
The Capitalocene in *Embrace of the Serpent*: Capitalism's Destruction of People, Culture, and Nature

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"Capital was born from extinction, and from capital, extinction has flowed."

Justin McBrien, *Anthropocene* 116

The Capitalocene, as an alternative to the Anthropocene, claims it is not merely *human* activity that is having such detrimental effects on the planet, but the activities of capitalism specifically. The concept of the Anthropocene puts equal blame on all humans and "fits comfortably with a view of population, environment and history governed by food and resource use – and abstracted from class and empire" (Moore, "The Capitalocene Part II" 238); that is, the concept overlooks the disproportionate role big corporations play in climate change. As the working class are denigrated for using plastic straws and charged to buy plastic bags, just twenty of the biggest companies continue to emit a third of all carbon emissions (Taylor and Watts). The Capitalocene, in contrast, focuses on the role of big industry, and recognises that it is capitalism and its values that have historically caused and continue to cause the most damage to the environment. A central theorist of the concept, Jason Moore states that "Global warming is capital's crowning achievement" ("The Capitalocene Part II" 237) and "'accumulation by extinction' has been fundamental to capitalism from the beginning" (Moore, "Introduction" 8). "The accumulation of capital is the accumulation of potential extinction—a potential increasingly activated in recent decades" (Moore, "Introduction" 8). Extinction here is taken to refer to the "'extinguishing of cultures and languages,' genocide, and

spectrum of biospheric changes understood as Anthropogenic" (Moore, "Introduction" 7; see also McBrien).

The rise of global capitalism came hand in hand with the "founding" of the New World (Quijano 533), sharing a central aim of progress, development, and profit above all, and "life in all its diversity – in people and in nature – seems to have been sacrificed to [this] progress' (Shiva xii). The central victims of this extinction are the subaltern, colonial subjects of this regime, and yet their stories, challenges, and deaths are often omitted by the scholarship around the concept. Indeed, there is a "long history of 'political exchange' between the owners of capital and the purveyors of imperial violence" (Moore, "The Capitalocene Part II" 242). However, "the dangers and challenges that threatened and still haunt the communities of the Amazon, such as death, dispossession, exploitation, destruction of their habitat and acculturation" are not often explored by any media (Mutis 32). An exception to this is *Ciro Guerra's Embrace of the Serpent*, which follows the story of Karamakate, the last surviving member of the Cohiuano tribe who were eradicated in the Rubber Holocaust (Rivera 49). The film follows two timelines: the first is set in 1909 and features a young Karamakate. The protagonist is approached by a fictionalised version of German ethnologist and explorer, Theodor "Theo" Koch-Grünberg, who is searching for the Yakruna plant to cure his malaria. The second timeline is set in 1940 with an older Karamakate approached by a fictionalised version of American biologist Richard Evans Schultes (referred to in the film as Evan), who intends to procure the Yakruna plant in order to increase the purity of the Americans' rubber trees. Whilst the two Western characters are based on real explorers and the narrative inspired by their diaries, Karamakate is a completely fictional character and the Cohiuano are a fictional community. Guerra himself explains the decision, stating that as a non-Indigenous film-maker he "didn't have the right to make a fiction about a real tribe" (Guerra in Guillén). The Cohiuano and indeed Karamakate, however, were heavily inspired by the actor who played

the older character, Antonio Bolívar Salvador. Salvador was one of the last Ocaina people remaining and was displaced by the Rubber Holocaust, escaped, and lived his life with a different community in order to survive (Salvador in Mathiesen; Guerra in Guillén). In this way, the fictionalised narrative is a reflection of a truth lived by many Indigenous peoples throughout the Amazon and this made the work incredibly valuable to the communities who are continually facing the destruction of their cultures (Salvador in Mathiesen).

