"DEFENDING WHAT IS OURS"



Resisting and Re-Existing in Covas do Barroso

An Ethnography of a Place-Based Struggle Over a Prospective Lithium Mine

Mariana Riquito

"Defending What Is Ours:"
Resisting and Re-Existing in Covas do Barroso.
An Ethnography of a Place-Based Struggle Over a Prospective Lithium Mine.

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May 2026

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ACADEMISCH PROEFSCHRIFT

ter verkrijging van de graad van doctor
aan de Universiteit van Amsterdam
op gezag van de Rector Magnificus
ten overstaan van een door het College
voor Promoties ingestelde commissie,
in het openbaar te verdedigen in de Aula der Universiteit
op woensdag 2 september 2026, te 14.00 uur

door Mariana Riquito Pereira
geboren te Coimbra

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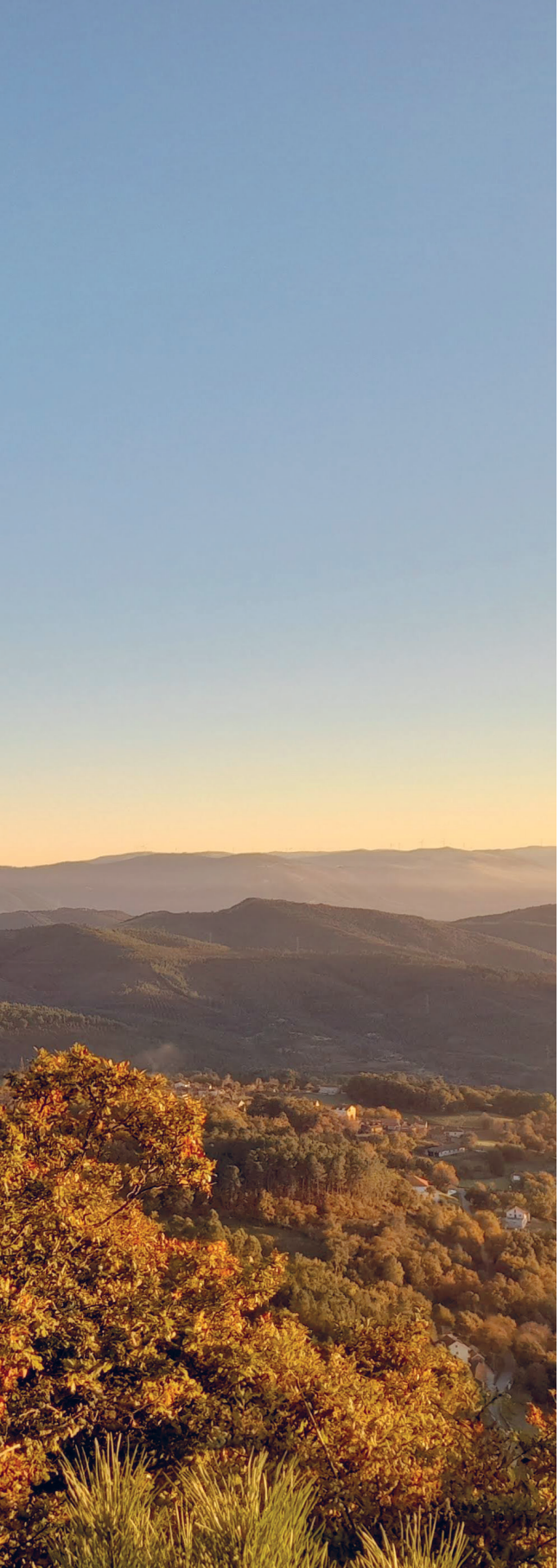
Faculteit der Maatschappij- en Gedragswetenschappen

Acknowledgement of Financial Support

I gratefully acknowledge the financial support of Fundação para a Ciência e Tecnologia (FCT), whose individual doctoral scholarship (2021.04679.BD) enabled me to dedicate four years to this thesis.

Recently dissolved by executive decision, the FCT was a vital source of support for countless scholars and researchers in Portugal, a country where academic work is structurally precarious. Its dissolution, now merged with the National Agency for Innovation, raises concerns that critical scholarship, particularly in the social sciences and humanities, may face increasing risks of underfunding. I am deeply aware of how fortunate and privileged I was to benefit from this support before these changes took place.





Estas águas claras, sossego
Este ar puro
Estas serras altas
Este é o nosso mundo
E é por ele que vamos lutar

Excerpt from the song
"Hora de Lutar" by Carlos Libo

These pristine waters, this quietude
This pure air
These hilly mountains
This is our world
And it is for it that we will fight

writing amidst

writing amidst a live-streamed genocide is a troubling experience. every day, from my phone screen, images of assassinated children, women, men; videos of tents being bombarded or burnt up; hospitals, schools, universities being torn apart; family members looking for their relatives' body parts in the midst of the rubble; doctors hopelessly operating on dying patients; drones and airstrikes endlessly targeting entire towns; sovereign countries being invaded; elected representatives assassinated; international institutions' headquarters blown up; hate speech pronounced with absolute impunity; maps, charts, and statistics with death counts whose numbers at one point just stopped making sense.

just stopped making sense.

flooded with all this information, all this horror, for almost three consecutive years.

barbarism normalized.

such horror is not one we have the emotional capacity to process – our bodies-brains-stomachs are simply not wired for such images, acts, narratives. because this is more than what a human can take. this is inhumane.

how did we get here?
how was barbarism normalised?
with a certain level of alienation perhaps?
alienation is a coping mechanism to deal with the unimaginable, the unbearable.
a certain degree of alienation seems necessary in order to keep living.
otherwise, how could we?

but, even with a certain degree of alienation – which has allowed me to keep going, to keep loving my loved ones, to keep enjoying life, to keep working, to keep writing –, I could never be silent. I could never forget. I could not continue as if everything were the same as before.
because nothing will ever be the same again.

and that is also why I write.
I write because I could not ***not*** write. barbaric would be to write, to create, to produce as if the televised genocide did not exist. barbaric would be to ignore it.
we need to acknowledge it and to grieve it.
grieve all this intolerable pain
grieve all this insurmountable pain
grieve what the body cannot hold

a genocide

for mourning is how the body metabolizes history

part of grieving, for me, is to write, to ***not*** allow all this violence to be ignored. to *not* remain silent in the face of barbarism. to not be afraid of naming it. of speaking up.

we need to break the siege of silence, of complicity, of indifference.

and cast a spell of love, of hope.

that starts by connecting the dots.

the imperative of displacement, which increasingly shapes our world, found its most barbaric grip in Palestine, but it is also visible in places such as Barroso, where I write from, with and for.

connect the dots. weave them.

knowing that what is happening in Barroso can hardly be compared to the violence taking place in Palestine, I take refuge in being-with those bodies-territories who are resisting the colonial machine. I write alongside *les damnés de la terre*, those who, for centuries, have borne, quite literally, the weight of the world on their backs, at the cost of blood, sweat, and tears.

I write alongside them. for them.

may there come a day when we can write something that "is not political," may there come a day when we can "listen to the birds" again, as Marwan Makhoul beautifully puts it. until then, and for as long as we cannot hear the birds – neither in Palestine nor in Barroso, where drilling machines have been tearing apart the earth's blood and silencing their song – we write "political things."

we write from a place of refusal: refusal of barbarism, of silence, of complicity.

I start with my refusal to accept the unacceptable.

yet, this refusal carries within itself a hope. as Holloway writes, "it is the very horror of the world that obliges us to learn to hope."

the struggle in Barroso has taught me that one must never cease to hope.

because in giving in to despair, we give in to barbarism.

and barbarism must never, never, never be accepted.

VIVA VIVA PALESTINA!

VIVA VIVA BARROSO!

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A Note on Italics

Throughout the text, italics are used both for Portuguese terms and for emphasising particular English words.

List of Publications

This PhD manuscript is a compilation of published and/or under-review academic articles, as well as unpublished essays. All texts are single authored.

Prelude.
This prelude was written for the sole purpose of this thesis. It immerses the readers in the rhythms of Covas do Barroso, situating them in the socionatural, affective, and temporal worlds of the dissertation, inviting them to think with the author about what it means to be situated, relational, and attentive to the material politics of place. It results from the author's documentation of the practice of the *torna da água* – a multimodal archive which was collaboratively done with the inhabitants of Covas do Barroso. That archive was partially published (in Portuguese) at Revista DIVERGENTE: Riquito, M. (2024). *Torna da Água do Povo de Covas do Barroso: Registo Documental de uma Prática Socio-Agrícola Ancestral.* Lisbon: Revista DIVERGENTE.

Chapter I.
This Chapter is an adaptation of the following article: Riquito, M. (2026). "'We Are Also the Colonised:' The Green Transition's Colonial Matrix of Power at Europe's Rural Peripheries" *Extractive Industries and Societies*, 2(101861).
https://doi.org/10.1016/j.exis.2026.101861

Chapter II.
This Chapter is an adaptation of the following under-review article: Riquito, M. (under review at *Social Analysis*): "Monte and Baldio: Strategic Equivocation as a Practice of Defence in Covas do Barroso".

Chapter III.
This Chapter is an adaptation of the following article: Riquito, M. (2025). "'Barroso Is Not Be Sold, It Is to Be Loved and Defended:' Affective Mobilizations for Land and Life in the Context of Green Extractivism" *Capitalism Nature Socialism*. 36(4).
https://doi.org/10.1080/10455752.2025.2562631

Tralhão I. & Tralhão II.
These essays were written for the sole purpose of this thesis. They are single-authored and remain unpublished.

All photographs and images are by the author, unless otherwise indicated.

PRELUDE

Covas do Barroso lies sheltered by mountains. It bears this name because, from the heights above, the village appears as a gentle hollow (*cova*).

From the springs of these mountains flows crystal-clear water nourishing agricultural practices throughout the year.

In the summer months, inhabitants follow an ancestral practice in which time is paced by the sun and the slow march of its shadows.

As the doors of the sluice gates swing open to the rhythm of sundials, water flows and maintains this village vibrant and green.

I invite you to read this prelude accompanied by the sound and images of Covas' water:

Video made and given by Paula Köning.





It is the early afternoon on a sweltering summer day in Covas do Barroso. The sun hangs high in a cloudless, azure sky. The air is dry, almost tangible in its stillness, offering no breeze to cool down. I want to go for a refreshing dip in the river, but I am committed to following the *torna da água*. I make my way to Largo do Cruzeiro, the place where inhabitants meet to *tornar a água*.

The *torna da água*, also known as *aviação*, is an ancestral practice of taking care of water, which takes place each summer, between the *Dia de São João* and the *Dia de São Miguel* – two religious festivities occurring on the 24th of June and on the 29th of September, respectively. These dates are expressed as religious feasts rather than calendar months, reflecting the enduring influence of the Catholic Church in rural Portugal. In villages like Covas, the Church remains an important institution, shaping social, family, and agricultural practices. António Fontes, a Priest from Barroso who conducted extensive ethnographic work in the region, notes that many ancient agrarian or pagan rituals – what he calls "celebrations of cosmic and agricultural life" (2014, 140-141) – were historically absorbed into Christian customs. As elsewhere in Europe, Christianity appropriated many practices associated with fertility and rural ritual life (Ginzburg 1989; Federici 2023).

São João and São Miguel are no exceptions. Closely tied to the cycle of agricultural life, the former marks the blooming *(momento da floração)* of some plants, while the latter signals the harvesting *(momento das colheitas)* for certain crops. Corn illustrates this: during my time in Covas, most corn sown in May was dry and ready for defoliation by late September. As a farmer once told me, "the dates of the *torna da água* make perfect sense for agriculture."

This irrigation system captures the water that rises in the Covas River, channelling it down the mountain by a *levada*. *Levadas* are traditional irrigation channels; the term comes from the Portuguese verb *levar*, which means "to bring to." In Covas, the main *levada* is about two kilometres long and is complemented by a myriad of other, smaller *levadas* (also called *ramais*). Together, they spread and flow through the whole village, forming an irrigation infrastructure able to supply the village's fertile lands – the *lameiros* (wetlands), the *terras de cultivo* (cropland) as well as the *hortas* (vegetable gardens).

The *lameiros* are the permanent wet or flooded fields where pasture grass grows – they provide sustenance for animals, particularly cows and sheep, and they are also where hay is grown. The *terras de cultivo* correspond to the land where corn, potatoes and beans are sown, what in Covas is commonly called *renovo*. The *hortas* are for individual or family consumption: it is where a variety of vegetables are sown and planted, known in the local slang as *miudezas* ("the little ones"), namely: cabbages, onions, lettuces, tomatoes, carrots, zucchinis, as well as potatoes for those who do not have animals, and thus only plant a smaller quantity.

Walking through Covas feels like stepping into an immersive soundscape, where the murmur of running water, the humming of birds, and the breath of the wind blend with the rough noise of old diesel-burning tractors, the steps of cattle lowing, and the rhythm of men and women carrying their *sacholas* (farm hoes).



The main *levada* of Covas. Source: Paula Kõning.

The main *levada* of Romainho, the neighbouring town, part of the Covas do Barroso Civil Parish. Source: Paloma Ruiz

Lameiro (meadow) with cows grazing.

Terra de cultivo (cropland), where corn is sown.



Lameiros (meadows). Source: Paula Köning.



During the *torna da água*, the water in Covas is aviada, literally "ready" or "completed" in Portuguese. Locally, this term is used specifically during the *torna da água* to refer to what happens to the water: inhabitants will usually say *a água corre aviada* ("the water runs aviada") or *a água vai aviada* ("the water goes aviada"). This means water is distributed among different plots of land, according to a centuries-old system of transmitted rules. Lúcia[1], a shepherdess in her late sixties, described it: "as the water is for the *antigos* ("elders"), so it runs for the new[2]."

The *antigos* (elders) share with their *herdeiros* (heirs) the *horas de água* (water hours) allocated to their *terrenos* (fields). As inhabitants often reminded me, during the *torna da água*, the water belongs to the fields (*a água pertence aos terrenos*). Approximately 70 parcels participate in this system. In winter, the divisions do not apply and anyone can use the water from the *levada* whenever they please. This is why this water is also called *água do povo* ("the people's water").

When I expressed interest in learning more, inhabitants directed me to Amadeus: "he knows a lot," they told me, as if he were a guardian of the long memory of the *torna da água*.

I first met him on a July morning. I left my house early that day and, fortunately, ran into a worker of the Local Home Support Service, who pointed out to the dead-end street leading up to his house. As I was walking through this narrow stone-paved street, I saw him from a distance: seated in a stone bench on his front porch, an old man looking vaguely into the horizon. As I approached him, some details immediately sparked my attention: he was wearing a white cap – with letters reading Savana *Notável* –, under which his sharp, light blue eyes stood out. *Savana Notável*, 'Notable Savana,' is a local construction company, founded in 2019, which has collaborated with the mining company Savannah Resources, the multinational holding concession rights to the '*Mina do Barroso*,' a lithium project planned for Covas do Barroso.

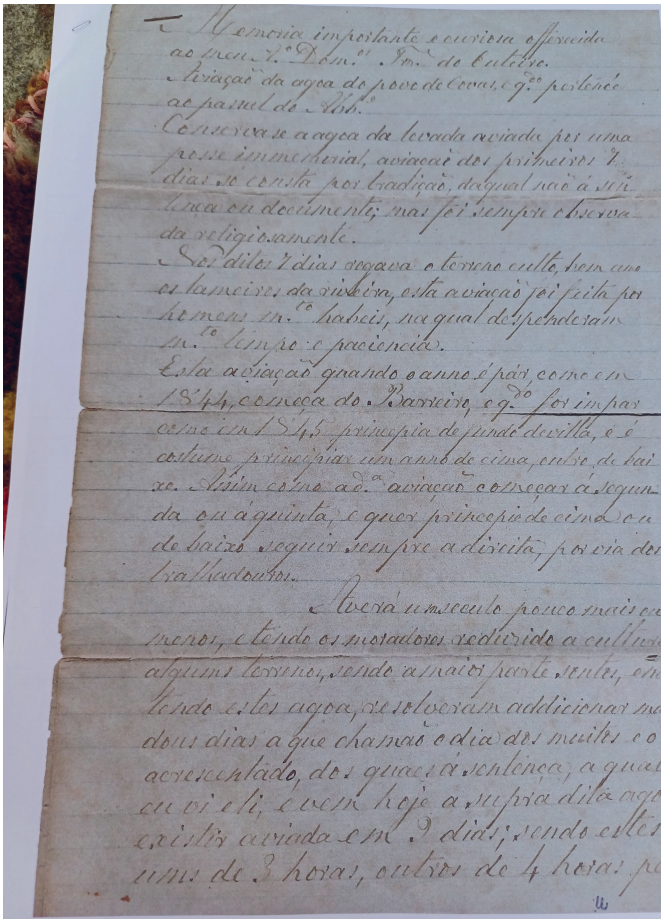
"Hello, good morning!" I announced. "Good morning," he replied, curious. "I do not think we have met before – my name is Mariana, I have been living in Covas for some months now, I am conducting research for my PhD. Your son suggested I speak with you about the torna da água." Amadeus quickly showed enthusiasm. Eager for an attentive listener, he started recalling the history of Covas. I jumped in at one point to ask about the origin of the torna da água. "I have a document here which was offered to my great-grandfather by the [then] priest; and it says there is no memory of the first seven days of the *aviação*," he replied.

Later that day, I returned to see the document, inaugurating many conversations and close collaboration with this almost centenarian man. "Go ahead, read it," he said. Looking at this brittle paper, I struggled deciphering the old calligraphy printed on it. Hesitantly, I read the title: "Important and curious memory offered to my friend Domingues Fernandes do Outeiro. *Aviação* of the *água do povo* of Covas do Barroso and when it belongs to the *Paçal do Abade*." He explained that *Paçal do Abade* are the fields belonging to the Church.

As I stumbled through the archaic sentences, Amadeus would finish them for me, even though the document was in my hands. I quickly realized he knew the words by heart. "You should read it; you know it better than I do," I invited him. And so, Amadeus read with absolute fluidity:

> "The water of the *levada* began to be *aviada* by an immemorial possession: the *aviação* of the first seven days is only known by tradition, of which there is no sentence or document, but which has always been observed religiously.[3]"

1 All names in this Prelude are pseudonyms.
2 "Conforme a água está nos *antigos*, conforme corre nos novos".
3 "Começava a água da *levada* aviada por uma posse imemoriável: a aviação dos primeiros sete dias só consta por tradição, da qual não há sentença ou documento, mas foi sempre observada religiosamente".



First page of the document **"Aviação da água do povo de Covas e quando pertence ao Paçal do Abade,"** written in 1844 by São Francisco Arménio Medeiros, who was, at the time, the Priest of Covas.

Written in 1844, this document confirms what I had often heard when I would ask about this practice's beginning: "no one knows." Even if "no one knows" when it began, "everyone knows as *regras dos antigos*" (the rules of the elders). The rules are passed down orally from parents to children, and are also written down. In the homes of the many families who generously opened their doors to me, I found their *caderninhos* ("small notebooks") tucked in drawers, shelves, or desks. These handwritten *caderninhos* connect the past, present and future of the different *herdeiros* and their water rights. In summer, they come alive through human hands pulling the *comporta*s (sluice gates) and digging the *tralhões* (ditches), creating a living portrait of this centuries-old system.

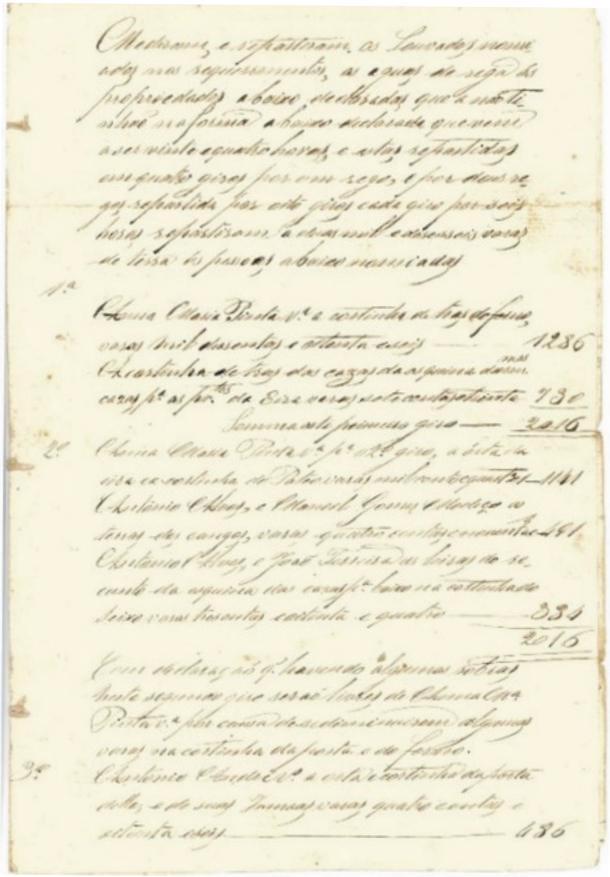
These rules set a rotation system. The complete cycle of the *roda da água* (water wheel) is 11 days, because each plot of land will have water every 11 days. Originally, it was seven days – corresponding, so the story goes, to the seven *lavradores* (plowmen) working the land. As more people began working the fields, two days were added: *Dia dos Muitos* (Day of the Many) and *Dia da Acrescentada* (Added Day).

This change, documented around 1781 by Domingos Alves, was confirmed in a scanned paper provided to me by Gabriela, and remains, to our knowledge, the first written document about this practice. In her late forties, Gabriela is insatiably curious and particularly passionate about the ancestrality of her family and her village. This document names the new *herdeiros* with water rights, who sign below, concluding, "We sign because we believe the declared division and the water rights are fair..." Indeed, the rules of the torna da água ensure everyone receives water proportional to the dimension of their plot.

As I was following the torna da água, by reading old documents, talking with inhabitants, observing them, and mapping down the different plots of land with access to water, I learned that the names given to the lands often correspond to family or personal names. These names tell stories of alliances, inheritances, quarrels, marriages, and divorces, past and yet to come. Even the smallest plots – the *corgos* (streams where water flows) or *leiras* (strips of land) – have names, such as *Canto do Abade* ("Corner of the Abbey"), *Reguengo* (a family name), *Hortas do Miguel* ("Miguel's vegetable gardens"), and *Curtinha do Cimo de Vila* ("the small place of the upper town").

Each day of the *roda da água* – except for Saturdays and Sundays – has a name: *Dia de Fundo de Vila; Dia da Via Cova, Dia de Lavanco; Dia do Barreiro; Dia do Paço; Dia de Joana Afonso; Dia da Travessa*. These names correspond to streets, neighbourhoods or people, and, during the *torna da água*, days are referred to by these customary names, not calendar dates.

On weekends, water is diverted to the *lameiros da Ribeira*, meadows outside Covas, even though the 1844 document notes that "there must always be water coming to the village for the animals to drink and in case there should be any fire." These meadows are irrigated from Saturday *ao passar das sombras* ("at the passing of the shadows") to Sunday *ao passar das sombras*. This moment is defined by a specific place on the road to Campos, the neighbouring town, where "a split stone" (*calhau rachado*) marks the sun's shadow. Jerónimo, a farmer, explained: "there is a stone with a crack and, when the shadows pass there on Saturdays, it is time to go up to the *monte*[4] and divert the water to the meadows.[5]" Although the exact location is difficult to pinpoint, it is known to many inhabitants. In another farmer, Aurora's, explanation, "On leaving Covas [towards Campos], you see the last house – and that is where the split stone is. It is when you see the monte moving backwards.[6]"



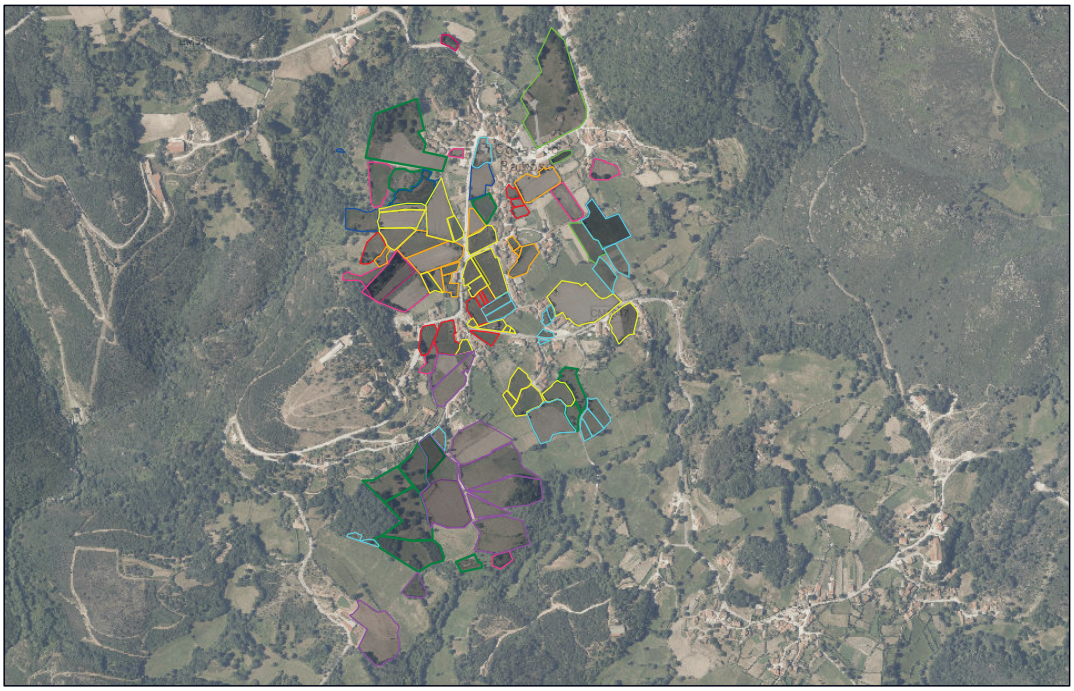
First page of the document **"Centença da água do dia dos muitos do lugar de Covas,"** written in 1781 by Domingos Alves.

4 Monte is a local term used to designate the communally possessed lands surrounding Covas and, more broadly, the mountainous lands around the village (cf. **Glossary**). Crucially, the nature of these lands will be explored in **Chapter II.**

5 "Há uma pedra com uma falha e, quando lá passavam as sombras, aos sábados, era tempo de ir lá ao monte tornar a água para os lameiros".

6 "À saída de Covas [para Campos], vês a última casa e é ali o calhau rachado. É quando vês o monte a ir para trás".

MAPA Terrenos com Água Aviada



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Esri, Intermap, NASA, NGA, USGS, Esri Community Maps Contributors,

I made this map together with my companions of Covas. It shows the different plots of land with access to water during the *torna da água*. Each colour corresponds to a different day of the water wheel.

Each day is divided into *horas* (hours). There are *dias de três horas* (three-hour days) and *dias de quatro horas* (four-hour days). Four-hour days are divided into four parts: from *meia-noite* (midnight) to *sol quente* (hot sun), from *sol quente* (hot sun) to *meio-dia* (midday), from *meio-dia* (midday) to *tarde* (afternoon), and from *tarde* (afternoon) to *meia-noite* (midnight). Three-hour days divide similarly but without *meio-dia*. *Dia de Fundo de Vila*, for example, is a three-hour day, while *Dia da Travessa* is a four-hour day.

By convention, certain hours are *horas inteiras* (whole hours), others *horas livres* (free hours), and others *horas de herdeiros* (heirs' hours). The *horas inteiras* include the *Hora do Passal* on Travessa Day, and the *Hora da Eira* on Joana Afonso's Day. During the *horas livres*, the water belongs to a given plot of land, with the person watering choosing where to divert it. In turn, during the horas de *herdeiros*, the water irrigates multiple plots according to a specific rotation system, ensuring cyclical rotativity.

These hours, however, do not correspond to conventional time because "this practice is older than the clock.[7]" During the torna da água, the hours are governed by ancient conventions in which time is paced by the reflections of the sun and its shadows. As inhabitants would usually say, "it is the sun who is in charge of the *aviação*[8]."

To know the hour, people go to Largo do *Cruzeiro*: "You always wait at the *Cruzeiro*, that's where you wait for the water hour[9]" because it is here that the *sinais da água* can be seen and read.

7 "A torna da água é mais antiga que o relógio".
8 "Quem manda é o sol durante a aviação".
9 "Espera-se sempre no Cruzeiro, é lá que se espera a hora da água".

The *Cruzeiro* of Covas do Barroso.

Largo do Cruzeiro is Covas' main square, named after the calvary (*cruzeiro*, in Portuguese) located at its centre. A semicircular base supports a four-meter-high column, topped by a globe and a cross, with a stone inscription dating its origin: 1776.

When I followed the torna da água, I went to Largo do Cruzeiro multiple times. One of those hot summer afternoons, I ran into Luísa. Finding comfort in the only nearby shadow, she was waiting for the sun. When she saw me, she got up and greeted me with a warm hug. I ask if she could explain the *sinais* da água, and she enthusiastically agreed. I had been following the water for some days, but still couldn't completely understand the sundials.

From Cruzeiro, she pointed east to the mountains: "You see that big stone there?" "Yes, that is *sol quente*, right?" "Exactly." "I knew that one." I already knew that the hour of *sol quente* begins when the sun touches a large, prominent rock, known as *o calhau do sol quente* (the stone of the hot sun).



The stone of the hot sun (*calhau do sol quente*). When the sun touches that stone, it is time to open the sluice gates and direct the water to a new direction. View from Largo do *Cruzeiro*.



The stone marking the *sol quente* is more easily seen during the winter because the oak trees are bare. View from Largo do *Cruzeiro*.

"What about *meio-dia*?" I asked. I had been following the torna da água for some weeks now, but still didn't quite understand when *meio-dia* was. Luísa pointed to the grooves carved in the Cruzeiro steppingstones. "On a three-hour day, it's this chito. On a four-hour day, it's that one." *Chito* is the local term for the grooves, marking the solar watch during the torna da água. Luísa explained that *tarde* and *meio-dia* are read by shadows passing the *chitos*: the *tarde chitos* face the Chapel, and the *meio-dia* ones face the People's Oven (*Forno do Povo*).

I took my notebook out, something I very rarely did, and sat on the steps to draw this. I had finally understood. I knew the sinal for *sol quente*, for *meio-dia* and for *tarde*. Only one hour remained. "How about *meia-noite* (midnight), how do you know when it's *meia-noite*?" "When the [Church] bell rings midnight," she replies, as if it were obvious. "Oh, ok, it is really at midnight." *Meia-noite* is indeed the only hour tied to the conventional clock.

As I was noting all this information down, Luísa interrupted me: "Move over a bit, please." "Oh, I'm sorry!", I promptly apologized. "It is to not cover up the sun,[10]" she explained, noticing that I was seated on the *chito*.

I had just learned about them and yet managed to hide them with my body. The *chitos* – three small lines carved into this old calvary steps – are easy to miss, yet crucial: they indicate *a que horas entra a água* ("at what time the water comes in").

Whoever has water rights waits at Cruzeiro: when the sun reaches a *sinal* (the chitos, the stone, or the midnight clock), the person opens the *comportas* (sluice gates), channelling the water to the thirsty fields.

10 "É para não tapar o sol".



The shadow is about to pass the first *chito* (groove) carved into the stepstones on the side of the Cruzeiro facing the Chapel of Nossa Senhora da Saúde. This *chito* corresponds to the *tarde* (afternoon) on a dia de *três horas* (three-hour day). If the shadow were passing the second *chito*, this would be the sinal of the *tarde* (afternoon) on a *dia de quatro horas* (four-hour day).



The shadow is exactly in the *chito* carved into the step-stones on the side of the Cruzeiro facing the *Forno do Povo* (People's Oven). This *chito* corresponds to *meio-dia*.

On this four-hour day, Luísa was waiting for the *tarde*. Time seems to be paced differently during the torna da água: it becomes more than just hours and minutes – it is a dance between the sun, its shadows, the stones, the *Cruzeiro*, the *chitos*, and the people who know how to read the *sinais*. This implies a presentation of time attentive and attuned to the sun's rhythms. Contrary to the ticking of the clock which regulates time pace homogeneously, during the torna da água, hours are readjusted almost daily. This complicates the linearity of time: *meio-dia*, for example, "goes backward" (o *meio-dia anda para trás*), because the sun's shadow passes the *chito* earlier from week to week – *meio-dia* would be closer to 1pm in June and closer to 11am in August. Moreover, there is a partial unpredictability – some days are cloudy, some days it might even rain, which can cast doubts as to when the time is.

That afternoon, Luísa was getting impatient. Half an hour had passed, and it was still not time. Her husband was up the *levada*, and she would ring the Church bell "when the sinal gets here" to alert him to open the upstream *comporta* (sluice gate) and let the water flow all the way to *Cruzeiro*.



11 "O lambão já lá vem em cima! Abriu a água... caralho!"
12 "Caralho, nem tocas o sino nem nada, ó!"
13 "Está quase a tocar".
14 "A primeira vez que me zanguei foi por causa da água".

As she was speaking, she saw Tomás, a farmer in his mid-fifties, from a distance. "The greedy is already up there! He opened the water... fuck!", she rants, furiously yet quietly, so that he doesn't hear her. She quickly gets up and phones her husband, telling him to open the upstream *comporta*. "Fuck, you don't even ring the [Church] bell!", António, who had arrived in the meantime, and is often seen meandering around, scorns. "It is almost touching," I say, referring to the shadow which would soon touch the *chito*. Luísa ignores both of us. I understand I should have kept my mouth shut. It was *almost* the *tarde*. And yet the *comporta*s had been opened. Luísa, just like Tomás, had opened the *comporta*s before it was time.

The *torna da água* follows centuries-old rules and is also one of the oldest sources of conflicts in Covas do Barroso. Some people confided to me that their first times "getting mad at someone else" was precisely because of this water. This seems to confirm what Jorge Dias (1984) and Fabienne Wateau (2000) reveal in their ethnographies about rural communities in Trás-os-Montes, the broader region to which Barroso belongs: the most intense conflicts between neighbours arise particularly around water.



***Comporta* located at the Largo do Cruzeiro.**

Opening the *comporta*s too early takes water from those watering. As one farmer joked sarcastically, "Everyone sees the sun in their own way.[15]" Conflicts were much more intense in the past, when Covas had about 700 residents. Josué, a retired construction worker, recalled during an interview: "at that time, everyone had their little plot sown heaven help anyone who touched the water![16]" It was common for one person to irrigate while the next waited with a *sachola* (farm-hoe). At the time, tense conflicts between neighbours would often result in episodes of physical assault or violence – or, in the local slang, in *sachola-das*: a beating with a hoe.

In the days where every single drop of water was precious, the nighttime – the midnight (*meia-noite*) hour – was as used by inhabitants as all the other hours, whereas nowadays most people, when they have water during the evening, use it to irrigate their cropland, which can be left watering all evening long. Stories about nighttime irrigation often gave rise to memorable situations, as Tomás recounted:

> "In the past, we had to go with oil lamps to light the fields and water the corn. Sometimes, when there was a lot of wind, the lamp would blow out and you had to relight it right there in the middle of the field and all this with only a few hours of water! I remember my wife telling me that once she was helping her mother water and ended up falling asleep and falling into the water while irrigating.[17]"



Although these stories usually belonged to the past, one night I found André repeating the same gestures – only this time, the light in his mouth was an electric lantern.

15 "Cada um vê o sol à sua maneira".
16 "Toda a minha gente tinha o seu cantinho semeado... ai de quem tocasse na água!"
17 "Antigamente, tinha de se regar à noite e tinham de ir com candeias de azeite para iluminar os terrenos e regar o milho. Normalmente, iam duas pessoas: uma com a candeia e outra regava. A mulher dele chegou a adormecer enquanto regava e caiu à água, quando era miúda e ajudava a mãe. Às vezes, quando havia vento, a candeia apagava-se e tinha de se voltar a iluminar".

Tomás' wife, Anita, was, at the time, a child, and, like many of the people I met in Covas, started working from a very young age. In her case, this included working "for the lords" (os *senhores*), from fourteen years old to her early thirties.

Anita's story is not unique. Social inequalities, poverty, famine, deprivation, and ceaseless hardships are realities often described by inhabitants when talking about the village's past. Emigrating – namely to France, Switzerland, Canada, the United States of America or Brazil – became the reality for many. From the 1960s onwards, Covas' population declined drastically: from 900 residents in 1960 to 191 in 2021, 81 of them over 65 years old (INE 2021).

One August evening, during the *torna da água*, slightly before midnight, I found six people in Largo do Cruzeiro, mostly emigrants who return home for their "dear month of August" (*querido mês de Agosto*). I think to myself that the torna da água is also a moment of conviviality, especially since the only late-night cafe had recently closed due to the owner's old age. Miriam, a woman in her fifties who had emigrated to France, was commenting how "we used to have a doctor here." "Yes, a doctor every day and a nurse twice a week" another, younger lady, adds. I inquire as to when that was. It was "more or less" around 1985, they reply. The doctor lived in the house standing in front of us, which is now permanently rented by Savannah Resources.

Miriam continued, recalling how:

> "At the time, we had everything! But then the village was depopulated. Basically, with emigration, people went in search of a better life, which is normal. But this was a village with a lot of people, families had a lot of children. My parents had ten children, three of them died, but, anyway, it was a family with seven children. They were very large families, and very poor, very humble, they had a very very bad time... They always depended on someone. The children started working at a very young age...[18]"

"Working for the *senhores* (masters/lords), wasn't it?" I asked. She confirmed. Until the 1960s, "the rich families" (*famílias ricas*) controlled most lands and water. "Famine was real... people had to be servants (*criados*)," she said, pointing to the Quinta do Cruzeiro.



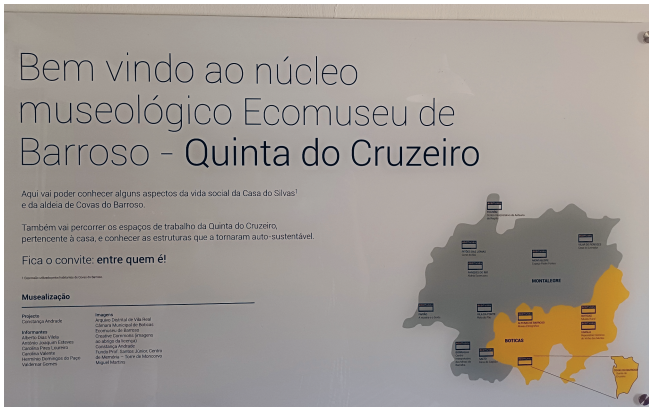


The Quinta do *Cruzeiro*. Source: Câmara Municipal de Boticas.

18 "Na altura, tínhamos tudo e mais alguma coisa! A aldeia foi despovoada... No fundo, com a emigração, as pessoas vão à procura de uma vida melhor, o que é normal. Mas era uma aldeia com muita gente, as famílias tinham muitos filhos. Os meus pais tiveram 10 filhos, 3 deles morreram, pequeninos, mas de qualquer modo, uma família com 7 filhos... havia famílias ainda com mais... Portanto, eram famílias muito numerosas, e famílias muito pobres, muito humildes, passavam muito mal... Muito, muito, muito. Dependiam sempre de alguém. As crianças começavam muito pequeninas a trabalhar..."

The Quinta do Cruzeiro is a 17th century Manor House, which belonged to the Silvas, the richest family of Covas, and was later acquired by the *Junta de Freguesia* (Parish Council[19]) who transformed it into an Eco-Museum in 2016. The President of the Parish Council explained to me that the Quinta do Cruzeiro was brought back to life through the generosity of local inhabitants, who donated bed sheets, bedspreads, antique objects, and furniture, allowing it to open its doors as a museum during the summer, where visitors have the sensation of traveling back in time. The Quinta itself preserved much of its original infrastructure, namely the oven (*forno*), the still (*alambique*), the loom (*tear*), and the mills (*moinhos*), both for water and for olive oil.

This museum is part of a network of museums across the Barroso region showcasing the region's sustainable agricultural practices, recognized as World Agricultural Heritage and a Globally Important Agricultural Heritage Systems by the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) in 2018. Since 2021, each summer, the Quinta do *Cruzeiro* has also hosted hundreds of activists who come from around the world to join the Camp in Defence of Barroso (*Acampamento em Defesa do Barroso*), protesting the prospective lithium mining project.



Welcome sign to the Núcleo Museológico (Museum Center) of the Ecomuseum of Barroso – *Quinta do Cruzeiro*.



The oven *(forno)*.



The still *(alambique)*.



The loom *(tear)*.

19 In Portugal, the Junta de Freguesia is the executive body of a freguesia (civil parish), a subdivision of each municipality. The Parish Council of Covas do Barroso belongs to the Boticas Municipality (Município de Boticas).



One of the mills located in the *Quinta do Cruzeiro*, along the main levada of Covas. This watermill incorporates a pair of linen mills.



The Quinta do *Cruzeiro* during the 2024 Camp in Defence of Barroso. Source: João Veloso.

Standing at Cruzeiro thus situates one at the intersection of all these transformations. Here, one can see the space where water has long structured daily rhythms, bounding people with place across generations; and one is also reminded of how this bond is deeply traversed by social hierarchies.

Anita's story – Tomás' wife, the woman who fell into the ditch while watering as a child – is one of many powerful reminders of stark inequalities between poor families and the wealthy they served. Luísa, the woman who taught me how to read the *sinais*, has also worked as a servant for rich families and farmed subsistence plots her whole life. Hence, why for her, this water is – quite literally – vital.

When she opens the *comporta* at Cruzeiro, I ask to tag along. "Of course!" As we head west from Cruzeiro, toward the Church of the Santa Maria de Covas do Barroso, Luísa opens one *comporta* after another, letting water flow.





Some of the comportas which Luísa opened and closed to divert water to her fields.

Inhabitants opening *comportas*.



These *comporta*s were built in 1989, when inhabitants set up *a Junta de Agricultores* (Farmers' Council) to cement the *levada*. Before that, stones, clods of earth, or even weeds and other plants were used to divert the water onto the fields.

The sound and rhythm of water flowing accompanies us. I stop to pour some over my sweaty body – through my naked legs, arms, and hair, allowing myself some refreshment. I drink a little, remembering the local saying: "in Covas, one may drink from anywhere, even from the river." Luísa just keeps on walking. I am always surprised at how heavily dressed women and men are in summer and how hard they work under the sun.

Walking with Luísa, we follow the water channel rather than the main stone roads. When the paths are too narrow, I stay behind her. This embodied practice allows us to flow with water. This is a collaborative movement, requiring attentiveness and adjustment. We open the *comporta*s slowly, yet steadily. We have to be careful to prevent overflow or stagnation, sometimes adding rocks or plants. Occasionally, we open *comporta*s for neighbours with water rights at that hour. Water circulation is a cooperative system of human hands, water, the *levadas*, and stones.



Walking with Luísa along the *levadas*.

Walking with water and opening the *comportas* implies a movement of attentive and attuned interaction with our surroundings. This practice exemplifies how movement shapes place, as suggested by British anthropologist Tim Ingold (2000; 2022). For Ingold, places emerge from "interwoven, multitemporal lines – or tracks and trails – of movement" (du Plessis 2022), what he calls "the meshwork" (Ingold 2022). The *levadas* of the torna da água are particularly generative for thinking of place-as-meshwork, as infrastructures interweaving human practices and material elements into a shared, moving environment.

After a five-minute walk, we reach Luísa's corn. Her husband, Manel, has arrived in the meantime. With his wellies on his feet and his farming hoe in his hand, he starts opening *regos* – small streams of water. The word comes from the verb *regar*, which means 'to water.'

Watering is fully manual, either à tralha (multiple channels per field) or rega de lima (continuous flow over meadows). The latter is considered a "remarkable characteristic" of Trás-os-Montes' practices (Dias and Galhano 2020). During the torna da água, it is only usable during *horas livres*, when one heir has exclusive rights.

Tralhões are "a way of dividing the fields," Aurora once explained to me. Speaking to a British journalist interested in the struggle against the mining project, Rui, a farmer, called the *tralhões* "one of the most important things in the region." The Portuguese Environmental Agency also notes sustainable water management as a factor in Barroso's designation as a GIAHS – Globally Important Agricultural Heritage Systems (AIA 2022, 120). Jerónimo, a farmer guiding FAO experts in 2016, recalled during an interview their amazement at the *chitos*' solar regulations: "they attached great importance to this, when they saw this [the *chitos*], they found it incredible![20]"

20 "[Elas] deram muita importância a isto (...) quando viram isto [os chitos], acharam incrível!".



The *rego* opened by Manel. The water will flow to the pumpkins and create puddles around them. Then the water will infiltrate the corn fields.



Luísa and Manel's pumpkins.



Luísa sows her beans among the corn and shows me the seeds. She says it's better for the aphids.

I watched as Manel channelled water to the corn and pumpkins and then asked about these plants. I learned that the corn had been seeded in April and would probably be picked in September. It will then go to the *canastro* (granary) to dry out for some months, transforming it into *grão* (grain) to be used as animal feed. Luísa and Manel raised rabbits and chickens year-round to lay eggs and to eat, and kept pigs in August, which were slaughtered and smoked in the traditional *fumeiro*. After slaughtering their pigs in December, Luísa and Manel make *enchidos* (different types of sausages) in the *fumeiro* – thus making food which will last them a full year. The term *fumeiro* refers to both to the practice of smoking the pig's parts, especially to make *enchidos*, like *alheiras* or *salpicão*, and to the place where the smoking occurs.



