



The emotional politics of *territorio*: women's resistance at the Isthmus of Tehuantepec, Oaxaca, Mexico

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Received: 24 November 2023 – Revised: 29 January 2025 – Accepted: 3 February 2025 – Published: 22 April 2025

Abstract. Using the example of resistance to a mega-project in southern Mexico, this paper shows how the emotional connections between bodies and land are used as political instruments in resistance movements. The Interoceanic Corridor is currently being built on the Isthmus of Tehuantepec, which leads to shifts in territorial organisation. The resistance movements that have emerged against (neo-)extractivist infrastructure projects in Latin America use the concept of *territorio* in their attempt to defend their lands. This paper argues that emotional attachments to *territorio* have so far been overlooked in debates on *territorio* and yet are key, as they lie at the centre of territorial identities and are a source of life. Based on interviews with women who understand themselves as defenders of *territorio*, I investigate the emotional link to *territorio* using the concept of *cuerpo-territorio*. The paper shows how women politicise and use their emotional link strategically in their practices of resistance.

1 Defending land and *territorio*: “enough of dispossession, plundering, and destruction!”

Territorio means going to the *vela*, it means going to the *regada* [both traditions in local celebrations], loving my *territorio* means eating the fruit, eating what is local, the season, the mango, the taste of the tortilla, the *totopos* [traditional food], I can't go anywhere without at least taking my bag of *totopos* with me, because I feel I'm not eating. And that's the *territorio*, that's why the *territorio* is not necessarily anchored in a physical space, but because it's made up of so many elements, it accompanies you wherever you go, but it's always there to pull you back [El territorio implica ir a la vela, implica ir a la regada, amar mi territorio es comer las frutas, osea comer lo que es de aquí, la temporada, el mango, el sabor de la tortilla, del totopo, no poder ir a ningún lugar al que yo vaya, sin llevarme al menos mi bolsita de totopos ¿no? porque siento que no como. Y eso es el territorio, por eso el territorio no está anclado en un espacio necesariamente físico, sino que como está conformado por tantos elementos, te acompaña donde vayas, pero

siempre está ahí para jalarte de regreso]. (interview with Maria, 30 May 2023¹)

In the quotation, Maria refers to the Isthmus of Tehuantepec, Oaxaca, in southern Mexico, where an infrastructure mega-project, the Interoceanic Corridor (CIIT), is currently under construction. The infrastructure mega-project includes a series of projects to “develop” the region, such as a railway line, industrial parks, highways, and ports (see Fig. 1) (Ceceña, 2023; SIPAZ, 2020). The mega-project inevitably involves territorial reorganisation (Colectivo Geocomunes, 2020).

Due to the geostrategic importance of the region, the mega-project lies in a highly disputed region (see Fig. 1) (Lehmann, 2019). The Isthmus of Tehuantepec is the narrowest part of Mexico, located between the Atlantic and Pacific oceans. Therefore, it has been of interest for several national and international projects throughout history (Gasparello, 2023). The project leads to the division of communities, the privatisation of social property, and the contamination of the land (Colectivo GeoComunes, 2020). In consequence, several resistance movements have emerged to defend the land and *territorio* under threat from the mega-project. This paper

¹For the safety of interviewees, names have been anonymised.