Indeed, according to Pinzón, the film “is the elaboration of a loss insofar as it invites us to witness the end of a world”; that is, the Native and natural world. The thirty-year expanse of the film foregrounds the effects of the rubber trade and “illustrates how much the Amazon has changed, become commercialized and overcome by colonialism” (Ramji 2). The film demonstrates how capitalism “leaves in its wake the disappearance of species, languages, cultures, and peoples,” and how this extinction is no accident, but is achieved through labour, murder, deforestation, depletion of resources, and dispossession all in the name of progress (McBrien 117). This study examines the ways in which capitalism causes the destruction of people, culture, and nature through slavery, mass extraction of resources, and the destruction of land. Firstly, this paper will explore the depiction of the Cohiuano’s environmental practices and knowledges, before going on to analyse the contrasting practices and ignorance of global capitalists. Secondly, it will examine how *Embrace of the Serpent* presents the effects of these practices. Specifically, how they led to the destruction of land and biodiversity in favour of mass extraction and consumption, how this extraction led to the displacement and enslavement of Indigenous communities, and how this enslavement and genocide led to the deaths of their cultures. As Arturo Escobar explains, “The capitalisation of nature has been central to capitalism ever since primitive accumulation and the enclosure of the commons. The history of capital is thus the history of exploitation of production conditions” (*Encountering Development* 200). Capitalism, at its very

essence, exploits its environment. This paper aims to show how *Embrace of the Serpent* presents extinction as a result of capitalism, and thus demonstrates the dangerous reality of the Capitalocene.

The film presents Indigenous knowledges and practices through Karamakate's conservation, understanding, and respect for his environment. Karamakate states that the "jungle is fragile, and if you attack her, she strikes back. She will only allow us to travel if we respect her" (*Embrace*). The pronoun "she," the concept of respect, and the necessity of her permission personify the environment and give it autonomy, showing that the Cohiuano people's relationship is one of "respectful coexistence and awareness of the fragility of nature. This attitude speaks more to current ecological concerns and processes of rainforest exploitation" (D'Argenio 137), so the focus on the necessity of respect could be seen as a criticism of the colonisers' disrespect. In the same scene, Karamakate states that they "must not eat meat or fish until the rains begin and we ask for permission to the Owners of Animals. We can't cut any tree from its root" (*Embrace*). The idea that they must "ask permission" connotes the necessity of consent. This, in turn, further endows a sense of autonomy to nature, since the "very setting of rules of behaviour implies an understanding of the jungle as an 'earth-being'" (D'Argenio 137), showing the "dynamic relationship which [Karamakate's] people have with both the stars and the Earth" (Martin-Jones 17). This "dynamic relationship" suggests an active, two-way connection between the tribespeople and forest. Furthermore, the Cohiuano's "rules" for interacting with nature infer that their relationship—like many Indigenous silvical practices—is based on the "sustainable and renewable maximisation of all the diverse forms and functions of forests and trees" (Shiva 58); they "try to maintain their harmony and comply with certain rules that over the years they have determined are necessary for everything to continue to flow harmoniously" (Ibáñez et al 175). Therefore, the rules are based on acquired knowledge and experience,

so the abstention from eating meat or fish before the rains may be in place to avoid destroying the populations of animals who are already struggling during the dry season. Likewise, the rule to not “cut any tree from its root” ensures that the tree will grow back. These rules, then, display a deep understanding of, as well as respect for, nature’s needs, and the way in which the “jungle is for [Karamakate] an extension of his own existence” (Ibáñez et al 175).

The film further presents the Cohiuano’s relationship with the jungle as a judicious one through a scene where butterflies fly around Karamakate (Figure 1). Their proximity, volume, and the calmness of all parties is the perfect example of “[hu]man's capacity to merge with [nature’s] rhythms and patterns intellectually, emotionally and spiritually” (Shiva 54). Whilst this moment could be seen to facsimile the stereotyping of Indigenous peoples as being at one with nature, it functions more to demonstrate Karamakate’s respect and understanding of nature. Indeed, butterfly swarms are a natural and normal occurrence, so the scene does not extend into the stereotypical presentation of shamanism and non-human companions. The focus in this scene is more on Karamakate’s reaction to them (or lack thereof): he ignores them as they ignore him. He simply exists within the same

