Chloe Nahum-Claudel, Regional Studies of Culture

This was an initiative for first year students studying the Anthropology of Amazonia. I invited an early career scholar from Ecuador, Andrea Bravo Diaz, to come and present her research with Waorani Indigenous people who live at sites of oil extraction in the Ecuadorian Amazon. Andrea has worked with the Waorani for over a decade. In preparation for meeting Andrea over zoom, we watched a recent documentary film about the tragedy of oil extraction in this part of Ecuador (Yasuni Man, Killackey, 2021).

In that documentary, there is a simplistic contrast drawn between Waorani who refuse and resist oil companies and those who work for them and live with them. This is highly moralized since the refusers are presented very much in edenic slot, while those who live with oil are presented as fallen – drunk, pillaging the forest, selling out. Andrea’s work is all about challenging these motifs, which are so pervasive in the media, which are also a part of the baggage that students come with, and which are so vividly played out in this documentary. Andrea works closely with Waorani women who negotiate companies’ access to oil resources. She gave the students firsthand insight into the ways that Waorani live alongside oil drills without therefore capitulating to a capitalist economy and environmental devastation.

In the lecture, the students came up with questions for Andrea, which we collated and shared with her using Mentimeter. She then answered their questions. There was a superb engagement from the students, who listened avidly to Andrea’s responses. This then set them up for reading some of Andrea’s published work for tutorial discussions.

This year I am teaching the course again. Andrea’s book has now been published and is the key reading. We will again be using Andrea’s work to think through and critique the filmic and media representations of indigenous people involved in extractive industries and to come to a more nuanced understanding of the lived experience of the capitalist frontier.