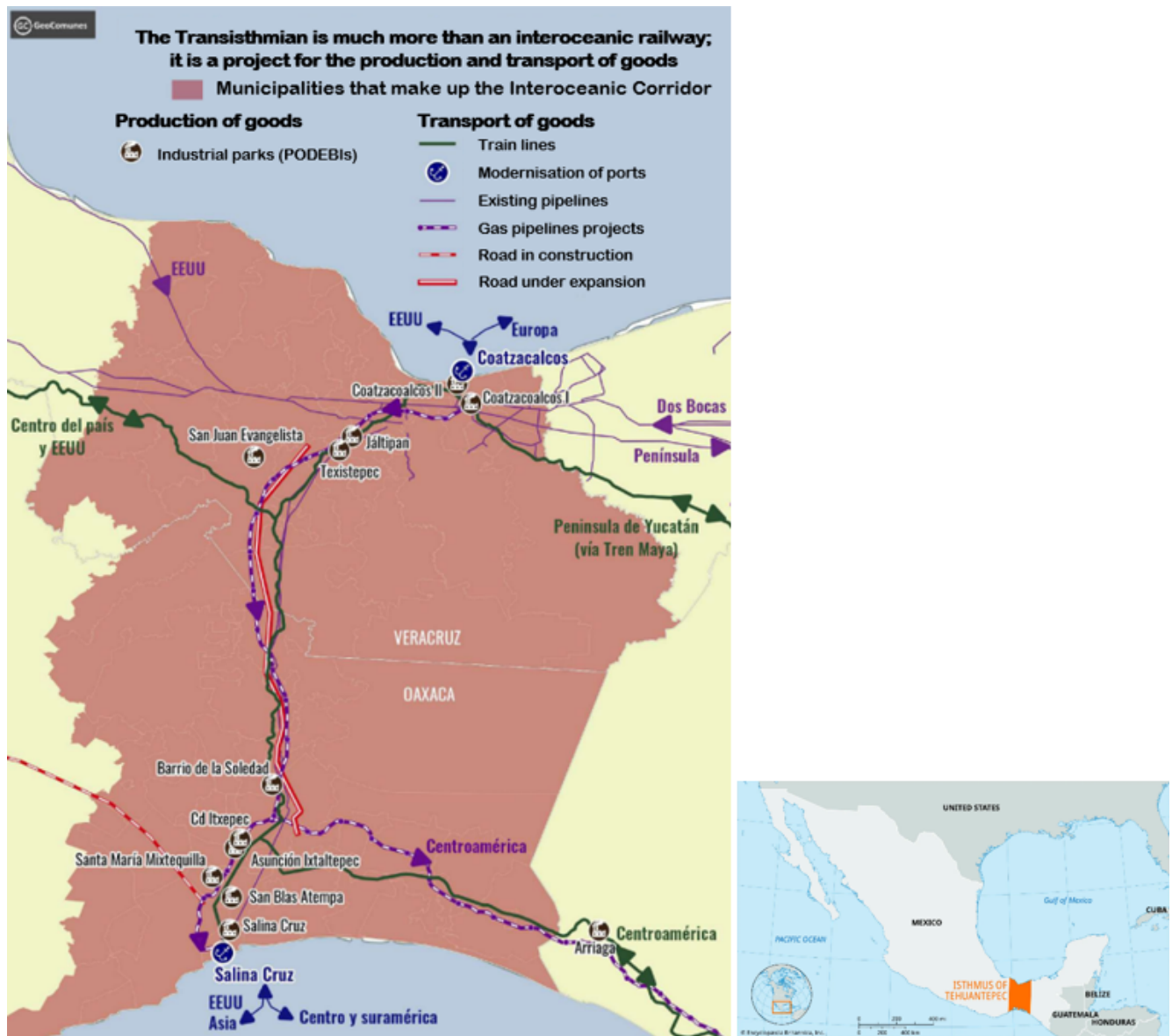


Figure 1. The Transisthmian is much more than an interoceanic railway; it is a project for the production and transport of goods. Source: Colectivo GeoComunes (<https://geocomunes.org/>, last access: 16 January 2025; translated by the author and reference for location in Mexico by © Encyclopædia Britannica, <https://www.britannica.com/place/Isthmus-of-Tehuantepec#/media/1/585650/296635>, last access: 16 January 2025) (EEUU – USA; Centroamérica – Central America; Suramérica – South America; Centro del país – center of the country; Península de Yucatán – Yucatan Peninsula).

focuses mainly on one of these movements, the Assembly of Indigenous Peoples of the Isthmus of Oaxaca in Defence of Land and Territory (Spanish – *Asamblea de Pueblos Indígenas del Istmo Oaxaqueño en Defensa de la Tierra y el Territorio*, APIIDTT, <https://tierrayterritorio.wordpress.com/>, last access: 15 January 2025). They are based in Juchitán de Zaragoza, Oaxaca. One main slogan of the movement is “enough of the dispossession, plundering, and destruction of our territories by the big global capital and corporate states” (APIIDTT, 2023; author’s translation). As with other move-

ments in socioterritorial struggles, their emphasis is on the defence of life (Haesbaert and Mason-Deese, 2020; Svampa, 2020) and “the production of alternatives to the dominant developmental projects” (Flórez-Flórez and Olarte-Olarte, 2023:134).

The initial quotation from Maria, a young defender of land and *territorio*,² draws on a definition of *territorio* that

²For women who are active in the struggles and who articulate themselves as defenders in their narratives, I use the term defenders of land and *territorio*.

challenges the hegemonic understanding of territory as a sovereign nation bounded by its borders (Storey, 2020). In Latin America, resistance movements in defence of land and *territorio* use the term referring to a plural understanding of this concept (Dorn, 2021; Haesbaert and Mason-Deese, 2020; López Sandoval et al., 2017; Zibechi, 2012). Latin American debates on *territorio* describe a mundane understanding and relate the concept to everyday life, building on the idea that different social groups produce and appropriate *territorios* simultaneously (Halvorsen, 2018). The defence of land and *territorio* is an established term in Latin America (*defensa de la tierra y del territorio*). The term is employed in social movements against infrastructural and (neo-)extractivist projects,³ offering a critique of neoliberal capitalism and hegemonic development discourse (Svampa, 2020). Land (*tierra*) is seen as an important means of sustaining livelihoods (Laing, 2020) and is related to agricultural resources (Altmann, 2018). *Territorio* goes further, as it refers to the autonomous exercise of their collectivity (Laing, 2020). Women⁴ are key protagonists in many of the movements in defence of land and *territorio* in Latin America (Asher and Wainwright, 2019; Haesbaert and Mason-Deese, 2020; Schurr, 2010; Svampa, 2020; Vega Ugalde, 2013; Villagrán, 2019); I analyse the gendered organisation and division of labour of these movements in terms of their emotional attachment to *territorio*. To refer to the debate in Latin America's resistance movements, I use the Spanish term *territorio* (pl. *territorios*).

Popular, communal, and decolonial feminism from Latin America foregrounds an understanding of *territorios* as plural and multi-territorial, where “they can exercise their right to self-determination over their *cuerpos-territorios* of life” and where they “offer the possibility of reconfiguring new and different social relations that are more just, anti-patriarchal, anti-capitalist, anti-racist, decolonial and ecological” (Vela-Almeida et al., 2020:104; author's translation). *Cuerpo-territorio* allows an emphasis to be laid on the emotional link and the experience of the interaction between body and *territorio* (Colectivo Miradas Críticas del Territorio desde el Feminismo, 2017). The opening quote from the young activist illustrates an example of the emotional connection with *territorio*. The concept of *cuerpo-territorio* is further discussed and operationalised in the following sections to highlight the emotional politics of resistance movements. In their article, Daskalaki and Fotaki (2024:1001) emphasise that “the anti-extractivist movement draws on eco-feminist discourses to offer an alternative imaginary that enables the embodied understanding of nature–society/culture

with collective and affective dimensions of being in the world”. Ulloa (2023:24; author's translation) further suggests that understanding movements in the defence of *territorio* requires emphasising “relations with non-humans and the spiritual and emotional dimensions”. Sultana (2011:163) argues for the incorporation of emotions into feminist political ecology (FPE), as emotions are crucial to understand “how resources are accessed, used, and fought over”. I explore women's emotional attachment to *territorio* and the emotive everyday practices of making it in light of the calls for the inclusion of emotions in the context of socioterritorial struggles. The analysis of emotions in the context of resistance and *territorio* offers a new perspective to understand why, in this case, women defend their *territorio*. I expanded on the emotional connection to *territorio* based on go-along and narrative interviews with women during four field trips between August 2021 and June 2023 (7 months in total). In their struggle against the mega-infrastructure project, the women politicise their emotional attachment to and their identification with their *territorio*. Politicisation means the strategic use of the emotional link for the struggle. This paper aims to analyse the emotional relationship with their *territorio* by demonstrating how the politicisation of this relationship plays a key role in resistance movements.

In the following section, I first focus on debates around the concepts of territory and *territorio*. In particular, I focus on Latin American feminist perspectives on *territorio*, such as the concept of *cuerpo-territorio*, and how the focus on emotions is necessary to understand why people defend the *territorio*. In the third section, I present the context of the Interoceanic Corridor project. After a concise methodology section, I discuss in Sect. 5 the results of my analysis of my research participants' emotional link to *territorio* and the politicisation of it in their resistance efforts. The conclusion highlights how the emotional link to *territorio* through territorial identity, the practice of traditions, and the use of strategic essentialism are politicised, thus contributing to the understanding of the concept of *territorio* in Latin America through emotional politics.

