

Bobbittizing Texaco: Dis-Membering Corporate Capital and Re-Membering the Nation in Ecuador

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In February 1994, I attended a meeting on oil activities in the Ecuadorian Amazon held at the headquarters of CONFENIEA (Confederación de Nacionalidades Indígenas de la Amazonía Ecuatoriana), the regional confederation of Amazonian Indians in Ecuador. This was one of the first forums in which lowland mestizo peasant and indigenous leaders throughout the region gathered to discuss petroleum development in the Ecuadorian Amazon (or Oriente as the area is called). Only three months earlier a Philadelphia law firm had filed a class-action lawsuit against Texaco Inc. in the New York federal court on behalf of Amazonian mestizo peasants and Indians.¹ The meeting focused on the lawsuit. Members of the lowland Indian federation with whom I was working asked me, along with a Quito-based environmentalist, to take part in discussions.²

At one point, a mestizo leader turned to me (the supposed expert on the United States) and asked why Texaco Inc. thought it was not responsible for its Ecuadorian operations. As I attempted to explain the legal relationship between a parent company and its subsidiary, another leader interrupted: "Oh, it [Texaco's subsidiary] is a *miembrillo* that does what the company orders." Laughter immediately filled the room. *Miembrillo*, although meaning "a small appendage" or "little member" in Spanish, is also slang for penis in Ecuador. Without missing a beat, Sonia (a Quito-based environmental activist, single mother of two, and the only other female in the room) teased: "Yes, but Texaco is more complex than *el hombre*. *La compañía* has many *miembrillos* and at least it pretends that it's not associated with the ones that get it into trouble." The playful sparring had begun. "Well then," the mestizo leader jeered, "let's help it along. We've learned a bit from Lorena, haven't we? We'll just *bobbittizar* la compañía."

This article explores the unanticipated connections that many Ecuadorians made in early 1994 between a class-action suit against Texaco Inc. and the Lorena Bobbitt affair.³ The transnational lawsuit filed on behalf of 30,000

marginalized Ecuadorian citizens in a New York federal court in November 1993 sought reparations from Texaco Inc. for allegedly contaminating the Ecuadorian Amazon with its petroleum operations over a period of more than 25 years.⁴ Ecuadorian plaintiffs accused Texaco of deliberately dumping toxic wastes into the environment and thereby severely endangering local people as part of the company's cost-cutting measures to maximize its profits. This was a story about a First-World corporation exploiting marginalized Third-World peoples. Two months later, Lorena Bobbitt (an Ecuadorian citizen) was tried in the United States for "malicious wounding"—for having cut off the virile member of her husband John Wayne Bobbitt. Pleading at her own defense, Lorena claimed that years of sexual abuse and torture led her to commit her act. This was a story about a First-World man exploiting a Third-World woman.

The coincidence of a \$1.5 billion class-action suit by Ecuadorian citizens against Texaco in New York and the trial of Lorena Bobbitt for having severed the penis of her North American spouse spawned fabulous metaphoric slippage in Ecuador. Frequently juxtaposed in common conversation and in newsprint, the temporal overlap of the two cases in 1994 whetted many an appetite for verbal play in Ecuador, provocatively tracing relations between capital accumulation and sexual exploitation. Lorena Bobbitt's surname was transmuted into a verb: *bobbittizar* (to bobbittize, that is, to cut or to curtail). In line with the witty repartee that spiced daily life, many supporters of the lawsuit against Texaco jokingly appropriated Lorena Bobbitt's surname *qua* verb. At the same time, I was researching the politics of petroleum in the Ecuadorian Amazon, working closely with many indigenous, peasant, and environmental activists who opposed multinational oil operations. A number of these individuals were the major catalysts of the class-action suit against Texaco. In jocular conversation—more often than not spirited by a few beers—mestizo and indigenous men invariably bantered about "bobbittizing la compañía," that is, of curtailing or cutting off the workings of transnational petro-capital and Texaco's exploits in particular.

In what follows below, I probe how and why the two cases connected so readily in people's minds. What was it about the Lorena Bobbitt incident that resonated with the experiences of many people belonging to Ecuador's subaltern groups: Amazonian Indians, nonindigenous lowland peasants, and even urban white women? What did this connection enable and produce? And what does it tell us about how gender and sexuality might literally and figuratively operate within relations of power across transnational space? I argue that the two cases connected so readily in the minds of those who supported the class-action lawsuit because together the Texaco and Bobbitt affairs simultaneously exposed and challenged the dominant politics of membership in Ecuador. That is, for Ecuadorians to read the lawsuit against Texaco through the Bobbitt lens was to capture, critique, and hold out the promise for transforming the exclusionary politics of belonging in Ecuador.

I use the term *subaltern*, drawn from the writing of Antonio Gramsci (1971), to refer to a heterogeneous group of people subordinated along lines of

race, class, gender, language, culture, and religion. Initially, for scholars of subalternity, the term referred to the autonomous voice and action of the oppressed that history had silenced and scholars sought to recover (Guha 1982). Through the work of the Subaltern Studies Group, however, the meaning of subaltern shifted. With time it came to represent the transgressive (though silenced) voice and action of the oppressed produced by structures of domination, not emerging independent of them (Guha 1983, 1985, 1989). Such a perspective identified “subalternity as a position of critique, as a recalcitrant difference that arises not outside but inside elite discourse to exert pressure on forces and forms that subordinate it” (Prakash 1994:1481). It is with this sense that I use the term. The challenge to bobbittize Texaco emerged from the fissures within dominant discourse; it was not external to it.

Yet, as Spivak (1988) reminds, problems of representation arise in assuming that subaltern subjects share a unified subject position because they have been silenced by history. The subaltern is by definition heteroclitite; subaltern subjects do not represent an already preconstituted cohesive entity, a coherent “class” as it were. Rather, the forces and forms that constitute identity and difference among subaltern peoples serve as sites of inquiry. With respect to the lawsuit against Texaco, the collectivity of individuals on whose behalf U.S.-based lawyers filed the class action did not represent a preconstituted, cohesive group. Instead the collectivity of class-action plaintiffs and activists included an array of people from different backgrounds whose class, racial, cultural, and gender interests were often opposed to one another. Antagonisms between lowland Indians (*indígenas*) and mestizo peasants were great; mestizo peasants were colonist (*colono*) homesteaders who had usurped rights over much indigenous land over the previous thirty years. Similarly, miscommunications among Amazonian indígenas, colonos, and white urban environmentalists abounded, as lowlanders were initially suspicious of environmentalists’ loyalties and agenda.

I argue here that the joking interchange that associated the Texaco and Bobbitt cases served as one site, among others, for consolidating common understandings between the class-action plaintiffs and activists. It produced a shared perception of injury (of “being screwed”) despite differences between plaintiffs and activists. It forged a “class” in the class action despite attendant risks.⁵ The formation of a “class” through this joking association between the Texaco and the Bobbitt affair simultaneously laid bare the racial, class, and gender workings of national and transnational bodies politic and offered plaintiffs new tools with which to question the ruling criteria for full membership. The class of the class action challenged the politics of belonging and demanded to be re-membered in national and transnational polities.

Of Sexual Slippage

Before delving into the two cases and their connections, I would like to begin with a joke popular throughout the 1990s. This joke offers a glimpse of the use of sexual metaphors in Ecuador. It goes as follows:

xy: So, have you heard the latest lie that the government is telling us, *el pueblo* [the Ecuadorian populace], when it comes to neoliberal reforms.

xx: No, tell me. What is it?

xy: Pues, la punta no más. La punta no más.⁶

On hearing this the first time, I stared at two friends with a naive blank: “What? I don’t get it!” My companions burst into laughter, shattering the quiet in the small café where we sat over drinks one lazy Sunday afternoon in central Quito (Ecuador’s capital). “Well,” my part-time journalist, part-time intellectual, part-time photographer friend explained, “It’s like when a guy really wants to ‘make love’ to a woman and she’s totally ambivalent and uncomfortable but not exactly adamantly opposed. And the guy pleads, ‘Ahh, come on, just the tip. Just the tip.’ . . . Well, we all know what happens from there.”

Over the course of seven years, I heard various acquaintances in Ecuador make reference to this joke, often simply reciting the punch line—*la punta no más* (just the tip)—in commenting on the economic policies ruling their country. A succession of Ecuadorian regimes from 1992 onward asserted that neoliberal policies aiming to privatize, liberalize, and deregulate the national economy were necessary changes for modernization to take place. The government assured that any pain that people (especially the poor) might experience as a result of economic reforms was purely ephemeral and benign. Neoliberal policies that enabled transnational capital to further permeate the social body were—so the government maintained—ultimately beneficial and healthy for the nation. Yet, far from being ephemeral or benign, neoliberal reforms had drastic and lasting consequences for the daily lives of the majority. By way of analogy, the *punta no más* joke effectively equated structural adjustments and multinational operations with date rape. *El pueblo*—the people—were the female being screwed through deception.

