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Cannibal Salvage Expenditure: The Subaltern Style of the Urban Peruvian Amazon

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the political ecology of subaltern existence at the urban cutting edge of our apocalyptic present, in the case of Iquitos in the Peruvian Amazon. Through an ethnographically surrealist montage of multiple elements across the themes of accumulation, architecture, and art, *cannibal salvage expenditure* emerges as a subversive urban style. This style is rooted in the material dynamics of cannibal capitalism, which thrives on the multiple resource frontiers of the region. The subaltern inhabitants of Iquitos seize what they can of its extractive spoils; collaborate with its mafias in the invasion of privately held land; and produce street art that celebrates its plundered wealth. Their relationship to this regime of accumulation is configured by multiple forms of salvage: they deploy practices of salvage accumulation that claw back shards of value and lay claim to slivers of freedom; they kick out the invasion mafias and build salvage communities on the appropriated land; and they salvage Indigenous cultural practices and the refuse of the city in their street art and communal architecture. This complex form of subaltern urbanism is infused with the orgiastic ethos that Georges Bataille called expenditure: the everyday philosophy of Iquitos holds that any surplus should be spent immediately in shared moments of excess; the street art of the city gives uninhibited expression to the libidinal energy of this constant collective discharge; and instances of looting and armed resistance to evictions embody the spirit of revolutionary expenditure in explosions of violent insurrection.

1 | Introduction

The 58th International Exposition of Art at the 2019 Venice Biennale had a relentlessly apocalyptic theme. In the words of one reviewer for a leading Western broadsheet, "The tide is rising. The ice caps are melting. The oceans are awash with trash … This is what the international pavilions seem to be saying, over and over again" (Cumming 2019). The reviewer was referring to the "melancholy" exhibitions of the dying colonial powers—France, Spain, Germany, Great Britain—where "If I saw one doomed pavilion, the floor wrenched up, the walls torn down (ever so politely) to reveal the gardens beyond, I saw four" (ibid.). But a very different apocalypse was being staged in the Peruvian pavilion, which entirely escaped the attention—or perhaps comprehension—of the Western media. Here the end of the world was not a potentially imminent event to be mourned and hopefully avoided. Instead, the exhibition constituted a surrealist critique of an unfolding apocalypse initiated by the colonial powers themselves, which had already been underway for centuries (Mbembe 2024; Yusoff 2018). Still more jarring to the genteel worldview of the biennale attendee was the attitude of the victims depicted in the immense mural at this exhibition's heart: far from mourning the end of the world, they appeared to be lustfully engaged in its destruction.

The mural was painted by Christian Bendayán, an autodidact artist born in Iquitos—the principal city of the Peruvian Amazon, and the largest city in the world with no road access. It presents a dialectical image of his home city, which was built on the enslavement and genocidal murder of the Indigenous inhabitants of the surrounding jungle during the rubber boom of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, whose descendants now form the majority of the city's population. Titled *Indios Antropófagos* ("Anthropophagous Indians"),

in mocking refutation of the racist slur through which such crimes were historically legitimated in Peru and across the colonial world (Buntinx 2019; Fraser 2022), the mural depicts a line of naked "Indians" moving through gloomy jungle, their flesh marked with the tattoos of the Bora people. The Bora had been marched along such trails under the weight of their extracted rubber, past their immolated villages and massacred families, towards the stations that would send the rubber to Iquitos and on to Europe and the United States (Hardenburg 1913; Taussig 1987). But instead of rubber, these Indians bear spears tipped with psychedelic diamonds that transform the decaying matter of the forest floor into filaments of neon light. They are voluptuous, androgynous, transgender. They are not marching but touching, kissing, fucking. One holds a flaming torch with which she has just ignited the Iron House supposedly designed by Gustave Eiffel—the crown jewel of belle epoque Iquitos, abruptly transposed into the bone-strewn jungle on which the city's wealth was founded, and which its ornate architecture had sumptuously repressed. The image is rendered on metal panels identical to those of the Iron House itself, which still stands in the central plaza. The founding violence of the city now rises to the surface of these panels in the inverted form of an uprising performed by the descendants of its victims in an act of hedonistic vitriol and orgasmic emancipation.[1]