2 Debates on *territorio*: the concept of *cuerpo-territorio*

In Latin America, Indigenous *territorios* have been and continue to be violated because of the colonial and postcolonial power of the modern state. Modern state borders divided the *territorios* of Indigenous people and caused land occupation (Halvorsen, 2018). Against the backdrop of this colonial historical context, scholars; activists; and grassroots, feminist, and Indigenous movements in Latin America (López Sandoval et al., 2017; Svampa, 2020) are currently developing and working with a plural understanding of *territorio* (Haesbaert and Mason-Deese, 2020). Social groups use the debates on *territorio* in their struggles “as a political tool” and to ex-

³Neo-extractivism includes not only traditional extractive activities but also, for example, large infrastructure projects (Svampa, 2020).

⁴When I use the term women, I refer to people who identify as female, understanding gender identity as a social category. Juchitán is also well known for *muxes*, who are a third Indigenous gender.

press their collective demands and feelings (Haesbaert and Mason-Deese, 2020:259). For example, they are used in the fight for their territorial rights and for *territorio* as a source of life. *Territorio* “has become the site of collective action for place-based development” (López Sandoval et al., 2017:57). It is used “mainly as a tool for mobilisation and struggle by different social movements” (Haesbaert and Mason-Deese, 2020:264; Dorn, 2021; López Sandoval et al., 2017; Zibechi, 2012).

Brazilian critical geographers have advanced the debate on *territorio* by looking at its reactivation in social movements (Svampa, 2020; Fernandes, 2005; Haesbaert, 2011; Porto-Gonçalves, 2009; Santos, 2005). Porto-Gonçalves (2009) emphasises that social groups appropriate the debates on *territorio* through everyday processes of *territorio* making. This means that they appropriate space and that *territorio* is created by subjects and groups through their daily activities and claims on *territorio*. Such a mundane understanding of *territorio* builds on multiplicity. This implies the idea that *territorios* can be constructed in multiple ways by different social groups who produce and appropriate *territorios* simultaneously (Halvorsen, 2018). *Territorios* are therefore disputed due to the presence of multiple claims, such as those regarding the right to use and control them (Dietz and Engels, 2018; Fernandes, 2005; Svampa, 2020).

As argued by Haesbaert (2013), the notion of *territorio* intersects with the “global sense of place” emphasised by Massey, as both concepts focus on territorial processes and multiple identities. The Interoceanic Corridor project, initiated by the Mexican government at the Isthmus of Tehuantepec, and the contradicting grassroots movements are examples of “the appropriation of space in pursuit of political projects”, which are “overlapping and entangled” (Halvorsen, 2018:791). The focus of regional planning in Latin America on the development of territorial projects contradicts the plural understanding of the term in Latin American debates, as it is based on the understanding of *territorio* as “a specific political institution, a delimited area with its own balance of power” (Schwarz and Streule, 2023:281; author’s translation). This is consistent with the view that the territorial state is a product of a specific conceptualisation of geographical space and the power exercised over space (Storey, 2020). Agnew (1994) introduced the term “territorial trap” to criticise the perception of states as fixed, with no possibility of change. He pointed to the lack of attention paid to the historical context of territories, namely the construction of territorial boundaries and the inherent risk of essentialising of the nation-state. In Elden’s view, territory is “produced, mutable and fluid” (Elden, 2010:812) and must be seen in a broad sense, taking into account historical, political, and geographical specificities (Elden, 2010, 2013). “If territory is conceived of as political calculative space, a technology; as a process rather than as an outcome; and as something continually being made and remade, then this helps us to break out of a static, bounded, defined, sense”

(Elden, 2019:8). Halvorsen (2018) comments that Elden focuses on a western perspective of territory and omits other historical, political, and geographical contexts. The focus on the western perspective leaves out “alternative understandings and practices of territory” and excludes these practices and interpretations (Halvorsen, 2018:793). Elden addresses the critique: “it means taking some account of colonial questions in relation to territory (see Halvorsen, 2018), to take the body more seriously, and the physical nature of the landscape, the places over which, through which, territories are established and contested” (Elden, 2021a:174). In this paper, I focus on how emotional connections to the *territorio* are used in the struggle over contested *territorios*, taking into account the body through the concept of *cuerpo-territorio*.

Elden (2021b) emphasises thinking about territory beyond the western context, on “terrain [as it] has the potential to be a more material way of thinking about territory” (Elden, 2021a:182). Gordillo (2021:192) further emphasises that “the idea of the power of terrain is fruitful to think of these questions across the diversity of human experiences because it resonates with the non-western conceptions of terrain examined by Indigenous scholars and anthropologists”, where “non-human power of terrain” is acting. Indigenous communities across Latin America have underscored that *territorio* embodies an Indigenous cosmovision. A cosmovision, which encompasses the non-human world and the connection between humans and nature, includes the importance of non-human beings in relation to humans (Castro-Sotomayor, 2020; de La Cadena, 2015; Escobar, 2008; Laing, 2020; Ulloa, 2015). Haesbaert and Mason-Deese (2020:262) explain that the concept of *territorio* of many Indigenous groups includes a space “where all beings live in relationship, and where the physical base of the land is also integrated into social relations in a way that does not reduce it to its materiality”. This interpretation forms the core of the Indigenous movements’ struggle to preserve their autonomy and sustain their relationships on their *territorio*, while safeguarding their interaction with non-human beings (Laing, 2020). I will therefore use the term *territorio* as it is used in the context in which I am working for the purposes of this paper.