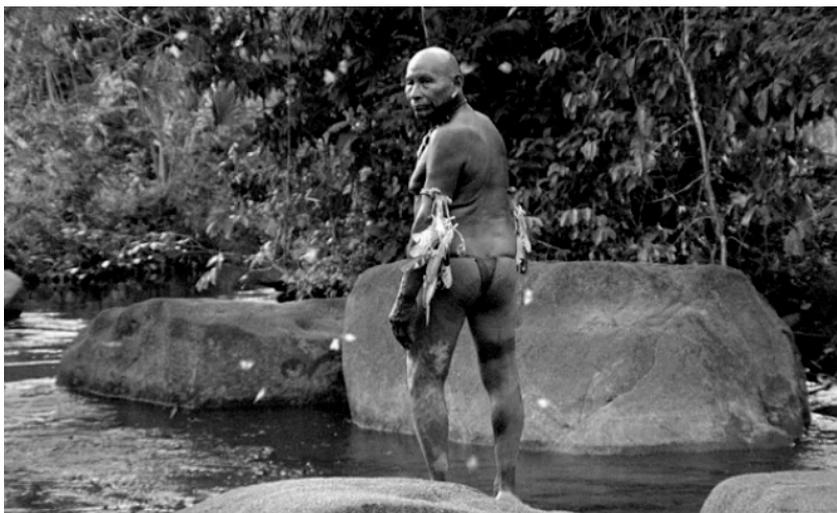


Figure 1

space as them and is content to share it: he does not brush them away as a nuisance, nor does he move to get away from them. This lack of reaction contrasts to the capitalists’ belief in

human supremacy as Karamakate appears to accept their coexistence and recognises that both human, non-human animal, and the natural world live with rather than against one another.

The use of butterflies in particular also emphasises this connection. Butterflies are generally solitary creatures, which is reflective of Karamakate as the last surviving member of his tribe. Nevertheless, some butterflies (such as the Coliadinae family) often spend time in groups near bodies of water, which facsimiles Karamakate's home and his reliance on community (Burger and Gochfeld 489). Indeed, as Burger and Gochfeld's study revealed, the larger the group of butterflies, the better their chance of survival (482). In addition, many types of butterflies have been shown to retain memories and knowledge from when they were caterpillars, despite the extreme metamorphosis they undergo in the cocoon (Blackiston et al). This fact can also be paralleled to Karamakate. Despite the complete transformation of his country, the forest, and many other tribespeople's ways of life, and notwithstanding his later difficulty remembering some practices, Karamakate holds on to his culture. He refuses to assimilate and does his best to maintain traditional practices, evincing a kinship between the human and the creature.

In addition, the use of butterflies could function to further support Karamakate's "forest rules" by referring to the butterfly effect. This phenomenon claims that "a butterfly flaps its wings in China and sets off a tornado in Texas," drawing on the ways in which "small events compound and irreversibly alter the future of the universe" (Boeing 14). This is reminiscent of Karamakate's understanding that eating animals during the dry season could have disastrous effects on the ecosystem as

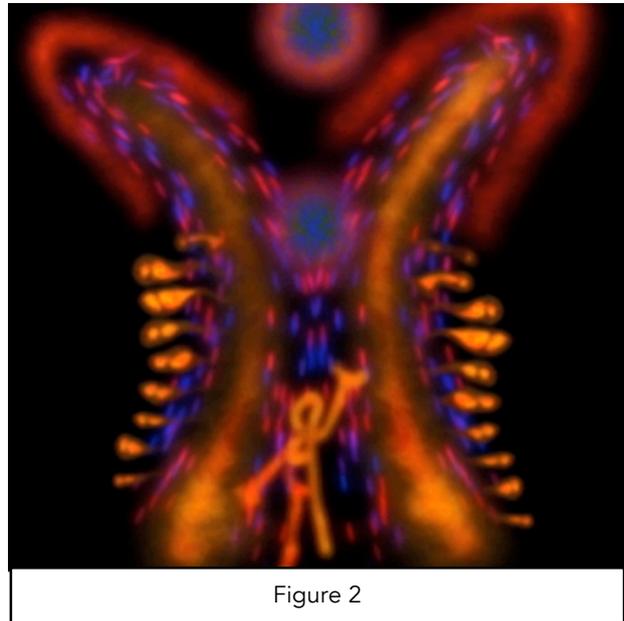


Figure 2

a whole. This kinship and the significance of the butterfly as a symbol of both change and cultural retention is emphasised by the dream sequence towards the end, which finishes on the image of a human figure drawn inside a butterfly (Figure 2). This could be a metaphor for the way in which the activities of humans and nature interlink and affect one another. Indeed, butterflies' "flight activity has provided important evidence of global climate change," indicating the ways in which human activity in the context of the Capitalocene can have disastrous effects on nature (Parmesan 2006). The image also reflects Karamakate's understanding of humans as a part of nature by literally depicting us living within it.