This paper takes *Indios Antropófagos* as the starting point for an exploration of the subaltern urbanism of Iquitos, understood as an "urbanization from below, a materialization of a more pluriversal territorialization of urban space" (Simone 2022, 9; see also Arcilla 2023; Cowan 2018; Roy 2011), which I further interpret as an affirmative example of what Ana Tsing (2015) calls "the possibility of life in capitalist ruins." In the case of Iquitos, as the mural suggests, this life is not limited to desperate survival strategies but is permeated by a collective commitment to abundance, enjoyment, and revolt, despite being lived in the context of poverty and dispossession, and in the shadow of a genocidal past. As a metropolis of settler colonial origins, in which as many as 80% of present inhabitants belong to one of multiple Indigenous groups (Espinosa de Rivero 2009), Iquitos embodies the profound sociospatial contradiction identified in the burgeoning literature on Indigenous and settler colonial urbanisms (Bayón Jiménez and Janoshka 2025; Dorries 2022; Léonard et al. 2023; McClintock and Guimont Marceau 2023; Porter and Yiftachel 2019; Toniak 2017). Yet the transgressive exuberance of its subaltern practices cannot be contained by any binary division between colonial and Indigenous worlds. Instead, the city expresses the "motley" form of urban *mestizaje* identified by Bolivian decolonial feminist Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui (2012, 105) as "*ch'ixi* modernity," which emerges from "the parallel coexistence of multiple cultural differences that do not extinguish but instead antagonize and complement each other." I interpret the particular iteration of *ch'ixi* modernity emerging in Iquitos as arising from a fusion of specific forms of accumulation, spatial production, and cultural expression that I call *cannibal salvage expenditure*, each element of which I will now introduce in turn.

In Iquitos, the seemingly paradoxical enjoyment of everyday life at the urban cutting edge of what Evan Calder Williams (2011) calls our "combined and uneven apocalypse" is materially grounded in a complex relationship to the dominant contemporary mode of accumulation that Nancy Fraser (2022) conceptualizes as "cannibal capitalism." Like *Indios Antropófagos*, Fraser's concept subverts the deployment of cannibalism as a colonial ideology of Indigenous dehumanization, by demonstrating that it is global capital that cannibalizes human beings and ecologies, and that is now devouring the very social and environmental conditions of its own reproduction. In Latin American cities like Iquitos, this process is increasingly configured by fusions of spectacular violence and organized criminality theorized by transfeminist scholar Sayak Valencia (2018) as "gore capitalism," for which the genocidal origins of Iquitos constitute an extreme precursor. Confronted by the ruination wreaked by this mode of accumulation, a growing number of critical thinkers have drawn attention to the multiple forms of "salvage" through which subaltern survival might be secured by picking over the bones of a terminally self-consuming system (Calder Williams 2011; de Bruin-Molé 2021; Salvage Editorial Collective 2015; Tsing 2015). The immense wealth and waste of this simultaneously expanding and disintegrating system create extensive opportunities for scavenging, thieving, poaching, appropriating, occupying, repurposing, and jerry-rigging (Anderson and Huron 2023; Soderman and Carter 2008), all of which are evident in Iquitos. Through such acts of salvage, unanticipated political identities and possibilities can emerge (Kosnoski 2022), as indicated by Bendayán's painting of the torching of the Iron House on metal sheets seemingly salvaged from the seized ruins of the edifice itself—as if their material salvage had facilitated the political revolt that the mural ecstatically depicts.

As the ecstatic libidinal dimension of *Indios Antropófagos* suggests, such acts of salvage are not mere survival strategies but possess a "bubbling energy" (Kosnoski 2022, 55) and a "piratical flair" (Calder Williams 2015, 852). This is the spirit of what the dissident surrealist Georges Bataille (1985) called "expenditure." In contrast to the endless accumulation of exchange value that defines cannibal capitalism, and the pragmatic appropriation of use values emphasised by much of the literature on salvage practices, Bataille insists that production and accumulation are only so many means to the ultimate end of expenditure, understood as the spontaneous squandering of surplus in destructive and orgiastic excess, which permeates the whole of more-than-human existence, from social rituals of carnival and potlatch to revolutionary explosions and the limitless outpourings of the sun.[2]

