds. To forget and remember in measures that make us smile. To prance and prowl, to dig and dance, as our hearts see fit, as ‘dirt beings’, as our own kind of flourishing makers, creators. On March 21st (the equinox, and the first day of the Andean New Year), the midday sun shines directly through the small, circular foot-diameter central hole in the ceiling of the Centre. You can put your hand in the sunbeams, make shadows, amuse your pals – one way that nine youngsters celebrated that day. One way to wish Happy New Year.

Underpinning these rich experiences, though, were critical struggles against the neighbouring broccoli plantations. They had diverted rivulets, sunk two vast wells to tap into further supplies of water, and were accused of polluting the few streams left for use by Cinco de Junio and their neighbours with run-off from the agro-chemicals used in their vast, intensive for-export agricultural production. Esmeralda and Cinco de Junio had played critical roles in the mobilisations, and legal proceedings, that had been organised (and supported by regional branches of the national Indigenous Movement) in order to fight these cases, and to sustain these struggles against the further contamination of water resources and dwindling of community landholdings. The educational experiences in the Centre were not only formative, they were critical to understanding what today’s youngsters would have to achieve and overcome in order to have any hope of sustaining a livelihood in the area. What would be possibilities for ongoing life and thriving small-scale agriculture in Cinco de Junio would depend on how inheritance and intention could be combined, and put to use in the ‘struggles’ that needed to be fought. To explore this further I now turn to theories of place that articulate this dynamic of tradition and specificity in conscious combination with new, and often challenging, outward-looking relations.

### **Threads of Place: Knots and Possibilities**

Doreen Massey's conception and illustrative description of place as a "knot of threads" – threads that are strands of links, connections and relations – is expanded on by Mario Blaser to better understand the dynamics of development, displacement and deterritorialization that countless rural populations around the globe, including San Isidro and Cinco de Junio, have negotiated and engaged with. Along these lines, place is conceived of as an amalgamation of interactions and connections – something that combines both the particular historical and geographical features of a place (vertical threads), as well as the links that are formed with other locations (horizontal threads). In this, 'vertical threads' refer to "those links and connections that ground place in specific histories and landscapes" (Blaser 2004: 29) and consequently constitute the genealogical make-up of place; meanwhile 'horizontal threads' refer to interactions and relations with other places, an element of place defined by its perspective on what it is not. Crucially, the formation of these knots – and how they are made and re-made over time (or, extending the metaphor, how they variously become frayed and weakened or more tightly bound and stronger) – is emergent from within active processes.

Such processes involve the diverse ways in which people negotiate shifting social and spatial boundaries and barriers that they encounter and challenge – forms of action and interaction occurring on the 'horizontal' plane, and drawing on their own experiences of 'vertical' relations and histories. Theories of place that emphasise action in this way also highlight how the types of action concerned are often in response to patterns and policies of oppression and marginalization. As such these ideas underscore 'place' as being fluid and responsive, contingent in its properties and characteristics (even if apparently fixed in its geographical location).

This also enables us to reassess processes of displacement and deterritorialization, as epitomised by projects of modernity, themselves typified by colonial practices. Such projects historically set about transforming places that had few direct, 'horizontal' relations into places that had only those kind of place relations: a place's particular history and specific qualities were ideally wiped out and replaced by an unprecedented and unusual sense of *itself*. This ideal of modernity, however, repeatedly fails. Processes of "colonization, assimilation and development" (Blaser 2004: 31) which are designed, largely, to suppress particular notions of place and identity are counteracted by life-projects which are devoted to "permanently rebuilding and strengthening those vertical threads" (ibid). Resistance of this kind is illustrated by Yshiro leader, Bruno Barras' description of his people's 'life-project' as "being about the possibility of their defining the direction they want to take in life, on the basis of their awareness and knowledge of their own place in the world" (Blaser 2004: 30). This, however, is not merely a description of 'resistance.' More than that, it describes a project that defines itself in its own terms and is informed by particular cultural practices – a project that defines itself not only through acts of opposition but also through acts of affirmation, underlining the visions and values that are important to those engaged in the struggle (Partridge 2015).

