

Rural precarity: relational autonomy, ecological dependence and political immobilisation in the agro-industrial margin

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ABSTRACT

Across the world, economic interests and state-making interventions have converged in dispossessing rural and urban dwellers. Drawing on literature on rural transformation, precarity, and life after dispossession, this paper explores how lifeworlds are constructed after dispossession. Based on ethnographic research in an Afro-descendant village in agro-industrial Colombia, I analyse five income-generating activities that together point to *rural precarity*, characterised by uncertain labour relations, fragile conditions of life, ecological dependence, and reconfigured rural relations. While villagers construct their lifeworlds around community, autonomy, and recognition, the constant search for income and reconfigured rural relations uphold and deepen inequalities in the agro-industrial margin.

KEYWORDS

Rural transformation; precarity; recognition; community; patronage relations; Colombia

Introduction

I am standing with Don Elias¹ on the village bridge, looking down at the river where the *areneros*, the sand extractors, are manually digging sand from the river floor. We talk about his retirement from a job in the sugarcane sector, and he tells me that he receives just about the minimum wage in pension. ‘But the fellows down there,’ he points to the *areneros*, ‘they don’t get anything.’ For weeks it has been impossible for the *areneros* to work, first because of low sand deposits, and later because heavy rains led to high waters, making it hazardous for the *areneros* to work. ‘I am calm here, with my pension,’ Don Elias says. ‘They don’t have that kind of security.’ While the river was high, he says, ‘they went every day to the river looking down. Trying to make it lower with their stare.’

Across the world, economic interests, violent entrepreneurs and state-making interventions have converged in dispossessing small-scale farmers, rural and urban dwellers (Borras et al. 2012; Hall, Hirsch, and Li 2011; D. Harvey 2004; Li 2007) – often disproportionately affecting racialised or ethnic minorities (A. Escobar 2008; Li 2000; Moore 2005). This paper explores how Afro-descendant villagers in agro-industrial Colombia construct

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their lifeworlds² after repeated rounds of dispossession. Marked by a history of colonial uprooting and enslavement, the convergence of capitalist expansion and state-sponsored dispossession, as well as internal conflict and displacement, the villagers have experienced various rounds of dispossession – and continue to be subjected to it. Drawing on literature on rural transformation, surplus labour, precarity and life after dispossession, I analyse their various income-generating activities and describe how the villagers construct their lifeworlds through notions of community,³ autonomy and recognition. Building on existing literature, I point to a particular form of *rural precarity* characterised by uncertain relations of labour, fragile conditions of life, ecological dependence and reconfigured rural patronage relations. I argue that in the context of repeated rounds of dispossession, lifeworlds in the agro-industrial margin unfold in a tension between autonomy, community and recognition, on the one hand, and rural precarity on the other, where ongoing dispossession, a constant search for income, reconfigured rural relations, and a subtle threat of violence cause political immobilisation, which upholds and reproduces existing inequalities in the agro-industrial margin.

This study draws on ten months of ethnographic fieldwork in the village Brisas del Frayle in Colombia conducted 2016–2018. During this time, I lived in the village for two months, while visiting the village several times a week the remaining time. Data construction methods include participatory observation, informal conversations, audio-visual methods, document analysis, 38 semi-structured interviews with villagers, public employees and academics, and attendance to 16 institutional and village meetings. Further, as part of negotiating access and constructing data, I engaged in collaborative research with the Community Council by conducting a household survey and accompanying the villagers in their encounters with statutory institutions.

In what follows, I first sketch the wider debates on rural transformation, surplus labour and precarity including literature on responses to dispossession. After this, I describe the regional historical context of Brisas del Frayle and the villagers' life trajectories, before moving onto analysing five different forms of income-generating activities in the village: contract farming, manual sand extraction, labour migration, wage-hunting and self-employment. I conclude by reflecting on how rural precarity influences political immobilisation and reproduces inequalities in the agro-industrial margin.

Rural transformation, precarity and life after dispossession

Based on Marx's concept of primitive accumulation, D. Harvey (2004) coined the term *accumulation by dispossession* to describe the ongoing processes of capitalist dispossession arising from the crisis of overaccumulation (see also Hall 2013). Dispossession has further been framed in terms of extra-economic means such as violence, legal tools or state interventions (Hall 2013; Hall, Hirsch, and Li 2011; D. Harvey 2004). Particularly in post-conflict situations even the *threat* of violence is an effective means of dispossession (Grajales 2011; Hall 2013; Lund 2017; Ojeda 2016). This is seen in Colombia, where

²I use the term 'lifeworlds' to refer to livelihood practices, i.e. ways in which people secure basic necessities such as food and shelter, and a broader set of relations, knowledges and values connecting people with each other and their environment (A. Escobar 2008).

³I understand community as dynamic entity that is continuously constructed through relations between people and their surroundings (Agrawal and Gibson 1999; A. Escobar 2008; Malkki 1992).

dispossession is often related to armed conflict, capitalist expansion, state intervention and resource appropriation (Aparicio 2012; Ballvé 2019; Grajales 2011; 2021; Ojeda 2012; Vélez-Torres 2014). Recent studies point to dispossession as an ongoing, gradual and ordinary process (Camargo and Ojeda 2017; Hurtado and Vélez-Torres 2020; Ojeda 2016), where paramilitary violence is entangled with processes of state formation (Grajales 2021; Reina 2022) maintained by multi-scalar political machines with local social bases and supported by discourses of sustainability, multiculturalism, good governance and community development (Ballvé 2020; Cárdenas 2012). In this paper, dispossession is understood as an ongoing, gradual and ordinary process depriving people from lands, resources and/or livelihoods through the confluence of economic forces, state interventions and violent means. In contrast to other contemporary studies (Grajales 2021; Ballvé 2020), violence in the present case is not a direct physical experience, but a subtle threat influencing everyday life and responses to dispossession.

