Convivial Conservation with Nurturing Masculinities in Brazil's Atlantic Forest

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This chapter explores convivial conservation, an emerging paradigm that supports care and interdependence among human and other life toward purposes of mutual regeneration and thriving. Rather than defending endangered nature from destructive people, this approach fosters intertwined human-environment care, wellbeing, and justice on multiple scales.

During decades of ethnographic research in South America, we coauthors have witnessed and reflected on practices and conditions that variously support or constrain convivial conservation. The following scenes from our learning experiences offer glimpses into life-worlds that enrich horizons of possibility for other kinds of populations who face the challenge of developing ways to live together with meaning and joy, while reducing the degrading exploitation of humans and other nature.

One September afternoon in 2014 in the Colca Valley of Peru's southern Andes, where Hirsch conducted two years of ethnographic research, he filmed three farmers singing to their land after a satisfying day of collaborative labor. The bass-toned voices of Dons Máximo, Sabino, and Gerardo reverberated down multiple terraces into the valley below, beseeching the earth to allow the seeds they had just planted to be warm and to bear fruit. Before singing, they had hydrated themselves and the terrain with *chicha*, a drink of fermented maize and barley that marks rituals and celebrations. In a chant called *Hialeo*, their Quechua-language verses shouted out the name of the feminine-gendered terrain,

"Mama Ch'ela," and praised the *Pachamama*, the oxen who pulled their plows, their planting tools, their home villages, and their families. Ending the long day in convivial celebration, singing to and with the land and each other, and nourishing the land and each other with chicha, is a gratifying form of conserving and sustaining relationships of reciprocity among farmers, seeds, and soil.

One September morning in 2002 in rural Bahia, Brazil, where DeVore and Paulson conducted research over many years, DeVore joined a group of men clearing the young rainforest that had regrown on an abandoned plantation called *Nossa Senhora*. As Colodino, his brothers, and their sons labored together, their calls and laughter reverberated through the forest, together with sounds of machetes, axes, and a borrowed chainsaw. Weeks after clearing understory vegetation, they would burn the plot; plant manioc, beans, and bananas; and eventually cultivate rich agroforests with perennial trees. This day of collaborative labor also culminated in convivial celebration, as participants played dominos, listened to *seresta* music, and shared a bottle of *cachaça*. Into the evening, impassioned conversations evolved around 'environmentalists' who condemn them for destroying the rainforest.

This chapter traces the emergence of vital interdependencies among human and other life in the second scenario, set in Brazil's highly biodiverse Atlantic Forest, which is home to a long history of struggles by indigenous peoples, enslaved Africans, and others seeking to forge alternatives to extractivist economies that degrade human and non-human life. We focus on a group of people who have built affirming life-worlds on land they occupied in the 1990s. Such squatters are frequently condemned as threats to society and adversaries of nature. Yet, over the years, we have been repeatedly inspired by their commitments to care for each other and for more than human lives by nurturing native trees, nourishing wild birds, protecting water sources, and similar gestures.

Whereas indigenous people and rural women are often stereotyped as guardians of nature, the protagonists of this chapter are the kinds of men who tend to be characterized as destroyers. Their journeys toward nurturing experiences and expressions of masculinity illuminate

the potential of (re)distributive politics to move men out of jobs that degrade their bodies and environments, and the potential of mutually sustaining interspecies relationships to build satisfying identities.

In this chapter, we seek to provoke reflections and debate about possibilities for forging futures with healthier gender roles and human-environment relations. Appreciation of convivialism in our research processes may motivate further methodological innovations. Our attention to conservation operating beyond formal nature preserves contributes to findings of surprisingly diverse intimacies among human and other lives (Haraway 2016; Hirsch 2017; Singh 2017). Finally, we celebrate the role of convivial conservation in restoring senses of joy, abundance, and festiveness through relations of solidarity.