In this light, it is important to emphasise that resistance to dominating processes of incorporation is often effective to the extent that it is not grounded exclusively in momentary, identifiable acts of resistance but in more continuous acts: where collective 'resistance' is embodied and articulated by finding ways to continue defining that collectivity's own ways of organising and

understanding social life. Education in these settings can offer strategies and advice for how to most effectively, and most sensitively, combine the vertical and the horizontal, inheritance and intention, in order to make real and lasting change in the world.

Again, this echoes ecopedagogical thought, and offers a critical perspective on the interaction between globalising forces and localities – one which neither fights nor submits exclusively to globalisation or localisation, but instead seeks to align and strengthen an emphasis on autonomy which, in contrasting ways, is central to both those apparently opposing forces (Kenrick 2013). As Descola & Pálsson (1996: 15) suggest, rather than identifying the manner or extent to which processes of globalisation ‘erase’ local specificities and concerns, we are led to a more sensitive appreciation of those specific actions and concerns by examining how globalising processes ‘redefine’ them. Through experiences in the Alpamalag valley, among the workers and students of education-creation centres there, we see how local specificities in turn redefine those globalising processes, reimagining and reengineering them to their own, intentional, purposes. Place-making actions, then, strengthened through locally-attuned and locally-specific education, not only combine the ‘threads’ of place but ‘define the direction’ of life as best they can – the principled goal of many intentional ‘projects.’ The following section expands on this idea of ‘place as project’, in order to echo the ways in which the kinds of action and education described above refuse to ‘naturalise’ unfavourable external relations and living conditions.

### **Place as Project, Place as Process**

Drawing on Escobar (2001: 152) and others, Blaser details how a focus on practice and process enables us to see how place emerges within particular struggles and contested power relations, as an expression not only of inequality but also of intentionality. In this, we’re led to understand place as:

‘the experience of, and from, a particular location with some sense of boundaries, grounds, and links to everyday practices’... [and] that this experience is emergent and not a given. A previously implicit understanding of place, in anthropology and other disciplines, as a given and natural locus from which senses of community and identity derive, has been recently displaced by more complex understandings which conceive place as a process, as ‘embodied practices that shape identities’, in part through resistance to changing ‘strategies of power’ (see Gupta & Ferguson 1997)... [places] must be compared in relation to the differences that arise between them from power asymmetries. As [Dirlik 2001: 30] puts it, ‘phenomena are all both local and global, but ... they are not all local and global in the same way’

Blaser 2004: 29, 32

Out of these different struggles, interactions and processes, *what* place is may change, even if *where* it is does not. To look beyond generally inaccurate assumptions about ‘place’ as a “given”, discrete and unresponsive background which does or does not generate a sense of ‘community’ it so acknowledge two further steps: (i) to understand the effects of ongoing, shifting relations with the rest of the world, and (ii) to examine forms of action that both articulate and respond to different ideas about the importance of a particular place. For example, there are undeniable ways in which, through labour migration, San Isidro today is shaped and influenced by the global demand for (and supply of) oil, for example. At the same time, through sustained and revived patterns of collective action, there are forms of activity which seek to

sustain certain aspects of life in that specific location, utilizing its particular characteristics (e.g. sourcing water in the nearby *páramo* hills). Thus analysing ‘place as process’ reveals apparently localised specificities and histories as being part of prior, and ongoing, histories that are themselves linked to previous scales and forms of globalised and globalizing activity (for example those brought about during the Spanish colonial era).

This ‘processual’ approach also involves considering how senses of place and its importance are produced, and how they alter over time. Rather than a static understanding of place that fails to capture the variability and differentiation of local experiences – that overlooks fluctuations in the intensities of experience that become concentrated within a particular locale – a long-term view enables us to expand an analytical prioritization of physical qualities for those that stem from action, where “[places] are defined less by unique locations, landscape, and communities than by the focusing of experiences and intentions onto particular settings” (Relph 1976: 141).

