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COASTAL CITIES IN ECUADOR: From Dispossession and Violence to Futures We Can Live With

CRISTINA CIELO
FLASCO Ecuador
https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1215-6646

CRISTINA VERA
FLASCO Ecuador
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6644-0397

VANESSA BONE
Univerisdad Técnica Luis Vargas Torre
https://orcid.org/0009-0000-4896-4907

In this article, we attend to the ways in which Afro-Ecuadorian populations long vulnerable to multiple violences put into play historically patterned possibilities for cultivating futures in the complex contexts of marronage, differential inclusion into a new nation, and now, multiple authorities vying for control. Ecuador's coastal cities have long played a nodal role in colonial extractive processes; today, that role continues, through imperial operations in which illicit economies work to entrench, rather than interrupt, unequal political economies.[1] Moreover, these sites have become territories in dispute over the last decade, among local gangs and organizations connected to international cartels, between these

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and militarized state forces, and as ever, as sites of both great desperation and expectations. In the interstices of such conflicts, in the city of Esmeraldas and in Guayaquil, where the highest concentrations of Afro-Ecuadorians live, inhabitants draw from ambivalent histories that began with free communities of maroons negotiating their sovereignty with the Spanish Crown to imagine in and beyond their complex presents.

Now, as the importance of transnational drug networks has increased in Ecuador, so has the diversification of labor opportunities in growing illicit economies, particularly important for young men in extremely difficult conditions for sustaining their own and their families' lives. In these contexts, we seek to understand how populations in coastal cities hard hit by the rise of narcotraffic-related violence negotiate visibility and capture to carve out paths forward. In doing so, they traverse and that recreate infrastructures sustained by sounds. These affective infrastructures (Berlant 2016) connect trickster pasts to possibilities of futures in impossible circumstances.

The district of San Lorenzo, in the Esmeraldas Province bordering Colombia to the north, and the neighborhoods around the saltwater estuary of the city of Guayaquil, the largest urban area of Ecuador, are connected through their histories of dispossession, displacement, and dispute. From their inception, territories occupied by organized ex-slaves—called *palenques*—were neither subjected nor free but occupied a "not in-between" (Moten 2017) space reflected in trickster-like figures of the maroon authority Alonso de Illescas and the mythical figure of *La Tunda*. Central to the *palenques*' fugitive continuity were the infrastructures of sound that emerged from their traditions and terrains, that accompanied them and were transformed as many Esmeraldeños were expelled from their land by the extractive and export economy of nineteenth century Ecuador, settling in the saltwater estuary neighborhoods of the port city of Guayaquil. In these complex urban spaces structured by racism, where the still lagging economy has devastated large parts of the population, illicit activities and the violences that accompany them, have found fertile ground. Yet these are also sites in which residents negotiate past possibilities through affective infrastructures to create futures they can live with.

SITES OF NOT-QUITE-SOVEREIGNTY AND TRICKSTER POTENTIALITY

Our work in the two study sites stems from long-established relationships with colleagues and organizations in the coastal provinces of Esmeraldas and

Guayas, and concern over the rising rates of extreme violence and widespread insecurity in the country over the last years, particularly in coastal areas. In the short period from 2019 to 2023, Ecuador has seen an increase of 574 percent—a nearly sixfold increase—in intentional homicides, making it the most violent country in Latin America (OECO 2023, 9); in 2023, Esmeraldas was the province with the third highest homicide rate and Guayas had the second highest homicide rate.[2] These concerns reached a crisis point with the government's declaration of "internal armed conflict" and of criminal organizations as terrorists in January 2024. An urgent need to understand what was happening in Ecuador's most affected territories and to hear from people in its most militarized areas led us to travel to the small city of San Lorenzo and the port city of Guayaquil in the following months, as part of the audiovisual project Counter-Narratives of Violence.[3]

In San Lorenzo, in the Esmeraldas province, we worked with the *palenque* elder of the Northern Esmeraldas Communal District and the Black Women's Movement of Northern Esmeraldas. Through her care and connections, we were able to travel through collectively owned mangrove territories and nearby rural communities, meeting people who worked in, and for the protection of, these areas threatened environmentally by industrial shrimp or palm oil farming and territorially by criminal organizations. We also engaged in exchanges with musicians, poets, ethno-educators, and luthiers, over the course of which we recorded several performances and songs. In the city of Esmeraldas, we worked with the collective Mujeres de Asfalto to organize workshops aimed at building narratives and audiovisual products to reflect on militarization, racism, and violence and the construction of desirable futures.

In Guayaquil, we worked with various community and cultural projects around the saltwater estuary where many Esmeraldeños settled when arriving from the northern province of the country. We interviewed community leaders and recorded musical pieces with the Karibu cultural center, the Cleotilde Guerrero Foundation, and the Nia Kali community organization. We were fortunate to be guided through the estuary neighborhoods and the estuary itself by colleagues and contacts, as we came to realize that it would be impossible to be in these areas controlled by gangs without their care and accompaniment. In several neighborhoods in Guayaquil, we organized workshops with children and youth where we worked with narratives on their daily lives through musical and video shorts. Neither these workshops, nor any of the fieldwork during this critical period, would have been possible without the collaboration of local artists and activists.[4]

The audiovisual methodology allowed us to escape the strictures of the written word, building spaces of interaction and collective creation with workshop participants. Young participants created short films, recording their music, hip-hop, and narratives of hopes for futures, as we sought to think through with them the relation of their experiences to their histories and contexts. It was important for us to avoid talking explicitly about the forms of violence that our interlocutors experienced, focusing instead on their concerns, reflections and aspirations. Through these methods, visits, and exchanges, we were led to the question that underlies this text, namely, how do people work with what there is in contexts of dispossession, precarity and violence to find futures they can live with?