A *presunto* (dry-cured ham) next to an old oil lamp.

The *fumeiro*. These sausages were just made. They smoke for weeks, with the fire kept constantly burning.

I am reminded that these crops feed animals, which feed humans, including Luísa's family and myself (at their table, I enjoyed numerous meals). Water, then, sustains this web of interdependencies. Living in this place means participating in intricate relations between soil, water, sun, animals, and people, ensuring all are nurtured and nurture one another in return.

Before leaving, I asked Luísa about *torna da água*. She replied: "Well, we're used to this. We're used to this, you know. Here, we need to go [to Cruzeiro] to know about the hours. It is what they did in the old times[21]."
Her answer resonates with what I have observed and with other inhabitants' words. In September, Maria, in her 60s, welcomed me to her courtyard to document her water hours. Shadowed by the tall *espigueiro* (granary), and as chickens pecked about, she chatted with her family at a stone table. At one point, her brother-in-law remarked:

> "The *água do povo*... they wanted to put it by the clock, not by the sun... many didn't understand [the sun]! But it's fair! The *velhos* (elders) weren't fools. And on the *Cruzeiro*, those three grooves that exist there, that's fair too[22]."

"We were born into this world and things were already like this[23]," said Tomás, as we were watering together one evening. André, likewise, commented, as I walked alongside him during the torna da água: "This is the law of all life. They have tried to change it, but it's not easy, it goes back centuries[24]." These comments, and the torna da água's enduring enactment, suggest that this practice is more than a way of distributing and sharing water during the summer – it is a fundamentally constitutive part of this place.

21 "Opá, estamos habituados a isto. Estamos habituados a isto, olha. Aqui, nós temos de ir saber das horas. Foi aquilo que noutros tempos fizeram".
22 "A água do povo... eles há muito tempo que queriam fazer isso... queriam pôr pelo relógio, não pelo sol... muitos não compreendiam! Mas é justo! Os velhos não eram tolos. E na cruz, os três riscos que lá tem, também é justo".
23 "Caímos neste mundo e as coisas já estavam assim".
24 "É a lei de toda a vida. Já tentaram mudar, mas não é fácil, é de séculos".



INTRODUCTION

In January 2021, together with friends, I was organising a national anti-fascist rally in my hometown, Coimbra, in response to the growing presence of Chega, Portugal's new far-right party. During a shared meal at a República – one of the city's autonomously managed collective houses – someone mentioned the government's plan to open lithium mines. At the time, I knew nothing about the emerging mining boom. The conversation immediately caught my attention. I was shocked by the scale of land slated for extraction and disturbed by what I perceived as the limited media scrutiny surrounding it. The issue interpellated me unexpectedly.

As the far-right party gained visibility, it held its first congress in Coimbra in April 2021. We mobilised again. Following the easing of pandemic lockdowns, organising was effervescent, and urban youngsters like me sought to build bridges across struggles. One of those bridges was with anti-mining movements from central and northern Portugal. That month, we hosted an information session, where I learned in detail about the 'Mina do Barroso' – an open-pit lithium mining project owned by the British company Savannah Resources, located in Covas do Barroso, a village in the mountainous region of Trás-os-Montes.

A few weeks later, I travelled to Lisbon to attend a protest organised by communities from Barroso. While government officials and corporate representatives convened inside the air-conditioned Centro Cultural de Belém for the First European Conference on Green Mining, dozens of protesters stood under the scorching sun. Under the motto "Mining is Not Green, Green is Barroso!", they were denouncing what they perceived as the hypocrisy of top-down energy transition policies which increasingly frame mining – especially lithium – as 'green' and climate-friendly.That day marked the beginning of my sustained engagement with this struggle. In August, I travelled to Covas for the first time to attend the five-day Camp in Defence of Barroso. I went alone, and the experience profoundly transformed me. I met extraordinary people who became friends and companions, and, later, research collaborators. I was overwhelmed by the vastness and beauty of the mountains – landscapes I had previously associated with foreign countries rather than my own[25]. In Daynes and Williams' (2016, 77) words, I got "caught up."

It was during the Camp that I learned I had been awarded a doctoral scholarship to research the prefigurative politics of climate justice movements. At the time, I could not have imagined how central Covas do Barroso would become to my research.

Between August 2021 and February 2022, before relocating to Amsterdam to start my PhD, I returned to Barroso monthly. During this period, my involvement deepened. Barroso – the struggle, the people involved, the quiet of the mountains, the waters of the river – rapidly became part of who I am. Though difficult to articulate, I sensed something unique was unfolding. I came to be affected by, attracted to, and entangled in the struggles of this place. Covas quickly became a "matter of care," that which is not only an object of thought or concern, but something that calls for affective, ethical, and practical engagement (Puig de la Bellacasa 2017).

25 This sense of wonder is shaped as much by my own amazement as by idyllic images of Trás-os-Montes, the broader region in which Barroso is located. Trás-os-Montes, literally meaning 'behind the hills,' was famously described as the "Marvellous Kingdom" (reino maravilhoso) by the Portuguese poet and writer Miguel Torga (2017). In dominant representations, the region is frequently portrayed as rural and isolated. It is also associated with linguistic distinctiveness, particularly in Terras de Miranda, where the mirandês, the only other officially recognized language besides Portuguese, is spoken. However, this initial sense of wonder, alongside these prevailing representations, risks exoticizing the region and reinforcing a static image that obscures its lived social and historical complexities – something this thesis seeks to unpack.

What I encountered there unsettled my "activist habitus" (Chao 2022): I had been accustomed to political spaces dominated by young, highly educated activists who articulated their positions through explicit ideological vocabularies. In Barroso, however, the social composition and the registers of resistance were markedly different: most of those directly opposing the mine were older, had limited formal education, and had spent most of their lives in this village; their opposition was framed less in terms of global climate politics or anti-capitalist doctrine than in the disruption of everyday rhythms, ancestral inheritances, and intimate relations to place.

This doctoral research grew out of my engagement with and connection to this place. Encouraged by my friends, companions, and colleagues, I came to see that this could form the core of my doctoral work – a decision supported both by my supervisors and my funding institution. My trajectory had begun at the Political Science Department of the University of Amsterdam, under the supervision of Dr. Enzo Rossi and Dr. Paul Raekstad. Fortunately, I happened to be at an institution with a recently-awarded ERC project titled 'Worlds of Lithium,' led by Dr. Cristóbal Bonelli, from the Anthropology Department. From October 2022 onwards, we redesigned the project and I submitted a research proposal reflecting that disciplinary shift.

This dissertation – which is situated at the interface of political ecology and political ontology – provides an ethnographic account of the place-based struggle that emerged in response to the arrival and expansion of an open-pit lithium mining project to Covas do Barroso, northern Portugal. It explores how a rural community in a peripheral corner of Europe engages with the disruptive transformations of a mining project framed as necessary for the hegemonic energy transition.

This study is timely given the rapid expansion of mining projects associated with the European energy transition (del Mármol and Vaccaro 2020), which has positioned Portugal as a key site for lithium extraction (Carvalho et al. 2022; Dunlap and Riquito 2023; Riquito 2023; Pusceddu 2024). Lithium has been classified as a 'Critical Raw Material' by the European Union (EU) since 2020, and Savannah's concession, in particular, has been designated a 'Strategic Project' under the Critical Raw Materials Act (CRMA) – the EU regulation that identifies certain mineral projects as essential to securing supply chains for renewable energy, digital technologies, aerospace, and defence.

Given its significance, the 'Mina do Barroso' project has become a highly mediatized and studied case (e.g., Dunlap and Riquito 2023; Saleth and Varov 2023; Silva and Sareen 2023), often cited as a paradigmatic example of what scholars conceptualize as green extractivism within the context of the European hegemonic energy transition (Dunlap and Laratte 2022; Bruna 2022; Dunlap et al. 2025; Djukanovic 2025). From this perspective, it constitutes an exemplary illustration of the "dispossessory dynamics of extractivism" (Chao 2022), a process premised on displacement through land expropriation, environmental degradation, exclusion from political participation, and the devaluing of rural lifeworlds.

This dissertation is concerned with the particular ways in which this displacement is being experienced in Covas do Barroso. It explores how inhabitants in an "out-of-the-way place" (Tsing 1993) engage with, react to, and experience the arrival and expansion of a prospective mining project. By approaching mining as a force which reconfigures temporal horizons, relational worlds, and everyday practices, this thesis is ethnographically concerned with how inhabitants' sense of place (Feld and Basso 1996) is transformed by the arrival of mining. Furthermore, this study is also concerned with how these place-based, yet not place-bound[26], transformations may inform broader understandings of the onto-political dynamics of Europe's green transition.

26 Escobar (2008, 30-67) suggests that territorial struggles, although grounded in specific local contexts (place-based), are not confined to those locations, because they can spread, adapt, or be influenced by ideas and practices from elsewhere (not place-bound). In acquiring a "transnationalized" dimension, these territorial struggles contribute to the pluriverse of socioecological alternatives, he argues.

The central question guiding this thesis is: How does the arrival and expansion of a lithium mining project intersect with and reshape existing place-making practices and senses of belonging in Covas do Barroso? To address this central question, two sub-questions were posed: (1) How do Barrosões experience, conceptualize, and contest the transformations brought by the lithium mining project? (2) How does the mining project affect Barrosões' relations with mountains, rivers, meadows, and the diverse lifeforms they sustain?

Grounded in a yearlong stint of ethnographic fieldwork conducted between April 2023 and April 2024 in Covas do Barroso, as well as my ongoing engagement with this place since 2021, this dissertation shows that the prospect of mining has radically reconfigured inhabitants' sense of place, time, and belonging.

Very early on, I noticed how inhabitants would invariably repeat *estávamos aqui tão sossegadinhos no nosso cantinho* ("we were here so peacefully and quietly in our little corner"). The word *sossegadinhos*, a diminutive of *sossegados*, coming from *sossego*, meaning calm, quiet, stillness, or peace, carries a connotation that is difficult to translate. The diminutive form implies that this state of being in sossego is not just any peace, but a small, delicate, cherished one – one which implies affection, tenderness, and love. *Sossego*, in this context, is more than the absence of noise or disruptions, it represents a profound affective and existential state, a particular way of being and living, rooted in a profound sense of belonging to place and a respect for ancestral practices, as I have learned. *Cantinho*, a word also in the diminutive form, coming from *canto* ("corner"), was how inhabitants described their place. As I learned over time, this cantinho is not just a physical space – it is a place of security, familiarity, and belonging. Crucially, it is the seemingly notion of *nosso* ("ours") what stands out – a relation which, as this thesis will reveal, should be understood not in an exclusively proprietary sense, but rather as co-constituted through ongoing practices between people, place, and the diverse lifeforms that inhabit it. It is this intimate connection between being and place (Basso 1996; Ingold 2000; 2022; de la Cadena 2015; 2019; di Giminiani 2013; 2015; 2016) that prospective mining threatens to sever, while simultaneously – perhaps paradoxically – making them more visible.

The proposed lithium mining project was precipitating what many described – and felt – as an existential rupture. Their *cantinho* was suddenly exposed and invaded: transformed from a relatively self-contained world into a site of intense scrutiny, contestation, and curiosity – an intrusion which extended beyond corporate and governmental actors to include the steady influx of activists, journalists, researchers, and artists. These transformations were unsettling Barrosões' sense of temporal continuity and spatial security, reshaping their everyday practices, future horizons, even their dreams. Following Blaser (2013a; 2013b; 2019) and Escobar (2015; 2016; 2017), I approach the occupation of land for large-scale extractive projects as an ontological occupation. Extractivism, in this sense, encroaches upon relational ways of being in place which communities are compelled to defend as conditions of life itself.

In Covas do Barroso, the prospect of imminent destruction compelled inhabitants to mobilise in defence of *o que é nosso* ("what is ours"), which I conceptualised as a defence of their emplaced *modo de vida* (way of life). This thesis therefore argues that the arrival and expansion of lithium mining catalysed a renewed connection to this place and triggered a process of politicization of inhabitants' place-based *modo de vida*, inaugurating a "politics of place" (Harcourt and Escobar 2002) for "re-existence."

"Re-existence," a term coined by Porto-Gonçalves (2006), plays on both 'resistance' and 'existence.' Both share a common etymological root in the Latin *sistere: resistere* (to resist) and *existere* (to exist), connecting them to the idea of standing firm or taking a stance (Hurtado and Porto-Gonçalves 2022). I use this concept to refer to place-based struggles which are not only against extractivism but also for the continuity of a particular form of existence – in the case of Covas, a particular *modo de vida* (way of life). This *modo de vida* refers to a dynamic assemblage of social, property, labour, family, and ecological structures, norms, and relations, enacted through place-based practices, reproduced over generations, which sustain life in this place, fostering a profound sense of place-belonging. It is this particular relation to place, inseparable

from one's existence, that the prospect of mining threatens to erase. Resisting the mine, therefore, became a way of reclaiming the conditions under which life remains meaningful and possible, because, as I have learned, inhabitants are-with (cf. de la Cadena 2015; 2019) this place, in such a way that opposing the mine is opposing the destruction of who they are. To resist is to affirm themselves as people who are-with their *cantinho*, and to assert the irreplaceability of world-making practices that would cease to exist in their current form should extraction proceed.

This article-based dissertation unfolds this argument across three interrelated articles. Taken together, they argue that resistance in Barroso is not simply opposition to a mine, but a defence of emplaced world-making practices against the onto-political enclosures imposed by green extractivism. This dissertation contributes to the growing body of ethnographic work on extractivism and energy transitions by offering a long-term, place-based study of lithium mining in Covas do Barroso, one of its most paradigmatic examples. While existing research has critiqued green extractivism and corporate–state interests (Dunlap and Laratte 2022; Bruna 2022; Riofrancos 2023; Andreucci et al. 2023; Dunlap et al. 2024), this ethnographically-informed thesis attends to the everyday practices, affects, and relations through which place is enacted and defended.

Drawing on the political ontology framework of analysis of territorial struggles (Escobar 2008; 2015; Blaser 2013a; 2013b; 2019; de la Cadena and Blaser 2018), I reframe lithium mining as an infrastructure that seeks to recompose place within the "one-world world" (Law 2015) of green extractivism, which is fundamentally premised on displacement (Blaser 2025). At the same time, I highlight how inhabitants of Covas do Barroso articulate and enact alternative ways of being, rooted in place. In this sense, this study engages the two central concerns of political ontology as outlined by Arturo Escobar (2015, 22): understanding, on the one hand, the conditions through which the "one-world world" maintains its dominance; and attending, on the other hand, to the emergence of "life projects" grounded in different ways of worlding, and to how these projects struggle to unsettle the one-world project while widening spaces for re-existence. This dissertation thus contributes to a pluriversal politics (Escobar 2008; 2017; 2018) attuned to the specificity of "the small" (Blaser 2025). Fundamentally, then, I argue that ongoing conflicts taking place in Europe's rural peripheries are central to contemporary debates on coloniality, ecological politics, and the pluriversal possibilities of living otherwise.

This thesis is composed of three academic articles. Together, they unpack how the arrival of a lithium mining project intersected and reshaped existing place-making practices and senses of belonging in Covas do Barroso. **Chapter I.** examines how the arrival of lithium mining intersects with historical patterns of internal colonization, arguing that the European hegemonic green transition operates as a governance strategy that reproduces an internal colonial matrix of power and reinforces the marginalization and ontological devaluation of rural lifeworlds. Drawing on ethnographic episodes, the Chapter demonstrates how Barrosões experience the project not as an isolated episode but as a continuation of structural abandonment, dispossession, and externally imposed narratives of backwardness that have long positioned Trás-os-Montes – and rural territories more broadly – as peripheral, inferior, and expendable. Moreover, this Chapter establishes the structural onto-political terrain of the "one-world world" of green extractivism, by approaching the hegemonic European energy transition as a political project shaped by onto-epistemic forms of coloniality that constrain the field of possibilities to a narrowly defined low-carbon future.

Chapter II. moves into how green extractivism, as an infrastructure of displacement, is being experienced and contested on the ground. Taking as its point of departure a land dispute over the limits of communally-possessed lands (*baldios*), and the seven-month-long blockade (*bloqueio*) which followed, this Chapter approaches this conflict as an ontological encounter. It describes how state institutions apprehend these lands through the grammar of property, cartography, and commensuration, while inhabitants relate with them through movement, memory, and ancestral presence. However, rather than rejecting state regimes of legibility, inhabitants strategically engage with them – namely by mapping their lands on cartographic digital platforms, filing legal actions, and pursuing heritage recognition. This Chapter conceptualizes this

move as strategic equivocation: a situated political practice of defence through which relations with baldios are translated into legible forms without collapsing them into the state's ontological regime. In Covas, inhabitants strategically use state devices as practices of defence, while simultaneously sustaining a relation with these lands that cannot be reduced to a relation mediated by property rights only. In this sense, the practice of strategic equivocation can be understood as a weapon of re-existence – whereby inhabitants tactically inhabit the very dispositifs that threaten to erase their lifeworld while simultaneously sustaining and enacting that lifeworld.

Chapter III. examines the affective dimensions of this struggle, highlighting how affect – and, particularly, place's affective fabric – operates as a powerful driver of mobilizations. Through ethnographic engagements, this Chapter demonstrates that rather than mobilizing abstract ideological arguments, inhabitants defend their place through expressions of pride, attachment, and love. These affects emerge from place-based practices – reproduced over generations – with land, animals, neighbours, and their *antigos* (elders). These practices constitute inhabitants' modo de vida and foster a profound sense of place-belonging. The threat of mining has politicized these attachments, transforming an inherited and often taken-for-granted *modo de vida* into an explicit object of defence. Resistance thus became a form of self-definition: resisting the mine is resisting the destruction of who they are, insofar as inhabitants are-with this place. This Chapter engages explicitly with the concept of "re-existence," arguing that resistance became a way of affirming a specific way of being, rooted in embodied and relational attachments, which affirm lifecentred ways of being, knowing, and relating with place beyond the extractivist colonial imaginaries of Europe's hegemonic green transition.

The **Conclusion** brings together the different empirical chapters, allowing conceptual and theoretical connections between them to emerge. While highlighting the main academic contributions of this thesis, it sets orientations for future research.

Short interludes – **Tralhão I.** and **Tralhão II.** – briefly suspend the flow of the articles. *Tralhão* (plural, *tralhões*) is a word from Trás-os-Montes used to name a small manual dig that diverts the course of water (see **Prelude**). In this dissertation, I adopt it as a guiding metaphor. These brief narrative interludes momentarily divert the reader's attention and gently displace the expectations of academic reading. They function as openings through which other textures can surface, offering a space to breath, before entering the next complex article. At the same time, although a *tralhão* redirects a flow, it never produces a clean separation: water inevitably seeps through, irrigates, and contaminates what lies beyond it. These interludes, therefore, also enable ideas, concerns, and affects to circulate across chapters, functioning as points of connection rather than rupture.

In what follows, I begin by ethnographically situating this case, recounting how lithium mining arrived to Covas do Barroso, while placing the project within the broader policy frameworks shaping the hegemonic energy transition in Portugal and across the European Union (EU). I then outline the methodological design of this thesis, which I conceptualize through gardening. Next, I trace my theoretical trajectory, reflecting on how I have come to approach this topic through the lenses of political ontology.

Contextual Background

A wary phone call, rumours in the monte, and the first drilling tubes

It was with great surprise that Aurora[27] recalls receiving a phone call from her cousin Gabriela, who lives in London, wondering "what the hell is going on in Covas?!" "Nothing," Aurora replied, glancing from her doorstep at her cows grazing peacefully under the clear early spring skies. "Oh, I just read on the news that the biggest European open-pit lithium mine will be in Covas!" she hears over the other side of the phone.

Nuno later told me that this was the moment the alarm bells rang. Small yet profoundly significant, it marked a turning point: the first time many inhabitants realized that something potentially enormous was underway.

In fact, weeks earlier, around March 2017, some inhabitants had already noticed unusual "movements in the *monte*[28]." Living in close proximity to their *monte*, any unfamiliar movement immediately draws attention – new jeeps or pick-up trucks travelling the dirt roads are instantly noticed. At that same time, Teresa, a local resident working for Savannah Resources, was going door-to-door requesting permission to conduct prospecting work. Many assumed this was linked to an inactive quartz and feldspar quarry licence from 2006 held by the company SAIBRAIS.

Because Teresa was a neighbour – and for some, a good friend – her presence facilitated Savannah's entry into the village. The seven or eight private landowners she approached, together with representatives of the Parish Council[29] (*Junta de Freguesia*) and the Directive Board of the Baldios[30] (*Conselho Diretivo dos Baldios*) accepted her request, effectively granting Savannah verbal authorization to conduct prospecting work on private, public, and communal land.

After the news arrived from London, however, some inhabitants began to fear that something else was underway. They recall that Savannah provided little information, insisting only that it had government approval – a powerful deterrent in a community unaccustomed to challenging the central state. Having witnessed the ecological damage caused by prospecting activities, representatives of the Parish Council contacted two national deputies, who confirmed that the company could not proceed without written authorization. The Council became the first authority to act, demanding an immediate halt on its lands, soon followed by the President of the Communal Lands Board. Some inhabitants also decided to form an association, realizing that individually they could neither obtain information nor request documents. *Unidos em Defesa de Covas do Barroso* (UDCB, United in Defence of Covas do Barroso) was thus created in November 2018.

27 All names in this Introduction are pseudonyms.
28 Monte is a local term used to designate the communally possessed lands surrounding Covas and, more broadly, the mountainous lands around the village (cf. Glossary). Crucially, the nature of these lands will be explored in **Chapter II.**
29 In Portugal, the Junta de Freguesia is the executive body of a freguesia (civil parish), a subdivision of each municipality. The Parish Council of Covas do Barroso belongs to the Boticas Municipality (Município de Boticas).
30 Baldios are the communally possessed lands (cf. Glossary).



One of the initial prospecting tubes.

Inhabitants and local authorities managed to stop prospecting that same month. Prior to that, between 2017 and 2018, the company's official documents (Savannah Resources 2019) indicate that 135 drilling tubes were installed.

Years later, in a summer afternoon in 2023, Nuno took me to see these initial drilling tubes. I climbed onto his tractor, sitting precariously on the wheel, pressing my grip firmly to not lose balance. Slowly, we drove in direction of the *monte*. The paved road soon gave way to a dirt track, jolting my body with every bump, while a warm breeze caressed me as we moved past the vast plantations of pine trees, as well as oak and cork. At the top of a hill, I jumped off the tractor and walked among the prospecting tubes: cylindrical blue tubes, with a hole roughly 15 centimetres in diameter and extending about 150 meters into the ground. Nuno recalled that some years earlier they had dropped a stone into one of the tubes and counted how long the fall lasted – twelve seconds. "The mine they want to open here would be 150 meters deep – deeper than the river." He paused for a second and then added, "You know what's funny? You know what grew up here when they [the company] came? Mimosas which are invasive species[31]." This prospecting landscape – which anticipates mining – already signalled ecological intrusion through foreign, unsolicited plants.

These drilling tubes can be considered "pressure points" (Chao 2022): sites that both enable extraction and disrupt local lives, producing either well-being or suffering depending on how they are activated. For Savannah, they confirmed the presence of lithium; for inhabitants, they made tangible the potential impacts of mining, namely water and soil degradation as well as noise and dust. In Covas, the tubes became focal points of contestation, transforming mountains, plants, soil, and water into matters of struggle. By exposing scars on the land, they recast the "environment" as a terrain of conflict. Such landscape transformations, as Rivera-Andía and Odegaard suggest, form "an important backdrop for the politicization of nature" (2019, 17).

31 "Quando eles foram fazer as plataformas para as prospeções, apareceram mimosas, que são espécies invasoras".

Recognising Barroso's Globally Important Heritage System

At the same time that lithium mining was advancing toward Covas, the Barroso Agro-Sylvo-Pastoral System was designated a World Agricultural Heritage and a Globally Important Agricultural Heritage Systems Site (UN GIAHS) by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), becoming the only Portuguese region and one of only fifteen regions across Europe and Central Asia to hold this status.

The FAO (2022) describes Barroso as "a harmonious system" that "hosts an abundance of agrobiodiversity, ranging from unique cattle breeds, potatoes varieties to oak forests with rare flora and fauna." Among these unique cattle breeds is the *Barrosã* cow, which is considered "the most notable" among the ancestral Indigenous breeds from northern Portugal, due to its unique genetic heritage (ADRAT 2018).



A barrosã cow in a meadow in Covas do Barroso. Source: Aurik Antunes

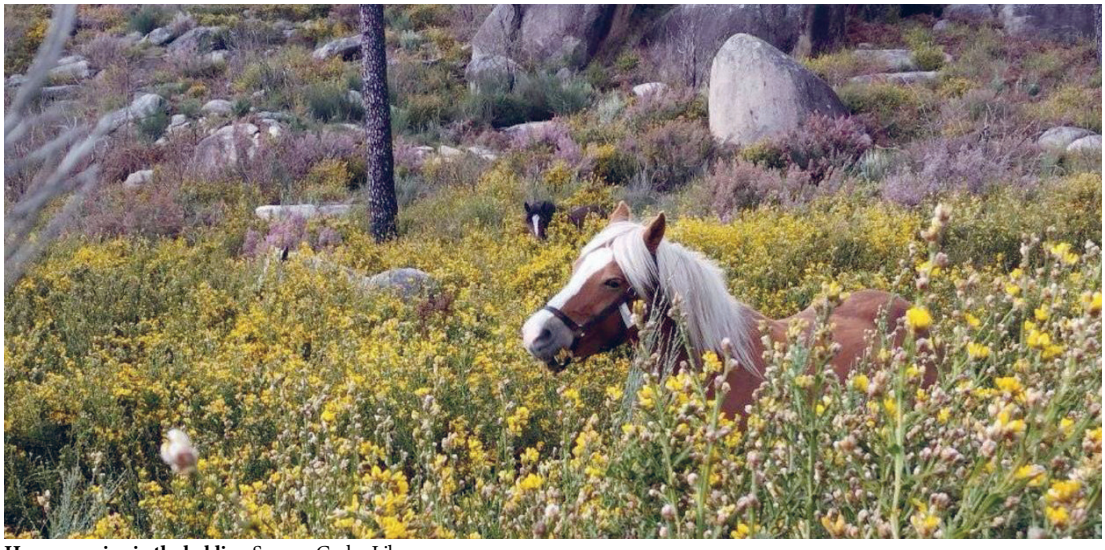
This rich biodiversity extends beyond domesticated breeds to the region's wider ecosystems, which the FAO (2018) describes as "very significant and relatively intact environmental areas," home to "numerous plant and animal species which are extremely important for nature conservation." Among these are the Iberian wolf (*Canis lupus signatus*) and the Freshwater pearl mussel (*Margaritifera margaritifera*), both critically endangered species (AIA 2022).

Moreover, the FAO (2018) highlights "communities' social management of common lands (baldios) and animals" as a distinctive feature of the region, considering "communitarianism" "a form of rural organisation" and "one of the most typical values and customs of Barroso," which has enabled the "preservation of the environment while sustaining local livelihoods." Likewise, it recognizes beekeeping as an important and distinctive component of the region's agrarian economy (ibid.).

Many of the people I spoke with over the past five years describe Covas do Barroso as "the prime jewel" of the Barroso region due to its unique microclimate, which allows diverse crops – olive oil, wine, corn, fruits, and vegetables – to flourish, despite the region's generally harsh conditions. Jerónimo, then President of the Baldios Directive Council, was the one welcoming FAO representatives to Covas, and recalls them being "greatly surprised" at practices existing in this place, namely the torna da água as well as the ancestral manual methods of tending animals.



Sheep grazing in the baldios.



Horses grazing in the baldios. Source: Carlos Libo



Beehives in the baldios. Source: Carlos Libo



Beehives covered in snow. Source: Carlos Libo

Gathering information and getting organised

Since those early months of 2017, when inhabitants noticed the first movements in the monte, life in Covas do Barroso fundamentally changed. The mere prospect of lithium mining reorganized everyday routines and strained the most intimate relations.

In December 2018, after a decade in office, Jerónimo decided to resign. Those elections were unusually contentious. For the first time, two competing lists emerged: one headed by Diogo, one of the two residents employed by Savannah Resources at the time, and another led by Aurora, his sister, and a vocal opponent of the project who remains a central figure in the struggle today. A record number of residents – one hundred – participated in the election, and Aurora won with sixty-five votes.

As those who opposed the mine began collecting information, their relatives and neighbours who had emigrated abroad were a crucial help. Gabriela, for example, albeit at a distance, is always attentive. Insatiably curious, she devours every piece of information. She would later recall in an interview how she began to realize that "everything was connected" the moment she read the English newspaper: she remembered geologists visiting her father's and her neighbours' homes in the 1990s, wanting to survey the fields in search of a "white rock." Lithium deposits in Portugal had indeed first been identified in 1992 by two geologists from the French National Geological Services and by Fernando Noronha, a geology professor at the University of Porto, often called "the father of lithium" in Portugal (Charoy et al. 1992). Gabriela reflected:

> "In my head, this was bound to happen because I had read reports on the largest lithium reserves in Europe in the 2000s what puzzled me was that the license was not for lithium – something wasn't right[32]."

Her intuition proved accurate: as inhabitants began piecing together the puzzle, they discovered that SAIBRAIS – which had signed a 2006 concession contract for a 120-hectare quartz and feldspar quarry – changed its name to IMERYS Ceramics Portugal in 2008 and entered into a new prospecting and research contract with the state. In 2016, an addendum expanded this contract to include lithium ore and enlarged the concession area to 542 hectares. The following year, IMERYS transferred the concession rights to Splistream Resources Portugal, Lda., a joint venture between Savannah Resources and Slipstream Resources Investments created specifically to develop the lithium project.





This site is exactly the same one where we were stood for seven months doing a *bloqueio* (Chapter II.)**, and the photographs were shared with me during one of those afternoons of the bloqueio.**

32 "Na minha cabeça, isto estava para acontecer porque eu antes tinha lido os relatórios sobre as maiores reservas de lítio na Europa nos anos 2000... aquilo que achei estranho é que a licença não era para lítio, algo não estava bem."

In 2016, the year the addendum was signed, the Secretariat of State for Energy created the Working Group on Lithium, which identified significant deposits in eight areas across northern and central Portugal. A year later, the government announced the Lithium Prospection and Exploration Plan (PPP *Lítio*), and in January 2018 launched the National Lithium Strategy, establishing strategic guidelines for valorising Portugal's lithium resources (Diário da República 2018). According to QUERCUS (2019), one Portugal's leading Environmental NGOs, between 2016 and 2019, the Directorate General for Energy and Geology (DGEG)[33] authorized requests for prospecting and exploration in 19.3% of the country's territory. In 2016 alone, 30 applications for exploration and prospection rights for lithium were filed, totalling an area of 2,500km2 (República Portuguesa 2017).

Recognizing the scale of the threat, inhabitants from affected villages – in Barroso, but also in Caminha, Fundão, and Viana do Castelo – formed local associations and jointly organized a first protest in Lisbon in September 2019, which drew hundreds of participants. In January 2020, they released a National Manifesto Against the Mining Plan in Portugal (*Manifesto Nacional Contra o Plano de Mineração em Portugal*), declaring:

> "We want to build sustainable development in our corner of the Earth, and we demand from our political representatives a long-term vision for our rural and mountain territories[34]."



Protest organised by communities from northern Portugal, affected by potential mining projects. Lisbon, September 2019. The big banner reads "No To Mine, Yes To Life".
Source: Vasco Morais [Facebook]

33 The governmental authority responsible for granting mining licenses.
34 "Queremos construir um desenvolvimento sustentável do nosso recanto na Terra e exigimos dos nossos representantes políticos uma visão de longo prazo para os nossos territórios rurais e de montanha".

Weaving resistance and building alliances

Despite organised resistance, companies persisted. In June 2020, Savannah Resources submitted an Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) for the Expansion of the Mina do Barroso, which foresaw enlarging the concession area to 593 hectares. In July, the Portuguese Environment Agency (APA) declared the EIA "non-compliant," citing missing documents and giving the company until September 15 to submit them. In December 2020, APA maintained that the EIA was still non-compliant, despite additional submissions.

In January 2021, Montescola, a Galician NGO, formally requested access to all documents related to the 'Mina do Barroso' contract, including the EIA. The APA ignored the request, prompting the Portuguese Commission for Access to Administrative Documents (CADA) to issue a non-binding opinion in March, demanding release within ten days, which APA refused. At the time, Montescola filed a UN complaint over inadequate public consultation, which, four years later, in August 2025, resulted in a UNECE Aarhus Convention Committee35 ruling that Portuguese agencies had violated the treaty.

In April 2021, APA released Savannah's EIA for public consultation. During this period, it received predominantly negative feedback, including from independent experts, such as Prof. Steven Emmerman36. In August, UDCB organized the first Camp in Defence of Barroso (*Acampamento em Defesa do Barroso*), gathering around 150 people from across the globe. By the end of 2021, journalists, researchers, activists, and artists were a regular presence in Covas.



Banner announcing the visit of Members of the Zapatista Movement[37] to Barroso, november 2021, with the motto "No to Mines, Yes to Life!"
Source: Jornal Mapa

35 The Aarhus Convention Committee is the compliance body of the UNECE Convention on Access to Information, Public Participation in Decision-making and Access to Justice in Environmental Matters, to which Portugal is signatory, tasked with reviewing complaints and assess whether states are meeting their obligations on environmental rights.
36 Steven Emmerman is a recognized authority on the hydrological impacts of mining and testified on this project before the European Parliament in December 2021 (European Parliament 2021). Prof. Emmerman has evaluated proposed and existing mining projects across North America, South America, Europe, Africa, Asia, and Oceania. He has provided expert testimony on mining issues before the United States House of Representatives Subcommittee on Indigenous Peoples, the European Parliament, the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues, and the United Nations Environment Assembly. He is also the former chair of the Body of Knowledge Subcommittee of the United States Society on Dams.
37 The Zapatistas are an Indigenous, peasant organization, represented by the Zapatista Army of National Liberation (EZLN), which emerged publicly in the first day of 1994, and who have since autonomously governed themselves, implementing their own systems of education, health, and justice, across several regions of Chiapas, Mexico. Their motto, "a world where many worlds fit," argues Salleh (2020), is the very definition of pluriverse, which political ontology scholars are committed to (Blaser 2013b).

In December 2021, the then Secretariat of State for Energy signed fourteen mining concessions (PÚBLICO 2021b), sparking widespread outrage. On 28 January 2022, coordinated protests took place simultaneously in Caldas da Rainha, Coimbra, Gerês, Lisbon, Montemor-o-Novo, and Oporto, timed with the legislative election on 30 January. That same month, the Strategic Environmental Assessment of the Lithium Prospection and Exploration Plan (PPP *Lítio*) was released, authorizing lithium research and exploration in six additional regions.

In June 2022, a brief relief was felt: the APA's Evaluation Commission rejected Savannah's project, concluding that:

> "The project, in the configuration presented and evaluated, will cause significant to very significant negative impacts – some of which cannot be mitigated – on environmental factors that are crucial to the evaluation, such as water resources, ecological systems, the landscape, and socioeconomics[38]." (AIA 2022, 311)



In August, UDCB organised the second edition of the Camp in Defence of Barroso, which attracted an even larger number of participants. The camp concluded with a symbolic blockade of the new centre that Savannah had opened in May 2022 in Boticas, under the slogan: "*Enterro da Mineração! Não Passarão!*" **("Burial of Mining! They Shall Not Pass!").** Source: João Veloso

38 "Concluiu-se que o projeto, na configuração apresentada e avaliada, provocará impactes negativos significativos a muito significativos, em alguns casos não minimizáveis, ao nível de fatores ambientais determinantes para a avaliação, como sejam os recursos hídricos, os sistemas ecológicos, a paisagem e a socioeconomia, pelo que a Comissão de Avaliação emite parecer desfavorável ao estudo prévio da Ampliação da Mina do Barroso."

However, DGEG countered APA's opinion, emphasizing lithium's strategic role for the energy transition (AIA 2022, 312-314). Hence, in September 2022, the company was granted another six months to reformulate its project. On March 16, 2023, Savannah submitted a revised EIA, coinciding with the European Commission's proposal of the Critical Raw Materials Act (CRMA).

In its current formulation, the project has a projected lifespan of 17 years, with the first two years dedicated to installation and construction, followed by 12 years of operation (extraction), and three years allocated to the rehabilitation of the open pits (backfilling) and the restoration of the area (QUADRANTE 2023). The project comprises four open-pit mines (Pinheiro, Grandão, NOA, Reservatório), with the largest pit located less than 490 meters from Romainho and 1,160 meters from Covas do Barroso (ibid., 456). In addition to these pits, the project includes several mining support facilities, namely a processing plant (lavaria), which would operate 24/7; four waste rock dumps, three of which are permanent and one temporary; a tailings storage facility for the deposition of processing residues; water management infrastructures; new access roads; and a relocated power line (ibid., 116). The total area of the mining concession – together with the additional area required for infrastructure, internal and external roads, as well as the inclusion of safety buffer zones – amounts to 851 hectares. Of this, the company estimates the need to use 642 hectares of baldios (communally-possessed lands) (ibid., 637).

The open-pit extraction process involves the dismantling of mountains, which the company would carry out using daily explosive blasting. The blasted and fragmented rock would then be transported by front-end loaders or hydraulic excavators to dumpers. The raw mineralized material would be sent to the processing plant, while the 'waste rock' would be directed to the waste tailing dumps. In Savannah's project, approximately 80 percent of what is extracted is classified as "mining waste" and is deposited in tailings dams, while the remaining 20 percent is sent to the processing plant. At the processing plant, the material is crushed and ground before undergoing "separation processes" to extract spodumene from the host rock. From one ton of rock, six percent of spodumene is recovered; the rest – the "waste" – is ultimately directed to the tailings dams, with annual tailings production reaching 1.5 million tonnes (ibid.).

Despite widespread public protest and overwhelming rejection of the project, the APA issued a conditionally favourable Environmental Impact Statement (DIA) in May 2023. As a result, opposition intensified: in August 2023, UDCB held the third edition of the Camp, drawing hundreds of people in solidarity. The Parish Council of Covas do Barroso and the Municipality of Boticas filed a lawsuit seeking to annul the DIA.

With the DIA in hand, Savannah is required to complete the RECAPE (Environmental Compliance Report), demonstrating compliance with its conditions, including additional exploratory drilling. In July 2023, the company sent letters to seven private landowners, the Parish Council, and an email to the Communal Lands Directive Board, requesting permission to conduct six months of prospecting on their lands. All refused.

Policing, drilling and guarding the monte

Unable to access these lands, Savannah began, from mid-October 2023, prospecting the 16 hectares covered by the rental agreement associated with the original quartz and feldspar concession.

The arrival of the drilling machine signalled a new phase. As Sophie Chao writes, commenting on the expansion of oil palm in West Papua, "the passage of the bulldozer signals the imminent destruction of the forest" (2022, 41). In Covas, likewise, inhabitants' already heightened state of alert intensified further, as they anticipated that the company would attempt to move the drilling machine into fields to which it had previously been denied access.

At the same time, a police patrol from the GNR was stationed in Covas do Barroso, which – alongside private security and the installation of surveillance cameras – thickened a tense geography of control. Their presence was met with indignation: inhabitants resented being treated as criminals, "guarded" by police when they understood themselves as the guardians of their place. Inhabitants were increasingly experiencing a dense convergence between corporate and state power, a configuration characteristic of many extractivist contexts (Gudynas 2010; 2018; Ehrnström-Fuentes and Böhm 2023; Lassila 2025). As Uncle Joaquim, a retired farmer, once told me, "they are sent by Lisbon to guard Savannah[39]." Here, "Lisbon" carries a profound connotation, reflecting the uneven dynamics between rural and urban Portugal, which **Chapter I.** will explore in detail. This collusion materialized not only through the visible presence of force, but also through more diffuse forms of pressure, including lawsuits targeting environmental defenders, which introduce psychological and financial pressures.

By this stage, inhabitants had developed rapid-response strategies to warn one another of movements in the monte and to react collectively. Premonitory signs proliferated – drones flying overhead and unknown vans driving through –, marking an increasing circulation of unfamiliar presences within the everyday life of the village. Alongside a cartography of vigilance and control, a cartography of fear and mistrust arose.



GNR officers and the drilling machine arriving to Covas do Barroso.

39 "São mandados por Lisboa para guardar as costas da Savannah".

As the presence of mining became increasingly palpable in Covas, a fleeting moment of relief settled in. On November 7th, Operation Influencer (*Operação Influencer*) became public, triggering a political crisis that culminated within hours in Prime Minister António Costa announcing his resignation. Operation Influencer is a corruption investigation launched by Portugal's Public Prosecution Office targeting alleged deals involving lithium concessions in northern Portugal, a green hydrogen plant, and a large data centre in Sines. In Covas do Barroso, news of the government's fall was received with exhilaration. "Have you seen it? A village as small as ours brought down the government!" inhabitants commented that day, as major television channels arrived to report the story. Anti-mining associations quickly seized the moment to demand the immediate cancellation of all lithium projects in Portugal.

Yet, shortly after, on November 13th, a provisional agreement on the CRMA was reached at the European Parliament, and three days later, on November 16th, Savannah attempted to enter the baldios to conduct additional prospecting. Inhabitants immediately blocked the excavator with their bodies, sustaining what became a seven-month-long blockade (*bloqueio*) while simultaneously pursuing legal action – practices of defence explored in **Chapter II.**

A few days after the bloqueio began, a Compartes' Assembly (*Assembleia de Compartes*) – the decision-making body of the baldios – was convened. One agenda item concerned the unlawful appropriation of communal land by third parties. Heated debate around the misuse of the digital land registry platform, BUPI, soon dominated discussion. Inhabitants pointed to how the company had been marking areas larger than those recorded in the land registry (*certidão predial*), encroaching onto the baldios, at times even resorting to registering land claims in other municipalities – outside Boticas, and even beyond the Barroso region, which some considered a sign of bad faith. The Assembly ultimately voted on whether to authorize the Directive Council to represent the community in court in defence of "its rights and interests," passing the motion with fifty-seven votes in favour, seven against, and one abstention.

In February 2024, the Portuguese Public Prosecutor issued an opinion on the lawsuit filed by the local authorities in September 2023. In line with it, the Public Prosecutor asked the Judge to annul the DIA due to many legal infringements, evidencing, namely, risks known to APA on the mining project endangering Barroso's UN GIAHS classification, and risks to protected species, such as the Iberian wolf (*Ministério Público 2024*).

In March 2024, after a long winter spent standing in front of the company's excavator, another Compartes' Assembly was convened, bringing together eighty-three compartes. The bloqueio was a central topic of discussion. Inhabitants debated whether to continue blocking the excavator, especially in light of the recent legal development regarding the injunction (*providência cautelar)* they had filed. The judge had decided not to grant the injunction before first determining ownership of the land. As a result, the legal status of the plot remained unresolved. As inhabitants were discussing, one stressed:

> "We know *what is ours*. And I believe it is both a right and a duty to fight for what is ours and which is very important to our community, and to continue living in Covas with dignity and quality – and to not have a company come and impose rules and laws on us, and try to trample over us[40]."

Another added: "We are guarding, let's put it that way, we are safeguarding *what is ours*[41]." And someone else noted: "We have already held out for four months; another four will not discourage us[42]." The compartes thus resolved to maintain the bloqueio, which lasted until May 2024, when the company withdrew its equipment.

40 "Sabemos aquilo que é nosso. E acho que é um direito, um dever lutar por aquilo que é nosso e que é muito importante para a nossa comunidade e continuarmos a viver em Covas com dignidade e qualidade e não vir uma empresa impor-nos regras, impor-nos leis e tentar passar por cima de nós".
41 "Estamos a guardar, digamos assim, a salvaguardar o que é nosso".
42 "Já estivemos quatro meses não serão outros quatro que nos vão demover".

As Aurora once told a French journalist, "honestly, I never expected this would be so long! I thought this would be resolved in a week, two weeks, one month." This exhaustion, combined with the near-daily presence of police forces, private security patrols, and newly installed surveillance cameras produced a climate of fear, control, and intimidation – one that sought to deter dissent. At the same time, as prospecting proceeded on lands the company had purchased, inhabitants witnessed increasing environmental damage. These cumulative pressures deepened exhaustion of bodies, minds, and land. As I often heard: "It creates anxiety. We are suffering every day. It is very hard to go to bed thinking: 'It could be tomorrow, or the next day.' Our lives are in suspension[43]."



Prospecting activity. Inhabitants complained about soil and water contamination. Noise from drilling machines was also a frequent complaint.



The roads inhabitants usually drove became very slippery, due to spoilages from the prospecting activities, and this was a constant source of indignation.



Site where the company dumped waste from prospecting work, and where inhabitants could previously gather bushes for animal bedding.



Prospecting activity. Inhabitants complained about water contamination, which was already affecting their relation with meadows – for they would fear bringing animals to meadows close to prospecting activities. Source: Eduardo Martins

43 "Dá muita ansiedade. É muito díficil. É muito difícil ir dormir e pensar: "pode ser amanhã, ou depois". As nossas vidas estão em suspenso".