In a sense, this liberates place from being associated only with what is confined, limited or traditional (Escobar 2001). As Blaser noted, landscapes are constantly constructed and in flux. In place of an image of location as a neutral backdrop to activity, onto which layers of cultural specificity are added and accumulated, we have a vibrant, contingent, intentional place. This is where “place as project” is understood to involve groups “[who view] their undertaking as projects without naturalizing them” (Blaser 2004: 32; Dirlik 1999: 175). By emphasising how place is continually being ‘produced’, we see places as positioned in, and constituted by, global relations (Gupta & Ferguson 1997) – constituted through dynamics that intentional place-making processes transcend by being both experiential and relational: place as the embodiment of social action. Interpreting ‘place as process’ emphasises the fluidity and emergence of different places, in continuous production. Articulating this as ‘place as project’ foregrounds the actors involved, and links abstract processes to tangible, lived experiences among communities and individuals.

Drawing on experiences in the Alpamalag Valley, we can take this idea a step further. Not only do active, intentional groups refrain from naturalizing their places and projects, they refuse to naturalise the ‘positionings’ that have been forced upon them, as if to say: “our position in your totalizing narratives is not natural, will not be naturalised, and is not inevitable. We *contest* it. It is not permanent. It is produced.” In this, our understanding of place, if informed by the details of localised struggles, can more accurately and attentively reflect the many, conflicting ways in which locations come to be – as ‘sites of contestation’ – and in which they come to be used and experienced.

### **Sites of Contestation**

An emphasis on collective involvement and participation reflects how localised conflicts over land rights and access to water are played out in the Alpamalag Valley, and how such sites of contestation co-constitute the people and places concerned. Even these processes, however, are not limited to the geophysical location of any one particular community. The contexts within which residents of San Isidro and Cinco de Junio are acting – as for indigenous people across the highlands, and for marginalised people across the world – are contexts that take shape through decisions made by powerful others in distant places. These are contexts shaped by intersecting forms of injustice – political, environmental, juridical – and shaped by historical lines of difference and division that begin and are perpetuated beyond the local context.

As conflicts scale up and become legally formalised, there follows the simultaneous rejection-endurance in attitudes toward a widely corrupt and discriminatory legal system. The system is frequently dismissed by many as yet another oppressive instrument in the machinations of institutions of authority, or else experienced as deaf and prejudiced toward people like San Isidro's *comuneros*/community members (if not also distortedly exclusionary and jingoistic, acting from a place blind to their existence and plight). Unfair treatment in the courts is yet another reminder that life-in-places is treated as being arbitrarily similar: the specifics of the case are ignored or left unattended, just as the particularities of place are dismissed and thus subjected to displacement and deterritorialization. Despite this, the conflicts that embattle San Isidro remain, and their effects persist in a tangible, bodily sense (quite literally for those on the receiving end of violent acts). The site of contestation, then, is not so much the courts, the realm of lawyers, judges, police officers and intermediaries, as it is the very place where the disputes stem from. That is, the worn and undulating, coarse and absorbent terrain; the fraught and fruitful land.

Disputes are both located and lived in the landscapes that are made and remade through agricultural practice and everyday movements. Such activities reflect *lazos fuertes* / strong ties with areas of land held both communally and individually, land which is actively farmed and defended. Individual, familial or communal occupation of particular areas of these lands is shaped by past struggles and forms of inheritance. Thus, over time, the possibilities for agricultural and other activities in a particular place are changed, modified, and expanded upon. At the same time, geographical physicality is inextricably bound to the bodily activity and sensuous engagement that experiences it. 'The land' as an inhabited life-scape not only dictates how it is best farmed (moulding much of the activity which occurs there), it also contains within it historical elements of the past, present and prospects of its current co-habitants. Actors and their bodies become living histories, living accounts of their own past, breathing shapes that are both witness and testimony to everything they have encountered. Bodies may clearly and directly bear the scars of physical torture or hardship, but these corporal signs are not necessarily visible or external. Instead, bodies can contain within them the passion and 'rebelliousness' that is generated through periods of oppression and struggle – "In this sense: the body is memory" (de Certeau 1986: 227).

