

Life, death, and the litter layer: The war on drugs in the Amazon rainforest

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A small farm in the Andean-Amazonian foothills. Credit: Kristina Lyons

The canopy is thick, the air heavy. The Amazon rainforest pulsates with

life, sustaining an estimated [10 million species](#) on a few centimeters of arable soil. It's also the site of war. Paramilitary groups, coca growers, narcotraffickers, insurgent groups, and government agencies all vie for control over this space. In the midst of this struggle—assassinations, aerial herbicide spraying, and crop eradication—exist the selvacinos, Amazonian farmers who cultivate forests, biodiversity, and alternative ways of life.

Kristina Lyons, assistant professor of anthropology and environmental humanities in the School of Arts & Sciences, has been conducting fieldwork in this region since 2004. She explores the multilayered world of the Colombian Amazon in her new book, "Vital Decomposition."

Since 2004, Lyons has been interested in the public health and environmental impacts of aerial fumigation policy in Putumayo, implemented by the United States and Colombia until [2015](#), but it wasn't until she visited an Amazonian farm school that the ideas behind "Vital Decomposition" emerged.

The farm school, Lyons says, shifted her focus "away from the sky, and what was raining down on people in the midst of chemical warfare, to what was germinating from the ground. What kind of life was being cultivated in the midst of death and poisoning? This really became the focus of the project, thinking about how people cultivate life in the midst of death and war."

In order to do so, she considered the hojarasca, or litter layer. Unlike [temperate zones](#), where the soil is usually a meter deep, deriving nutrients from parent rock material, the thin, 5-10 cm Amazonian soils are "biological, produced by a continuous nutrient recycling between the forest canopy and microbial life below," Lyons says.



Kristina Lyons works from home. Credit: University of Pennsylvania

Early discourses in anthropology and archeology discussed the supposed social effects of "poor soils," characterizing those of the Amazon as senile, thin, acidic, toxic, and inhospitable to conventional agriculture, Lyons says. The alternative agricultural practitioners are resisting a stigmatized characterization of Amazonian soils as inferior, in addition to the pervasive coca culture and a militarized and repressive foreign

policy, Lyons says.

During the U.S.-Colombia [War on Drugs](#), attempts by the Colombian government and [USAID](#) to eradicate coca involved crop duster planes flying low over fields and forests, spraying Monsanto's herbicide glyphosate. Government programs would then attempt to swap a licit monocrop for the illicit coca they had just killed, Lyons says. However, attempts at farming pepper, vanilla, coffee, cacao, and heart of palm failed.

"The idea behind those programs is to substitute an illicit export-oriented crop with a legal export-oriented one," Lyons says. "The logic has not been to restore agro-biodiversity or food sovereignty. Both monoculture coca and its official alternatives are extractive-based forms of agriculture."

As she wrote the book, Lyons was inspired by these practitioners. Using a mix of genres, she infused literary and poetic writing into her ethnography. "I used the poetics to discuss the structural violence, the way that violence and war interrupts daily life but was not necessarily the focus of everyday conversation," Lyons says.



A mural in La Hormiga, Putumayo depicts life before and after years of aerial fumigation with glyphosate. August 2007. Credit: Kristina Lyons



Doña Maria Elva demonstrates Amazonian seed storing and sowing practices. Mocoa, Putumayo, January 2013. Credit: Kristina Lyons

"In the best kind of ethnographic writing, there is no separation between the empirical and the analytical," Lyons says. "I try to use literary genres to enact this. Literary styles or poetics became a way of writing the hojarasca. So, the poetics became a way to keep the tension between

violence and life making, poison and germination."

In the hojarasca, life germinates from decomposition. "You constantly need this relational movement," Lyons says. "It's a different continuum of life and death." This also highlights people's struggle to die with dignity, Lyons says, rather than being killed violently or being dispossessed from their land. "People in this alternative agriculture context are trying to cultivate different modes of life and different modes of death and dying" inspired by the nutrient cycling of the selva, the tropical forest, Lyons says.

This ties into the Latin American concept of *buen vivir*, or "living well." A Spanish translation of Aymara and Quechua indigenous concepts, *buen vivir* departs from the extractive mindset of unlimited growth for individual or collective human gain, Lyons says. "And this really was about making life happier. Rural communities attempting to cultivate a dignified life that will allow them to remain on their farms, fomenting affective attachments, love and care in the midst of the social rupture caused by decades of war that also alienated them from their land and territories," she says.

Publicly engaged anthropology has been the ethos of Lyons' work, who dialogues with communities about their interests and needs when designing a research project. She also collaborates with scientists, legal teams, and filmmakers.

Lyons continues to work on transformational projects with political implications. She received a 2021 Fulbright award to collaborate with Colombia's Special Jurisdiction for Peace, where she will work with a legal team on a case that treats territories and not only human actors as victims of the social and armed conflict. "This is the first time that a transitional justice process will treat nature as a casualty of war in need of criminal prosecution and reparative strategies," Lyons says. "I don't

think that the kinds of the socioecological problems we are facing today can be solved without multidisciplinary approaches."

Provided by University of Pennsylvania

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