López Sandoval et al. (2017:57) state that “beyond the scholar discussions, *territorio* has provided the possibility to express feelings, understanding, struggles for what groups claim to be collective demands and to discover endogenous possibilities for change”. Feelings are used for the struggles around *territorio* but are not explored in academic debates. Gutiérrez Rivera (2021), in her study of women from urban grassroots movements, presents them as “producers of urban territories”. She focuses on “how women embody and experience territory” and links this to “feeling/thinking knowledge” (Gutiérrez Rivera, 2021). González-Hidalgo and Zografos (2020:19) also point to the relevance of emotions in environmental struggles, developing a framework of emotional political ecologies, in which they highlight “the psy-

chological, the more-than-human, the collective, the geographical and the personal-political". González-Hidalgo and Zografos (2020:20) emphasise that "by explicitly discussing 'the political' when considering emotions in environmental conflicts, a bustling and engaged EmPEs [Emotional Political Ecologies] research and action agenda can be fruitfully expanded". Building on the Indigenous understanding of the interconnectedness between human and non-human beings, Haesbaert (2023:108; author's translation) emphasises the importance of "developing a new environmental affectivity that recognises the significance of an 'existence between bodies'" as a means of decolonisation. The interconnectivity between humans and the non-human world is a concept that is not alien to Indigenous cosmologies. It is embraced by the decolonial, Indigenous concept of *cuerpo-territorio*. González Hidalgo and Zografos (2020) also advocate for a deeper engagement with the body.

Feminist activists have developed the concept and methodology of *cuerpo-territorio*, which emphasises the relationships between one's body and *territorio*. Cabnal (2010), an Indigenous communitarian feminist, coined the concept *cuerpo-territorio*, which perceives the body and *territorio* as one entity. According to Cabnal (2010), the body plays a crucial role in recovering from the exploitation of the land and in generating life. This is particularly true for the female body, as it has been subjected to the historical continuation of patriarchal and colonial exploitation and violence against the body (Cabnal, 2010; see also Bauriedl and Hoinle, 2021; Ojeda, 2023). Ojeda (2023:367) adds that "territories are social bodies integrated into the web of life and, in this sense, demand a recognition of interdependence and an ethics of co-responsibility". Ojeda (2023) further highlights that *territorios* are integrated into symbolic and material relations. They are vulnerable to the accumulation of capital, and they are embedded in logics of patriarchal violence that destroy bodies and *territorios*. Several collectives (e.g. Colectivo Miradas Críticas del Territorio desde el Feminismo, Juntas Logramos Más, Colectivo de Geografía Crítica del Ecuador) have taken up Cabnal's concept of *cuerpo-territorio* and further developed and worked with it (Hanson, 2020).

The understanding of *territorio* as *cuerpo-territorio* creates an emotional connection with it, the Colectivo Miradas Críticas del Territorio desde el Feminismo (2017:7; author's translation) highlights that their senses are connected to the *territorio*: "we listen to what the river tells us, we talk to the *chacras*, the *milpas*, and we laugh with the birds". They speak of emotions that are felt by different communities throughout Latin America in relation to the *territorio* in the body: "sadness over exploitation, fear of pollution, but also joy in our hearts that despite so much violence we are building other worlds" (Colectivo Miradas Críticas del Territorio desde el Feminismo, 2017:7; author's translation). Thus, "well-being is, according to the women's understanding, not limited to physical well-being but explicitly includes affect and emotions" in relation to *territorio* (Leinius, 2020:213).

Schwarz and Streule (2024:12) note that "territories are inter-subjective: much depends on the intentions upon which such multiple inter-subjective territorialities are built, as well as by, with, and for whom they are being constructed", referring to feminist debates on *territorio* in Latin America. Schwarz and Streule (2024) point out that the concept of *cuerpo-territorio* and the focus on the body raise difficult questions about strategic essentialism in these resistance movements. Strategic essentialism refers to "a *strategic* use of positivist essentialism in a scrupulously visible political interest" (Spivak, 1996:214). Thus, it can be used "as a political strategy whereby differences (within a group) are temporarily downplayed and unity assumed for the sake of achieving political goals" (Eide, 2016:2). At the same time, "Spivak... warns against the application of the concept, as other theorists also do, since strategic essentialism may encourage the survival of frozen identities and deepen differences" (Eide, 2016:2). Because of this danger of essentialising, I focus on the different perspectives of the women interviewed, emphasising the emotional connection to the *territorio* but also showing how they use this connection to politicise their resistance efforts.

3 Context: the Isthmus of Tehuantepec – a context marked by conflict

The Isthmus of Tehuantepec, a 200 km long strip of land between the two oceans, holds considerable historical and geopolitical significance (Ceceña, 2023; Colectivo Geocomunes, 2020; Gasparello, 2023). The CIIT has been in planning under different names by several governments since 1980 (see Gasparello, 2023). Especially against the most recent projects, there has been a fierce popular opposition (Ceceña et al., 2021; Colectivo Geocomunes, 2020; Gasparello, 2023; Lehmann, 2019).

In the past and present, the Isthmus of Tehuantepec is a conflict-ridden context (Lehmann, 2019). Historically, the region has been characterised by unequal land distribution and contested land relations, as control over land has been and continues to be contested between communal and private land ownership (Lehmann, 2019). Indigenous land policies of communal land interfere with the capitalist logic of land ownership, and Indigenous movements fight for their right to co-determination (more details in Lehmann, 2019). The issue of land is of the utmost significance, given the strategic location of the Isthmus of Tehuantepec, which is utilised for national and international projects (Lehmann, 2019). The installation of numerous wind farms in the Oaxacan part of the Isthmus of Tehuantepec since the mid-1990s is emblematic of the conflict-ridden context, having generated various social conflicts (Dunlap, 2018; Lehmann, 2019; Lucio, 2018).

The CIIT is linked to the other projects in the south-southeast of Mexico. Being a territorial reorganisation project, it leads to the restructuring of the region (Colectivo Geocomunes, 2020). The aim of the mega-project is to use

the strategic isthmus to facilitate the transport of goods between the two oceans and between Asia and the east coast of the United States of America (Ceceña, 2023; SIPAZ, 2020). As part of the project, the railway line between the east and west coasts will be modernised and straightened. The CIIT includes other major projects such as the expansion of ports, motorways, 10 industrial parks, and energy projects (wind farms and a gas pipeline) (Ceceña et al., 2021; Gasparello, 2023; SIPAZ, 2020). The industrial parks are called *polos de desarrollo para el bienestar* (development poles for well-being; author's translation) because they are supposed to create employment opportunities by attracting national and international companies with subsidies and tax breaks, thus opening up this region to the national and global markets (Secretaría de Gobernación, 2020; Gasparello, 2023). Opponents of the project point out that the risk of community division and privatisation of social property is very high (Colectivo Geocomunes, 2020). Concerns about industrial pollution and the negative impact it would have on the communities are also raised. Communities would be alienated from their land and turned into cheap workers or sold off (Colectivo Geocomunes, 2020).