Literature on rural transformation describes how people who are dispossessed have become proletarianized, by taking up labour on the plantations dispossessing them, or by migrating to new agricultural frontiers or to urban areas for industrial jobs, as originally envisioned by Marx (Bernstein 2010; Hall 2013; Li 2010). These forms of precarious employment are central to the functioning of the capitalist economy; without parts of the population performing piecemeal jobs for low salaries and with little labour protection, the capitalist system could not exist (Bremner and Das 2000). However, in the process of attraction and repulsion – drawing labour towards new frontiers and pushing it away when labour power has been extracted – mechanisation and labour productivity seem to have outlived capitalism's capacity for uptake of the 'reserve labour army'; as a result, the dispossessed become 'surplus' to production (Li 2010). Thus, the dispossessed and precarious labour are both situated at the *centre* of the economy, essential for its functioning, and at its *margins* (Bremner and Das 2000; Jaramillo 2020; Roitman 1990). As the 'promise that modernization would provide a pathway from country to city (...) has proven to be a mirage' (Li 2014, 3), many stay where they are, creating a form of *rural precarity*.

Exploring the everyday conditions of wageless work in Rio de Janeiro, Millar (in Shaw and Byler 2016) sees precarity as 'insecure relations of labor intersect[ing] with fragile conditions of life' (Millar in Shaw and Byler 2016, 8). Butler (2015) conceptualises precarity as the absence of social and political institutions and infrastructures that sustain life; the outcome of a capitalist and political system that renders people simultaneously 'indispensable' and 'disposable'. Further, P. Harvey (2018) sees precarity as the tension between the formal and the informal: 'the desire and need for official *recognition* and for the autonomy afforded to those who remain *below the radar* of state controls' (2018, 121, emphasis added). This adds a distinct political dimension to precarity, in which mutual recognition between citizens and authorities plays a central role. By claiming rights from institutions, Lund (2016) argues, citizens recognise these as relevant authorities with the capacity to grant rights; likewise, by granting rights, institutions recognise rights claimants as citizens. Inspired by Honneth's (1995) three forms of recognition (personal, legal and wider societal recognition of worth), I use recognition both in its *legal* form, in relation between state and citizen, and in the form of *wider societal* recognition (e.g. of job or group status). Further, I add the form of *personal-political* recognition, where personal and political relations blend, as seen in patronage relations. Here, I understand patronage relations

as originating in landed elites providing protection against ‘uncertainties of rural life’ in exchange of labour and loyalty (Clapham 1982; Eisenstadt and Roniger 1984; Scott 1972). With industrialisation, this has translated into corporate foundations (Acosta and Pérezts 2019; Djelic and Etchanchu 2017), and political patronage, where aspiring political candidates draw on networks of affective personal relations to gain or maintain public office (Archer 1990; C. Escobar 2002; Kitschelt and Wilkinson 2007). Hence, precarity is not only about being at the centre and margin of the *economy*, but also at the centre and margin of *the state* and political life (Das and Poole 2004).⁴ Recognition, then, is a double-edged sword that on the one hand fosters a sense of dignity (Honneth 2001), and on the other institutes authority and legitimises existing power relations (Lund 2016). In this way, relations of recognition can hamper people’s ability to mobilise politically, thereby upholding or deepening existing inequalities. Based on the above, I conceptualise *rural precarity* as characterised by uncertain relations of labour, fragile conditions of life, ecological dependence and reconfigured rural patronage relations.⁵

In response to dispossession and precarity, people employ various strategies; some use ‘weapons of the weak’ or ‘everyday forms of peasant resistance’ (Scott 1985), while others assemble in wider social protests halfway between everyday resistance and ‘revolutionary war’ (Butler 2015; Starn and Fox 1997). Others deal with dispossession and precarity by repossessing identities, subjectivities and values (Andersen 2016; Rasmussen 2016; Salemink and Rasmussen 2016), or trying to live ‘otherwise’ within the seams of capitalism (Jaramillo 2020; Millar 2015; Povinelli 2011; Tilzey 2019). In Colombia, this has taken the form of alternative life projects, drawing on notions of autonomy, community, peasant struggle and nonviolence (Aparicio 2012; Baquero Melo 2015; A. Escobar 2008; Grey 2012; Guasca, Vanneste, and Van Broeck 2022). I am inspired by Millar’s (2014) term ‘relational autonomy’, which signifies that marginalised people gain a relative control over time and work activities, which enable them to sustain relationships, fulfil social obligations, attend to ‘everyday emergencies’, and pursue other life projects.⁶ Further, Millar (2015) uses the term ‘woven time’ to describe how work and other activities, such as leisure, socialising and community obligations, are interlaced.

