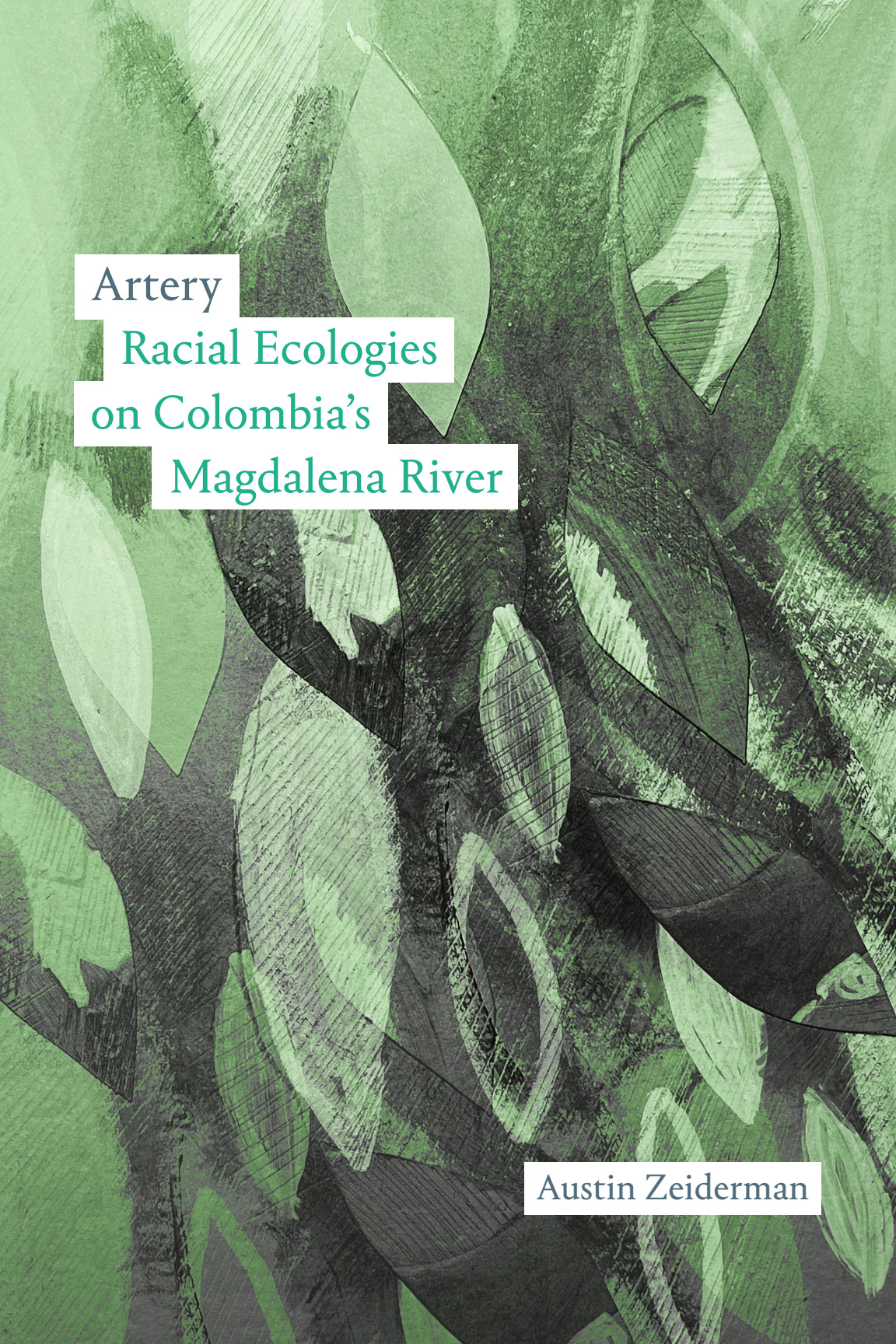
Artery
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on Colombia's
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Austin Zeiderman

Duke University Press *Durham and London 2025*

Printed in the United States of America on acid-free paper ∞
Project Editor: Livia Tenzer
Cover design by David Rainey
Typeset in Portrait and Helvetica Neue
by Westchester Publishing Services

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Names: Zeiderman, Austin, [date] author.
Title: Artery : racial ecologies on Colombia's Magdalena River / Austin Zeiderman.
Description: Durham : Duke University Press, 2025. | Includes bibliographical references and index.
Identifiers: LCCN 2024025063 (print)
LCCN 2024025064 (ebook)
ISBN 9781478031406 (paperback)
ISBN 9781478028185 (hardcover)
ISBN 9781478060390 (ebook)
Subjects: LCSH: Shipping—Colombia—Magdalena River. | Globalization—Social aspects—Colombia. | Globalization—Economic aspects—Colombia. | Magdalena River (Colombia)—Commerce.
Classification: LCC HE655.Z7 M35 2025 (print) | LCC HE655.Z7 (ebook) | DDC 304.209861—dc23/eng/20241217
LC record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2024025063
LC ebook record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2024025064

ISBN 9781478094371 (ebook/other)

Cover art: Illustration by Reno Inchenko.

This book is freely available thanks to generous support from the LSE Department of Geography and Environment and the LSE Library.

For Eliseo

Contents

Preface

A Colombian nursery rhyme with the catchy title of "La serpiente de tierra caliente" tells of the misadventures of a serpent from the hot lowlands (*tierra caliente*) who travels to the cold interior (*tierra fría*). It visits the hairdresser—in vain, as it has no hair. It goes shopping for shoes—another failure, as it has no feet. Children laugh at the serpent's silliness, of course. Yet they probably miss the explanation stressed by the refrain: the serpent is drunk on plantains spiked with *aguardiente*, a potent firewater brewed from sugarcane. The delicacies of its tropical homeland have gone to its head: it is out of its mind, *demente*. In another song, an iguana grooms itself on the banks of the Magdalena River, as if to become more socially acceptable. But what's the point? Try as it might, the iguana can never fit in: it drinks coffee at teatime (*tomaba café a la hora del té*).

During my research, these tales lost something of their youthful innocence. The human target of their playful mockery was all too evident. That they appeared in nonhuman form was unremarkable. After all, the fluidity of the human/animal divide is characteristic of the early childhood imagination—only later do we begin to think of our species as unique. Yet tropes of animality have also been inseparable from racial ontologies and their entanglement with ideas of nature. In Colombia, these ontologies have geographical coordinates: lighter-skinned people from the cool, mountainous highlands are presumed intrinsically superior to the darker-skinned inhabitants of the hot, coastal lowlands. In the stories of the crazed serpent and gauche iguana, I could not but hear echoes of the entrenched hierarchies that govern Colombian society and the place of nature within it.