An increasing number of resistance movements fight against the CIIT and other mega-projects. This is especially the case in territories where the majority of people identify themselves as Indigenous (Gasparello, 2023). The Isthmus of Tehuantepec is located in the states of Oaxaca and Veracruz. In Oaxaca, 57 % of the population identify themselves as Indigenous, belonging to different groups, i.e. Chontal, Huave (Ikoots), Mixe (Ayuuk), Zapoteca (Binnizá), and Nahuatl (COPLADE, 2017; Secretaría de Gobernación, 2020) (the name in brackets is self-designated name). Veracruz has a lower percentage of Indigenous people at 25 % (Zoqué, Nahuatl, and Popoluca). As the mega-project is a threat to the villages in southern Mexico (El Topil, 2023), resistance arises from different groups such as the affected communities, researchers, and other experts (Ceceña, 2023). The militarisation of the process and the declaration of mega-projects as highly important for national security has led to extensive repression of resistance groups (Ceceña, 2023; Redacción Animal Político, 2023; Lozano, 2023). Furthermore, Mexico is the country with the third-highest number of attacks against defenders of human rights and the environment (Front Line Defenders, 2023). Awareness of the CIIT among the general population is low due to repression, lack of information and resources, multiple crises (e.g. a massive earthquake in 2017, the COVID-19 pandemic, inflation), and daily struggles to survive. These challenges impact the current resistance movements.

4 Methods

I conducted ethnographic fieldwork in four research stays, mostly in Juchitán de Zaragoza, Oaxaca, and its environs,

during a period of 7 months in total between August 2021 and June 2023. The context of violence and repression made fieldwork a challenging endeavour. During the research stays, I interacted with different organisations and groups that oppose the CIIT and worked with communities on different issues related to *territorio* and culture. Due to the scattered nature of the resistance movement, I chose to focus on the Assembly of Indigenous Peoples of the Isthmus of Oaxaca in Defence of Land and Territory (APIIDTT), a resistance movement based in Juchitán, and its related groups and topics. Because of the context of conflict, it would have been beyond my ability to carry out research in close collaboration with more than one resistance group. The focus on the APIIDTT has allowed me to examine in detail the viewpoints of diverse women who are either members of the same resistance group or share similar backgrounds. I have decided not to present the standpoint of those who endorse the CIIT and the present government, as this paper focuses on the women in resistance. The paper offers a comprehensive analysis of the understanding of women in the resistance rather than presenting conflicting views on the mega-infrastructure project. In addition, I have observed that the current state of repression, instability, and numerous challenges has resulted in decreased involvement and reluctance to identify oneself as a part of any resistance group.

Applying a feminist perspective when working with Indigenous women, I constantly reflected on power imbalances and my positionality as a White female researcher from Germany/Switzerland (see Bauriedl, 2016; Caretta and Riaño, 2016; Hanson, 2020; Mollett and Faria, 2013; Schurr, 2017; Schurr and Segebart, 2012). From the outset, I drew inspiration from the work of decolonial feminist scholars. During the research stays, I discussed how I could engage with the context and subsequently collaborated with some of the activists on workshops and activities of the resistance movement (Hanson, 2020). From February to May 2023, I collaborated closely with one of the activists to develop workshops. During this process, we discussed my positionality and the design of the workshops, ensuring their utility for the APIIDTT and for my research. This collaboration was only possible after establishing trust and openly discussing sensitive topics, such as power inequalities. Two workshops were conducted in collaboration with the aforementioned activist, one of which addressed patriarchal violence and the other integrative health. The latter employed the *cuerpo-territorio* mapping method (based on Colectivo Miradas Críticas del Territorio desde el Feminismo, 2017), which enabled participants to articulate their emotional responses to their *territorio*.

Using the method of narrative interviews and go-alongs (Kusenbach, 2003), I accompanied 16 women over the course of several days in their daily lives. The women interviewed have varied backgrounds, including village and urban environments and high and low levels of education. Some are full-time activists, some also work in an NGO on

similar topics, others are traditional workers in areas such as embroidery or food production. Most of them identify as Indigenous (Binnizá). Also, I investigated how they use their territorial identity for the resistance. I accompanied them to their workplaces and observed them embroidering, making *totopos* (traditional maize product), and working in their places of activism. I participated in activities organised by the APIIDTT and invited women from distinct generations and backgrounds to participate in my research. After transcribing the go-alongs and narrative interviews, the textual data were analysed through qualitative content analysis following Kuckartz's (2016) methodology using the MAXQDA software. The analysis was informed using the videos from the go-alongs as well as the participant observations. As explained by Jenkins (2017:1444), I intend "to make audible the voices of these women activists, and to value these experiences in their own right". As a result, I use long quotes to make their thoughts and experiences readable.

I used the go-along method, as well as participating in the various activities, to explore the embodied relationship and emotional attachment to *territorio* of women in resistance (see also Jenkins, 2014). By observing, asking questions, and listening, I was able to analyse their lived experiences and everyday practices (Kusenbach, 2003). The women show their material environment, perform in it, and explain their activities so that their experiences and the meaning of the activities for them become comprehensible (Pink, 2007; Schurr, 2012). Pink (2007) suggests that the video tour method can produce an emphatic and sensually embodied and situated understanding of other people's experiences. Furthermore, the concept of *cuerpo-territorio* is instrumental in comprehending the subjective experience, embodiment, and materialisation of the *territorio* within the body and the interconnections between them. In her 2023 work on *cuerpo-territorio*, Cruz Hernández draws upon the insights of Ahmed (2014) to emphasise the cultural construction of emotions through bodily interactions and social interactions. To explore the emotional politics of women in resistance, I first examine the identification, practices and traditions associated with the *territorio* to gain insight into the emotional link. Secondly, to understand why the women resist the mega-project, I work on politicisation, using strategic essentialism to highlight how the women use the emotional link to the *territorio*. In examining the interviews, I investigate how the connection to the *territorio* is conceptualised and experienced. The Colectivo Miradas Críticas del Territorio desde el Feminismo (2017) emphasises the emotional responses experienced by the collective and the groups with whom they are working when the *territorio* is contested.