Strategic urgency on the ground: fast-tracking extraction

In March 2024, one year after its proposal, the Critical Raw Materials Act (CRMA) was approved (European Commission 2024). Part of the Green Deal Industrial Plan, the CRMA sets binding targets for mining, processing, and recycling within Europe: extracting 10% of annual consumption of strategic raw materials, achieving 40% domestic processing capacity, 25% recycling capacity, and diversifying imports by 2030. These measures aim to "ensure a secure and sustainable supply of critical raw materials for European industry and to significantly reduce the EU's dependence on imports from single-country suppliers," especially for the automotive, renewable energy, defence, and aerospace sectors (European Commission 2024).

By the time the CRMA was approved, Covas do Barroso was increasingly at the eye of the storm: it was in every major international outlet – De Volkskrant, Deutsche Welle, El País, Euronews, Le Monde, Libération, Reuters, The Guardian, The New York Times, among many others. During the year I spent living in Covas for fieldwork, scarcely a week went by without journalists, researchers, or activists arriving. If this constant influx intensified exhaustion – of bodies, minds, and narratives –, it also contributed to place Covas as a node within transnational circuits of energy and climate politics and activist solidarity networks.



The 25th April 2024 marked the 50th anniversary of the Carnation Revolution, and supporters marched down Lisbon's Avenida da Liberdade carrying a banner reading "Solidarity with Barroso." Source: João Veloso



This march was done alongside movements from Alentejo, struggling against industrial-size solar panel projects, also propelled within the context of the European hegemonic energy transition, as well as large-scale golf and resorts projects which would lead to beach privatization. In the photography, we see the two banners: "solidarity with Barroso" and "take your hands off the coast of Alentejo". Source: João Veloso



In May 2024, the film A Savana e a Montanha, directed by Paulo Carneiro and shot entirely in Covas with inhabitants, premiered at the Cannes Film Festival, which some people from Covas attended. Together with members from the film crew, they wore t-shirts saying "Green is Barroso. No to Mines". After the screening of the movie, they sang some of the resistance songs composed and written by Carlos Libo. Source: UDCB [Facebook]



In August 2024, the fourth edition of the Camp in Defence of Barroso drew a record of 500 participants. Photo of the march held during the 2024 Camp in Defence of Barroso. The banner reads "Barroso lives and resists." Source: Jan Kleinpeter





During the 2024 Camp, ex-uranium mining workers decided to come to express their solidarity with the anti--mining struggle in Covas do Barroso. Source: Jornal MAPA.

Those mining workers came back to Covas some months later to put up a banner: "Association of Ex-Workers of the Uranium Mines In Solidarity with the People of Covas do Barroso. No to Lithium Mines". Source: UDCB

In line with the CRMA, the Portuguese government launched an Action Plan establishing the CRMA Working Group (REMPC, in its Portuguese abbreviation) in July 2024. Its October 2024 report recommended nineteen measures, including public tenders for mineral exploration rights, funding mechanisms for contracts, expedited resolution of legal disputes related to strategic projects, and legislative revisions to ensure deposits are exploited within CRMA timelines. In December, the Minister for Environment and Energy announced new tenders for copper, gold, and lithium exploration to be launched in 2025. The updated National Energy and Climate Plan (PNEC), also published that month, reinforced the strategic importance of critical raw materials – especially lithium – through measures such as enhancing the value of domestic deposits, simplifying environmental licensing, streamlining procedures, assessing lithium potential, and monitoring mineral value chains (PNEC 2024). Echoing the CRMA, the PNEC emphasised speed and urgency, framing Portugal as a "frontrunner" in achieving carbon neutrality ahead of the EU schedule. Long accustomed to neglect, as I explore in **Chapter I.**, inhabitants now experienced a different form of state presence – sudden, extractive, and intrusive. As they often remarked, "The main party to blame for the company being here is the state[44]."

44 "O grande culpado da empresa estar aqui é o estado". "A empresa é secundária".

Anticipating the Commission's announcement of strategic projects during the Critical Raw Materials Week (December 2024), UDCB – together with the European Environmental Bureau (EEB), Friends of the Earth, and Mining Watch Portugal – produced a factsheet explaining why the 'Mina do Barroso' project should not receive this status. The 'Strategic Project' status is the CRMA's core mechanism for fast-tracking permitting and implementation of projects. Invited by the EEB, a member of UCDB and I travelled to Brussels during that week. There, we met with Sámi representatives, and with communities from Serbia and Spain facing similar projects, as well as environmental associations which were part of the EU Raw Materials Coalition, a network of more than sixty NGOs contesting the CRMA. As we were in Brussels having our concerns transmitted directly to Brussels-based decision-makers, three other members of the UDCB addressed a parliamentary commission in Lisbon.

The following day, my companion's phone rang incessantly: the GNR police was at her neighbours' doors, informing them that an administrative easement (*servidão administrativa*) had been issued, granting the company one-year access to private and communal lands. *Servidão* literally means servitude – a term thus carrying heavy connotations of subordination and coercion, thus evoking previous waves of dispossession during Salazar's fascist regime.

In January 2025, UDCB organised a protest titled *O tempo da servidão acabou* ("The time of servitude has ended"), drawing hundreds of people to Covas. During the protest, participants marched to one of the private lands to which the state had just granted the company access, and symbolically burned the easement document. That same month, during a Compartes' Assembly, inhabitants voted to terminate the rental agreement over 16 hectares of baldios, dating back to 2006.

Three months later, in March 2025, the 'Mina do Barroso' project was designated a "Strategic Project" under the CRMA, making it eligible for fast-track approval and EU funding. UDCB and ClientEarth, an European NGO, challenged this decision legally. In April 2025, three new lithium exploration concessions were granted in the district of Vila Real, including one in Covas do Barroso, which was acquired by Savannah Resources (PÚBLICO 2025).

In January 2026, the Portuguese state approved a non-reimbursable grant of up to €110 million for Savannah Resources under the European Commission's Temporary Crisis and Transition Framework (Diário da República 2026). The urgency embedded in the CRMA is no longer rhetorical or technocratic – it is experienced on the ground as accelerated procedures, legal impositions, financial incentives, police presence, and mounting pressure to render Covas do Barroso available for extraction.



Protesters and inhabitants symbolically burning the servidão administrativa.
Source: UDCB

Methodological & Ethical Cultivations

I conceptualise my methodological approach as gardening, using the ethnographic practice of tending a vegetable garden not only as a metaphor, but also as a way of thinking through method itself. I do not present gardening as an entirely novel methodology devised from scratch. Rather, I situate it in relation to existing methodological literature, particularly reflexive, decolonial feminist onto-epistemologies, which understand knowledge as partial, situated, and relational, emerging through specific encounters in the field (Behar 1996; Haraway 1988; Lassiter 2005; de la Cadena 2015; Puig de la Bellacasa 2017; Reyes 2020); scholarship on affect, corporeality, and embodied knowledge, which highlights the sensory, emotional, and bodily dimensions of ethnographic research (Ahmed 2004; Pink 2009; Alaimo 2010; Braidotti 2022; Daggett 2023; Giordano and Pierotti 2025); and politically engaged anthropologies, which emphasize political commitment (Maxey 1999; Hale 2001; Hoffman 2003; Halvorsen 2015), friendship and companionship (Taylor 2011; de Regt 2015; Owton and Allen-Collinson 2014; Tillmann 2015; Giraud 2019), and the co-creation of knowledge (Smith 1999; Chao 2022).

This section is organized as follows: I first recount my experience with the garden, then explain briefly how I came to treat it as an ethnographic method. I then explore the three main stages of gardening – seeding, tending, and harvesting – each serving as a metaphor for a corresponding stage of my methodology. **Seeding** represents the fieldwork itself – the practical enactment of ethnographic tools and techniques used to gather materials. **Tending** reflects the cultivation of those seeds – which, in gardening, requires watering, weeding, and fertilising – and which I use as metaphor for the practice of care I have cultivated throughout fieldwork. Finally, **Harvesting** signifies the analytical and writing stage, which emerges from the combination of fieldwork tools (the seeds) and the ways in which those tools were cared for (tending).

The Garden

When I arrived in Covas, despite having a research proposal and an ethical approval, I wanted to let myself be surprised. To let the place guide me. One of the first things I decided was I would have a vegetable garden, like everyone else does. Arriving in April, I was perfectly timed to plant and sow. The house I rented was a recently renovated old mill, with an adjacent plot. The owners, long emigrants to the United States of America, had converted it as a gift for their mother, who passed away unexpectedly. I was thus the first to inaugurate the house. When I asked to have a vegetable garden, my landlord was surprised but accepting.

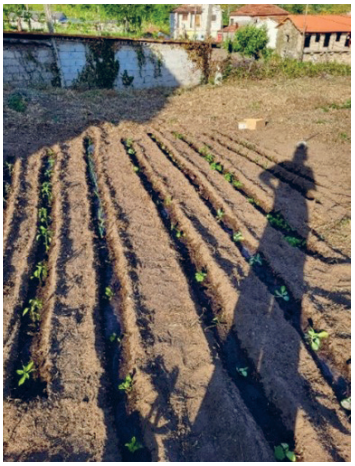
The plot, however, was filled with rubble, garbage, and construction debris. Thankfully, my neighbour Josué, their relative-in law, was happy to help. Our shared enthusiasm, along with the local maxim *só não colhe quem não planta* ("only those who don't sow fail to reap"), propelled us forward. Together, we removed stones, roof tiles, and trash. After three or four days, the plot was ready to become a garden.

On May 18, 2023, I bought seedlings and seeds – green beans, tomatoes, peppers, chard, leek, cucumbers, zucchini, kale, cabbage, lettuce, parsley, basil, coriander, onions, carrots, and pumpkins. Thrilled, I waited for the sun to soften before planting.

Josué taught me how to open *regos* with a *sachola*, seed and plant, and organize the plants to avoid shade

competition. Because renovation work on the house had blocked my connection to the *torna da água*, I used Josué's tank to water my plants, learning to water in the evening to retain soil moisture. Working and learning alongside Josué forged a connection between us. Although I knew his wife from the anti-mining struggle, I had barely met him before. Gardening thus offered a way to bond – it created a rhythm we could share, a space where patience and attention mattered more than titles or roles. A space where I quickly became the learner, the apprentice.

In this way, the garden became more than a practical undertaking: it was a method of inhabiting Covas. It slowed my days, tethering them to cycles of caring for soil – watering, weeding, dealing with plagues. It drew me into relations of dependence and reciprocity, as tending it often meant relying on others – friends or neighbours – during my absence. And it revealed abundance not as a given, but as something sustained and patiently awaited. The exhilaration of harvesting – of seeing the soil yield more than I had anticipated – was inseparable from the labor, time, generosity, and companionship that made it possible. In learning how to cultivate the garden, I was also learning how to be present in the village: as an apprentice, a neighbour, and, gradually, as someone woven into its everyday life.



The planting day.



As the garden grew, Josué and I harvested pine wood from his private land to support climbing plants like tomatoes and green beans.



In July, the tomatoes and the green beans were very tall.

Excerpt from
my field diary:

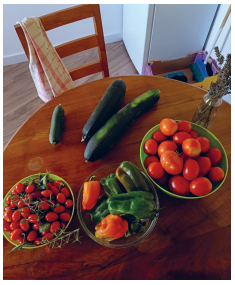
Yesterday I ate cucumber, lettuce, courgettes, and chard from my garden

♥ ♥ ♥ ♥ ♥ ♥ ♥

It was so beautiful to look calmly at the green beans today — to remember that I planted them and now I am eating them.

I'm going to make a soup with green beans and courgettes from the garden, potatoes, pumpkins and carrots from Maria.

July, 12th, 2023









Gardening as Method

Gardening allowed me to root myself in Covas – bodily, sensorily, socioecologically, temporally – and fostered a relational ethics of emplaced care, grounded in embodied apprenticeship. In this sense, gardening was not only something I did, but also an orientation towards research grounded in affect, embodiment, and relational responsibility.

Attending to plant growth demanded sustained attention and patience, offering a different experience of temporality, governed not by rigid schedules but by organic rhythms. Daily tasks such as watering and weeding anchored my presence, creating what might be called an *ethics of staying* – a commitment to continuity, since the garden can only survive through sustained care. As Puig de la Bellacasa (2017, 43) argues, this "everyday labor of maintenance conveys ethical obligations: we must take care of things in order to remain responsible for their becomings." In tending my garden, then, I cultivated "response-ability," which feminist STS scholars describe as the capacity to attend, to respond, and to remain accountable to more-than-human relations (Haraway 2016; Puig de la Bellacasa 2017). As a relational practice oriented towards becoming-with, rather than extracting-from, gardening allowed me to cultivate a practical ethics of care, which extended beyond my relations with the soil to include the relations I cultivated with other beings.

Crucially, gardening as a method allows me to highlight how knowledge emerges not only from interviews or documents but from bodily and sensorial engagements with place. Conventional anthropological approaches, such as participant observation, have long emphasized the centrality of the body, the senses, and immersion in knowledge production (Spradley 1980; Okely 2007; O'Reilly 2012; DeWalt and DeWalt 2011; Daynes and Williams 2018). Similarly, affect and embodiment scholarship (Ahmed 2004; Daggett 2023; Giordano and Pierotti 2025), along with decolonial and feminist critiques of vision-centred epistemologies (Pink 2009; Alaimo 2010; Puig de la Bellacasa 2017; Braidotti 2022), encourage us to attend to the embodied dimensions of knowledge, highlighting the body as a site of experience for learning and knowledge production.

More recently, scholars working at the intersection of the ontological turn and ecological matters advanced the paradigm of *sentirpensar* (thinking-feeling), which rejects the separation of cognition and affect (Escobar 2014), as well as the concept of *cuerpo-territorio*[45] (Zaragocin and Caretta 2020; Glockner et al. 2024), which treats the body as a sensitive extension of the territory it inhabits. To think-feel with the Earth, or with our body-territories, is to know through embodied relational awareness rather than abstract detachment. One of my first embodied understandings was experiencing how time moves differently: days stretched long, yet weeks seemed to pass quickly. Rooted in place, time is not an abstract measure but something lived. Or, as I came to understand, time and place are together.

Gardening as a method responds directly to these methodological and epistemological sensitivities. Through my body, tending this garden fostered attachment to the place and, more importantly, a sense of proximity and intimacy that interviews alone could not provide. It was a form of learning by doing – specifically, by doing as people in Covas do –, allowing me to engage with this place not only through what is said about it but through how it is lived in practice. Each gesture of watering, weeding, or harvesting generated knowledge through touch, fatigue, patience, and attentiveness. Emotions – excitement, anxiety, frustration, joy, wonder, delight – were integral to this process. My understanding of what is at stake, then, emerges not only from the interviews, or the fieldnotes, but also from the full range of bodily, sensorial and affective engagements with this place – from the sound of machines in the monte, from prolonged rain, or from tending and harvesting vegetables in my garden. In sum, gardening as method reflects a methodological approach rooted in place, attuned to its temporal rhythms, embedded in community relations, and grounded in a practical ethics of care.

45 This concept is particularly developed in **Chapter III.**

Seeding

from the latin seminare:
the beginning of a cultivation

I take seeding as a metaphor to explain what I have done: which seeds have I planted – that is, which methodological tools I have used to gather "data."

Participant Observation

Fieldwork for this doctoral research took place from April 2023 to April 2024, with participant observation as the primary methodological approach, a key tool for capturing everyday practices and interactions (Spradley 1980; Okely 2007; O'Reilly 2012; DeWalt and DeWalt 2011; Daynes and Williams 2018). My time in the field was particularly guided by Mol's (2022) invitation to investigate what people do, a method she calls "praxeographic," which makes possible to understand the realities which are created rather than the meanings attributed to them. During fieldwork, then, I wove myself into the shared rhythms of Covas through agricultural labour, everyday encounters, cultural festivities, and the cadence of the always-fast-approaching prospective mining project.

I participated in a wide range of agricultural and communal activities, including sowing and harvesting crops; producing silage; defoliating maize; corn crushing and graining; grape harvesting; feeding animals; accompanying shepherds to the *lameiros* and *baldios;* observing forestry work, firewood collection, sheep shearing, or vaccination; observing the *matança do porco* (pig slaughter) and the subsequent fumeiro; observing the baldios assemblies. Participation followed seasonal rhythms, with summer (May – September) being particularly active, due to the timing of agricultural work, the occurrence of the torna da água, as well as the increased presence of people – both supporters of the anti-ming struggle and emigrants returning home for the season. Participant observation also involved lingering in the local café, attending birthdays or funerals, and sharing home-made meals and drinks.

Crucially, I sought to connect with this place in the most immersive ways possible: gardening, walking in the meadows, swimming in the river, foraging mushrooms or fruits were not mere leisure activities but deliberate methodological practices. These embodied activities allowed me to attune to place, cultivate relational attention, to think-feel this place, to *be-with* it, even if only momentarily. This immersive paradigm enabled me to decentre research from a vision- and logo-centric framework and to experience time and place in a deeply embodied way.



Picking up cherries.



Sowing potatoes.



Picking up chestnuts.



Foraging mushrooms.



Cooking and eating mushrooms.



Picking up apples.

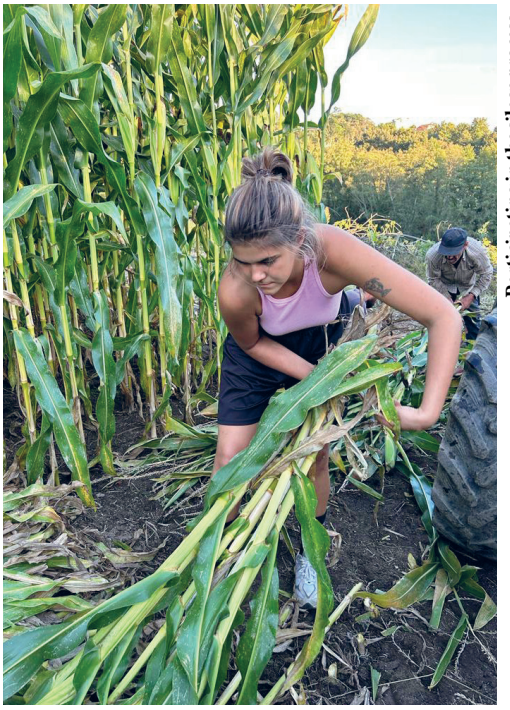
Defoliating corn and crushing it for the silage. The combination of manual and automated work is a characteristic trait of agricultural practices in Covas do Barroso.







The 'Natal do Idoso' (The Elderly Christmas), in Boticas, where inhabitants of Covas do Barroso were performing the traditional songs and asked me to come on stage with them to sing an anti-mining resistance song. Source: Câmara Municipal de Boticas.



Participating in the silage process.



Fishing in the river.



Different steps in the process of the matança do porco.



Different steps in the process of the matança do porco.

Given my commitment to the anti-mining struggle, participant observation extended to political engagement: attending and organising protests and events; accompanying inhabitants in interactions with journalists, researchers, or company representatives; and participating in the seven-month-long blockade of a company's excavator. Alongside companions, I helped transform the old primary school into the communitarian centre SACHOLA, hosting cinema sessions, workshops, artistic residencies, and serving as an information and solidarity hub for activists. I was also involved in the local anti-mining association, UDCB, supporting press releases, meetings with political representatives, organising events, managing social media, or assisting with legal matters.

Throughout, I would take notes on my phone or ask permission to record small segments of conversations, later transferring them to my digital field diary. I also kept handwritten diaries, recording the day's observations. These diaries, kept carefully on my shelf, are precious objects that carry the weight of my work. As ethnographic research has long emphasized (Emerson et al. 1995; Bernard 2006; O' Reilly 2012; Daynes and Williams 2018), such jottings and fieldnotes constitute one of ethnography's central analytical practices, allowing lived experience to be transformed into a cumulative written record. These notes form the core material of this dissertation.

Semi-Structured Interviews

Fieldnotes from participant observation were complemented by eighteen in-depth semi-structured interviews (Edwards and Holland 2013), designed to systematize information in participants' own words.

Most interviews took place during winter (December 2023 – April 2024), when agricultural activity declines and inhabitants spend more time at home. The interviews typically lasted between one and three hours, and sometimes longer, which reflects the close proximity and trust established with my interlocutors. They were conducted while walking through meadows or *baldios*, or in the warmth comfort of their kitchens, over shared food and drinks. Several also occurred during the *bloqueios*, benefiting from the extended periods of shared time, with little to occupy us beyond simply being present together. The interviews followed a semi-structured format guided by a prepared script addressing personal life stories, connection to this place, land use (particularly *baldios*), pastoral practices, animal care, and experiences and perceptions of the mining project. At the same time, discussions were allowed to develop organically in a relational manner. With participants' consent, interviews were audio-recorded and supplemented by written notes to aid transcription. All interviews were conducted in Portuguese and securely stored on my University Research Drive.

As some scholars have noted, interviews are often not the best way to collect data, especially in contexts of prolonged ethnographic engagement (Briggs 1986). In my case, because of my deep immersion in Covas' life and the close relationships formed with many inhabitants, formal interviews sometimes felt artificial. Consequently, several people – especially those with whom I spent the most time – were not formally interviewed. Nonetheless, the interviews that did occur proved valuable in helping to systematize people's experiences, perceptions, and memories in their own words, and they served as an important complement to the insights gathered through fieldnotes from participant observation.

Documentation of the Torna da Água

The **Prelude** to this dissertation introduced Covas do Barroso through the *torna da água*, foregrounding it as a practice, a rhythm, and a material infrastructure crucial to Covas' politics of place, and, as I will suggest, to its *modo de vida*. During fieldwork, I conducted additional interviews specifically about the *torna da água*, produced maps of water distribution, and created family diagrams. In collaboration with Covas' inhabitants, we managed to compile a full calendar of the water wheel, systematically documenting all plots and their allocated water hours, producing the first comprehensive record of the system's rules, including weekly, daily, and hourly rotations, alongside maps, photographs, and transcription of

old documents. This extensive documentation emerged from both my own interest and the community's expressed desire for a systematic record. This living archive was presented to the community in March 2024, enabling corrections and verification. Copies were made accessible for consultation, and I plan to develop an interactive exhibition at the Eco-Museum of Covas do Barroso to further disseminate the stories of the *torna da água*[46].

Secondary Materials

In addition to interviews and notes from participant observation, reports, news articles, and other documents constitute important sources for this dissertation. Key reports include the *Estudo de Impacte Ambiental* (EIA, Environmental Impact Statement), the *Declaração de Impacte Ambiental* (DIA, Environmental Impact Assessment), as well as the *Parecer da Comissão de Avaliação da Agência Portuguesa do Ambiente*, specifically the *Procedimento de Avaliação de Impacte Ambiental N.°3353*, both the first (July 2022) and the second version (May 2023). Documents from both public consultations were also examined – these contain the full contributions of individual citizens, independent experts, and collective authorities.

Key policy documents issued by the state and the EU were also considered, notably the updated Plano Nacional de Energia e Clima (PNEC, National Plan for Energy and Climate), as well as the EU's Critical Raw Materials Act. Relevant legislation, particularly laws governing the *baldios*, was also studied in detail. Additionally, corporate documents were also consulted, namely Savannah's online "investors communications" and the "lithium magazines" circulated in the region.

Finally, news from television, newspapers, and social media were continuously monitored. While this was not systematically analysed through a formal methodology, following this mediascape provided an ongoing and contextual understanding of what is unfolding in Covas.

Materials 'Outside' the Field

Given my ongoing relationship with Covas, it is impossible to draw a strict boundary between "time in the field" and experiences elsewhere. Ethnographers have long noted how the "field" is not a neatly bounded site but a relational and shifting space that often extends beyond a single location or period of immersion (Clifford 1997; Amit 2000). Returning to the gardening metaphor: one can only harvest what has been continuously nurtured. While fieldnotes and interviews are clearly demarcated within specific periods, Barroso is continuously present in my life. My engagement began in January 2021 and has remained ongoing: multiple visits between 2021 and 2025, along with daily contact with inhabitants and encounters with them outside of Covas, have contributed to a continuous, evolving understanding of what is at stake.

46 Part of this work is also published (in Portuguese) at Revista DIVERGENTE.

Tending

from the Latin tendere:
to care for; to attend to

I take tending as a metaphor for the labour of sustaining relations in the field. If seeding named arrival and what was initiated, tending refers to how those seeds were able to grow – through ongoing practices of presence, trust, and reciprocity.

Gardening as a method supposes a research practice guided by a sustained commitment to care – care for this place, its inhabitants, and the relations that made my presence possible. Following María Puig de la Bellacasa, I understand care not as a sentiment, but as a practice:

> "To care is to be *attracted*, to be *entangled* with the recipients of (our) care in a relationship that not only extends (us) but obliges (us) to care" (2017, 167 [emphasis added]).

As a practice, care does the opposite work of coloniality (Blaser 2025): whereas colonial logics render bodies-territories extractable, care demands recognition, reciprocity, and responsiveness. As I understand it, care is not a distant ethical stance: it is a continuous practice that binds because it entangles, generating responsibilities precisely because we are already within relations that matter (Puig de la Bellacasa 2017). My frequent use of the suffix "-with" signals this emphasis: relations do not emerge from agents that exist outside them, but within them (de la Cadena 2015; Blaser 2025). Care exists only through and within these *entanglements*. Likewise, care implies *attraction*. As the Brazilian poet Clarice Lispector (2013) writes, "one of the indirect ways of knowing is to find it beautiful[47]." My experience with Barroso began with amazement. I was repeatedly struck by the place's beauty: the vastness of the mountains, the quiet force of the wind, the endless shades of green. This amazement was not incidental to my research; it shaped how I came to experience what was at stake. Inhabitants, too, would pause during walks to contemplate this place's beauty. I do not treat this as romantic distraction, but as a mode of knowing: being affected by beauty signals attachment to place and informs how potential loss, for example, is experienced.

This caring ethics – understood as practice – was grounded in two complementary approaches. On the one hand, in reflexive, decolonial feminist onto-epistemologies, which establish that research does not produce universal truths but rather partial, *situated knowledges*, which emerge situationally and relationally in the field (Behar 1996; Haraway 1988; Lassiter 2005; de la Cadena 2015; Puig de la Bellacasa 2017; Reyes 2020). On the other hand, in politically engaged anthropologies, which call for ethical and political engagement in the field, and a sustained moral commitment to challenging injustice, supporting interlocutors' struggles, and producing knowledge that is accountable to the communities with whom it is co-created (Maxey 1999; Hale 2001; Hoffman 2003; Halvorsen 2015; Chao 2022).

Guided by these perspectives, I arrived in Barroso intending to resist the extractive logic which can sometimes be reproduced in academic research, which treats stories, voices, and bodies as "data" to be taken, rather than relationships to be nurtured. I did not want every conversation to feel instrumental, or every encounter to be shaped by how it would serve my thesis. I wanted to be present without being governed by the imperative of productivity. Likewise, academic research often treats "knowledge" as something to be "collected," as if it could exist outside the body or the relationships that sustain it. On the contrary, my commitment was to immerse myself in the practices through which realities are enacted, using that immersion as both generative and integral to knowledge production.

Anthropologists and social scientists have long challenged the idea of unbiased observation (Scheper-Hughes 1992; Behar 1996; Daynes and Williams 2018). Critical feminist perspectives on positionality and reflexivity (Harding 1992; Haraway 1988; Reyes 2020) go further by contesting the deeply rooted positivist assumption that neutrality is the foundation of scientific inquiry – insisting instead that "objectivity is neither desirable nor possible" (Daynes and Williams 2018, 56). What we come to know is inseparable from who we are: what we see, what we listen to, whom we speak with, what we are told,

and what remains unsaid are all mediated by our histories, affects, commitments, and desires (Harding 1991; Haraway 1998; Okely 2007; Puig de la Bellacasa 2017; Reyes 2020; Cuevas et al. 2023). In other words, all knowledge is *situated* (Haraway 1988). What we might expect to learn about, while conducting research, are not universal truths, but rather a set of partialities, of partial connections, of situated, embodied, grounded knowledges (ibid.). According to these perspectives, scientific inquiry does not achieve credibility by pretending to transcend the subject who conducts it – rather, its rigor lies in acknowledging that knowledge is always produced from somewhere, by someone, within specific relations (Harding 1992; Haraway 1988; Reyes 2020). In other words, research is always partial to, dependent on the subject (the researcher) conducting it – what Haraway (1988) calls "embodied objectivity."

To acknowledge positionality and situated knowledge in a context of extractivist conflict requires making visible my own position within the struggle (Hoffman 2003; Chao 2022). In politically charged settings, some scholars argue that participation and observation are inseparable (Hoffman 2003), and neutrality is not an available position: to be present is already to be implicated (Ortner 1995; Chao 2022). They frame such involvement as an ethical commitment to challenge inequalities (Hale 2001), some scholars argue that activism grounded in reciprocity is one of the core principles of anthropological practice (Kirsch 2002, 178), with authors advocating for a "militant anthropology" that is politically and morally engaged (Scheper-Hughes 1995). Perspectives from engaged anthropology help me make sense of – and value – that political work. They show that participation and solidarity are not distractions from research but can be constitutive of ethnographic practice. My participation in the struggle, therefore, was not peripheral to my research – it fundamentally structured it.

At the same time, this political engagement generated tensions with academic expectations: being deeply involved in the struggle, I was haunted by fears of insufficiency: not recording enough, not conducting enough formal interviews, not having enough "material." Institutional expectations sat uneasily alongside my desire to be a caring and committed presence. In retrospect, these fears seem common and, as my colleague Maurizia Mezza (2025) suggests, may underpin anthropology's epistemic humility: reminders that the field always exceeds what we can grasp, and that ethnographic knowledge is inevitably partial.

Recognizing that all knowledge is situated, embodied, and shaped by positionality, what follows in these pages is necessarily a partial reconstruction of the lifeworlds of Covas do Barroso amid the prospect of lithium mining. It is one account among others, emerging from situated relations cultivated since 2021.

However, this does not mean reducing it to the merely personal. Positionalities are never just personal identities – they take shape through intra-actions with people, objects, landscapes, and infrastructures. I became a friend, a companion, a confidant, a comrade to many. I was a researcher with high levels of education in a context where such degrees of formal education are uncommon, thus marking differences between myself and many inhabitants. Other material inequalities were also visible in the field: the newly renovated house I rented, or driving my cousin's Mercedes. Crucially, these shaped how I was perceived – an educated woman, "from good families," or, simply put, "not from here" (Martins 2012). At the same time, I became an open opponent of the mine in a community marked by active antagonism, while simultaneously being an insider to the mining struggle. I became a young woman in a field largely inhabited by older generations, where being single – or romantically attached – shaped how my body was perceived and sexualized. Crucially, these positionalities were not static attributes I carried – rather, they were forged through the web of intra-relations I cultivated with a caring ethics.

This ethics of care led me to cultivate relationships throughout the community and to avoid shutting any relational doors. While in the field, I sought to balance my political orientation with openness, recognizing that – even where opposition to the mine is widespread – people's motivations and levels of engagement vary, and that the conflict itself is layered, marked by resignation (Kirsch 2014), pragmatism, fear, and disagreement.

47 "Um dos indiretos modos de entender é achar bonito".

Reconciling my political stance with a desire for openness required cultivating curiosity rather than hostility. I arrived angry about the mine, but soon realized that care demanded remaining attentive to complexity, including to those who did not share my position. Although those who were not opposing the mine were often criticized by those actively resisting, I maintained a stance of care, curiosity, and non-confrontation. I avoided reproducing antagonism in everyday interactions, and sought spaces for dialogue. The challenge was to remain faithful to that complexity without betraying the intimacy built with those resisting the project, and how to engage across divisions without exacerbating them. Thanks to this deliberate openness – which was made possible as I became a young, kind, woman, with a non-conflictive interpersonal style – I established connections with people who had come to accept the mine[48]. The torna da água was crucial in this regard. Following this practice allowed me to interact with almost all inhabitants. As a shared infrastructure of collective life, it constituted a domain not exclusively defined by the conflict surrounding the mine (yet permeated by its own conflicts, as recounted in the **Prelude**.). Like gardening, it is a practice through which relationships could be patiently cultivated.

Being a *caring researcher,* a figure my friend and colleague Yentl de Lange once suggested in one of our many Signal conversations, did not mean abandoning critique or political commitment – I was never neutral about the mine –, but it complicates how that position was lived relationally in the field. It meant accommodating divergent positions without relinquishing my own. It required patience, attentiveness, and a willingness to remain in uncomfortable spaces. It required cultivating relationships that did not reduce individuals to their alignment with the mining project. As a methodological orientation, the figure of the caring researcher resists reducing the field to a binary moral landscape, all the while acknowledging conflict, and unapologetically taking a stance before it. It is grounded in relational maintenance: it insists that political commitment must be practiced, much like gardening, through unhostile cultivation – tending relationships, maintaining connections, and inhabiting differences.

Sustaining a caring ethics also requires sustained self-reflexivity. Throughout the research process, I practiced what Reyes (2020) terms "interpretive reflexivity:" ongoing attention to how my social positions shaped access, interactions, and interpretation. I remained attentive both to the coloniality of power structuring my encounters and to the limits of collaboration, even as I draw inspiration from relational proposals such as "co-labouring" (de la Cadena 2015). On the one hand, caring for and being-with others does not erase disparities of mobility and status that determine who speaks, who writes, whose voice circulates, and who is paid. Writing this dissertation is itself an exercise of privilege. For several years, I have been funded to observe, travel, and write; I am the one invited to conferences and policy discussions where many of my companions cannot be present. Even when critiquing extractivism, my work and my body circulates within academic or political networks largely inaccessible to those whose lives inform it.

On the other hand, although I sought ongoing dialogue about my research process (Hale 2001; Chao 2022), not everyone wished to engage in theoretical discussions or read my work, often expressing trust in my representation instead. Even collaborative initiatives, such as the documentation of the torna da água, carried ambiguity: while produced collectively, participation in the process of constructing the document itself was uneven. In practice, only a small number of people possessed the detailed knowledge required for tasks such as mapping, for example, which require an understanding and interpretation of satellite images.

Ultimately, this dissertation remains an academic artifact: written in English, shaped by disciplinary conventions, and circulating within institutional spaces. Even though I have made many efforts to translate and share my work outside academic spaces, those efforts do not eliminate these inequalities. Acknowledging these hierarchies does not invalidate the relationships built, the care practiced, or the trust shared with my companions in Covas. Rather, it situates those relations within broader structures that exceed individual ethics while shaping what can be known, written, and circulated. Caring research therefore requires vigilance toward its own conditions of possibility – recognizing that collaboration unfolds within uneven terrains of power and that companionship does not imply symmetry.

Harvesting

from the latin colligere:
to gather, to assemble, to pick

I take harvesting as a metaphor for the analytic process that followed seeding and tending. Harvesting refers to the work of assembling, interpreting, and giving form to what emerged through those relational processes.

Aware that the separation between fieldwork, reflection, analysis, and writing is often artificial (Foucault 1980), my analytic process was fundamentally iterative: I reread fieldnotes repeatedly, highlighting passages, annotating margins, tracing recurring themes, and articulating preliminary arguments. Rather than applying a rigid coding scheme, themes consolidated through repeated reading and rewriting. Gradually, I constructed an outline of how these materials might come together. I listened to all recorded interviews, guided by the time-stamped notes taken during the interviews. I transcribed many, though not all, prioritizing those most relevant to the emerging questions, or selected excerpts within them. While transcribing, I attempted to preserve the affective texture of the field – ambiguities, reactions, humour (Bucholtz 2000; Galasinski 2017).

Because this work was conducted in Portuguese, the language of the encounters, translation into English itself introduced a layer of analysis. Translation is never neutral, and such decisions required careful consideration. For this reason, I retain several Portuguese terms – baldios, monte, terra, *torna da água*, *modo de vida*, *tralhão*, *compartes* – whose ethnographic weight exceeds any straightforward equivalent. These words name place-specific practices, relations, and infrastructures – translating them too quickly would risk flattening their textures[49].

Terminology also mattered when referring to those who live in Covas. Labels such as "local people" or "community" imply particular assumptions about cohesion and boundedness. I ultimately adopt "inhabitants," following Tim Ingold's (2000; 2022) understanding of place as constituted through movement, dwelling, and relational entanglements.

Ethical decisions regarding anonymity likewise developed during writing. In a small, heavily mediatized community, anonymization does not guarantee unrecognizability. I therefore discussed this with some of my companions and, throughout this thesis, I sometimes use composite characters to redistribute identifying details while conveying lived experiences. In **Chapter III.**, however, my companions appear under their real names, with explicit consent and shared judgment that doing so posed no risk.

Writing itself thus became a central analytical tool. Arguments often emerged in the act of composition; the blank page, though intimidating, was also a space where dispersed fragments began to cohere. Writing with care is challenging. Writing always risks misrecognition or unintended exposure, even if it comes from a desire to honour those relationships. A persistent question accompanied the process: how will this be received by those who entrusted me with their stories? How can I do justice to our shared experiences? This tension between analytical clarity and relational responsibility became part of my caring ethical practice. Recognizing I am entangled, I am-with, I feel more response-able for how I think through, interpret, and assemble things.

48 Meaningful relationships with those directly employed by the mining company, however, proved difficult. My visible participation in protests or the machine blockade made my opposition clear. As a result, I could not cultivate sustained relations with those few most closely aligned with the project. Consequently, voices supporting or reluctantly accepting the mine remain largely minoritarian in this thesis. As Giraud (2019) observes, politically engaged work necessarily involves omissions that must nonetheless be acknowledged. Absent from this account are many dimensions of the conflict: internal political disputes, family fractures, tensions between inhabitants and external activists, disagreements within the movement, a systematic gender analysis, among others. These absences reflect not indifference but the situated limits of this research, and they are also part of the ethics of care – of choosing, care-fully, what to say, how, and when.

49 For convenience, I have included a short **Glossary** on the final page of this dissertation for readers to consult.

Although writing is individual endeavour, it was never solitary: the thoughts presented here draw on countless conversations in homes, offices, and cafés, over shared meals or glasses of wine, by the river or the sea, often in the most mundane situations. As my friends and colleagues write, "Every sentence is already co-authored: by the conversations that precede it, the readings that inform it, the infrastructures that enable it" (Ampuero-Ruiz et al. 2025). Research, especially ethnographic, should not be understood as an individual endeavour but what Gudeman and Rivera call "a long conversation" (1995 apud Descola and Pálsson 1996). Ethnographic learning "is situated in communities of practice," a perspective which suggests a radical break with the Cartesian tradition because it breaks with the idea that research is a solitary, individual, independent experience, and rather is "a dialogic product, a collective result of a long conversation" (ibid. 1996, 6-7). My fieldwork in Covas do Barroso was indeed part of that "long conversation" which began in 2021, and is an ongoing, always unfinished, and collective (yet situated and embodied) process.

Finally, harvesting also implies abundance and loss. The material gathered far exceeds what can be included here. As in gardening, many plants are shared, some spoiled, and others are left unpicked. Writing this dissertation, therefore, meant gradually unlearning the impulse towards perfection and mastery. In relinquishing the desire for control, I have had to accept the limits of this work. It will never fully match what I imagine it could be, nor will it ever feel entirely complete. It is thus shaped by hard choices about what to include and what to let go. Its incompleteness is not only a limitation but also a sign of the richness of the stories entrusted to me.

Yet, as in gardening, harvesting is never the end of the process. What I harvested was eaten, shared, preserved, and composted. Research follows a similarly circular rhythm: analysis does not conclude with writing – it continues through presenting, publishing, discussing, revising, and living on with the materials and relationships that fieldwork has generated, which in turn generate new ideas, connections, and projects. The conversations, attachments, and responsibilities formed in Covas do Barroso do not end with the completion of this dissertation. Rather, they continue to shape how I think, write, and relate to this place. Like soil altered by previous seasons, I, too, have been changed by this place, and that transformed ground will shape – and is already shaping – whatever comes next.

Theoretical Approach: Researching Extractivism as An Ontological Project in Europe

In this section, I provide an overview of my theoretical journey, which has been profoundly inspired and shaped by the ontological turn, specifically, by the framework of political ontology for analysis of land conflicts (Blaser 2009; 2013a; 2013b; 2014; Escobar 2014; 2015; 2017). Rather than providing an extensive literature review on the ontological turn, I reflect on how its key arguments, and, specifically the political ontology framework, have shaped my thinking and the main concepts I work with – extractivism, place, and re-existence.

Encountering the Ontological Turn

I situate my work within what has been termed 'the ontological turn' – a body of work that is less a coherent paradigm than a loose constellation of debates across anthropology, science and technology studies (STS), and environmental humanities (Holbraad and Pedersen 2017). Whereas in classical philosophy "ontology" literally means the "study of being" – concerned with questions of "how things are, what a person is, and what sort of world this is" (Bateson 1972, 313) – the ontological turn in anthropology and the social sciences emphasizes five key insights: (1) A deconstruction of the Great Divide (Latour 2006), central to Western ontological politics and its hierarchical structuring of reality; (2) A foregrounding of relationality; (3) The idea that realities are enacted in practice; (4) An attention to the "Others" of modernity; and (5) An explicitly political orientation. According to Escobar (2017, 241),

> "What defines this turn is the attention to a host of actors that deeply shape what we come to know as 'reality' but which the academy rarely tackled – things like objects and 'things', non-humans, matter and materiality (soil, energy, infrastructures, weather), emotions, spirituality, feelings, and so forth. What brings together these very disparate list of items is the attempt to break away from the normative divides, central to the modern regime of truth, between subject and object, mind and body, reason and emotion, living and inanimate, human and non-human, organic and inorganic, and so forth. This is why this set of perspectives can be properly called post-dualist."

Scholars associated with the ontological turn have long shown how modern ontology produces a particular way of organizing and structuring reality through the hierarchical allocation of entities (Sousa-Santos 2007; Escobar 2007; Blaser 2009). In Latour's (2006) seminal terms, modernity is founded upon an Internal "Great Divide" between Nature and Culture. This Internal Divide, he suggests, is the ontological substratum for a greater system of hierarchies that dualistically structure social reality (Blaser 2009, 887).

These dichotomous binaries include, among others: subject versus object, mind versus body, reason versus emotion, human versus non-human, masculine versus feminine, living versus inert, civilized versus savage, culture versus ancestral knowledge, and independence versus dependence (Herrero and Pascual 2010; Herrero 2013; Mies and Shiva 2014; Beltrán 2019). Crucially, these are not neutral distinctions but

"pairs of opposites with unequal value" (Herrero and Pascual 2010, 1) – for example, man positioned as superior to woman.

This hierarchical and dichotomous mode of thought functions as an ontological principle that legitimizes relations, structures and systems of domination, oppression, and exploitation (Strathern 1980; Sousa-Santos 2007). Indeed, these distinctions are not merely philosophical abstractions: they are materially embedded in scientific practices, legal regimes, and technological infrastructures (Strathern 1980; Mies 1986; Sousa-Santos 2007). They authorize intervention by framing certain domains – most notably "nature" – as external, passive, and available for manipulation, while positioning others – typically human subjects – as agents of knowledge and action.

It is precisely through the construction of Nature as inferior to Culture that its domination, colonization, and extraction are justified (Mies and Shiva 2014). Relatedly, and because the Internal Divide underpins the External Divide, this dualist ontology has historically served to justify oppressive relations with those considered *inferior* because they are (constructed as) "close(r) to nature," "feminine," "savage" and/or "emotional/irrational." The primacy of the "masculine," associated with reason and culture, has legitimized domination over women's bodies (Merchant 1980; Mies 1986; Herrero 2013; Mies and Shiva 2014), for example, while simultaneously legitimizing domination over all those bodies-territories on the *Other* side of the "abyssal line" of modernity (Sousa-Santos 2007) – namely, Indigenous and traditional communities, racialized populations, the proletariat, the Global South, nature and non-humans.

The ontological politics (Mol 1999) of modernity, thus, are fundamentally rooted in a particularly violent relationship with subaltern (Spivak 1988) subjects – those who have been systematically silenced, dominated, not accounted for. Law (2015) has brilliantly encapsulated the ontological oneness of modern thought in his concept of the "one-world world." He asks: *what is wrong with the one-world world?*, to which he replies that this model – by assuming there is only one single reality –, reduces difference, devours the Other and silences non-dominant ontologies. In other words, the one-world has claimed for itself the exclusive right to be "the world." In "presenting itself as exclusive, [the one-world world] cancels the possibilities for what lies beyond its limits" (de la Cadena and Blaser 2018, 3). In the words of Stengers (2018), modernity is "a world-destroying machine [that] cannot fit with other worlds." Other (non-dominant) worlds, or ontologies, are thus the 'constitutive outside' for modernity (Mitchell 2000 apud Blaser 2009) – the latter needs the former to reiterate its own existence and self-declared superiority.

Two caveats are necessary here. First, proponents of the ontological turn do not claim that the "one-world world" is exclusively Western. As Jensen (2021, 100) observes, "many non-Western people also think their distinctive form of reality is**...**reality." The issue, therefore, is not the existence of such claims, but the historical dominance of the Western version over others (Blaser 2009; Jensen 2021). Second, it is crucial to recognize internal differences within what we call "modernity" or "the West." As Sousa Santos (2007, 1) notes, there exist "marginal or subordinate versions of modern Western thinking" that contest hegemonic forms. This is particularly important for my thesis, as Covas do Barroso can be understood as part of these undervalued formations, as **Chapter I.** explores. Attending to these nuances prevents the reification of totalizing categories and preserves the possibility of dialogue.