The ethos of expenditure infuses the subaltern culture of Iquitos, in which cannibal capitalism is not only a social relation of exploitation and dispossession but is also cannibalized in turn—seized on, feasted upon, and regurgitated in deliriously reconfigured material and aesthetic forms. This subversive inversion of cannibal capitalism is common to multiple postcolonial worlds, as celebrated by the Brazilian poet Oswald de Andrade in the *Manifesto Antropófago*. Published in 1928, this pioneering decolonial text sought to "push onward" along the path opened by "the Surrealist Revolution" (Andrade 1991, 39), transforming the colonial denigration of the Indigenous "cannibal" into an affirmation of an omnivorous and untameable cultural style (Andrade Tosta 2011; Garcia 2020). *Indios Antropófagos* takes its name from this text and conveys its spirit in the case of Iquitos, in the staging of what Gustavo Buntinx (2019, 13), the curator of Bendayan's exhibition at the Venice Biennale, calls "a reinvented

cannibal dream that is voracious in its exuberant digestion of all glories and disgraces … A spontaneous, popular, unlettered embodiment of those complex elaborations."

The subaltern urbanism of Iquitos is thus configured by an unruly fusion of cannibal capitalism, salvage practices, and an ethos of expenditure. Together, these disparate elements constitute what Henri Lefebvre (2000, 29) called an urban "style," understood as a spontaneous aesthetic arising through the collective production of urban space (see also Chiodelli 2013). This paper seeks to capture and convey the cannibal-salvage-expenditure style of Iquitos, as a contribution to the emergent literature on the (urban) political ecology of our apocalyptic present, which shares the perspective of *Indios Antropófagos* that the supposedly avoidable breakdown staged in the biennale pavilions of the anxious colonial empires is in fact already underway (Cassegård and Thörn 2018; Heron 2024; Pohl 2021; Swyngedouw 2023; Wilson 2023a). In doing so, the paper also responds to calls in the broader literature on urban political ecology for situated ethnographic studies grounded in the lived experiences and spatial practices of Indigenous and other subaltern urban citizens of the Global South (Gururani 2023; Lawson et al. 2023; Monte-Mór 2023; Simone 2022; Tzaninis et al. 2021).

My sense of cannibal salvage expenditure as the subaltern style of the Iquitos street emerged gradually over 16 months of ethnographic research conducted in the city between August 2019 and May 2023, including an 11-month period living in an informal settlement. As the anthropologist James Ferguson (1999, 18) has noted, urban ethnography is a particularly bewildering and challenging research method, in which the object of study is extraordinarily fluid, multifaceted and opaque, offering "no 'whole' knowable social world in which a fieldworker might acquire a sense of mastery or confident familiarity." Like Lefebvre, Ferguson's (1999, 20) study of urban life in the Zambian Copperbelt thus led him to replace the standard scholarly search for unity and coherence with "an idea of 'cultural style'" as a looser and more impressionistic sense of the unique ambiences emerging from the spatial and temporal complexities of specific iterations of subaltern urban life. My sense of the style of Iquitos was incrementally acquired through many afternoons and evenings spent with my neighbors in our barrio; countless wanderings through Iquitos and its flooded informal settlements; and long-term engagements with a landless people's movement and the organizers of the annual carnival in one of the poorest barrios of the city.[3]

In seeking to grasp and convey the subaltern style of Iquitos, I have taken inspiration from the dissident surrealism of Andrade and Bataille, and from Lefebvre's (2008, 261) own enduring commitment to the surrealist "hypothesis that only the excessive image can come to grips with the profundity of the real world." The paper draws on "ethnographic surrealism" (Clifford 1981; Lusty 2017), which adopts the approach of Bataille's journal *Documents*, using surrealist methods of montage and juxtaposition against the normalizing techniques of academic convention, and ensuring that "there is no smoothing over or blending of the work's raw 'data' into a homogeneous representation" (Clifford 1981, 564). As such, ethnographic surrealism constitutes an appropriate method for capturing *ch'ixi* modernity as "the product of juxtaposition" (Cusicanqui 2012, 105), and its manifestation in "a Peruvian society composed of fractures … in which no present can cancel all the unresolved pasts that overflow and collapse upon us" (Buntinx 2024). As the overtly surrealist mode of *Indios Antropófagos* indicates, the surrealist disruption of institutionally sanctioned modes of experience and representation is profoundly consistent with the style of the Iquitos street.