Drawing on these insights, I explore how the villagers in Brisas del Frayle after dispossession construct independent livelihoods around notions of autonomy, community, dignity and recognition. Further, I draw on and contribute to the literature that argues that alternative projects and social mobilisations in Colombia are limited by ongoing dispossession, state intervention and threats against social leaders (Aparicio 2015; Guasca, Vanneste, and Van Broeck 2022; Ojeda 2016) by pointing to the micro-dynamics of rural precarity. While precarity may cause political passivity and immobilisation due to fear, limited resource access, and little knowledge of rights (Eberle and Holliday 2011), I point to ongoing dispossession, constant search for income, relations of recognition, and a subtle threat of violence as limiting political mobilisation in the agro-industrial margin.

⁴For instance, Simandjuntak (2012) argues that votes from marginalised citizens are central to the functioning of the political machine of ‘patronage democracy’.

⁵While rural precarity is cut through by gendered and racialised conditions (Chatterjee 2020), a full development of such analysis is beyond the scope of this paper.

⁶Millar (2014) uses the term ‘relational’ to emphasise that ‘autonomy’ should not be understood in a liberal sense, since people are always woven into relations and social obligations.

The agro-industrial margin in the Cauca Valley

The flat plains of the Cauca Valley in western Colombia are dominated by monoculture sugarcane plantations. As explored elsewhere (Hougaard [forthcoming](#)), the region's hacienda economy is founded on the dispossession of indigenous people and enslaved labourers brought from the African continent to forcefully labour on the haciendas. After the first sugarcane *ingenio*⁷ was established in late 1800s, the sector started incorporating land into production by dispossessing the small-scale peasantry that had formed in the outskirts of the haciendas through economic and extra-economic means, such as fencing off collective and individual peasant lands, and evicting people without formal title (Mejía Prado [1993](#); Mina [1975](#)). In the first half of the 1900s, sugarcane expanded partly through government-supported research and infrastructure resulting in further dispossession as increased inflow of foreign capital incited peasants to grow cash-crops, trapping them in debt relations and forcing them to (re)turn to haciendas as waged workers (Mina [1975](#); Rojas Guerra [1983](#)). During the second half of the twentieth century, the old landed elites and the sugarcane entrepreneurs dispossessed much of the remaining peasantry through the elite capture of a land reform and large-scale landscape interventions, such as draining wetlands and flooding low-lying peasant lands (Vélez-Torres and Varela [2014](#); Vélez-Torres et al. [2019](#)). The emergent agro-industrial production model was highly dependent on cheap labour, which was supplied by dispossessed peasants and migrant labourers from neighbouring regions (Achinte [1999](#); Knight [1972](#)). With mechanisation, subcontracting and a continuous inflow of new labour migrants, rural labour in the Cauca Valley became 'surplus' and some migrants returned to their home regions, moved to the cities, or persisted in pockets of the agro-industrial landscape, creating small colonies with compatriots from their place of origin (Achinte [1999](#)). One such settlement is Brisas del Frayle.

Brisas del Frayle was established in the late 1970s when people started settling along the main road between Candelaria (Cauca Valley region) and Puerto Tejada (Cauca region). The first families came from the neighbouring regions Cauca, Nariño and Chocó, where they had been dispossessed by the confluence of internal conflict and capitalist expansion. One of the villagers relate how she fled from guerrillas at night with her new-born baby, and her husband only in flip-flops [*chanclas*] pretending to go visiting family. Other villagers tell similar stories of displacement, having to leave their landholdings behind. Achinte ([1999](#)) describes how capitalist interests appropriated and privatised former collective landholdings in the village Patía, where many in Brisas del Frayle originate from. When internal conflict came with extortion, kidnappings and killings, landowners sold off to drug-traffickers who needed large estates for money laundering, leaving large areas of land with few cattle and little employment for rural labourers. Thus, adding to colonial dispossessions experienced by earlier generations, the villagers had endured dispossessions when they came to the Cauca Valley.

Along the old national road, the villagers carved out a minimum of land to build makeshift houses and construct their livelihoods. Similarly to other communities in the region (Vélez-Torres and Varela [2014](#)), they combined wage-labour on the nearby haciendas and

⁷'Ingenio' means both 'wit, ingenuity' and 'company', yet in the Cauca Valley the term is used particularly for sugarcane companies operating highly industrialised production complexes.

sugarcane plantations, with fishing and sand extraction from the river. While many were displaced by the internal conflict, some had come to the region specifically to work in the growing sugarcane industry, yet the increasing mechanisation made labour redundant. Surrounded by plantations, the villagers had no available land to cultivate, and sand extraction became the main livelihood activity in Brisas del Frayle.

Today, the village consists of approximately 105 households, located along one side of the road, the *callejón*. Self-identifying as Afro-descendants, the villagers have formed a Community Council (*Consejo Comunitario*) under Law 70 from 1993, which recognises Afro-descendant communities as ethnic groups.⁸ While supplying the regional construction sector with manually dug sand is the main income activity, other occupancies in the village include temporary employment in the agro-foods, transport and construction sectors, as well as migrant labour in neighbouring regions' agro-industrial sectors. Some villagers are engaged in 'various trades' [*oficios varios*] – day jobs in the nearby villages and towns – or informal sales and recycling activities, while very few are farming on contract with the neighbouring ingenio or are employed in the municipality or the sugarcane industry. These occupancies are dynamic, and villagers may move between different income-generating activities, as described in the following.