The intention here is not to describe or summon abstracted, immaterial or distinct 'bodies', but is rather to emphasise the ways in which each set of fluidly bound phenomena – people, place, activity, struggle – feeds into and influences the other. This brings us closer to ways of considering lived rural life by addressing the temporality of inequalities and forms of domination experienced (Crawford 2008) or, indeed, in terms of the temporality of landscape itself (Ingold 1993). For Ingold, 'landscape' is better conceived of as a wholly enveloping, boundless and visceral 'taskscape' involving the constructive, creative, and productive characteristics of human activity, of 'dwelling activities', which are accented along with their rhythmic, temporal resonances (Ingold 1993: 161), and where the inherent sociality of action is as inescapable as the mutual links to the world we move through.

Here, I want to accentuate a particular strand of sociality and its relations to a 'taskscape' from the perspective of many of San Isidro's residents. This is the engagement in processes beyond

‘our’ immediate control and its effects, activity within unfavourable circumstances not of our choosing, addressing the temporality of struggle and defiance. How to root our understanding of place – and of the ongoing practices of education and resistance that contribute to the constitution of place – in contemporary, unfinished struggles in contexts of clear power asymmetries? Rather than seeing places and conflicts in terms of universal struggles – as if in a polarised relationship between place-tradition and mobility-modernity – we might more accurately see them as diverse conflicts *against* universalism. That is, championing local specificity and particularity, in acts strengthened through education, in order to more fruitfully (and justly) find ways-of-life and ways-of-being that combine the many diverse threads of place.

Acknowledging the diverse ways in which these ‘combinations’ might take shape is also to acknowledge the internal diversity of communities such as San Isidro and Cinco de Junio – diversity that the education-creation Centres have to incorporate, support and foster in order to be effective in their goals of inclusive education. Anthropological writing about communities (especially indigenous communities across Latin America) often emphasises one of two extremes: either representing the group as a halcyon dance of solidarity and calm cooperation, or describing naught but such conflicts and contradictions that the existence of a community (let alone its ability to act collectively or politically) seems an outright impossibility (Lazar 2012: 220). This leads us to ask, how do the communities concerned see themselves? Life in San Isidro encapsulated both poles at once. Long-running conflicts were entrenched to the point where a small number of families lived in relative isolation from their neighbours and *compañeros* / community partners. At the same time, recent successes in communal projects made the time I was there for fieldwork something of a ‘hopeful moment’ in the life of the community. The relationship between positive impacts of collective action in San Isidro, and the instability, ruptures and conflict involved reflects how collective action has continued not only in spite of these issues, but also partly because of them. Harmony and agreement were not prerequisites for the continuation of action nor, as we have seen, were family differences overcome in order for the Centre in San Isidro to continue operating. The work of ‘*formación*’ persisted, despite those difference of opinion.

Continued efforts to sustain the community – just as with the work of communities elsewhere to make and remake themselves – were disputed, uncertain, and open to failure, shaped by the “diverse understandings of what people believe their community to be and what they imagine it should become” (Robertson 2012: 186). As much as the community took shape through being an entity defined by legal rights, inherited land and familial relations, its ongoing existence emerged from the ever-unsettled realm of action – the possibility of living as a *comunidad* had itself become an intentional endeavour. Intentional action can be interpreted as the ‘articulation’ of particular values (Rio & Smedal 2009: 42). Actions of ‘articulation’ here involve two senses of the word (Haynes 2012), and thus involve both *expression* (through enactment, embodiment and pursuit) of certain values, as well as *interaction* with, and implication in, other (often competing) value systems. In broad terms, the preservation and localised celebration of place might occur in negotiation with external forces, rather than seeking their negation.