Embrace of the Serpent conveys the Coahuano people's conservational practices as Karamakate appears to possess "botanical wisdom beyond that developed by Western civilisation" in scenes such as the first visit to the missionary temple (Martin-Jones 19). Karamakate teaches the kidnapped boys about the Chircaspi plant, explaining it is a "gift to our Karipulakena ancestors from the gods. We received the sun's semen when Yeba, the sun's daughter, scratched his penis and ground the semen to dust. We must do the same with this plant before boiling

it [...] This is the strongest defence we have against any disease" (*Embrace*). The belief that the plant is a "gift" embeds nature as a sacred being to be treasured, and the plant's healing qualities demonstrate the two-way relationship, as the jungle gives back to those who take the time to understand and care for it. Karamakate and the Cohiuano show a "far superior knowledge of and engagement with the rainforest ecosystem," a rapport that clearly prioritises the health of the forest and its inhabitants (Martin-Jones 20). Indeed, many Indigenous populations' commitment to and interaction with their environment is based on such pragmatic conservation efforts. For example, using trees' produce to survive whilst conserving the trees themselves and only taking what is needed (Shiva 62). This prioritisation of sustained instead of maximised resource extraction is deployed as grounds for capitalists and colonialists to position Indigenous communities as unproductive (Shiva 10). Correspondingly, capitalist invasion of the Amazon meant that "[r]esource flows to maintain nature's cycles and local needs of water and diverse vegetation have been replaced by cash-flows as a measure of 'yield' and 'growth'" (85). As Escobar attests, "capitalism impairs or destroys the social and environmental conditions on which it relies (including nature and labour)," replacing long-term sustainability with short-term profit and productivity (*Encountering Development* 200).

The film contrasts these sustainable practices and relationships against capitalist activities and attitudes towards the environment. The exploitative capitalist "way of being in the world" is sharply criticised by Guerro and his team (Martin-Jones 16). Karamakate describes the white people as "ants. They'll eat anything, and they die fat. [They'll] devour everything" (*Embrace*). Karamakate's in-depth knowledge of nature would tell him that ants hoard food and are often destructive (Cook et al). Accordingly, the film may be referring to capitalism's tendency to eschew long-term survival in favour of short-term profit, in the shape of mass extraction and consumption (Lumsden). Moreover, ants represent an apt metaphor

for colonial forces and their agents, as they “occupy virtually all major terrestrial habitats” and are known as an “invasive species” (Ward 550).

Karamakate tells the children that “[o]ne day [the Colombians] will finish all the food in the jungle,” emphasising their lack of regard for sustainability, lack of general respect for the environment, and their one-way association with the place. As Karamakate explains, his mission was to share the belief and understanding that “every plant, every tree, every flower is full of wisdom” with the children of his tribe, “but the rubber barons and Colombians came” (*Embrace*). The syntactical prioritisation of the barons suggests that it is the extraction of rubber and, by extension, the commodification of nature that brought the colonisers, and it was this incumbent capitalism that stopped him sharing his culture. The extinction of many Indigenous peoples’ way of life “is grounded in the experience of alienation and the [colonists’] attitude of entitlement” (Crist 29); their relationship with the ecosystem is one of possession and domination.

Embrace of the Serpent demonstrates how the locals’ relationship—predicated on understanding and respect—is sundered by the invasion of capitalism. Practices of conservation are replaced by creeds of commodification. The film accomplishes this through the presentation of the colonisers’ disregard



Figure 3

for the Cohiuano’s prohibitions (such as not eating meat or fish before the rains begin), both in the Christian Mission where the travellers are offered fish for

dinner (*Embrace*) and when Theo, addled by delirium, protests the rules.