I encountered these regimes of naturalized inequality often in relation to the Magdalena River. Indeed, I began to sense the importance of the waterway

in establishing and sustaining them. The more I focused on social and environmental orders in this place, the more I felt the need to understand race as an organizing principle of the modern world—what Sylvia Wynter, in "1492: A New World View," identifies as the new construct that came to take the place of prior ordering structures, such as religion and caste. The construct of race, she argues, buttressed the metaphysical order of the post-Columbian societies and polities of the Caribbean and the Americas, extending through the nineteenth-century empires of Western Europe and continuing into the present. The problematic under examination in this book—the intersecting regimes of difference that shape relations among humans and between humans and the rest of the world—emerges out of the shared history of disparate geographical locations—what Lisa Lowe calls the "intimacies of four continents."

Decades of critical scholarship have shown how racial formations structure social, economic, and political life. Less attention has been given to how race also structures ecologies and infrastructures, thereby underpinning exploitative relations, not only among human populations but also between humans and the planet. Increasingly recognized as unjust and unsustainable, these relations are undergoing profound change as climate crisis is radically transforming landscapes and waterscapes. Meanwhile, movements for economic, environmental, and social justice are emerging to challenge entrenched relations of inequality. There is now more reason than ever to think about the racial formations embedded in ecological and infrastructural orders as well as the conditions of possibility for their eventual undoing.

At this pivotal moment, *Artery* examines a flagship megaproject on Colombia's Magdalena River that aims to build a logistics corridor along the waterway through engineering works (mainly dredging and channeling). Focusing on this intervention reveals the centrality of racialization and other forms of difference-making to the contemporary global order, especially as they undergo major shifts in Colombia and indeed in the world at large. By ethnographic standards, the navigation project is large and the river basin vast. Their scale is dwarfed, however, by the magnitude of the issues at stake. In this sense, the Magdalena is a microcosm encapsulating a much wider problematic. *Artery* strives to enrich the nascent yet burgeoning field of critical inquiry centered on the shifting relationship between race, nature, and capitalism in the Anthropocene.

A book's title can only do so much. In selecting one for this project, I sought a word or phrase to bridge the gap between concerns that often run parallel: racial formations and infrastructural environments. In referencing both the circulation of the blood and a key transport route, *Artery* felt right. After all,

the Magdalena is often referred to by anatomical metaphors: it is the nation's life force (*fuerza vital*) or spinal column (*columna vertebral*). As in the catchphrase "rivers are the veins of the planet," arteries carry oxygen from the heart, just as waterways enable other vital flows. However, I was never entirely comfortable with the analogy to the human body, as if it were a neutral abstraction. The history of scientific racism is itself a reminder that some invocations of blood are far from benign. Yet it was precisely these complexities that I hoped to examine, and *Artery* signaled that intention. This book engages with entanglements of race and nature while aspiring toward a future in which they might be undone.

Acknowledgments

A popular saying along the Magdalena River alludes to oscillations of fortune and misfortune: *el río le pone, el río le quita* (the river gives, the river takes away). I have heard people apply this expression to all sorts of situations concerning life along the waterway. In researching and writing this book, I thought frequently about the ethics of reciprocity, knowing that I was receiving from my interlocutors more than I could possibly return. I hope the gratitude expressed here, and in the footnotes, goes at least some way to redressing that imbalance.

My appreciation goes, first and foremost, to the men and women who power fluvial transport along the Magdalena River: riverboat captains and crews, but also the dockside workers of shipping companies, port terminals, and logistics hubs. Their knowledge was indispensable to this book, as their labor is to the economy. Despite their demanding workloads, Edinson Mercado, Eder Luna, and Aníbal Robles became confidants in matters both professional and personal, first on water and then on land. Corporate managers, government officials, and technical experts sacrificed less to speak with me but were often generous respondents. Daniel Posen and Diana Reyes were especially sympathetic to my interest in logistics. I also benefited from time spent with townspeople in Honda, Puerto Berrío, Puerto Wilches, El Banco, Calamar, Yatí, Mompox, and Magangué.

My relation to Colombia as a place from which to think is not uncomplicated. I have been conducting research there since 2006, yet I am acutely aware of my status as visitor. I have no authority or legitimacy based on birth, ancestry, or identity; my connections to places and people are entirely artificial, in that they have been made. My attention to race stems partly from my upbringing in the sharply segregated city of Philadelphia and partly from my own genealogical descent: southern Italian and Swedish migrants on one side and

Polish-Jewish refugees on the other who navigated structures of racial hierarchy to eventually become white Americans, with all the privileges and obligations that come with that position. My interest in nature, especially rivers, was sparked by my time spent working with the Western Water Project of the Natural Resources Defense Council. Though over twenty years have passed, I remain indebted to Hal Candee and Barry Nelson for starting me on this journey.

Although completing this book took longer than expected, my colleagues in the Department of Geography and Environment at LSE provided much-needed encouragement and feedback along the way. I'm especially grateful to Kasia Paprocki and Rebecca Elliot for creating space to think about the social life of climate change and the environment. Thank you to Sam Colegate, Lee Mager, and their team for making the department a pleasurable and productive place to work. A group of brilliant scholars near and far commented on parts of the manuscript or shaped the ideas contained therein: Rivke Jaffe, Matthew Gandy, Alejandro De Coss-Corzo, Rory O'Bryen, Sandrine Revet, Clive Nwonka, Alpa Shah, Laura Bear, David Madden, Suzi Hall, Gisa Weszkalnys, Pablo Jaramillo, Diana Ojeda, Ashley Carse, Robert Samet, Nikhil Anand, Sharad Chari, Asher Ghertner, Kiran Asher, Kevin O'Neill, Sergio Montero, Ananya Roy, Hannah Appel, Tariq Jazeel, Tianna Paschel, Sylvia Yanagisako, Niranjana Ramesh, Laura Pulido, AbdouMaliq Simone, and Diane Davis. I also learned valuable lessons from teaching Geographies of Race with a succession of superb graduate teaching assistants: Taneesha Mohan, Jeanne Firth, Dalia Gebrial, Zo Mapukata, and Line Relisieux.

I have been lucky to work with a stellar group of research assistants. At the London School of Economics, Kyle Kulmann, Leopold Schwarz-Schütte, and Lina Quiñones conducted background research in the project's early stages. A virtual collaboration with Melissa Martínez and Rubén Gutiérrez during the pandemic was a breath of fresh air. Sylvia Naneva helped prepare the manuscript for publication, and Mina Moshkeri lent it her formidable cartographic skills.

I could not have asked for a more capable and conscientious editorial team than Gisela Fosado and Alejandra Mejía of Duke University Press. They patiently guided this project throughout trying times, always on hand with judicious advice. Two anonymous reviewers offered invaluable insights that improved the book in ways large and small. My thanks also go to the press's editorial, production, and marketing teams for their commitment to quality.