Sexuality—especially sexual relations between unequal bodies—constitutes an everyday metaphor in many parts of Latin America for making sense of and reconciling all kinds of imperial ploys (Alarcon 1989; Franco 1989; Sommer 1991).⁷ It is hardly an exaggeration to say that the underclass majority feels, more often than not, *jodido* (screwed/fucked) by the North and that U.S. corporate power is commonly perceived by the marginalized as a sexual aggressor. And as the *punta no más* joke illustrates, the disenfranchised might creatively deploy sexual imagery to give meaning to circumstances even as they are “being screwed.” Yet, the predominant sexual imagery that people use to make imperial ploys meaningful (both in their deployment and reception) is often couched within a predictable repertoire. Sex is essentially a male act: The female is the passive victim, serving as a conduit for manly exploits. The subaltern/the environment/the South/the female is in the submissive position and transnational capital/the petro-industry/the North/the male is in the domineering one. As “we all know,” my joke interpreter contends and such imagery suggests, the *punta*’s penetration eventually leads to a predicament out of the female’s/*el pueblo*’s/the environment’s control. The joke is funny because, in addition to making clear that neoliberalism does hurt *el pueblo*, it simultaneously jabs at

the Ecuadorian regime's flimsy rationale for its neoliberal project and pokes fun as well at many Ecuadorians' own naiveté in accepting it.

Yet, the joke also works because those who tell and hear it are savvy enough to see through the horny guy and the Ecuadorian state. It never is "just the tip." And it is precisely this perceptiveness that allowed the Texaco and Bobbitt cases to meld in popular thought. The two incidents converged so compellingly, if only momentarily, in popular consciousness not simply because they tapped into the dominant logic of the male screwing the female. Rather, both cases grabbed hold of people because they questioned both the trajectory *and* inevitability of this logic. Although sexuality could yield a matrix for plotting and instantiating the supposed natural hierarchies between North and South American, male and female, and dominant and marginal bodies, it could similarly yield the matrix for *questioning* and *interrupting* these ranked dichotomies. Both Lorena Bobbitt's transgression and the class action's provocation threatened naturalized gendered power arrangements and challenged the extent to which conventional power hierarchies would always prevail.

Of Membered and Dismembered Corporate and National Bodies

Making jokes that linked the Texaco and Bobbitt cases was not, of course, the only or even the dominant way in which colonos and indígenas came to make sense of the lawsuit. Indeed, during the majority of the ten-hour meeting at the CONFENIAE headquarters, participants discussed very pressing and serious concerns about Texaco, oil contamination, and local people. In particular, energy was focused on educating participants (many of whom, but not all, were plaintiffs) about the lawsuit: Why was the suit filed in the first place? What was the suit alleging? Why was it in New York? What *was* a "class action" and what did it call for? There were many misconceptions about the lawsuit, for even if peoples were familiar with Ecuadorian (roman) law, U.S. (common) law was an enigma.

The class-action lawsuit was against Texaco Inc., the U.S.-based parent company (or *matriz* as it is called in Ecuador)—not its subsidiary in Ecuador. Yet, the fact that White Plains, New York, happened to be the corporate headquarters of Texaco was only in part the reason for filing the lawsuit there. Just as importantly, the plaintiffs' lawyers presented the case to a New York federal judge because it alleged that White Plains was the site of tort, or wrongdoing. That is, the suit charged that over a period of 28 years Texaco's officials made strategic decisions in their New York executive chambers to maximize corporate profits by using substandard technology in the company's oil operations in Ecuador. The lawsuit claimed that the negligent industrial practices and outmoded equipment that resulted from these decisions dumped toxic wastes into water and soil systems throughout the Amazonian region, severely contaminating the environment and endangering local people. It was Texaco executives in New York who were ultimately accountable for decisions that condemned many Amazonian residents to living in toxic dumps.

As a quick history of Texaco in Ecuador indicates, problems began for those living in the northern Oriente in 1967 when Texaco's subsidiary TexPet (Texaco Petroleum Company) discovered the first commercially productive petroleum reserve in the Ecuadorian Amazon. Texaco's 28 years of exploring for and exploiting crude oil indelibly transformed the northern rain forest, resulting in thousands of miles of seismic grids, over 300 oil wells, more than 600 open waste pits, numerous pumping stations, an oil refinery, and the bare-bones infrastructure essential for petroleum operations. A network of roads linked oil towns, facilitating the homesteading of the region by over 200,000 poor mestizo farmers or colonos (CESR 1994; Trujillo 1987; Uquillas 1985, 1989, 1993; Vickers 1984; Zevallos 1989). As their lands diminished, many Oriente Indians increasingly joined the ranks of the nonindigenous, semi-urbanized, and rural peasantry and proletariat. Thirty thousand of these *colono* and *indígena* individuals make up the "class" of the class-action lawsuit against Texaco.

Throughout its 28 years of operations (1964–1992), Texaco took negligible environmental precautions. Between 1972 and 1991, Texaco produced over 1.4 billion barrels of crude in Ecuador (Petroecuador 1992:14). Based on the annual price per barrel, Texaco's production earned over \$23 billion dollars. Granted, investment costs needed to be deducted to ascertain the company's net profit. But significantly, Texaco's subsidiary in Ecuador greatly enhanced overall profits by cutting the cost of production. The plaintiffs' chief lawyer, Cristóbal Bonifaz, estimated that TexPet saved the parent corporation between \$4 and \$6 billion dollars by reducing its per barrel production costs by \$3 to \$4 dollars (personal communication, June 1995). "Cost-cutting" practices such as using minimal equipment, outmoded technology, and cheap labor permeated all phases of TexPet's petroleum "development": seismic exploration, exploratory drilling, extractive drilling, processing facilities, pipeline maintenance, and pumping stations. Although such practices were efficient enough to keep oil flowing, they were environmentally and socially lethal.

TexPet's drilling and processing facilities were deplorable. Huge toxic earth pits lay next to each oil well. The chemical muds and industrial solvents essential for drilling and the sludge and formation waters that surfaced from oil reservoirs, along with crude, were regularly dumped untreated into these pits (Giovani Rosania, personal communication, April 19, 1994; Kimerling 1991). Unlined and open pits served merely as holding receptacles for eventual toxic seepage and overflow. With Amazonian rainfall reaching between four and five meters a year, buried oil spills and inundated pits contaminated surface waters and aquifer systems throughout the northern Oriente.⁸ Engaging in negligent practices meant that Texaco via its subsidiary chose not to invest in the more sophisticated equipment and the more complex technologies that would have assured a modicum of social and environmental protection. This choice flew in the face of standard petroleum practice in the United States over the past quarter century.⁹

Thus, although placards on Texaco pumping stations in the United States cautioned North Americans against inhaling gasoline fumes, thousands of colonists and Indians bathed, washed clothes, fished, and cleaned food in Amazonian rivers whose waters and sediments were contaminated with crude toxins (Garzón 1995; Kimerling 1991). Wastes from oil operations contain known carcinogens that bio-accumulate,¹⁰ and a growing number of studies document the detrimental and deadly effects that over 25 years of crude contamination have had on Amazonian populations (CESR 1994; Real López 1993:54; San Sebastián and Córdoba 1999).¹¹ The stories that Sonia recounted during the CONFENIAE meeting echoed those in reports that document an increased incidence of skin and intestinal disease, tumors, headaches, fevers, miscarriages, and birth defects among colonos and indígenas in the area (AE 1993; CESR 1994; San Sebastián and Córdoba 1999). The suit argued that physical disorders were a direct result of environmental contamination.

Predictably, Texaco pleaded for complete exoneration, motioning to the New York federal judge that the case be dismissed from U.S. courts.¹² Under the guidance of former Attorney General Griffin B. Bell (the chief counsel who defended Exxon in the Exxon Valdez debacle), Texaco contended that its subsidiary TexPet was liable for operations in Ecuador not the parent company.¹³ TexPet was legally based in Quito and it was there, the multinational maintained, that Ecuadorian citizens would have to prove wrongdoing and seek restitution. But for Amazonian lowlanders it was obvious that Texaco and TexPet were intimately linked, as the TexPet-miembrillo association indicates. By threatening to bobbittize Texaco for the actions of its “Pet” membrillo, Amazonians were sending a message. As a mestizo leader told me on the truck ride to a Texaco oil field a few months after the CONFENIAE meeting, “The lawsuit is to make sure that la compañía [meaning Texaco and any other oil company] never has another irresponsible membrillo.”

The specific connection between petroleum exploitation and sexual exploitation grew out of a history of colonos, Indians, and environmental activists often using body metaphors when talking about oil operations. Beginning in the late 1980s, a loose and fluid alliance was built among Acción Ecológica (a radical, mostly female-run Quito-based environmental NGO) and peasant and indigenous Amazonian organizations and communities. In 1990, the alliance launched the Campaña por la Vida (Campaign for Life), which was crucial in ultimately forming the Frente de Defensa de la Amazonía (Amazonia Defense Front). The Frente, in turn, is the principal body that represents the Ecuadorian plaintiffs in the lawsuit and coordinates activities with U.S.-based lawyers. Because these groups often conceptualized (though in different ways) the Amazon as a living being, body-part or body-function metaphors often infused their rhetoric. La Amazonía, for instance, was the “lungs of the earth,” “the pulse of humanity.” One of the Campaña’s signature slogans was “Fluye el petróleo, sangra la selva” (As petroleum flows so the jungle bleeds). Oil tore

at both social and ecological bodies, making them hemorrhage. Often, the Frente spoke of the Amazon as a gendered being—*nuestra madre primordial* (our primordial mother) or *la pachamama* (mother earth)—and conceptualized petroleum extractions as a *violación* of Amazonian peoples' lives and landscapes. Now, although in some instances *violación* means violation in Spanish, more specifically it means rape: the violent sexual abuse of one gendered body by another.