To explore answers to this question, we slip back to the mid-sixteenth century, as one starting point in histories of disputes—over territory, mobility and sustaining life—that maintain continuities, yet are not linear and certainly not uniform. In 1553, a storm ran aground a ship en route to the Spanish colonial capital of Lima, and the thirteen Africans on board obtained ownership of themselves by fleeing. During our fieldwork, many of the people with whom we spoke mentioned Alonso de Illescas, a maroon liberator who survived the shipwreck. According to Ines Morales, the *palenquera mayor* of northern Esmeraldas, Alonso de Illescas, "was a great national hero whose main political proposal was to build *palenques* as liberated spaces, beyond the processes of slavery and colonization, seeking autonomous territories where Africans and their descendants could live and practice their freedom" (Ines Morales, interview, 2024).

The *palenque* constituted by Illescas was not the only one in Latin America. According to Robinson (2020), independent communities of Africans trafficked to the Americas were recognized by the colonial authorities beginning in the seventeenth century. They were called *palenques* in the Afro-Pacific region, *quilombos* in Brazil, and *cumbes* in Venezuela, and their inhabitants were known as *cimarrones* or maroons.[5] San Basilio del Palenque, in present-day Colombia, was the first such free town in America, founded by the ex-slave Benkos Biohó in 1599 and, despite repression and violence, is the only *palenque* that survives to this day. Brazil's Quilombo de os Palmares, another well-known maroon community, lasted from 1605 to 1695, and plays an important role in Brazilian resistance narratives (Gonzalez 2021).

If we consider that failed maritime infrastructure of the sixteenth century, in the form of shipwrecks, enabled the establishment of maroon communities in northern Esmeraldas, it is the aspirational commercial and mining infrastructure of the seventeenth century that allowed for their official recognition by the Spanish Crown. As independent communities—not yet legalized—began settling in northern Esmeraldas, colonial conquistador companies were driven by the rumors of an alluring territory filled with gold and riches. From the seventeenth to the eighteenth centuries, viceroyalty authorities sought to "pacify" the Esmeraldas territory, building roads and ports, seeking to increase trade between Panama and the centers of production in the Andean region. The road project that would link the Andean capital of Quito to the sea would also help commercialize the gold mining in the north of Esmeraldas (Rueda 2001).

This "pacification" was made possible by the governance of the territory by the maroon Alonso de Illescas, whose leadership was strengthened through strategies of kinship alliances and localized violence with indigenous inhabitants of the area (Olaya 2016). Despite the original resistance of these independent territories to colonial authority, their control over the area and their tactic of entrusting themselves to the King's service through further alliances with church leaders, made them ideal intendants for indirect government.

For Sembe (2022), Illescas exemplifies a case of subsovereignty and vernacular agency, as his declared support and correspondence with the King, in which he recognized himself as a subject despite being a freed African, demonstrates his ability to construct his freedom from available resources. In Sbembe's reading, Alonso de Illescas, and more generally maroon, complexity is reflected in a capacity to subject oneself to colonial authority in order to safeguard one's freedom. Through Illescas' negotiations, the colonial authorities granted ex-slaves in his territory pardon for their condition of fugitives and recognized them as free. In exchange, "they offered their obedience to the King and committed themselves to collaborate in the foundation of towns, whose location should be based on the benefit they could provide to the maintenance of the road and the future ports" (Rueda 2001, 7).

Alonso de Illescas's governance allows us to reflect on the forms of adaptability and permanence (Olaya 2016) that developed in this territory. Illescas's story is part of the historical memory of the Afro-Ecuadorian people, a divergence allowing us to break with the monolithic idea of the plantation slave model by showing the particularities of the slave regime established in the Afro-Pacific region, forged as it was in the context of incipient mining development and its jungle terrain. In addition, Illescas's story helps us to imagine complex and dynamic forms of sustaining life that employed strategies of alliance, deception, violence and escape, oscillating between submission and resistance (Sembe 2022), neither one nor the other and not quite the in-between.

Sembe's term "subsovereign agency" recalls Berlant's "non-sovereign relationality" in which proximity does not mean being joined or captured. Non-sovereign points to the fact that boundaries are not dissolved but are "the experience of affect," that is, the experience of being shifted but not defined, allowing for a decidedly relational agency but not independent sovereignty. These historically generated patterns are continually transformed as they are put into play, in the same way that improvised riffs generate patterns that are transformed, and as infrastructure is inscribed through movement (Berlant 2016).

Berlant describes infrastructure as "that which binds us to the world in movement and keeps the world practically bound to itself" and proposes "that one task for makers of critical social form is to offer not just judgment about positions and practices in the world, but terms of transition that alter the harder and softer, tighter and looser infrastructures of sociality itself" (2016, 394). In this sense, infrastructures are what we build for future socialities, as roads or channels are built for future movement. Harder or softer, tighter or looser, these can allow for more or less movement, more or less re-invention of the social, but there will always be wayward excess. As traces of our everyday, the construction of these infrastructures is not necessarily planned or rational, nor does the infrastructure have to be material, yet the objectification it represents can be technical, affective, symbolic. These are traces that our past walks leave behind, rivets that deepen on a dirt road through which water flows when it rains, Andean paths called *coluncos* that deepen to become underground trails after multitudes of human and animal steps sink into and open up the earth.

The construction of infrastructures—armatures or dispositions both within and composing what Echeverria (1998) calls the "instrumental field" or in a semiotic sense a "code"—is always an unequal exercise. In our predetermined but not overdetermined use of infrastructure, we transform it; as the poet Antonio Machado reminds us, "*Se hace camino al andar*"—the path is made by walking it. Yet the unequal constitution of these paths imposes inequalities through their predeterminations, so that the codification of infrastructures is co-constituted with racialized geographies. An attention to affective infrastructures allows us to understand the possibilities of its excesses or escapes. It is in this sense that the archive, memory made material, is infrastructure, and allows us to walk on paths carved, through histories, through affective forms, into impossible futures.