Taking these caveats seriously, what I find most generative in the ontological turn's critique of dualisms is how it approaches them as an ordering logic that stabilizes particular versions of reality. The critique, therefore, is not directed at the existence of distinctions *per se* – which may be unavoidable – but at the hierarchical organisation of reality through separations. Scholars of the ontological turn do not necessarily argue that they can be wholly overcome; rather, they examine how they are enacted, contested, and reconfigured in practice, all the while making visible how alternative modes of relating persist alongside them. In this sense, describing the ontological turn as "post-dualist" (Escobar 2017) signals not the disappearance of dualisms, but a refusal to accept them as the only possible terms through which reality – or realities – can be organized.

To think beyond these binaries, the ontological turn foregrounds relationality. While relational thinking is not unique to this body of work – having long been present in both Western and non-Western traditions – it is central to its analytical orientation. Thinking relationally shifts the focus from entities (the "*who*") to relations (the "how"). Influenced by STS, including Latour's Actor–Network Theory, scholars of the ontological turn argue that entities do not pre-exist their relations but are constituted through them (Mol 1999; 2002; Latour 2004; Escobar 2008). In other words, realities are enacted in practice (Mol 1999; 2002), and, "since there are different practices, there are also different enacted realities" (Law and Joks 2019, 425). Importantly, these practices and realities overlap and intertwine, generating what has been termed ontological multiplicity (Mol 1999, 2002; Law 2004; Woolgar and Lezaun 2013; Holbraad and Pedersen 2017; Law and Joks 2019).

If realities are not given but enacted, the ontological turn inaugurated a shift from a "politics of who" (who gets to speak or act) to a "politics of *what*" (what realities come into being) (Mol 1999), and, crucially, to a "politics of *how*" (how these realities are enacted) (Dányi 2016; Law and Joks 2019; Blaser 2025). This shift invites attention to the intra-relations through which entities emerge (de la Cadena 2015; Blaser 2025). The concept of *intra-action* (Barad 2007), as opposed to *interaction*, is key here: it directs us not to relations between pre-existing entities, but to relations that bring entities into being (de la Cadena 2015; Blaser 2025).

Thinking relationally, then, requires attending to the presence in politics of beings that dominant disciplines have relegated either to "nature" or to the symbolic (de la Cadena 2010; 2014; 2015). Importantly, this relational perspective is inspired and affected by Indigenous peoples and other groups whose cosmovision – or whose ways of being – greatly differs from the cosmovision of the modern West (Escobar 2022). Moreover, as feminist and phenomenology scholarship suggest, attending to affect, the body, and embodiment is crucial in challenging modern dualisms because, as Descola and Pálsson (1996, 15) observe, "the 'body' does not easily allow for a fixed division of academic labor, nor does it admit a firm boundary between nature and culture."

In challenging these binaries, the ontological turn explicitly confronts the "colonising attitudes of modern knowledge" (Escobar 2022, 109). In this sense, this turn is not only an analytical critique of dominant forms of thought, but also a political project: it is concerned both with diagnosing the conditions of the present and with *opening* possibilities for other ways of worlding[50]. As Holbraad and Pedersen (2017, 295-297) suggest, politics is not external to the ontological turn but immanent to it, specifically a politics which is analytically anti-authoritarian. The "return of the repressed" identified by Escobar (2022) thus signals not only a theoretical shift, but also a political one: a revaluation of what modern onto-epistemologies have rendered marginal, invisible, or impossible.

The Political Ontology of Extractivism

One of the main concepts I work with in this thesis is the concept of "extractivism." I align with de la Cadena and Blaser (2018), Ye and colleagues (2020), Durante and colleagues (2021), Kröger (2022), and Chagnon and colleagues (2022) in understanding extractivism as constitutive of the modern ontology which rests on the Nature/Culture Divide. Blaser goes as far as to describe extractivism as the "archetypical figure of the modern collective qua infrastructure of displacement" (2025, 10), e.g., a world-making machine that expands by displacing other ways of worlding. In doing so, it participates in what de la Cadena and Blaser (2018) call the "contemporary colonial ontological occupation of territories." From this perspective, extractivism is defined as "a particular way of thinking and the properties and practices organized towards the goal of maximizing benefit through extraction, which brings in its wake violence and destruction" (Durante et al. 2021, 20).

50 For political ontologists, "ontology," "ways of worlding," and "ways of being" often appear as interchangeable synonyms.

Extractivism's ontological work entails the production of what Kröger (2022) calls "zones of non-being:" places and beings which are systematically devalued, silenced, or erased in the pursuit of profit through extraction. As de la Cadena and Blaser (2018, 3) highlight, "extractivism actively creates space for the tangible expansion of the one-world by rendering *empty* the places it occupies and making *absent* the worlds that make those places". In other words, extractivism ontologically *empties* those bodies-territories, by designating them as "empty," "backward," or "underdeveloped," a move necessary and constitutive of the material practices of extraction (Mies 1986; Goméz-Barris 2017; Durante et al. 2021; Shapiro and McNeish 2021; Chagnon et al. 2022). In doing so, it makes possible certain kinds of existence while foreclosing the possibility of others (Kröger 2022).

Understanding extractivism as an ontological project, a "loosely connected network of scholars" (Blaser 2009, 873) – with its seminal figures being Arturo Escobar, Marisol de la Cadena, and Mario Blaser – developed the political ontology framework (Blaser 2009a; 2009b; 2013a; 2013b; 2014). This framework emerged as "a militant project" (Blaser 2025, 13) at a moment when extractivism appeared to be galloping forward at a more destructive rhythm for existences than earlier modes of extraction (Kröger 2022, 3), in such a way that aimed at cancelling existing forms of life and foreclosing the possibility of the pluriverse (de la Cadena and Blaser 2018).

This framework expands the disciplinary field of political ecology (ibid.) by offering tools for understanding extractivist conflicts as confrontations between different ways of worlding – that is, practices through which realities are enacted. Political ecology is an interdisciplinary field concerned with environmental conflicts and the power relations that shape access to, control over, and distribution of natural resources. It critically examines nature–society relations and exposes how environmental degradation and resource extraction are entangled with capitalism, colonialism, and state power (Robbins 2012). While political ecology represents a significant advance over earlier political economy approaches – by integrating ecological concerns and foregrounding local struggles –, it has often retained an implicit assumption that conflicts are ultimately about resources, redistribution, or competing interests over the same underlying entities (de la Cadena and Blaser 2018). Political ontology emerged in part from the recognition that this assumption can be insufficient. While political ecology tends to ask *who* has the right to act, speak, and access resources, political ontology asks *what* is being enacted as real and *how* particular practices bring certain entities into being while excluding others (de la Cadena and Blaser 2018). Political ontology, thus, involves a particular way of interrogating conflicts so as to open up their onto-epistemic political potential beyond the limits of modern politics (Blaser 2009; Blaser 2025, 29). The political ontology framework has therefore contributed to the ethnographical re-orientation of territorial conflicts as "wars about worlds," e.g., as ontological conflicts (Blaser 2009; Escobar 2017; 2018; de la Cadena and Blaser 2018).

As a militant project, this framework has a commitment to the *pluriverse* (Blaser 2013b; 2025; Escobar 2015). The pluriverse recognises a *world in which many worlds fit*, inspired by the Zapatistas (Salleh 2020). In opposition to the globalizing civilizational aim of the one-world world (Law 2015), pluriversal ontologies recognize not only the multiplicity of reality but also the interconnectedness of all existences (Escobar 2008; 2015; 2017; 2022; Paulson 2018; de la Cadena and Blaser 2018; Blaser 2025). Political ontology emphasizes the importance of thinking from, and within those configurations of life that, while partially connected with the globalizing worlds, also remain unoccupied by them (de la Cadena 2015 apud Escobar 2017). Such configurations of life, or lifeworlds, can be described as "the pluriverse of alternatives" (Escobar 2008), often emerging from place-based struggles against extractivist endeavours (Escobar 2017).

In those territorial struggles, the coloniality that makes the world one is interrupted, even if just temporarily: in resisting the advancement of extractivism, territorial struggles insist that there *are* alternatives which go beyond human-centred, patriarchal, productivist, capitalist, developmentalist ways of organizing life (Escobar 2017).

The vast majority of works exploring the political ontology of extractivist conflicts has focused on Indigenous communities, particularly within the context of Indigenous Abya Yala[51] (Blaser 2004; de la Cadena 2015; 2019; Li 2015; Ødegaard and Rivera-Andía 2019; Kröger 2022), but also in parts of Asia (Kumpf 2021; Chao 2022). These are the territories historically most affected by extractivism's displacement machine (Gudynas 2015) and where, according to political ontologists, western modernist lenses frequently appeared unable to account for the complexity of *what* was going on (Kröger 2022). For example, in certain places in the Andes, mountains or rivers are not just considered resources: they are "earth-beings" (de la Cadena 2015); some Indigenous people experience themselves not as merely human (Viveiros de Castro 2004; 2009); some Afro-Brazilian Quilombos see the human-spirit interface in a completely different way from the Christian cosmovision (Kröger 2022); even concepts such as "dispossession" or "property" suggest that all people would consider that they could own a piece of land (Kröger 2022, 108), which is not the case for some who see themselves as being-with the land, and whose experiences exceed the limits of these concepts (Blaser 2013a; 2013b; de la Cadena 2015; 2019; Kröger 2022). There are many other illustrations which suggest that there are many worlds, which the modern lexicon, centred on humans, is insufficient to render account of (Kröger 2022).

Much less academic attention has been devoted to rural or traditional populations in contexts where "Indigenous" is not a political nor social category (Blaser 2004, 53). Although not every environmental conflict is an ontological conflict neither is every conflict involving Indigenous peoples necessarily ontological in nature (Blaser 2013b, 25), political ontology lenses can be applied when there are reasons to suspect that what is at stake exceeds disagreements over resources or interests (ibid.). In Covas do Barroso, I began to recognise the surprising similarities between place-making practices and senses of place belonging there and Indigenous communities elsewhere. Moreover, acknowledging Law's (2015, 128) insistence that there is ontological difference in the North, and resisting any homogenizing distinctions between "Indigenous" and "non-Indigenous" worlds (Li 2013) – because all worlds are already partially connected to globalizing processes (de la Cadena 2015) –, I have approached the struggle in Covas as an onto-political one.

Although my ethnographic material resonates, in part, with concerns historically addressed by scholars of economic anthropology – particularly its attention to the moral economy of peasants and the distinctions between formal and substantive economy – I do not adopt this framework as my primary analytical lens. Such approaches would offer valuable insights into the dynamics of social conflict and collective mobilization – which is not where my research stops but rather where it starts. Indeed, my central concern lies not with the political composition of the social movement as such, but with processes of becoming that are inseparable from place. My concern, then, entails shifting the analytical focus from exclusively human agency to the broader field of relations in which more-than-human entities – land, water, plants, mountains, meadows, rivers, and other elements and beings – actively participate in the constitution of this place's lifeworlds. In this sense, while moral economy provides a useful point of departure for understanding how value is negotiated and contested, it remains limited in its capacity to account for the agentive role of the more-than-human, for example. By contrast, a political ontology approach allows for an examination of how different realities are enacted through situated practices, including those that exceed human-centred frameworks of value and action. This is particularly significant in the European context, where such debates are only beginning to emerge in a still tentative manner (Hokkanen 2024)[52].

51 Abya Yala is a term used by some Indigenous peoples to refer to the Americas.

52 Crucially, the political ontology framework is not without its critiques. Graeber (2015) makes a powerful critique against taking interlocutors' conceptions of reality as literally constitutive, which risks reifying difference. Nadasdy (2021) emphasizes that the "multiple worlds" framing can obscure the fluidity and partial overlap of realities, while Zúñiga (2025) warns that strong versions of ontological multiplicity may lead to political relativism. These critiques underscore the need to approach political ontology, and especially in an European context, with carefulness, attending to enacted practices, historical contingencies, and the situatedness of knowledge, rather than assuming fully separate cosmologies, nor reifying existing differences. Zúñiga (2025) warns that strong versions of ontological multiplicity may lead to political relativism. These critiques underscore the need to approach political ontology, and especially in an European context, with carefulness, attending to enacted practices, historical contingencies, and the situatedness of knowledge, rather than assuming fully separate cosmologies, nor reifying existing differences.

Politics of Place: Place, Emplacement, and Re-Existence

Along with "extractivism," the concept of "place" is central to my analysis. Drawing on phenomenological and relational approaches (Basso 1996; Feld and Basso 1996; Ingold 2000; 2022; Ingold and Vergunst 2008; Escobar 2001; 2008; 2014; Blaser 2004; 2025), I approach "place" not merely as a geographically bounded location, but as an "identity-generating journey" (Chao 2022, 37), deeply imbricated in the mutual constitution of the self and the world (Ingold 2000; 2022; di Giminiani 2016), emerging through the ongoing intra-relations (Barad 2007) of human beings and land, enacted through practices of life (de la Cadena 2019). Place, then, exceeds its material boundaries: it is simultaneously social, affective, and ontological, constituted through everyday practices, attachments, and modes of living.

For Ingold, place is not a bounded container but something that emerges through movement, dwelling, and engagement; it is delineated not by the outer limits to movement, but by the very lines of life along which beings – humans and other-than-humans – move (Ingold 2000; 2015). As he reminds us, as earthbound beings, we can only live and know in places: our apprehension of the 'world' unfolds through *embodied* practice, and place constitutes our primary access to it (Ingold 2015, 146). Similarly, Basso (1996) emphasizes that places are not merely locations but repositories of lived experience, memory, and meaning – sites where histories, identities, and moral understandings are actively produced and recalled. For Blaser, place refers to the spatiotemporal point where the vital trajectories of the relations which compose a multiplicity of existents meet (2025, 15) – a point in which space and time are made together. Such trajectories – constructed through people's own and their ancestors' engagement with and in a specific landscape (Ingold 2000; Blaser 2004) – are dynamic and continuously in the making. This caveat avoids any essentializing understanding of place and its existences. Place, therefore, isn't a static backdrop or a pre-existing container; rather, it is something which comes into being through the ongoing practices and relations of both human and non-human existents.

An interest in the spatial effects of those relations leads Mario Blaser (2025) to distinguish between "displacement" and "emplacement" – terms he uses to differentiate, not in a binary way, but rather as a spectrum, between "grounding infrastructures," which are infrastructures that determine how our relation with the "place" we inhabit is shaped. An infrastructure predominately oriented to displacement is "an infrastructure grounded with as little consideration as possible for the specificity of a place" (18), whereas an infrastructure predominately oriented to emplacement "plays careful attention to and nurtures the complex array of existing relations that compose a place's multiplicity, to the point that it moves in the direction of overriding or at least containing the imperative of displacement" (ibid.). As he suggests, certain collectives' "life projects" are infrastructures of emplacement because the practices through which these collectives orient their lives are inexorably linked to the space they inhabit, and, therefore, oriented towards what he calls "the small" (36). The particularity of life projects, then, resides precisely in their "constant awareness of the complex, non-dichotomous, but mutually constitutive connections between one's own self/place" (Blaser 2004, 28).

Extractivist endeavours often sever this connection between being and place (Leff 2006; Li 2015; de la Cadena 2019; Ødegaard and Rivera-Andía 2019; Chao 2022; Kröger 2022; Lassila 2024a), giving rise to what Escobar defines as "politics of place" – a term which describes a political framework where place is not just a stage for and of struggle but the very object and subject of that struggle (2001; 2008; 2014). His argument is that those movements consciously construct place – politicizing it in order to struggle for it (Ehrnström-Fuentes 2019, 58). In such contexts, place is rendered visible and valuable because it is under threat. Yet, the politics which emerge are not only about halting imminent destruc-

tion, but also, and fundamentally, about affirming the existences of that place (Porto-Gonçalves 2006; Leff 2006; Escobar 2008; 2014).

From this perspective, certain place-based conflicts are not only movements for the defence of a particular place, but also struggles to continue the existence of place-based worlding practices. In other words, they are not only resistance movements but also movements for "re-existence," a concept which I borrow from Porto-Gonçalves (2006) and which I define as struggles not simply against displacement, but for the continuation of particular forms of life, grounded in relational practices, which are inseparable from the places in which they emerge.

In the following chapters, these conceptualisations of place, emplacement, and re-existence will be brought into dialogue with the ethnographic stories from Covas do Barroso. Through an engagement with everyday practices, relations, and forms of struggle, I show how place is actively made, contested, and defended in situated practices. The subsequent analysis therefore traces how the abstractions discussed in this section become lived realities, as inhabitants navigate, inhabit, and rework their relations with place, and the diverse lifeforms it sustains, in the context of extractivist expansion.

CHAPTER I
"We Are Also the Colonised:" The Green Transition's Colonial Matrix of Power at Europe's Rural Peripheries[53]

Abstract

This article examines how Europe's green energy transition functions as a governance strategy which reproduces long-standing processes of internal colonial subalternization affecting rural communities. Focusing on the lithium mining rush – particularly, on the 'Mina do Barroso' project in Covas do Barroso – it traces how these dynamics operate across intertwined scales: Portugal as a peripheral European economy, and the Barroso region in Trás-os-Montes as a rural periphery within Portugal. Drawing on long-term ethnographic research, this article situates contemporary green extractivism within a longer trajectory of rural dispossession, internal colonization, structural politics of abandonment, and the Othering of rural communities and territories. This article contributes to contemporary debates on decoloniality and energy transitions, by arguing that green extractivism in Barroso extends historical colonial grammars that devalue rural worlds, transforming decarbonisation into a new vehicle for onto-epistemic domination and territorial dispossession.

Keywords

Green Transition; Lithium; Coloniality; Subalternization; Colonial Continuum; Extractivism; Portugal

53 This Chapter is an adaptation of the following article: Riquito, M. (2026). "'We Are Also the Colonised:' The Green Transition's Colonial Matrix of Power at Europe's Rural Peripheries" *Extractive Industries and Societies*, 2(101861). https://doi.org/10.1016/j.exis.2026.101861

O Abril está tão distante
Ninguém se lembra de vós
Estais esquecidos a um canto
E estamos esquecidos nós

Excerpt from the song "Brigada da Foice," by Carlos Libo

April[54] is so far away
No one remembers you
You are forgotten in a corner
And we are forgotten too

Introduction

I climb to the Olhar do Guerreiro with Rui[55], a farmer and environmental defender. We are accompanying a French journalist who is writing yet another reportage about Covas do Barroso. A small rural village in northern Portugal, Covas is by now very well-known because of its ongoing, eight-year-long, struggle against a prospective lithium mining project. The prospective mine is owned by Savannah Resources, a British multinational stock-exchange company, whose slogan, "Enabling Europe's Energy Transition," captures how this project is framed as essential to Europe's green ambitions.

As we stand at the Olhar do Guerreiro – a site that offers a clear view of Covas and the surrounding mountains, named 'Warrior Lookout' because from there one can see one of the *guerreiros galaicos* (Gallaecian warriors), stone sculptures, likely from pre-Roman times, discovered in 1785 – I hear Rui explaining the project for the umpteenth time. It consists of four open-pit lithium mines, a processing unit, four waste dumps (three permanent and one temporary), a tailings storage facility for the disposal of waste from the processing unit, over a total area of 592 hectares, along with several ancillary infrastructures, including a new road.

This new road would "pass right by the Castro do Lesenho!," Rui remarks – the site where the warrior stands. These sculptures are considered one of the *ex-libris* of Portuguese archaeology: the original ones are located in the National Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, whereas replicas were placed in the mountains of Barroso. This, Rui contends to the journalist, reflects the attitude the state has towards the region: "He [the warrior] should be here – this is where he belongs, not in Lisbon. I've never seen him, but, if I want to, I have to go to Lisbon. And that's exactly the point: they say the interior is deserted – of course it is. It's deserted precisely because of this, and other things like this... Everything's in Lisbon. It's all in Lisbon. They take everything from us[56]."



View of Covas do Barroso from Olhar do Guerreiro.

54 'April' is a reference to the 25th of April 1974, the day of the Carnation Revolution, which put an end to the dictatorial regime of Salazar, and brought political freedoms to the population.
55 In this article, I follow standard anthropological practice by using pseudonyms to protect the privacy and safety of the people I mention. When necessary, I also employ multi-layered protections, including blurring or altering unique identifying characteristics and instead using fictionalized composite characters.
56 "Havia de estar aqui, era aqui que ele devia estar, no concelho de Boticas, e não em Lisboa. Eu nunca o vi, mas se eu o quiser ver tenho de ir a Lisboa. Por isso é que lá está: depois dizem que o interior está desertificado. Pois está. Está desertificado precisamente por isto e por outras coisas como isto. Porque assim quem quisesse ir ver, quem quisesse, tinha de vir aqui, agora não, basta ir a Lisboa. É tudo em Lisboa. Está tudo em Lisboa".



One of the replicas of the Gallaecian warriors, standing in Castro do Lesenho.

Rui's insistence that "everything is in Lisbon" and that "they take everything from us" carries a deeper resonance, one echoed in the lived experience of my companions in Covas, who feel abandoned, dismissed, stigmatized and dispossessed by central authorities – which 'Lisbon' stands for. On the one hand, there is a pervasive sense among inhabitants of structural state neglect, made tangible in the absence or closure of life-sustaining infrastructures, such as hospitals, maternity wards, or schools. At the same time, they bear the weight of decisions affecting their lives taken from afar: farmers, for instance, resent choices over their agricultural practices being determined by those unfamiliar with the territory. Recently, this resentment extended to yet another decision made from afar, which takes from them. This time, not their ancestral stones, but what lies beneath: lithium.

The displacement of the *guerreiros* materializes the unequal geographies which characterize Portugal's centre-periphery (urban-rural or coastal-interior) relations: a historical dynamic whereby resources from the interior are extracted and accumulated in urban centres, leaving rural communities to endure both loss and neglect. As trucks might soon replace the breath of the wind and the chants of birds, what was once a site of divine protection becomes a frontier of extraction.

Ethnographically grounded, this article examines how the green transition in Europe, as shaped by dominant actors, operates as a governance strategy that reinforces processes of internal subalternization, rooted in colonial logics. These processes operate across interconnected scales: they affect primarily peripheral regions or countries within Europe[57,] and, within those peripheries, they target rural or Indigenous communities. Another layer, though not developed in this article, can be identified in Europe's rhetoric of exceptionalism: by claiming to uphold the world's highest environmental and social standards in mining, narratives around Europe's onshoring of extraction reproduce colonial imaginaries that position the continent as inherently superior to China or to African and Latin American countries. Underlying these patterns of subalternization, embedded in colonial logics, is a process of epistemic coloniality, through which lithium mining for the green transition epistemically narrows the field of possible ways of knowing, imagining, and acting beyond a narrowly defined low-carbon future (Gelderloos 2022; Riquito 2023; Bonelli and Pávez 2025).

57 A caveat here is necessary: although lithium mining projects in Europe initially targeted particularly peripheral countries and regions – such as Portugal, Spain, the Arctic, and Serbia – new projects are now emerging in Europe's core, including in France and Germany. This illustrates how any dualistic, Manichean vision of center/periphery often oversimplifies, thus underscoring the importance of attending to nuance. At the same time, it supports Shapiro and McNeish's (2021) argument that we live in a "hyper-extractivist age," in which extractivism is becoming not only planetary but universal, extending ever "closer."

This article emerges from my ongoing engagement with the place-based struggle over a prospective lithium mining project in Covas do Barroso since 2021, and, in particular, from ethnographic fieldwork conducted between April 2023 and April 2024. Participant observation was my principal methodological approach. Over this period, I became deeply immersed in this village's life, participating in everyday activities – from agricultural tasks, family gatherings, anti-mining events, and other encounters. I maintained a detailed field journal documenting these interactions, whose notes were complemented by semi-structured in-depth interviews.

Because this article engages directly with issues of coloniality and patterns of subalternization, I wish to stress that I do not speak on behalf of my companions; they speak for themselves. At the same time, I approach the trust they placed in me with profound respect and ethical responsibility, acknowledging the relational dimensions of a politically engaged ethnographic research. Through ongoing dialogue, collaboration, and shared reflections, I have sought to ensure that what is written here does justice to our shared experiences. I refer to them as "my companions" because I am not a detached observer – I walk alongside them; and my knowledge production is inseparable from these lived, shared engagements. This positioning is grounded in reflexive ethnographic methodologies, which recognize that knowledge emerges relationally and situationally in the field (Behar 1996; Lassiter 2005; de la Cadena 2015), and informed by decolonial (and) feminist epistemologies, which have long established that research does not produce universal truths but rather partial, *situated knowledges* (Haraway 1988; Reyes 2020). By presenting myself as a companion-researcher, I situate my work within the methodological and ethical frameworks of politically engaged anthropologies (Maxey 1999; Halvorsen 2015) and within approaches that conceptualize friendship and companionship as an ethnographic methodological tool (Owton and Allen-Collinson 2014; Tillmann 2015). Central to this is sustained reflexivity (Reyes 2020) and vigilance regarding the asymmetries and hierarchies inherent in the encounters between myself and my companions in Covas, a consideration I revisit throughout the article.

Ethnographically informed, this article looks for "theory in small places," produced by people who resist imposed invisibility and neglect, and who have something to teach us about living under entrenched, often subtle, regimes of subalternization (Chao 2022). Decolonising ethnography and research does not require rejecting all Western science, or even all Western ontological assumptions, but entails placing historically marginalized communities at the centre of inquiry (Smith 1999), which, in this case, also requires de-homogenizing and decolonising our understandings of Europe itself, by opening up "Northern multiplicities" (Law 2015, 135) and revealing that the post-colonial encounter is *within* the North itself.

This article begins by contextualizing the current mining revival within European and Portuguese green transition policies, with a particular emphasis on the strategies to promote lithium mining as the new panacea for solving the climate and energy crisis. Next, it discusses the most relevant literature linking extractivism, coloniality and subalternization, including contemporary scholarship on the colonial imprints of the green transition. The article continues by demonstrating how Portugal's peripheral position in Europe – historically shaped by economic dependency and racialized hierarchies – is being reproduced in the context of the green transition, with lithium extraction projects reinforcing peripheral dynamics, despite official rhetoric of national leadership. It pursues by ethnographically examining how structural abandonment, prior dispossessions, and social constructions of rural backwardness intersect with contemporary state and corporate strategies to legitimize lithium extraction in Covas do Barroso, further entrenching the subalternization of rural communities, while revealing the historical continuity of such colonial patterns. Finally, the article concludes by emphasizing the need to decolonize what counts as *worthy* existences, particularly rural lifeways, suggesting decarbonisation policies rooted in the lifeworlds of communities as well as their right to say no. It thus highlights the *margin* as a crucial topographic and conceptual place from where to ground ourselves and to begin decolonizing the green transition.

Making Lithium Mining Inevitable for Europe's Green Transition

In July 2019, newly elected President of the European Commission (EC), Ursula von der Leyen, stated she wanted "Europe to become the first climate-neutral continent in the world by 2050." In December that year, the EC announced the European Green Deal (EGD), a set of proposals to make the European Union (EU) policies fit to reach carbon neutrality across all sectors by mid-century. Announced as a "growth strategy," the EGD sets clear goals: cutting emissions by at least 55% by 2030 and reaching carbon neutrality by 2050. The EGD became legally binding with the European Climate Law, requiring member-states to develop ten-year Integrated National Energy and Climate Plans (PNECs), outlining how they will meet EU energy and climate targets.

Portugal pledged carbon neutrality by mid-century as early as 2016. In 2019, released its Roadmap for Carbon Neutrality 2050 (RNC2050), a document which envisions a carbon-neutral country based on possible "scenarios" and "trajectories." Beneath this goal lies a political vision that frames decarbonization as a national opportunity, casting Portugal in a leadership – and even messianic – role (Carvalho et al. 2022). In December 2024, Portugal updated its PNEC, advancing its mission to "anticipate carbon neutrality by 2045" (PNEC 2024, 29) and consolidate its "leadership position" (49) in European decarbonization efforts.
Transport is a prime target in decarbonisation policies, as this sector remains one of the largest contributors to emissions in the EU, accounting for a third of them both in Europe (Dolge et al. 2023) and in Portugal (APA 2024). Centring its strategy on the rapid expansion of Electric Vehicles (EVs), the EU will prohibit the sale of new vehicles with combustion engines in 2035. This shift drives soaring demand for "transition minerals," especially lithium. The Commission estimated the EU would need 18 times more lithium by 2030 and 60 times more by 2050, compared with 2020 supply levels (European Commission 2020). Still overly reliant on imports, the EU is pushing to secure raw materials domestically.

The Critical Raw Materials Act (CRMA) – announced in 2023 and passed a year later – anchors this strategy. Part of the Green Deal Industrial Plan, the CRMA sets 2030 targets: 10% extraction, 40% processing, 25% recycling and import diversification. With the goal of ensuring a "secure and sustainable supply" of materials for sectors such as energy, digital, aerospace and defence (European Commission 2024), it clearly underscores the "sustainability–security nexus" (Riofrancos 2023). Governments in the Global North – once reliant on the offshoring of extractive industries from the Global South – now frame onshoring as essential to ensuring supply chain stability, while simultaneously presenting it as a cornerstone of their climate mitigation strategies (ibid.). On the one hand, mineral extraction, and lithium mining especially, is discursively and materially rearticulated as something *compatible with* and *necessary* to climate change mitigation (Barbesgaard and Whitmore 2022; Voskoboynik and Andreucci 2022). On the other, growing awareness of China's dominance over the global battery supply chain, compounded by the energy insecurities exacerbated by the war in Ukraine and broader geopolitical tensions, has heightened the urgency of securing access to critical raw materials. Within this framing, Europe positions itself as a model of "responsible" extraction, upholding superior environmental and human rights standards when compared to China, or Latin American and African countries.

By emphasizing the importance of "timely action," the CRMA reinforces a forward-looking vision – and, fundamentally, an urgency-driven political agenda. This sense of urgency is framed as vital: "without timely action, European industries and EU efforts to meet their climate and digital objectives are at risk" (European Commission 2024). The invocation of risk functions discursively to legitimize haste, transforming political and economic choices into matters of survival and inevitability, thus rendering

them unquestionable. This urgency is institutionalized in the CRMA's fast-track approval mechanisms, which allows project considered 'strategic' to receive accelerated permits and public funding. In May 2025, Savannah Resources' 'Mina do Barroso' project was granted this status.

In line with the CRMA, Portugal launched its Critical Raw Materials Action Plan in July 2024 to align national policies with CRMA requirements. This group's October 2024 report recommended 19 measures the government should adopt. In parallel, the PNEC was updated in December 2024 and introduced additional measures on critical raw materials, particularly lithium (PNEC 2024), highlighting how national climate policy is increasingly linked to extraction, a trajectory that began in 2016. As of October 2025, 22 lithium mining contracts for prospection, exploration, and exploitation had been approved (DGEG 2025).

Lithium mining is framed as an opportunity for the country to become a product producer and better integrated into the continental value chain (Pusceddu 2024), with institutional narratives emphasizing "modernization" and "techno-economic development," envisioning Portugal transcending its historically subaltern role in the European energy landscape (Carvalho et al. 2022). Governmental officials consider that, since the country is in "a privileged position" with "amongst the most extensive lithium reserves in Europe" (PNEC 2024, 125), lithium mining is inevitable.

The Directorate General for Energy and Geology (DGEG), for example, frames lithium as "a mineral resource of imperative strategic value," its extraction justified by the "imperative focus on carbon neutrality" (DGEG 2022, 2-4). When the Portuguese Environmental Agency rejected Savannah's initial Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) in 2022, citing "very significant and irreversible impacts" on the landscape, hydrology and ecosystems, DGEG countered: "Lithium is central to the energy transition and decarbonization agenda; its strategic relevance is indisputable" (AIA 2022, 312). While serving as incumbent Prime Minister, António Costa – who resigned after an alleged corruption scandal[58] linking lithium projects, a hydrogen plant, and a data centre – attended a Toyota EV launch, where he affirmed that "we cannot have any hesitation; we truly must be able to make use of the lithium we have" (Jornal i 2024). Costa's statement echoes other official discourses: in November 2021, then-Minister of the Environment stated that "lithium exploitation is the inevitable path" (PÚBLICO 2021a). The current executive's update of the PNEC, adding measures specifically to prioritize critical raw materials within what remains the country's main climate policy document, and the merger of the Environment and Energy Ministries, demonstrates both alignment and continuation of this strategy. All these examples illustrate how, despite recognized socioecological impacts, lithium extraction is framed as indisputable, central, and inevitable for achieving decarbonisation goals (Riquito 2023; Pusceddu 2024).

Extractivism, Coloniality and Subalternization

The concept of 'extractivism' was coined by Eduardo Gudynas (2015; 2018), who defines it as the large-scale appropriation and export of natural resources with minimal processing. Gudynas frames extractivism as both a mode of wealth accumulation and nature's appropriation, driven largely by the demands of central countries. This classical understanding highlights extractivism as an economic and political system that commodifies nature, dispossesses local populations, and deepens social, ecological, and ge-

58 Influencer Operation (Operação Influencer in Portuguese) is an ongoing investigation launched by Portugal's Public Prosecution Office (Ministério Público) on November 7, 2023, targeting alleged corruption involving a lithium exploration concession in northern Portugal, a green hydrogen plant, and a large-scale data center in Sines. Costa, who was not made a formal suspect (arguido), became the subject of a separate investigation by the Supreme Court of Justice, on suspicion of intervening to unblock procedures related to lithium mines (specifically, in the municipality of Montalegre, in the project 'Mina do Romano') and to green hydrogen power plant projects (DN 2025).

opolitical inequalities. Historically, the development of extractivism has been deeply intertwined with European colonialism, imperialism and expansionism (Rodney 1972; Mies 1986; Acosta 2013; Durante et al. 2021; Chagnon et al. 2022), of which Portugal constituted an early and long-standing example.

Even though contemporary extractivism reflects the sociopolitical asymmetry established in earlier colonial eras and maintains a colonial imprint (Mezzadra and Neilson 2017), its economic structure has evolved with the shifting dynamics of global trade and international finance (Gudynas 2018) and it is no longer confined to former colonial powers, as phenomena such as neo-extractivism in Latin America demonstrate (Acosta 2013; Svampa 2019). Portugal is a great illustration of these evolving dynamics. The country was a colonial power whose imperial project, spanning from the early fifteenth century to the late twentieth century (Soares de Oliveira 2022), was structurally anchored in extractivist energy projects, namely hydropower projects and mining, across its African colonies (Issacman and Isaacman 2019). Despite its imperial past, Portugal currently occupies a semi-peripheral position within the world-system (Sousa-Santos 1993).

Recent scholarship has expanded the notion of extractivism beyond material resource extraction to encompass the domains of finance (Mezzadra and Neilson 2017), digital data (Gago and Mezzadra 2017), and culture or knowledge (Grosfoguel 2016). These new conceptualizations suggest that extractivism is also present in the realm of intangible resources, highlighting how it became a "global mode of organizing life" (Chagnon et al. 2022), rooted in a particular ontological assemblage: Western modernity (Grosfoguel 2016; Gómez-Barris 2017; Shapiro and McNeish 2021; Chagnon et al. 2022; Kröger 2022).

The ontological basis for extractivism is the conception of certain bodies and territories as *terra nullius* (Durante et al. 2022, 25) – empty, thus, *available* for appropriation (Mies and Shiva 2014; Ødegaard and Rivera-Andía 2019; Shapiro and McNeish 2021; Kröger 2022). These narratives of emptiness – which draw on, and reproduce, patriarchal imaginaries of those territories as virgin (Merchant 1980; Mies 1986; Riquito 2021) – operate as a precondition for dispossession, preparing the ground for extractivist incursions.

Closely related is the notion of an "infinite constitutive outside," which presumes the possibility of endlessly externalizing and exterritorializing 'costs' without bearing the associated consequences (Mies 1986). Western modernity – the ontological substratum for extractivism – suggests humans are "owners and masters" of nature, able to exceed its limits without suffering the effects (Mies and Shiva 2014). This ontology denies the interdependence of all beings, and reduces the complexity of life's networks to a mechanistic logic (Mies 1986). Extractivism, then, is not only an economic and political system, but also an ontological project, crucially "premised on the onto-epistemological *devaluing* of most of the web of life" (Chagnon et al. 2022, 18) and on the nullification of Othered human and more-than-human modes of existences (Kröger 2022). These "Others" – constructed as marginal, peripheral, inferior, or even as non-existent – are not-seen, not-valued, thus *sacrificeable*.

In this sense, extractivism, coloniality, and subalternization must be understood as interdependent processes that reproduce and sustain one another. Coloniality, as theorized by Aníbal Quijano (2000) and Walter Mignolo (2007a; 2007b), refers to the enduring structures of power, knowledge, and being that persist long after formal colonial administrations have ended. Quijano mentions a 'colonial matrix of power' that continues to shape global hierarchies through the racialized, gendered, and epistemic subordination of peoples and territories. As opposed to colonialism, coloniality highlights the lasting logics of domination embedded in contemporary social, political, and epistemic systems. Subalternization, in turn, refers to the processes through which certain subjects and knowledges are rendered inferior, or invisible, within hegemonic epistemic-political regimes (Spivak 1988). It is the epistemic and political outcome of coloniality: the positioning of peoples and places, as well as their knowledges and worlds, on the "underside of modernity" (Mignolo 2007a). Within extractivist endeavours, subalternization functions as both condition and consequence: it legitimizes dispossession by devaluing certain life-worlds, while simultaneously deepening their subalternization.

Another closely related, yet distinctive, concept is that of colonization. As opposed to colonialism, colonization looks at "the microcosm of territorial control, landscape and socio-cultural change, exploring the literal colonization of habitats, people, social fabrics and more-than-human networks," even in the absence of formal laws or institutions governing that occupation (Dunlap and Riquito 2023, 5). There is, indeed, a significant difference between landscape colonization and the colonial occupation of entire peoples and nations: what is experienced in Palestine, West Papua, Western Sahara, or what Portugal has done in its former colonies, in no way resembles what occurs in Barroso, for example.

However, concepts such as colonization and coloniality provide a historical and analytical framework that challenges the idea of colonialism (and its onto-logic) as a relique of the past, focusing instead on the active, ongoing processes still operating through colonial onto-logics, particularly in the context of extractivist projects. Understanding this colonial continuum is important because it allows for analytical precision and complementary, as well as for drawing continuities between struggles. Across territories, "there are different governmentalities, methods of Othering, intensities of violence, and historical continuities" (Dunlap and Riquito 2023, 6), yet a common thread persists: extractivism produces – and relies on – processes of subalternization of certain peoples and places, which are rooted in colonial logics (Gómez-Barris 2017; Chagnon et al. 2022; Kröger 2022; Durante et al. 2022). Without ever equating contexts – as the scales of violence differ dramatically –, the same logic of disposability, violent Othering, and seizure of ancestral lands and peoples that underpins extractivist projects in Barroso find its most violent face on the ongoing and historical genocidal occupation of Palestinians.



At the 2024 Camp in Defence of Barroso, a discussion connected Barroso's struggle with Palestine's, accompanied by a banner: "From Barroso to Palestine: The land belongs to those who work it"

In sum, extractivism operates through the fundamentally colonial logic of domination, non-reciprocity and non-recognition (Kröger 2022), generating "zones of non-being" (Grosfoguel 2016), where certain lives and lifeways are devalued, silenced or erased, reproducing the idea that some bodies and territories are destined for exploitation and that their destruction is a necessary cost of "progress" (Mies and Shiva 2014; Carvalho and Riquito 2022). While enclosing 'resources,' extractivism also encloses socionatural relations, ways of knowing, and entire worlds (Ødegaard and Rivera-Andía 2019). Extractivism, and its colonial onto-logic, can thus be understood as an attempt to compress and assimilate the 'many worlds' of the pluriverse into modernity's uni-verse (Law 2015; Escobar 2017; de la Cadena and Blaser 2018).

The Persistence of Colonial Dynamics in Europe's Green Transition

As 'green' and climate policies intersect with extraction, further expanding the environmental degradation they seek to combat – a phenomenon termed "green extractivism" (Dunlap 2018; Bruna 2022) –, many scholars have shown how these dynamics are reproducing and adding to the colonial matrix of power (Dunlap 2018; Andreucci et al. 2023; Tornel 2023a; Baca 2024; Dietz and Kristina 2024; Dunlap et al. 2024; Yanez and Moreno 2024; Dunlap et al. 2025). These dynamics have been conceptualised as forms of "energy colonialism" (Sanchéz Contreras et al. 2023), "renewable energy colonialism" (Batel and Küpers 2023) or, relatedly, "green colonialism" (Normann 2021; Bringel and Svampa 2024; Lang et al. 2024) – all of which foreground the ways in which so-called renewable energy projects or decarbonisation policies perpetuate colonial patterns of domination, dispossession, and inequality.

In the case of lithium mining for electromobility, scholars have shown how this is deepening rather than alleviating colonial logics. In the salares in Chile, where most lithium is mined, Jerez and colleagues (2021) describe how extraction not only generates socioecological injustices, but also renews asymmetries between the Global North and Global South. The off-sites of these salares, Weiberg (2023) suggests, are themselves "inspired by colonial systems of exploitation of indigenous labour and natural resources." Even the end-of-life phase of lithium batteries remains entangled in colonial dynamics, as recycling practices in central countries reproduce coloniality through asymmetrical regimes of knowledge production and waste management (Geraerts 2026).

The colonial character of the green transition, however, extends beyond Global North/Global South dynamics, manifesting also through other core/periphery power structures within the Global North, namely across urban/rural divides (Batel and Devine-Wright 2017; Kronenburg García and Wiegink 2024; Lassila 2025). Rural spaces have historically been key sites of accumulation by dispossession under fossil-fuel industrial capitalism (Harvey 2006), a dynamic which is being renewed under green capitalism (del Mármol and Vaccaro 2020). Research so far has shown that large-scale 'green' energy projects in Europe are often implemented in rural or Indigenous territories, and reproduce (internal) colonial logics, by treating such places and their existences as sites of "green sacrifice" (Zografos and Robbins 2020), dismissing local concerns and knowledges during public consultations (Lassila 2021), representing communities as backwards (Normann 2021), and orienting value flows outward with limited local benefit (Langguth 2025). Moreover, green projects frequently build on the historical layering of earlier extractivist dispossessions (Batel and Küpers 2023; Lassila 2025), which shows the colonial continuum between conventional and green extractivism.

Fundamentally, and because extractivism is an ontological regime, I argue, following Bonelli and Pávez (2025, 2), that the green transition functions as a colonial epistemic device, "extracting not only territories, but the capacity to think and dream other possible worlds." The continuous use of terms such as "strategic," "critical," "imperative" or "inevitable" creates a rhetoric of inevitability surrounding lithium extraction (Riquito 2023). The concept of "critical raw materials" itself has its origins in the military-industrial complex and reproduces its warlike ethos, grounded in urgency and security. In this logic, what is critical is not merely important, but *vital* – therefore, non-negotiable. Once framed in these terms, such decisions become unquestionable – an imperative rather than a choice.

Thinking with Bonelli and Pávez (2025), we could name this "a green infernal alternative." The concept of "infernal alternatives," coined by Stengers and Pignarre (2005, 24), names a "set of situations that seem to leave no other choice than resignation or a slightly hollow sounding denunciation." Capitalism's

very mode of functioning, the authors argue, "kills politics" (25), as it often denies the possibilities for dialogue and contestation, thus creating infernal alternatives as its *modus operandi*. This process is a form of "capitalist sorcery" which maintains political realism and immobilizes action, particularly in the face of crises, and, fundamentally, suspends imagination, as even those who resist often remain trapped in this spell. The global consensus around carbon-centred decarbonization (Bringel and Svampa 2024) – rooted in climate fundamentalism and carbon reductionism, legitimized by the epistemic authority of predictive sciences (Hulme 2011; Gelderloos 2022; Riquito 2023; Soto-Hernández 2025) – constructs lithium mining as inevitable, reducing the green transition to a technocratic, depoliticized, and colonial project that constrains imagination and forecloses alternative futures. Such an enclosure of dialogue and imagination – this epistemic coloniality – is the connective tissue of all other colonial patterns: only by colonizing our very own imagination (Escobar 2017; Gómez-Barris 2017; Ødegaard and Rivera-Andía 2019; Krenak 2022; Bonelli and Pávez 2025) does it become possible to justify and reproduce other colonial logics.

The Case of the 'Mina do Barroso' Project

As the literature demonstrates (Jerez et al. 2021; Normann 2021; Lassila 2021; Andreucci et al. 2023; Sanchéz Contreras et al. 2023; Batel and Küpers 2023; Tornel 2023a; Baca 2024; Bringel and Svampa 2024; Dietz and Kristina, 2024; Lang et al. 2024; Geraerts 2026), coloniality is not a remnant of the past, but an active structure that is being rearticulated under the banner of the green transition. In what follows, I focus on how the Mina do Barroso project exemplifies and reproduces these (internal) colonial logics within Europe.