Doña Carmen's voice shook at first as she stood at the front of the assembly at CONFENIAE to tell her story. She was a small-boned colona who had moved to the Oriente with her family in the early 1980s. "Texaco has destroyed everything—our *chacra* [subsistence garden], the stream near our house, our *animalitos* [little animals]." A leak in a secondary pipeline near one of Texaco's oil wells had, with the help of heavy rains over the course of a week, oozed to flood and kill her crops and most of her chickens and chicks. Within days, her infant daughter contracted a debilitating fever and diarrhea.

Somos jodidos [we're screwed], how are we supposed to pay our bank loan when la compañía *arrasa* [ravages] everything we have? How are we supposed to live when our water is contaminated? My baby doesn't have any fingernails; her skin is covered with welts. Something is wrong. Whom are we supposed to go to when the government cuts us off and la compañía doesn't pay any attention to us?

Doña Carmen's sentiments echoed those of Ecuador's oldest and most respected human rights organization: "The Amazon holds enormous riches, yet it is one of the places where the interests of capital destroys people's very existence—all in the name of state modernization and economic growth" (CEDHU 1993:57). Despite being the region that provides Ecuador with its greatest wealth (oil revenues accounted for approximately 50 percent of the state budget), the area where Doña Carmen lives in the northern Oriente is plagued by health problems, poverty, and industrial contamination.

"Screwed, yes," Marco, a young Achuar leader, interjected, "but not *resignados* [resigned]." The torrential rain that hammered at the meeting hall's tin roof stopped as quickly as it had begun. Indeed, resigned was hardly how one could describe Amazonian lowlanders. Years of sustained activism around Texaco's activities in Ecuador preceded the filing of the class-action lawsuit. Between 1988 and 1993 numerous actions were taken to put pressure on Texaco. Affected communities wrote letters to the multinational's headquarters in New York denouncing spills, toxic seepage, and the destruction of forest and farm property. Concomitantly, these communities staged nonviolent protests in Quito and two oil towns (Coca and Lago Agrio) and staged occupations at oil wells in the Oriente. In September 1992, the Campaña's alliance declared a boycott against Texaco. Within months, a network of green groups across Europe and the United States expanded the ban to the international arena. Among their many international tactics, the colono-indígena-green alliance together with international organizations encouraged members to send rolls of toilet paper to Texaco in New York with the message: "Clean up your mess!"¹⁴

Was the corporate body incapable of controlling its industrial discharge? The Campaña sought to politicize public opinion around the social, economic, and ecological dangers of the Ecuadorian state's neoliberal agenda to intensify so-called oil development. In fact, Marco's comment came from an old campaign chant: "¡Jodidos, sí; resignados, no!" (Screwed, yes; resigned, no!). Campaña members were convinced that they had the capacity to influence otherwise worsening conditions.

Leonardo, a prominent lowland Quichua leader, expanded on these concerns when asked to speak at the CONFENIAE gathering. His face stern, his eyes peering severely from below his abruptly cut bangs, he began:

Despite the fact that the Amazonía is looked to as the solution, the salvation, for the nation's problems, we *indios* and *campesinos* [mestizo peasants or colonos] have never been the beneficiaries of petroleum. Twenty-five years of oil development have left only misery and a slow death. *El hombre* thinks he can dominate, possess, la Amazonía. But we don't dominate or possess it. In the long struggle against the privatization of land, *indios* would say: 'You know, they say that land is our pachamama. Well, damn it! You don't sell your mother!' Now with oil, there's a new twist: 'You know, they say that land is our pachamama.' Well, damn it! You don't screw your mother!¹⁵

Leo cracked a smile; the assembly laughed. Crude perforation (where *perforación* means drilling) metaphorically slipped into lewd penetration. In Spanish, *¡carajo!* is the expletive used, and, although I have translated it as "damn it" above, *carajo* is also slang for *prick*. In the telling of the joke, the "pricks" doing the selling and the screwing are the governing neoliberal regime and the multinational corporation respectively. On hearing Leonardo tell this joke, the *colona* sitting next to me leaned over and whispered in my ear: "Did you see the graffiti on the butcher shop?" Puyo (the town near CONFENIAE headquarters) was known for its near-scandalous graffiti, usually political and often tinged with black humor. I had not but I did that evening. Appropriately positioned on the outside wall of the *carnicería* was the black scrawl: "Contaminate here and we'll call Lorena. Signed la Amazonía."

This language of violation and being screwed granted indigenous and colonist leaders and community members a moral authority that was not easily swayed. But perhaps more importantly, it built cohesion. Even more so than class actions in the United States, the "class" of Ecuadorian people on whose behalf the lawsuit was filed did not exist as a pre-given constituency. Rather, the "class" had to be formed. On the one hand, a "class action" does not exist as a legal measure in Ecuador. Consequently, the idea that a collection of people could act as a single group to press a lawsuit was quite unheard of. On the other, because the relations between lowland colonos and *indígenas* were quite antagonistic historically, the lawsuit against Texaco served as an occasion for rearticulating relations between these groups. It was through discussions and interactions (both serious and joking) at workshops, seminars, meetings, and public protests that thousands of marginalized Ecuadorians despite differences of race, class, or ethnicity came to see themselves as part of a "class" with more

or less shared interests and common concerns.¹⁶ The associations that people made between the Texaco and Bobbitt cases were particularly fruitful moments through which cohesive ties were made.

“¡Que cabrón! [What a pimp!]” was Marco’s (the Achuar leader’s) reaction as we stood reading a document over Luis’s shoulders. It was mid-January 1994 and Acción Ecológica had just received a letter by fax that the Ecuadorian ambassador to the United States had written to the U.S. State Department. In the letter the ambassador demanded that the U.S. executive body intervene in judicial process and have the Texaco case expelled from U.S. courts. Texaco presented the letter to the New York federal judge as supporting evidence for having the case dismissed and reverted to Ecuadorian courts. The plaintiffs’ lawyers immediately sent it on to Ecuador. Luis, a colono and key Frente leader, just shook his head as he read. Within days, a number of leading newspapers published the letter’s text in full, bringing the lawsuit against Texaco even more into public debate precisely at the moment when Lorena Bobbitt went to trial in the United States.

In his letter, Ambassador Edgar Terán Terán claimed that the ruling of a U.S. court to accept jurisdiction for a lawsuit concerning activity within Ecuadorian territory would constitute a flagrant affront to Ecuador’s national sovereignty. The ambassador questioned the alleged citizenship (that is, national allegiance) of the Amazonian plaintiffs and (in the same breath) warned the U.S. State Department that acceptance of the case would negatively affect the Ecuadorian economy.¹⁷ Hearing the case in New York would create “serious disincentives to U.S. companies” intent on investing in Ecuador “precisely at a moment” when the country was “attempt[ing] to attract [foreign] investors.” Were “the U.S. courts [to] accept jurisdiction” of the Texaco case, Terán Terán concluded, the “benefits” and “guarantees” that Ecuador so strategically conceded would be “significantly eroded.”

The class-action suit against Texaco coincided with attempts to implement drastic neoliberal changes in Ecuador. As oil revenues accounted for 50 percent of the state’s budget, the petroleum sector was a prime focus for implementing structural adjustments.¹⁸ To double oil output during his administration, President Sixto Durán Ballén pursued two principal actions. First, he withdrew Ecuador from OPEC in November 1992 in order that the country could produce in excess of the cartel’s quotas. Second, in November 1993 he ushered amendments to the hydrocarbon (or oil) law through the National Congress that granted oil companies greater autonomy and profit sharing (Sawyer 1997). These sweeping executive and legislative changes—what one former president referred to as “succulent incentives” (*Energia* Nov/Dec 1993:21)—aimed to lure further foreign investment to Ecuador with more attractive fiscal provisions. Predictably, Euro-American multinational corporations and multi-lateral lending institutions applauded the administration’s efforts.

Marco, Luis, and I stood along with a number of Frente and Acción Ecológica members in the central hall of CONAIE (Confederación de Nacionalidades Indígenas del Ecuador), Ecuador's nationwide confederation of indigenous nationalities whose headquarters are in Quito. We were all gathered for a meeting with the CONAIE directorship on the recent legislative changes to the hydrocarbon law. A key point of discussion was to think through how the class-action lawsuit against Texaco might be used to scare off the multinational oil companies that would soon be bidding for ten new Amazonian oil concessions in the area south of Texaco's operations. I was translating into Spanish a two-page advertisement that the Ministry of Energy and Mines had placed in foreign petroleum trade journals to attract foreign investment in the upcoming bidding round when Sonia ran through the doors of CONAIE waving the ambassador's letter.

One part of the letter in particular infuriated those who read it: The ambassador maintained that the allegation made by "persons *claiming* to be citizens of Ecuador" were "false and defamatory." "Que bestia! [What a beast!]," someone said. "He gives all the guarantees in the world to a transnational [corporation] and doesn't even recognize his fellow citizens!" Marco asked me to translate once more a few lines from the Ministry of Energy and Mines advertisement; it read: "Ecuador enjoys a climate of peace and order [that is] enticing to foreign investors" and "Ecuadorian law facilitates foreign investment." "He's shameless," someone said. "No, he's a pimp," Marco retorted, "running around whoring the nation's wealth."