“Permission from whom?,” he shouts, “You? The Owner of the Fishes? I’m sick

because of respecting your ridiculous prohibitions! [...] This river is full of fish! One less won't change anything!" (*Embrace*). The derogatory, mocking tone—particularly evident in the phrase "Owner of the Fishes" as a mimicry of the Cohiuano's beliefs regarding the "Owner of the Animals"—indicate the level of disrespect that even "nice" colonisers like Theo have for Indigenous cultures as well as nature itself. Theo's claim that "one less fish" won't make a difference reveals his disregard for the importance of each and every life that the Cohiuano treasure. It also encapsulates his ignorance regarding the dramatic effects the smallest of actions can have; that is, the 'fragility' of the jungle that Karamakate warned of earlier in the film. Evan's propensity for throwing his cigarette butts into the river entrenches this disrespect further (Figure 4). He pollutes the waterway without considering that this could harm the plants, animals, and humans that rely on the water itself. These violations demonstrate the capitalist view that "humans could and indeed should control nature", rejecting any form of judicious coexistence (McBrien 125). Thus, the colonisers jeopardise the health of the ecosystem due to their perceived entitlement and view of nature as a commodity that exists for their own use. These attitudes reflect a larger cultural narcissism and human supremacy that white capitalist societies partake in.



Figure 4

The film goes on to depict the effects of this mass extraction of resources and ignorance of the land to illustrate how "capitalism imposes a relentless pattern of violence on nature, humans included" (Moore, "Introduction" 5). Commercial

demands have “frequently resulted in large-scale forest destruction.” (Shiva 58-9) *Embrace of the Serpent* presents and criticises this destruction of land and the resultant ligation of biodiversity, laying bare the impacts of these losses on the Indigenous communities who rely on that land. Karamakate claims that the white man's science only leads to “violence, death” as it is dependent upon and derivative of profit (*Embrace*). A prime example of this kind of dominance in the film is the rubber tree, the commodification of which destroyed entire forests through “armed conflict over the control of areas where rubber can be harvested” (Martin-Jones 16). Here, “control” indicates the colonisers’ wish to dominate the land, rather than live and interact with it. Moreover, the conflict is inferred to be military in nature, and thus violent. This is emphasised as Karamakate asks, “you want to steal yakruna? What else will you turn into death?” For “rubber means death,” which, considering the context of the rubber trade, can be seen as paraphrasis for “the capitalist commodification of nature causes death” (*Embrace*).

Embrace of the Serpent articulates capitalism as “a colonising force on the biosphere stripping it of its biological wealth and potential” (Crist 23) through the cultivation and consequential exploitation of nature “by the capitalist mode of production” (Shiva ix-x). The Cohiuano’s sacred traditions hold that “yakruna must not be cultivated”, potentially referring to the pejorative biological effects of cultivation (*Embrace*); what is known as “green revolution agriculture” decreases genetic diversity, inhibits their medicinal value, and increases the vulnerability of



Figure 5

plants to diseases, and therefore extinction (Shiva xiii). This drive to extinction is also

evinced by the plant's supposed caretakers, who have given up protecting it from capitalist development, been reduced to drunks, and are shown "toasting the end of the world!" (*Embrace*). The camera alternates between shots of the sacred plant being cultivated and its caretakers toasting (Figure 5), which reinforces the link between the two events. This connection presents the "systematic desecration and prosecution of ancient Indigenous knowledge" and practices by capitalism. (Rivera 49). Whilst the tribespeople see yakruna as ecologically valuable and consider it their "greatest knowledge", Western colonisers merely want it for its exploitable properties—specifically its capacity to enhance the purity of rubber, which the Americans believe will help them win World War II (*Embrace*). Capitalism values only commercially useful nature. This view prepares and precipitates the felling of forests full of trees that "maintain the life of the soil and water and of local people" but do not generate profit, and so are viewed as weeds and "an obstruction to agriculture" (Shiva 74; 59). These "weeds" are replaced by ecologically damaging trees or commercially grown crops that provoke hydrological changes which ravage the forest, alluding back to the butterfly effect and demonstrating how damage to one part of an ecosystem can imperil another. Such deforestation could "lead to the loss of a large number of plant species, which in turn would seriously threaten the tribespeople's way of life and their food security" (Ibáñez et al 177). As Déborah Danowski and Eduardo Viveiros de Castro note, the people of the Amazon are experiencing "a desynchronization of seasonal rhythms and hydrological cycles, and a consequent perturbation of the biosemiotic interactions characteristic of these peoples' traditional habitats" (75). This disruption derives from the "generalized and mounting violent destruction of these environments by the programs for the acceleration of growth pushed forward by nation-states in thrall to Integrated World Capitalism' (Danowski and de Castro 75). Such extinction, then, can be seen as a direct result of the colonisers' lack of regard for, desecration of, and commodification of nature.