Intent and inheritance were combined, and expressed, amidst disputed histories and ongoing conflict. To inherit/intend had become associated with clashing notions of instability and permanence. People’s criticisms of their own community reflected the sense that boundaries – of

place and identity, and also of time – were shifting. Coordinated forms of action and interaction that residents continued to make time for, and contribute to, affirmed notions of value attached to particular principles and practices. These included: the social significance of shared work; a commitment to public processes of deliberation and decision-making; solidarity and support in connection with neighbouring villages – all elements of social life and struggle that were central to the ethos of education-creation. Throughout both communities, such collective actions were undertaken at the same time as residents negotiated different roles that derived from intersecting positions of inequality. Thus meeting material needs involved diverse arrangements of individual, familial and communal work. Distinct forms of collective activity interacted with unequal participation in the flows of people and things that both delineated opportunities and possibilities, and experiences of exploitation and discrimination (Maeckelbergh 2009: 228).

The constitution of outside pressures, opportunities and ‘forces,’ however, appeared very differently to different people, especially in relation to labour migration and political participation. Some drew on their personal experiences with the wider Indigenous Movement to identify the commonalities between challenges faced in San Isidro and those encountered elsewhere in the country, and would describe many of the changes to livelihood practices as being linked to people ‘beginning to see the world in a very different way,’ as Porfirio put it (*empieza a mirar la vida el mundo en una forma muy distinta*). Others, meanwhile, had successfully pursued careers that balanced an income earned elsewhere in the country with continued participation in the work and affairs of the community as a whole. Facing such a range of uncertainties and conflicts – and often also tensions within families, between generations and between siblings – youngsters in the Alpamalag valley could not assume that their life and livelihoods would remain in the places they were familiar with. As witnessed throughout the Ecuadorian highlands (Martínez Valle 2002) and elsewhere in the world, detachment from the land and a decrease in dependence on its productive character – both forms of deterritorialization – also affected how “place” was defined and understood: less a seat of sustenance, and more of a collectively-made and redefined entity. Informal educational work in the area, as detailed above, played crucial roles in enabling more people to more effectively engage with these detachments and definitions.

## Conclusion

Drawing on theoretical and conceptual notions of place we have seen ‘place’ as emergent within active processes (Escobar 2001), as both site and source for collective acts of struggle and resistance. In addition to landscapes, communities and local histories, the terms of such struggles are inherited. By encouraging sharing and reflection on the challenges that individuals and collectives face in a particular location, and on the implications of these diverse forms of inheritance – as we have seen in the communities of San Isidro and in Cinco de Junio – educational processes of ‘education-creation’ have fostered a critical engagement with the present, and have provided some tools with which to further intentional action. Some of these tools echo forms of critical pedagogical praxis, and offer foundations for collective action in other places, e.g. a critical awareness of historical inequalities and the modes by which they are perpetuated, and engagement with the organizing processes of community life that form the basis of tactics to take further action to address them. In the context of these two communities in highland Ecuador, *formación* or education-creation forms a central pillar to the dynamics of

cooperation, where to ‘inherit/intend’ reflects both the basis and the objectives of collaborative action.

While these processes echo dynamics of ‘ecopedagogy’ (the defence of rights, the attention to liberation and injustice, grassroots organizing, and the values and skills that foster sustainability), they are also highly particular and in that way expand the terms, ideas and concepts we might associate with such engaged and critical processes of education. As conscious attempts to direct education toward a reflective engagement with place, position and struggle, the formation in San Isidro and Cinco de Junio of centres of education-creation is itself an expression of resistance, insofar as it is action that refuses to accept the conditions of inequality that shape and dominate life in the places concerned. As long as stark inequalities persist (and are exacerbated by the increasing concentration of land, water and wealth – both in the local area and globally), then acts that conceive of and work toward alternatives through education are inherently justice-focused: they actively pursue alternative strategies for meeting basic needs and, crucially, refuse to naturalize the conditions that so negatively impact on the potential and praxis of everyday life.

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