Days later, the Republic of Ecuador submitted an amicus brief to the New York District Court. The document further indexed where allegiances stood. In laying out the "facts," the brief began, "Ecuador needs foreign investment in order to stimulate its economy. For this purpose, the government has implemented an array of market-based reforms."¹⁹ The most significant reform sought "to privatize 70 percent of state-owned industries, including part of the oil sector. . . . the nation's principal export." "Ecuador's privatization program, however," the text continued, would "not succeed without an infusion of foreign capital." A U.S. court's "assertion of jurisdiction" over the class action could irreparably "disrupt" the country's IMF-encouraged economic agenda. Transnational corporations, the brief argued, "carefully consider Ecuadorian laws and regulations prior to investing." And, "foreign investors naturally assume that disputes relating to the development of Ecuador's natural resources are to be adjudicated by the courts of Ecuador." Already this lawsuit had "cast a cloud over [these] reasonable expectations." Suggesting that Ecuador's purported economic necessities might outweigh any concern for industrial and health standards, the ambassador observed: "Decisions concerning liability for [the] production . . . or misuse of petroleum resources in Ecuador must be made in light of the economic, political and social conditions of Ecuador,"²⁰

Neoliberal reforms purportedly led to "open exchange" among equal and autonomous partners in the global arena. Yet, in a "free-market" world marked by so-called comparative advantage, a country entered into exchange through

its ability to “entice” the best suitor with more seductive propositions. The gendered imagery of the “la punta no más” and “screwing your mother” jokes offered a powerful commentary on how the Ecuadorian regime secured contracts with and obtained needed foreign revenues from Northern businessmen and financiers by offering up its land, its resources, and its people to those corporations that paid the best price. The executive branch advertised its people and lands as being docile bodies of “peace and order” wedged between the violence of Colombia and Peru. Similarly, it submitted its subjects and natural resources to laws that granted multinational corporations greater autonomy and profits. Like a father—or worse a pimp—offering his daughter to the man who best promised to build up his capital and solidify future alliances, the ruling elites sought out suitors who could provide desperately needed “infusions” of foreign capital.

As popular groups noted, however, economic reforms were hardly “just the tip.” Amazonian lowlanders had every reason to be concerned as neoliberal changes that enabled more intensive oil exploration made their lives more precarious. Supporters of the class action against Texaco objected to the ways in which the Ecuadorian government granted more comprehensive protection and more lenient prerogatives to a multinational corporation than to those who by right of birth deserved its protection. In questioning the citizenship and thus the loyalty of the plaintiffs, the ambassador suggested that *real* citizens (or docile daughters) would never file such a suit. Metaphorically, Ecuadorian land and resources were the female awaiting capitalist penetration, those “infusions” essential for spawning modernization. For the Ecuadorian executive body (here, specifically, the president and his cronies), this female was a daughter through whom it could build alliances and in exchange for whom it could extract the highest bride-price. For many Amazonian groups, this female was the pachamama and they accused the ruling administration of “pimping,” “selling,” or “auctioning” her off to multinationals, irrespective of the deleterious effects that oil operations had on local people.

Sr. Embajador, do you mind explaining to the little girl with a festering rash, to the woman who had a miscarriage, and to the gentlemen with a tumor on his chest, why it is that you think they are lying when they claim that their land and water is contaminated?

Sonia and I sat with Clara in her living room listening intently to the radio. One of their coworkers at Acción Ecológica, whom I call Sabina, agreed to debate the Ecuadorian ambassador to the United States over the Texaco case on an early morning talk show a few days after his letter appeared in the press. The talk show was famous because its conservative host thrived on stirring up controversy. The ambassador retorted,

Well look, Señorita—or is it Señora—I don’t know what you are, though they tell me you have children. Where is your loyalty to *la patria*? Those who have a complaint

to file can do so in Ecuador. Aren't you embarrassed to support a suit that goes against Ecuadorian interests? Of course we're concerned about los indios but our national sovereignty is at stake.

The talk-show host intervened, directing himself to the listening audience: "Well, Señores and Señoras, what do you expect when *las ecochicas* [eco-chicks] go around with *selváticos* [lowland Indians]? It seems Lorena is not our only irrational *compatriota*." One of us in Clara's living room let out a scream. Our eyes widened and our jaws dropped.

Over the previous five years, Sabina along with others had worked to document the social and ecological damage that Texaco operations had caused in the Northern Amazon. Although the link between industrial contamination and health is indisputably complex, the connection became increasingly difficult for the state to dismiss as the evidence for it accrued. Yet both the ambassador and the talk-show host sought to do just that. They questioned Sabina's integrity and the credibility of her work through a fluster of commentary that challenged her sexual virtue and national loyalty. The ambassador equivocated on Sabina's marital status while noting that she had children. At the time, Sabina was going through a turbulent divorce from her spouse, a member of a prominent Ecuadorian family. In a country where divorce among white women was uncommon and female sexuality still guarded, a woman's character largely hinged on her sexual virtue—or, at least, could be slandered through it. The implication here was that Sabina, being a single woman and with children, was irresponsible and loose and that it was this same irresponsibility that led her to support the class action against Texaco. Similarly, the talk-show host denigrated Sabina and her cause in a single breath, implying too that she was unrestrained and irrational. Ecochicas was a nickname for the women in Acción Ecológica and, though at times it was used endearingly by friends, when used by strangers it was for the most part belittling. In this case, the radio show host sought to imply that the women of Acción Ecológica were promiscuous women in "going around" with *selváticos* (another derogatory word). But, particularly disturbing in this (and other) interchanges was how easy it was for the ambassador and the talk-show host to link purportedly questionable sexual virtue with questionable national loyalty.

Since the Ecuadorian Republic's inception, *la patria* (more so than *la nación*) has been the primary image to which elite white males have proclaimed their national allegiance. Epitaphs to *la patria* routinely grace government documents.²¹ Yet, *patria*—often translated as fatherland²²—is in fact uniquely gendered and sexed in Ecuador. Although tied to patriarchy, the primary denotation of *patria* in Ecuador is feminine. Often she is referred to as *La Señora* (as proclaimed, for example, in the national anthem)—a married, heterosexual, and virtuous female—or as *La Madre Patria* (Mother Homeland)—the fecund, upright mother.²³ Of concern here are not women but mothers, and less the welfare of mothers per se than the movements of their wombs. *La Patria* is the cherished possession of the *pater, el padre*—the prize of his patrimony.

La patria is the gendered trophy of the ruler that ensures national identity and its faithful reproduction.

As many scholars note (Martinez-Alier 1989; Smith 1995; Stolcke 1993; Stoler 1989, 1992), women and female images are often the bearers of national identity. Being the biological and social reproducer, the female often serves as the material and symbolic signifier of national differences and boundaries (cf. Yuval-Davis and Anthias 1989:7). Yet, as the right of conquest—the prerogative of the ruler—la patria is likewise raced in Ecuador. Within elites' mythology of the nation, for national integrity to be maintained, this female treasure must be of the same race as *el conquistador*. Because the term *conquistador* in Spanish is synonymous with *blanco*, whites are the “bodies that matter” (Butler 1993) in the nation space. The discursive system of la patria is set up such that only white, propertied heterosexual men can show pure and proper desire for la Señora; and thus, only white, propertied heterosexual men can be true members of the nation. Although an ideology of whitening provides the illusion of an egalitarian ethic, within elite mythology the emasculated, feminized, marginalized, and otherly raced could never express, to adopt Sommer's phrase, true “passion for ‘la patria’ ” (1991:32). Those individuals less than white men are less than citizens: They both *have* lesser members and *are* less than members. Indigenous and mestizo men cannot stand as proxy for the conquistador because a union between nonwhite men and la patria always results in a bastardization. Women (all women, but especially white women) are called on to uphold the image of la patria.

The family trope that sustained la patria—that “belonging to the patriarch, the father of the family” (Taylor 1997:34)—afforded “an indispensable [model] . . . for sanctioning social hierarchy” (McClintock 1995:45). Inscribing social differences within a familial idiom naturalized inequalities. “Since the subordination of women to men and child to adult” reflected the purported “natural” order, “hierarchies within the nation” when cloaked in a familial idiom affirmed “social difference as a category of nature” (McClintock 1995:358; see also Malkki 1994). The idiom of family harmony when applied to the nation served to legitimize the exclusion of those in unequal roles. Because the lower positions of those otherly raced and gendered were but “natural” and “complementary,” it was inevitable that they were seen as lacking and thus denied full membership as citizens. Like the father of the family, the Ecuadorian masculinist state staunchly defended the honor of la patria against any violation—either by outside males (namely other states, as seen in the ambassador's letter) or internally by devious females (namely “subversive” environmentalists, indígenas, and colonos who supported the class action as seen below).