The remainder of the paper traces the entanglement of cannibal capitalism, salvage practices, and the ethos of expenditure across three key dimensions of subaltern urbanism in Iquitos: accumulation, architecture, and art. In contrast to the didactic approach of conventional academic writing, I seek to allow the style of the city to emerge through this ethnographically surrealist montage of "interstitial layers that seem to come from nowhere … but that are 'coded' into the very propulsion of the urban itself" (Simone 2022, 16). Section 2 draws on Anna Tsing's concept of salvage accumulation, in detailing subaltern involvement in various local forms of cannibal capitalism, including the illegal timber, gold and cocaine trades, as well as the insubordinate ways in which the salvaged value is expended. Section 3 addresses the expansion of Iquitos through the invasion of privately held land by landless people led by armed mafias. Drawing on Jason Kosnoski's work on salvage communities, it documents the struggles through which the inhabitants of the invasions confront state and capital on one side and the mafias on the other, through practices of salvage architecture, collective organization, and violent resistance. Section 4 explores the vernacular aesthetics of Iquitos as an uninhibited expression of the ethos of expenditure. This spontaneously surrealist street art eulogises salvage accumulation, wantonly engages in the cannibalization of colonial cultural forms celebrated by the *Manifesto Antropófago*, and gives displaced expression to the dreams and desires of multiple marginalized groups for whom Iquitos has become a refuge from persecution, despite the genocidal origins of the city itself. The paper concludes by interpreting cannibal salvage expenditure as a radical reclaiming of the right to the city, connecting it to other cases of subaltern urbanism and *ch'ixi* modernity, and drawing out its utopian dimension.

2 | Accumulation

The body of a young Indigenous woman is draped across a table, her breasts and thighs arranged among jungle fruits and fishes, like the meat at the centre of a feast. White men in linen suits puke their fine whiskeys onto their half-unbuttoned shirts, laughing about their latest profits as they prepare to gorge themselves upon her. This is the scene portrayed in another of Christian Bendayán's paintings, called *The Banquet*.[4] Like *Indios Antropófagos*, *The Banquet* critiques the violence and obscenity of cannibal capitalism. While the linen-suited men represent the role of this regime of accumulation in the history of Iquitos, the modern attire of the half-naked woman attests to its continued significance for the city. The painting was part of a 2014 exhibition of Bendayán's work titled *The Devil's Paradise*, in reference to the book that first revealed the crimes of the rubber boom in the Peruvian Amazon, which had been published under the same name a century before (Hardenburg 1913). Driven by burgeoning demand for rubber in the industrial capitals of Europe and North America in the late 19th century, the rubber boom

rapidly transformed Iquitos from a minor Amazonian outpost of the Peruvian state into a prosperous settler colonial city (Espinoza 2016; Ortiz Sotelo 2018). By the turn of the century, the city center was adorned with the ostentatious architecture of the European belle epoque, and Iquitos had been reinvented as "a coquette Iberian city ensconced in the heart of Amazonian darkness" (Buntinx 2019, 22).

But the opulence of Iquitos concealed the genocidal violence of the surrounding rubber stations on which its wealth was founded. In the Putumayo region on the border with Colombia, the enslavement of Indigenous communities was enforced with systematic torture, rape, and murder, resulting in the deaths of an estimated 30,000 members of the Huitoto and Bora peoples: "They are tortured by means of fire and water, and by tying them up, crucified, head down ... They are cut to pieces and dismembered with knives, axes, and machetes" (Hardenburg 1913, 185). Their exploitation was justified as a civilizing act in response to their alleged cannibalism (Taussig 1987). But as noted by Roger Casement, who investigated these crimes (Mitchell 1997), the true cannibalism was that of the surplus value extracted through their enslavement, and the British investors who financed these operations would surely "enjoy the taste of their dividends, for at every meal they sit at a cannibal feast" (quoted in Wylie 2013, 99).