Constructing lifeworlds

On contract

The first family settling along the *callejón* were small-scale peasants. Doña Yellen explains how her father bought a piece of land which was then considered *monte* – wild woodlands – from a local hacendado, and together with his siblings developed it into a multi-product farmstead, where they grew corn, beans, tomatoes, and other *pancoger*.⁹ With time, food production was replaced by sugarcane crops, and though Doña Yellen explains the change in less dramatic terms than the forced dispossession depicted above (partly because sugarcane was less exposed to theft than *pancoger*), her case illustrates the absorption of small-scale peasants into the agro-industrial production model. Together with her siblings, Doña Yellen owns around 5 ha on which she, together with her daughter, cultivates sugarcane, which is sold to the neighbouring ingenio. Her cousin, Don Paco, owns another 5 ha of sugarcane on the neighbouring field, which is also sold to the ingenio. Thus, while other villagers contribute to community consumption (see below), Doña Yellen and Don Paco's production enters into the wider capitalist economy.

In the agro-industrial model, the ingenios focus on the sugar refining process in the factory and leave cultivation in the field to independent growers. These can roughly be divided into two groups: large-scale growers, often (absentee) landlords on former multi-product haciendas, and small-scale producers, former multi-crop peasants who more or less forcefully have entered contract farming agreements. The large-scale growers have established the Colombian Association of Sugarcane Producers and Providers (Procaña)

⁸According to a household survey conducted as part of this research, 61% of the households recognise themselves as 'Black, Mulatto or Afro-descendant', while 14% recognise themselves as 'Mestizo', 9% as 'Indigenous', and 6% as 'White' (Vélez-Torres et al. 2017).

⁹*Pancoger* are food crops grown for subsistence and household consumption.

to ensure the interests of suppliers in negotiations with the ingenios.¹⁰ However, Procaña is an 'exclusive club' for wealthy landowners; with its high membership fees, it effectively excludes small-scale producers, who do not have political or organisational representation, and manage contractual relations individually.

In Doña Yellen's supply agreement the ingenio is in charge of harvest and transport. As the ingenio has various suppliers and wants a constant flow of harvested sugarcane to the factory, they can choose to harvest whenever it suits their production plan. This leaves small-scale producers like Doña Yellen and Don Paco in a precarious situation; they may have to wait for more than 13 months for harvesting – and another month before the payment arrives. 'People think we have money because we own land,' Don Paco's sister, Yolina, who runs the farm with him, says. 'But we are in debt.' Hence, like argued by Little and Watts (1994), small-scale contract farmers are left with very little decision-making power over their production. Though they are landowners, they depend on the ingenio for their incomes, resembling what Watts (2004) points to as 'propertied labourers'.

The contract farmers' precarious situation caused by the ingenio's arbitrary harvesting schedule is exacerbated by ecological cycles. If harvested too early or too late, the cane loses sucrose or growth potential (James 2004), and the grower gets a lower price. Further, since sucrose levels fall when the cane gets wet, the growers want it harvested before the rainy season, adding a particular rural aspect to the concept of precarity. While hacendados in earlier periods may have protected peasants against these forms of rural uncertainties through patronage relations (Clapham 1982; Eisenstadt and Roniger 1984; Scott 1972), capitalist contract farming offers little such protection.

Nevertheless, like argued by Millar (2014), the semi-independent livelihood of contract farming also implies a degree of dignity and self-determination (see also Breman and Das 2000). Doña Yellen is among the more well-off in the village and respected by other villagers. Further, her relation with the ingenio is not marked by outright exploitation, but also a degree of respect. For instance, when the ingenio wants to discuss matters with the village (e.g. damages on the access road caused by the heavy sugarcane trucks), they address Doña Yellen. However, this also points to the double-edged sword of recognition. On the one hand, the ingenio recognises her as a relevant social actor (cf. Honneth 2001), on the other, I argue, this personal-political recognition reinvigorates notions of patronage relations and works as a subtle act of intimidation. By negotiating directly with her, the ingenio implicitly mixes village matters with personal business. To avoid souring her commercial relations with the ingenio, Doña Yellen has retracted from community work. Thus, the Community Council loses a resourceful person in their social and political work, illustrating how reconfigured patronage relations lead to political immobilisation.

Similarly, other villagers seek to be on good standing with the ingenio, since jobs in the industry are desired for their stability and social benefits, such as pensions. This conceals historical dispossessions and questions of land distribution and reduces the villagers' interests in organising socially. Thus, while the semi-independent livelihood of contract farming implies a degree of dignity and self-determination, farmers are also caught in a precarious situation of ecological dependence, arbitrary harvesting schedules, and reconfigured patronage relations. Being on contract with the ingenio – or aspiring to

¹⁰The ingenios have likewise formed the Association of Sugarcane Cultivators in Colombia (Asocaña).

be – hampers the villagers' ability to organise and reproduces unequal land and labour relations in the agro-industrial landscape.

Building community

Sand extraction has taken place in the Cauca Valley for centuries. While it in other parts of the region is mainly done mechanically with excavators, dredges and winches (CVC 2008), it is in Brisas del Frayle performed manually. The sand extractors, *areneros*, start early in the morning. They work in teams where some go up the Frayle River to extract sand from the river floor, while others stay on the unloading site in the village, shovelling sand from the canoes up the terraces to the waiting trucks that bring the sand to construction sites across the region. Sand extraction is hard physical work; it requires both strength, skills and perseverance to jump into the ice-cold water, squat down and amass a reasonable amount of sand into the self-made tool, *the pandonga* (a metal bucket cut in half on the long side), and lift it into the canoe while maintaining balance in the river current. It is a gendered and generational activity; hardly any women extract sand, and those who go up-river are mainly young men – the ice-cold water can cause hypothermia, and one needs to be in a physical fit condition to endure it.