At about the same time as the radio talk show, rumors circulated in the Oriente that the women who worked for Acción Ecológica were *perras* (bitches) or *putas* (whores) “seducing” Indians with foreign ideas. Given that my field research consisted in working daily with indigenous organizations and environmental activists around the intensification of multinational oil operations in the Oriente, I was far from excluded from these aspersions. On one occasion, the

house that female environmentalists had established as their base in the Amazon was spray painted with the message: “*Damas* have no place in the Oriente.” A generous interpretation would argue that the graffiti was a warning to these female activists, all of whom lived in Quito. The Oriente, the message cautioned, was an uncivilized, dangerous, and lawless space; *damas* (ladies) were not safe within its jungled walls. Yet, around the corner on another wall the graffiti continued: “We are not deceived.” The message aimed to slander, disparage, and intimidate. Being from upper-middle-class white backgrounds, the women of Acción Ecológica were indeed the stuff of *damas*. But ladies, according to the spray-painted graffiti, would not be comfortable in the Oriente—the land of unruly savages, treacherous beasts, and renegade politics. Given that these female activists exerted a formidable presence in the region, one could only conclude—following the epigram’s “truth” that its authors were “not deceived”—that these women were *not* *damas*. Their politics and voice put them in another category: It marked them as untrustworthy, immoderate, and devious women. Weeks later another graffiti read “Feura Perra” [Get out, bitch].

Sexual slurs, voiced repeatedly by those who disapproved of the feminist ecologists supporting the Texaco lawsuit, underscored the extent to which the class action posed a challenge to structures of power and privilege. As that permeable boundary delineating group identity, women were signifiers of racial and national difference. If Indians were excluded from being full members of the nation by truncating their membership, as it were, then white women—the wombs essential to ensure that the conquistador’s national identity continues into perpetuity—were whores in forging alliances with indigenous men. Sexuality constituted a prime site through which to undermine radical political projects and to question the political allegiances of female environmentalists and those with whom they were associated.

Acción Ecológica women were the near antithesis of the virtuous, sacrificing mother of la Madre Patria. They were unruly white women and as such had compromised their rights of inclusion. Not unlike Lorena Bobbitt, they crossed the bounds of their “proper place.” This cracked the appearance of white male control and threatened the privilege of male power. As some scholars (Franco 1989; Taylor 1997) note, “public” women often evoke ambivalent feelings in Latin America. With considerable frequency, they are considered prostitutes, madwomen, and/or otherwise subversive agents. Sabina was arguably the most eloquent and unswerving Ecuadorian environmentalist campaigning against Texaco on the plaintiffs’ behalf. The fact that the talk-show host (a white male) associated Sabina with Lorena Bobbitt did more than define her as untrustworthy and to classify her actions as insane. Sabina represented the phallic female who threatened to symbolically castrate dominant interests. Her political activity (along with that of others who supported the class-action suit) imperiled dominant sensibilities and the racial, class, and gender matrix on which privilege was based.

Of Violent Penetration

The analogy between capitalist accumulation and heterosexual penetration acquired further currency through the imagery of the highly publicized U.S. court case between Lorena Gallo de Bobbitt and her *marido mutilado* (mutilated man), John Wayne Bobbitt. Pleading guilty of having severed her spouse's penis in a moment of madness after years of being sexually abused and tortured, Lorena Bobbitt (an Ecuadorian citizen though long-time U.S. resident) unwittingly became the crucible of debate over gender, power, and inequality in Ecuador, as well as elsewhere.²⁴ Emerging as a symbol of protest for some and as a deadly Delilah for others, Lorena Bobbitt incited global reflection on domestic violence and its unfathomable horrors.

In her appeal to the jury, Lorena Bobbitt tearfully recounted the events of that notorious night. Having been raped yet once more by her drunken spouse, she stumbled into the kitchen enraged and humiliated in search of a glass of water. There she laid eyes on her carving implement. John Wayne Bobbitt slept only to wake to searing pain. Horrified by her act, she fled the apartment, her husband's amputated member still in hand; whereupon, in her frenzy, she disposed of it in an empty lot. John Wayne Bobbitt's penis, the defense argued, was an instrument of torture; with it he imposed a "reign of terror" and a "daily hell" (*Hoy*, January 11–13, 1994), wielding his member like "a portable battering ram" (Ehrenreich 1994:74). Through her transgressive "cut felt around the world" (quoted in Deem 1996; see also Limbaugh 1994), Lorena Bobbitt amputated the organ that symbolized her misery. As the defense argued, "It was his penis or her life."

While vendors hawked Slice (!) soda outside the Virginia courthouse during Lorena Bobbitt's two-week trial,²⁴ feminist groups in Quito and Guayaquil (Ecuador's political and economic capitals) rallied behind their compatriot's plight. Women's organizations held protest rallies and marches urging "the thousands of Lorenas in Ecuador" to "break the silence" that surrounds domestic violence and to unite "in defense of their honor" (*Hoy*, January 15–18, 1994). In one widely publicized demonstration in Guayaquil, more than two hundred women with their faces painted to simulate bruises paraded through the city's main streets. Bearing banners reading Honk for Lorena, Oppose Her Conviction, Justice for Women, and Stop the Battering, protesters interrupted traffic for a good part of the day and held a spirited rally in front of the U.S. Consulate.²⁶ Demonstrators sought to spur popular debate around the trial and gathered signatures in support of an acquittal.

For many, Lorena Bobbitt was "a victim of violence, battery, and sexual abuse" (*Hoy*, January 16, 1994). These protesters hoped that the manicurist's tragedy would raise Ecuadorian consciousness of marital rape and brutality. For more radical feminists, she was an avenging subaltern who "took the law into her own hands" (*Hoy*, January 14, 1994)—indeed, displacing domination with the flick of her wrist. They publicly warned that should Lorena Bobbitt be convicted, they would retaliate by castrating one hundred *norteamericanos* within Ecuadorian territory (*Hoy*, January 15, 19; 22, 1994). Another version

of the threat was that Ecuadorian women would castrate ten U.S. men for every year Lorena Bobbitt would be imprisoned (*Hoy*, January 19, 1994). As reported by the Ecuadorian press, Lorena could spend up to twenty years for “malicious wounding;” if John Wayne Bobbitt’s penis had not been successfully re-attached, she could have been convicted for up to forty years.

“The Ballad of John and Lorena”²⁷ held particular metaphoric richness in Ecuador. She was the weak, vulnerable (for some, hot-blooded) latina immigrant. He was the robust, blond, ex-marine *yanqui* whose name, John Wayne—that icon of the American Western—conjured images of “rugged masculinity” (Deem 1996:516) and, for many Ecuadorian subalterns, images of ruthless Indian killing. Yet their tragic drama brought more into play than merely the feminist struggle for sexual liberty with its attendant condemnation of rape and the male ownership of female bodies. Lorena Bobbitt’s transgression was an incisive critique of a specific regime of power: phallocracy, phallocentrism, patriarchy in all its forms.²⁸ As the Lorena Bobbitt for Surgeon General buttons in the U.S. intimated, Lorena’s carving skills were surgical strikes. In Ecuador, as appropriated by supporters of the class action against Texaco, these strikes undercut masculinist beliefs held by the Ecuadorian executive and transnational capitalists of just who was ripe for exploitation.

If, following Derrida (1981), there is a fundamental “undecidability” built into language that prevents any final fixing of meaning, then Lorena Bobbitt embodied such a discursive plasticity. With her name transmogrifying into a defiant act (*bobbittizar*), Lorena became a symbol for unfixing power-saturated binaries and unfreezing the play of social relationality. Her infamous deed underscored what everyone knew: Sexual encounters do not always go as planned. Yet her act similarly carried a subversive potential when thought of as a metaphor; not only was a sexual tryst hardly predictable, but it could also be positively painful in unanticipated ways. It was this contingency (i.e., that outcomes were far from certain) that enabled the Bobbitt affair to proliferate as an allegory for rethinking all sorts of power relations and fantasizing about different incorporations. Contingency opened a space to consider that “undecidability,” a space for imagining how power relations might be otherwise.

Five men huddled over a crumpled newspaper as we waited for others to join us in a store that doubled as a meeting hall for San Carlos, a *colono* community about twenty miles from Coca. One read while the others listened. San Carlos was one of the communities greatly affected by Texaco’s operations and all of its members formed part of the “class” of the class action. Sonia and I had brought along that morning’s newspaper from Coca for our scheduled meeting. The newspaper was full of commentary on the Ecuadorian ambassador’s letter to the U.S. State Department and we hoped that these commentaries might generate discussion and build an understanding of what it meant to be part of the “class.” Yet it was that *other* court case between an Ecuadorian and North American body that captured these colonos’ attention. It was mid-January 1994. The Lorena Bobbitt trial was in full swing. The five men eagerly pored over reports detailing the U.S. court proceedings with a mixture of fascination,

repugnance, and humor. They were both horrified and giddy about Lorena Bobbitt's deed. One article recounted in painful detail her story of brutal mistreatment by her spouse. Another entitled "Lorena Alleges Dementia" was dominated by a large color photograph of John Wayne Bobbitt's severed member, an exhibit that the prosecution presented as evidence to the jury. "Can you imagine the pain?" José cried, flamboyantly crossing his legs tight in an overly exaggerated motion that made everyone laugh. "Well, one thing is very clear," Maria (the owner of the community store) added, "she sure knew exactly where to get him. Cutting off his *miembrillo* was worse than cutting off his arms." "I could have sworn," Sonia interjected in a voice of feigned innocence, "that Suzana and I traveled here because other 'vulnerable' Ecuadorians were involved in another legal case that had something to do with also being wronged by a *miembrillo*" (referring, of course, to Texaco's subsidiary). "Pues, lo bobbittizamos [then, let's bobbittize it]," José exclaimed. An even stronger burst of laughter filled the room. "Who says that *la compañía* can get away with inflicting damage any more than Señor John Wayne."