Following Pusceddu (2024), I propose a dual perspective: on the one hand, Portugal as a peripheral economy within Europe, and, on the other, northern rural Portugal, particularly Trás-os-Montes, where Barroso is located, as a periphery within the periphery. Within this second layer, my research reveals how the prospective lithium project accentuates long-standing internal colonial patterns in Portugal through four interconnected dynamics. First, the framing of Trás-os-Montes as a space of decline – or an empty space – naturalizes structural state neglect and legitimizes renewed extractivist interventions. Second, the expansion of lithium mining builds upon a historical trajectory of dispossession and displacement for industrial or energy projects, in the name of development and progress. Third, rural inhabitants are rendered subaltern – inferior, expendable – through discourses that portray them as backward, ignorant, or in need of development – representations that have been externally imposed, yet internalised, and are being reactivated in the context of the green transition. Fourth, when these communities articulate dissent, their resistance is framed as a deficit of information or understanding, thereby denying their political agency and foreclosing genuine participation. Together, these processes reproduce a colonial continuum in which abandonment, dispossession, and subalternization converge to render rural bodies and territories expendable to the developmental imperatives of the green transition.

Portugal's Peripheral Position in Europe

Sociologist Boaventura de Sousa-Santos (1993; 1997) has long argued that Portugal occupies a 'semi-peripherical' position in the world-system, a concept, which, as Medeiros (2006) observes, avoids the all-too-easy centre/periphery dichotomy. This binary often reproduces a Manichean and overly simplistic opposition between coloniser and colonised, which fails to capture the complexities at stake, particularly evident in the Portuguese case, where a former imperial power now occupies a semi-peripheral position

within the global economy. In line with Sousa-Santos, Avelãs-Nunes (2002) argues that, in Europe, the country's resource extraction has positioned it as a "proximate periphery" of the European core, which, as Pusceddu (2024) remarks, is particularly salient in certain industrial sectors, such as the automotive industry.

The positioning of Portugal as a peripheral European economy has long carried racialized dimensions (Sousa-Santos 2002; Van Vossole 2016). Thinking-with the ontological dualisms of Western modernity, Southern Europe has been constructed as less rational – more passionate, and inherently Other compared to Northern Europe (Goldberg 1993; Sousa-Santos 2002). These imaginaries were sustained through patterns of labour migration, namely the massive emigration of the 1960s from South to North, but also during the 2008 financial crisis and subsequential austerity measures imposed on the PIIGS (Portugal, Italy, Ireland, Greece, Spain) through which patterns of neocolonialism resurfaced (Van Vossole 2016). Today, these hierarchical patterns are re-emerging in the context of the green transition, of which the case of Covas do Barroso is particularly telling.

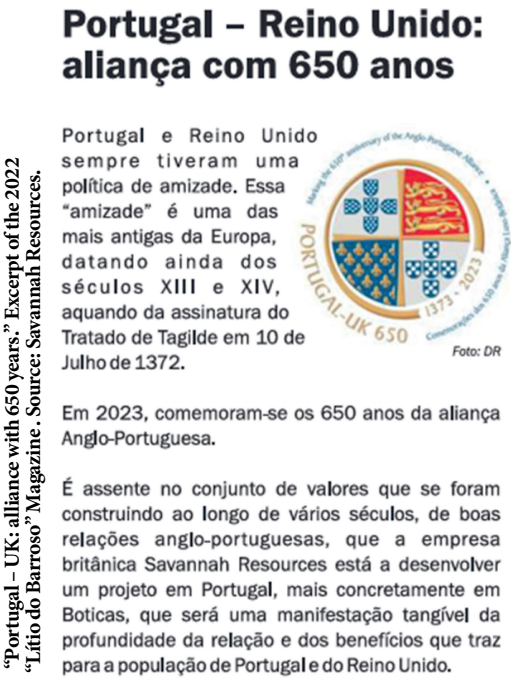
A London-listed multinational, Savannah Resources operates in Portugal through its subsidiary, Savannah Lithium, Unipessoal, Lda. While legally distinct, the subsidiary manages the local operational activities, whereas decision-making and financial control are predominantly Savannah Resources' responsibilities. Savannah is a junior mining company, which, in the mining sector, means that its main role is to discover and prove up new mineral deposits, with the goal of attracting major companies which would then acquire and develop the project. In other words, junior mining companies often sell licenses to firms with the financial and technical capacity to carry out the mining venture. In the past, Savannah owned a copper project in Oman, which it sold in 2020, and a mineral sands project Mozambique, which it sold to Rio Tinto in 2021. The current CEO of Savannah has expressed in an interview, in November 2023, that, as a mining development company, its intention is to find partners with whom to develop the project (RTP 2023).

In July 2024, AMG Lithium B.V., a subsidiary of AMG Critical Materials N.V. (Euronext Amsterdam), became Savannah's largest shareholder; in September of that year, AMG opened a lithium refinery near Berlin. In December 2024, Savannah announced that Euler Hermes, the credit agency acting on behalf of the German government, had issued a non-binding letter confirming the project's "eligibility in principle" for a German public guarantee to finance the venture. In September 2025, following the company's claim that the project's lithium reserves are "enough to eliminate the oil consumption of the entire car fleet in Portugal, France, and The Netherlands" (SAPO 2025), Savannah CEO stated that "this brings good things," highlighting specifically that "it attracts greater potential foreign investment to Portugal." The Portuguese state itself has actively contributed to this through its promotional strategies of lithium, which, from the beginning, were directed towards foreign investors (Dunlap and Riquito 2023). At the same time, in January 2026, the Portuguese state has approved Savannah's application to a non-reimbursable grant of up to €110 million, supported by national funds under the European Commission's Temporary Crisis and Transition Framework (Diário da República 2026).

While the Portuguese state seeks to frame itself in a leading role (Carvalho et al. 2022) – now reinforced though potential direct financial support – these developments suggest that Savannah's project may nonetheless reproduce patterns of economic dependency. Although the grant would allow the state to claim strategic leadership, it simultaneously socializes risk in a context where decision-making and future value capture remain largely transnational. Public funds are mobilized to support a junior mining company whose business model prioritizes partnering with industrial actors, without binding commitments regarding domestic processing, for example. Indeed, despite rhetoric about retaining added value locally, there is still no guarantee that a lithium refinery will be built in Portugal, a step necessary to secure meaningful long-term economic benefits. Some people involved in this struggle even fear that, through Savannah's strategic partnership with AMG Critical Materials, lithium extracted in Covas

may ultimately be refined at AMG's Berlin refinery. State intervention, therefore, does not eliminate dependency but rather reconfigures it, as economic dependency becomes actively mediated and legitimized through public and EU policy transition mechanisms. In a context of economic globalization and liberalized capital flows, where companies often operate beyond the reach of peripheral states (Van Vossole 2016), Portugal risks remaining in a peripheral within European value chains, as public resources support extractive activities whose orientation may remain outside effective state control.

Foreign investment, frequently framed as benevolent assistance, often conceals dependency under the guise of helpfulness (Van Vossole 2016). In 2022, a company bulletin invoked the "650 years alliance" between Portugal and the UK to legitimize the project, labelling the Anglo-Portuguese relationship a "friendship policy" and describing the mining venture as "a tangible manifestation of the depth of the relationship and of the benefits it brings to the peoples of Portugal and the United Kingdom." Framed as a "politics of friendship," such discourses obscure unequal historical power relations (Amaro 1995). What is presented as cooperation and mutual benefit, in practice, may reinforce dependency, as Portugal continues to mobilize public resources in support of projects embedded in transnational corporate networks, maintaining its historically peripheral position within Europe and the global economy.



Portugal – Reino Unido: aliança com 650 anos

Portugal e Reino Unido sempre tiveram uma política de amizade. Essa "amizade" é uma das mais antigas da Europa, datando ainda dos séculos XIII e XIV, aquando da assinatura do Tratado de Tagilde em 10 de Julho de 1372.

Foto: DR

Em 2023, comemoram-se os 650 anos da aliança Anglo-Portuguesa.

É assente no conjunto de valores que se foram construindo ao longo de vários séculos, de boas relações anglo-portuguesas, que a empresa britânica Savannah Resources está a desenvolver um projeto em Portugal, mais concretamente em Boticas, que será uma manifestação tangível da profundidade da relação e dos benefícios que traz para a população de Portugal e do Reino Unido.

"Portugal – UK: alliance with 650 years." Excerpt of the 2022 "Lítio do Barroso" Magazine . Source: Savannah Resources.

In sum, although the green transition is officially framed – both by the Portuguese state and by interested corporate actors – as an opportunity for Portugal to assume a "leading" role in Europe, this rhetoric obscures persistent hierarchies and patterns of dependency that the transition claims to overcome. These dynamics, however, are most acutely felt internally, as rural communities and territories are persistently portrayed and treated as expendable.

59 English Transcription of this Excerpt: Portugal and the UK have always had a friendship politics. This "friendship" is one of the oldest in Europe, dating back from the XIII and XIV centuries, when the Treaty of Tagilde was signed on July 10th, 1372. In 2023, the 650 years of the Anglo-Portuguese alliance will be celebrated. It is based on the set of values that have been built up over several centuries, of good Anglo Portuguese relations, that the British company Savannah Resources is developing a project in Portugal, more concretely in Boticas, which will be a tangible manifestation of the depth of the relation and the benefits that it will bring for the population of Portugal and of the UK.

The Enduring Internal Colonial Subalternization of Rural Communities

Savannah's CEO, Emanuel Proença has repeatedly framed the 'Mina do Barroso' project as an opportunity to revitalize a territory experiencing demographic decline, arguing that it "can deliver important results in terms of developing the region" (The Mining Podcast 2025). This diagnosis is echoed in Savannah's EIA (QUADRANTE 2023), which depicts a region marked by depopulation, low literacy, economic stagnation, and persistent poverty – in short, in decline. Against this backdrop, the project is presented as offering the "possibility of contributing to the repopulation of the area, the revitalization of the local economy, and the return of working-age generations" (332-333), namely by creating jobs, building new infrastructures, generating financial incentives, and supporting socioeconomic activities (632-633).

These representations build upon a long-standing historical trajectory. Trás-os-Montes, including the Barroso region, like much of Portugal's rural interior, has experienced a massive rural exodus and continuous outmigration since the 1960s, motivated by industrialization processes and agricultural policies (Almeida 2020), resulting in persistent demographic contraction. The municipality of Boticas, where Covas do Barroso is located, lost 13 percent of its population between 2011 and 2021 (ADRAT 2021). For many of my companions in Covas, this decline is not understood solely as the outcome of natural demographic cycles, but as the cumulative result of prolonged state neglect and the devaluing of rural lifeways – a sense of abandonment which surfaced repeatedly in everyday conversations.

Returning to my opening vignette, Rui's words – "they take everything from us" and "everything is in Lisbon" – encapsulate a broader sentiment of dispossession and marginalization. His statement resonates with what Marisol de la Cadena (2015, 158) has termed the "state politics of abandonment," or even the "biopolitics of abandonment" (38) – forms of governance she observed in Pacchanta, Peru, where the "roughness of living conditions" emerged from the intertwining of difficult climacteric conditions, infertile soil, and a lack of life-sustaining infrastructures. Although, as I experienced during my time there, "in Covas, everything can be cultivated" – from vegetables, olive oil, corn, fruit trees, and wine –, the long cold winters, the arduousness of agricultural labour, the experiences of poverty and material depravation, whether lived firsthand or recounted by older generations, and the enduring sense of isolation make life in these mountains considerably harder. This, my companions stressed, is not simply geographical, but also the result of systematic withdrawal of public infrastructure.

To quote the lyrics opening this article, written by the local beekeeper Carlos Libo, "no one remembers us, we are forgotten in a corner." Those who have chosen to remain – or who did not have the possibility of leaving – structurally resent the progressive dismantling of public services, with echoes of neglect reverberating through many of the conversations I had. My companions speak, for example, of the closure of the pediatric emergency unit in Chaves, the nearest hospital, yet fifty minutes away by car or about an hour and a half by the twice-daily bus. Women recount how they were compelled to drive one hour and a half to Vila Real to give birth after the maternity ward in Chaves closed some years ago. Such decisions might be justified by the state as responses to an aging population; yet my companions interpret them as accelerants of exodus – further incentives for the youth to depart – and as forms of neglect toward those who have chosen to remain. This politics of abandonment thus acquires a biopolitical dimension, as the ability to heal, give birth, or die is partially conditioned by the (un)availability of public infrastructure. The withdrawal of state infrastructures, however, did not lead to the disappearance of life-sustaining infrastructures, relations and practices: in Covas, neighbours and family members take care of one another, and charitable institutions provide institutionalized forms of care on a daily basis to certain families.

As public funds are progressively withdrawn from life-sustaining infrastructures such as hospitals or schools, my companions expressed a bitter irony that a private company now appears to assume the role of the state. In April 2024, during the electoral campaign triggered by the Influencer Operation, when lithium had become a "hot topic," I attended a meeting in Covas with the only political representative who came to the village. The conversation quickly turned to state's relationship with the interior – a dynamic characterized by abandonment and extraction, my companions stressed. At one point, Rui commented:

> "We used to have everything here, and they've taken it all away from us. This place [*Casa do Povo*] used to be a health centre. They took all of that away from us. And now a private company comes to give us that?! I mean…![60]"

Rui's lament – which was received warmly by his companions in the room – captures more than personal frustration: it reveals how the withdrawal of public services into potentially corporate responses is experienced as a form of dispossession, only made possible by the structural abandonment of the rural interior.

However, others believe that the arrival of corporate capital can provide forms of welfare that are otherwise unavailable and unviable. Amadeus, an almost centenarian man, and Josué, an early-retired construction worker, would often tell me that "since they [the company] are here, we might as well negotiate[61]." Amadeus once suggested, during an interview, that the company could build a health facility or an agrarian school, given that this is an agricultural region, recognized by the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) as World Agricultural Heritage. Despite our divergent stances on the mine, these were two of the people I spent the most time with; over time, I came to understand that, even if they would not necessarily choose the mine *per se,* now that it is in their village they believe it is best to try and get as much "benefit" from it as possible. This position mirrors what Stuart Kirsch (2014) describes as the "politics of resignation," whereby extractivist activities come to be perceived as inevitable, prompting people to resign themselves to their presence. "Benefit" here must not be understood in strictly economic terms – on the contrary: most of their propositions emphasised the importance of "building something which lasts[62]," pointing, again, to the importance of emplaced continuity.

Such dynamics complicate any homogeneous portrayal of the community. Recently, for instance, a new association, *Futuro do Barroso* (Future of Barroso), was formed, composed mainly of residents from neighbouring towns who seek to engage with Savannah Resources. The emergence of this association, together with the fact that some inhabitants of Covas are accepting the project, highlights how extractivist initiatives come to appear as one of the few remaining feasible options (Kirsch 2014). As the literature shows (Kirsch 2014; Brock and Dunlap 2018; Ehrnström-Fuentes and Böhm 2023), mining companies frequently position themselves as providers of welfare in contexts marked precisely by political abandonment – a strategy that enables them to secure social legitimacy and pacify dissent. The ability of private companies to step in as providers of welfare or development is thus inseparable from how rural territories are not only discursively framed, but also materially constructed as spaces of decline and emptiness, allowing state and corporate actors to justify extractivist and industrial projects.

Crucially, the arrival of lithium mining is not experienced in isolation – it is apprehended in relation to earlier and ongoing forms of rural dispossession: on the one hand, those associated with so-called renewable energy projects, such as dams and wind turbines, which now crowd nearly every mountaintop; and, on the other, with the historical seizure of *baldios* (communally possessed lands). Ana, a farmer from Covas in her late fifties, would frequently recall how people from a neighbouring village had to be relocat-

60 "Nós aqui já tivemos tudo e já nos tiraram tudo. Porque isto aqui, por exemplo, nós estamos aqui, isto já chegou a ser um centro de saúde, já chegámos a ter aqui centro de saúde. Já nos tiraram isto tudo e agora vem uma empresa privada dar-nos isso?! Quer dizer...!"

61 "Já que cá estão, devíamos negociar".

62 "Se deixarem dinheiro, se deixarem para aí dinheiro... Eu digo que não. Porque esse dinheiro desaparece e ninguém sabe... há doi ou três que se vão abarbatar com ele e não vão fazer nada, e a aldeia vai ficar pior do que estava. Por isso que eu digo que eu queria era obra. Que deixassem obra feita".

ed from their homes during the construction of dams. "They ended up living in containers," she would say, with shock and sorrow in her voice. Tobias, a young environmental educator from Boticas and an avid lover of the river waters, once invited me to accompany him while he monitored the artificial habitats created by Iberdrola, a Spanish energy company, as part of its biodiversity compensation program, implemented in connection with the construction of the Tâmega Hydroelectric Complex. As we were walking along the river banks, climbing from hill to hill, following one GPS coordinate after another, in a treasure-hunting-mode, he paused for a second and commented:

> "Man, the dams...we talk a lot about 'green energy,' about 'energy produced in nature,' about 'clean energy,' man, and it makes it seem like it's all wolves running across the hills, haha, eagles flying in the sky, haha – but the reality is very different. The Tâmega Valley was probably one of the most enchanting valleys we had. A region which is now submerged. Before it was submerged, I used to roam it. I went through it fishing, walking, just enjoying... something that will never come back. (...) Before, you would walk along the river and hear the sounds of wild boars and roe deer. (...) There were bay laurels, cork oaks, hollies, oaks, pines, ashes, willows, strawberry trees – man, a whole array of native forest that...disappeared... and, along with it, you had an incredible range of biodiversity: at the base of the cork oaks, I could easily find droppings of genets and martens. (...) Man, it's something that is lost forever... so many extremely important species. (...) And now... if they gut the earth... it will be the straw that breaks the camel's back.[63]."



The river banks of Tâmega.

63 "Opá, as barragens... nós falamos muito de "energia verde", de "energia produzida na natureza", de "energia limpa", opá e parece que é só lobos a correr pelo monte, hah, águias a voar pelo céu ahah, opá, mas a realidade é muito diferente. A nossa zona se calhar é um dos vales mais encantados, que nós ali tínhamos, era sem dúvida o vale do Tâmega, uma região que está submersa, e antes de estar submersa percorria-a. Percorri-a, pescando, caminhando, opá, no fundo, usufruindo da... de algo que nunca mais vem. (...) Opá, e caminhavas sobre o rio e ouvias o som dos javalis, dos corços. (...) tinhas lá loureiros, tinhas lá sobreiros, azevinhos, carvalhos, pinheiros, freixos, salgueiros, medronheiros, opá, uma panóplia de floresta autóctone que... desapareceu... e associada a ela tens um leque de biodiversidade monstra. Na base dos sobreiros, facilmente encontrava excrementos de ginetas, de fuinhas (..) Opá, é algo que se perde para sempre... são muitas espécies importantíssimas (...) E agora... se eles esventrarem a terra... é a gota de água".

Like Ana and Tobias, most people I spoke with experienced the arrival of lithium mining as a continuation of a longer history of landscape colonization through energy infrastructures – a phenomenon that Batel and Küpers (2023) conceptualize as "renewable energy colonialism." Crucially, my companions stress how these projects have brought irreversible transformations to local existences – affecting rivers, animals, plants, and mountains –, and thus conceptualise the hegemonic green transition as a "lie" and a "fallacy" insofar as it produces environmental degradation while the energy or economic benefits seldom accrue to them or their communities.

This process of landscape colonization is part of a longer historical trajectory marked by large-scale seizures of the *baldios* (communally possessed lands). As Rodrigues (2008) notices, attacks on the baldios are as old as their own existence, having span every political regime (Hespanha 2024). For the mining project to proceed, the company requires access to them. Since they cannot be sold, Savannah would have to reach a rental agreement with the local community, who legally possesses and manages them. The community, however, has refused any rental agreement since 2017. In May 2023, Savannah received a conditionally favourable Environmental Impact Statement (EIS), which, among other requirements, called for additional prospecting work. Unable to gain access to the lands to conduct prospecting, the state granted the company a one-year access to both private properties and baldios through an administrative easement (*servidão administrativa*) in December 2024, and, in January 2025, the company subsequently announced that it had filed for expropriation. In parallel to the enactment of dispossession through legal-administrative documents, private security personnel and police (GNR) were deployed almost daily from October 2023 to May 2024, and nearly continuously throughout 2025.

These practices echo Portugal's fascist past, when mountainous communities were forcibly stripped of their baldios through the enactment of the Forest Management Plan (*Plano de Povoamento Florestal*) in 1938. In 1936, the Estado Novo regime created the Internal Colonization Board (*Junta de Colonização Interna*), an organism whose responsibilities consisted in "carrying out surveys and establishing reserves of baldio belonging to the state, which could be used for the settlement of farming households" (Barros 2012, 22). The idea of 'internal colonization' itself had been proposed much earlier, in 1887, when Oliveira Martins presented his Project for a Law on Rural Development (*Projecto de Lei de Fomento Rural*) to the Chamber of Deputies (Hespanha 2024). Although it was not enacted at the time, this initial proposal provided the conceptual foundation for later policies (da Silva 2015; Castro Guerreiro 2022; Hespanha 2024), especially those of the fascist regime.

Between 1936 and 1960, the regime built seven agricultural colonies (*colónias agrícolas)*, including one in Barroso, with the goal of fixating population in the rural territories (Castro Guerreiro 2022). In parallel, between 1939 and 1974, the Forestry Services planted 287,000 hectares of trees in the baldios across the country as part of the national plan for reforestation (Barros 2012). Bushes gave way to pine trees. Shepherds were replaced by forest guards and loggers. Pastures once grazed by goats and sheep disappeared, and small farmers and shepherds were increasingly pushed to urban areas (Rodrigues 2008; Barros 2012; Almeida 2020). What was *monte* became *floresta*. In Covas, many inhabitants recall "working in the *floresta*" with a dreadful tone: the floresta (forest) came to embody the oppressive practices imposed by the fascist state, such as the ubiquitous presence of forest guards, or the requirement of licenses for the simple acts of gathering brushwood or firewood, under the threat of having to pay a fine. The violent expropriation of the baldios not only represented a form of landscape colonization, but also a deliberate project of hollowing out rural communities of their political autonomy, as the state took over many of the responsibilities previously seen to by neighbourly cooperation (Pina-Cabral 1986).

These land seizures reflect a long-standing pattern in which rural and mountainous communities have repeatedly been portrayed as obstacles to "development," and thereby subordinated in the name of "progress." These portrayals have deep historical roots: as early as the eighteen century, liberal thinkers identified agro-pastoral communitarianism with backwardness and ignorance (Hespanha 2024, 55-56), and

baldios have historically been framed as *terra nullius* (Brouwer 1999). Alexandre Herculano, for example, a central intellectual figure of the time, famously wrote that "the existence of the baldios constitutes one of the most serious *embaraços* (impediments, obstacles) to agricultural progress" (Gralheiro 2018, 12). The use of the word *embaraço* serves to portray baldios as more than physical obstacles – it constructs them as inherently problematic, legitimizing their expropriation as a necessary step for national modernization.

Today, the same rhetoric of imperative national modernization and rural backwardness is being deployed to justify new extractive projects. Taken together, these episodes of internal colonization reinforce the structural marginalization of rural and mountainous populations and demonstrate how contemporary extractive initiatives extend historical legacies of dispossession. Crucially, they reveal how the same internal colonial logics that frame rural spaces as vacant or empty – logics that, during the imperial colonial period, were used to frame African territories (Ferraz de Matos 2006) – also cast their inhabitants as backward, poor, or in need of development, exposing the enduring coloniality of power that devalues rural peoples, their knowledges, and their worlds.

One episode remains particularly telling. As a stock-exchange company listed on the London Stock Exchange, Savannah Resources is the subject of continuous online discussions among investors. I was always struck at how much attention Pedro, a farmer from Covas, would devote to these chats. Although he does not speak English, he would routinely translate the website using Google's automatic translation tool – enough, as he put it, to "understand the essentials." For the past eight years, he has followed the fluctuations of Savannah's share price almost daily, celebrating when it fell and lamenting when it rose. These market movements are closely tied to political developments: the granting of the conditionally favourable EIS in May 2023 prompted the share price to climb, for example, while the Influencer Operation caused it to drop. While scrolling through the chat, he came across a comment which read: "Why are they [people of Covas] against the mine? It will bring them refrigerators and TVs!"

This comment, as critical development studies have long shown (Escobar 1995; Illich 1997; Klein and Morreo 2019), mirrors a classical attitude: the investor cannot comprehend why the people of Covas would reject "progress." This also reflects a broader process of Othering (Sousa-Santos 2022), through which rural Portuguese communities are cast as *lacking* – thus, *in need* of external interventions, which will improve their lives, according to modernist and developmentalist standards, just as lithium mining for electromobility is framed as improving the overall life of the planet. Pedro was outraged and offended by this comment: "This is the image they have of us! They think we are savages! This is what they think of us, huh?[64]" For him, the investor's remark reflected a broader pattern of inferiority and paternalism, which he has endured for the past eight years: the persistent portrayal of himself and his neighbours as backward, ignorant, and impoverished.

Such imaginaries and representations of backwardness have been internalised by many of my companions. In a conversation over dinner at Antónia's place, another farmer, as the topic of the mine inevitably arose, she remarked that "they have propaganda on their side, and we are *just* farmers, we are mountain people[65]." Her words encapsulate a long-standing process of internalised subalternization: rural and mountainous populations have historically been imagined as ignorant or backward66, and such stereotypes have not only structured external representations but have also been absorbed by those they target. Her self-description as being "*just* farmers" resonates with de la Cadena's (2015) observations in Peru, where peasants had the feeling of *being less*.

In Barroso, this sense of inferiority does not operate along racial or ethnic lines, but rather through an urban/rural divide. In Portuguese, *urbanidade* (urbanity) remains synonymous with civility and refinement, standing in opposition to rudeness or vulgarity, associated with the countryside. As Pina-Cabral

64 "Isto é a imagem que eles têm de nós! Acham que somos uns selvagens! Isto é o que eles pensam de nós?!"
65 "Eles têm a propaganda do lado deles e nós só somos agricultores, somos pessoas da montanha"

has shown, peasants in Alto Minho, northern Portugal, frequently reported being told that they "cannot even speak Portuguese properly" or that they "are considered dirty" (1986, 100-101). In Covas, likewise, my companions would often resent having their accents mocked at, or being regarded as dirty or uncivilized, or would describe their lives as "poor" or "simple." In this context, such descriptions do not merely translate economic or material poverty – although, in strict economic terms, many are significantly poorer than other Portuguese regions (FFMS 2025) – but rather to being perceived, and perceiving themselves, as *lacking in* literacy or (formal) education. All of this reflects enduring hierarchies – urban/rural, literate/illiterate, refined/poor or cultured/backwards – that continue to shape collective imaginaries in Portugal.

These enduring hierarchies – symptomatic of the colonial matrix of power (Quijano 2000) – are also reproduced in my encounter with them. As a young woman endowed with high levels of formal education, I too embody a form of symbolic capital. While my engagement in the struggle generated considerable trust, my presence as a PhD researcher – an activity associated with the highest standards of academic and epistemic value – inevitably positioned me as an outsider: educated, urban, and "from good families." As someone once told me, "Covas is too small for you," pointing to the internalisation of broader hierarchies in which the countryside is imagined as *lacking* – culturally, socially, aspirationally. My positionalities – built in relation with my interlocutors – did not merely shape my access to the field: they actively mirrored the very asymmetries I seek to dissect. Such hierarchies are continually reinforced by media and popular culture. As a young filmmaker from a neighbouring town remarked, during a cinema session we organised in the old primary school building of Covas, "the representation of *transmontanos*[67] is always as old people or farmers. There's nothing else[68]."

Even though these stereotypical images have been internalised, they also sparked resistance. In the same breath that they would refer to themselves in self- deprecating terms, my companions affirmed their attachment to rural life. They would insist that "this is the life we chose[69]" and that it is a "good life[70]," which they "wouldn't change for anything[71]," or acknowledging that, while they may lack formal education, they possess other forms of knowledge that formal literacy cannot impart. In the case of farmers, this was particularly evident in the way they spoke about the rules imposed by institutional bodies on their practices, often describing them as "nonsense." As de la Cadena's observes in relation to peasants in Peru, "this inferiority is an irrefutable feeling, yet it is only relative to the terms of the state which, while dominant, does not occupy all of runakuna's existence" (2015, 161). Similarly, in Barroso, people have undoubtedly internalised a sense of inferiority, but this is only relative to how the state frames 'value,' and, most importantly, does not define the totality of their lives. Instead, it coexists with the pride they take in performing everyday practices through which they assert and sustain their worlds in the face of imposed hierarchies.

These imposed hierarchies are also reflected on how state representatives portray these communities' dissent. In response to persistent opposition, political representatives have repeatedly emphasized the need to improve dialogue. In May 2021, for example, during the 1st European Green Mining Conference, the then-Director of DGEG stated that it was necessary to "improve communication skills to reduce public resistance" (PÚBLICO 2021c). This Conference, held in Lisbon, about eight hours' drive from Covas, excluded the very communities whose mountains and rivers would potentially be affected by the mines, prompting them to organise a protest.

66 This representation of rural communities as backward is not exclusive to Portugal. In France, rural populations were long perceived by political and cultural elites as ignorant, superstitious, and resistant to modernity, requiring education and state intervention to be made fully "French" (for more, see, for example, the works of Eugen Weber). Across Europe more generally, in the Middle Ages, peasants were often been viewed as not entirely human, positioned closer to nature than to culture – a process of dehumanization that established a quasi-caste distinction between rural populations and the elites (see, for example, the works of Massimo Montanari or Chris Wickham).
67 *Transmontanos* refers to the the inhabitants from Trás-os-Montes.
68 "A representação dos transmontanos é sempre como velhos ou agricultores. Nao se vê outras coisas"
69 "É a vida que escolhi".
70 "É uma boa vida".
71 "Não trocava por nada".



Protest "Mining is not Green, Green is Barroso," during the 1st European Conference on Green Mining, May 2021, Lisbon. In the banners, we can read "Covas do Barroso, World Agricultural Heritage, Says No To The Mine," "Green Mine = Black Death," "Green is Barroso," "No To Mines, Yes to Life" **and** "Women from Serra d'Arga. For Our Mother Earth."

At the time, media outlets reported that "European representatives acknowledged the need to improve communication strategies to convince the public that it is both urgent and necessary to increase the production of raw materials in Europe to meet environmental goals" (PÚBLICO 2021c). Years later, in December 2024, during a parliamentary hearing requested by the local anti-mining association from Covas, politicians stressed repeatedly the need to "improve dialogue," yet the possibility of rejecting the project was never on the table (ARTV 2024). Within this framing, dissent is not recognized as a legitimate political stance but framed as a communicative deficiency to be corrected through information campaigns, reflecting a logic in which consent is engineered, and political dialogue is effectively foreclosed, as objectives are presented as already settled, a configuration where politics is neutralised by denying the very conditions for contestation (Stengers and Pignarre 2005).

This discourse of "lack of information" constitutes a form of symbolic violence and epistemic coloniality. It presumes, first, that opposition stems from ignorance, implying that, once properly informed, inhabitants would inevitably accept the project. In this green *infernal alternative* (Stengers and Pignarre 2005), dissent is rendered unintelligible: no other future can be legitimately articulated. Second, from the perspective of Lisbon- or Brussels-based policymakers, the political action of *barrosões* appears largely inconceivable: it seems they do not recognize that inhabitants might legitimately influence their own futures. This reproduces a deeper layer of subalternization, rooted in the historical inferiorization of rural populations as backward and irrational. Similar dynamics have been observed elsewhere. In the Arctic, for example, policymakers often assumed that negotiations with reindeer herders would eventually lead to acceptance of 'green' mining projects, thereby marginalizing dissent in advance (Lassila 2025), or dismissing Indigenous knowledges during institutional platforms (Normann 2021). Across Europe, the concerns of potentially affected communities by decarbonisation projects are frequently framed as NIMBYism (del Mármol and Vaccaro 2020; Normann 2021; Ayeh and Rutjes 2025; Djukanovic 2025; 2026), reinforcing the perception that their resistance is irrational. As Ashwood and colleagues note, "the sustained ideological stigmatization of rural territories seems to result in the demand that rural people resign their rights" (2019, 89-90 apud Batel and Küppers 2022). In Portugal, this produces first- and second-order citizens, whose status is largely determined by their place of residence (Almeida 2020; Batel and Küppers 2022).

As many of my companions would frequently tell journalists or other visitors asking about the project, "we were never considered nor involved in this whole process[72]." Such statements reveal a profound sense

of exclusion and neglect: their voices are experienced as pre-emptively dismissed or simply ignored, a dynamic that, in turn, legitimizes the paternalistic attitudes on the part of both the state and the company, while simultaneously reinforcing an internalised sense of inferiority. Institutionalized platforms, such as public consultations, operate within this same framework of exclusion and are widely perceived as performative exercises. On the one hand, these consultations are conducted primarily online and allow only a few weeks for participants to review highly technical documentation. I remember being in Covas during the public consultation period for the revised EIA and barriers were significant: inhabitants have limited or inexistent access to computer, internet, and even email. External support thus becomes indispensable if they wish to engage with the procedural formats recognized by the state. On the other hand, despite overwhelming public opposition – 98% of submissions in the most recent public consultation rejected the project (AIA 2023) – it was nonetheless approved, illustrating how dissent is systematically disregarded and rendered politically inconsequential, a dynamic reminiscent of Stengers and Pignarre's (2005) analysis of capitalism's *modus operandi*.

These multiple, layered narratives of subalternization – articulated through narratives of emptiness, poverty, ignorance, or underdevelopment – reproduce a colonial grammar that legitimizes extractivist intervention. As I have shown, such narratives are historically situated: they have justified previous dispossessions, upon which green extractivism now builds, and have been simultaneously internalised by rural populations, whose voices are once again dismissed or ignored. In the context of the energy transition, these dynamics are further amplified by the discourse of the inevitability of lithium mining for decarbonization – what we have termed the "green infernal alternative" – in which opposition is rarely recognized as legitimate.

This long trajectory of dispossession and onto-epistemic devaluation is explicitly named by some of those who live it. Catarina, an environmental defender born in Covas who later migrated to an urban setting, wrote in her public statement:

> "It was Salazar's government that infantilised and brutalised us and used us to do the same to others in colonised countries. But *we are also the colonised*. This government and Savannah never stop telling us that we are poor, ignorant, and without culture, while at the same time destroying everything tied to our own history, culture, and identity as a community – they even want to change the names of our places[73]" (AIA 2023, 186 [emphasis added]).

By explicitly describing her community as "colonised," and by linking Salazar's overseas colonial empire to the historical subalternization of rural Portugal, Catarina situates the expansion of lithium mining within a colonial continuum. Her statement foregrounds processes of internal colonization, through which state and corporate actors assert control over rural territories and their lifeways while simultaneously disqualifying their existences. In doing so, her words resonate with Quijano's (2000) and Mignolo's (2007b) notions of 'coloniality' and 'colonial matrix of power,' which highlight how social hierarchies, epistemic domination, and the control of places and peoples persist long after formal decolonization. Catarina's testimony makes tangible how contemporary extractivist projects are not merely economically intrusive, but ontologically and epistemically invasive: the destruction of heritage sites and the renaming of places signals a profound *erasure* of local lifeways and ancestral histories – an erasure of entire worlds. Framed as "poor" and "without culture," or "progress," rural communities are once again positioned as deficient subjects in need of intervention, revealing how green extractivism reactivates a longstanding colonial gaze that has historically oversaw peripheral regions.

72 "Nunca fomos tidos nem achados neste processo".
73 "Foi o governo de Salazar que nos infantilizou e brutalizou e nos usava para fazer o mesmo a outros nos países colonizados. Mas os colonizados também somos nós. Este governo e a Savannah no seu EIA não se cansam de nos dizer que somos pobres, ignorantes e sem cultura e ao mesmo tempo destroem tudo o que se prende à nossa própria história, cultura e identidade enquanto comunidade, e até os nomes dos lugares querem mudar".

Taken together, these ethnographic episodes demonstrate that green extractivism in Barroso does not constitute a rupture with past forms of rural marginalization, but rather unfolds along a historical continuum of internal colonization. Through narratives and politics of abandonment, representations of backwardness and inevitable underdevelopment, rural territories are discursively and materially produced as spaces available for intervention. This colonial grammar enables the state and corporate actors to present extraction as revitalization, dissent as ignorance, and dispossession as a necessity. Catarina's diagnosis – "we are also the colonised" – powerfully names the totality of this process: a situation in which the subordination of rural lifeworlds operates according to colonial logics. In this sense, resistance to lithium mining in Barroso is also a struggle against the reproduction of an internal colonial order that continues to uniformly organize value, knowledge, and life itself, within the logic of green capitalism and mono-temporal growth.

Conclusions

In this article, I connected past experiences – including patterns of structural state abandonment, previous dispossessions, and the internalization of representations of rural backwardness – to the recent expansion of lithium mining, framed nationally and across the EU as essential and inevitable for the green transition. The transformations experienced in Barroso are deeply entwined with a longer history of neglect and persistent discourses portraying rural communities as deficient, depopulated, or in need of modernization. Taken together, this analysis demonstrates how historical patterns of abandonment and dispossession intersect with contemporary extractivist pressures, producing layered forms of marginalization, rooted in colonial logics. This article also argues that the dominant green transition functions as a colonial epistemic device that constrains the capacity to imagine alternative futures while legitimizing extractivist interventions (Bonelli and Pávez 2025).

Against this backdrop, many inhabitants of Covas have, over the past eight years, resisted both the colonising logic of *terra nullius* that underpins extractivist projects, and the totalizing logic of the "green infernal alternative" that frames lithium mining as inevitable. Those who reject the project open a portal from which to question this supposed inevitability, while simultaneously affirming that their territory is alive. In doing so, they resist the compression of many worlds into one (Escobar 2017), demonstrating that other possibilities exist – and other lifeworlds are worth preserving.

To avoid reproducing a colonial ethos, I suggest that decarbonisation policies take communities seriously, by upholding their right to say no and recognizing their situated knowledges as integral to energy transformations. The designation of this region as a Globally Important Agricultural Heritage System by the UN-FAO in 2018 represents an initial step toward institutional recognition of these situated knowledges and practices. A decolonial approach, however, also requires unsettling conventional conceptualizations of the 'rural' and the 'countryside.' Rather than framing them as spaces of ignorance or decline, they should be understood as places from which to learn. As the writer born in Boticas José Carlos Barros suggests, it is time we reconsider who counts as cultured (*cultas*). For Barros, the community of Covas do Barroso constitutes a "cultured community" because "they are able to live off the resources the land provides – something that most of us no longer know how to do" (Câmara Municipal Póvoa do Varzim 2025). A decolonial approach suggests we begin to understand *cultas* those who cultivate the land, who nurture the land-as-future.

In the context of global climate and energy changes, this analysis calls, following Blaser (2025), for the need to *ground* ourselves in place. Attending to place and its situated practices would enable climate and energy transformations to be grounded in lived realities rather than in abstract projections. This entails seriously embracing the decolonial feminist invitation to choose the *margin* (hooks 1989). Mar-

ginal places – hegemonically perceived as "less than" – can instead constitute powerful topographic and conceptual sites from which to rethink dominant categories, insofar as we don't reduce them to icons of stability, radical difference, or modernity's "dying other" (Tsing 1993). Imagining futures-otherwise may thus begin at and from the margins: in places that endure and remain, where ancestral warriors refuse displacement, and where the future is, thinking with Krenak (2022), ancestral.

Acknowledgements

I am deeply grateful to the anonymous reviewers for the time and care they devoted to reading and commenting on this article. Their constructive insights strengthened and clarified my arguments, and their supportive remarks provided invaluable motivation and encouragement. I extend my appreciation to the often invisible workers within academic publishing platforms who devote their time to editing and polishing the final versions of our manuscripts. My greatest *obrigada* belongs to my companions in Covas do Barroso. Walking alongside you for the past five years has deeply transformed me, and I carry with me all that I have learned and *felt* from our shared journey. I am endlessly grateful for the trust and respect you have so generously given me. Obrigada. Barroso vive!

TRALHÃO I.

The windows of the van were all fogged up. A shadowy humidity lingered in the cold air outside. It was only five in the afternoon, but the darkness made it hard to discern anything clearly. We had had another long, tiring day, standing in front of the company's excavator. After our shift ended, we drove through the monte.

As we were driving, we felt a tense proximity – another vehicle was intentionally following us.

At a bend, headlights appeared ahead.

"There they are," Jorge said.

A silence settled in the van, thick as the condensation on the glass.

We kept going, slower now.

Then, the van cornered us. Jorge snapped. He had had enough of private security guards in his monte.

"This is persecution!" he shouted, rolling the window down slightly despite the winter cold. "Now we can't even walk in the monte?!"

It felt like a film scene, but without the distance that fiction allows.

By then, the siege had already thickened. The daily police patrols. The private security vans, moving night and day. The surveillance cameras. The drones. The incessant messages from company representatives. Their attempt at convincing the priest. The lawsuits targeting villagers.

A cartography of control was taking shape. Inhabitants resented their monte being no longer entirely *theirs*; it was being held in a tightening grip of surveillance, machinery, and unspoken threat.

With control, came fear. And with fear, mistrust.

Barroso – a region famous for the maxim *entre quem é* ("come in, whoever you are"), evoking hospitality and openness – was being slowly reshaped by an insidious grammar of suspicion.

These geographies of fear and intimidation are the tangible expression of the colonial onto-logics underpinning extractivist endeavours, explored in **Chapter I. Chapter II.** will examine how Barrosões react, engage, and navigate these unfolding realities.



"Mecanismos de Acumulação" Acrilyc painting by So Dias

CHAPTER II
Monte and Baldio: Strategic Equivocation as a Practice of Defence in Covas do Barroso

Abstract

This article focuses on a dispute over communal lands in Covas do Barroso, triggered when Savannah Resources attempted prospecting a plot it claimed through Portugal's new digital cadastral platform. In reaction, inhabitants placed their bodies in front of an excavator, sustaining the blockade for seven months. Grounded in long-term collaboration and yearlong ethnographic fieldwork, this article follows the initial moments of this dispute to explore how competing – and overlapping – claims emerge from divergent ways of knowing, naming, and relating to these lands. It focuses on the equivocation between *monte*, a relational place enacted through memory, movement, and ancestral practices, and *baldio*, a juridical object capable of travelling through courts and cadastral maps. It introduces the concept of *strategic equivocation* to describe how inhabitants navigate this difference. Although their relations-with these lands exceed the limits of state legibility, they strategically deploy lawsuits and cartographic tools as situated practices of defence, making their claims legible while maintaining ways of being with these lands that cannot be captured by these instruments. Going beyond the legibility framework, I argue this is not only a tension between local knowledge and state legibility, but a strategic equivocation that functions as a situated practice of defence.

Keywords

State; Knowledge; Legibility; Strategic Equivocation; Baldio; Monte

De defender o que é nosso
E que nos querem roubar
E não há lei que me obrigue
A ser fodido e a calar
E não há lei que me obrigue
A ser fodido e a deixar
E não há lei que me obrigue
A ser fodido e a aceitar

This is the hour to fight.
To defend what is ours
And there is no law that can force me
To be fucked over and stay silent.
And there is no law that can force me
To be fucked over and walk away.
And there is no law that can force me
To be fucked over and accept it.

Excerpt from the song "Brigada da Foice", by Carlos Libo

Introduction

I am finishing eating lunch – with mushrooms I had foraged the day before in the communal lands – when someone knocks at my door. Though it is not unusual for people to knock, I am not expecting anyone in particular. "Come in!" I call out. The door opens, but the person remains on the doorstep. "They have moved the machine" I hear. Before I even have time to blink, I slip on my shoes and leap into their pick-up truck. Off we go. We speed off into the *monte*, bouncing from one dirt road to another. In less than ten minutes, we arrive at the spot where the company Savannah Resources had just moved an excavator. A dozen people are already there, and many more are on their way. Within minutes, around thirty people of all ages were gathered.

Getting off his pick-up, Rui[74] walks up to the plot of land which was just terraced with fierce determination. Running from one side to the other, he shouts: "This is the biggest shame anyone has ever witnessed in this country[75]!" His companions were stirred by his performative gesture. Some took pictures to collect evidence. Most were commenting how abusive this situation was. Everyone was infuriated. Rui and his companions began explaining the situation to the two subcontracted workers – a machine operator and an archaeologist – whose works were stopped. They tell them that while it is true that Savannah bought a parcel of land from a private landowner, the place where the excavator is – and where we are standing – is not part of the *limits* of that parcel of land. Inhabitants were claiming the private landowner had abusively marked his land on the digital platform BUPi, overextending it onto the *baldio* (communal lands).

This article focuses on a land dispute, which began when the multinational mining company Savannah Resources attempted to carry out prospecting work on a piece of land it had purchased from a private landowner and whose boundaries it claimed through the newly introduced digital cadastral platform BUPi. Inhabitants contested the limits drawn on BUPi, claiming they encroached on the *baldios*, insisting they know the lands' limits better than anyone else. They also contested the company's right to operate there, because the baldios *belong* to them. The dispute over the contested limits led to the filling of a legal action, and the attempt to initiate prospecting work within that contested plot triggered the immediate reaction of placing their bodies in front of the excavator – an act of defence which, little did anyone expect, would end up lasting for seven full months.

74 In this article, I follow standard anthropological practice by using pseudonyms to protect the privacy and safety of the people I mention. When necessary, I also employ multi-layered protections, including blurring or altering unique identifying characteristics and instead using fictionalized composite characters.
75 "Isto é a maior vergonha já vista neste país!"



Some of the people present during that first November 2023 afternoon.

Following the initial moments of this conflict, this article shows that this dispute reveals an encounter between different, and overlapping, forms of knowing, naming, relating to, and being-with these lands. It argues that inhabitants can *strategically* navigate this encounter, by translating their claims across different onto-political regimes as a situated practice of defence.