5 "It is this love . . . that can drive us to defend it [the *territorio*]" – politicising the emotional understanding of *territorio*

5.1 Emotional relations to *territorio*

Well, then you say, it's not like an isolated thought, it's not just something I think, it's a feeling or a thought shared by many people who realise the importance of recognising us, above all our *territorio*, our identity, more than anything else [Pues es entonces donde dices, no es como un pensamiento como aislado, no es solo algo que yo pienso, sino que es un sentimiento o un pensamiento compartido por muchas personas que se están dando cuenta de la importancia de reconocernos, sobre todo, nuestro territorio, nuestra identidad más que nada, y eso sí]. (interview with Carmen, 12 March 2022)

This quote, taken from an interview with a young activist, shows the link between identity and *territorio*. It highlights the emotional bond between the activist and the *territorio* being protected. Carmen emphasises a shared identity, which is established through the recognition of practices on the *territorio*. I first met her in her village, where she took me on a tour of her village on her motorbike, telling me how much she felt connected to her village and to the people and expressing her fear of the changes that the mega-project would bring and the impact it would have on the practices that for her make up the *territorio*. This is a similar description to Maria's interview cited in the Introduction of the paper. For her, loving the *territorio* means being involved with it, taking part in the celebrations, and eating local food. The emotional connection to the *territorio* is essential in both quotes. One of the activists interviewed describes *territorio* and her understanding of it as follows:

The *territorio* is also us; the *territorio* is all this, it is the land, it is the customs, the relationships, the *fiesta*, it is our culture, our food, our language, the corn, the way you organise yourself, the rituals, that is the *territorio* for me [El territorio somos nosotros también, territorio pues es todo esto, es la tierra, son las costumbres, las relaciones, la fiesta, es nuestra cultura, nuestra comida, nuestra idioma, el maíz, la forma en que te organizas, los rituales, eso es el territorio para mí]. (interview with Berta, 1 September 2022)

In her quote, Berta highlights the mundane understanding of *territorio*, emphasising the traditions associated with her Zapotec identity. Zapotec culture is alive and vibrant on the Isthmus of Tehuantepec. It is reflected in the use of language and different traditions, celebrations, and food. The Zapotecs (Binnizá) are the main Indigenous group in the region. They are known as rebellious and proud, and they are associated

with their “strong” women (see Bennholdt-Thomsen, 1997; Lehmann, 2019). Various resistance groups, such as the API-IDTT, strengthen the connection to their *territorio* by leveraging the association with Zapotec identity. As Halvorsen et al. (2019) put it, “the production of food, music, literature, and other cultural practices occurs in territory, [is] in turn (re)creating socioterritorial relations. In other words, territories produce identities, which in turn reproduce territories”. The celebrations mentioned by Berta and others demonstrate the connection with the *territorio*. During the research stays, the women taught me about the significance of the traditional celebrations, and I accompanied them to some of the celebrations. In their explanations, the strong identification with the practices, the food, and the traditions was evident. The celebrations serve as a conduit for fostering a sense of community and joy, which are vital links with the *territorio*.

Berta’s quote envisions the reproduction of *territorios* and collective organisation through the emotional attachment to them. This emotional attachment is also noticeable in the subsequent quote:

Because my words to them are it is like taking away our life if you take away our forest [*el monte*]. Because the forest means a lot to us, it is a life. Because I’m telling you, it’s where we get wood for cooking, for everything, to buy a stove, to buy a tank of gas, we can’t afford it, and we’re farmers, we’re farmers [Porque si le digo, nos quita el monte, es como que nos quitan la vida. Porque el monte significa mucho para nosotros, es una vida. Porque le digo, de ahí sacamos leña para cocinar, de todo pues, para comprar la estufa, para comprar un tanque de gas, ¡no nos alcanza, y somos campesinos pues, somos campesinos]. (interview with Irma, 24 May 2023)

The quote from an elderly woman who actively fought against a CIIT industrial park and impeded its construction illustrates the tenacity of the fight for life. It describes the vehemence and consequences of the imposition of this industrial park. She stresses the impact that the construction of the industrial park would have on her daily life and on activities related to the *monte* (referring to an area of forest). The emotional significance of the *territorio* becomes clear when she says with urgency that they will take her life if they destroy the *monte*. The *monte* is the source of life for many families in the village. Without this *territorio*, it is impossible to sustain their lives. Therefore, it has to be defended. Thus, the collective understanding of the *territorio* as the life of the women leads to and emphasises the emotional bond with the *territorio*.

In another village in the region, a community resisted a wind farm a few years ago. Some community members are now also opposing the CIIT. The women stressed that they defended their land and the resources that sustain their lives.

While she spoke, she posed the question with a sense of urgency:

So, the people here have stopped all this . . . They have prevented them from bringing their things here and taking over our land. Because from here we live from the land, we eat, we live from the sea, we live from the sea, we live from the land. If they take our land, where will we get enough to eat? We will no longer plant maize, we will no longer plant this, what is it called, the sorghum, the sorghum, the maize, the sesame, the reeds also grow here, the peanuts, the flowers and all the things that grow here [Entonces la gente de acá impidieron todo esto . . . que ellos metieran sus cosas acá y que se adueñaran de nuestras tierras. Porque de aquí vivimos de las tierras comemos, vivimos del mar. Ajá vivimos del mar, vivimos de la tierra. ¿Si se adueñan de nuestras tierras, de dónde vamos a sacar para comer? Ya no vamos a sembrar maíz, ya no vamos a sembrar este ¿cómo se llama? el sorgo, el sorgo, el maíz el ajonjolí, las cañas también se dan por acá, los cacahuates, las flores y todas las cosas se dan por acá]. (interview with Guadalupe, 6 March 2022)

Both quotations show that they fight for their territorial rights because they need the *territorio* to sustain their lives (see López Sandoval et al., 2017).

Several young activists and community workers returned to the Isthmus of Tehuantepec region after completing their studies in major Mexican cities. Their objective was to assist their local community after the 2017 earthquake, driven by a strong sense of emotional attachment to their *territorio*. This attachment is also illustrated by the quote of Maria (see p. 1) and of Leticia:

It is this love, this tenderness, that can drive us to defend it, when we realise that, yes, our land nourishes us [Como desde este amor, desde esta ternura y que eso es lo que nos puede impulsar a defenderla, cuando nos damos cuenta de que sí, que nuestra tierra nos da de comer]. (interview with Leticia, 9 March 2022)

Leticia is another young activist who returned to her *territorio* after her studies and created an NGO. For her, recognising the value of land as it provides for people’s needs and expressing gratitude for its productivity imply a love for and thus a defence of the *territorio*. I held the interview with her in the garden of the NGO; she guided me around and I was able to observe the tenderness with which she was showing me the herbal plants that they use to produce traditional medicine.