Among circles of Ecuadorian supporters, resonance between the Texaco and Bobbitt cases echoed deeply. The irony of the fact that Lorena Bobbitt's abuser was named John Wayne—the symbol of white, bigoted, macho domination—was lost on few and only encouraged the analogy. Just as Lorena Bobbitt had been the target of rape and abuse, so Oriente inhabitants and ecologies were targets of industrial pillage and plunder. Just as her body served to satisfy her husband's violent urges, so Amazonian landscapes served to satiate bloated capitalist desires. Just as John Wayne Bobbitt's torturing violated her bodily sovereignty, so Texaco's reckless contaminating ravaged Amazonian bodily integrity. Just as John Wayne Bobbitt believed that he possessed and controlled her body, so the Ecuadorian executive branch and Texaco believed that it owned and ruled the marginalized. Both Lorena Bobbitt and the Ecuadorian plaintiffs were defined through their lack, their deficient membership; others more complete where deemed necessary to control their lives.

Lorena Bobbitt's drama yielded the text for contemplating another order of relations. Her story of abuse provided a mirror narrative for reading *crude* (as in raw and petroleum) exploits and her transgressive slice provided the subversive script for (re)coding colonos' and indígenas' transnational suit against Texaco. As we all know, the punta—the terminal point on those appendages (like corporate subsidiaries and penises)—*is* attached to more. But that need not always lead to a predicament beyond the power of the marginalized. Lorena Bobbitt's transgression suggested ways that might meddle with the anticipated outcome of gendered power relations and elite male mastery. Though John Wayne Bobbitt's obsessions often led to situations out of her control, Lorena Bobbitt struck back. Although the exigencies of corporate accumulation often led to situations out of *el pueblo's* control, *el pueblo* could also strike back.

Backers of the legal action against Texaco playfully teased out parallels as bobbittizar became an *active* verb. The English verb "to bob" made this verb-making particularly appealing (or disturbing) to English speakers in Ecuador.

highlighting language's inherent and potentially playful "undecidability" and "differance" (cf. Derrida 1976). Webster's Ninth Edition reads: "bob *vt* (13c) 1: to strike with a quick light blow . . . *vt* (ca. 1798) 1: to cut shorter: crop."²⁹ But the pleasure of language play equally came to Spanish speakers; *bobo*, usually referring to an easily duped or dumb person, is slang (though somewhat archaic) for a limp penis in Ecuador. Thus bobbittizar not only meant to cut but it also meant to make eternally impotent.

Leonardo, the savvy Quichua leader, and Domingo, the vice-president of CONFENIAE, were already sipping beers by the time I walked, laptop in tow, into the Puyo café bar. Despite being exhausted from the day's journey from Quito, we had agreed to meet that evening to draft an official confederation letter in response to the Ecuadorian ambassador's stance on the Texaco case. Domingo would take it to the CONFENIAE president in the morning. Leonardo closed my laptop, ordered me a beer, and asked Margot, the café owner/friend, to turn on the television. The evening news was about to begin. The Lorena Bobbitt trial was the top story and coverage focused on that day's key witness: a female psychiatrist. Testifying on behalf of the defense, the psychiatrist claimed: "Lorena was a typical abused woman. She had been beaten, raped, and insulted by her husband so many times that she was terrified for her life." Her "growing anxiety and constant fear led her to commit her crime" of momentary madness. The television screen cut to an interview with the director of the Latin American Association of Human Rights. "For many," the director noted, "Lorena is a heroine. She has revindicated women's capacity to react in the face of abuse and violence." She has challenged the "traditional patriarchal ideology that negates women their rights in the intimacy of the domestic sphere." A few news stories later, a reporter standing in front of a recent oil spill in the Oriente offered a detailed analysis and update on the Texaco case.

With a mischievous grin Leonardo turned and gave me a big wink: "*Mi gringita* [my little gringa], I think it's time to send you out to bobbittizar *los petroleros* [U.S. oilmen]. Isn't this [la Amazonía] your domestic sphere too?" Domingo almost spit up his beer from laughing. "Leo, you're incorrigible!" I retorted. A lot was at play here. Leonardo was a master of embedded meanings. He knew, of course, that la Amazonía was not "my" domestic sphere. On a number of occasions we had long conversations over the role of foreigners (and especially anthropologists) working in the Oriente. Seeking possession was not an appropriate role, assuming an identity of belonging was not another. Leo's association of the Ecuadorian Oriente with the domestic sphere, however, came from the fact that indígenas called the rain forest their *casa* or *llacta* (home), as much as their pachamama. His appeal to *mi gringita* was both a sign of endearment toward a friend (Leo and I had become good buddies by that time) and a not-so-veiled reminder of the multiple forces of power that shaped and sustained our interaction. Leo often called me *mi gringita* as a playful reversal of earlier anthropologists' claims to "my people." Yet, in this context, together with the admonition that it was "time to send [me]," the reversal

was a desire both to call to mind and to upset the race, class, and gender norms that created and maintained power hierarchies and distinctions between First-World researchers and Third-World subjects, as well as among Ecuadorians. As Acción Ecológica's efforts showed, collaborations between white women and Indians incited wild speculation, especially among white Ecuadorian elites. For an Indian to have the power to send a white woman to castrate a white male verged on being an ultimate subversion.

A week or so after Leonardo's provocative suggestion, I rode in the back of a truck with a group of young indigenous men and women. We were driving through Quito streets to meet up with others who would also take part in a non-violent occupation of the Ministry of Energy and Mines to protest the new bidding round that would lease ten more oil concessions in the Oriente to multinational petroleum corporations. Conversation tacked between the bidding round, the lawsuit against Texaco, and, of course, the Bobbitt affair. In spirited conversations, a couple of indigenous men jokingly taunted that they would get their "women" to perform the dirty deed on los petroleros. With Ecuadorian feminists threatening to castrate U.S. businessmen based in Ecuador should Lorena Bobbitt be convicted, proponents of the transnational lawsuit were all too willing to offer up American oilmen as worthy candidates. Being the most prominent male-dominated U.S. enterprise in Ecuador and, given its preexisting association with sexual penetration, the oil industry was an easy target. This conjuncture perhaps most powerfully captures the coming together of these two legal battles and the politics of the defensive strike that lie at their center. Lorena Bobbitt's action carved out an imaginative space for undercutting transnational capital and elite privilege and curtailing the violaci6n/rape of Amazonian social and ecological landscapes. Lorena Bobbitt had cut out the source of the violence against her. The class action filed in New York threatened to do something of the same: to emasculate corporate capital at that tender place from which its subsidiaries emerged—the spot where pain would be most felt and have its most profound effects.

On Re-Membering the Dismembered

Psychoanalysts might suggest that attacking the male virile member represents the desire to assume male power. Given her maiden name, one might say that Lorena Bobbitt's crime was foretold. Her surname at birth was Gallo Coronel: Gallo her father's name and Coronel her mother's. *Gallo* means rooster or cock in Spanish. Now, though the sexual innuendo does not translate exactly, gallo in Ecuador is used to refer to a cocky guy.³⁰ Gallo was what Lorena lost at marriage. Was it the identity she was striving to reclaim? And was it her maternal grandfather, el Coronel (the Colonel), from whom Lorena learned the strategy of debilitating power when it was least aware? Similarly, given that Texaco's New York headquarters were the *matriz* (womb), were marginalized plaintiffs (los jodidos) seeking retaliation and trying "to screw" the corporation? What did such transgressions seek? As Butler notes, "the phallus is a transferable phantasm, and its naturalized link to masculine morphology

can be called into question through aggressive reterritorialization” (1993:83). Let me bring this article to a provisional close by thinking about power and its potential rearticulations through surgical strikes.

The penis, being an anatomical organ, marked the private domain of *some* bodies—those understood as distinct from Lorena Bobbitt’s and mine. The phallus, being a meaning-making machine, signaled wholeness and the power that wholeness endows its possessor. In dominant Ecuadorian understanding, the phallus was the entry badge into the public: It was a “crucial signifier in the distribution of power, authority and a speaking position” (Grosz 1990:125). Now, the phallus, of course, has no pre-given content; that which it signifies coalesces through its temporary alignment with other signifiers. For this reason the phallus is capable of subsuming multiple forms (e.g., a car). But because the phallus simultaneously signifies its opposite—“lack,” that which marks castration—the penis often acts as a privileged carrier of phallic power in popular culture. In the telling of jokes, in the use of slang, and in understanding Lorena Bobbitt’s transgression, specific penises in Ecuador came to be an occasion of the phallus—a “privileged signifier” (Lacan 1985:82 quoted in Butler 1993:77). More than a sign of masculine power, the phallus was the symbol of power itself, the ur-symbol that “generates significations” (Butler 1993:60).