The continued and repeated recalling of Illescas reanimate him as a contemporary trickster figure. Sembe emphasizes the ambiguity and duality of maroon strategies, focusing on Illescas's "tendency to constantly switch sides, stances and tactics, that is central to marronage [and] a defining characteristic of a trickster.

The trickster is an ambiguous presence, an embodiment of mischief that seeks to catalyze change" (2022, 595). She connects this ability to blur categories of master and slave, fugitive and servant, rebel and king's vassal, to Afro-Caribbean tricksters such as Anansi or Esu Elegbara, all of whom operate in liminal spaces, beyond binaries, beyond capture.

Afro-Ecuadorian affective infrastructures are shaped by the recollection of other tricksters and complex characters as well. La Tunda, another character frequently mentioned by people in both contemporary San Lorenzo and Guayaquil, is another figure of remarkable complexity. On the one hand, she symbolizes freedom and resistance; on the other, she is associated with threat and danger.[6] This duality is manifested in her appearance, which is described as both monstrous and captivating. According to Hernández:

> The Tunda was a creation of our enslaved grandparents now in America; they invented fear to protect life. They made the enslaver believe that we were terrified of Tunda our liberator, they gave a new shape to these fears, giving meaning and direction to our struggles. They shaped her by her stench, one foot like a misshaped hoof, the other a child's foot and an enormous resemblance to a loved one. When an enslaved person disappeared, he had not escaped! Surely, he was stolen away by the Tunda! To make the story credible, a protocol was elaborated for the rescue of the victim, in which weapons, prayer and a priest intervened; the bass drum sounded, the dogs barked and warned the *tunda' d* fugitive. The deception was brilliant, but the terrible thing is that the invented fears persisted and the liberatory Tunda vanished. (Hernández 2018, 25)

Such political strategies of adaptability and permanence construct infrastructures of feeling that transgress borders of not only space but also of time. Territorialized inhabitation took advantage of the fissures of the mining slave model—of failures in the marine infrastructure and aspirations in the commercial infrastructure that upheld it—generating spaces and political organization at the margins, allowing not only survival, but also cultural reproduction. The fugitive slaves and, later on, freed blacks, thus shaped their adaptation to and appropriation of the northern Esmeraldas landscape, integrating the natural environment, their subsistence activities, and their stories into what Olaya (2016, 37) calls "Afro-descendant territories": "Hence, the mangroves, mountains, rivers and estuaries found sites and places of collective memories, in addition to a history of common experiences."

WORKING WITH WHAT THERE IS: *Palenques* in Music and in Movement

Attention to racialized geographies allows us to think about the ways in which racialized populations have given shape to living with what there is, in spite of systematic destruction and exploitation.[7] Though slavery and the labor of enslaved people is a sine qua non condition for the existence of capitalism in all its phases, its geographies not only constructed forms of domination, but also created projects to escape from the system of slavery. *Palenques*, as such spaces of escape and flight also provided the scaffolding for affective infrastructures of cultural reproduction in which music was central to carrying its patterns through time and across territories.

To Robinson's (2020) reading of the material force of racism through the centrality of the slave trade in the constitution of the modern world economy, Mbembe (2017) adds a consideration of blackness in a continuum that moves through colonialism, slavery, apartheid, globalization to contemporary securitized neoliberalism. "To produce Blackness is to produce a social link of subjection and a *body of extraction*, that is, a body entirely exposed to the will of the master, a body from which great effort is made to extract maximum profit" (Mbembe 2017, 18). The historical conformation of both San Lorenzo and Guayaquil is inserted into these processes of capital accumulation that depend on the power and patterns of racialized extraction in its Afro-Pacific specificities (Roa 2017).

As mentioned above, the extractive history of the San Lorenzo district of northern Esmeraldas has its origins in the consolidation of the colonial-slave regime since the seventeenth century. By this period, the mining-slavery frontier extended from the Darien in Panama to the province of Esmeraldas in the Audiencia of Quito. This broad frontier was characterized by its extensive gold production, from the *real de minas* (i.e., places where gold was extracted) to mining districts that engaged in alluvial mining by enslaved black crews. Once the Republic of Ecuador was constituted, the gold-rich territories of northern Ecuador were granted to British creditors for the payment of the debt of independence. In this period gold mining continued and the exploitation of tagua and wood began. María Arboleda (2005, 107) considers that this act of the nascent Ecuadorian state would be a sign of "a pattern of abandonment and negligence to which the province would later be subjected."

From the mid-twentieth century, once the concession to British creditors ended, San Lorenzo continued to be part of Ecuador's extractive economy, as part of the banana and oil boom circuit, followed by timber extraction, shrimp, and palm oil industries, and now, illicit mining. Throughout its history, then, violence in San Lorenzo has been a tangible structural and historical element in the loss of Afro-ancestral territory, though the forms of violence that have anchored the development of capital in the region are not always visible (Minda 2020). Contemporary connections between illegal mining and capital expansion (Teran and Scarpacci 2024) and between militarization and control over territories for investments, in what Paley (2014) terms "drug war capitalism," shape the daily lives of Esmeraldeños. In this context, we can understand the historical continuity and relevance of "marronage as the manifestation of the African's determination to disengage, to retreat from contact. To reconstitute the community, Black radicals took to the bush, to the mountains, to the interior" (Robinson 2020, 310).