Embrace of the Serpent proceeds to express how this mass extraction and the consequent destruction of environment catalyses the destruction of Indigenous communities through displacement, lack of access to resources, and even murder. In many countries, colonial capitalism functions to limit local peoples' access to the forests they previously relied on for survival (Shiva xiv; 78) and threatens "their way of life and their food security" (Ibáñez et al 177). Evidently, the Capitalocene ignores "the rights of communities to their territories and resources," enacting "tremendously uneven patterns of global consumption, environmental impact, and structures of exploitation" (Escobar, *Encountering Development* xxiii). Moreover, the capitalist mode of development in regions such as the Amazon and India does not draw on "surplus produced over and above the needs of the community" (Shiva 4). These extractive forces take everything and Indigenous communities are left in poverty. As Vandana Shiva states, these "resources which supported their survival were absorbed into the market economy," suggesting that these people are displaced by capitalism (11). Such displacement has resulted in 456 million people starving or being malnourished, giving rise to "a crisis of poverty rooted in ecological devastation" and shows that the usurpation of tribal land in favour of capitalist plantations leads to the extinction of Indigenous people (Shiva xiii; xvi). The effects of this displacement are addressed by the older Karamakate, who reminisces that stones, trees, and animals all used to talk to him (*Embrace*). The past tense is crucial in this scene, as the character explains that he can no longer read the petroglyphs he himself drew; "Now they're just pictures on rocks. Now I'm empty. I'm a chullachaqui." In the film, it is explained that a chullachaqui is a creature "which looks exactly like the person but is empty and hollow, a copy that drifts like a ghost" (*Embrace*). This claim thereby connotes that Karamakate's displacement from his land and the extinction of his community has compromised his connections with his environment and culture, rendering him "hollow" and "lost" (*Embrace*). Indeed, Mutis paraphrases Guerra in claiming that "the Chullachaqui is a metaphor for what

the Amazon tribes feel, who fear that their culture, languages and traditions are being lost" (Mutis 39).

The decimation of land in favour of rubber plantations rides high in the film, providing commentary on the connective tissue between disease and deforestation. Sickness also contributes to the extinction of people through Theo's malaria, characterised by his sweating, shivering, and fever (Crump). The relentless demand for rubber caused the ecological homogenisation of areas "whose Native diversity was destroyed and replaced by a few staple crops such as sugar, tobacco, and coffee," and in this case latex, which fed almost entirely luxury exports to the global west that held no use to the locals (McBrien 120). This paucity of ecological diversity in favour of profit "allowed for malaria and yellow fever to thrive to new epidemic proportions," showing how the exploitation of nature indirectly drives the extinction of Indigenous populations (120).

Another mode of destruction highlighted by the film is direct murder, with Karamakate himself the last survivor of "an Indigenous tribe eradicated during armed conflict over the region's rubber" (Martin-Jones 17). The character regularly reminds the audience that the "Cohiuano don't exist anymore" because white people "killed them all" (*Embrace*). These lines evidence that the extermination of



Figure 6

Karamakate's people was a genocide committed by white Colombians seeking to commodify the sharinga trees. This is emphasised when the travellers stumble upon a mass grave and witness bodies hanging from trees at rubber plantations (Figure 6).

The kind of genocidal activity Karamakate speaks of was not a

rarity during the rubber boom of the early 20th century and is part of the Rubber

Holocaust (Rivera 49). Furthermore, Karamakate states that his people were killed by the “Caucheros,” who “razed everything,” implicating the concomitant combination of murder and dispossession deployed by the rubber barons who destroyed his people in order to make room for plantations. The people’s death is conveyed as the result of capitalist exploitation in regard to the rubber trade. The film’s end credits explicitly inscribe this theme; *Embrace of the Serpent* is “dedicated to all the peoples whose song we will never know” (*Embrace*).