Within the mythology of *la patria* and neoliberalism, those who purportedly “had” the phallus included elite nationals and multinational capitalists. They were the fully membered: the ones whose power for self-definition appeared effortless and magical. As such, Ecuador’s ruling elite merited the rights of complete bodies in the nation; multinational capitalists merited the rights of complete bodies in the transnational arena; and both merited immunity from being nationally and globally accountable. National and transnational elites indexed the disempowered through the norms, ideals, and models forged for and by privileged males. Against such criteria, *colono* and indigenous groups and white women were always lacking: They were fixed through their privation and their absence of full membership. As implied by the *punta no más* joke and the ambassador’s letter, possessing or not possessing a member (being more or less endowed) signaled one’s capacity to participate in national decision making. Transnational capital and the Ecuadorian government not only had a penetrating member, but they also set the neoliberal economic agenda. The *pueblo* or subaltern groups not only lacked a member, and thus were vulnerable to penetration, but they were dis-membered and excluded from defining the nation’s goals.

Lorena Bobbitt’s act, however, momentarily unnerved this naturalized alignment of power with the rule of elite men. Her dis-membering of John Wayne Bobbitt displayed how phallic power could be detached from its tenacious alliance with male morphology. Thus decapitating the penis qua phallus represented more than an act of liberation: the female reclaiming her body. It represented the symbolic castration of power through painful exposure. Her deed exposed the arbitrary nature of the phallus/white-male alliance. She exposed how phallic power functioned as a prosthesis, a necessary supplement

buttressing particularly virulent forms of patriarchy. The class action against Texaco threatened to do the same. Indeed, linking the Texaco and Bobbitt affairs held out the possibility of curtailing abuse and of transforming the predicament of the marginalized. Although viscerally aware of the terror of economic/sexual exploitation, both cases challenged the inevitable monopoly of those who presumably “had” power.

In his seminal work on kinship, Lévi-Strauss states: “the total relation of exchange which constitutes marriage is not established between a man and a woman, where each owes and receives something, but between two groups of men. . . . The woman figures only as one of the objects in the exchange . . . she cannot alter its nature” (1969:115). Women within Lévi-Strauss’s analysis were the objects of exchange that signaled the transference of the phallus among men. Likewise in the stories told by Ecuadorian elites of *la patria* and neoliberalism, the female/feminine was a vital, indispensable tool in congealing relations among men. A woman might momentarily “be” the phallus, but only those who possessed or “had” the phallus (specific groups of men) could manipulate and control it.

Brandishing a nine-inch knife, Lorena however did alter its nature. Materially, she severed the penis from its corporeal site and altered its physicality; symbolically, she momentarily “displaced the privileged status of that signifier” (Butler 1993:90): the phallus. Lorena curtailed that process whereby the phallus must pass through her but could never reside with her in its exchange between men (cf. Rubin 1975). Rather than being the vehicle of phallic instantiation, Lorena herself momentarily “had” the phallus and altered the morphology of membership. By making herself into a disruptive agent who had to be taken into account, Lorena Bobbitt momentarily became a body that mattered.

The class-action suit against Texaco similarly threatened to destabilize the smug self-assuredness and self-righteousness of national and transnational exploitation. The plaintiffs’ action both exposed the hypocrisy of Ecuadorian membership and demanded restitution from a multinational where it hurt. The plaintiffs also dared to “alter its nature,” that is, the homoeconomic bonding of national elites and global capitalists that demanded the privation of the marginalized. The plaintiffs sought to arrest that process whereby neoliberal power must exploit through them but never reside with them in its exchange among capitalist interests. If only as a specter of the possible, the plaintiffs momentarily “had” the phallus and threatened to alter the morphology of national and multinational privilege. Thus, linking the class-action suit against Texaco with the Bobbitt tragedy both made sense of and threatened to interrupt the conventional dynamics of exploitative economic encounters.

In its modern image, history culminates at each epoch with a final rupture: power overthrown, heads cut off. Yet, as poststructuralists reveal, power persists and heads resurface in suitable, although altered, sites. Search and rescue teams recovered John Wayne Bobbitt’s severed penis from an empty lot; medical doctors sutured it back to its proper place. Potency was regained, to the pleasure of an eager public. In the ultimate simulacrum and the commodification

of spectacle, *Bobbitt: Uncut* was reportedly “the number-one pornographic movie in the United States” (Deem 1996:517). Yet, is there room to imagine a reconstructed John Wayne Bobbitt strolling arm-in-arm with Lorena or of his namesake, actor John Wayne, fighting for the rights of, not massacring, Indians? Danger lurks in these fantasies. Lorena Bobbitt, after all, still works as a manicurist while both John Waynes have reaped bonanzas.

But risk pries open questions of dis/semiation and the possibilities for altered political anatomies of what counts for membership. Importantly, fantasies of displacement and reapportionment do not seek to occupy the master’s place, to regain the Gallo (cock) or to screw the matriz (womb). The act of dislocating is more aligned with a politics of (re)articulation, which differs substantially from the politics of inversion and substitution. Fantasies of displacement through dangerous exposure beg “questions of imitation, subversion, and the recirculation of phantasmic privilege” (Butler 1993:85). They hold out the possibilities for the metamorphosis of power through alternative embodiments.

Consequently, I suggest, the plaintiffs in the lawsuit against Texaco did not wish to inhabit the master’s house. Their action sought to interrupt what they viewed as exploitative corporate actions and thereby to curb the form of mastery exercised. Similarly, their action aimed to intrude into the exclusive club of national belonging and thus to transform political process in Ecuador. By filing a lawsuit in the United States and indicting a transnational corporation abroad, the class-action plaintiffs contested the ability of multinational capital to be inculpable for the crude exploits of its subsidiaries *and* exposed the exclusionary ideology of the Ecuadorian nation that allowed elites to profit from neoliberal reforms while depriving the marginalized of their rights of belonging. In both instances, plaintiffs laid bare and indicted (like Lorena Bobbitt) the dominant narrative of who belonged within the folds of the body politic: They defied the prevailing pattern of who mattered and who served as a constitutive lack. Plaintiffs’ concern with power—both the technologies upholding capital accumulation and the scaffolding erecting elite privilege—was with the forms of articulations through which it persisted; the “how” of power (cf. Foucault 1979, 1980). Unsettling normative narratives of power and dominance effectively meant challenging phallogocentric rule and its binary hierarchical order (presence/lack; complete/incomplete; membered/dismembered).

By rearticulating their historically strained relationship, colonos and indígenas formed a “class” of shared injury. This identification of collective being unjustly harmed allowed them to dare to clip a corporate appendage and obliged the state to re-member their place in the nation. Both associating the Texaco and Bobbitt affairs and filing the lawsuit in New York marked a “subversive repetition” (cf. Butler 1993:90) for citizens defined through a lack. Challenging exclusionary notions of the nation through transnational space prompted the potential rewriting of narratives of national and transnational belonging. As Renan reminded us more than a century ago, “the essence of a nation is that all individuals have many things in common, and also that they have forgotten many things” (1990:11). The forgetful memorying that narrated

Ecuadorian and global politics omitted the tales of how the disenfranchised had been bereft of their membership. In November, 1999 plaintiffs declined to accept Texaco's offering of an out-of-court settlement and, as of this writing, the suit is still pending in the New York federal court. As seen through the lens of the Bobbitt affair, the class action by marginalized Ecuadorians against the world's fifth largest oil corporation (soon to be the fourth with the Chevron–Texaco merger) continues to challenge the politics of membership and calls for subaltern subjects to be mindfully re-membered in national and transnational bodies politic.

Yet, how to make sense of the fact that it was predominantly men (colono and indígena) who joked of bobbittizing Texaco and of sending “their women” to do the dirty deed? Was this yet another example of the female serving as the vehicle through which groups of men engaged in struggle (cf. Mani 1987)? Transgressive narratives held the potential to divert the apparatus of dominance so as to imagine a form of membership that did not rely on the privation of others for its functioning. This potential, however, was neither guaranteed nor ipso facto complete. Transgressive narratives were not autonomous of elite discourse; residues of power inequalities lurked within them. As Spivak notes, subalternity and postcolonial criticism consists in saying an “impossible ‘no’ to a structure, which one critiques, yet inhabits intimately” (1990:28). Colono and indígena men critiqued a metaphorically gendered foundational myth of national and transnational domination even as they inhabited a naturalized hierarchy of concrete gender relations in their own lives. It is through these critiques—which in themselves need critique—that the apparatus of domination might gradually become transformed.

Notes

Acknowledgments. I thank Norma Alarcon, Ann Anagnost, Tani Barlow, Lisa Disch, Suad Joseph, Jean Lave, Purnima Mankekar, Bill Maurer, Roger Rouse, Dan Segal, Stefan Sperling, Li Zhang, four anonymous reviewers, and especially Diane Nelson, for their insightful comments on various versions of this article. Paulina Garzón, Shannon Wright, Chris Jochnick, Teresa Velasquez, and Cristóbal Bonifaz have generously kept me up to date on the ever-pending Texaco suit. Research for this project was generously supported by the SSRC-MacArthur Foundation Fellowship for Peace and Security in a Changing World and the National Science Foundation.

1. For a detailed analysis of the court case see Sawyer (2001). I have used the complete name Texaco Inc. here to encourage the reader to imagine the parent company as a being “incorporated” with appendages—a body with lots of extensions—for reasons that will become obvious in the argument that follows.