Thinking with Blaser (2010) and Escobar (2017), I approach this territorial struggle as an ontological one, because it "entails questions about what counts as knowledge and what kinds of worlds different knowledge practices contribute to perform" (Blaser 2010, 3). Following the political ontology framework, I use the concept of 'worlds' and 'ontologies' interchangeably to refer to concrete practices that bring worlds into being – what can be called 'world-making practices' –, emphasizing that worlds do not exist as pre-existing realities or beliefs, but are co-produced through the enactment of concrete practices (Blaser 2009, 2010; de la Cadena and Blaser 2018).

As I accompanied the unfolding dispute, I noticed, as other anthropologists before me have (Brouwer 1999; Amoedo-Martínez 2018), that, in everyday life, inhabitants would frequently use the term monte to refer to the communal lands, known formally as *baldios*. This intrigued me. Over time, I wondered whether the *baldio* and the *monte* were not the same – yet not entirely distinct. Even though both words are used to refer to the same physical space, I argue these are not just names – they are different worlds. The *monte* is an affective relational territory – one that is known *through being there*: walking, grazing sheep or goats, gathering wood, bushes or mushrooms, and performing other practices transmitted by the *antigos* ("the elders"). It is a territory grounded in ancestral memory, shared knowledges, lived stories, and movement. The baldio, on the other hand, is the territory as enacted by the state – lands which are granted a certain bundle of rights and entitlements, allocated to a group of people (*compartes)* defined by that territorial area, who have the legal right to manage and administer those lands (Barroca 2018; Gralheiro 2018, 2025). The first exceeds (de la Cadena 2015) the latter: the legal category cannot capture the lived experiential relations constitutive of the monte, which relate more to belonging (*pertença*) and possession (*posse*) than to ownership (*propriedade*).

Thinking with Viveiros de Castro (2004), an equivocation might be at stake: when inhabitants mobilize the word 'baldio' they might actually be referring to the 'monte.' An equivocation occurs when a shared term circulates across different interlocutors while referring to ontologically different realities, producing communication that appears mutual but is grounded in non-coincident worlds.

However, what is notable in Covas is how inhabitants navigate this equivocation. Even though their experiential and relational way of knowing, relating and being-with *exceeds* the state's instruments of legibility, they do not reject those instruments. Instead, they *strategically* engage with them – namely by filing law suits or by adhering to the digital cartographic mapping – to make those claims legible (Scott 1998). By employing state cartography and resorting to legal actions, inhabitants are re-signifying and re-appropriating themselves of these mechanisms, ensuring they become another instrument of defence. Simultaneously, they place their bodies in front of an excavator, claiming they do not need the Court's final decision to *know* they have the *right* to be there, which is *theirs*. In other words, they strategically use state devices as practices of defence, while simultaneously sustaining a relation-with these lands that cannot be reduced to a relation mediated by property rights only.

I suggest that this movement can be understood as a 'strategic equivocation.' I introduce this concept to refer to practices through which inhabitants translate their relations into legible claims, without, however, collapsing them into the grammar of property or cartography. Strategic equivocation thus names a political practice that uses to its advantage, rather than resolves, the non-coincidence between worlds, enabling territorial defence without reducing one mode of existence to another.

This article emerges from my ongoing collaboration with this place-based struggle since 2021, and, particularly, from ethnographic fieldwork conducted between April 2023 and April 2024 in Covas do Barroso. My primary methodological tool was participant observation. During this period, I became deeply embedded in the village life, which included, among other things, participating in the *bloqueios* (blockades) – standing before this excavator, during long mornings and afternoons, through relentless rain, biting cold, or scorching sun, in a routine that for me lasted six months, but for the people of Covas stretched into seven. I kept field journals, in which I registered all interactions with as much detail as possible. My notes were complemented by semi-structured in-depth interviews which typically lasted between one and three hours, sometimes longer. Interviews often unfolded either as walks through the meadows or the baldios, accompanying people in their daily routines, or as moments shared in the warmth of their kitchens, over food and drinks. Some also took place during the period of the bloqueios, benefiting from the long hours with little to do but *to be there* together.

The relationships I cultivate with people who live in or converge in Barroso are grounded in a relational ethics of care, reciprocity, respect, and love. In fact, what is written here has been discussed with some of my companions to ensure a fair representation of their situation. This reflects my commitment to situated knowledge production, shaped by my positionality as an active participant in this struggle.

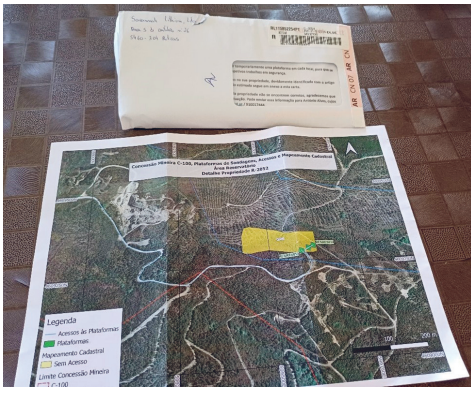
This article is structured as follows: it begins by discussing cartographic maps as tools of power and legibility, and, specifically, how BUPi became an object of contestation in Covas do Barroso. The article then proceeds to explore the ways in which inhabitants name, relate to, know, and are-with the communal lands, by revealing the monte as a territory sustained by memory, movement, and ancestral practices. The article continues by showing how inhabitants strategically stepped into a relation with the state, all the while maintaining practices which exceeds those terms. In doing so, it demonstrates how inhabitants enact what I conceptualize as 'strategic equivocation' as a situated practice of defence. The article concludes by situating this case within broader debates on political ontology, arguing that strategic equivocation illuminates how different worlds are sustained and defended within *and* in excess (de la Cadena 2015) of state regimes of legibility.

Background

In early November 2023, Daniel and Carlos, two young men, were doing forestry work in the baldios, when they noticed subcontracted workers from Savannah Resources cutting trees on a plot they suspected the company did not own. They phoned representatives of the Baldios Directive Board, who confirmed the plot was privately owned. At that moment, inhabitants' quasi-permanent state of alert and vigilance heightened: they knew Savannah aimed to enter either that plot of land or an adjacent one to conduct prospecting work, as required by the conditionally favourable Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) it received in May 2023.

Savannah Resources, the British stock-exchange company who owns the concession rights to the 'Mina do Barroso' lithium project, has faced sustained local opposition since 2017. The mining concession consists of 592 hectares, 71% of which is located in baldios. According to the law, baldios are inalienable, imprescriptible, and unseizable – they cannot be sold, transferred, or otherwise alienated; they cannot be acquired by third parties through the passage of time; and they cannot be seized or attached in execution of debts (law n.º 75/2017 of 17th August). Baldios are possessed and managed by the "local community," defined by the law as the collective of *compartes* – all the effective residents of the area where the baldios are located. They take decisions over the baldios in the Compartes' Assembly (*Assembleia de Compartes*), which are then executed by the elected members of the Baldios Directive Board (*Conselho Diretivo dos Baldios*). To be able to initiate the mining project, the company would need to reach a rental agreement with the local community. If such an agreement is not reached, the state would have to expropriate these lands. For the past years, inhabitants have systematically voted against renting their baldios to the company.

In July 2023, Savannah sent a letter to private owners, to the Parish Council (*Junta de Freguesia*), and an email to the Baldios Directive Board, requesting permission to carry out prospecting work for six months, as required by the EIS. All of them refused.



The letter and maps sent by Savannah Lithium, Lda., the subsidiary to Savannah Resources, requesting permission to conduct additional prospecting work.



The plot of land which was terraced.

Unable to gain access to these plots of land, in mid-October 2023, the company began conducting prospecting activities in its own fields and on the 16 hectares of baldios under a rental agreement – transferred between different companies since 2006, and which inhabitants unanimously voted to cease in January 2025.

That November afternoon marked the moment some people feared would come: Savannah entered the adjacent plot of land it had been nearing earlier that month, which inhabitants claim to be baldio. Carving terraces into the hillside, felling trees, and tearing through the last traces of vegetation, the excavator sank its teeth into the land.

The BUPi as a Contested Legibility Object

Standing on the terraced plot, my companions explain that the company purchased a parcel of land from Lobo, who abusively marked his plot of land on the digital cartographic platform BUPi, extending its limits onto the baldio. While his field is officially registered with three hectares in its *certidão predial* (Land Registry Certificate), it appears as having six on BUPi.



Satellite images. The red line represents the approximate boundaries of Lobo's field, according to the certidão predial. The yellow line represents the approximate boundaries of the drawings made on BUPi.

In Portugal, three property information systems operate under a cadastral regime: the Property Matrix (*Matriz Predial*), the Land Registry (*Registo Predial*), and the Cadastral Survey (*Cadastro Predial*). The Property Matrix, managed by the Tax and Customs Authority (commonly referred to as *Finanças*), serves fiscal purposes and issues the *Caderneta Predial* (Property Tax Register). The Land Registry, overseen by the Land Registry Offices (*Conservatórias do Registo Predial*), records the legal status and property rights through the *Certidão Predial* (Land Registry Certificate). The Cadastral Survey, managed by the Directorate-General for Territory, contains geographic, geometric, and administrative data. According to official government statements (Conselho de Ministros 2023), only 30% of Portugal's territory is registered under this system. BUPi is part of a reform designed to address this knowledge gap.

BUPi (*Balcão Único do Prédio*), translated to English as Digital Land Cadastre, was created by the Portuguese government in 2017 as part of the Forest Reform (*Reforma da Floresta*), launched after the devastating forest fires which ravaged the country that Autumn. It is a digital platform designed to "facilitate the georeferenced registration of rural and mixed properties by landowners" (BUPi n. d.), who can identify the geographic boundaries of their properties online. This data is later validated by qualified technicians, who are also responsible for providing in-person assistance to citizens in the process of georeferencing their properties, and cross-referenced with other public records. Initially piloted in ten municipalities, BUPi was expanded nationwide in 2021 and is set to be fully implemented by 2026. BUPi's goal is for all existing buildings and properties in the national territory to be identified. Under this reform, lands that remain unregistered by that date might be transferred to state ownership.

The introduction of BUPi is an example of what James Scott (1998) has called "legibility," the process through which states seek to make societies understandable, through instruments, infrastructures, tools, and practices that condense and systematize information on its population and territory, thereby

creating a synoptic view over them. This view-from-above, resembling Foucault's panopticon, is what allows the state a better management over and of its population and territory. Legible – thus manageable and appropriable.

The cadastral map, as Kain and Baigent (1992 apud Scott 1998, 47) remind us, has historically functioned as one such instrument of control: it provided rulers with the knowledge necessary to tax, govern, and, in many cases, erase previous forms of landholding and belonging. Following Lefebvre (1974), Harley (1989) and Scott (1998), I approach maps and practices of mapping not as neutral or purely objective representations of space, but as situated knowledge practices that actively participate in the production of particular spatial realities. The modernist assumption that maps function as 'mirrors of nature' rests on the idea that reality can be fully and precisely represented. Postcolonial and postmodern scholars have challenged this assumption by showing how maps selectively foreground certain relations while obscuring others, thereby legitimizing particular territorial projects (Harley 1989; Pickles 2004). Maps are thus never neutral: they operate as technologies of power, inscribing authority onto the very landscape they claim to objectively depict. In the context of conflicts triggered by competing territorial projects, this dynamic – the world-making capacity of maps – becomes particularly evident (Li 2015; Chao 2022; Brightman 2019; Lassila 2021; 2024b).

One such way of producing reality is depicting lands more geometrically regular than they in fact are, thereby ignore their complexities. During that first November afternoon, Rui, speaking to the geologist noted:

> "On BUPI, the only boundary markings that are all messed up are the ones done by the company [Savannah] that hired that land surveying firm. (...) The fields the company marked look like geometrical figures – either squares or rectangles... We know very well that that would never happen. You take any field and there are very few [people] which have drawn a geometric figure, it's always curves. What the company did was: a straight line from here until down there! (...) Look at this [showing the map drawn by the company on his phone]: a square; half a moon. Do you think any field is like this?! I know the fields! Look, here's a square, as it is![76]"

For Rui, the digital maps made by the company were inaccurate, absurd, and disrespectful to the natural fluidity of both private lands and baldios, which do not follow straight lines, but rather adapt to the mountains' irregular shapes, with hills, streams, all intricately and unpredictably interwoven in patterns that defy the straight edges imposed by BUPi's system. As Chao (2022, 55) notes, the straight lines of maps symbolically flatten the liveliness of a place by imposing a simplified order on it. In a beautiful metaphor, Scott equates the cadastral map with a photography of a river: a river's liveliness, always flowing, cannot be pictured in a photography. The cadastral map, likewise, can never depict the always evolving transformations of land, precisely because its goal is a "straightforward administrative formula," which the bureaucrat "can quickly grasp and administer from the documents in his office" (Scott 1998, 45-47).

Such straightforward representation of places is what later facilitates their conversion into sacrificeable units for extractivist interventions. In Portugal, for example, the first cadastral survey to identity the existing baldios was conducted by the Fascist regime. This survey served to launch what would be characterized as "the most cunning and oppressive campaign against communal lands" (Paiva et al. 2020, 18): the Forest Settlement Law (*Lei de Povoamento Florestal*). Published in 1938, this law subjected the baldios to the Forest Management Plan (*Plano de Povoamento Florestal*). This Plan envisaged the afforestation of 420,000 hectares, but only part was carried out: between 1939 and 1974, the Forestry Services afforested 287,000 hectares of baldios (Barros 2012). In 1954, the state enacted a Regulation of the Forestry

76 "No BUPI, as únicas marcações que está tudo à moda do carago, as únicas são as que fez a empresa [Savannah] que contratou aquela empresa de marcações. (...) Os terrenos que a empresa marcou parecem figuras geométricas – ou quadrados, ou retângulos... portanto, sabemos perfeitamente que isso nunca acontecia. E tu vais pegar aí num terreno qualquer e são muito poucos os que desenham uma figura geométrica; é sempre umas curvas, por aqui, por acolá. A empresa o que fez foi: uma linha reta daqui até lá abaixo (...) Olha só: um quadrado, uma meia-lua. Achas que algum terreno era assim?! Eu conheço os terrenos! Isto foi tudo o que vós fizesteis. Olha, aqui está um quadrado, tal e qual".

Police Service (*Regulamento do Serviço de Polícia Florestal*), expanding the powers of the Forestry Police, including the authorization to bear arms, alongside other coercive measures (Rodrigues 2008; Barros 2012). Such measures were not uncontested: throughout the country, conflicts, and, at times, violent clashes, erupted between mountainous populations and the state police (Paiva 2020), which is another example of "how hard European states had to work to evict peasants from their forests" (Tsing 2005, 201). In Covas do Barroso, likewise, during the seven months which followed that first November afternoon, police officers were present daily.

The recent introduction of BUPi can be understood as part of this historical Statist attempt to make the national territory legible. In a country where only 3% of forest land is state-owned, 6% is baldio, and the remainder (91%) is privately held, with 4% being managed by industrial companies (ICNF 2021), this measure allows the Portuguese state to address a long-standing challenge: the lack of knowledge about its own territory (BUPi n. d.). Given the many unsuccessful attempts to implement a full cadastral system in Portugal, BUPi is conceived as a simplified system, designed to reach the largest possible number of people who own properties. What is simple for the state, however, is not necessarily simple for the population.

In Covas do Barroso, inhabitants recall that, prior to BUPi, registering or modifying land boundaries required visiting the Tax and Customs Authority, and any alteration exceeding 20% had to be verified by neighbouring landowners. Ana, a farmer, started explaining this to the archaeologist on that November afternoon: "when you would register a field, you'd call your neighbour, and ask: 'look, am I marking it well'?[77]" and "the neighbouring landowners had to sign; or, in the case of the baldio, the Directive Council[78]," Rui completed. This suggests a convivial form of relating to neighbouring landowners, where mapping the land is embedded in reciprocal recognition – an approach that stands in contrast to the technical and distanced nature of BUPi. "On BUPi," on the other hand, "you can have 50 fields staked each on top of each other[79]," Duarte, a nurseryman, added. This happens because, while technicians later review the online entries, the initial registrations are made directly by private owners. That is why BUPi's drawings are not a legal proof of property – the binding property rights, including the property limits, remain those in the Land Registry Certificate (*certidão predial*).

The nationwide implementation of BUPi and the adherence of the Boticas Municipality to this platform in June 2021 coincided with Savannah's first successful attempts at buying land. As the company secured access to private lands, inhabitants noticed what they consider to be abusive demarcations on BUPi. Similar to what was happening with Lobo's land, there are other cases in which the digital mappings of plots purchased by the mining company encroached on the boundaries of the baldio, inhabitants claimed. Far from a neutral tool, I started understanding BUPi as a mechanism through which competing claims over the baldios are articulated.

Mapping the Baldios on BUPi as a Contentious Practice

When people noticed abusive demarcations on BUPi, urgency grew to map both private properties and the baldios. Mapping properties on BUPi has not, however, been a straightforward process. For many inhabitants, who lack access to computers, navigating this mapping system is a significant challenge. As part of BUPi's implementation policy, the Municipality organized a workshop to support private landowners in registering their lands, in May 2023.

77 "Quando vai marcar um terreno, chamava o vizinho. Olhe: "será que estou a marcar bem?"
78 "E os confrontantes tinham de assinar ou, no caso do baldio, o Conselho Diretivo".
79 "No BUPI, podem estar uns em cima dos outros, uns 50".



The workshop notice, posted on a pine tree where such announcements are usually displayed. It includes information about the date, time, and location. It reads: "REGISTER YOUR PROPERTIES, COME ALONG!" It has the symbol of the Boticas Municipality, followed by "counts on you." It contains the official BUPi information: "Identify and register your land easily and free of charge at bupi.gov.pt or at your local Town Hall. (1) Gather your Citizen Card, your Property Tax Register from the Tax Authority, and proof of ownership. (2) Draw your plot of land at a BUPi counter or at bupi.gov.pt. (3) Register your land free of charge."

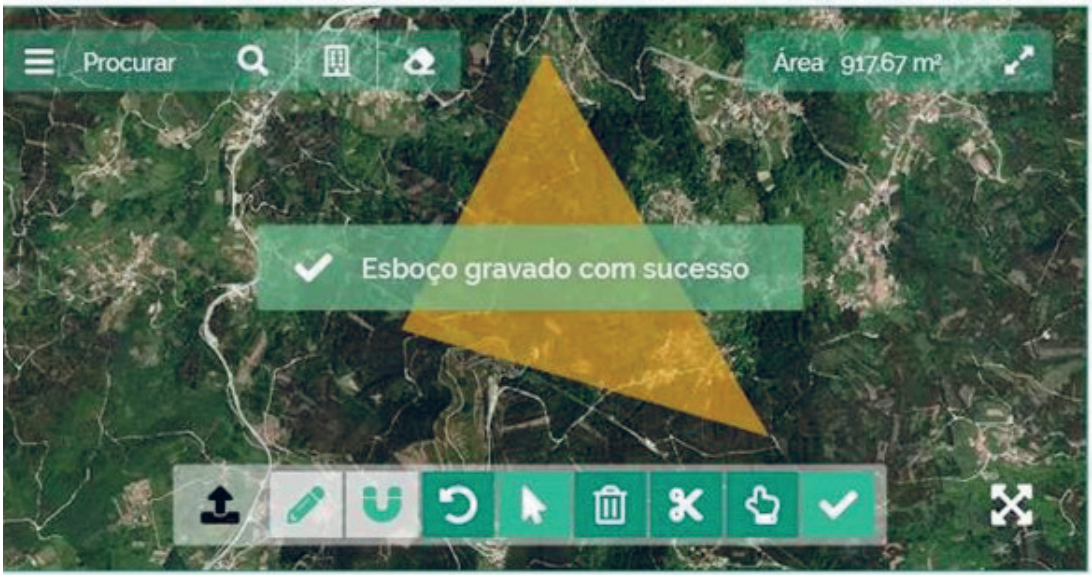
I did not go to the workshop, but I spoke with some landowners who went. From what they have told me, part of the difficulties to identify their plots of land relate to *being able* to read the two-dimensional maps. Even though private lands, in principle, have traces (*vestígios*) identifying them as such, those are not always easily recognizable through the digital representation given by satellite image. This view-from-above erases part of the complexities of the land, making it hard for inhabitants – whose relation to their lands is mediated by physical presence – to read, interpret, and perceive where the limits of their lands lie.

The mapping of the baldios was an even greater challenge. As Scott's research demonstrates, "some communal forms of tenure simply could not be adequately represented in cadastral form" (1998, 38). BUPi is not an exception: until mid-2022, BUPi's system did not allow the insertion of the baldios due to their complex spatial configuration. The baldios of Covas currently encompass 1872 hectares of discontinuous and irregular terrain, interspersed with private lands. These private plots are typically identifiable by physical markers, which serve as locally recognized delimitations: these are usually walls (*muros/paredes*) or boundary stones (*marcos*) made from stones collected in the baldios, but they can also be specific trees, streams, or reeks. These traces (*vestígios*) are what allow the identification – thus delimitation – of what is private and what is baldio. As people would usually say, "wherever there is a wall, it is private, everything else is baldio[80]."

Mapping the baldios falls under the responsibility of the Baldios Directive Board. I have observed Aurora, one of the representatives of the Directive Board, mapping the baldios with the help of Álvaro, a forest engineer who works at the local agricultural cooperative, and helps with the management of the baldios of Covas do Barroso. I was in Covas the moment when Aurora and Álvaro managed to fully insert the totality of the baldios of Covas on BUPi's system. It was an afternoon in the Spring of 2025. Daniela, working as an intern for the cooperative, was also there. This moment was particularly interesting: albeit doing this for years, the difficulty of imprinting on BUPi the specific land limits of the baldios seemed as complicated as ever.

80 "Onde há muros, é privado. Tudo o resto, é baldio".

The platform requires users to draw a *polígono* – a polygon approximating the shape of the land parcel. With her finger touching the computer screen, Aurora would point to the exact spots where Álvaro had to draw the limits of the polygon with the computer mouse. He would zoom in and out or pull the cursor up and down whenever she needed to – as if they were trying to approximate this experience of mapping, mediated by a computer screen, to her experience of *being in* the baldios. For me, looking at the screen, the 'landscape' all looked the same: roads and trees. Aurora, on the other hand, could read the image projected on that screen like no one else at that table. Far from abstract dirt roads and pine trees, each parcel of those lands, each particular 'dot' on the map, carried a specific story. She was carefully thorough: if the limit drawn by Álvaro with the cursor would go over the limit of the baldio even for a short millimetre, she would have it erased. Her thorough and meticulously detailed knowledge of these lands seemed to contrast with the cadastral map's straightforward representation.



Example of a polygon on the BUPi platform. Source: BUPi

At one point, as they were navigating the satellite image, Aurora says that a *cavada* used to exist in a particular location – one that, on the digital screen, not only is quite small, but is also surrounded by private properties. A cavada is a parcel of land within the baldios that a person may cultivate during their lifetime, with the community's consent, and which returns to the community after their death. People usually cultivate potatoes and rye in the cavadas. In rare occasions, some cavadas are fertile enough to cultivate vegetables. It is the case of this one: "Since it is down south, a bit before the river, and in that particular hill, the temperature is warm enough to have a *horta* (vegetable garden), and the soil is not so bad," Aurora tells me. Not only she knows that particular location's soil specificities, she also knows the name and the history of the woman who used to cultivate it. Now that she is no longer with us, that piece of land has returned to the community – hence, it is baldio and needs to be incorporated onto the BUPi's drawings.

To incorporate the boundaries of this cavada onto the polygon they were drawing was a particularly challenging task for Álvaro. The polygonal drawings, despite allowing for some flexibility, inherently impose a certain rigidity to the user: even if a polygon can have many faces, it is made of straight lines. When Aurora realized that Álvaro could not draw the boundaries with the exactitude she wanted, she said, exasperated: "we have to go to the *monte*![81]"

81 "Temos de ir ao monte!"

The Monte as Lands Enacted Through Memory and Movement

This is something I often heard her saying. From the computer screen alone, the monte cannot be properly grasped. Aurora and Álvaro agreed to meet the next morning to go to the monte together. Only *there* could she adequately convey to the engineer the lands' limits, so that he can later translate – within the constraints of the platform – that embodied experience into the digital mapping system. Importantly enough: the experience of *being in* the monte seems to be what matters when it comes know and relate with these lands.

I did not go with them the following morning, but I have walked in the monte with Aurora several times. Whenever we would walk together, she would recount particular stories for each particular location. There is this one particular trail, for example, which we walked many times together and whose transformations she has been accompanying since her childhood. She began walking that trail with her dad and their animals when she was five before moving to a neighbouring town at the age of twelve to pursue her studies. Aurora's knowledge of the land is not digital or schematic – it is grounded in bodily movement, memory, and relational familiarity. "I know the monte like the back of my hands," she would frequently tell me.

Just as Aurora claimed to know the monte like the back of her hand, so did many of our companions. During that first November afternoon, and over the months that followed, they insisted that no one knew the limits of these lands better than them. Fátimo, a man in his late sixties, had worked for Gabriela's father in Lobo's adjacent plot for many years. Despite his age, he made sure to come that first afternoon and recounted that he had trimmed trees and cut bushes; he recalled when Lobo bought his field and built the wall; he knew how long it took to walk its entirety, which extended all the way to the river. Other inhabitants also recalled that Lobo had once planted chestnut trees, distinguishing his field from the rest, which was covered mostly in pines.

Their familiarity with the land was specific, situated, and personal. As Rui said, "the question is that we know the fields; we are from here, so we know exactly where they are[82]." Their knowledge had been acquired over the course of close, lifelong interaction with these lands – it came not only from legal documents or digital platforms, but from their own personal stories and repeated physical encounters with the monte.

Over time, I started seeing the monte as a place full of memories and stories – a place of intimate familiarity. Not an abstract spatial continuum, but a place known through usage and occupation, grounded in an intergenerational continuous learning process (Amoedo-Martínez 2019). The monte is a known territory, not a mere extensive bulk of lands. It is known by *being there* – walking, grazing sheep, gathering bushes, wood, mushrooms, doing forestry work, driving. The monte is a concrete territory, in which each part of the land carries particular stories – and it is those stories that allow people to situate themselves in the 'landscape.' This concrete relation becomes further tangible in the fact that many locations in the monte have their own name, which highlight that a whole body of knowledge is embedded in the land.

This form of knowing the land resembles Tim Ingold's arguments about how places come into being. For Ingold (2000), the capacity of native people to situate themselves and interpret the 'landscape' derives not from abstract representations but from movement and storytelling, two inter-

82 "A questão é que nós sabemos onde estão os terrenos; nós somos de cá, portanto sabemos exatamente onde estão".

twined dynamics. The British anthropologist has long argued that places are not fixed points on a map, but emerge through interwoven, multitemporal lines – or tracks and trails – of movement (du Plessis 2022, 49). For him, people have a "wayfinding" and constantly evolving bond with their 'environment.' This wayfinding entails movement, not merely through or within locations in a given space, but along "narratives of journeys previously made, by oneself or others" (Ingold 2000, 155). He suggests that it is through these stories that 'landscapes' become meaningful, arguing that "places do not have locations, but histories" and that "wayfinding resembles storytelling more than it does map-using" (219).

As Aurora's collaboration with Álvaro reveals, she knows every given location of the monte because each of those locations has a story – and it is only because she knows (or has lived) those stories that she knows those locations. More so: she tells those stories as a way to *find her way*. Indeed, when looking at the representation on the screen, she was telling particular stories as a means to locate herself.

The monte, thus, is known not merely through boundaries on a map, or through physical traces, but through embodied practices of walking, with relatives and animals, and telling stories about those journeys. It is through this entanglement of movement and storytelling that the monte is known, which also relates to Ingold's distinction between the practices of "mapmaking" and "mapping" (2000, 219-220). While mapmaking refers to a scientific and instrumental approach that produces a fixed, two-dimensional representation, mapping unfolds through the practice of wayfinding – which happens through movement and through the exchange of stories and memories of and from the land.

As storied landscapes, the montes are repositories of collective memory, sustained through intergenerational practices. It is here where people have worked, or continue to work; where they gather brush for animal bedding, tend their beehives, or collect mushrooms; it is where they once came with their parents or grandparents; where they graze their sheep or bring their horses. As my companions would often assert, in what could be a reinterpretation of the famous Cartesian maxima *cogito, ergo sum*: "I am from here, therefore I know," suggesting knowledge arises from being from here, which requires presence and is intimately connected to one's existence.

This knowledge of the land and the way it is transmitted can be understood as an 'education of attention,' which Ingold describes as a continuous process of learning *within* the environment, through presence and attention (2001, 20). This form of knowing is embodied and experiential, shaped by daily practices and attachments, and reinforced by the accumulated experiences and the transmitted knowledge of the *antigos*. I thus began to see movement and memories as the primary means through which inhabitants in Covas *know* their communal lands and develop their "sense of place," which Feld and Basso (1996, 11) define as the bodily and affective ways in which a place is known, imagined, remembered, and lived.

Attending to the practices through which relations of being-with the monte are enacted revealed the centrality of the *antigos* in shaping how the monte is remembered, known, and cared for, a dynamic which recalls ethnographic accounts of Indigenous contexts (Di Giminani 2013; 2015, 2016; Blacker 2021; Chao 2022). Not only my companions' knowledge was acquired through the experiences, memories, and stories shared with their *antigos*, but their presence, especially on that first November afternoon, served as evidence of their long-standing relation with these lands, which ensured, they claimed, their legitimate *right to remain there*.

Baldio and Monte: Equivocation and Excess Between Worlds

During that first November afternoon, inhabitants stressed *ad nauseam* how "Here are the people of Covas, who know the fields perfectly[83]!" and how "There is not a single antigo from the village who would say this land is Lobo's[84]" and that "The antigos who are here know this has always been baldio, it has always been ours (*nosso*)[85]." Inhabitants were reiterating their right to remain there because they know that plot of land is baldio – and the baldio is *theirs*. After more than an hour of standing there, the conversation grew increasingly tense. The police was on their way. Everyone was demanding that the company take the machine out of this plot of land. Rafael, the geologist from Savannah Resources, shielded himself by saying they were only "following orders." At that point, the tension mounted further. Everyone started speaking at the same time. Duarte, as outraged as his neighbours, managed to be listened and said:

> "Following orders from whom?! No one has more authority than the people standing here! If this land is in an area which we confirm is baldio, no one rules more than the people. Following orders from whom?! No one has more power than the people![86]"

Duarte's, Rui's – or anyone else's – insistence on their rightful claims surprised me. It was absolutely clear for them that they had *every right* to be there. When the police officers arrived, they accused inhabitants of impeding the works of the company and asked them to leave, saying they had to wait for a Court's decision. Tension mounted once again: how could it be that the police was telling them they could not be in *their* baldio? When the police threatened that remaining there could bring them consequences, my companions replied – without even blinking – that they were prepared to face them. No one was willing to comply with the police's order to leave and allow the machine to work. They assured the officers that they would remain there, for as long as necessary, as long as the company persisted in operating on what *is theirs*.

I suggest that inhabitants' use of the word 'baldio' in this context may in fact refer to what, for them, is the monte, indicating that an equivocation is at stake. Viveiros de Castro (2004) defines equivocation as the situation in which the same term circulates between interlocutors while referring to ontologically different realities. As Marisol de la Cadena (2019, 39) summarises, "equivocation emerges when bodies that belong to different worlds use the same word to name entities that *are not the same* (...); disagreement results from misunderstandings about the conditions for naming the same entities in a world that should be shared." In Covas do Barroso, although the term baldio appears shared, it indexes divergent worlds: company representatives invoke a bounded property object rendered legible through cadastral mapping, while inhabitants refer to a lived territory known through memory, movement, and ancestral practices. This is not merely a difference of naming, but of ways of relating and being-with land. When my companions speak of 'baldio,' they may in fact be mobilizing a set of practices that *exceed* its legal definition.

Baldios have been part of the Portuguese juridical framework since 1512 (Paiva et al. 2020). Their legal regime has undergone constant transformations, closely tied to the longstanding coveting of baldios by successive political elites and regimes – from "feudal nobility, landowning bourgeoisie, physiocratic, liberal, and positivist thinkers to the modern state administration" (Hespanha 2017, 338). The baldios have historically been "a misunderstood subject" for the different institutional powers (Gralheiro 2018, 2025), and determining their legal status has been persistently difficult (Barroca 2018).

83 "Está aqui o povo de Covas que conhece perfeitamente os terrenos!"
84 "Agora, aqui não há nenhum antigo aqui da aldeia que diga que isto é deles!"
85 "Estão aqui os antigos que sabem que isto sempre foi baldio, este sempre foi nosso".
86 "A cumprir ordens de quem?! Ninguém manda mais do que o povo que aqui está! A cumprir ordens de quem?! Se isto está em área que confirmamos que é baldio, ninguém manda mais que o povo. A cumprir ordens de quem?! Ninguém manda mais que o povo!"

I argue that the fact that their legal definition remains complex is because of the excess which they represent for the state and the law. I think of excess with de la Cadena (2015), who defines it as that "which is beyond the limit or the first thing outside which there is nothing to be found and the first thing inside which everything is to be found" (Guha 2002, 7 apud de la Cadena 2015, 275). She uses this concept to refer to ways of being, relating, and knowing that are real and consequential for the people she co-labours with, but go beyond what dominant modern frameworks can recognize, explain, or classify.

As ancestral possessions – baldios' origins date back to very ancient settlements (Rodrigues 2008; Gralheiro 2025) –, their roots relate more to belonging (*pertença*) and possession (*posse*) than to ownership (*propriedade*). During the Compartes' Assembly held a few days after the first bloqueio, representatives of the Directive Board were explaining the situation to everyone present, ensuring all compartes were informed. At one point, Álvaro interjected and emphasized: "The baldio is yours (*é vosso*) because it comes from your ancestors (*antepassados*), and it is what will endure and remain for future generations[87]." A sense of ancestral belonging and continuity shapes what the baldios do in practice: the baldios *de facto* enact a relation grounded primarily in a respectful commitment to sustain and cultivate these lands, as their *antigos* have done. This, however, cannot be fully captured within the grammar of a law that has private property as one of its most politically salient concepts because of state agency (Rossi and Argenton 2021).

Even if the current law of baldios attempts, to a certain extent, to capture the difficulty of translating baldios into a purely juridical regime, it remains bound to an onto-logic of property. Although the law privileges the language of possession (*possuídos*) and management (*geridos*) over that of property, and revises the definition of compartes to include those who effectively live in the territory – while those who have ties of origin (through birth or marriage) are required to submit a formal application –, thus signalling the importance of presence, it nonetheless continues to operate according to a proprietary logic. The law starts from the bundle of rights normally associated with property – namely, the right to use, enjoy, transform, alienate, or reclaim something – and selectively subtracts some of these rights. When land conflicts arise, they ultimately come to be framed juridically as conflicts over property.

However, as many of my companions would say, "it's not about owning, it's about looking around and knowing: this is ours (*nosso*)[88]." This is why I argue that it is best understood in terms of *excess*: as a repository of collective memories, guarantor of intergenerational sustenance, and ancestral belonging, the monte links people to these lands beyond what the juridical framework of the baldios can do. The term baldio remains, in Portuguese, synonymous of uncultivated, abandoned, useless, vacant, unproductive or wasted land. This, as Brouwer (1999) notes, has been central to the state's ontological erasure of baldios: by defining communal lands as lands without use or utility, or as belonging to no one, the state strategically rendered them available, which helped justify the successive waves of violent expropriation and dispossession. As the historiography shows (Paiva 2020), these waves of dispossession were always met with fierce resistance. This is because the ontological enactment of this physical space as empty, useless, and belonging to no one radically differs from the practices which make these lands valuable, meaningful, and essential for mountainous communities. Indeed, what I have observed in Covas is how inhabitants are-with *their* monte. Thinking with de la Cadena (2015), the monte is a piece of land, but not only – it is also sustenance, the living memory of their antigos, and community. Hence why the monte has a great capacity to spark resistance and provoke politics. Their fierce – and unweathering – reaction points to the ontological strength of these lands, suggesting this conflict extends far beyond a conflict over property rights. In other words, this is not only a matter of property, but a matter of an entire relation with this physical space which is inseparable from one's own existence.

87 "O baldio é vosso e é aquilo que na essência porque é dos vossos antepassados, e é o que perdurará e ficará para as gerações vindouras e isso é fundamental".
88 "Não é sobre ter, é sobre olhar à volta e saber: isto é nosso".

Strategic Equivocation as a Practice of Defence

Although inhabitants are-with these lands – through relational familiarity, grounded in lived movement and shared stories –, they nonetheless operate within the frameworks of conventional legibility to make their claims heard. Simply asserting "this is ours" was insufficient to deter the machinery, as such claims do not align with the institutional language framing legitimacy, which requires a legal decision: in this case, a Court's ruling. The state establishes property as the only legitimate register through which ancestral territories can be made to exist in legal terms, and is currently establishing BUPi as the cartographic regime through which to access, visualize and map its national territory. That is why inhabitants engaged in practices deemed legible and commensurable to external actors to defend their lands: they have mapped them on BUPi with the help of forest engineers; they have taken legal actions with the help of a team of lawyers; and they have applied for immaterial cultural heritage with the help of a team of anthropologists. At the same time, they kept their bodies in front of the machine for seven months, claiming they had every right to be there, needless of a Court's final order to claim their legitimacy. In other words, they *strategically* engage with the state legibility instruments, without ever surrendering the excess that make these lands more than legal property.

I propose to name this movement a 'strategic equivocation.' I introduce this concept to refer to the practices through which inhabitants translate their relations into legible claims, without, however, collapsing their relations-with communal lands solely into the grammar of property or cartography. Strategic equivocation thus names a political practice that uses to its advantage, rather than resolves, the non-coincidence between worlds, enabling territorial defence without reducing one mode of existence to another. In the case of Covas, as inhabitants were sustaining a seven-month-long blockade, they were simultaneously organising Compartes Assemblies, thereby using the legal representation mechanisms to decide to go to Court, although, in their everyday relation with the monte, they were never reducing it to a matter of property only.

The adjective 'strategic' in strategic equivocation foregrounds the pragmatic nature of inhabitants' engagement with state categories and instruments. Their deployment of legal and cartographic tools is a necessary practice of defence, undertaken with awareness that these categories are incomplete, misaligned even, with the lived, relational knowledge of the monte. In this respect, my proposal resonates with Gayatri Spivak's notion of 'strategic essentialism,' which foregrounds the conscious, temporary mobilization of analytically insufficient categories for specific political ends, without mistaking them for adequate political representations. (Spivak 1996; Eide 2016). In Covas, inhabitants mobilize practices to render their claims legible to the state, while refusing to surrender the authority grounded in memory, movement, and embodied presence – enacted through their seven-month long blockade.

In this respect, "strategic equivocation" builds on, and relocates, Viveiros de Castro's (2004) seminal proposal of "controlled equivocation." For him, equivocation is something to be *controlled* by the anthropologist, as a methodological practice that prevents false translation and preserves ontological difference. His call for controlled equivocation was not merely a methodological refinement, but an explicitly political intervention within anthropology: a refusal to resolve misunderstandings by subsuming difference under a universalist regime, and an insistence that anthropology takes responsibility for sustaining ontological non-coincidence rather than erasing it. My proposal departs from this intervention by relocating its political stances: in Covas, equivocation is something *strategically* inhabited by inhabitants themselves. Even though the practices which make the baldio do not coincide with the lived, relational, and storied practices which make the monte, inhabitants deliberately enact those legible and commensurable practices to defend those lands, whose existence exceeds legal recognition. Hence why

I call it strategic: it is a deliberate engagement with practices which are known to be insufficient, yet tactically necessary in contexts of intensified territorial threat.

Moving between these different worlds – translating claims into legible terms without renouncing their excess – proved exasperating at times, a difficulty that itself indexes the equivocation at stake. One critical piece of information required by the Court was the valuation of the baldio. This proved to be quite challenging. As what happened with the BUPi system, the baldios were treated in their entirety as one landholding. Valued according to standard criteria – size, usage, and location – the baldios amounted to a very large sum, which required the legal case to be transferred to a higher court. Yet this valuation was, on the one hand, nonsensical, since the land in dispute concerned only three hectares. While it was later possible to subdivide the baldios for the purposes of valuation, this was also problematic, as their value lies precisely in their integrity, inhabitants would tell me. Most places are not particularly fertile; large expanses are covered in pine trees, while others are overgrown with *mato*, suitable for grazing sheep or gathering bushes for animal bedding. Unlike private property, baldios generate diverse forms of economic revenues for the community – primarily from timber, but also by enabling farmers and beekeepers to access European agricultural subsidies, since most people do not own sufficient private land to be able to reclaim them, as well as by generating local employment through forestry work, something which the current Board has prioritized.

More fundamentally, though, these activities are embedded in a place-based way of life, whose 'value' cannot be adequately conveyed through conventional valuation methods (Li 2015), as **Chapter III**. will further demonstrate. As many farmers or shepherds told me when we would speak about this, they could not understand the Judge's demand of valuation of the baldio. In Aurora's words, "It's as if all the memories, everything you've already harvested from there, which isn't palpable or quantifiable, didn't count. A lot of people have survived thanks to the baldio." Here, again, the word baldio circulates, but it does not refer to the place as enacted by the state. When the Court asks for the valuation of the baldio, it is forcing the monte into a world where value must be numerical; it is fragmenting a relational whole into divisible units. When State institutions demand valuation in quantifiable and commensurable terms, they are not simply overlooking the relations which make place, but actively rendering them non-existent within the state's regime of truth. Even the label "immaterial value" or "immaterial heritage" – under which a team of anthropologists applied the baldios of Covas do Barroso for UNESCO recognition – is part of this commensuration grammar. What I suggest, however, is that what appears as immaterial value or heritage from the perspective of the state is better understood not as a different, less palpable, type of value, but as an *excess* that escapes the grammar of commensuration itself (Li 2015; de la Cadena 2015). It signals the presence of different world-making practices – and, thus, different ways of enacting value.

What is particularly interesting in Covas is how my companions navigate both the antagonisms and the intersections between these worlds – how they strategically engage with the equivocation. They practice the language of property and valuation in Court; the language of immaterial heritage in applying for UNESCO; and the language of digital cartography when mapping on BUPi. In engaging with these institutions, the baldio becomes a strategic label through which the monte continues to exist and be defended, even as it exceeds the legal category itself. What is happening in Covas is not unique. Referring to Runakuna's strategies in Peru, de la Cadena notes that "stepping into relations the state could recognize seemed like their ticket to freedom," which required "deploying the language of property along with the language of ancestral possession" (2015, 138). The same author, years later, reflecting on Máxima Acuña's resistance to mining in Peru, says she both shows the legal documents that prove her ownership of the land, while simultaneously explaining her being-with the land (2019, 48-50). di Giminiani (2013; 2015) recounts that, in Mapuche land claims in Chile, Indigenous populations strategically used state instruments to frame their local ancestral knowledge. Blacker (2021) similarly shows how First Nations communities in Canada strategically translate elements of Traditional Knowledge into scientific data in order to engage state institutions, while actively preserving the autonomy and incommensurability of

their practices. All these movements, I suggest, can be understood as practices of 'strategic equivocations,' by which certain communities engage with the state's legibility practices while simultaneously enacting world-making practices which exceed that legibility.

Conclusion

This article has examined a land dispute in Covas do Barroso as an ontological encounter, revealing how different ways of knowing, naming, and being-with land generate overlapping yet non-coincident land claims. By following inhabitants' practices of defence against mining prospecting, I have shown that what is at stake is not merely a disagreement over property boundaries, but a clash between different world-making practices. While state institutions apprehend these lands primarily through the grammar of property, cartography, and commensuration, inhabitants relate to them through movement, presence and memory, grounded in ancestral practices which foster a particular sense of belonging to place. This non-coincidence produces an equivocation: the shared term 'baldio' circulates, referring to the same physical space, but to a different ontological one.

At the same time, the case of Covas complicates any simple opposition between local knowledge and state rationalities (Scott 1998). Despite knowing the monte through affective and ancestral relations that exceed legal categories, inhabitants do not reject state mechanisms of legibility. Instead, they strategically engage with them. By mapping their lands on BUPi, filing legal actions, and applying for heritage recognition, they reappropriate cartographic, legal, and patrimonial dispositifs to make their claims heard – and to defend their lands. I have conceptualised this movement as a *strategic equivocation:* a situated political practice through which inhabitants translate their relations-with land into legible forms without collapsing those relations into the state's ontological regime. Strategic equivocation does not resolve the equivocation between worlds – it exploits it, enabling defence while preserving excess. In the face of extractivist projects and expanding state regimes of legibility, inhabitants of Covas are not simply resisting a lithium mining project, but fighting for the continued existence of their emplaced lifeworld. Strategic equivocation names one such weapon of defence: a way of inhabiting the very regimes that threaten this lifeworld without allowing them to erase it.