Of the many whose love and friendship sustained me over the years, a few made concrete contributions: Jesse Watt, Hayden Thorpe, Paula Durán, and

Mike Day. Special thanks to Natalia Guarín for help with the title. Eeva Rinne was a paragon of calm, creativity, and care. Howard Zeiderman, Colin Thubron, and Stefanie Takacs were unwavering allies, while Margreta de Grazia's support is in a category of its own. This book is dedicated to my son, Eliseo, who fondly referred to it as *his* book. I hope it lives up to his expectations!

MAP 1. Colombia, between Latin America and the Caribbean. Cartography by Mina Moshkeri.

MAP 2. The Magdalena River basin and its environs. Cartography by Mina Moshkeri.

Introduction

Race, Nature, and Logistics in Fluvial Colombia

The water was clear and cold. It even smelled good. I decided to trust my senses, ignore my apprehension, and take a long drink. Before embarking on this journey up the Magdalena River on a towboat-and-barge convoy (figure I.1), I had asked whether to bring my own water supply. The operations coordinator facilitating my trip, who worked out of the shipping company's Cartagena office, reassured me that the boat had a top-rate purification system, and I need not worry. "We test it frequently," she said. "It's cleaner than the water we drink here in Cartagena." And so I dropped the subject. After all, I wanted to avoid being the demanding guest, much less jeopardize the permission I had waited so long to get.

Having just boarded, I was now being shown around by the operations coordinator. She made a point of introducing me to the faucet, filling up two glasses, and downing one without hesitation. Standing before her with my glass in hand, droplets of condensation on its surface, I froze in one of those momentary flashes of uncertainty when conflicting thoughts collide. Her tour of the boat thus far had seemed like a performance—one designed to showcase the company's commitment to health and safety—and this stop felt contrived. But it could have also been a genuine attempt to assuage my concerns. Either way, there were no alternatives, so I gave the water one last look and gulped it down.

Later that afternoon, as we set off upriver, I found myself reflecting on that encounter by the faucet. I thought back to my suspicions—about the coordinator's reassurance, about the water's quality. It occurred to me that mistrusting the shipping company was a crude manifestation of my disciplinary training—anthropologists assume that the powerful always resist scrutiny and that we're too clever to be duped. But distrusting the boat's drinking water had more to

do with my racial formation—the assumption that some bodies are more sensitive, even more valued than others, is integral to whiteness. I was struck by a pang of guilt. Though normally condemning presumptions of superiority, I had just succumbed to two of them simultaneously. "Fuck it," I thought to myself. "I'll just drink the water and like it."

Over the next few days, I did just that. In fact, I drank zealously from that faucet. It was as if each sip filled me with satisfaction for having identified and overcome pernicious prejudices. I vowed to rally my critical faculties, redoubling my vigilance toward civilizational hierarchies of all sorts. Trips to the kitchen to refill my water bottle even provided glimmers of that vaunted ethnographic virtue—recalibrating one's value system, to the point of feeling more camaraderie with "the field" than with "back home." Eager to document my heightened awareness, I remarked in my field notes on the water's appeal, extending the coordinator's comparison to the water in Cartagena: "It tastes better than the water that comes out of my tap in London," I wrote.

A few days later, I fell ill. My body ached, my head throbbed, my stomach churned. At first, I hid my suffering from the captain and crew, fearing mockery. Though I hardly knew them at that point, my head was full of stereotypes—about logistics workers, about Colombian men, about masculinity in general—and I was already self-conscious about being an effete academic among rugged boatmen. We had gotten along well so far, but in my vulnerable state I worried about triggering an onslaught of machismo. When I could no longer conceal my discomfort, what followed was instead an outpouring of care and generosity. It would certainly have been inconvenient if the gringo perished, but I doubted their compassion could be attributed to that alone. Coupled with the absence of stereotypical behaviors associated with seamen and their riverine counterparts (drinking, swearing, philandering, and so on), I felt my assumptions about the forms of masculinity inherent to riverboat life and labor start to dissolve.

In sympathizing with my condition, the crew repeatedly asked about the cause of my illness. "I think it may have been the water," I responded sheepishly to a group of deckhands on break. Looks of surprise and alarm spread across their faces as one exclaimed, "What, you're drinking the water from the tap?! *Está muy pesado* [literally, "It is very heavy," but with connotations of being hard on the body]. It may be filtered, but it's still sucked straight from the river." This is the same river that receives raw sewage from millions of upstream city dwellers, is polluted by mercury and other toxic chemicals discharged by mining operations, and just a few days before had absorbed the largest oil spill in Colombia's history. The fact that an office worker had assured

FIGURE I.1. Towboat-and-barge convoy ascending the Magdalena River. Source: photograph by author.

me the water was fine to drink elicited a collective chuckle: "It may be fine for us, but it's certainly not for you," one responded. Although this echoed my earlier concern, I was taken aback by the sharp line drawn between their bodies and mine—this time by them—not to mention their downplaying the potential health risks of long-term exposure. In the conversation that ensued, my efforts to cast doubt on the physiological differences dividing us were repeatedly rebuffed.

We agreed on the obvious—that on the surface we look different. After all, most crew members were darker-skinned and would be categorized socially by terms connoting some degree of proximity to Blackness (*costeño* and *moreno*, perhaps Afro-colombiano or *negro*). My appearance and accent occasionally allow me to pass as a Colombian from Bogotá, but I am usually identified as a gringo (light-skinned foreigner, often North American or European), and while sometimes labeled *judío* (Jew) after explaining the origins of my surname, I am still classified as white. However, when I suggested that these racial taxonomies—despite their social, political, and economic implications—may not explain my intolerance of contaminated water, crew members insisted that the differences between us were more fundamental. I started to wonder

what determined where the line is drawn: Was it because I'm not Colombian or because I'm white? Would someone from Bogotá be able to drink the water? These questions sparked a flurry of comments, but uniting them was a categorical order separating riverboat workers from everyone else. Their bodies, I was told, are uniquely suited for the ordeals of laboring along the river, and that was inherited, not acquired.

When put in historical perspective, this connection—between the peculiar qualities of riverboat work and the physical constitution of those who perform it—comes into sharper relief. From the early sixteenth century to the mid-twentieth, the Magdalena River was the primary artery of trade and travel between the Andean interior and the Caribbean coast (figure I.2). Those whose labor powered the watercraft moving people and goods along the river were known as *bogas*—a category that referred simultaneously to professional occupation, geographical origin, and racial extraction (figure I.3). Initially denoting enslaved Indigenous and African boatmen, and later free people of African descent from the lower Magdalena valley, *bogas* were typed as evolutionarily closer to tropical nature, and therefore genetically predisposed to the hardships of riverboat life. This category supported the exploitation and control of a racialized labor force, but it also enabled *bogas* to establish and protect their monopoly over river transport, much to the chagrin of elites from the interior. Though the term *boga* is uncommon today, the vocation of riverboat worker remains tied to the same river towns and their inhabitants, who are believed to be constitutionally fit for this demanding occupation.