Embrace of the Serpent ties the scale of these plantations and the mass extraction performed by the capitalists directly to the enslavement and extinction of Indigenous peoples and their cultures. This extinction was executed through forced labour, as the “arrival of the rubber boom [meant that] many were converted to slavery” (Ibáñez et al 175). Karamakate immediately



Figure 7



Figure 8

recognises the lacerations on Theo’s Indigenous companion, Manduca (visible in Figure 7). They are patently inflicted by the rubber barons, illustrating the violent prevalence of plantations where barons “brutally subjected the Indigenous peoples to forced labor” (Prasch 93). Such brutality is foregrounded by the mutilated local that the travellers come across, who has only one arm, serious facial scarring, a limp, and an improvised cast on his leg (Figure 8). The man begs Manduca to kill him and, when the others

protest, Manduca states that "If I don't [kill him], they'll torture him to death. [...] Nobody deserves this hell" (*Embrace*). The invocation of "hell" and its attendant connotations of evil gesture toward the extent of the horrors on the plantation. It is telling that death is considered better than being a slave there. Furthermore, Manduca's knowledge of the man's fate suggests that it is a common one among the slaves. This slavery is the torture that the Indigenous peoples suffer, who "either were murdered or died because of the cruel treatment they received from the rubber barons" (Rivera 49). Suffering and death in this formulation are a direct result of capitalism's drive for profit, as the Native people "were forced to extract the latex; if they did not deliver the fees demanded by the rubber tappers, they were punished in the stocks, flogged and tortured [and when they did deliver] they were given certain goods at exorbitant prices" (Ibáñez et al 176). Here we see how the Native people were forced to participate in the colonial economy as well as being turned into labourers in the interest of that same economy's proliferation. The extent of the commodification of nature, capitalism's demand for maximum profit, and the pressure put on the slaves are condensed in Wade Davis' claim that a single worker would "tap over four hundred trees a day" (306).

This enslavement is shown to be causal to the extinction of Indigenous cultures, evidenced in the Christian Mission, which was based in a former rubber plantation (D'Argenio 141; Figure 9). The aim of such missions was to "civilise the savages and convert them into sons of God and of the homeland" (Pérez Benavides 108). Amongst this erasure was the changing of children's names and banning their Native languages, making it "easier" to instil the ideology of capitalism into the local

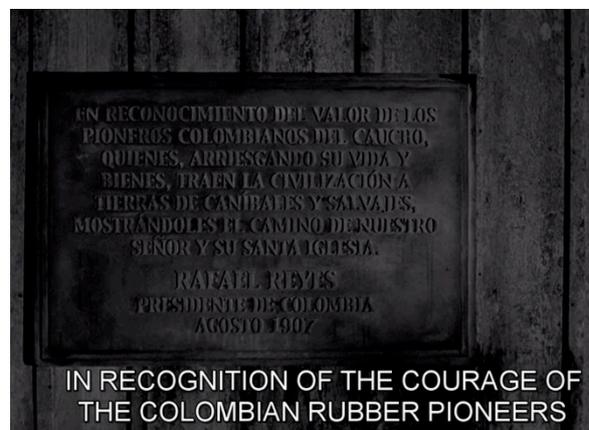


Figure 9

population (*Embrace*). Indeed, the missions turned the local children into a “(subaltern) workforce.” In conjunction “with the rise of global capitalism and need for primary goods (D’Argenio 141), the missions received state funding to kidnap more children in order to provide more labourers to keep up with demand, demonstrating how the “Capitalocene [as extinction] signifies also the ‘extinguishing of cultures and languages’” (Moore, “Introduction” 7). These scenes also outline capitalism’s influence in changing “the role of *Homo Sapiens*” from “member and citizen” of the land to “conqueror” (Leopold 204). This pattern transformed “nature from terra mater into a machine and a source of raw material; [removing] all ethical and cognitive constraints against its violation and exploitation” (Shiva xiv).