Acknowledgements

This manuscript has been read and reread by many people, and I am incredibly grateful to have received such overwhelmingly positive feedback. I want to thank my colleagues at the HCB Seminar, University of Amsterdam, particularly Professors Branwyn Poleykett and Nafis Hasan, for their invaluable comments on an earlier version of this manuscript, which helped me refine my arguments on legibility and defence practices. Likewise, I wish to thank all my colleagues at the Writing Up Club, especially my good friends Laetitia van den Bergen and Yentl de Lange, for thinking-with me and making sense of my messy words at an early stage of this article. I also thank my supervisors, Cristóbal Bonelli, Enzo Rossi, and Paul Raekstad. I thank Cristóbal for challenging me to think with excess and multiplicity, and I thank Enzo for helping voice one of the main arguments of this paper with his philosopher's hat, giving me an amazing "eureka moment" during a supervision meeting when "we got it!" I am likewise deeply grateful to my parents, both legal scholars, for carefully engaging with my thoughts and for giving me the confidence to pursue these arguments. Above all, my deepest appreciation goes to my companions in Barroso, with whom I have learned and grown immensely over the past five years. This article is inspired by an extraordinary seven-month-long blockade, and by my amazement at their bravery and determination. Yet no words, and no article, could ever do full justice to their courage and to the tremendous beauty of this struggle.

TRALHÃO II.

Half a year had passed. Half a year of standing guard. Of waking up before sunrise in winter, and returning home after it had set. Of being identified by the police, every morning. Of our bodies becoming the barrier between extractive infrastructure and the land. Of long hours in the monte, with nothing to do but watch. Of fatigue, anxiety, exhaustion.

But also – half a year of learning how to endure it together: playing card games, sharing food, telling stories, singing songs, staging small theatre plays, reading books, and lighting up fires.
One day, half a year later, we decided to plant a vegetable garden.

It was an early spring afternoon. There were three of us holding the blockade, along with the machine operator, with whom we had, over time, become closely acquainted. The weather was warmer now; days stretched longer and the risk of frost had passed. We knew the soil was poor and exposed, but we wanted to plant anyway.

Before heading to the monte, we gathered hoes, watering cans, and rakes, along with seedlings and plants, borrowed from different neighbours. When we arrived, we put our bodies to work. We removed stones and used the trees the company had chopped to build garden beds. What had been cleared for extraction was repurposed for cultivation. By mid-afternoon, under the heat of the sun, our bodies were soaked with sweat. Still, we persisted, and, by the end of the day, potatoes, courgettes, and onions were sown.

The following day, we heard that the company's chief geologist was furious. Outraged. She apparently stepped onto the vegetable garden. For Barrosões, this was experienced as a brutal affront. The way they described it felt like *they* were the ones being stepped on.

That reaction stayed with me.

Yet I had already felt a version of that same intensity months earlier, when the blockade began: for inhabitants of Covas, the company's occupation of that plot of land felt like their skin being torn apart. As if place was not an external surface, but deeply entangled with one's body.

In the weeks that followed, the garden was watered and weeded by many hands. Tending it required attention and patience – it required care. To our delightful surprise, the plot yielded enough potatoes to feed some participants at the Camp in Defence of Barroso. Those potatoes were collectively harvested and cooked. By the summer, what had been felt months earlier – that to wound the land is to wound the body – returned in another register: to sustain one is to sustain the other.

Tending and eating from that garden was to practise a body-territory relation: a territory defended through flesh, and flesh sustained by the territory. Tending a garden in that particular plot of land enacted a relation based on reciprocity and care with a place where destruction attempted to be carved. It was a beautiful enactment of germinating and sustaining life within the extractive zone. Because, after all, what was being defended was never only about that *one* plot of land – it was about defending an entire relation to place and to land, inseparable from one's body and one's existence: it was about defending a whole way of life, as **Chapter III.** will explore.



CHAPTER III
"Barroso is Not to Be Sold, it is to Be Loved and Defended:" Affective Mobilizations for Land and Life in the Context of Green Extractivism[89]

Abstract

This article explores the affective dimensions of resistance in Covas do Barroso, a rural village in northern Portugal facing a prospective mining project. Drawing on a yearlong ethnographic fieldwork and my ongoing, collaborative relation with this place since 2021, the article examines how inhabitants' refusal to accept mining is rooted in a *modo de vida* (way of life) intertwined with place-based ancestral practices, which foster deeply affective connections to this terra. In Barroso, terra is not merely a piece of land – it is the living memory of sustenance of past and present generations, as well as an intimately known and loved place. The article suggests that the intrusion of extractivist logics has triggered a process of reappropriation and politicization of this place-based *modo de vida*. Drawing on the concept of "re-existence," the article argues that resistance in Covas is not only about opposing environmental harm, but also about affirming alternative forms of living, being, and relating to *terra*. Grounded in decolonial ecofeminist frameworks, the article highlights how resistance is sustained and animated through embodied and affective attachments, highlighting the importance of affect in propelling political mobilizations. In the context of a contested green transition, this article reframes rural resistance as an urgent onto-political struggle for the preservation of place-based ways of life, rooted in profound and relational respect for land and life.

Keywords

Extractivism; Place; Resistance; Re-Existence; Modo de Vida.

89 This Chapter is an adaptation of the following article: Riquito, M. (2025). "'Barroso Is Not Be Sold, It Is to Be Loved and Defended:' Affective Mobilizations for Land and Life in the Context of Green Extractivism" Capitalism Nature Socialism. 36(4).

O teu chão é chão sagrado
É o lugar onde eu nasci
Podem-dar-me o mundo todo, ai Barroso
Ninguém me arranca daqui

Your land is sacred land
It is the place where I was born
They can give me the whole world, oh Barroso
Nobody can tear me away from here

Excerpt from the song "Exploração", by Carlos Libo

Introduction

"Your water, your land, your life, your mountain. No to the mine![90]" reads the banner that a group of young women just put up in the nets of the communal football pitch in Covas do Barroso. It is May 2023 and a group of activists from the *Rede 8 de Março* (8th March Network), a Portuguese feminist network, came to organize their national encounter. Covas do Barroso, a rural village of about 200 inhabitants in northern Portugal, has become a place of multiple convergences, catalysed by its inhabitants' resistance to a prospective open-pit lithium mining project since 2017.



Banner put up by feminist activists during the National Encounter of the 8th March Network.

During this feminist gathering, in which I participated, several women share that their motivation for coming to Covas is rooted in their desire to feel the place – connecting to these waters, forests, rivers, and peoples – to relate not just rationally but also viscerally, through closeness, care, and presence. For them, cultivating an intimate, embodied and affective connection to place is a central element in propelling action. "To create a relation, to feel, an activism which does not come from the mind, it is not masculinized, it is felt, and *embodied*[91]," Chei, one of the participants, who is a poet and an intersectional activist, tells me, with words deeply resonating with ecofeminist praxis and ethics (Mies and Shiva 2014), specifically to what Caretta and colleagues (2020) and Glockner and colleagues (2024) discuss as *cuerpo-territorio* (body-territory) and to the embodied nature of struggles against extractivism.

https://doi.org/10.1080/10455752.2025.2562631
90 "A tua água, a tua terra, a tua vida, a tua serra. Não à mina!"
91 "Criar relação, sentir, ativismo que não é de mente, não é masculinizado, é sentido, é encorpado".
92 Resource nationalism, to put it simply, refers to states' – or supranational entities' – willingness to assert more control over 'natural resources.' For further elaboration on this tendency in the context of the dominant energy transition, see Riofrancos

For Covas' inhabitants, this is not a desire, an aspiration, or something which can be constructed – it is a lived reality. Their connection to land, water, animals, and mountains is not something they consciously seek; it is an inevitable condition of their *modo de vida* (way of life), which stems from generations of shared practices, stories, responsibilities, and interdependencies.

Focusing on the ongoing conflict surrounding an open-cast lithium mining project in Covas do Barroso, this article explores how place-belonging operates as a powerful driver of resistance in the context of land struggles, thus advancing scholarship on the importance of affect, particularly place's affective fabric, in political mobilizations. Drawing on extensive ethnographic fieldwork, it argues that a connection to an intimately known place, thinking of Escobar (2008; 2014; 2015; 2016; 2017; 2018), underpins this struggle. It suggests that those resisting mining expansion in Covas are engaging in a particular politics of place (Harcourt and Escobar 2002) to defend their place-based *modo de vida*. In other words, their resistance emerges not from an abstract commitment, but from the conditions of lived experience. *Their* place is one to be loved and defended – holding incommensurable value, beyond extraction, something which is materialized in their refusals to sell land or accept monetary compensations.

This article thus suggests that resistance to the prospective mine is *not only* (de la Cadena 2015), about opposing an industrial extractivist project, but also a struggle for "re-existence," which refers to movements who resist extractivism by affirming life-centred ways of being, knowing, and relating to place (Porto-Gonçalves 2006; Leff 2006; Escobar 2014; Hurtado and Porto-Gonçalves 2022; Blaser 2025).

This article contributes to the growing body of literature interrogating the contradictions and often hidden violences of so-called 'renewable' energy technologies (Dunlap 2021), specifically in the name of an "energy transition" that has and continues to propel new (and renewed) regimes of extractivism (Dunlap and Laratte 2022; Bruna 2022; Riquito 2023; Dunlap et al. 2024; Tornel and Dunlap 2025) and resource nationalism[92] (Riofrancos 2023; Szeman 2024). While recognizing the partial – yet surprising – similarities between this place-based struggle and land mobilizations in Indigenous contexts, this article engages with academic debates on the political ontology of land conflicts (Escobar 2008; 2014; 2015; 2017; 2018; de la Cadena 2015; Blaser 2004; 2013b; 2025; de la Cadena and Blaser 2018). It does so by making visible those modes of existences who resist and re-exist in spite of, and against the grain of the totalizing modernist capitalist project of so-called 'progress,' now greened. This body of work has largely focused on Indigenous contexts, particularly in Abya Yala-Latin America. Building on these contributions, while shifting the focus to a peripheral rural context in Europe, this article seeks to multiply and decolonize dominant understandings of Europe.

The article begins by contextualising this case within the broader landscape of European and Portuguese policy directives around the energy transition. It then outlines the theoretical framework, situating my contribution in the relevant scholarly debates, namely stressing the connections between extractivisms, political ontology, and ecofeminism. Next, I discuss my methodological sensibilities, with particular attention to questions of ethics and positionality. The following section presents ethnographic descriptions to illustrate inhabitants' profound connection to place and how that rootedness is mobilized in their resistance to the project, while bringing those ethnographic vignettes into broader debates about land and place in the context of struggles against green extractivism. The article concludes, stressing rural resistance as a vital and urgent struggle for territorial justice in the face of ongoing extractivist expansion in Europe.
Aligned with the goals of the Paris Agreement (2015), the European Commission (EC) embraced the 'energy transition' as an urgent, necessary, and top-priority commitment for the coming decades. In 2019, the EC launched the European Green Deal to advance a set of legislative proposals aimed at achieving carbon neutrality by mid-century. Meanwhile, Portugal released its Roadmap to Carbon Neutrality 2050.

(2023) and Szeman (2024).
93 "Temos uma conexão com a terra que vem de gerações que é difícil de explicar. Nós sabemos que da terra podemos viver. Há pessoas na minha aldeia que já viveram sem nada, de pé descalço, mas tiveram um pedaço de terra".

Background

The hegemonic energy transition – with its almost exclusive focus on climate change and on the reduction of carbon emissions (Hulme 2011; Gelderloos 2022; Riquito 2023) – has accelerated a shift towards the adoption of low-carbon technologies, infrastructures and innovations across all productive sectors. Low-carbon energy systems require significantly more minerals and metals than previous fossil-fuel-based systems (Arrobas et al. 2017; Hund et al. 2023). Lithium demand alone is expected to rise between 4,200% and 6,000% by 2040-2050 driven by the production of Electric Vehicles (EVs) batteries and renewable energy storage systems (Bolger et al. 2022). Seeking to reduce its dependence on material imports, the EU has launched multiple initiatives to secure domestic supply chains, namely the Critical Raw Materials Act (CRMA) (2024), which accelerates permitting and supports funding for extracting, processing and recycling of raw materials within the European borders, representing a shift toward onshoring extraction.

This evolving policy and economic framework has placed Portugal at the centre of Europe's lithium strategy. The country is home to the continent's largest estimated lithium (metal) reserves and national governments made lithium exploration a policy priority since 2016 (Carvalho et al. 2022; Dunlap and Riquito 2023). The Barroso region, particularly the village of Covas do Barroso, is the epicentre of this lithium rush. A rural village of about 200 inhabitants, Covas is located in the bioregion of Barroso, classified as World Agricultural Heritage and as a Globally Important Agricultural Heritage System by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO). This unique distinction in the country recognizes how local populations combine the preservation of biodiversity and resilient ecosystems with traditional farming techniques, irrigation practices, and communitarian values (FAO 2018).

A few months preceding this award, the British stock-exchange company Savannah Resources secured concession rights to the 'Mina do Barroso' project. In its current formulation, the project consists of four open-pit mines, tailings dams, a processing facility, and additional infrastructure – spanning a total area of 592 hectares (Savannah Resources 2023). More than 70% of the project would be located in baldios, a type of communally possessed lands, constitutionally protected, and of extreme importance for the sustenance and lifeways of mountainous agricultural populations (Rodrigues 2008; Hespanha 2024). According to the company, this is "Europe's most significant resource of hard rock spodumene lithium," and their slogan, "Enabling Europe's energy transition," encapsulates perfectly how they position themselves as a key actor in EU's current energy policies.

This project faces strong opposition from local communities since 2017, as well as from a vast meshwork of national and international environmental organizations, researchers, journalists, activists, artists, social movements, and informal collectives. As early as 2019, more than 4.500 citizens signed a petition to the Portuguese Parliament rejecting the project and calling for the license to be revoked. Several local, regional, national, and even international protests have been organised in the past eight years, and, since 2021, an yearly international camp gathers hundreds of supporters in Covas every summer. In January 2025, more than 120 national organizations and collectives signed a manifesto demonstrating their solidarity with this struggle. Besides grassroots engagement, there is also formal opposition from local and regional authorities as well as from four national political parties, who called for the immediate suspension of the project in September 2024. Several judicial actions, including one demanding the annulment of the Environmental Impact Assessment (DIA), are ongoing.

Savannah's proposal was initially rejected by the Portuguese Environmental Agency (APA) in June 2022, due to the "very significant and irreversible negative impacts" of the project on the landscape, hydrology and ecosystems (AIA 2022). However, APA's unfavourable ruling was not endorsed by the Directorate General for Energy and Geology (DGEG), whose voting declaration evidenced lithium's

central role in the energy transition (ibid.). The company was thus granted an additional six months to reformulate its project. The reformulated version was submitted in March 2023 and received a conditionally favourable Environmental Impact Assessment (DIA) in May 2023. Savannah Resources must now prove they are capable of meeting the conditions imposed by the APA, by completing the execution compliance report (RECAPE). To meet these conditions, which includes conducting more prospecting work, the government issued, in December 2024, an administrative easement (*servidão admnistrativa*), a legal mechanism granting the company one-year access to private and communal lands. In March 2025, this project was classified as 'strategic' under the CRMA, making it eligible for fast-track approval and European funding. This decision – as well as the ruling of the central government to temporarily seizure private and communally possessed and managed lands – effectively reveals how lithium mining, particularly this project, is a policy priority within the energy transition agenda in Portugal and in the EU, despite its anticipated and already felt socioecological impacts.

This article sits at the intersection of political ecology, environmental anthropology, and critical literature on the energy transition. Drawing from post-modern, decolonial, ecofeminist thought, as well as from the political ontology framework, and building upon insightful work on the political ecology of (green) extractivism, this article contributes to the emergent literature on place-based struggles against green extractivism in Europe.

Theoretical Discussions

Originally coined to describe developments in the mining and oil export developments in Latin America in the 1950s (Gudynas 2010, 2015, 2018), the term extractivism has since broadened, with some scholars suggesting that extractivism has become "a global mode of organizing life" (Chagnon et al. 2022, 14). These new contributions are "indicative of more profound ontological conflicts underlying natural resource extraction and deep-seated global and social structures" (ibid., 8). Durante and colleagues define extractivism as "a particular way of thinking and the properties and practices organized towards the goal of maximizing benefits through extraction, which brings in its wake violence and destruction" (2021, 23).

Extractivism's Ontological Politics

This *particular way of thinking* refers to modern Western ontology. Post-modern scholars have widely discussed how modern ontology is founded on an Internal "Great Divide" (Latour 2006 [1991]) between Nature and Culture, which, in turn, serves as "the ontological substratum for a greater system of hierarchies that dualistically structure social reality" (Blaser 2009, 887), namely: man/woman, civilized/savage, reason/emotion, urban/rural. From an ecofeminist perspective, these dualisms are deeply gendered: they are associated with and attributed to each one of the genders, which are also conceived in a binary way – the 'masculine' is aligned with reason and culture, and the 'feminine' with emotion and nature (Merchant 1980; Herrero 2013; Mies and Shiva 2014; Salleh 2017; Barca 2020). Historically sustained by the hegemony of universal (Western) science, colonialism, and capitalism, this ontological dualism rests on the idea that one domain is open to control and colonization by the other (Strathern 1980). In other words, these ontological hierarchies have historically justified oppressive relations with those considered inferior because they are (constructed as) "close(r) to nature," "feminine," "savage" and/or "emotional/irrational" (Sousa-Santos 2007; Herrero 2013; Carvalho and Riquito 2022). These "Others," constructed as marginal, peripheral, and of an inferior status, are, thus, acceptable for sacrifice. These are namely women, Indigenous, traditional and rural communities, racialized populations, the proletariat, the Global South, Nature, and non-humans.

Extractivism operates through this logic of domination, non-reciprocity and non-recognition, generating "zones of non-being" (Kröger 2022, 33-99), where certain lives and lifeways are devalued, silenced or

erased (Shapiro and McNeish 2021). More than an economic and political system, extractivism is an ontological project (Grosfoguel 2016) crucially "premised on the onto-epistemological devaluing of most of the web of life" (Chagnon et al. 2022, 18) and on the nullification of Othered human and more-than-human modes of existences.

Feminist scholars have shown how this logic of non-recognition is deeply gendered, particularly stressing how extractivism disproportionately affects women and how it relies on gendered construction of certain bodies-territories as 'virgin,' and, thus, open and available for extraction and sacrifice (Mies 1986; Mies and Shiva 2014; Barca 2020; Santisteban 2020; Riquito 2021). Latin American decolonial communitarian feminists have foreground the concept of *cuerpo-territorio* (body-territory) to expose the (ontological) inseparability between bodies and the territories they inhabit (Cabnal 2018; Caretta et al. 2020; Zaragocin and Caretta 2020; Glockner et al. 2024). From this perspective, violences inflicted on the land – water contamination, deforestation, soil pollution – are simultaneously experienced as wounds on bodies, where those effects are felt and embodied. Such understandings point to extractivism not only as an economic model but also an ontological system that perpetuates systemic violence across bodily, communal, and planetary scales.

Signalling the importance of recognizing the ideological, cosmological, and existential dimensions inherent in extractivist expansions (Kröger 2022), a "loosely connected network of scholars" has developed the political ontology framework (Blaser 2009, 873). Originating in contexts where Indigenous struggles revealed the inadequacy of Western ontological lenses (Kröger 2022), this approach opens the possibility of understanding land and territorial struggles as ontological struggles (Blaser 2009; 2013b; Escobar 2017; 2018).

Political ontologists contend that, in certain contexts, disputes were not merely over resources or sovereignty but confrontations between incommensurable ways of worlding (Blaser 2010; 2013b; Escobar 2018; de la Cadena 2015; de la Cadena and Blaser 2018). This approach highlights how extractivist endeavours reorganize peoples and places – as well as the multiple relations that compose them – according to modernist, anthropocentric imaginaries and imperatives (Hokkanen 2024), on the one hand, while drawing our attention to the frictions that emerge as different worlds strive to sustain their own existence while interacting, mingling, and, at times, clashing (Blaser 2009; 2025; de la Cadena and Blaser 2018).

Green Extractivism and the Hegemonic Energy Transition

In recent decades, extractivism is creating frontiers in the unlikeliest of places, prompting Shapiro and McNeish (2021) to describe this condition as a "hyper-extractivist age." A striking feature of this hyper-extractivism is the fact that dominant responses to climate change are themselves accelerating extractive activity – prominent example being the renewed expansion of mining propelled by the EU's energy transition policies (del Mármol and Vaccaro 2020; Dunlap and Laratte 2022). Lithium extraction especially is marketed as compatible with and necessary to climate change mitigation, despite its socio-ecological disruptions (Voskoboynik and Andreucci 2021; Barbesgaard and Whitmore 2022). The case of Covas do Barroso is particularly telling, as this mining project is labelled 'green mining' and promoted as 'strategic' to achieve the energy transition targets.

As a growing body of research suggests, most policies labelled as 'green,' 'renewable,' and 'sustainable' often result in the further commodification of nature (Isla 2018; Dunlap 2021), violent extraction, rural dispossession, agrarian land grabbing (Franco and Borras 2019), the creation of (green) sacrifice zones (Zografos and Robbins 2020), and the cheapening and externalizing

of human and non-human labour (Goméz-Barris 2017). Common to all this research is the fact that green and climate policies intersect with extractivism, a phenomenon which has been termed "green extractivism" (Dunlap 2019). Relatedly, these 'green' imperatives have transformed climate mitigation into a vehicle for capital accumulation, reinforcing old and creating of new, greener markets (Verweijen and Dunlap 2021; Voskoboynik and Andreucci 2021; Dunlap and Laratte 2022; Bruna 2022; Franquesa 2022; Bouchi and Caraway 2022; Dunlap et al. 2024). What we see with each application, say de la Cadena and Blaser (2018, 3), is that "many practices allegedly intended to save the planet continue to destroy it."

Without questioning productivist, hyper-consumerist dogmas, based on infinite economic growth, current energy policies continue to rely on market-led responses and techno-managerial regulations. Therefore, seeing that the corporate energy transition (Svampa 2024) is expanding extractivism, material-use and energy production and consumption (Fressoz 2024), and that there is "no actual move away from one source to another," but simply the adding up of sources to the energy matrix, the current paradigm resembles more an "energy addition" rather than an "energy transition" (York and Bell 2019). Ultimately, then, green extractivism does not represent a rupture with past paradigms but their rearticulation under a green banner.

Fundamentally, these policies are sustaining the ontological foundations of modern capitalism. They reduce the complex ecological crisis to climate change, and climate change to a sole problem of carbon emissions – what some have termed, respectively, climate fundamentalism and carbon reductionism (Eisenstein 2018; Gelderloos 2022). This reductionist thinking conceptualizes the climate as a sphere distinct and separate from ecology, in turn decoupled from sociopolitical and economic issues (Riquito 2023), thus ignoring the complexity of the biosphere and its entanglement with social, political and economic choices (Sullivan 2017; Gelderloos 2022; Riquito 2023). By reducing the topic of climate change to a simple question of atmospheric carbon, these policies take the 'climate' as something they can 'fix,' by simply cutting down carbon emissions, relying on highly technological and market-based solutionisms, which flatten, ignore, or simply erase broader socioecological contexts and the more-than-human assemblages they are part of (Sullivan 2017; Riquito 2023). This further reiterates the modern ontology which perceives 'nature' as something 'fixable,' 'measurable,' 'commodifiable' (Merchant 1980; Mies and Shiva 2014), thus silencing existences which, on the contrary, relate to 'nature' in a non-mechanical or non-commodified way.

By rendering the biosphere into a repository of extractable units and carbon metrics, and constructing peripherical territories as sacrificeable, the dominant energy transition entrenches the same practices it claims to remedy by employing the same logics. This article therefore approaches the energy transition as a deeply politico-ontological project – one that sustains the colonial-capitalist/statist/extractivist/patriarchal occupation of Planet Earth under the guise of planetary salvation.

This article results from my close, ongoing relationship and engagement with inhabitants and other people and collectives resisting prospective lithium mining in Covas do Barroso –a relationship that began in 2021 and continues to this day. My ethical and political positionality is deeply entangled with this place and its existences, both human and other-than-human. In other words, my academic and scientific production is not detached from, nor ignores my normative stance regarding this struggle.

Ethical and Methodological Considerations

As part of my doctoral research, I conducted ethnographic fieldwork between April 2023 and April 2024 in Covas do Barroso. Participant observation was the primary methodological tool: during this period, I became embedded in the village life by participating in daily agricultural, cultural, social activities; in conversations, meetings, family gatherings, meals; as well as in anti-mining protests, events or encounters. I kept a field journal, in which I would register these interactions, with as much detail as possible, including, namely, the description of events as well as citations my companions had pronounced. This was complemented by semi-structured in-depth interviews that allowed my companions to systematize information and articulate their experiences in their own words. Furthermore, together with the people of Covas, we have created the first systematic documentation of the *torna da água*, an ancestral irrigation practice. For that purpose, I have had access to and have transcribed old documents; I created maps of the irrigated fields; and conducted additional interviews.

The relationships I cultivated with people who live or converge in Barroso were guided by a fundamentally relational ethics, rooted in care and reciprocity, involving affections and shared experiences. This methodological ethics sought, as far as possible, to co-create reciprocal, convivial and horizontal relationships, avoiding relationships mediated by the concern to *produce* academic research and the reinforcement of hierarchical dichotomies of researcher/researched. Adopting the grounded ant view (Puig de la Bellacasa 2017) instead of the eagle one meant I did not have the ambition of understanding or representing a real that exists a priori – and therefore inert, instrumentalize, passive, in the face of an extractivist scientific (cartesian) rationality (Carvalho and Riquito 2022) – but rather I have immersed myself in that real(s), valuing the ethnographic learning experience situated in communities of practice (Descola and Pálsson 1996). In doing so, I have sought to learn *from* and *with* others – rather than learning about or on them. Learning with others meant listening-with and doing-with – hence why participant observation was so crucial in my methodological design.

Taking this seriously, in this article, I chose to honour my companions' preferences regarding how they are named and how their stories are represented. Rather than adhering to the conventional academic practice of anonymisation, I use their real names whenever they expressed the desire for this. While the format of an academic article does not allow for the depth and complexity of each relationship to be fully conveyed – and names may at times appear as fleeting references – each one belongs to someone I care deeply for, and with whom I share many personal stories. This approach reflects my commitment to rejecting the extractive tendencies of academic research that often treats stories, voices, and bodies as 'data' to be taken rather than relationships to be nurtured.

This methodological commitment reflects my broader onto-epistemological concerns, grounded in (eco)feminist, decolonial and critical theories which have systematically argued that there is no such thing as neutral observation or knowledge production and that what we learn is bounded to our own positionalities (Harding 1991; Ortner 1995; Haraway 1988; Puig de la Bellacasa 2017; Reyes 2020; Cueva et al. 2024). This means that what I write, how I write it, and the conclusions deriving from it, are not universal truths, but rather, thinking with Haraway (1998), a set of partialities – of situated, embodied, grounded knowledges. In this case, situated knowledge does not simply mean that all knowledge is socially constructed, but rather that *this* knowledge is "intrinsically politically and ethically situated in its purposes and positionalities – that is, standpoints" (Harding 1991 apud Puig de la Bellacasa 2017, 41). Fundamentally, my positions bordering researcher and supporter of the struggle, and my relations with so-called 'research participants' bordering informants, acquaintances, neigh-

bours, companions, friends, confidents guide this research through an ethics of care, relationality, and a heightened sense of responsibility and commitment to Barroso's re-existence.

Covas do Barroso: An Affective Struggle for Re-Existence

This article explores how the struggle against lithium mining in Covas do Barroso is rooted not only in environmental concerns, but also in deep affective attachments to place. Drawing on ethnographic encounters and conversations with inhabitants, this article shows how their *modo de vida* (way of life) is sustained through everyday place-based practices with mountains, rivers, animals, neighbours, and their *antigos* ("elders"), fostering a profound sense of place belonging. The threat of mining has politicized these attachments, transforming an inherited and often taken-for-granted modo de vida into an explicit object of defence. In this sense, resistance in Covas can be understood as a struggle for re-existence: not only against extraction, but for the continuation of an emplaced way of being and living, which is fundamentally dependent on *terra* – a term referring both to a piece of land and to this place. In suggesting that it this place's affective fabric which propels political mobilizations, this article advances ecofeminist discussions on affect as a driving force of resistance as well as debates on the embodied nature of extractivist struggles.

An Emplaced Modo de Vida: Place-Belonging and the Affective Fabric of Place

Aida and I left Covas in an early, cold Winter morning. It was December 2023 and we were travelling to Lisbon, the capital of Portugal, about 500 km from Covas. We were invited to a symposium on the energy transition, hosted by an American climate foundation and attended by a range of civil society organizations, companies, lobbyists, and bureaucrats involved in the EU's decision-making process around mineral extraction for the energy transition. The organizers wanted to hear "the perspective of affected communities" and invited the local anti-mining association, of which Aida and I are part of, to speak.

We arrived in Lisbon at dusk, entering a world that felt radically dissonant with the one we had left behind just hours earlier. We were accommodated in a five-star hotel, in a room on the 18th floor with large windows facing the Tejo. I remember Aida's reaction looking over the window: "oh Mariana, you *really* have to write about this!" After dropping our backpacks, we boarded on a private shuttle which took us to a gourmet restaurant. At the restaurant, participants were chatting lightly and sipping cocktails, over scallops and tempura shrimp. We waited, unsure of when Aida would be asked to speak.

When she did, she spoke of her life: of how she walks out every day with her cows; of how becoming a farmer was a choice, not an imposition; of how she knows the monte like the back of her hand; of how the majority of land in her village is baldios (communally possessed lands); and how farmers, like herself, use manual and ancestral techniques for tending animals and irrigating fields. These are some of the reasons the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) has designated this region a World Agricultural Heritage Site and a Globally Important Agricultural Heritage System (GIAHS), she tells the audience. Later that evening, as NGO representatives curiously approached with questions, Aida told one of them:

> "We have a connection to the land (*terra*) that has been passed down through generations which is hard to explain. We know that off the land we can live: there are people in my town who have lived with nothing, barefoot, but have had a piece of land[93]."

Her words resonate with the lyrics of the song quoted at the beginning of this article, written by Carlos Libo, a local beekeeper turned singer of the resistance, and with what I observed in Covas: a form of place belonging that is articulated through everyday practices, such as cultivating vegetable gardens; tending to animals by walking with them every day in the meadows or in the *monte*; caring for relatives and neighbours; irrigating fields according to the *torna da água*, an ancestral division based on a solar watch; using and taking care of the *baldios*; doing agricultural tasks together with neighbours, relatives, or friends; knowing when to sow potatoes or corn according to place-based temporalities; performing a *matança do porco* (slaughter of the pig) and, subsequently, doing the *fumeiro*, e.g., smoking parts of the pig according to traditional methods to make sausages (*enchidos*), etc. These ancestral practices enact a *modo de vida* (way of life) rooted in relationality with rivers, mountains, meadows, animals, one another, and their *antigos* ("the elders"). This *modo de vida* refers to a dynamic assemblage of social, property, labour, family, and ecological structures, norms, and relations, enacted and reproduced through place-based practices, over generations, which sustain life in this place, fostering a profound sense of place belonging.

This modo de vida – and the practices which sustain it – is closely tied to the *terra*. While *terra* can be translated to 'land,' the term has multiple and overlapping connotations: it refers to a piece of property (which one might possess, rent or use); to the soil (where one may cultivate, grow, and harvest crops from); or to the place where one belongs to. Terra is simultaneously subsistence and home – material and affective. Although inhabitants relate to land in terms of ownership or individual utility, this relation comes with the commitment to preserve, to care for, to cultivate it, as their antigos did. In this sense, this relationship is one of property, but it is radically different from a notion of private ownership of the land (Pina-Cabral 1986, 126). Radically different because it is primarily sustained through an intergenerational commitment "to preserve, to care for, or, more specifically, to cultivate or till the soil," (Ingold 2000, 185), despite and in excess of the legal rights. This relation to land (and to place) is thus one of "response-ability," which feminist STS scholars define as the capacity to respond to others and cultivate relations, in an affective, caring, attentive way (Haraway 2016; Puig de la Bellacasa 2017).

In Covas do Barroso, inhabitants' modo de vida simultaneously fosters and depends on a strong connection to their terra – understood simultaneously as the land which is cultivated, and the place where one belongs to. As João Pina-Cabral argues, referring to the Alto Minho region, "this strong link to the land is what defines a peasant in his own eyes" (1986, 153). This connection to an intimately known terra is not easily conveyed by words: it is felt, embodied, lived. Hence why Aida says "it's hard to explain." Moreover, and importantly, without seeking to romanticize, Aida's words that evening also evoke a direct memory of the hardship and hunger endured by past generations – something which was frequently recounted to me during my time in Covas. This direct memory may also help to explain the profound attachment to the land – a memory rooted in subsistence agriculture and its hardships, where land was, quite literally, vital.

94 "Ligou-me de novo à terra, às raízes (...) com esta questão da mina, eu escolho ser ou não ser de Covas do Barroso. Para ser, tem de ser em plenitude, com compromisso. A luta permitiu-me enraizar novamente, depois de sentirmos algum desenraizamento".

Reappropriating, Politicizing, and Reclaiming their Modo de Vida

It is in the context of inhabitants' close affective connection to *their* terra – on which their modo de vida depends on – that the prospective lithium mining project was met with fierce opposition by a great majority of the population. Even though contradictory feelings and positions emerged, the project is generally experienced as disruptor – something which does not fit in this place, and which has inevitably (and irreversibly) disrupted their sense of place. These disruptive transformations have triggered a renewed connection to this place: what was once an inherited, taken-for-granted *modo de vida* has become a conscious stance of defence. What is happening in Covas is not unique: in Peru, for example, Li noted how the expansion of mining "renewed people's sense of connection to a landscape that mining would permanently destroy" (2015, 111). In Barroso, too, the threat of extraction has made people choose this terra – actively and affectively –, thus reanimating the ties that bound them to this place. In the words of Carla, a woman born in Covas but living in an urban setting:

> "It connected me again to the *terra*, to my roots (...) with this issue of the mine, I choose whether or not to be from Covas do Barroso. To be, it has to be in fullness, with commitment. (...) The struggle allowed me to take root again, after we had felt a certain uprootedness[94]."

Perhaps for the first time, inhabitants were compelled to define and defend a modo de vida they had previously lived without needing to name or conceptualize: confronted with the possibility of a potential destruction of their terra, inhabitants began affirming, with pride, their attachments to this place, to define themselves through their relations to this place, and to assert different purposes to their daily practices. As anthropologist Kim Fortun (2001) argues, such "enunciatory communities" do not pre-exist environmental conflict – rather, they emerge from it, producing new identities in response to existential threats. In Barroso, inhabitants began proudly asserting their identity as *barrosões* – farmers, shepherds, beekeepers, people who live with and off the land, and who are the heirs and protectors of a valuable *património* (heritage) which they have the responsibility to protect, just as their antigos did. The fact that Barroso was designated a World Agricultural Heritage Site in 2018 – coinciding with the moment that the mining company was entering this place – has reinforced inhabitants' perceptions of their role as keepers of an irreplaceable legacy.

Inhabitants' opposition to mining is simultaneously an affirmation of who they are and a claim to guardianship over the terra themselves and their antigos have sustained over generations, and which sustains them. As such, this struggle – grounded in socio-ecological concerns, namely water, soil, air depletion and land expropriation – is also a struggle for the continuity of this modo de vida, based on place belonging, and deeply tied to one' existence. Resistance, then, became a form of self-definition: resisting the mine is resisting the destruction of who they are, because they are-with this place. Thinking with anthropologist Marisol de la Cadena (2019, 48), the practices which make up inhabitants' modo de vida enact an "entanglement of entities needy of each other in such a way that pulling them apart would transform them into something else." In the words of Carla, "People know their very existence is at risk. The *way they exist* is at risk. It breaks my heart to realize that there are fewer and fewer chances to continue existing[95]."

95 "As pessoas sabem que a existência delas está em risco. A forma como existem está em risco. Corta o coração perceber que se sentem cada vez com menos hipóteses de existir".
96 "A gente vive no nosso cantinho, e vive bem".
97 "Se a mina for avante, Covas do Barroso irá desaparecer porque todos os vínculos que tínhamos desaparecerão com as terras

In line with inhabitants' articulations and experiences, this article argues that the arrival of mining has inaugurated a particular politics of place (Harcourt and Escobar 2002) for re-existence, based on a politicization, reappropriation, and reclamation of their emplaced modo de vida. Re-existence is a play with the words 'resistance' and 'existence.' In Academia, it was originally coined by the Brazilian geographer Carlos Porto-Gonçalves and has since been used by decolonial, critical, and feminist scholars, as well as by grassroots movements, activists, and struggles, especially in Latin America.

Porto-Gonçalves defines re-existence as "a way of existing from a place of one's own, which is as much epistemic as geographic" (2006, 165). For him, re-existence is more complex than resistance: it refers to movements who "not only fight to resist against those who kill and cause deforestation, but also fight for a certain form of existence, a certain way of life and production" (2006, 130). Leff uses this concept to refer to how land movements engage in processes of reappropriation of territory which are also processes of reinvention of their identities, their relations to others and to nature (2006, 449), a perspective followed by Escobar (2014, 93). Recently, the concept of re-existence has been taken up by feminist decolonial scholars, particularly interested in making visible those bodies-territories who sustain and reproduce life in the face of extractivist advances (Lozano Lerma 2017; Gabbert and Lang 2019; Glockner et al. 2024). All these scholars stress how re-existence comes from ways of life which are declared without value to capitalist accumulation and/or which are made invisible by the colonial modernist ontological foundations precisely because these lifeways are centred on what Silvia Federici (2013) calls the "reproduction of life."

In Covas do Barroso, resisting the mining became a way of reclaiming the conditions of possibility under which life remains meaningful – which, for inhabitants, is to remain *emplaced* (Blaser 2025). As many inhabitants would often tell me, whenever doing everyday practices, "we live in our *cantinho* ("little corner"), and we live well[96]." To resist mining is not only to oppose an extractivist project – it is also to affirm a world, a way of being and living that is interwoven with the memory of the antigos, and with an affective commitment to nurture and protect this terra. Catarina's beautiful testimonial in her public consultation summarises this:

> "If the mine goes ahead, Covas do Barroso will disappear because all the ties (*vínculos*) we had with the lands (*terras*) and the peace (*sossego*) and way of life (*modo de vida*) of those who live there will be gone. The memory of *who we are* and the ties (laços) that bind us to each other and to the land (*terra*) will also disappear[97] (AIA 2023, 188)."

In a similar vein, another inhabitant once told me once over lunch how "people are from the terra – it's a piece of them that goes away[98]." Indeed, part of what Aida was trying to convey that evening is that her life is inseparable from this terra – which refers both to a piece/plot of land and to this place. Place, then, should be understood not only a territorial, physical, geographical presence, but a relational entity co-constituted through embodied practices of life (Blaser 2004; Escobar 2008; de la Cadena 2015), and deeply imbricated in the constitution of one's existence (Ingold 2000; 2022; di Giminiani 2013; 2015; 2016).

Refusing to Sell as an Index of Incommensurability

This relational conception of land and place as deeply tied to one's existence (Ingold 2000; 2022; di Giminiani 2013; 2015; 2016) clarifies inhabitants' refusal to sell their lands, even for large sums of money. Despite the company's persistent efforts to purchase private land at prices above prevailing market rates, the great majority of inhabitants in Covas refuses to sell. Likewise, they have consistently refused a leas-

e o sossego e o modo de vida de quem lá vive. Desaparecerá também a memória de quem somos, dos laços que nos unem entre nós e à terra".
98 "As pessoas são da terra – é um bocado delas que vai".
99 "Eles pagam, mas isto não tem valor".
100 "Desaparece".

ing agreement over the communally possessed lands. Moreover, when the state granted the company the administrative easement, inhabitants refused the monetary compensation associated with it. Inspired by the works of anthropologists Fabianna Li (2011; 2015), Andrea Muehlebach (2023), Maija Lassila (2023; 2024a; 2024b), and Marisol de la Cadena (2015; 2019), I argue that these refusals are expressions of a deeper logic of incommensurability, in which their terra (here taken as synonymous of both land and place) holds incommensurable value, far beyond extraction, because it is the foundation of their *modo de vida*. As I frequently heard, "they pay, but *this* has no value[99]" – *this* referring not just to the plots of land, but also to their modo de vida.

In Covas, money was consistently framed as finite and exhaustible – something that inevitably "runs out[100]" – whereas land was understood as regenerative and enduring: a material and relational grounding through which present and future generations might sustain themselves, just as their antigos had. As my companions often remarked, "money doesn't last forever[101]" and "those who sell end up with no fields and no money, because they have spent the money and now they have nothing[102]." Here, "nothing" (*nada*) refers, above all, to the loss of land as generative substrate – an indispensable basis from which life can be sustained and reproduced.

During one of the bloqueios we did together, João, now retired, commented that, if the mine were to proceed, he would lose seven plots of land, to which the operator responded that the company would compensate him for his losses. João immediately contested: "Yes, they do, but what is money worth for? What do you eat afterwards? From the oak trees, I take firewood, I take everything. What is the money good for?[103]". This comment echoed many others I heard from my companions: land is understood as having the capacity to generate and sustain life, in fundamental opposition with money, which seems to suggest a pre-capitalist conception of money. These understandings are grounded in lived histories or shared memories: many inhabitants recall their parents' or grandparents', or have directly experienced themselves, stories of famine and deprivation. They recognise, then, that it is this terra which has enabled their endurance, or their antigos'. Hence, even when assigned a price, its value is widely regarded as exceeding calculation.

A similar logic applies to the baldios: on the day we were travelling to Lisbon, Aida, who is currently the President of the Directive Board of the Baldios, told me "the Court wants to know the 'value' of the baldio. But that makes no sense, it makes no sense to talk about value, that's not what it's about[104]." Aida's struggle to make sense of the Court's order or to explain what their connection to terra *is* is not a failure of language, but an index of incommensurability (Lassila 2024a), e.g., the impossibility of translating affective, emplaced lifeways into the legible metrics of the market, or the state.

In refusing to sell private land or to rent communal lands for large sums of money, as well as refusing monetary compensation following the administrative easement, inhabitants are fundamentally questioning what it means to give value to a life-giving substance such as land, thus suggesting that there are other, alternative modes of valuation which both challenge and exceed the dominant conception of land as a commodity ready to be sold. This politics of refusal aligns with eco-feminist understandings of land not as a dead resource but a living entity which one has the responsibility to care for (Mies and Shiva 2014; Haraway 2016; Puig de la Bellacasa 2017). As Maria – a farmer and, as most women in Covas, a caretaker (of older relatives) – expressed during an interview:

101 "O dinheiro não dura para sempre".
102 "Vendem, mas depois acabam por ficar sem terrenos e sem dinheiro, porque o dinheiro já o gastaram e agora não têm mais nada".
103 "Se a mina vier, são sete terrenos que perco. Entre terrenos, lameiros... / Mas eles têm de lhe pagar. / Pois têm, mas o dinheiro pra que serve? O dinheiro nem pró cu serve. É como diz a moda: serve para comprar o papel, mas não serve nem pra limpar o cu. Você o que é que come depois? Das carvalhas, tiro lenha, tiro tudo. O dinheiro pra que serve?"
104 "O Tribunal quer saber o valor do baldio. Não faz sentido, não faz sentido falar de valor, não é disso que se trata".
105 "[Os terrenos] são sagrados. É o que me deixaram, é o que me foi deixado. Dos meus pais, dos meus avós. E isso para mim é sagrado. Eu, para mim, um terreno... posso perder por questões de saúde, mas nunca o perderia, nunca o iria vender por outras

> "[the fields] are *sacred*. It's what they've left me, it's what has been left to me. My parents', my grandparents'. And that's sacred to me. For me, a piece of land... I could lose it for health reasons, but I would never lose it, I would never sell it for other reasons. I could sell it if someone's life was at risk and couldn't afford [the treatment]. A relative, or a friend, or a neighbour, but I would never trade it. Even more so for a cause that will affect everything [referring to the mining project].[105]"

The refusal to sell – incomprehensible and irrational within the logic of homo economicus and market rationality – suggests that land is a piece of land, but *not only* (de la Cadena 2015; 2019): it is the legacy of their antigos, the living memory of the sustenance of past, present and future generations, and an intimately known and loved place. During an event at a university to which he had been invited and had asked me to accompany him, Nelson, a farmer and environmental defender from Covas, told the audience:

> "As far as we're concerned, the fields are *priceless* because it has already been my parents' sustainability and it can be my children's and grandchildren's. I have no legitimacy to sell a plot of land that will become unviable. We can't destroy what gives us life. And it's not just ours, it's ours and everyone's, we're preserving everyone's life[106]."

By stating that this is "everyone's life," Nelson highlights how their practices of caring for their place are inseparable from the preservation of life more broadly, thus acknowledging ecological interdependencies. In doing so, he underscores one of the main points of contestation: inhabitants conceive their modo de vida as a "truly sustainable" form of inhabiting and caring for the territory, in direct opposition to the extractive logic of mining.

Moreover, when categorising the fields as "priceless" or "sacred," Nelson and Maria are rejecting their reduction to a marketable asset, instead foregrounding a form of value that exceeds economic calculation. In Muehlebach's ethnography about movements resisting water privatization across Europe, she noted how, for her interlocutors, the "value of water is, even when priced, ultimately incalculable and immeasurable and thus incommensurable with an abstract market logic" (2023, 4), calling this as a "foundational incommensurability" (139). In Barroso, likewise, I suggest that, in refusing to sell, and in insisting that this place and this land are *nosso* (theirs) – e.g., valued in highly localized ways, carrying memories, affections, stories –, people are reaffirming the incommensurable value of *their* place and *their* (way of) life, thus expressing a respectful commitment to the inappropriability[107] of their terra. This, as Muehlebach also noted (2023, 8), bears striking resemblance to Indigenous mobilizations.