Having read up on this history before embarking on my journey, I was unsure how to handle crew members invoking the very typologies once used to subjugate their predecessors. And it felt even more uncomfortable recognizing in myself some of the same prejudices that Spanish colonizers and criollo elites had leveled against them.[1] Despite their fundamental importance to both colonial and postcolonial regimes of accumulation, *bogas* were the target of harsh discrimination, which ascribed qualities to them such as bestiality, lasciviousness, and debauchery.[2] These racialized and gendered stereotypes are repulsive, yet they were not entirely distinct from my assumptions about the forms of masculinity I would encounter among the crew—assumptions quickly invalidated but nevertheless present.[3]

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1 Villegas, "El valle del río Magdalena."

2 O'Bryen, "On the Shores of Politics."

3 For the argument that masculinity is deeply embedded in infrastructure, see Siemiatycki, Enright, and Valverde, "The Gendered Production of Infrastructure." For an insightful essay

Equally awkward is the recognition that my experience mirrored narratives written by travelers who had journeyed along the river centuries before.[4] Their accounts uniformly emphasized the hardships endured during their travels, with many describing illnesses similar to mine. Like the Spanish colonizers and their locally born descendants, who believed that they could only survive in the temperate climates of the highland interior, European and North American voyagers saw the exuberant tropical nature of the Magdalena River valley as hostile and unhealthy. Indeed, it was in such encounters with the region's suffocating heat, torrential rain, irrepressible vegetation, swarming insects, and unfamiliar animals that people who understood themselves to be "white" came to define the tropics as the primordial home of those whose labor they would exploit—who, in turn, would be made into "Blacks" and "Indians."[5] And here I was: a white researcher from London, on a boat powered by a racialized workforce, tormented by gastrointestinal malaise, entertaining the idea that I was anatomically unfit for life along the river. The parallels made me cringe.

With echoes of the past bouncing around in my head, I began to feel stuck in an endless cycle of racialized encounters with the human and more-than-human natures that make up the tropical lowlands of northern Colombia's Caribbean coast. For centuries, hierarchical relations between different categories of humans (races, but also genders, cultures, nations, and so on) have been entangled with hierarchical relations between people and the so-called natural world. The Magdalena River has played an important role in that history, and its social and environmental orders have been markedly transformed by it. I would find myself thinking about this again and again throughout my journey as I struggled to understand the peculiar world of a commercial riverboat. But the story would not end there, as entanglements of race and nature would continue to haunt my wider inquiry into this vital artery of cultural, political, and economic life.

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that questions "the very assumption of logistics' masculine character," see Peano, "Gendering Logistics." My thinking about the forms of masculinity among riverboat workers is inspired by feminist geographical scholarship on intimacy and care work. See Berman-Arévalo and Ojeda, "Ordinary Geographies."

4 Martínez Pinzón, "Tránsitos por el río Magdalena"; Nieto Villamizar and Riaño Pradilla, *Esclavos, negros libres y bogas*.

5 For a vivid account of this phenomenon, see Carby, *Imperial Intimacies*, 279.

FIGURE I.2. Map of Kingdom of New Granada and Popayán. Originally published in Joannes De Laet, *Nieuwe Wereldt ofte Beschrijvinghe van West-Indien*, 1625.

RACE AND NATURE are two of the most powerful organizing principles of the modern world. Their histories are deeply intertwined, and their influence spans a wide spectrum of cultural, scientific, moral, economic, legal, and political institutions. Together they structure our societies and environments, effectively drawing boundaries among humans and between them and their categorical others. However, both terms have been called into question of late as artifacts of earlier paradigms of knowledge. Decades of genetic research have debunked the scientific validity of race, and the Anthropocene debate contends that nature is no longer an independent realm beyond human activity. Yet even if dismissed as problematic or passé, these potent concepts continue to reassert themselves in both familiar and unexpected ways.

Troubled by this paradox, and building on a rich body of scholarship in anthropology, geography, history, and related disciplines, I situate myself at the intersection of race and nature to account for the work these interrelated ideas continue to perform in the world: how they regulate social and environmental

FIGURE 1.3. Ramón Torres Méndez, *Champán en el río Magdalena*, ca. 1860. Source: Banco de la República.

orders; how they divide the category of humanity and determine what (indeed, who) is excluded from it; how their meaning and materiality are made and remade in everyday encounters; how their historical legacy weighs on the present and shapes conditions of future possibility; how they enable and sustain relations of care as well as violence; how people navigate a world structured by these ideas; how they saturate the research enterprise; and why scholars still need to think critically and carefully about them.[6] The concept of *racial ecolo-*

6 Many studies have tackled the historical and ongoing entanglement of nature and race. For those influential to this analysis, see Cronon, *Uncommon Ground*; Wade, *Race, Nature and Culture*; Haraway, *Primate Visions*; Leal, *Landscapes of Freedom*; Moore, Kosek, and Pandian, *Race, Nature, and the Politics of Difference*; Stepan, *"The Hour of Eugenics"*; Brahinsky, Sasser, and Minkoff-Zern, "Race, Space, and Nature"; Ranganathan, "Caste, Racialization, and the Making of Environmental Unfreedoms"; Jazeel, *Sacred Modernity*; Hosbey, Lloréns, and Roane, "Global Black Ecologies"; Jaffe, *Concrete Jungles*; Ferdinand, *Decolonial Ecology*.

gies foregrounds the indisputable significance of race and racism to the ordering of both human societies and nonhuman environments.[7]

Impending climate emergency and resurgent white supremacy give these matters heightened urgency. Yarimar Bonilla puts it succinctly, urging scholars "to think more carefully about the relationship between notions of civilizational hierarchy and of human superiority over the more-than-human world, interrogate how these logics have operated in tandem, and explore how they can be tackled in unison."[8] Over two decades ago, Clyde Woods alighted upon the entanglement of extractivism and exploitation: "the settler worldview saw the ecosystem in all its biodiversity as isolable and exploitable parts: forests became timber, deer became fur, water became irrigation, and people became slaves."[9] Together, the logics of civilizational hierarchy and human superiority have been responsible for an unfathomable degree of violence and destruction in the past, and they may well be careening toward a catastrophic future. Yet these logics are also undergoing processes of profound change as new movements for racial and environmental justice emerge to pose radical challenges to long-standing relations of domination within human society and between humans and the planet. The biggest question of our time may be: Which of these two forces will ultimately prevail?

My encounter with this question is sited along Colombia's Magdalena River, the primary waterway connecting the country's Andean interior and Caribbean coast.[10] These coordinates are significant to the conjoined careers of nature and race, which have circulated globally over centuries of imperial domination, capitalist expansion, and scientific exploration.[11] No single location can claim to be the sole birthplace of such ubiquitous formations, but their history is inconceivable without the European conquest of the Americas, especially the greater Caribbean, including the archipelago of islands and

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7 Nishime and Williams, "Introduction"; Ranganathan, "The Racial Ecologies of Urban Wetlands"; Pulido and De Lara, "Reimagining 'Justice' in Environmental Justice."