Sand extraction is the main economic pillar in the village with 36% of the households depending on it as their primary income, and another 13% relying on it as a secondary income (Vélez-Torres et al. 2017). The number of people engaged in the activity varies over time since it serves both as a main income source, a complementary income and a fall-back strategy between salaried jobs. Moreover, since the *areneros* live and work in the same place, many spend their earnings in the village bar, food stands and kiosks. Thus, sand extraction has a direct impact on local commerce and cash flow in the village.

Furthermore, sand extraction is central for constructing community and forming identities in the village. For some of the *areneros*, occupation is, as theorised by Jütten (2017), a defining feature of their individual and collective identity. A few villagers who have a relatively stable income elsewhere, occasionally participate in the sand extraction – not due to economic necessity, but to socialise and participate in community life. The river also play a central part in the collective identity: like Afro-descendant communities in the Pacific region (Oslender 2002), the villagers have named their community after it, and the river serves as a space of recreation and social interaction, where children and adults play, swim and fish. Even the bridge crossing the river forms a socialising space as people hang out to chat and watch the *areneros* work, illustrating the close connection between sand extraction, river and community identity.

Working and residing in the same place allows the *areneros* to practice what Millar (2015) terms 'woven time': a fluid relation between work, leisure, socialisation and community obligations. The worksite becomes an extended version of village life, where communal matters are discussed in the canoes and unloading site. Likewise, village life becomes an extended version of the worksite as canoes and tools are repaired, sand prices are debated, and the prospects of river levels and sand deposits are discussed in the village bar. Moreover, the flexibility of independent wageless work gives the *areneros* control over their time, enabling them to attend to 'everyday emergencies' such as medical appointments, funerals, school events, or community meetings. Not being

bound by a labour contract, this 'relational autonomy' (Millar 2014) allows them to work more some days and take other days off to visit relatives in the neighbouring regions. Thus, after dispossession, the independent livelihood of sand extraction imply a degree of autonomy, dignity and self-determination.

In addition to working in a collective and relational way, the areneros respect the ecological cycles of the river. They work only until midday to allow sand deposits to replenish before next day. This reflects a moral economy that has enabled the areneros to continue working in the river for more than 30 years. 'There is a controlled form of working in the river,' the president of the Community Council, Fernando, says. 'People only extract for their subsistence, not to fill their pockets. (...) This ensures that there is always sand to extract.' This is not to claim that the areneros do not have any impact on their environment; while the areneros could earlier extract sand directly from the river shores, they now go upriver in canoes to find sand deposits. However, compared to the mechanical extraction with dredges and excavators in other parts of the Cauca Valley, manual extraction in Brisas del Frayle has a limited impact and involves a concern for maintaining local livelihoods.

While reflecting a moral economy, the respect for the ecological cycles also implies a degree of precarity. Some weeks, the river is low due to reduced rainfall in the mountains, and sand deposits run dry. Other weeks, when it has been raining heavily, the river is high. While this replenishes the sand deposits, it is dangerous for the manual areneros to work, as they risk being carried away by the current. This is when the areneros, according to Don Elias, stand at the bridge looking down at the river – 'as if they could lower it with their stare'. This ecological dependence adds another aspect to the concept of rural precarity, which is exacerbated by capitalist structures that the areneros – despite trying to live by their own moral economy – are caught in. They have to work continuously to maintain their commercial relations and satisfy a constant and increasing demand from the construction sector. Further, they have bills to pay and food to buy. This may push some areneros to extract more or faster than the sand deposits can replenish or take the risk of diving into high waters. This can occasionally cause tiffs in the village, and points to a double tension between, first, ecological cycles and economic-material needs of society, and, second, between the immediate needs of the individual and the long-term sustenance of the collective.

Finally, the areneros are pressured by the legal-administrative system and a competing mining claim. As described elsewhere (Hougaard and Vélez-Torres 2020), the areneros have through the years tried to formalise their activities and gain legal recognition from the statutory institutions (cf. Honneth 1995; Lund 2016). While they during the 1990s had permission from the regional environmental agency to extract sand, their attempts to formalise have since been ignored, neglected, and rejected. Meanwhile an external person has managed to gain right to extraction exactly on their site, which points to a new round of legal dispossession, where the areneros find themselves in constant fear of eviction and legal persecution. Thus, while sand extraction in Brisas del Frayle is characterised by ecological awareness and notions of autonomy, community and identity, it also exemplifies rural precarity marked by physically exhausting labour, unstable ecological cycles, economic structures and legal pressure.

Migrating and finding home

Due to the temporality of sand extraction, the areneros are occasionally forced to look for other income opportunities, including migrant labour. As described above, migrant labour has from the beginning been a central part of village life; the village was formed by migrants from neighbouring regions, and the continuous inflow of migrant labour pushed salaries and labour conditions down, why many villagers resigned from the sugarcane industry. Thus, the villagers are both 'migrants', lowering conditions and displacing the host population, and 'hosts', being displaced by more recent migrants (cf. Breman 1990; Knight 1972).