1. Convivial Conservation

In heated debates about conservation, exclusionary approaches that use fences and guns to keep humans out of nature preserves are pitted against participatory projects that train local residents to manage preserves in approved ways (e.g., Agrawal/Redford 2009; Brockington/Duffy/Igoe 2008). Despite strong differences, both approaches reinforce the conceptual dichotomy, and practical segregation, of humanness from wilderness. The strategy of securing conservation by divorcing humans from other nature is exemplified in "Half-Earth" proposals, championed by E. O. Wilson (2016) and other scientists, who propose to designate 50 percent of the Earth's land mass and water area as a patchwork of conservation zones, protected from human life and economic activities. While some proposals allow extremely small roles for select groups such as rural women and indigenous residents, these approaches portend forced removal and resettlement of historically marginalized populations (Büscher et al. 2017). Visions of conservation through perpetual segregation militate against principles of *The Second Convivialist Manifesto* (Convivialist International 2020 [hereafter cited as: *SCM*]).

Convivial conservation, pioneered by Bram Büscher and Robert Fletcher (2020), is an integrated Whole Earth approach that responds to ecological, social, and political-economic forces and factors that are undermining biocultural diversity in the 21st century. It does not focus blame on marginalized people who perform destructive work that degrades their bodies and other nature, such as coal miners of West Virginia, gold miners of Brazil's Serra Pelada, or, in the case discussed here, laborers in monocrop plantations carved into tropical forest. Instead, by addressing and redressing structural relationships that undergird and compel this mutual violence, convivial conservation seeks to renew affirming interdependencies among human and other life.

While considering scenes from rural Brazil, we invite readers to ask: What roles can and do relations with non-human others play in the formation of good lives? How might conservation and care for diverse organisms and environments be bound up with conservation and care for human communities? We hope the case will motivate you to join our reflection on principles outlined in the *SCM* (7):

> "*Principle of common naturality*: Humans do not live outside a nature, of which they should become 'masters and possessors.' Like all living beings, they are part of it and are interdependent with it. They have a responsibility to take care of it. If they do not respect it, it is their ethical and physical survival that is at risk.
> *Principle of common humanity*: Beyond differences of skin, nationality, language, culture, religion, or wealth, sex, or gender, there exists only one humanity, which must be respected in the person of each of its members.
> *Principle of common sociality*: Human beings are social beings for whom the greatest wealth is the richness of the concrete relationships they maintain among themselves within associations, societies, or communities of varying size and nature."

2. Methods: From Collecting Data to Living and Learning With

Our understanding of this case developed over long-term engagements. Between 2001 and 2009, Paulson led field research schools in Bahia for six weeks each year. In addition to practicing scientific techniques for gathering information, participants were encouraged to learn by actively *living with* humans and other nature, including the settlement Nossa Senhora. DeVore participated as a student in one of these field schools, and subsequently completed 38 months of ethnographic and ethnohistorical research in the region between 2002 and 2012. Our understandings expressed here are also enriched by studies elsewhere in South America, including 13 years of research that Hirsch carried out with Quechua farmers in the Peruvian Andes, and 20 years of research that Paulson pursued in Bolivia.

All of us engage methods that might be called convivial, joining enthusiastically in long days of labor, celebrations, and relaxation, in which we not only observe, but also experience and connect with people and surroundings. We also experiment with more mutual and less hierarchical practices of knowledge production, exemplified by the video project described below, which fosters creative agency among local participants.

The three co-authors of this chapter shared and discussed our observations in several conferences and workshops, and subsequently co-authored the article, "Conserving human and other nature: A curious case of convivial conservation from Brazil" (DeVore/Hirsch/Paulson 2019). The present chapter develops from that longer article, which also explores the instrumentalization of indigeneity in conservation-related legislation, projects, and scholarship.

3. Historical Violence, Redistributive Justice, Convivial Conservation

Since European colonization, Brazil's highly biodiverse Atlantic Forest has been the site of conflict among competing interests including profit-driven extractivism and state-directed timber conservation (Dean 1995). During the first half of the 20th century, former slaves and other people squatted in the region's hills where they cultivated manioc gardens, foraged, fished, and hunted. Stories told by former members of these communities recall lives that emphasized sharing, reciprocity, and social reproduction (DeVore 2014). Beginning in the 1950s, however, this world was dismantled through a protracted land grab inaugurated by one of Brazil's most infamous capitalists, Norberto Odebrecht, who appropriated the region's timber resources and sold the land to investors, notably Firestone, seeking to plant rubber (DeVore 2018). As resident families were expelled, men and some women were repurposed as plantation laborers.