2. Over the past decade I have collaborated with OPIP (Organización de Pueblos Indígenas de Pastaza), a lowland-Indian organization, at various junctures. From June 1993 to December 1994, I worked intensely on a day-to-day basis with the OPIP leadership and community members on growing concerns over petroleum operations in the region.

3. I thank Diane Nelson (1995, 1999)—with her fabulous knack for splicing together the uncommon—for greatly inspiring my writing this piece.

4. Civil Action No. 93 CIV 7527 (VLB) presented to the United States District Court for the Southern District of New York: *Maria Aguinda, et al., individually and on behalf of all others similarly situated, Plaintiffs, v. Texaco Inc., Defendant.*

5. Plaintiffs and protesters encountered numerous confrontations with the military during their protests against Texaco. For a detailed analysis of the relation between the military and plaintiffs see Sawyer (2001).

6. There are variations to this joke. Here is another:

xy: You know they say that the government tells us, el pueblo [the Ecuadorian populace], "one big lie" when it comes to neoliberal reforms.

xx: Oh, really? Tell me, what's that?

xy: Pues, la punta no más. La punta no más.

7. I thank Norma Alarcon and Tani Barlow for encouraging me to think critically about language and sexual metaphors in everyday latino life.

8. Researchers estimate that Texaco's operations generated up to 4.3 million gallons of hazardous waste daily (Kimerling 1991). Similarly, between 1972 and 1990 the Texaco-operated trans-Andean pipeline spilled an estimated 16.8 million gallons of crude into Amazonian headwaters—over one-and-a-half times that of the Exxon Valdez (Kimerling 1991, 1993, 1996).

9. Since the early 1970s, standard industrial practice in the United States re-injected highly toxic formation waters and subterranean sands at least one mile below the surface of the earth, processed chemical solvents until they were environmentally safe, and refined subterranean gases. In Ecuador, oil wastes were poured into pits; volatile gases were burned freely into the atmosphere; oil spills were buried.

10. Crude oil's most toxic components (polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons [PAHs] and volatile organic compounds [VOCs]) have been shown to negatively affect the reproductive and cellular development of all life forms and to lead to skin disease, reproductive abnormalities, nerve damage, and various forms of cancer among humans (Eckardt 1983; Green and Trett 1989; IARC [International Agency for Research on Cancer] 1989; Reis 1992). Beyond the hazardous elements found in crude oil, drilling and production processes likewise generate toxic pollutants containing carcinogenic heavy metals, strong acids, and concentrated salts. Such pollutants are largely found in drilling muds (used to lubricate, cool, and control pressure during perforation) and industrial solvents.

11. In 1992, CORDAVI (Corporación de Investigaciones Jurídicas y de Defensa de la Vida, a Quito-based human rights group) conducted studies showing that water in rivers near oil camps had a concentration of hydrocarbons 2,000 times that considered tolerable for aquatic ecosystems (Real López 1993:54). The Center for Economic and Social Rights recorded contaminants in drinking water that reached levels 1,000 times the safety standards recommended by the U.S. EPA (CESR 1994).

12. Texaco hired former Attorney General Griffin B. Bell as counsel to defend its concerns. For action to dismiss the case see: "Memorandum of Law in Support of Defendant Texaco Inc.'s Motion to Dismiss Based Upon Principles of International Comity;" "Memorandum of Law in Support of Defendant Texaco Inc.'s Motion to Dismiss Individual Claims;" "Memorandum of Law in Support of Defendant Texaco Inc.'s Motion to Dismiss for Failure to Join Indispensable Parties" (Law offices of King and Spaldings, Texaco's acting counsel). The text of these documents, as well as all affidavits and depositions, are from the internal files of the law offices of Kohn, Nast, and Graf. I obtained copies of all the legal documents that I cite either through the Frente de Defensa de la Amazonía, or the plaintiffs' chief lawyer Christóbal Bonifaz. The law offices Acción

Ecología representing both the plaintiffs and the defendant hold a complete set of the thousands of pages of legal documents generated for this case.

13. In his affidavit, George S. Branch (partner with Griffin B. Bell in the law firm King and Spaldings and Texaco's acting counsel) stated that the case against Texaco should be dismissed "on the grounds that Texaco Inc. neither conducted nor directed the activities at issue in this case. TexPet, not Texaco Inc., is the entity that actually operated in Ecuador until mid-1990." Furthermore, he argued "that Texaco Inc. did not conduct the alleged activities, that Texaco Inc. is not liable for the activities of its subsidiary (Texaco Petroleum Company), and that Texaco Inc. should therefore be dismissed." New York, December 27, 1993. See Note 12 for location of legal document.

14. See RAN Action Alert No. 86 and document "Make an Example of Texaco: 'Star' Polluter of the Ecuadorian Rainforest"; Norwegian "Frantiden I Vare Hender" document "Boikott Texaco"; Acción Ecológica document Alerta Verde No. 6 (June 1993); Punto de Vista No. 577 (June 15, 1993); Tierra Amiga document "Papel higiénico para las petroleras." The documents cited can be found in the archives of these organizations.

15. The joke in Spanish would be: "Se dice que la tierra es nuestra pachamama; pues, la madre no se vende/jode. Carajo!"

16. Along with other events in 1993 and 1994, the class-action suit provided the space to significantly transform colono/indígena relations and for developing new forms of interaction. I explore this process in greater detail elsewhere (Sawyer 1997) and in a book I am currently completing.

17. The ambassador's letter read: "Persons *claiming* to be citizens of Ecuador have presented demands before the Southern District Court in the State of New York against Texaco Inc. . . . Of additional concern is the fact that this claim, if judged in U.S. courts, could have collateral effects on the economy of Ecuador. . . . The inappropriate exercise of jurisdiction in this case would become a serious disincentive to U.S. companies that have invested in Ecuador. This disincentive would take place just as Ecuador attempts to attract investors from the United States by extending all possible guarantees to those who invest in Ecuador" (Washington, D.C., December 3, 1993). This letter became public when Texaco Inc. presented it to the New York judge as supporting evidence for having the case dismissed and reverted to Ecuadorian courts. Peasant, indigenous, and environmental groups in Ecuador (especially the Frente de Defensa de la Amazonia, CONAIE, and Acción Ecológica) obtained the letter via the plaintiffs' chief counsel Cristóbal Bonifaz and disseminated it widely throughout Ecuador. Both Terán Terán's letter and the amicus brief were published in Ecuadorian newspapers.

18. In 1988, oil accounted for approximately 70 percent of foreign revenues (Uquillas 1989; Zevallos 1989). In 1990, 46 percent of the foreign revenue came from oil exports (*Oil and Gall Journal* April 23, 1992:23). In 1993, "exports of crude accounted for more than 50 percent of the state budget" (*Energia* Nov/Dec 1993:30). In 1994, oil production contributed 50 percent of the national budget (CESR 1994).

19. Brief of Amicus Curiae of the Republic of Ecuador, filed in U.S. District Court Southern District of New York on January 26, 1994. See Note 12 for location of legal document.

20. Affidavit of Ambassador Edgar Terán Terán, Washington, D.C., April 8, 1994. See Note 12 for location of legal document.

21. Although the term is used by many other than just white statesmen, importantly, indigenous community and organization leaders have consciously and unconsciously attempted to excise the term *patria* from their vocabulary.

22. See Radcliffe and Westwood (1996) for an example of this. *Patria* is also variously translated as “homeland” or “native land.”

23. The Ecuadorian national anthem reads:

Chorus: ¡Salve o Patria, mil veces! ¡Oh Patria!, ¡gloria a ti! Y a tu pecho rebosa, goza y pas, y tu frente radiosa, mas que el sol contemplamos lucir.

Stanza: Los primeros los hijos del suelo, que soberbio el Pinchincha decora, te aclamaron por siempre señora, y vertieron su sangre por ti. Dios miró y aceptó el holocausto, y esa sangre fue germen fecundo, de otros héroes que atónito; el mundo vió en su torno a millares surgir. [Juan Leon Mera, 1867]

The Ecuadorian national anthem is ubiquitous. For example, it was written on the back of the spiral notebooks I would buy in stationary stores to write my fieldnotes. I copied the text from these.

24. Deem notes that the sheer “number of articles on Bobbitt required the new category of ‘penis mutilation’ in the *Reader’s Guide to Periodical Literature*” (1996:7 n.7).

25. In addition to Ecuadorian reports detailing events in the United States, features by Ehrenreich (1994), Heimel (1994), Kaplan (1994), Limbaugh (1994), and the *New York Times* supplemented my understanding of reactions in the United States.

26. In addition to shouting clever chants and brandishing smart signs, protesters performed street theater re-enacting Lorena’s tragic married life that ultimately culminated in her moment of castrating madness (*Hoy*, January 18, 1994).

27. This was the title of a *New York Times* editorial on January 13, 1994.

28. For a similar analysis see Alejandro Moreano’s fabulous article “¿Una Dalila moderna?” (*Hoy*, January 19, 1994).

29. I thank Jean Lave for reminding me of this.

30. As Gabriel Garcia Marquez noted in a *New York Times* article, “in the republic of Ecuador there are 105 names for the male sex organ” (August 13, 1997). Although *gallo* is not among them, one of the many terms for the male virile member in Ecuadorian slang is, however, *polla* (a young hen).

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