Today, villagers continue to migrate for temporary labour opportunities. While Don Horacio in the 1990s went to Putumayo in the south of Colombia to labour in the banana and yucca plantations, his son and nephew, Jeison and Jefferson, recently migrated to the neighbouring region Tolima to labour in the rice industry for some months. Thus, the villagers are part of what Breman (1990) calls labour circulation: seeking employment away from home, but continuously returning to the starting place. In the literature, migration is seen both as an opportunity for improved livelihoods and as reproducing existing inequalities (Porst and Sakdapolrak 2018; Sunam and McCarthy 2016; Tappe and Nguyen 2019). The agro-industrial production system is enabled by these circulations of cheap and easy-to-control labour (Breman 1990), out-competing the settled and organised population, who are themselves forced into the position of migrant labour. As industries in different regions can literally 'swap populations' to ensure a fragmented labour force with little bargaining power, systematic migrant labour is an effective tool for controlling labour and maintaining wages low. Being part of this circular migration, I argue, the villagers in Brisas del Frayle are inadvertently contributing to lower wages and labour conditions, which risk leading to political immobilisation (cf. Eberle and Holliday 2011; Tappe and Nguyen 2019).

Despite migrations, the villagers have created a place to return to. Life in the village is characterised by a continuous coming and going of neighbours and family members who have been labouring elsewhere and return 'home' after a period. 'I missed my village,' Adriana says to explain why she returned after just four months in the town Pradera, where she had moved for a job. Likewise, Jefferson returned from the rice plantation in Tolima after three months, because his wife missed her family. Similarly, Esperanza called her husband home from labouring in the transport sector in Tolima, and after a short stay in the town Cabuyal, they returned to Brisas del Frayle. 'I have lived in many places,' Esperanza says, 'but of all the places I like it best to live here.' Like many of the other villagers, Esperanza's extended family lives in the adjacent houses, and they maintain strong family and kinship relations despite periods of migration. Thus, I argue, while migrant labour contributes to lower wages and labour conditions and limits opportunities for political mobilisation, and despite Brisas del Frayle being a relatively recent settlement, the villagers have managed to create a place called 'home'. As other migrant communities (Achinte 1999; Moore 2005; Tappe and Nguyen 2019), they build on trans-local relations and family ties and construct a place-based and kinship-based sense of community.

Wage hunting

Temporary employment in the regional poultry industry is another common income source in Brisas del Frayle. As in other places of the world (see e.g. Watts 2004), the poultry sector in the Cauca Valley has been sharply industrialised, and is, like the sugarcane industry, characterised by global connections and multinational companies. Many of the poultry complexes bear the name of former haciendas, and with the surrounding land covered by sugarcane plantations, the industrialised landscape leaves little room for other ways of life, effectively forcing people to rely on wage-labour.

As one of the few sources of waged employment in the region, the poultry industry is a desired labour option, yet for most villagers it is marked by unstable employment conditions and insecure wages, resonating the global trend of precarious labour (Denning 2010; Jeffrey 2010; Li 2010; Watts 2011). One of the villagers, Luz Marina, used to labour in a broiler complex nearby, but never had a formal contract. 'I used to work on a chicken farm,' she says, 'but after seven years, they didn't recognise my work. They didn't help with anything.' Using the word 'recognise' she points to the changing rural relations signalling an expectation of personal-political relation of patronage, in which the patron does not only pay a salary, but also helps with uncertainties of rural life (Eisenstadt and Roniger 1984; Scott 1972). Yet, the agro-industrial production model does not offer that kind of personal-political recognition and support; nevertheless, the salaried job is, like Millar (2014) observes, still a 'desired labour opportunity'.

However, the rigid requirements of the agro-industrial model with production round the clock challenges the villagers' ability to attend to other aspects of life. This is the case for Adriana, who, labouring in the poultry sector, often gets home from a shift at 2 am or 7 am in the morning, only to get up and work again by midday. The companies can, with loose employment relations and almost non-existing contracts, easily hire and fire as they wish, however, labourers can also, as Millar (2014) observes, 'turn away' from rigid conditions and seek employment elsewhere. Adriana tells how she had left her new job '... because they cannot let me go for meetings, and I have to attend meetings every now and then in the school or in the Community Council.' Months later, she explains how she had asked her new employer to get the day off due to an important village meeting; as this was rejected, she took the day off anyway. 'I have another job interview on Monday,' she says unemotionally. Thus, the lack of loyalty that patronage relations once ensured goes both ways.

By temporarily turning away, Adriana regains a bit of autonomy over her time. However, it is not an unequivocal turning away, and the rejection happens from a different power position than the company. Running from job to job between different companies in the poultry sector, Adriana can be considered what Breman (1994) calls a 'wage hunter'. While Breman (1994) uses the term for seasonal labourers migrating in search of jobs, Adriana's wage hunting is provoked by an incommensurability between the requirements of industrial capital and her need and desire to attend to other aspects of life. It is her responsibility and commitment as a parent and community leader that compels her to wage hunt. Studying the educated unemployed middle class in India, Jeffrey (2010) claims that the 'waiting' between jobs can be an opportunity for political mobilisation. However, in the agro-industrial margin there is no waiting; you must get an income. Thus, on the one hand, the lack of traditional patronage relations

allows Adriana to temporarily turn away and fulfil family and community obligations. On the other, this autonomy simultaneously aggravates her situation of precarity, and her constant search for new income opportunities limits her time and resources for community work. Thus, the wage-hunting and the reconfigured rural relations, I argue, allow for a degree of dignity, but also leads to political immobilisation.