What interests us about these Afro-descendant territories, is their potential role in the articulation of spaces of cultural and political struggle that are sometimes hidden and in the margins (Davis 1998). The *palenque*, as such a space of freedom, which persists in Afro-Ecuadorians collective memory, was built not only as a physical space, but also as a sound project, in which instruments and orality play a fundamental role. As Mayra Estévez-Trujillo notes, sound is part of processes that are at once social, cultural, political, and economic. Sound is not only material, but creates the possibilities for "conceptual and spatial situations":

> Sound is possible in the confluence of production logics and the positioning and place from which subjects act [...] constructing sonorous acts, actions or practices that supplant and construct subjectivities and universes in which there are audible and inaudible "things," linked to the act of listening and being listened to, that shape scenarios in which different power relations are articulated. (Estévez Trujillo 2016, 14)

For the inhabitants of the *palenques*, the forest, the mountain, the jungle, were the landscapes of their shelterage. "The particularities of the mining slave model, as opposed to the plantation model, allowed maroons, freed from enslavement, to rebuild their existence and socialities using the natural resources found in the environment" (Vanín, Romero, and Ortiz in Alvarado 2022, 45). Thus, the instruments they created constituted a particular sound project based on their subsistence economy on the Pacific coast.

Miguel Quintero, creator of instruments in San Lorenzo, recounts being taught how to elaborate instruments from materials found in the mountain. This is increasingly difficult because of the felling of trees and the destruction of animal habitats, which makes it more complicated to find the right materials to make instruments such as drums, maracas, *cununos* and the *guasá*.

> These days, because of logging in the forests, there is hardly any wood to make our instruments, we have to spend weeks in the mountains to find what we need. Our elders who go to the mountain and teach hunting traditions now provide us with the hides. They kill an animal for their own and their family's food, and in order not to waste the skins, they look for instrument makers to give us or sell us the fresh skin. It must be dried in the correct way, traditionally, with the ash from the fire. (Miguel Quintero, interview, 2024)

For Hernández (2018), music has historically been linked to maroon resistance, using sounds from drums, *bombos*, maracas, and *guasá*, using the movements of the dance, to communicate with men and women enslaved on haciendas. Music is a clear example of infrastructures created to communicate with what there is, in interaction with social processes of domination. For our present-day interlocutors in San Lorenzo, music continues to be linked to struggles for self-making. In the 1990s, as their territories were threatened by agro-industrial expansion, the northern Esmeraldas organization began to host gatherings of "music and dance in defense of territory, music and dance in defense of the environment, music and dance in defense of our identity" (Ines Morales, interview, 2024).

In spite of the persistence of collective memory and continued political-cultural struggles of Ecuadorian Afro-descendants, their sounds and stories have been incorporated into dominant narratives through the passage of time, extractive and symbolic violence, church and moral impositions and structural racism. As we saw above, the initial possibilities of the liberatory Tunda have been subsumed into a frightening figure. The possibilities of unruly communication in marimba music have been defused through its folklorization. In this sense, we must be cautious with the too-quick celebration of "collective memory." Even as it may constitute a practice "to recover, strengthen, reposition and reconstruct existence as an ancestral right . . . to give back the word, to question the current order imposed by the State" (Walsh and Salazar 2015, 83), it can also impose a monolithic understanding of resistance that allows for its capture.

Historical manifestations such as the marimba have entered state and commercial circuits, and as their institutional recognition increases, their political-economic challenges to dominant structures often decrease. Alvarado writes that the Afro-descendant identity (as is the case for Indigenous identity as well) is represented by "their" music, dance, theater, handicraft production. "At the same time that the communities are recognized and made visible, they are used for profit and to build an institutional instrumentalization of subjectivities" (Alvarado 2022, 52). This is not only a state or dominant use of ventriloquism (Guerrero 2010), but the very binding of these subjectivities that equally fixes and instrumentalizes the making of one's self.

Visibility, therefore, is not only straightforward legibility that helps to shape political resistance. As Hartman (2019) urges us to ask, what does it mean to be visible to whom? Her examination of the refusal of the terms of visibility of wayward black women in early twentieth-century cities of the U.S. North helps us locate in our own context those affective infrastructures that allow for movement through music that oscillates between capture and flight, past and future, San Lorenzo and Guayaquil. Insofar as this movement is made possible, such infrastructures "restitute potentials that have been subtracted by subject-centered ways of seeing, which establish specific sensory boundaries and angles of relational possibilities, and can be seen as a gesture toward the uncertain stabilities that exist in and as a result of the territorialization of space" (Simone 2022, 11).

These infrastructures of sound are sonorous dimensions of what Ruth Wilson Gilmore terms "infrastructures of feeling":

> In the material world, infrastructure is the basis of productivity—it accelerates some processes and slows down others, imposing particular interests, producing isolation, enabling cooperation. The infrastructure of feeling is material too, in the sense that ideology becomes material as do the actions that feelings make possible, or inhibit. The infrastructure of feeling is then a foundation of consciousness, sturdy, but not static, viscerally underlying our ability to select, to recognize possibility as we select and reselect liberating lineages—in a lifetime [and] between generations and from one generation to the next . . . What matters—what materializes—are vivid rearticulations and surprising combinations. (Gilmore 2018, 74)

It is in the articulation of these infrastructures that music's colonization by commercialization, nationalization, or tradition can be circumvented and can become a condition of "possibility to live unbounded lives" in an escape from the many forms of carceral geographies or captured life (Gilmore cited in Campt 2017, 50).