8 Jobson, "Public Thinker: Yarimar Bonilla."

9 Woods, *Development Arrested*, 43; cited in Hosbey, Lloréns, and Roane, "Global Black Ecologies," 2.

10 Bocarejo Suescún, "Lo público de la Historia pública." Several social and historical studies of rivers have influenced my approach to the Magdalena. Key examples are Raffles, *In Amazonia*; White, *The Organic Machine*; Mukerji, *Impossible Engineering*; Pritchard, *Confluence*; Bear, *Navigating Austerity*; da Cunha, *The Invention of Rivers*; Rademacher, *Reigning the River*. For river studies that examine the racial orders of fluvial environments, see Ballantine, "The River Mouth Speaks"; Johnson, *River of Dark Dreams*; Woods, *Development Arrested*.

11 Stepan, *Picturing Tropical Nature*; Grove, *Green Imperialism*.

adjacent coastal lowlands.[12] Indeed, the Magdalena River itself was racial slavery's conduit into mainland South America; it was also along its banks that naturalists like Alexander von Humboldt began their groundbreaking expeditions.[13] The river and its peoples again featured prominently in the racial imagination of republican Colombia, where the democratizing potential of *mestizaje*, or hybridity, was hotly debated.[14] During the armed conflict, lighter-skinned paramilitaries displaced darker-skinned peasants from the river's adjacent swamps, and the environmental controversies now roiling its waters reflect the stark inequalities engendered by enduring structures of coloniality.[15]

Yet the relationship between past, present, and future along the Magdalena River is marked by persistence as well as change. Here I follow recent studies pointing to the shifting relationship between race and nature in the sciences, extending their insights to the dynamic processes through which social and environmental orders are entangled with big development projects.[16] My focus is a project at the heart of the government's plan for postconflict Colombia: reactivating commercial shipping along the Magdalena River. While the river was once the country's primary axis of travel and trade, a combination of economic, political, and environmental forces precipitated its decline in the second half of the twentieth century.[17] In 2014, the Colombian government initiated the process of returning the waterway to its former glory by establishing a permanently navigable shipping channel and resuscitating fluvial transport through channeling and dredging (figure I.4). In highly unequal societies like Colombia, megaprojects like this one, which seek to harness nature through technology in pursuit of economic progress, inevitably intersect with historically entrenched racial hierarchies.[18] Focusing on this project allows me to examine how social and environmental orders structured by the articulation of race and nature are both reproduced and reconfigured through large-scale infrastructural interventions.

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12 Thomas, *Political Life*; Wynter, "Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom." On the Colombian Caribbean as a historical region, see Vanegas Beltrán, "Elementos para identificar"; Bassi, *An Aqueous Territory*.

13 Múnera, *El Fracaso de la nación*; Cañizares-Esguerra, *Nature, Empire, and Nation*.

14 Appelbaum, *Mapping the Country of Regions*; Wade, *Blackness and Race Mixture*; Restrepo, "'Negros indolentes.'"

15 Taussig, *Palma Africana*; Gómez-Barris, *The Extractive Zone*.

16 Fullwiley, *The Enculturated Gene*; Wade, *Degrees of Mixture*; Hartigan, *Care of the Species*; M'charek, "Curious about Race."

17 Márquez Calle, "Un río difícil."

18 Benjamin, *Captivating Technology*.

Current efforts to remake the river into a logistics corridor, in the terminology favored by the Colombian government and industry groups, draw on what Sheila Jasanoff calls "sociotechnical imaginaries." According to Jasanoff, sociotechnical imaginaries are "collectively held, institutionally stabilized, and publicly performed visions of desirable futures, animated by shared understandings of forms of social life and social order attainable through, and supportive of, advances in science and technology."[19] As evidenced by recent national development plans, the Colombian state now envisions fluvial transport and the logistics industry as keys to future prosperity. Echoing earlier moments in which imperial or national fortunes were tied to the river, the plan to improve navigation and increase trade along the waterway now promises to advance Colombia forward to a new stage of history. Yet racialized inequality, as Ruha Benjamin notes, ensures that "the hopes and capacities of some are routinely discredited in popular representations of progress or completely written out of futuristic visions, a kind of temporal penitentiary that locks the oppressed in a dystopic present."[20]

In the case of the Magdalena River, the sociotechnical imaginaries invoked by the project's investors, planners, and technicians reflect deeply rooted taxonomies and hierarchies. The project to promote commercial shipping by engineering the river is part of an extensive process of infrastructure building following the historic 2016 peace accord, which aims to capitalize on the promise of *el posconflicto* (the postconflict) to promote not only political stability and economic growth, but also social equity and ecological sustainability.[21] The economic and political imperatives of dredging and channeling are evident: these interventions clearly underpin the expansion of extractive infrastructures in resource-rich areas, the integration of supply chains managed by the global logistics industry, and the establishment of sovereignty in territories once marked by the absence of the state.[22] The potential for social and environmental reform is less tangible, however, as nearly all the products currently moving along the river are fossil fuels, and riverine communities—who have been consistently disadvantaged by Colombia's racial and geographical

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19 Jasanoff, "Future Imperfect," 19.

20 Benjamin, "Introduction," 16n20. See also Benjamin, "Catching Our Breath." For a discussion of the need for attention to race and racism in STS, see Mascarenhas, "White Space and Dark Matter."

21 Zeiderman, "Concrete Peace."

22 For the political ecology of channel deepening projects, see Carse and Lewis, "New Horizons for Dredging Research"; Carse and Lewis, "Toward a Political Ecology."

FIGURE 1.4. Dredge rig consisting of a tracked excavator mounted on a pontoon barge. Source: photograph by author.

hierarchies—are unlikely to benefit.[23] The regime of accumulation and sovereignty predicated on resource extraction and racialized subjugation, which has been in force for centuries and has long depended upon the river, may be difficult to undo. Yet people living and laboring alongside megaprojects like this one maneuver within their interstices, often in ways that hover somewhere between acquiescence and opposition.

The civilizational hierarchies embedded in large-scale infrastructure projects often go hand in hand with notions of human superiority over nature. Indeed, the logic of master/slave and colonizer/colonized that defined the labor regimes underpinning capitalist modernity also informed the modern construction of nature as wild, unruly, and in need of domination.[24] According to the paradigms of knowledge that have enabled capital accumulation on a global scale, certain human and more-than-human natures belong to an inherently inferior world that could be domesticated by force and whose productive

23 For another example of how climate crisis and related social initiatives translate into dispossession in the Caribbean coast region of Colombia, see Camargo and Ojeda, "Ambivalent Desires."