Inhabitants are-with (cf. de la Cadena 2019) their terra (here, place-land) in such a way that selling land, renting the baldios, or accepting the mining project would signal the erasure of their own existence. Fundamentally, then, the refusal to be rendered commodified according to extractivist imperatives represents an insistence on another way of being in the world – to be emplaced and in *sossego*. As Governo, a retired forestry worker, told me during one of the bloqueios we did together, "we don't want to negotiate nor do we want money; we want our *sossego*[108]," or, in the words of Maria, "our life option was to remain here[109]." It is precisely in their "recalcitrant persistence" on remaining as they are and refusing to be colonised by the totalizing logic of the modern capitalist project that these place-based struggles are so "profoundly political" (Blaser 2025, 93). In refusing and resisting extractivism, while simultaneously enacting and affirming other ways of being, relating, knowing, and living – other "life projects" (cf. Blaser 2004) –, based on close relations to place, these struggles interrupt, at least temporarily, the coloniality

questões. Podia vender caso houvesse alguém que estivesse em risco de vida e não tivesse dinheiro para pagar [o tratamento]. Um familiar, ou um amigo, ou um vizinho, mas nunca o trocaria. Ainda mais para uma causa que vai afetar tudo".

106 "No nosso entender, os terrenos não têm preço porque já foi a sustentabilidade dos meus pais e pode ser dos meus filhos e netos. Eu não tenho legitimidade nenhuma para vender um terreno que vai ficar inviabilizado. Não podemos destruir o que nos dá vida. E não é só nosso – é nosso e de todos, estamos a preservar a vida de todos".

107 Inappropriability is the condition of something which cannot be appropriated, taken possession of, or be converted into property.

108 "E nós não queremos negociar nem dinheiro, nós queremos o nosso sossego".

109 "A nossa opção de vida foi ficarmos cá".

that makes the world one (Escobar 2017). In this light, the struggle over lithium mining in Covas is not only socioenvironmental: it is also a politico-ontological conflict between divergent ways of valuing, living, imagining, and being-with place, land, as well as with one's own past, present and future. It is about fears over land, water and air destruction, as well as fears about losing an entire *modo de vida*, which has been sustained over generations.

Conclusions

The banner hanging in the nets of the communal football pitch of Covas do Barroso reminds me how this place has become the site of multiple converges, woven together by affective attachments and relations between people, other animals, rivers, forests, and mountains. A growing and shared love for Barroso resists letting this place be translated according to Statist, capitalist, and extractivist grammars. Hence why we sing "Barroso is not to be sold, it is to be loved and defended[110]" in protests. This slogan – which echoes Indigenous mobilizations to protect land, water, and life and which was inspired by the encounter between Barrosões and the Zapatistas – encapsulates the foundational incommensurability between this place and capitalist-extractivist commodification.

In line with (eco)feminist and political ecologists (Weszkalnys 2016; González-Hidalgo and Zografos 2017; Ødegaard and Rivera-Andía 2019; Sefarini 2019; 2021; Velicu et al. 2026), this article has explored how affect – and, particularly, place's affective fabric – operates as a powerful mobilizing force in the context of land struggles. In doing so, this paper resonates and advances contemporary decolonial feminist conceptualisations of *cuerpo-territorio*, which foreground the ontological inseparability of the body and the territory (Cabnal 2018; Caretta et al. 2020; Zaragocin and Caretta 2020; Glockner et al. 2024).

This article has argued that opposition to lithium mining in Covas do Barroso emerges not only as a reaction to environmental degradation, but as a defence of a modo de vida – a particular way of living, being, and relating, enacted through ancestral practices oriented towards emplaced, fostering a profound sense of place belonging. Inhabitants of Covas experience themselves as of this place, bound by historical, affective, and material ties. It is these connections that extractive logics disrupt. What unfolds is not merely a story of resistance, but one of reasserting a world where land and place are not just resources but the grounds of life itself. Resistance, thus, became an expression of re-existence. In Covas do Barroso, re-existence is a refusal to sever the threads (*vínculos*) that tie people to *their* place – it is a struggle over the very conditions that make life possible and meaningful. As Fabianna Li (2015, 142) reminds us, such struggles are never final: they persist as long as the lifeways of Barroso are enacted by those who inhabit and defend this place, even as pressures of mining expansion continue to unfold.

Acknowledgements

I am deeply grateful to the anonymous reviewers for generously taking the time to read and comment on my work, and for their constructive feedback, which helped me sharpen and refine my arguments. My thanks also go to the Editors of this Special Issue for organizing this important collection and for their thoughtful revisions of my article. I owe a special gratitude to Xander Dunlap for consistently and enthusiastically encouraging my work, as well as for his insightful feedback on the revised version of this manuscript. I am likewise grateful to Michelle Geraerts, my good friend and colleague, who offered valuable comments on an earlier draft and whose kindness, generosity, and friendship I deeply cherish. Above all, my greatest and deepest appreciation goes to my companions in Barroso, who have, for the past four years, made me feel at home in Covas; and with whom I have learned and grown immensely. I am forever grateful for your beautiful and powerful determination and for the tremendous trust you place on me. Obrigada. Seguimos, juntas.

110 "O Barroso não se vende, se ama e se defende".
112 "É o que faz sentido".

CONCLUSIONS

It has been almost ten years since a prospective lithium mining project arrived in Covas do Barroso. During this period, life has unfolded through its ordinary rhythms: people have died, children have been born, crops have been harvested, and animals have been cared for. Alongside these continuities, other transformations emerged in response to the arrival of the mining project: marriages have ended, drilling tubes have been dug, legal actions have been filed, surveillance cameras have been installed, lands have been temporarily seized. Covas do Barroso has been profoundly reshaped – at times imperceptibly, others abruptly – by the arrival of new flows: of people, information, capital, infrastructures. These flows do not simply pass through this place – they sediment within it, reconfiguring relations between humans and other-than-humans, as well as between past, present, and future. This thesis has been concerned with the particular ways in which these transformations unfold.

Within a global context of intensified extractivism, attending to how prospective extractive sites are both transformed and actively respond is an urgent political and scholarly task. Based on one year of ethnographic fieldwork in Covas do Barroso, complemented by sustained engagement with and in this place since 2021, this research has asked: How does the arrival and expansion of a lithium mining project intersect with and reshape existing place-making practices and senses of belonging in Covas do Barroso? Two sub-questions further structured my analysis: (1) How do Barrosões experience, conceptualize, and contest the transformations brought by the lithium mining project? (2) How does the project affect Barrosões' relations with mountains, rivers, meadows, and the diverse lifeforms they sustain?

To answer these questions, I sought to bring the readers into the lifeworlds of Barrosões at a moment of profound uncertainty – when the mine is not yet operational, but its effects are already perceptible. Through an ethnographic engagement with everyday life practices and relations, and their intersection with the fast-approaching mining project, I have argued that:

1. The mining project is understood and experienced as part of broader historical processes of marginalization, dispossession, and ontological devaluation of rural lifeworlds (cf. **Chapter I.**);

2. The mining project is experienced as a profound existential disruption which unsettles socioecological, territorial, temporal, and affective relations (cf. **Chapter I., Chapter II.** and **Chapter III.**);

3. The arrival of the mining project has catalysed a renewed connection to place, politicizing inhabitants' relations with mountains, rivers, and meadows, and the diverse lifeforms they sustain, thus strengthening their sense of place-belonging, and fostering a process of territorial reappropriation through the politicization of their place-based *modo de vida* (way of life) – a process which I have conceptualised through the lenses of "re-existence" (cf. **Chapter III.**);

4. As part of this process, inhabitants strategically engage with state instruments while maintaining relational enactments of place that cannot be reduced to legible logics of property or commensuration – a practice which I have defined as "strategic equivocation" (cf. **Chapter II**.).

Taken together, these arguments suggest that what is at stake in Covas do Barroso is not merely a dispute over resources, development trajectories, economic compensations, or political opinions. Rather, it concerns the possibility of sustaining *o que é nosso* ("what is ours"), which, as I have argued, refers to inhabitants' emplaced modo de vida. Resisting mining, in this context, is about defending place not as a mere location, but a relational, meaningful, and loved world, which is deeply imbricated in

the constitution of one's existence. Insofar as inhabitants are-with place – bound together in complex relations through which place fabricates them and they fabricate place –, resisting mining is a form of defending one's existence. I have therefore argued that the struggle against the prospective lithium mining in Covas do Barroso is best understood as a struggle for re-existence.

In this **Conclusion**, I bring together the different chapters, allowing conceptual and theoretical connections between them to emerge. I reflect on some of the main academic contributions this thesis has put forward while suggesting avenues for future research.

In this thesis, I have approached the European hegemonic energy transition as an onto-political project that sustains colonial, capitalist and extractivist forms of onto-territorial occupation under the guise of climate salvation. I have done so by showing how it operates as an epistemic device which colonizes our imaginations, by constraining the possibilities of the future to a narrowly defined decarbonisation, resting on the assumption that mining, particularly lithium, is inevitable (cf. **Chapter I.**). This colonization of our imaginations – which makes lithium mining a "green infernal alternative" (cf. Stengers and Pignarre 2005) – is further enabled by the historical devaluation, marginalization, and subalternization of the territories where lithium mining is projected to occur.

In the case of Covas do Barroso, these colonial onto-logics operate at two interrelated levels: on the one hand, Portugal as a semi-peripherical country, and, on the other, Trás-os-Montes as an internal periphery (cf. Pusceddu 2024) (cf. **Chapter I.**). Currently justified under climate and energy policies, the mining project builds upon the historical structural neglect and abandonment which these territories have been subjected to. It is this fabricated emptiness – coupled with the construction of rural lifeworlds as *less than* – which justifies new extractivist incursions (cf. **Chapter I.**). Lithium mining, then, is not an isolated event: it is embedded in a long history of rural internal colonization linked to industrial or renewable energy projects. Historically, rural territories and their inhabitants have been portrayed as obstacles to "development" and "progress," a logic which is now being extended to frame them as obstacles to decarbonization. Against this backdrop, inhabitants of Covas reclaim their way of life as "truly sustainable," a perception which was reinforced by the classification of this region as World Agricultural Heritage (cf. **Chapter I.** and **Chapter III.**).

By approaching green extractivism as an ontological project – premised on the devaluation of rural lifeworlds and on the epistemic coloniality of reducing and compressing the future to a narrowly-defined decarbonisation (cf. **Chapter I.**) –, I have sought to analyse how the transformations brought by extractivism were affecting Covas and its existences.

Early on, I noticed how the mining project was experienced as a profound disruption of everyday life: familial and interpersonal relations were shattered, social relations destabilised, rivers and mountains wounded, communal lands seized, imaginaries of the future disrupted, and even Barrosões' dreams were impacted by the arrival of mining (cf. **Contextual Background, Chapter I., Chapter II.** and **Tralhão I.**). These kinds of disruptions lead me to realise that the mining project is experienced as an intrusion affecting the essence of being-in-the-world (cf. **Chapter I.** and **Chapter II.**). Mining is not simply a social, political, or ecological issue. As lived and articulated by many inhabitants, even those who do not reject the project (cf. **Chapter I.**), it constitutes a profound existential disturbance that destabilises their sense of continuity and place-belonging (cf. **Chapter II.** and **Chapter III.**).

The disruptions introduced by the mining project, however, renewed, reactivated and intensified inhabitants' sense of belonging to place. Throughout the thesis, I showed how the perceived threat of the mine catalysed processes of territorial reappropriation, namely by prompting renewed engagement with communal governance structures, such as assembleias de compartes (cf. **Chapter II.**), as well as a renewed

connection to the monte through the activation of situated knowledge or the engagement with strategic defence practices (cf. **Chapter II.**). The arrival and expansion of mining has likewise fostered expressions of pride in everyday practices and reactivated a sense of self and collective worth in the face of imposed representations of backwardness (cf. **Chapter I.** and **Chapter III.**).

I suggest, then, that the arrival and expansion of lithium mining politicized certain practices, knowledges, and attachments. The threat of mining has politicized what inhabitants name as *o que é nosso* ("what is ours"), which corresponds to their modo de vida (way of life). I conceptualize this modo de vida as a dynamic assemblage of social, property, labour, familial, and ecological relations, reproduced across generations, through place-based practices which sustain life in this place, while fostering a profound sense of place-belonging (cf. **Chapter III.**). These place-based practices are, among others, the torna da água (cf. **Prelude**), the relations with the monte (cf. **Chapter II.**), and the fumeiro (cf. **Contextual Background and Chapter III.**). Scrupulously followed for centuries, and rooted in place, these practices are grounding infrastructures orienting this community's modo de vida towards emplacement (cf. Blaser 2025).

An attention to the relations enacted by those practices allowed me to examine how place is made through ancestrality, memory, movement, and affect. I came to see this place as one which is deeply known and loved. Every location in the monte, for example, has a name, passed down by the antigos (cf. **Chapter II**.). Likewise, during the torna da água, the plots of land and the days of the water wheel have their own names (**Prelude)**. These names come from topographic locations or family lineages, indicating that a whole body of land- and place-situated knowledge is imprinted in these practices. Similar practices of naming places after humans are found in Quilombola[111] territories (Nobre et al. 2020). Although inhabitants in Barroso do not relate to water or to the monte as kin in the exact same way that some Indigenous or Quilombola populations do (Jewett and Garavan 2018; Strang 2023), these practices enact a particular kind of place-belonging, rooted in ancestral affective connections. The torna da água, while irrigating meadows, cropland, and vegetable gardens, also weaves together the ancestors of different families: the inherited rights and obligations, the shared rules, the named plots of land configure a network of relatedness in which belonging is enacted through memory and continuity (cf. **Prelude**). Inhabitants' relation with the monte, likewise, comes from having been there with their antigos, namely with one's parents or grandparents, enacting a relation to these lands grounded in memory and movement (cf. **Chapter II.**).

I have thus come to understand how these practices inaugurate a particular relation to place in which this place is *theirs* – which should be understood not in a proprietary sense but in a sense of belonging to, of being-with (cf. de la Cadena 2015; 2019). If, then, inhabitants are-with their place, refusing mining is a refusal to sever the very essence of being.

As a consequence, I argue that the arrival and expansion of the prospective mining project inaugurated a "politics of place" for "re-existence." "Politics of place" is a concept I borrow from Escobar (2001; 2008) to define struggles in which place is not only the object but also the subject of contestation. "Re-existence" is a concept I borrow from Porto-Gonçalves (2006) to refer to place-based movements which resist extractivism by affirming life-centred ways of being, knowing, and relating to place. In the case of Covas, "re-existence" refers to the process through which inhabitants are-with place in such a way that defending it becomes inseparable from defending their own existence. What is at stake is an ancestral and existential relation inhabitants have with this place – *their* place. What is at stake is their modo de vida.

In Covas do Barroso, to resist mining is to insist on being: to defend and enact ways of knowing, doing, and living that are rooted in this place, in the memory of their antigos, and the practices which have sustained – and continue to sustain – life across generations (cf. **Chapter II.** and **Chapter III.**).

111 *Quilombolas* are descendants of enslaved Africans who escaped during the colonial and imperial periods in Brazil, forming resistance communities known as quilombos.

This insistence on being – what might be called a politics of continuity – is not about reproducing the past for its own sake. Inhabitants sustain and defend place-based ancestral practices because they make life possible across generations. According to many farmers, the torna da água, the way they irrigate meadows, or the way they walk with animals everyday are practices which "make sense[112]." They make sense because they sustain life. This therefore gives rise to a particular politics of sustainability – sustainability, in Covas, is a lived practice, grounded in accumulated knowledge and shared memory, rather than an abstract ideal imposed from above. As Rui, a farmer and environmental defender, noted, the recognition of Barroso as a World Agricultural Heritage site was granted because "we did not have to do more nor less than what we already do[113]." This resonates with Escobar's (2016, 19-20) conception of ancestrality not as "an intransigent attachment to the past," but as a future-oriented practice grounded in "living memory" (see also: Krenak 2022).

In this sense, I came to understand that this relation to place (this modo de vida) also implies a particular relation to time. Inhabitants are defending a particular way of inhabiting time, which is lived through rhythms that are cyclical and circular[114], attuned to the specificities of place, and grounded in the living memory of their antigos. The mining project, on the contrary, imposes a linear, accelerated, future-oriented, and extremely short (it has a predicted timeline of seventeen years) temporal regime (cf. **Chapter I.**). On the ground, it disrupts place-based rhythms of life by bringing urgency, immediacy, and acceleration (cf. **Chapter II.**). This disruption of everyday rhythms is also a disruption of ancestral rhythms insofar as the practices sustaining inhabitants' modo de vida have been reproduced across generations. In this sense, extractivist incursions do not only disturb place, but also the conditions of continuity of life across multiple temporalities.

Against this urgency and fastness, inhabitants insist on their *sossego*: they insist on being-with place, which implies attending to the rhythms which sustain collective life. They insist on planting a collective vegetable garden (cf. **Tralhão II**.), for example, as a response to the expansion of mining. Planting this garden is a way of enacting a relation to place which is not only reciprocal, but also has a particular temporality. It is not immediate like the seconds which took the machine to cut the trees and carve the soil – it took months of seeding, tending, watering, and, then, harvesting. Against the accelerated temporality of modernity's "big story" (cf. Blaser 2025), a project premised on its continuous expansion, inhabitants insist on cultivating forms of temporal coexistence which are-with, rather than against, place.

By understanding that people are-with place, through practices reproduced across generations, I could then make sense of inhabitants' politics of refusal, e.g., refusing the mine, refusing to sell private land, refusing to rent communal lands, refusing any type of economic compensation. From a purely rational homo economicus logic, refusing to sell private land for big sums of money is irrational. However, for inhabitants who are-with Covas, a piece of land is not only (cf. de la Cadena 2015) land – it is also the living memory of the sustenance of past, present, and future generations, as well as an intimately known and deeply loved place (cf. **Chapter II.** and **Chapter III.**).

I therefore argue that inhabitants' refusal is based on a "foundational incommensurability" (cf. Muehlebach 2023) between their valuation of their *terra* – here, meaning both land and place – and corporate and state valuations. While the former operates within a framework of economic value and compensation, inhabitants emphasize that their terra is the basis of their existence, thereby challenging the

113 "Não tivemos que fazer nem mais nem menos do que já fazíamos".
114 As inhabitants used to say, "every year is the same:" in February, the *batatas temporãs* (early potatoes) are planted; in April, the *batatas serôdias* (late potatoes) are planted and corn is sown; in May, the *miudezas* (vegetables in the garden) and the *sementeiras* (any other seedings) are sown and planted; in June, the batatas temporãs are harvested; by mid-July, the hay is cut and rolled; in August, the *batatas serôdias* are collected; September is the time for silage-making and grape harvest; in October, the corn is husked; in late November and early December, comes the pig slaughter, followed by the *fumeiro* (curing of meats), and, finally, in January, comes the olive harvest. "Everything has its time," they would say. Gardening as a method allowed me to attune to this temporal rhythm, even if only momentarily.
115 "Que vai ser de nós?
116 Real names are used in this conclusion

very premise that it can be made commensurable at all (cf. **Chapter III.**). These refusals point to the impossibility of translating inhabitants' relational and affective relations-with *terra* into the economic metrics of the state and corporations.

However, despite this foundational incommensurability, inhabitants strategically mobilise and engage with state instruments as a practice of defence – what I have conceptualised as "strategic equivocation" (cf. **Chapter II.**). I define "strategic equivocation" as those practices through which inhabitants translate their relations into legible claims, without, however, renouncing to the excess which they represent to the dominant grammars of property or cartography.

Strategic equivocation is a useful lens for understanding socioecological struggles where incommensurabilities are at stake, because, in such contexts, inhabitants often engage with state structures while maintaining relational ways of being that exceed them (e.g., di Giminiani 2013; 2015; de la Cadena 2015; Li 2015; Blacker 2021). As Ailton Krenak suggests, it is sometimes necessary to "occupy those worlds" (2022, 90) – not as a form of assimilation, but as a condition for making claims politically effective. Strategic equivocation names this practice: a way of navigating and mobilising dominant regimes of legibility without surrendering to them. In doing so, it provides a conceptual tool for grasping how place-based struggles sustain incommensurable lifeworlds while engaging with the structures that seek to contain and erase them. Strategic equivocation can thus be understood as a weapon of re-existence – it is a practice which allows inhabitants to resist, defending their place and their own existence, without surrendering to the excess that their world-making practices represent for the state and the company.

Towards Pluriversal Politics in Europe?

In this thesis, I have approached the place-based struggle in Covas do Barroso through the political ontology framework. This framework, which emerged in Latin America, where modern lexicons appeared insufficient to analyse what was at stake (de la Cadena and Blaser 2018), has often told the "stories of peoples in spite of Europe" (Blaser 2013a). Much less academic attention has been devoted to contexts where Indigenous is not a political category (Blaser 2004). In Europe specifically, land conflicts are often framed as matters of farmers' livelihoods or environmental concerns, rather than as questions about different forms of existence (Hokkanen 2024). With this thesis, by explicitly engaging with political ontology, I sought to bring those discussions to the metropole, by making visible processes of world-making which do not necessarily take place in the margins of modernity, but rather within the margins of its assumed core.

Attending to a rural region in a peripheral European country opened up a set of questions that remain underexplored in anthropological discussions. Can concepts forged in Indigenous struggles travel to the metropole? If so, how? And what might they reveal, or obscure, when they do? Rather than asking whether Barroso is "Indigenous," I took the 'ontological' not as a set of beliefs or cosmologies but rather as realities enacted in practices (cf. Mol 2002). By focusing on how realities are enacted in practices, I have showed how people become and are-with place, in such a way that tearing them apart would turn them into something else (cf. de la Cadena 2019). This allowed me to analyse more subtle – yet no less consequential – ontological divergences, namely: between place as commodity or place as belonging; between temporalities oriented toward rapid extraction and those grounded in maintenance, continuity, and care. This suggests that, even within contexts profoundly shaped by structures and practices enacting modern dualist ontologies (e.g., ownership of land; weight of Catholicism), strong relational modes of existence persist. In other words, ontological difference in Europe may not take the form of radically distinct cosmologies, as documented in many Indigenous contexts, but can instead reside in the tensions, overlaps, and partial connections between dominant dualist frameworks and lived relational practices. Future research could delve into a comparative study across different rural European

context to identify other relational modes of emplaced existence and under which specific conditions are they able to gain visibility, legitimacy, and political traction.

Crucially, these ontological debates are inseparable from broader histories of marginalization. Just as Indigenous communities have been racialized and Othered as "primitive" and "in need of development," rural regions such as Barroso are likewise framed as backward and in need of progress. The case of Barroso reveals how land struggles in Europe are entangled with internal forms of coloniality, whereby certain populations and territories are rendered inferior and expendable, thus available for extraction and occupation. By focusing on the colonial onto-logics through which certain practices, namely land expropriation for energy projects, are justified, I traced a colonial continuum between the state's relation to its rural territories and its overseas colonies. Indeed, during Salazar's regime, practices of territorial occupation in rural Portugal operated according to the same onto-logics as extra-metropolitan colonization practices, although the scales of violence, devastation, and extinctions was invariably greater. With this approach, I sought to contribute to debates on the logics of internal colonization within Europe's own borders, moving beyond comparative engagements with the Global South. An avenue for future research could extend this framework through postcolonial comparison with land-based conflicts in Brazil, Mozambique, or other former Portuguese colonies.

This analytical sensitivity not only provincializes dominant understandings of Europe as fully subsumed under a single modern ontology, because, "indeed, universal effects can never fully stabilise itself as the universe" (Blaser 2025, 163), but also contributes to broader efforts to multiply – to decolonize – Europe itself. I argue, therefore, that Europe is not outside the pluriverse, but one of the sites from where it emerges.

The notion of the 'pluriverse' rests upon the assumption that Western modernity has not only oppressed knowledges, bodies, and territories, but also entire world-making practices (Escobar 2017). In this sense, the pluriverse can be understood as a tool which enhances appreciation for the multiple ways of knowing and being in the world, thus decentring models of science and development which have been portrayed as universally true and good (Paulson 2018) – what Blaser (2025) names "modernity's big story." Away from universality, political ontology stresses the importance of the pluriverse (Escobar 2017; de la Cadena and Blaser 2018; Blaser 2025). Pluriversal politics, then, have a commitment to embrace the multiplicity of realities enacted in practice, which also supposes a commitment to challenge the coloniality which aims to suppress pluriversal multiplicity and make the world one (Escobar 2015; 2017; Blaser 2025).

Within the context of the European hegemonic energy transition – which presents lithium mining as the inevitable future and decarbonisation as the "big story" for all, therefore creating a mono-narrative and erasing any Other possibilities – it is particularly important to resist this epistemic coloniality. As I have demonstrated throughout the thesis, this "big story" not only colonizes our imaginations, but also attempts to erase the specificity of places, while portraying them as obstacles to its expansion, and dismissing their own stories. Indeed, hegemonic discourses frequently portray struggles in Europe against decarbonisation projects as NIMBYst (Not In My Backyard), ignorant, or irrational. Against this backdrop, I sought to de-stigmatise such struggles, by instead reframing them as vital enactments of love for land and place. Crucially, in resisting and challenging modernity's big story, they are interrupting, at least momentarily, these colonial-extractivist onto-logics *and* opening up pluriversal alternatives.

Future research could further explore the pluriversal alternatives emerging from land-based struggles in Europe, particularly in the context of contesting dominant decarbonisation pathways. One promising avenue would be to examine the role of affective alliances (cf. Krenak 2022) between rural communities, environmental movements, and the lifeforms they seek to defend – whether rivers, mountains, or other beings – in sustaining pluriversal politics and challenging hegemonic narratives beyond growth-centred futures. Such an approach would also call for methodological experimentation, including multimodal and arts-based practices that decentre text while foregrounding embodied forms of knowledge, especially the body in its relational entanglements with place.

Before Closing,

I invite my readers to pause for a second. Close your eyes. Breathe in. And out. Stretch if you need to. Feel where your body is. Then come back to this text.

I would like you to remain with one final image: *the impossibility of leaving.*

What does it mean to be unable to leave? What does it mean to be so deeply bound to a place that life elsewhere is unthinkable? What does it mean to be confronted with its possible destruction? How does that feel in the body? How much grief does that thought hold?

In Covas, I caught a glimpse of it. Unbearable.

The mere thought provokes an immediate reaction: "what would it *be* of us? [115]"

As I have learned over the years, there is no other plan beyond simply existing here. They remain because they *are* by remaining. Governo[116], during one bloqueio we took part in together, described leaving Barroso as becoming a bird in a cage. And, as many people would say: "to take me from here is like killing me[117]."

It is this profound love, woven through the beauty of this place and the memories it holds, that makes inhabitants resist and remain. As João, a construction worker, once told me over dinner at his table, while we talked about the looming possibility of the mine and his refusal to leave: "I may die, but I will die standing. I will die here[118]."

117 "Tirarem-me daqui é como matarem-me".
118 "Posso morrer, mas morro de pé. Morro aqui".

Summary

This dissertation is an ethnographic account of the place-based struggle that emerged in response to the arrival and expansion of an open-pit lithium mining project in Covas do Barroso, a village in northern Portugal, in the mountainous region of Trás-os-Montes. Grounded in ethnographic fieldwork and sustained engagement with this place since 2021, it examines how the arrival of mining reconfigures temporal horizons, relational worlds, and everyday practices. It asks how the arrival and expansion of lithium mining intersect with and reshape place-making practices and senses of belonging, by exploring how inhabitants – Barrosões – experience, conceptualise, and contest these transformations, and how their relations with mountains, rivers, meadows, and the lifeforms they sustain are affected. By adopting a political ontology framework for the analysis of extractivist conflicts, this thesis approaches the struggle in Covas do Barroso as an onto-political conflict.

The thesis reveals that the mining project is understood as part of broader historical processes of marginalisation, dispossession, and the ontological devaluation of rural lifeworlds. Moreover, it is experienced as a profound existential disruption that unsettles socioecological, territorial, temporal, and affective relations. Mining is not simply a political, economic, or environmental issue; it constitutes an intrusion into the very essence of being-in-the-world, destabilising continuity, belonging, and future imaginaries. At the same time, the arrival of the mining project has catalysed a renewed connection to place, politicising inhabitants' relations with mountains, rivers, and meadows, and the diverse lifeforms they sustain. This has strengthened their sense of place-belonging and fostered a process of territorial reappropriation through the politicisation of their place-based *modo de vida* (way of life).

This process of politicisation and reattachment is conceptualised as "re-existence:" a form of resistance grounded in the defence and enactment of the conditions of existence itself, which are inseparable from place. Insofar as inhabitants are-with place – bound together in complex relations through which place fabricates them and they fabricate place – resisting mining becomes a form of defending one's existence. Refusal – whether to accept the project, sell land, or accept compensation – emerges from a foundational incommensurability between inhabitants' relational connection with place and the economic logics of state and corporate actors. Despite this incommensurability, inhabitants strategically engage with state and corporate mechanisms to make their claims politically viable, while enacting relations with place that cannot be reduced to legible grammars – a practice of defence conceptualised this dissertation conceptualises as "strategic equivocation."

By mobilising political ontology in a European context, this thesis highlights how ontological differences – between place as commodity and place as belonging, and between extractive and relational temporalities – persist within the margins of modernity's assumed core. It argues that such struggles are not merely local conflicts but openings towards pluriversal politics. Within a context of hyper-extractivism, this thesis reveals that the struggle in Covas do Barroso is neither marginal nor isolated, but a crucial site for understanding the stakes of contemporary energy transitions. By foregrounding the defence of relational lifeworlds, it shows how this place-based struggle is challenging the colonial inevitability of extractivism and opening up possibilities for pluriversal worlds.

Samenvatting

Dit proefschrift is een etnografie van de plekgebonden strijd tegen de komst en uitbreiding van een dagbouwmijn voor lithium in Covas do Barroso, een dorp in Noord-Portugal, in het bergachtige gebied van Trás-os-Montes. Gebaseerd op etnografisch veldwerk en een voortdurende betrokkenheid bij deze plek sinds 2021, onderzoekt het proefschrift hoe de komst van demijnbouw de temporele horizonnen, relationele werelden en dagelijkse praktijken herschikken. Het proefschrift stelt de vraag hoe de komst en uitbreiding van de lithiummijnbouw de plekgebonden praktijken en het gevoel van toebehoring doorkruizen en hervormen, door te onderzoeken hoe de inwoners – de Barrosões – deze transformaties ervaren, conceptualiseren en betwisten, en hoe hun relaties met de bergen, rivieren, weiden en de levensvormen die ze in stand houden, worden beïnvloed. Door een politiek-ontologisch kader te hanteren voor de analyse van extractivistische conflicten, benadert dit proefschrift de strijd in Covas do Barroso als een onto-politiek conflict.

Het proefschrift onthult dat het mijnbouwproject wordt begrepen als onderdeel van bredere historische processen van marginalisering, onteigening en de ontologische waardevermindering van de leefwereld op het platteland. Bovendien wordt het ervaren als een diepgaande existentiële verstoring die sociaal-ecologische, territoriale, temporele en affectieve verhoudingen ontwricht. Mijnbouw is niet simpelweg een politiek, economisch of milieuprobleem; het vormt een inbreuk op de essentie van het zijn-in-de-wereld, die continuïteit, toebehoring en toekomstvisies destabiliseert. Tegelijkertijd heeft de komst van het mijnbouwproject een hernieuwde verbondenheid met plek teweeggebracht, waardoor de relatie van de bewoners met bergen, rivieren en weiden, en de diverse levensvormen die ze in stand houden, gepolitiseerd is. Dit heeft hun gevoel van toebehoring met de plek versterkt en een proces van territoriale terugtoe-eigening bevorderd door de politisering van hun plekgebonden modo de vida (levenswijze).

Dit proces van politisering en hernieuwde verbondenheid wordt geconceptualiseerd als "re- existentie": een vorm van verzet geworteld in de verdediging en verwerkelijking van de existentievoorwaarden zelf, die onlosmakelijk verbonden zijn met plek. Voor zover bewoners mét de plek zijn – verbonden in complexe relaties waardoor de plek hen maakt en zij de plek maken – wordt verzet tegen mijnbouw een vorm van verdediging van de eigen existentie. Weigering – van het accepteren van het project, het verkopen van land of het accepteren van compensatie – komt voort uit een fundamentele onverenigbaarheid tussen de relationele band van bewoners met de plek en de economische logica van staats- en bedrijfsactoren. Ondanks deze onverenigbaarheid gaan bewoners strategisch in op staats- en bedrijfsmechanismen om hun eisen politiek haalbaar te maken, terwijl ze relaties met plek onderhouden die niet te reduceren zijn tot leesbare grammatica's – een verde igingspraktijk die in dit proefschrift wordt geconceptualiseerd als "strategische ambiguïteit."

Door politieke ontologie in een Europese context te mobiliseren, belicht dit proefschrift hoe ontologische verschillen – tussen plek als handelswaar en plek als toebehoring, en tussen extractieve en relationele temporaliteiten – voortbestaan binnen de marges van de veronderstelde kern van de moderniteit. Het proefschrift betoogt dat dergelijke strijd niet louter lokale conflicten zijn, maar openingen naar pluriversale politiek. Binnen een context van hyper-extractivisme onthult dit proefschrift dat de strijd in Covas do Barroso noch marginaal noch geïsoleerd is, maareen cruciale casus voor het begrijpen van wat er op het spel staat bij hedendaagse energietransities. Door de verdediging van relationele leefwerelden centraal te stellen, daagt deze plekgebonden strijd de koloniale onvermijdelijkheid van extractivisme uit en opent zij mogelijkheden voor pluriversale werelden.

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Glossary

Antigos | elders
Baldio | communally possessed lands
Bloqueio | the seven-month-long blockade of the company's excavator
Cantinho | literally, "little corner"
Compartes | commoners (inhabitants of Covas who possess and manage the baldios)
Levada | traditional irrigation channel
Modo de vida | way of life
Monte | local term used to designate the communally possessed lands surrounding Covas and, more broadly, the mountainous lands around the village
Tralhão | a manual dig used to separate the course of the water
Rego | a small stream of water
Sachola | a farm-hoe
Sossego | literally, "peace" or "quietude"

Acknowledgements

This PhD was a long journey. Along the way, many were the souls, spirits and bodies who have accompanied me. Aware of the impossibility of naming them all, or of even finding the words to do them full justice, I humbly take these last pages to express my gratitude to some of them.

I thank my supervisors – Cristóbal Bonelli, Enzo Rossi, and Paul Raekstad – for generously entrusting me with their confidence. Their main advice has always been "be confident!" I was always struck by how easily they would say it. It never sounded fully right. Over time, I learned I could – and indeed should – be confident. I learned to trust them – to trust that they trust me. This fostered my autonomy, independence, and freedom. Thank you for that. Cristóbal, thank you for challenging me to open up my initially clenched fists; for urging me to think harder; for pushing me to be more precise. Enzo, thank you for your pragmatic yet fierce spirit; for keeping things on track yet ensuring their quality; for having been there in almost every protest, demonstration or occupation I went to in Amsterdam – it is inspiring to find comrades within the higher walls of our ivory tower. Paul, thank you for being my first door into this University, for inspiring me with your works on prefigurative politics, and for always bringing the needed conceptual clarity to the table.

I thank Professor Mario Blaser for accepting to be part of my PhD Committee. Having been introduced to political ontology through his works, it is an immense privilege and an honour to have him engage so enthusiastically with my own works.

At the Department of Anthropology of the University of Amsterdam, I had the luck of crossing paths with Else Vogel and Vicent de Rooj, two wonderful pedagogues who taught me ethnographic methods. I hope this ethnography does small justice to what I have learned with you.

An enormous 'thank you' goes to my peers: Amanda Mokoena, Anne Kervers, Bérénice Boukaré, Butet Manurung, Emily Ragus, Linda Musariri, Joanna Lu, Maurizia Mezza, Pablo Ampuero Ruiz, Sandra Zaroufis, Shahana Siddiqi, Shivani Kaul, Sonja Evaldsson, and Zaydoun Hajjar. All of you have, in one way or another, shaped my doctoral trajectory: whether through discussing ideas, sharing anxieties, or watching your paths from afar. A special 'thank you' to those with whom I've shared an office: Anna Verbeeck, Jenske Bal, Laetitia van den Bergen, Laura van den Brink, René Nissen, Yicun Jin, and William Rosa. Our C5.02 will forever remain the most beautiful and alive of all the flex-rooms.

A personal word of thanks to Bérénice, Emily, Laetitia, and Pablo. To Bérénice, for joyfully sharing my passion for dancing and music, and equally angrily sharing my fears and frustrations with academia. To Emily, with whom I have shared so much of this doctoral journey: from starting out in Political Science and then moving to Anthropology, to taking the same ethnography classes that set the stage for our exciting fieldwork periods, and eventually returning to wrap up our writings while dealing with the stress of preparing for our defences and postdocs. Thank you for being a companion through the initial and final moments of this four-year-long journey. To Laetitia, for being my partner in crime in Amsterdam: in protests, nights out, morning coffees, late-night discussions; merci, meuf, for the interminable laughs and the never-ending intellectual exchanges. To Pablo, for his incredible generosity and support – for being the person I could always call in a moment of academic anxiety. Thank you for listening so carefully to my worries, and for steadfastly reading and commenting on my work. Thank you all: this dissertation would have not been done the same way without your friendship.

At the Amsterdam Institute for Social Sciences Research (AISSR), I thank Agnes Kiss, Muriël Kiesel, and Naziha Irassir for ensuring everything always ran smoothly, financially, logistically, and administratively; and Simon Cijsouw, who always assisted me timely with the many bureaucratic endeavours. The institutional support of the AISSR has undoubtedly given me the material conditions to successfully conduct this research – a computer; an office room; a good chair and a big laptop; free printing; subsidised rent; travel allowances.

These are priviledges I would never have had at a Portuguese University, and that so many of my friends and colleagues – even the rare ones with permanent contracts – still struggle to have in Southern Europe and elsewhere in the world. Inevitably, every time I walked the corridors of the UvA, I was reminded of the many existing privileges cemented in these infrastructures and of the unequivocal inequalities which continue to divide Southern and Northern Europe.

To be fair, though, I have to thank my centre: the Centre for Social Studies of the University of Coimbra (CES-UC). Here, I use the possessive pronoun the same way people from Covas refer to their mountains: not proprietarily, but rather carefully and respectfully. My centre as a place where I belong to. CES-UC was where I started my academic trajectory; there, I have had the privilege of learning-with the heat of street protests, artistic experimentation, and friendly companionship. During my PhD, I had the immense joy of being part of ECOSOC and was especially lucky to be part of the project GREENPATHS. GREENPATHS offered me the privilege of working and thinking alongside Gea Piccardi, Irina Velicu, Hestia Delibas, and Marcus Erridge, and gave me an additional institutional platform through which to disseminate my work. ECOSOC provided me with a collective academic space where joy, passion and care were at the centre of our endeavours. Thank you Ananda Martins, Eliane Rapchan, Flora Pereira, Gustavo García-Lopez, Joana Vaz Sousa, and Jonas Van Vossole for forming this beautiful collective – I hope to keep walking this path with you for many more years.

A special gratitude goes to António Carvalho and Xander Dunlap. António, my first mentor, for your initial academic teachings and your longstanding respect. Xander, for bravely encouraging my work from the very beginning and right until the end; thanks for being so unapologetically you, and for continuously confronting and disrupting academia.

Another muito obrigada goes to my companions of the Barrosã academic road: Diogo Sobral, Francisco Venes, and Tiago Patatas. I sometimes wish we had had more talks about our own works. And yet, I am grateful we didn't. Instead, we are bound by a beautiful friendship, mutual admiration, and heartfelt companionship.

Outside the walls of Academia, my biggest obrigada goes to those who have always been by my side.

To my family, for unconditionally believing in me.

To my siblings – Fred, Aurora, Leo, Júlio and Augusto – for teaching me joy and sadness, patience and frustration, silliness and responsibility. I love you more than any words can ever describe.

To my parents, my greatest fans, for being an endless source of intellectual inspiration and for the constant trust they place in me. To my father André, for listening to me and supporting me, allowing me to grow and thrive. To my mother Ana Luísa, who is always there, who never gives up on her job: "ser chata," and thus never lets me settle for anything less than the best version of myself. I love and admire you both profoundly.

To Elisabete and Olaf, thank you for the fine balance you bring into our lives.

To BUCHA, my other family, for celebrating my successes as if they were their own, and for always being there – holding me whilst devouring life. Um obrigada só não chega.

To Michelle and Yentl, colleagues, paranymphs, friends, life partners: thank you for loving me so deeply, for seeing me, for being-with me. Thank you for all the love and all the rage – for sharing my painful astonishment at the world's injustices, and for helping me make some bitter sense out of them and finding courageous love within the messiness. Thank you for the endless conversations about academia and our place in it; the endless tears and laughs about our experiences with men; and the never-ending talks about the whys and the hows of everything and anything. Thank you for being a home, one where venting, mumbling, crying, laughing, dreaming are shared experiences. Michelle, I wrote part of these acknowledgements from your

house, having you sat in front of me. You have blonde hair now, but I just can't forget the girl with blue hair I first met – the one whose profile picture had purple hair. And I just can't forget how after our first team meeting you were going to play a concert with your post-punk all-women band. Wow, I was mesmerised! And what a joy it is to call you a friend now. Better yet: a life partner. Thank you for inviting me into your life. Thank you for your softness, your generosity, your curiosity, your sensibility, your creativity. Yentl, you have named me "the earring girl," while wearing what were probably the coolest earrings ever. This is how we first connected at the PhD Welcoming Day: over earrings, and over our insatiable, unapologetically enthusiastic curiosity about the world. It was love at first sight. I remember so clearly that first day, when you encouraged me to move to the Anthropology Department and introduced me to everyone, making me feel welcome before I was even there. Thank you for wanting me in your life. Thank you for always giving me back such a critical mirror of myself, for your fierceful passion, and for your extraordinaire critical spirit. It is an honour to be your friend. I love you, girls.

To Kenza, my favourite podcaster, for our endless conversations over the years, filled with intimate-political laughs and vents; to Vera, for sharing the load of being an enraged feminist in academia, and for going ahead, leading the way.

To Cat and So, for creating the comfort of what a 'home' should be like: warm, peaceful, intimate, loving. A home smells like intense dark coffee sprinkled with long morning conversations over life and its many meanings; a home tastes like warm shared meals with good friends at the kitchen table; a home is nurtured by happy plants growing through bright rays of sun; a home is made of paintings, board games, vinyl, books, laughs, and tears. A home welcomes all emotions. And holds space-time for them. Thank you for being my home these past two years. What a privilege it is to dance through life with you.

To GRETUA, for being my second home during the last stages of my PhD. A home that offered me the time-space to do what I love the most: make theatre, move my body, and get lost in creative companionship. It was a privilege to be de-centred from this thesis during its final hours.

To Rich, who (re-)entered my life during those final PhD moments, and who has been showing me ever since that intensity can be easy and soft.

To my loves. Babi, my go-to emotional support. Juca, my joyful ray of sun. Kiko, my life partner – there are no big enough words for what it feels like to share a life with you; it is the most joyful experience of all. Obrigada por serem amparo-na-queda. Amo-vos.

And, finally, my absolute gratitude goes to Barroso. To the full moon when she shines over the Olhar do Guerreiro; to the waters of the Rio Covas, which have always given me the energy and groundedness I needed; to the rhythms of sowing and harvesting, which taught me to be patient; to the monte, which has taught me hardship; to the water of the torna da água, with whom I've fallen in love; to the sun when he sat behind the mountains; to the heather and the broom, who lit up my days with their colours; to the stormy rains, for teaching me boredom; to the cows, for teaching me stillness; and to the sheep, for showing me the comfort of being in a group.

O meu maior obrigada só pode ser transmitido na língua-mãe. Aida Fernandes, Albina Eira, Ana Maria Sanches, Anabela Loureiro, Armando Dias da Mó, Artur Dias, Aurik Antunes, Benjamim Gonçalves, Bertília da Cruz, Carlos Libo, Carla Gomes, Catarina Alves Scarrott, Cláudia Loureiro, Daniel Loureiro, Daniel Sanches, Elisabete Pires, Ernestino Maravalhas, Fernando Alves, Filipe Gomes, Gabriela Gomes, Inês Mó, Ira Daniel, Irene Dias, Lúcia Mó, Lúcia Pires, Lucília Loureiro, Lucília da Cruz, João Loureiro, João Carlos Arribada, João Carlos Fernandes, José Miguel Fernandes, Maria Loureiro, Maria Fernandes Loureiro, Mila Alves, Mila da Silva, Miguel Ângelo Sanches, Napoleão Fernandes, Nelson Gomes, Paloma Ruiz, Paulo Pires, Paulo Sanches, Rita Mó, Sílvia Dias, Sofia Gomes, Susana Gomes, Zé Manel Arantes, OBRIGADA! Escrevo os vossos nomes para que se imortalizem. Obrigada pela vossa força, determinação, resiliência, coragem e humildade. Obrigada por serem quem são. Obrigada por me ensinarem tanto. Obrigada por nos darem tanto. A admiração é imensa. Levo-vos no meu coração. Viva Barroso!