A musician from Esmeraldas now living in Guayaquil says, "Marimba for me is life . . . I was born through marimba and will die with it" (Nadia, interview, 2024). Music in its complexity can escape its institutionalization, become roads to travel on, and connect pasts to presents constituted through the futures that can be imagined. Art forms work differently. Writing on political theater performing at the intersection of Brazil's celebration of and violence against black bodies, Smith notes that "Performance is at once the site of black social death and the site of its redress. It is that which reproduces pain and that which ruptures it" (2016, 24). A similar polyvalent character is found in much creative work; the music played by and commented on by our interlocutors depends on tradition while resisting its capture. It transmits affects, knowledges, identities, not as institutions, but as refusals—Tina Campt also cites Moten and Harney's "refusal to be refused" and Butler and Athanassiou's "refusal to stay in one's proper place" (Campt 2017, 50). These, then, are channeled lines of flight, continuities of possibilities of escape "that provide a way for people and things to get away from having to absorb or be the bearings of . . ." (Simone 2022, 12).

Fred Moten helps us to think of the role of music in these movements:

> Song is a privileged site of such improvisation, and the not-in-between signifies a collision that guarantees the ongoing presence and the irrecoverable possibility of what gets coded as conditions and foundations . . . Everything here depends upon some kind of not-in-between suspension and propulsion, a certain arrhythmia, the breakdown of the too-smooth historical trajectory of European domination and accumulative apotheosis . . . The line of that dialectic has got to be broken by another dialect; the trajectory of that narrative has got to be disrupted by some kind of lyric materiality. (Moten 2017, 10)

These lyric materialities are reflected in the sounds that Fercho Arroyo, a young music and performance artist from one of the estuary neighborhoods in Guayaquil, names:

> In lots of areas of life, black people did not learn through methods, but orally. So I say to him I'll "pass you the pop" or you "pass him the pop" we "pass him the pop" we "pass him the pop." So you "pass him the pop" you "pass him the pop" and that's how he learned it. So, the way of intoning afro instruments is like onomatopoeia. So I also play with "*papa con yuca*," "*papa con yuca*" and "*toca tambor*," "*toca tambor*." It's like in the kitchen, when you're making a coconut stew, I put this, this and this in it, and that's how they pass sounds on like secrets . . . (Fercho Arroyo, interview, 2024).

Fercho is now studying dance formally, but notes that he "didn't learn musicality by means of *five, six, seven, eight* . . . I simply have it here because I grew up with music, my whole environment was music, my dad and salsa, all kinds of music."

We spend some time with him in the vacant paths that line the saltwater estuary behind the houses of his largely Afro-Esmeraldeño neighborhood Isla Trinitaria. He warns us to not to walk through Isla Trinitaria on our own, someone will always be watching, but he talks to the ferryman who transports people across the estuary so we can get a sense of the area lined with mangroves and water plants, that though neglected and polluted, push through the surface. A community leader of the area notes that many people from the northern part of Esmeraldas settled here precisely because of the importance of water and plants: "There is a sense of being related to nature. Our people there are close to the river, close to the mountain . . . These are old sectors where the Afro-descendant population settled. When our people arrived here, all this was mangrove" (Carlos Valencia, interview, 2024).

While the province of Esmeraldas has the highest proportions of Afro-Ecuadorians in its population, Guayaquil is the city where the greatest number of black Ecuadorians live, with over a quarter of Afro-descendants living in the port city in 2022. The arrival of the Afro-Ecuadorian population in the Guayaquil metropolis is a consequence of forced mobility and resistance, historical traces in the comings and goings of Ecuador's Afro-descendant peoples. For decades, internal human mobility in Ecuador has been a consequence of the dispossession and insecurity faced by the population in both communal territories and in urban-popular neighborhoods. People arrive to Guayaquil from the province of Esmeraldas in the north of the country not only looking for work, but also because of the impacts of palm oil plantations, lumber companies, and mining that stretches from colonial to contemporary illicit economies, and given the difficulty of sustaining life in conditions that now include narcotrafficking violence in their northern territory. Though Guayaquil has a higher homicide rate than San Lorenzo, the northern district's border and gang conflicts have made it the site of extreme "expressive violence" that includes public displays of mutilated bodies (Segato 2013).

VIOLENCE AND FUGITIVE FUTURES IN GUAYAQUIL

In another of Guayaquil's mostly black estuary neighborhoods, another activist who runs a community foundation that attends especially to women, children, and youth hoped "to assemble a *palenque*, where our children can learn." She notes that her mother was from Esmeraldas, but she was born in Guayaquil and raised in Quito, "so I didn't know anything. I would go to the pharmacy and ask for a pill, until an aunt told me, you need to know you are a healer." She imagines the *palenque* a place where "girls can learn when to use rue, vinegar, oregano, lemon . . ." (Ines Santos, interview, 2024). Ines Santos's vision for a contemporary *palenque* is in no way directed by hopes to replicate traditional culture for its own sake. As Moten says of the Congolese painter Tshibumba Kanda-Matulu:

> The aesthetico-political (historical) encounter in Tshibumba's work operates in a way that calls the idea of culture into question rather than merely illuminating that idea in some particular manifestation . . . Culture is a false, allegorical totality, an object given in a methodology that works in and toward the eclipse of the aesthetic and the (political/economic) historical, that means to stand in for the complexity of the social totality, that moves in relation to the articulated combination, the interinanimative autonomy, of the aesthetic and the politico-economic. (Moten 2017, 23)

As such, it is no surprise that Ines Santos continues discussing the political historical importance of cornrows for black women, a practice best documented in Colombia's San Basilio de Palenque (Vargas 2003). Ines relates how women observed the paths to escape, lines of flight and incorporated the communication of these into their aesthetic.

> The women braided their hair making maps for how to get out. And depending how the braid was made, it told you if there was a river or a direct path this way. Then you have to take this turn. And the turban served so that inside these braids, they could put grains. So, when they escaped from slavery, they could inhabit other territories with the grains that women carried in their hair covered by the turbans, to cultivate and grow our own food. (Ines Santos, interview, 2024)

Black men and women's escape from violence as slaves resonates in Afro-descendants continued endeavors in eluding colonial, republican and contemporary violences by finding spaces not-in-between oppression and liberal freedom, exclusion and unequal inclusion, the state and criminal organizations.