24 Heynen, Kaika, and Swyngedouw, *In the Nature of Cities*; Gandy, *The Fabric of Space*.

potential could be harnessed.[25] These violent acts of appropriation and exploitation were mediated by infrastructure. From the technologies of finance and shipping that enabled the Middle Passage to the hydraulic systems that powered the processing of precious metals and minerals extracted by enslaved workers, and from the human bodies converted into machines to the marvels of modern industry and engineering they made possible, infrastructures undergird the transformation of certain people and things into the raw materials necessary for the production of the modern/colonial world.[26] The persistent relationship between notions of civilizational hierarchy and human superiority is reanimated by this contemporary megaproject and its futuristic visions of social and environmental transformation.

Yet the project to remake the Magdalena River will inevitably do more than simply reproduce histories of dispossession and dehumanization. After all, while infrastructures have been instrumental in the racialized control of nature and labor, they have also been sites of insurgency and insurrection, as well as more minor acts of autonomous creativity and clandestine subterfuge.[27] From the network of safe houses and passageways that expedited the abolition of slavery in the United States to "service delivery protests" around electricity meters in apartheid South Africa and demands for tribal sovereignty along the Dakota Access Pipeline, movements seeking to disrupt the dual appropriation of labor and nature have continuously coalesced around infrastructures.[28] Although the Magdalena River project is explicitly designed to minimize potential disruptions to the flow of goods along the waterway, it inevitably provides a stage on which social and environmental injustice can be debated and challenged. Moreover, those whose lives and livelihoods have long depended on the river, such as the riverboat workers I came to know on my journey, regularly enact forms of knowledge and practice that disrupt the logics and optics—the ways of thinking and seeing—on which the megaproject depends.

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25 Moore, *Capitalism in the Web of Life*; Johnson, *River of Dark Dreams*.

26 Aimé Césaire's concept of "thingification" has been influential among scholars of race, but less so his emphasis on its infrastructural dimensions. See Césaire, *Discourse on Colonialism*, 42. See also Heynen, "Urban Political Ecology II"; Roediger and Esch, *The Production of Difference*; Harney and Moten, *The Undercommons*; Derickson, "Urban Geography II."

27 Simone, "Urbanity and Generic Blackness."

28 von Schnitzler, *Democracy's Infrastructure*; Cowen, "Infrastructures of Empire and Resistance"; Mitchell, *Carbon Democracy*; Chari, "State Racism and Biopolitical Struggle."

MY APPROACH TO thinking about the conjunction of race and nature is large scale and long term, since this is how today's most pressing social and environmental problems are often framed. The geographical locus of this study is Colombia's vast Magdalena River basin and its fluvial and maritime ports, while its historical reach stretches from the colonial period to the present. This analytical frame, though capacious, is still limited: the transformations underway relate to economic and ecological processes that are planetary, and the river's human and environmental history goes back long before the Spanish arrived in the early 1500s. To give focus to this potentially infinite expanse of space and time, my account selects certain aspects of the river's past, present, and future. But I also make a bolder claim about how to engage with large social and environmental transformations: paradoxically, through a fine-grained analysis of situated practices, specific actors, and ordinary events. Tacking back and forth between the micro and the macro provides insights that neither scale in isolation possibly could.

Grappling with racial ecologies along the Magdalena River requires pushing beyond the categorical divides that have long structured the humanities and social sciences. This book is as much about the social and cultural life of the river as it is about the river's political and economic significance, and these human dimensions of the river frequently appear alongside its physical properties.[29] These ostensibly separate dimensions of "riverhood" are often inextricably intertwined, so much so that it often makes little sense to differentiate between the river's social and natural histories, its imaginary and material manifestations, its cultural and economic values, its human and nonhuman constituents (figure I.5).[30] However, while I steer clear of binary frameworks that separate the world into neat and discrete categories, I also exercise caution toward hybrid analytics that collapse such bifurcations.

Across the humanities and social sciences, the imperative to recognize the entanglement of humans with countless other living and nonliving beings has become orthodoxy.[31] While I agree with the ethical and political importance of

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29 Camargo and Cortesi, "Flooding Water and Society."

30 Boelens et al., "Riverhood."

31 A substantial body of work on posthumanism, new materialism, multispecies ethnography, and the Anthropocene posits the hybridity of material processes and social relations, the entanglement of humans and other beings, and nonanthropocentric forms of agency as the ontological foundations of a renewed approach to the humanities and social sciences. For problems involved in ignoring race and racialization in these conversations, see Zeiderman, "Low Tide." See also Rosa and Díaz, "Raciontologies." Rosa and

FIGURE 1.5. Cattle ranch along eroded stretch of riverbank, Tenerife, Magdalena. Source: photograph by author.

unsettling anthropocentrism and coloniality, I chart a path between humanist and posthumanist paradigms, for neither alone can capture environmental politics in all their complexity or account for the practices and performances through which ontological divides (such as subject/object, human/nonhuman, person/thing, being/nonbeing) are created and sustained, navigated and mediated, destabilized and reconstructed.[32] Inspired by the tradition in Black

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Díaz ask and answer a key question: "How might the 'ontological turn' be disrupted if we understood that modern ontologies are profoundly anchored in race?" For efforts to foreground justice within multispecies studies, see Chao, Bolender, and Kirksey, *The Promise of Multispecies Justice*. For a persuasive argument for "nondualist" ontological politics that engages with racism and anti-Blackness, see Escobar, *Pluriversal Politics*. I share these concerns but also see the need to treat ontological indeterminacy, multiplicity, and pluriversality as empirical questions and to carefully and cautiously consider their political implications.

32 My emphasis on the practices and performances of ontological fixing derives from Frantz Fanon's discussion of "Look! A Negro!," in which he "found that [he] was an object in the midst of other objects." In my reading of Fanon's account, the "epidermal racial schema" that rendered his ontological status as less-than-human, while rooted in colonization, was constituted in that momentary encounter: "the Other fixes me with his gaze, his

studies of interrogating the human as the arbiter of being and belonging, my goal is to understand how articulations of race and nature come to organize lifeworlds and the role they play in the creation of unequal, and often unlivable, social and environmental orders.[33]

These inequalities reflect the river's place within the formations of racial capitalism underpinning the project of colonial modernity in the Americas.[34] With its insatiable appetite for cheap inputs—racialized labor, appropriated nature—fluvial transport and trade along the Magdalena River has been integral to Colombia's long, bloody history of resource extraction, human subjugation, and wealth accumulation. No doubt some things have changed over the years: Indigenous groups no longer predominate along the river; the abolition of slavery occurred over 150 years ago; alluvial forests are mostly gone; gold and silver are less plentiful; and the Spanish colonizers and white criollo elite are no longer the primary beneficiaries. However, accumulation still depends on the Lower Magdalena's racialized workforce; the carbon-based energy powering the riverboats is fuel oil rather than wood; the lucrative resources being extracted are now petroleum, gas, and other minerals and metals; and it is mainly multinational logistics, commodity trading, and infrastructure firms that stand to benefit. And the colonial and postcolonial geographical imaginary—in which the river was a racialized measure of civilization and a means by which to enrich predominantly white elites—continues to orient the models of development that attempt to restore the waterway's historical importance. Yet some visionaries foresee an alternative future for Colombia reflected in the river's surface. How, then, might histories of human exploitation and environmental degradation be redressed and overcome?