A new phase of struggles emerged in the early 1990s, when a *witch's broom* fungus (*Moniliophthora perniciosa*) devastated the region's commercial cacao plantations, prompting owners to abandon their land and causing workers to lose their wages. In the wake of this disaster, native vegetation regrew vigorously, and groups of former plantation workers, together with their families, occupied and began to cultivate plantation lands for themselves.

Especially in the early years, members of these nascent communities employed machetes, axes, and chainsaws, together with fire, to open spaces for cultivation. As they slashed-and-burned forest to create space for their own life-worlds, these squatters were condemned—like generations of swidden farmers around the world—as ignorant enemies of nature. One community member named Damião pointed out with irony how Brazil's environmental protection agency did so much to protect jaguars, but nothing to protect small farmers, protesting: "I have no interest in cutting down a tree. But I have to survive."

But Damião and others were not just felling trees. They were emancipating themselves by building meaningful and sustaining

relationships with land, plants, animals, and other aspects of their biophysical world. Over the years, we witnessed burned forests transform into bountiful agroforests, producing foodstuffs like manioc, bananas, beans and vegetables, and cash crops such as cacao and rubber, under the shade of volunteer saplings (DeVore 2017).

4. Interspecies Care and Affection Express Common Naturality

Moved by the enthusiasm with which these Brazilian men express joy and affection for trees, and the Peruvian farmers described above sing loving gratitude to the soil, we explore various methods to learn about interspecies relationships. In 2009, one farmer asked DeVore to video record the interwoven stories of his life, his family, and their farm. The video became so popular that others asked DeVore to record their stories, too, resulting in the co-production of fourteen videos. Inspired by this method, Felipe Pinheiro, a graduate student working with Paulson, co-produced similar videos in 2019 with silvopastoralists in the Bacia do Jacuípe region of Bahia (Canal Agroecologia 2020).

In July 2010, DeVore collaborated with Floriano to record his family's story, which highlighted mutual care and provisioning with plants and animals. Pointing to various crops that his family cultivated, such as the fruit-producing *cupuaçu* tree (*Theobroma grandiflorum*), Floriano explained, "It's good to plant plenty of fruit […] the fruit will reveal itself, it'll say: '*I'm here*.' It's like the cupuaçu saying, '*I'm here. We've arrived at the time for me to give to you*.'"

Since his family began to occupy and cultivate their corner of Nossa Senhora, Floriano has planted seeds and seedlings, including *pequi* and *aderno* trees, numerous *sucupira* trees, and two dozen *jatobá* trees. In the following quote, he remembers planting half a dozen *oti* trees on his birthday twelve years earlier:

> "Passing through neighboring forests, I saw some good *oti* seedlings there, I brought them to see if they'd take root, if they'd grow. I planted

> this *oti* tree here. The thing suffered, but he began to extend himself, saying, '*I'll rise, I'll rise*.' […] They say that for him to give fruit, it takes 30 years. I say, '*I wanna see*.' It was planted one day, it was my birthday. On my birthday I went there, planted him."

Deep temporal horizons are revealed by Floriano's motivations to cultivate trees that are elsewhere valued for their hardwood timber, a resource that Floriano would not live to harvest:

> "I plant because nature asks for it. The land asks for plants. So, if the land asks, and there are no trees here, the farmer has to bring them from elsewhere to plant. That's why I plant. […] And this example that I'm making here, I want it to serve for a century. So that all who may come work the earth, who have their little farm, and also plant three or four or five trees, to show their children and to show their grandchildren and great-grandchildren."

These words from rural Brazil evoke lines from Wendell Berry, the Kentucky poet-farmer who, in a well-loved poem "Manifesto: The Mad Farmer Liberation Front," writes:

> "Invest in the millennium. Plant sequoias.
> Say that your main crop is the forest
> that you did not plant,
> that you will not live to harvest."

Floriano recalled that some companions jokingly asked him: "What'll you do with those trees, eat them?" To which he replied: "I don't eat it. But the birds eat, the others […]. As long as they go there, they don't come to eat off my plate […]. If I don't plant for them, they'll come eat off my plate." "This year," he observed, the aderno trees "put out plenty of fruit. I've got plenty of seeds here on the ground […] this is food for birds, toucans, *inguaxo* [*Cacicus haemorrhous*], and even the *paca* [*Cuniculus paca*]." He explained that if he did not plant something for the animals and insects, they would go directly to his cacao: "Cacao is the food that we [humans] want most, so we'll share with them […]. We give—we plant for them, too."