The emotional relation to *territorio* is also reflected in the use of traditional medicine, which is linked to it and to ancestral practices. Land and *territorio* defenders working

with traditional medicine mention that after finding medicinal plants in the surrounding hills, people give the hill another meaning. They see the value it has and do not want it to be destroyed. They feel that they belong to and love their *territorio*. As they discover the natural area and the medicinal plants, they want to protect them and change the way they perceive the *territorio*. Before, many of them did not know about the importance of the hill and the existence of these plants. By recognising their significance, their motivation to participate in the resistance movement rose. Veronica, another young defender of land and *territorio*, told me about this while we were walking in this natural area. We commenced our excursion at an early hour to avoid the hottest time of the day. During our walk, she articulated her sadness at the increasing exploitation of natural resources, despite the presence of a multitude of plants and animals and despite the location being a sacred site of the Zapotecan community.

In sum, it is the attachment to and dependence on the *territorio* that create the emotional relationship with it. The women show their emotional attachment by identifying themselves through their daily territorial practices and by underlining the fact that the *territorio* they inhabit is linked to their identity. Moreover, their perception of it as essential for life and for maintaining a livelihood necessitates the defence of the *territorio*. In the fight against the mega-projects, identification with the *territorio* is a crucial means of politicisation. In the following section, I explain how this emotional link and identification with the *territorio* becomes politicised.

5.2 Politicising territorial identity and an emotional understanding of *territorio*

I like the celebrations a lot, I like them, I follow the rituals, with the neighbours, with the people, with everything. Because it feels like this is the fabric, the social fabric, that we can't let it fall apart, because in a way it contains the DNA of our people, our identity, who we are, and that at some point we can say this isn't fair what's happening and let's do something, let's do something about it. It's trying to get people to look at the land, to look at their lives, to look at their practices, to look at how they're being affected by the dynamics of global corporative capital, so that they can do something, they can do what we've been doing, to have that consciousness, to say this is happening, let's change things, let's not let them come in and take it away from us [A mí por ejemplo me gustan mucho las fiestas, me gusta este, yo cumplo con los rituales, con los vecinos, con la gente, con todo. Lo tengo que hacer, porque siento esto es el tejido, que se va haciendo el tejido social que no dejemos que se rompa, porque ahí de alguna manera contiene el ADN, de nuestro pueblo, de nuestra identidad, de lo que somos y de que en un mo-

mento puede surgir, decir bueno no es justo lo que está pasando y hagamos las cosas, hagamos algo en contra. Y además, por ejemplo las prácticas que estamos haciendo es para eso lo que promovemos a nivel de las comunidades que no siempre sale bien, es para tratar de que la gente voltee hacia el territorio, que voltee hacia su forma de vida, voltee hacia sus prácticas y cómo están siendo afectadas por esas dinámicas del capital global cooperativo y que puedan hacer algo, puedan hacer lo que nosotros ya hicimos tener esa conciencia, de decir eso está pasando, transformemos las cosas, no dejemos que vengan y nos lo quiten]. (interview with Berta, 1 September 2022)

Berta reinforces the idea of turning to land and *territorio*, which is also linked to the emotional relationship mentioned above. She aims to encourage people to protect their land and *territorio* by practicing their traditions and fostering their identification with it. She politicises this connection by participating in and strengthening traditions and territorial practices. Thus, the emotional connection to the *territorio* is reinforced. The underlying idea is that by focusing their attention on it, people will commit to protecting it against destruction. The APIIDTT uses its various activities, such as working with medicinal plants, traditional handicrafts, embroidery, and the local economy, as well as living the traditions, speaking Indigenous languages, and using the products of the land and sea, to strengthen the bond with the *territorio*.

The connection between social movements' territorial struggle and territorial traditions, customs, and the identity of the people is crucial for the work with women that the APIIDTT has carried out in recent years: a school for women defenders of land and *territorio*, workshops on traditional medicine, and bio-construction to build ovens and embroidery cooperatives⁵. The activities focus mainly on women because women are considered to be particularly important for the defence of land and *territorio*. As de La Cadena (1995) argues in her work "*Women are more Indian*": *Ethnicity and Gender in a Community near Cuzco*, indigeneity is unequally distributed. She explains that in some environments, women have more characteristics of indigeneity than men in everyday life. In the Isthmus of Tehuantepec, the women interviewed also play an important role in maintaining actively lived traditions. For example, the importance of festivities was mentioned in several interviews. Although the celebrations are mixed with capitalist practices (e.g. beer companies, reproduction on social media), several interviewees stressed that traditions are linked to territorial identity. Following Sultana (2011), I am aware of the reduction and essentialisation of these attributions to women. In line with her research (Sultana, 2011:164), I want to "show the ways in which emotions play a role in the lived realities that shape

⁵These activities have been observed during field work.

the practices of access, use and control of natural resources” and to investigate the relations to their *territorio* in the resistance against such mega-projects. Moreover, women use the essentialised relationship strategically for the struggle (see Ruales and Zaragocin, 2020).

And I think that starting from loving life and the land and trying to get more women to come or start to appropriate the *territorio*, I think we will be, we will try to be stronger, braver, with what is happening around us [Y creo que empezando desde amar la vida y la tierra, y tratar de que más mujeres lleguen o empiecen a apropiarse del territorio, creo que seremos, trataremos de ser más fuertes, más valientes, con lo que está pasando alrededor de nosotras]. (interview with Veronica, 25 March 2022)

Veronica’s quote highlights the idea of popular feminism that “challenge[s] the reductionist ideas of autonomy and individualism and instead emphasise[s] the notion of interdependence” (Svampa, 2021). She also focuses on the appropriation of the *territorio* by women. Like Berta, she refers to her activism against mega-projects and the possibility of living their traditions in their *territorios*. Veronica emphasises the emotional bond with the land, stressing her love for it and the sense of belonging that it provides. She focuses on gathering women to reinforce collective appropriation by strengthening love and emotional attachment to the *territorio* and territorial identity. In doing so, “territorial identity is generated alongside the territoriality of a community” (Halvorsen et al., 2019). The APIIDTT seeks to reach young people to familiarise them with their *territorio* from a young age to facilitate an emotional connection to it.