Focusing on this megaproject and its stated objective of making the Magdalena River into a "logistics corridor" puts me into contact with three key dimensions of the global economy: the logistics industry; the paradigmatic space of that industry, the supply chain; and the governing rationality of

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gestures and attitude, the same way you fix a preparation with a dye." Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 89.

33 Weheliye, *Habeas Viscus*; Jackson, *Becoming Human*; Walcott, "Genres of Human"; Wynter, "Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom"; Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*; Césaire, *Discourse on Colonialism*.

34 See Robinson, *Black Marxism*. I am also inspired by Latin American thought on coloniality, mostly notably Quijano, "Coloniality of Power"; Quijano, "Questioning 'Race'"; Zapata Olivella, *Por los senderos de sus ancestros*.

logistics, supply chain security (figure I.6).[35] Building on the work of scholars who highlight the centrality of logistics to capitalism, I approach logistics as a world-making project with profound social, political, and ecological implications—in other words, I attend to processes of "logistification" and their effects.[36] Among these processes, I focus specifically on the securitization of the Magdalena River and on the rationalities and technologies through which circulation along the waterway is enabled and sustained.[37] Based on ethnographic fieldwork in port terminals, on commercial vessels, and in riverside towns, I examine the logics and optics that underpin the work of securing the logistics corridor against disruption. However, the smooth operation of logistics is not always opposed to the resistant sociality and unruly materiality of the world it seeks to remake. Instead, logistics is a contingent and contested field in which a range of actors work to protect continuous circulation, but not always in the most predictable or compatible ways.[38] Yet despite these inconsistencies and incongruities, the logistics industry still manages to reap rewards from racialized inequality and resource extraction.[39]

While there are good reasons to distrust the project to remake the Magdalena River, I engage in a mode of analysis that is critical but not denunciatory. Many studies conflate these two, so that a critique of something becomes tantamount to its repudiation. Inspired by Stuart Hall, the distinction this book makes between these modes of analysis is at the level of contingency; that is, the possibility that history may not play out exactly as our analytical and political commitments would predict.[40] This does not mean ignoring per-

35 Cowen, *The Deadly Life of Logistics*, 8.

36 Cowen, "A Geography of Logistics"; Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World*; Easterling, *Extrastatecraft*; Guyer, *Legacies, Logics, Logistics*; Cross, "Detachment as a Corporate Ethic"; Hepworth, "Enacting Logistical Geographies"; Easterling, "The New Orgman"; Graham, "FlowCity"; Rothenberg, "Ports Matter"; Khalili, *Sinews of War and Trade*. For the concept of "logistification," see LeCavalier, *The Rule of Logistics*, 6.

37 Lobo-Guerrero, "Los seguros marítimos."

38 An inspiration here is Kiran Asher's work on the politics of development in the Colombian Pacific. See Asher, *Black and Green*; Asher, "Fragmented Forests, Fractured Lives."

39 Appel, *The Licit Life of Capitalism*.

40 Hall's concept of "articulation" and his emphasis on the conjunctural method both inspire my interest in the limits of economic determinism and the possibilities of historical rupture. Hall does not, however, claim that everything is contingent: "Contingency . . . does play a role in the unfolding of history, and we must allow for it." See Hall et al., *Policing the Crisis*, 6. Yet in that same study, Hall and his collaborators emphasize that the "moral panic" of 1970s Britain, like earlier paranoias about crime, was "both less contingent and more significant" than was commonly assumed at the time.

FIGURE 1.6. Port terminal and logistics hub, Barrancabermeja, Santander. Source: photograph by author.

nicious, persistent forms of injustice and oppression, but that their relentless exposure and excoriation, as Katherine McKittrick cautions, reifies abjection and inhibits curiosity.[41] The denunciatory mode also has the unfortunate effect of obscuring unexpected positions, unconventional alliances, unpredictable events, and uncommon projects, as well as the unintended complicity of the analyst in what is being denounced.[42] While this book embraces the ethical horizons of antiracism and environmental justice, and aspires to push, however incrementally, in the direction of both, it also checks, indeed relinquishes, any pretense of certainty. If the coordinates of race, nature, and capital are shifting alongside transformations of planetary proportions, our critical standpoints must adjust to the radical uncertainty the world is facing.

This imperative is as much analytical as personal, which means that attention to positionality and self-reflexivity is essential. Alongside efforts to grapple with the social and environmental orders of the Magdalena basin, then,

41 McKittrick, *Dear Science and Other Stories*, 46.

42 I'm thinking here of the kinds of encounters and connections that have been at the heart of Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing's work. See Tsing, *Friction*; Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World*.

are attempts to account for my own racial and epistemological formations and their implications for what it is possible to think, know, say, do, and be. Following W. E. B. Du Bois's proposition that the "race problem" in his native United States might be understood better in relation to the Warsaw ghetto—an idea that resonates with me for biographical reasons—I scrutinize my formation as a racial subject as necessary for coming to terms with racialized hierarchies in a social world other than my own.[43] If knowledge systems always bear traces of the embodied emplacement of the knower, as feminist science studies has shown, then the intellectual traditions and academic disciplines to which I belong deserve similar scrutiny.[44] Anthropology, geography, perhaps the social and human sciences in toto, have enduring alliances with colonial and neocolonial relations of power and knowledge and their constitutive logics of patriarchy and white supremacy—this much we know.[45] But even as decolonizing initiatives become more prevalent, the dominant gesture remains one of undoing, of deconstruction.[46] How to respond to this predicament from a reconstructionist standpoint—that is, to ask what can be done in addition to what must be undone?[47]

My critical and analytical engagement with racial and environmental orders, in the past and the present, also has a stylistic correlate. Many scholarly communities are presently reckoning with the question of how to write about the worlds we now inhabit, and various proposals have been put forth. Here I seek a prose whose theoretical baggage is light, empirical details are privileged, disciplinary jargon is minimal, and contextual specificity is paramount.

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43 Du Bois, "The Negro and the Warsaw Ghetto." There is a long tradition of antiracist and anticolonial thought and practice that finds common ground and forges alliances across different experiences of racism. For example, see West, *Race Matters*. See also discussions of Nazi anti-Semitism and European imperialism in Césaire, *Discourse on Colonialism*; Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*.

44 Haraway, "Situated Knowledges"; Harding, *Whose Science? Whose Knowledge?*

45 Mignolo and Walsh, *On Decoloniality*.

46 See Bonilla, "Unsettling Sovereignty." Bonilla prefers "the term *unsettling* to *decolonizing* not only because it privileges the perspective of settler colonialism (which has often held a backseat within postcolonial studies) but also because I remain skeptical as to whether one could truly decolonize either sovereignty or anthropology, given that there is no precolonial status to which either could return. *Unsettling* avoids the telos of decolonization. What is unsettled is not necessarily removed, toppled, or returned to a previous order but is fundamentally brought into question" (335).