Violence is a phenomenon that reproduces itself in the daily life of Afro-Ecuadorians, linking exploited bodies with extracted territories and traumatized territories with brutalized bodies (Zaragocin and Caretta 2021), often directly and without respite. In order to understand the specific potentialities of existence in devastating conditions of structural, subjective and direct violence, it is helpful to further differentiate conditions in San Lorenzo and in Guayaquil, in order to trace how diverse but connected affective infrastructures are traced and trace paths in each place, making possible experiences and responses to everyday injustices.

In San Lorenzo, violence is not always perceived as a dangerous, threatening beast, because sometimes, and perhaps more often than we acknowledge, violence is a neighbor with whom we learn to live. Such features of daily life in San Lorenzo are in large part due to the complexities of the Ecuador-Colombia border: historical socio-cultural connections across the border, illicit trade in many types trafficking and the fallout of the Colombian "peace process."[8] At the same time, an almost complete lack of confidence in State responsibility for keeping them safe has led northern Esmeraldeños in San Lorenzo to self-manage their collective lives, continuing to sustain themselves in and through their territories.

Recent analyses have focused on the spikes in armed and extreme violence in the Esmeraldas province. Yet studies and news reports have long shown how illegal mining, contraband, arms and drug trafficking, the presence of irregular groups, organized crime, and other phenomena undermine security and threaten life in San Lorenzo. Nevertheless, local organizations maintain access to their livelihoods, as the president of the Federation of Local Collectors of Mangrove Products (FEDARPOM) of Northern Esmeraldas notes:

> One of those new [criminal] organizations that found itself on top tried to take our territory . . . When you take away the control of communities at this border, you lose territorial control. Because the territory is not controlled by the marine, nor the police, it's controlled by the communities. We kept control of the territory through organizations, through organizational processes. (Inginio Castillo, interview, 2024)

The complex conflicts and negotiations with organized criminal groups are necessary for populations whose livelihoods continue to be the same territories in dispute. Inhabitants coexist with illicit actors not only in the mangrove, but also in the Santiago River, in communal lands and across the border with its formal and informal trade. People fish in the same waters of the Santiago River that irregular armed groups use to traffic fuel, drugs, arms—even people—and that local inhabitants use to traffic cigarettes and other everyday commercial items through informal trade that helps them to make ends meet. The forms of sociality and organization that we described in previous sections are precisely the affective infrastructures that make coexistence with violence possible.

In the estuary neighborhoods of Guayaquil, in contrast, the "radical material heteronomy" of urban living carves other paths of possibility (Lordon 2014). We mentioned above the Guayaquil community leader Ines Santos who aspires to create contemporary *palenques* in the estuary neighborhood of Isla Trinitaria. The foundation she leads, Nia Kali ("intense purpose" in Swahili) seeks to "show children who tend to absorb everything they see and absorb in their surroundings—violence, crime, and many other conflicts—to show them that there are other paths" (Girón 2023). But the possibilities of *palenques* are completely different in Guayaquil than they are in San Lorenzo. Without the territorial relationship to natural resources of the latter, Guayaquil *palenques* would hardly be larger than a block, defined by more limited familial relations, a constricted commons circumscribed to the social.

In this context, in the absence of the possibilities of territorial subsistence, the relationship to violence is one of confrontation rather than cohabitation. This confrontation is seen in the literal patrolling of tight borders: if there is to be a group activity in a park, or if people from outside the neighborhood will visit them, community leaders must notify the gangs who will relax their strict perimeters for the time being. This constant confrontation and territorial contention is not always explicitly violent, but relies on agreements and recognition and respect of boundaries. As Jean-Francois Gayraud writes,

> Violence belongs to an initial stage of affirmation and installation of mafia power, but it is not a permanent element; the reputation of dangerousness, fruit of history and myth, is enough of an origin to spread fear, and a generalized fear allows to economize and avoid the use of violence. . . Such a measured and limited use of violence allows criminal capital to reproduce itself in a given territory and obeys . . . three criteria. It is economic, invisible and endogenous. (Gayraud 2007, 258)

In such contexts, protection rackets and recruitment sustain the economies of criminal organized groups. As work possibilities in crime continue to grow in increasingly precarious contexts and populations, an increasing number of youth, particularly young men, are recruited into these dynamic economies. The local term for being recruited is being "captured."

Ecuador is the Latin American country that has worst recovered from the regional economic crises of the last decade. Inequality has grown since oil prices dropped in 2014 and austerity measures were implemented accompanying a return to dependence on the International Monetary Fund (IMF) in 2019; poverty is now 16.9 percent higher than it was six years ago (Johnston and Vasic-Lalovic 2023). Public education has suffered cuts, as have other basic public services and labor rights. Most of Ecuador's job recovery since the pandemic is in flexible, insecure, and informal work. Salaried jobs with benefits and job security are scarce in the country, while regressive taxes have made the prices of basic goods alarmingly expensive.

Our interlocutors make clear that "captured" youth are often propelled into these groups by the need "to take care of their families" (Jimmy Simisterra, interview, 2024). Young men are especially driven by the desire to support or contribute to the family economically: "Desperate to help his mother, so that they can get by, it's very easy for someone to come and whisper in his ear, 'Look, I can help you earn easy money'" (Fercho Arroyo, interview, 2024). Young people might even "fall into that situation" trying to keep their neighborhoods and families from being prey to protection rackets: "So the kids, for self-defense you could say, had to form their own group over here, to get involved, to put a stop to the other group coming in" (Ines Santos, interview, 2024).