The activists use these essentialised connections in their struggles against the CIIT. By emphasising women as defenders of land and *territorio*, they highlight the conflict between global capital and the defence of the traditional/Indigenous use of *territorio*. To establish a connection with their *territorio* and encourage people to turn to it, they use activities associated with it that evoke an emotional attachment, such as traditional medicine and embroidery. Through the focus on territorial identity and emotional attachment, the *territorio* is being politicised. The women use the connection to the land and the *territorio*. They also strengthen activities that are connected to the *territorio*. By the strategic use and politicisation of *territorio*, the women draw a picture that emphasises their close connection to their *territorio* and that minimises differences in order to emphasise resistance and struggle against the imposed mega-project (see Eide, 2016; Tuhiwai Smith, 2008). This strategic essentialism can be regarded as a political strategy (Spivak, 1996). Women evoke emotional attachment to protect and defend the *territorio* and to mobilise others to join. Berta explains the difficulties they encounter with the mobilisation:

But when we want to do something in a more collective way, to organise, to do that, everybody has things to do, not everybody wants to get involved. . . . Well, at least it’s been sown, even if it’s a tiny seed, maybe it will grow if you keep fertilising it, if you keep working a little bit [Pero cuando queremos concretar algo de manera más colectiva, que se organicen, hagan esto, que todo el mundo tiene cosas que hacer, no todo mundo no quiere comprometerse. . . . Pues por lo menos se ha sembrado aunque una semillita chiquita, tal vez vaya crecer, si la sigues abonando, si sigues trabajando poquito]. (interview with Berta, 1 September 2022)

The defence of land and *territorio* is an ongoing process, whereby Berta emphasises the lack of time and economic resources and their struggle to politicise more people. For this reason, the activities of the movement focus on strengthening the social fabric and reinforcing the practices related to *territorio* and territorial identity. Using the term strategic essentialism (Spivak, 1996), I do not intend to de-legitimise the resistance to the mega-project. I rather use it to analyse the understanding of *territorio* and how it is used for resistance. Some of the women that I interviewed and accompanied use this essentialism in their political practice and agenda. However, not all the women use this link to actively oppose the CIIT and participate in resistance movements; some have few economic and time resources and fear repression, and others are not well informed about the implications and are looking for the “development” promised by the current government but continue to live their traditions linked to their *territorio*.

6 Conclusion

The paper focuses on the resistance against the mega-project on the Isthmus of Tehuantepec, which involves multiple “development” projects in the region. The women interviewed defend their *territorio*, which is perceived as their source of life, while the CIIT affects the relationship with the *territorio*. By identifying themselves with the practices of the *territorio*, the women show their emotional attachment to it. Furthermore, I have explored the link between their *territorio* and their identity and the concept of *territorio* as essential to their way of life. For this reason, the emotional attachment to their *territorio* is emphasised through identity, traditions, and mundane practices. The analysis has shown how the women use and essentialise this emotional bond to strengthen the struggle for their *territorio*. The defenders of land and *territorio* use activities connected to the *territorio* to highlight this emotional attachment. Emotional politics, which involve the politicisation of emotional attachment to the *territorio*, are used by those who oppose the CIIT.

This paper advances the concept of *cuero-territorio* by highlighting the emotional attachment that women who resist the CIIT have to their *territorio*. I contribute to the debate on

territory by focusing on feminist Latin American understandings of *territorio*. The feminist and Indigenous rethinking of *territorio* enables a deeper engagement with the emotional insights shared by the women interviewed. This approach contributes to the wider objective of elucidating the politicisation of an emotional link to *territorio* in everyday practices and shows how the women use this emotional link in a strategic way in their political struggle. This use of strategic essentialism anticipates the critique of *cuerpo-territorio* as essentialist, as I show how the women use the emotional connection without romanticising their practices. Understanding the emotional basis of everyday political struggles provides a new framework for looking at resistance movements and explaining why movements defend their *territorio*.

As a privileged White European researcher, I continuously ask myself whether I can talk and write about this emotional connection and focus on traditions without essentialising and folklorising the women I spoke to. I decided to include long quotes so that some of the women's voices become visible throughout this paper. While the diverse backgrounds of the women interviewed allow multiple perspectives on their emotional linkages to their *territorio*, other perspectives remained invisible. It is worthwhile to revisit Massey's concept of a "global sense of place" and quote her in stating that places "do not have single, unique 'identities'; they are full of internal conflicts" (Massey, 1994). This paper reflects on the inherently conflicting nature of place, specifically *territorio*, as shaped by overlapping and opposing interests. On one hand, the CIIT imposes a narrative of "development" on the *territorio*; on the other, resistance movements actively oppose this imposition. As discussed earlier, some full-time activists strategically use their emotional connections to *territorio* to strengthen and sustain resistance. These connections are deeply tied to their identities, which are rooted in the *territorio*, and are driven by the fear of losing it due to the imposition of the CIIT. Others also have the emotional connection but do not actively engage in resistance against the CIIT. Yet some still argue that the CIIT will destroy their lives on their *territorio* and emphasise the emotional politics of *territorio*. This emphasis enables the examination of "alternative understandings and practices of territory" (Halvorsen, 2018:793), and through the concept of *cuerpo-territorio*, the exploration of emotional connections between humans and non-humans. The resistance movement is part of a broader network of struggles for *territorio* across the globe, where activists similarly advocate for the defence of their lives, identities, and *territorios*.

Data availability. The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy and ethical restrictions. The requisite ethical approval was duly obtained from the Ethical Committee of the Catholic University of Eichstätt, where I was employed before.

Competing interests. The author has declared that there are no competing interests.

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Acknowledgements. I would like to thank first and foremost the women interviewed, for their openness and for the opportunity to accompany them and learn from their perspectives. Thanks go to the APIIDTT for the insights and discussions. Special thanks go to the editors of this special issue and to my doctoral supervisors, as well as to the two anonymous reviewers. Also, I would like to thank my friends and several colleagues for the helpful comments and fruitful discussions.

Financial support. This research has been supported by the Schweizerischer Nationalfonds zur Förderung der Wissenschaftlichen Forschung (grant no. P000PS_211917).

Review statement. This paper was edited by Nadine Marquardt and reviewed by two anonymous referees.

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