The joys and juggles of self-employment

While Adriana's periodic 'letting go' of wage labour is followed by a need to return to it, other villagers have more permanently 'turned away' from waged employment. They have created their own independent livelihoods as scrap-collectors, recyclers, moto-taxistas or by selling foodstuff or daily necessities from homebased convenience kiosks or food stands in the village. As self-employed, they enjoy a certain level of autonomy and independence, and have, akin to Saleminck and Rasmussen's (2016) point, managed to shape new identities and subjectivities 'after dispossession'.

This is the case for Luz Marina, who, as mentioned above, turned away from waged employment in a poultry company: 'They didn't help with anything, so I thought that I can earn the same myself. And now I am peacefully in my house.' Luz Marina sells grilled sausages in a makeshift stand in the village. Currently, she buys the sausages in the neighbouring village, but considers making them herself. This would give her more independence and complement her plans of establishing a small-scale agricultural production in her parents-in-law's backyard, where she could keep poultry, grow vegetables, and harvest from the numerous fruit trees.

Like her, other villagers are engaged in small-scale independent food production. Apart from growing sugarcane, Doña Yellen and Don Paco both raise chicken, grow vegetables, and keep fruits trees like mango, banana, orange, lemon, fig and avocado. Other villagers have carved out a space for food production either behind their house, in front of their house, or on the other side of the callejón in the narrow strip bordering the sugarcane fields. While most produce mainly for own consumption or for sharing with family and friends, a few derive an income from these small-scale productive activities. Esteban Sandoval has a small garden with vegetables, chicken and pigs, and sells foodstuff to the villagers and a local market. Satya raises 6–7 pigs in the back of her house which she sells to a nearby pork factory, and Adriana's mother, Naty, raises chicken in a few cages in front of her house. Like Doña Yellen, she sells the slaughtered chicken to her fellow villagers. While the incomes generated from these activities may be small and variable, they imply a certain degree of autonomy and self-determination.

Further, they reflect what Millar (2014) calls 'relational autonomy'. Independent livelihoods may resemble what de Soto (1989) terms 'micro-entrepreneurialism', which Butler (2015) argues can be seen as a form of precarisation with their 'individual responsibility and the obligation to maximise one's own market value' (Butler 2015, 15). However, I argue, the productive activities in the village are mostly intended for the villagers themselves, not for the wider capitalist system. The convenience kiosks, Luz Marina's sausage stand, and the various food productions are all part of sustaining life in the village. Moreover, taking place on the location of residence, they ensure a constant activity in the village, which creates a sense of security – people can leave their doors open and their

bikes unlocked. Further, it allows the villagers to practice what Millar (2015) calls 'woven time' and contributes to the construction of community.

Dorany's Bingo Bar is an excellent example. The bar was set up while I was living in the village; one day, some villagers transported a *sapo*¹¹ game from one end of the village to Dorany's place and started constructing a small wall around it. 'To have a place to drink and socialise on Sundays,' Dorany said. The next day, it was already busy: men sitting inside the newly constructed shelter drinking beer and playing *sapo*, women sitting outside playing bingo. While the villagers did not call the place anything, in my notebook it became the Bingo Bar, and was one of my fixed go-to spots in the village: it was a natural place for gatherings and there was always someone to talk to. Dorany altered between managing her business, attending her clients and socialising with them, in essence embodying 'woven time' (cf. Millar 2015). Moreover, the Bingo Bar became a place for discussing village matters – such as housing improvements, cleaning the canal behind the houses, and the *areneros*' struggle against the competing mining claim. In this way, the Bingo Bar became a place not only for constructing community in the sense of socialising, but also *maintaining* community, through strategic deliberations and collective organisation.

This construction of community also had a clear material expression. Shortly after opening her bar, Dorany invested in some plastic chairs, and later gathered some stumps from a tree that had been cut to use as chairs. Just before Christmas, she started cementing the floor to level it for the *sapo* game. She only had money to do half the floor, but after Christmas she cemented the other half, and three months later she invested in a tin roof. In her article *Cementing Relations*, P. Harvey (2010) describes how concrete, as a symbol of state power, is used by the Peruvian government to transform public space in provincial areas. As a solid material, it promises 'to operate as a generic, homogenous, and, above all, predictable material [however, it] is constantly challenged by the specificity of the terrains to which it is applied – terrains that are intrinsically unstable and heterogeneous' (P. Harvey 2010, 44). In the same way, by cementing the floor of the Bingo Bar, Dorany is trying to create stability; not only for herself, but for the whole community. 'Now they cannot take it away from me,' she says, referring to the public institutions and the unregistered status of her business. However, the comment is also part of a wider conversation about the municipality's hesitancy to install water and sanitation in the village. This would, in Honneth (1995) and Lund's (2016) terminology, be a recognition of the village as a relevant actor with rights. Not installing it, is a way of keeping the door open for eviction and relocation; an action allegedly desired by the *ingenio*. As Dorany is aware of, her bar is built on a fragile and uncertain ground; on the one hand, the precarious incomes of her clientele threaten the economic stability of her business, on the other, she is susceptible to the whims of the local administration and the silent threat of closure – or even the entire community's relocation. However, as P. Harvey (2010) claims, the stability of concrete can be secured if surrounded by social relations of care. Dorany knows that concrete alone will not do the trick; the Bingo Bar has to be used, nurtured and cared for. Forming relations through concrete,

¹¹A pub game involving brass rings thrown from a distance as dart to a square table with several holes, each yielding different points.

beer and bingo, Dorany cements relations and contributes to the construction of community in the village.