At the same time, makeshift attempts and cross-border inventions to sustain life can also be captured. The spread of illicit economies controlled by global networks and criminal organizations has meant that even popular economies are captured by the hierarchical structures of the transnational drug trade. While many women have in the past used micro-trafficking as a part of their multiple strategies to sustain themselves and their families, it is every day more difficult to remain autonomous. "We're increasingly integrated into a chain that prevents us from being in a concrete territory. Instead, we become part of a structure in which we know the part below and not the intermediate part on upwards" (Jaqui Gallegos, interview, 2024).

Fugitive potentialities demand affective structures that open up the not-in-between liberal unequal inclusion and categorical refusal. All the community leaders with whom we spoke in these neighborhoods of Guayaquil understood clearly that the cultural activities they support are more than dance, art, song. Jimmy Sinisterra's cultural organization began with a small group of dancers practicing in the street, “and they liked it, they said I want to be a part, let me dance”; he sees his marimba work as preventing the recruitment of these youth into criminal organizations. Yet the very definition of participation in criminal activities closes down possibilities of liberating movement.

Ines Santos of the Nia Kali Foundation notes that the youth who are part of gangs are not allowed to join in the few municipal activities that take place in those moments that community spaces can be used. In a neighborhood soccer tournament, one group didn’t show up, so she and her volunteers suggested that they invite those watching from the borders of the field, who had been excluded by municipal rules:

> And they played, then, at least this once, those four hours that they played, they cleared their minds and forgot about all the insecurity, of having to be on the defensive, that they are going to do something to someone, that someone is going to do something to them, that there is going to be a problem . . . So these are the spaces that are needed with more activities, to avoid their involvement and being captured. (Ines Santos, interview, 2024)

The categorical imperatives that bind the either-or and the in-between are likewise refused by Fercho, who is honestly incredulous when he tells us why he decided to stop taking buses, despite the huge size of the decidedly un-bike-friendly city of Guayaquil:

> So I’d get on the bus. And I’ll never understand how someone can treat you like you’re not even human . . . So I got to the point that I decided I’d rather ride a bike [and] my bicycle allowed me to open my way to freedom. So, when I go by bike, it’s like the air carries me. I’m super calm. I can stop at a shop to buy a cola, I can sit on the sidewalk and the wind blows on me and I can see everything around me. (Fercho Arroyo, interview, 2024)

Such possibilities marked by “refusing to be refused” also require refusing to refuse. These are at the basis of the hopes for infrastructures that open up possibilities for such airy movement as Fercho’s.

The Batucada Popular is another group in Guayaquil that seeks to provide such affective infrastructures. Bringing together youth from the estuary and other urban-popular neighborhoods, the *batucada* is a syncopated percussion ensemble, a musical and rhythmic style that is originally Afro-Brazilian. When we spoke with him, Billy Navarrete, director of the Permanent Committee for the Defense of Human Rights, detailed with clarity the complex history and current transformations in the violence and rights violations of the most vulnerable populations in Guayaquil. At the end of his incisive and devastating analysis, we asked where he saw hope for the future and he said without hesitation, "the Batucada Popular" (Billy Navarrete, interview, 2024).

About a hundred young people from Guayaquil neighborhoods, in which the risk of being captured by gangs is palpable, make up this space where they learn to play together in rhythm. In mixed collaborations and to the beat of raucous drumming that can express their complex lives often simplified and criminalized by securitization, these adolescents can escape being confined into categories of "good" or "bad" youth. Johanna Chevez, who leads the group and trains the drummers, opening up her house to young men and women who drift in and out for practice, to hang out, for a safe space when they need one, tells us that the idea for the group began in 2020, when she and others decided to gather women to play the drums in street protests "in dignified rage."

> And these women came with their children. And then, when it was time for them to play the drums, the mothers said, you go ahead . . . I feel that the mothers already felt it back then. Already. I feel that they had a sense already that things were going to get worse . . . And that's why they gave them the drums. And that's why they looked for a safe place, they had to secure it, they had to protect it. (Johanna Chevez, interview, 2024)

There is both continuity and contrast with the drumming that anchored the music and the movement in the Miguel Quinteros's instruments made in San Lorenzo. Instead of wood and animal skins for the drums, instead of elders passing on their knowledge and their songs, the Guayaquil sounds emerge from what there is: "We didn't have money for drums, so we used buckets . . . We broke brooms and made sticks and beat on the buckets in the back patio" (Johana Chevez, interview, 2024). Despite their differences, in both cases, drumming marks the beat of the affective infrastructures to collectively search escape from capture, built from what there is.

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People construct abolitionist geographies from what there is; shifts in perspectives connecting memories and aspirations can radically revise the notion of what can be done with the materials available. The affective infrastructures that takes us from rural territorialized livelihoods through the movement of music to the shaping of black urban spaces seeks to find lines of flight out of historically sustained and constraining structures.

La Tunda was once the maroon woman with the disfigured leg who guided enslaved people to the *palenque*. Colonial and church hierarchies began to persuade us that she was nothing but a myth, associated with being struck physically and spiritually; in Spanish the word *tunda* also means a beating. No longer seeing La Tunda's ambivalent, trickster nature boxed her into a figure to fear, stemming escapes from haciendas and marronage as a decolonizing project.