Embrace of the Serpent ends with Evan experiencing a hallucination after Karamakate prepares the last Yakruna plant for him to consume, with Karamakate stating, “I wasn’t meant to teach my people. I was meant to teach you”. Whilst this ending could be seen as an example of the White Saviour Complex, it more likely functions to embed the superiority of the Cohiuano’s understanding and knowledge over capitalist greed. Evan pursues the plant in order to utilise its profitable properties (i.e., purifying rubber). Conversely, Karamakate instead uses the last of it to show him a snippet of his people’s views, knowledges, and understanding of the jungle. In this way, the scientist is enlightened regarding both his own personal ignorance and the ignorance of his culture more broadly. When he awakens, however, Karamakate has disappeared, leaving Evan with no answers or explanations—no full understanding of what he has witnessed. Evan’s Western, capitalist views and knowledge structure are thus diminished as he is shown how much he and the culture he represents do not know. Earlier in the film, Manduca warns that “If we can’t get the whites to learn, it will be the end of us. The end of everything” (*Embrace*). This final scene returns to this notion as Karamakate realises

that the only thing he can do is teach "the Whites" their own ignorance. Through this scene and indeed Karamakate and Evan's journey more broadly, the filmmakers emphasise the direct correlation between the extinction of people, culture, and nature. Karamakate regains his lost culture and knowledge just as Evan realises that his own capitalist views are ignorant and destructive. As capitalist views and practices are challenged, rejected, and broken within the narrative, Indigenous knowledges and cultures are reclaimed.

Through its presentation of the Indigenous slave trade and the rubber trade, the Indigenous peoples' judicious relationship with nature in contrast to capitalism's destruction of it, and the domination and cultivation of nature, Guerra's *Embrace of the Serpent* evinces the interlinked ways by which capitalism causes the extinction of Indigenous people, cultures, and nature. By depicting this extinction, the film brings to light the songs of many communities who have suffered from the effects of capitalist greed and will continue to be the prime victims of the Capitalocene. It demonstrates the claim that

Some activities that man has carried out in these lands have brought and continue to bring negative impacts on [Indigenous] ecosystems and natural resources. Economic activities, especially extractive activities, although they have generated wealth for some, have been negative for both their inhabitants and the environment. (Ibáñez et al 177)

The film's depiction of this story from the perspective of an Indigenous person, as indicated by the frequent positioning of the camera looking over

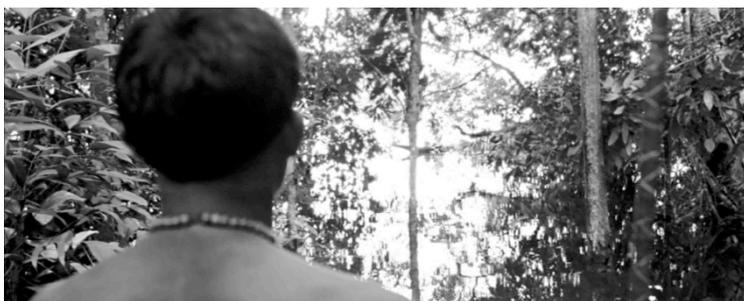


Figure 10

Karamakate's shoulder (Figure 10), attempts to combat—to some degree—the erasure of such stories and the

ignorance of the disastrous effects that damage and destroy Native communities. Since the film is spoken “mostly in cubeo, uitoto, ticuna and guanano,” Indigenous languages are prioritised over Spanish, German, or English (D’Argenio 136). This counteracts erasure, as it allows Indigenous stories to be told in their own languages. While the West’s environmental concerns have a tendency to focus on the aesthetic (the loss of the coral reefs’ beauty for example), temperature changes and volatile sea levels represent the catalysts of a new genocide in the Global South. As Escobar explains, “In the sustainable development discourse nature is reinvented as environment so that capital, not nature and culture, may be sustained’ (Escobar, “Constructing Nature” 49). The very focus of sustainability needs to change. Potent warnings of the kind that *Embrace of the Serpent* delivers are vital now more than ever, as is the acknowledgement of the Capitalocene’s historical and ongoing destruction of people, culture, and nature.

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