In conventional economic terms, Floriano's orientation to the trees that he cultivates is non-utilitarian: they offer nothing for his family to eat or sell. Environmental impact assessments may illuminate the trees' contributions to ecosystems services or agroforestry, yet fail to capture the wholeness of interspecies commitment. Floriano's insistence on planting for nature and for future generations, and planting so that insects, birds, and mammals can also eat, represents an interesting convergence with arguments for Half-Earth-style conservation. Both perceive that the ability to provide for human groups is bound up with care for other organisms, and both aim to ensure that nature has its share: one by excluding human activity, and the other by making space for all at a shared table.

5. Beyond Demeaning Stereotypes, toward Common Humanness

The scarred and fatigued bodies of the middle-aged men featured here testify to their contribution to regional economies, and to the failure of those economies to reciprocate with care. Norms of subordinate masculinity into which they had been cast involve expectations that men will endure violence in and beyond the workplace, and will perpetuate violence against women, children, other men, and against nature.

Across Latin America, early deaths suffered by low-income men have contributed to growing gaps in life expectancy, where men, on average, have fallen far behind women (Paulson 2015). How are these outcomes related to the massive expansion of ecologically destructive industries such as logging, mining, petroleum, and industrial farming? Among other forces, violent regimes of masculinity have been motivated to justify degrading and hazardous working conditions, and to fuel environmental struggles in which some marginalized men are conscripted into public or private security forces to fight against other marginalized men in conflicts over territory and resources.

While traditions of green primitivism construe indigenous people as naturally closer to nature, and some eco-feminist visions endow

women with innate nurturing capacities (Leach 2007), men like these are rarely protagonists of conservation narratives. On the contrary, men described here are publicly condemned as threats to the endangered biodiversity of Brazil's Atlantic Forest, and to private property controlled by the region's socioeconomic elite.

Here we have presented a curious case in which landless men with little formal education, branded as violent destroyers of nature, affirmatively reconstruct life-worlds through nurturing relationships with land, trees, and other features of their biophysical world, as well as with each other. Their lives still involve harsh challenges, and their expressions of masculinity continue to embrace conventional roles as *producers* and *providers*. Yet, even in the face of violent norms and structural domination, these men have managed to expand and enjoy identities as *reproducers* and *caretakers*. That amazing feat, and its sweet rewards, should motivate readers in diverse other contexts.

6. Toward Convivial Futures

In a world where political economic processes continue to undermine ecosystems and communities, and development initiatives continue to focus on expanding money-earning opportunities, efforts to protect the environment will continue to employ closed conservation areas. Some conservation scientists and practitioners will continue to argue that efforts to improve material conditions for people jeopardize the preservation of biodiversity (Sanderson/Redford 2003). We hope that the case presented here will contribute to complementary policies and projects designed to strengthen diverse life-worlds by supporting meaningful and caring relationships among humans and with other nature.

Shifts from political ecologies of mutual violence and degradation toward dynamics of mutual flourishing show that convivial futures are possible, and that struggles for more equal distributions of the means of (re)production play a vital role in such transitions. Interspecies relations of care glimpsed in Peru and Brazil suggest broader possibilities

for renewal of the convivial *principle of common naturality*, even among humans who have been marked and rendered as threats to nature.

Against historical conditions in which subordinate men have been brutally employed in the aggressive exploitation of nature for someone else's profit, we find hope in practices and meanings through which some men nurture and care for themselves, others, and non-human nature. Here *principles of common humanity* encourage respect for all fellow humans, even those maligned as violent and destructive.

This is not a story of individual achievement. In the cases we have studied, values and practices that guide people to work and to care in solidarity are rooted in deep *traditions of common sociality*. Continual (re)generation and adaptation of cultural resources and community ties are vital to sustaining shared natural environments.

To support conditions in which these principles can thrive, political economic systems must be reoriented away from domination and growth and toward equitable wellbeing and resilience. And diverse communities must be strengthened in their own collaborative and intergenerational efforts to build life-worlds that seek and celebrate human-environmental wellbeing and justice.

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