Another mythical figure from traditional Afro-Pacific song that came up repeatedly, in the context of concerns with the increasing recruitment of young men, is the lost Torbellino (whose name translates literally as Whirlwind):

Torbellino se ha perdido	Torbellino is lost
Yo no se donde andará	Where could he be?
Ay Torbellino! Ay Torbellino!	Oh Torbellino! Oh Torbellino!
Subiendo miro pa'rriba	Going up I look up
Bajando miro pa'bajo	Going down I look down
Torbellino se ha caído	Torbellino has fallen
Todavía nadie lo ha encontrado	No one has found him
Torbellino se ha perdido	Torbellino is lost
Yo no se dónde andará	Where could he be?
Preguntale al marimbero	Ask the marimbero
Que por ahí lo anda buscando	He's out there looking for Torbellino[9]

La Tunda may be lost like Torbellino, the marimba and the *palenque* may have been folklorized, and Alonso de Illescas is now the name of a bus company. But these trickster figures—and the possibilities of escape that they represent—are alive in the city, passing through cars and polluted streets. We can hear them in the *toca tambor, toca tambor* of the *bomba* drums. The rhythms and memories that pulse from Esmeraldas to Guayaquil—in the voices of elders recounting stories and histories to wide-eyed children, through the drums of San Lorenzo to the streets of Guayaquil—mark possibilities of tentatively tracing futures not yet drawn. By making paths as we walk them, creating openings for future paths through infrastructures of affect and sound, the potentialities of La Tunda and Torbellino remain just beyond being found, somewhere in the smog and the crowds of black city spaces, where they make haste, make do, and make things happen in the concrete jungle.

ABSTRACT

A vertiginous rise in violence, criminal activity, and militarization in Ecuador in the last few years has hit the inhabitants of Afro-descent the hardest, particularly in Esmeraldas and Guayas, coastal provinces which are among the country's most dangerous areas. These populations have historically negotiated visibility and capture to cultivate possible futures in complex contexts of marronage, differential inclusion into a new nation, and now, multiple authorities vying for control. In this article, we argue that the stories and histories that Afro-Ecuadorians trace across time and territories, through music, sounds, and collective memories, create affective infrastructures that open paths towards vernacular and relational forms of sovereignty and agency. Through historical and traditional figures and rhythms, these infrastructures connect trickster pasts to possibilities of futures in impossible circumstances. [affective infrastructures, afro-descendant and sonorous politics, subsovereign agency, Esmeraldas, Guayaquil, Ecuador]

NOTES

1. We are grateful to the anonymous reviewer who suggested making this dimension of the analysis explicit, and their suggestion to read Zavala (2018), whose discussion of how cultural imaginaries of narco-trafficking benefits state and imperial power converges with studies we cite that connect criminal economies to capital accumulation.
2. In 2023, the homicide rate in the Esmeraldas province was 82.87 homicides per 10,000 inhabitants; in Guayas, the rate was 85.66. Only the province of El Rios (of 24 provinces in the country) had a higher homicide rate (OECO 2023). Compare these rates to the 2021 global average of 5.8 homicides per 10,000 inhabitants (UNODC 2023).
3. The project Counter-Narratives of Violence seeks to document and communicate grassroots interpretations and responses to the current context of increased violence, in order to challenge the government and mass-media narratives that criminalize racialized and marginalized youth and securitization and militarization as a solution.
4. We would like thank the generosity and contributions of the *palenquera mayor* Ines Morales; the artists, musicians and poets Miguel Quintero, Jackson Ayoví, Victor Arroyo, Sulia Caicedo, Amada Cortes, Jenni Nazareno, Fercho Arroyo, Olmedo Guerra; the community and cultural organizers Carlos Valencia, Jimmy Simisterra, Inés Santos and Johanna Chévez; the neighborhood and social leaders Inginio Castillo, Juanita Bone, Eugenia Castro, Maria Eugenia Delgado and her daughter Vicki; as well as the urban historian Patricia Sanchez and the important work of the CDH in Guayaquil, with particular thanks to Paul Murillo and Billy Navarrete. We would never have been able to connect and learn from so many in San Lorenzo and Guayaquil without the collaborations of our colleagues Ana Maria Morales and Marilyn Urresto, as well as the rest of the Reproduction and Violences team working on the Counter-Narratives project Lisset Coba, Cristina Vega and Juan Gonzalez Rebollo. Many of the ideas in

this article emerged from exchanges and the profound insights of these colleagues and comrades.

5. According to Arrom, *cimarron* "is an indigenous term of Antillean origin" already in use by the first part of the 16th century (Arrom 1983). Maroonage as resistance against slavery and racism is described by Edzon León's: "to politicize and, with it, to critically contemporize the experience of marronage linked to colonial slavery in order to recompose a political thought of the existence of the maroon that can contribute to the current political processes of the peoples of the diaspora" (León 2021, 16). Likewise, we are interested in an anti-essentialist, historicized reading of the category, such as Pedro Lebrón's: "the mythopoetic figure of the maroon has become a central referent for thinking about urgent philosophical problems related to colonization, decolonization, anti-black violence, and ways of being and being in the world that resist and reverse processes of subjectivation rooted in the catastrophic experience of the crossing of the Atlantic" (Lebrón Ortiz 2023, 278).
6. A similar figure is the Brazilian leader Zumbi of the long-lasting maroon community Quilombo de los Palmares, which existed from 1605 until 1695, who is now remembered as a devil. "In the popular imaginary of Northeastern Brazil, Zumbi is characterized as an evil nocturnal devil who steals children away who behave badly" (Gonzalez 2021, 38).
7. We thank Cristina Vega for sharing the idea of "working with what there is," a notion emerging from dialogues with the Laboratoria Feminist Research Space. See Pimentel et al. (2021) for a gathering of such dialogues.
8. Negotiations that led to the signing of a peace treaty between the Colombian government and the Colombian Revolutionary Armed Forces (FARC) guerrilla group created disaffected, decentralized and still armed splinter groups whose territorial conflicts are now Ecuadorian conflicts (Palma 2021), as Ecuador has transformed it main role a transit route for narcotrafficking to becoming a site for its production and storage as well, making control of its territories more contentious (Rivera-Rhon and Bravo 2020).
9. A performance of this song is accessible at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BfaK-6JuO1mY

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