Along with other self-employed villagers operating in what conventional economists call 'the informal sector', Dorany balances between the desire for legal and societal recognition and the appeal of what P. Harvey (2018) terms 'remaining below the radar'. While municipal authorities and the police regularly visit the village and are aware of the existence of these informal businesses, they overlook them, let them be. However, the threat of a change of procedure is a constant, though silenced, source of concern. Thus, the villagers in Brisas del Frayle try to balance between formality and informality; while trying to go 'below the radar' and maintain some form of autonomy (cf. Gandolfo 2013; P. Harvey 2018), they seek recognition from local authorities as a relevant social actor (cf. Lund 2016). While the self-employed – the areneros, scrap-collectors, recyclers, moto-taxistas, food producers and kiosk owners – enjoy the autonomy of their informal and unlicensed activities, they also want to be recognised for contributing to the regional economy and for having constructed a peaceful community (cf. Honneth 1995; Jütten 2017). 'Everything we have, we have built ourselves,' Don Horacio says pointing up the callejón. 'Look at this settlement: All the brick houses and all this – we have built it ourselves, without help from the municipality.' However, the desire for autonomy and informality limit the villagers' options for political mobilisation. If they remain below the radar, they cannot claim rights; if they mobilise and claim rights, they are also obliged to formal regulations and licences. In the same way, statutory institutions may allow informality and refrain from enforcing regulation in order to avoid providing services. Thus, while the independent livelihoods imply notions of dignity, autonomy and construction of community, the villagers are strung out in a tension between recognition and informality, where their desire and need for autonomy limits their ability for collective mobilisation and livelihood improvements.

Discussion and conclusion

Drawing on literature on rural transformation, surplus labour, precarity and life after dispossession this paper explores how the villagers in Brisas del Frayle after repeated rounds of dispossession construct their lifeworlds in the agro-industrial margin through independent livelihoods and notions of autonomy, dignity and recognition. Analysing five income-generating activities, I point to a distinct form of rural precarity, characterised by uncertain relations of labour, fragile conditions of life, ecological dependence and reconfigured rural patronage relations.

Political immobilisation has been argued to be caused by precarity, fear, limited resource access, and little knowledge of rights (Eberle and Holliday 2011). In Colombia, scholars point to ongoing dispossession, state intervention and threats against social leaders as impeding social mobilisation and alternative life projects (Aparicio 2015; Guasca, Vanneste, and Van Broeck 2022; Ojeda 2012). Based on the above, I argue that political immobilisation in the agro-industrial margin is caused by ongoing dispossession, a constant search for income, reconfigured rural patronage relations, and a subtle threat of violence. Ongoing dispossession is seen in the case of the competing mining claim, intimidating the areneros and forcing them to search for other income options. The constant search for income is seen in labour migration and wage hunting, directing time and

resources from collective mobilisation. Rural relations are changing as seen in unfulfilled expectations of recognition, loyalty and support, and the reconfigured patronage relations illustrate the double-edged sword of recognition that on the one hand fosters a sense of dignity (Honneth 2001), and on the other legitimises existing power relations (Lund 2016). Contract farmers and aspiring labourers seek to be on good terms with the ingenio, and thus avoid speaking up against the historical dispossessions, land concentration and ongoing health concerns from harvest fires and aerial fumigation. Further, as explored elsewhere (Hougaard 2019), the ingenio reconfigures patronage relations through their CSR programme (cf. Acosta and Pérezts 2019; Djelic and Etchanchu 2017), offering homework assistance, cooking and baking courses, and occasionally sending a health brigade to the village. Together with the desire for jobs in the company, this makes it difficult for the villagers to mobilise and criticise the company for its environmental and social impact. Likewise, patronage relations are reconfigured as local politicians and benefactors use personal-political recognition to enrol individual voters and campaigners through the promise of jobs and public services (cf. Archer 1990; Kitschelt and Wilkinson 2007; Ballvé 2020). Moreover, these reconfigured patronage relations are closely tied with the subtle threat of violence. More than once, the general threat on social leaders in Colombia was raised as a concern in relation to challenging the competing mining claim or speaking out against the ingenio, while, as election time got closer and aspiring candidates started counting voters (Hougaard 2019), I was warned about moving alone in the area. Thus, while violence in Brisas del Frayle is not direct physical experience, it lies as a subtle threat influencing everyday life and motivations for political mobilisation.

Thus, after repeated rounds of dispossession, the villagers in Brisas del Frayle construct their lifeworlds in a tension between autonomy, community and recognition, on the one hand, and rural precarity, on the other. However, the same relations of recognition institute and legitimise local authorities, and, together with ongoing dispossession, a constant search for income, and a subtle threat of violence, cause political immobilisation, which upholds and deepens inequalities in the agro-industrial margin.

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