47 See Jesse McCarthy's comments on "reconstruction" in McCarthy and Shatz, "Blind Spots."

This does not mean that conceptual concerns are elided, disciplinary debates ignored, or intellectual debts forgotten. Rather these are presented in clear language, limited to brief discussions, and placed in footnotes when further exposition is warranted. Moreover, in an attempt to minimize the divide between theory and data, the book's theoretical commitments are implicit in the description and analysis. Ethnographic and historical details are foregrounded and presented in the form of stories that convey both their particularity and their wider relevance.[48] These stories are meant to be immersive and evocative and ultimately to provoke thought rather than provide closure: as McKittrick puts it, the "story opens the door to curiosity."[49]

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THE RIVERBOAT JOURNEY with which I began came to an end when, after seven days on the water, we arrived at our destination—the river port of Barrancabermeja, approximately 630 kilometers inland from our point of embarkation. Still weak and weary, I decided to seek medical attention at a local clinic. Not surprisingly, tests revealed the presence of waterborne parasites, and the doctor on call prescribed a potent antibiotic cocktail. Physical recovery was nearly instantaneous, but cognitive unease lingered. Although my illness had been given an identifiable cause, I was left wondering about the racial schema used onboard to explain it, especially given the organism—a parasite—found responsible. After all, parasites were not only integral to the scientific racism underpinning Nazi anti-Semitism and the Holocaust; their place in the history of raciological knowledge stretches back to Charles Darwin's legendary 1871 treatise *The Descent of Man*, in which he extended to humans his earlier arguments about evolution and natural selection from *On the Origin of Species*.[50] In the later book, the puzzle of whether "the races themselves ought to be classed as distinct species" hinged on reports of parasites reacting differently to differently racialized bodies.[51] Darwin's case against polygenesis, or the theory that different races descended from different ancestors, grappled with many such reports: "The surgeon of a whaling ship in the Pacific assured me that when the Pediculi [lice], with which some Sandwich Islanders on board swarmed, strayed on to the bodies of the English sailors, they died

48 In *Dear Science and Other Stories*, McKittrick "understands theory as a form of storytelling," which could also include storytelling as a form of theorizing (7).

49 McKittrick, *Dear Science and Other Stories*, 7.

50 Raffles, *Insectopedia*; Darwin, *The Descent of Man*.

51 Darwin, *The Descent of Man*, 220.

in the course of three or four days."[52] This inaugural instance of what Sylvia Wynter calls the "biocentric version of humanness" is also staged over water, and with reference to the bodies of crew members laboring on a cargo vessel.[53] It is the still unfolding and unfinished history of such entanglements of race and nature that this book aims to examine and, if not undo, at least unsettle.[54]

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CHAPTER 1, "ARTERIAL CURRENTS," introduces the concept of *geo-racial regimes*: hierarchical orderings of society and space organized primarily along racial lines. The chapter highlights the importance of infrastructural environments, like the Magdalena River, to the historical emergence of the modern/colonial world. The regimes of racial and spatial difference structuring social and environmental orders in Colombia have had a constitutive relationship with the Magdalena River. During the periods of Spanish colonial rule and postcolonial nation building, the river has been central to these regimes. And it continues to be in the ongoing project to create a logistics corridor along the artery.

The most recent scheme to boost commercial shipping on the river is the subject of chapter 2, "Dredging Up the Future." It focuses on the sociotechnical imaginaries and interventions attending this megaproject, and in particular their relationship to entrenched racial taxonomies and regional hierarchies. This chapter examines the practices and performances of both fixing and destabilizing ontological divides (land/water, being/nonbeing, subject/object, human/nonhuman, person/thing) and considers their consequences for who and what either flourishes or perishes. How do racial formations work with and through infrastructural environments? Which entities, living and nonliving, are relegated to the past, and which are afforded a future?

Chapter 3, "Securing Flow," takes on the fluvial transport and logistics industry and its governing rationality: supply chain security. It examines the forms of expertise deployed to secure the smooth and uninterrupted flow of cargo, paying close attention to the categories, calculations, and probabilities used to manage the multiple factors threatening to disrupt circulation: from droughts and pandemics to strikes and accidents. Underpinning the logics and optics of supply chain security are hierarchical orders of value. Attending

52 Darwin, *The Descent of Man*, 219.
53 Wynter and McKittrick, "Unparalleled Catastrophe," 16.
54 Meehan et al., "Unsettling Race."

to both the value gradations specific to Colombia and those endemic to the logistics industry worldwide, this chapter demonstrates how logistics renders some people and things security threats, while caring for and protecting others.

Chapter 4, "In the Wake of Logistics," foregrounds the workforces powering the movement of goods along the waterway from the colonial period to the present. It argues that the labor power required by the fluvial transport and logistics industry depends on regimes of difference-making whose racial underpinnings have both persisted and changed over time. Alert to continuities and divergences, this chapter engages with the afterlives of colonization and enslavement as well as with their geographically situated manifestations and historically specific transformations. The focus on articulations of race and labor in the domain of logistics reveals the persistence of racial hierarchies and their perpetual instability, which in turn enables the links between past, present, and future to be analyzed without teleological assumptions.

Gendered idioms and practices circulating along the river are the subject of chapter 5, "Madre Magdalena." This chapter considers the relationship between masculinity and bestiality presumed endemic to the region in the national imaginary as well as the attribution of femininity to the water body itself. It then considers the gendering of human-environment relations, which traditionally associate women with care work and men with productive labor. Although stereotypical gender roles are reflected in the fluvial transport and logistics industry, an intersectional analysis attuned to interlocking hierarchies of gender, sexuality, race, class, and region reveals heterogenous forms of gendered personhood that defy binary, essentialized logics of logistical capitalism.

Chapter 6, "Navigating Racial Ecologies," foregrounds the navigation techniques of river captains and pilots, and their entanglement with the pervasive inequalities of Colombian society and the logistics industry. As in other vocations, intuitive knowledge and embodied skill are relied upon to maneuver ships and boats in challenging and changeable environments. However, in a world structured by interlocking hierarchies, and along a waterway central to formations of colonial and racial capitalism, these techniques are more than just practical solutions for getting from port to port. How do those occupying an indispensable yet disregarded vocation use navigational expertise to ensure their survival, defend their autonomy, and assert their humanity?

Two parallel movements toward social and environmental futures are considered in the afterword: confronting racial injustice and redressing environmental injury. In Colombia, both movements are taking shape in the cultural

sphere as well as in legal and institutional reforms, and efforts are being made to link them together in pursuit of a wider progressive agenda. While these initiatives are timely and significant, the analysis put forth in *Artery* suggests that more work is needed to overcome stubborn hierarchies and to disentangle race and nature.