The rubber boom ground to a halt in the 1910s, as British plantations in colonial Malaya outcompeted the wild rubber of the Amazon. The economic survival of Iquitos in the subsequent century has been achieved through a series of smaller extractive booms, based on the vast resources of the region of Loreto of which it is the capital (San Román 1975; Santos-Granero and Barclay 2015). Precious hardwoods and exotic furs and skins sustained the city until the discovery of oil in the region in 1971, when international capital flooded back into Iquitos. At around the same time, Iquitos became a key transit node for the burgeoning cocaine industry, with oil and cocaine jointly fueling a new era of urban prosperity in the late 1970s and early 1980s, materialized in gaudy hotels, brothels and casinos throughout the city center (Ríos and López 2014). Regional oil reserves, however, are now diminishing; cocaine trafficking routes have shifted away from the city; and the unregulated exploitation of precious timber, exotic animals, and other natural resources has brought them to the brink of "commercial extinction" (Dourojeanni 2013, 30). Meanwhile remote regions of Loreto have become new frontiers for illegal goldmining and cocaine production, both of which, like the oil and timber industries, are highly damaging to fragile local ecologies. This extractive system is increasingly controlled by an integrated criminal network that reinvests narcotrafficking profits in the illicit gold and timber trades (Amazon Underworld 2023; UNODC 2023), with 90% of hardwoods exported from Loreto now estimated to be illegal (Dourojeanni 2013). Iquitos has become a money laundering centre for these industries, and the same mafias that control them also influence the local state through the financing of electoral campaigns (Crabtree and Durand 2017; Wilson 2025a).

In 2019, the Iquitos-born artist Kay Zevallos staged a performance inspired by Bendayán's *The Banquet*, in which she sought to comment on the contemporary reality of this cannibal capitalist system. Rather than locating the performance in the relative opulence of the city centre, Zevallos staged it in the peripheral barrio of Bajo Belén. As capital fled Iquitos at the end of the rubber boom, Indigenous slaves found their way from the abandoned rubber stations to Belén. Since then, cannibal capitalism has driven multiple waves of Indigenous and mestizo migrants into the barrio, which has extended beyond the narrow table of land on which Iquitos was originally constructed, expanding across the surrounding floodplain through an improvised wooden network of floating huts and stilted houses to form Bajo Belén (Ramírez Tamani 2014; Reátegui Bartra 2015). By locating her interpretation of *The Banquet* here, Zevallos was thus inviting the victims of cannibal capitalism to reflect upon "the cannibalization of peoples and lands" (Zevallos 2019). The performance was staged in the central plaza, at the heart of the barrio's sprawling market. Playing the role of the woman in the painting, Zevallos reclined upon a raised plinth overflowing with mangos, pineapples, passionfruit, watermelons, papayas, and cakes covered in glittering icing of soft pink and baby blue. Traders and customers gazed at this delectable spectacle in bewildered silence from the humble stalls of the surrounding market. But then a child reached out and took a piece of fruit. Another seized a piece of cake. Within seconds, everyone had descended on the stage, scrambling over each other in the looting of its wealth. Improvising a response to this unanticipated turn of events, Zevallos started smearing herself with cake and smashing chunks of fruit into her face, surrounded by the cannibalistic feasting of the crowd.

Reflecting on the performance afterwards, Zevallos explained that her intention had been to "inform the public about these vicious practices of power ... I honestly imagined that the people were not going to do anything; that they were going to sit down and look."[5] But while it disrupted her critique of extractivism from the perspective of its victims, the looting of Zevallos's staging of *The Banquet* also communicated a deeper and more complex truth about subaltern involvement in the political ecology of cannibal capitalism (Penfield 2019; Vindal Ødegaard 2019). The extractive economy of Loreto constitutes a paradigmatic example of salvage accumulation, through which capital seizes hold of forms of value produced outside its circuits. Operating at the frontiers of cannibal capitalism, salvage accumulation not only exploits and dispossesses marginalized populations but also promises wealth and freedom in ways that transcend the strictures of formal proletarian labour (Erickson 2024; Tsing 2015). Seventy percent of the working population of Iquitos work in the informal economy, and the most lucrative opportunities in this regard are those provided by the illegal timber, gold and cocaine industries—forms of salvage accumulation that offer young men the persistent promise of a big haul, the brief pleasures of big spending, and the relative freedom of a life improvised on the margins of wage labour and the law (Gasche 2014; Silverstein 2022). In the words of one illegal gold miner, recalling a particularly profitable period working on a tributary of the Putumayo: "At that point we left [the dredger] and went to spend it! We had a lot of gold, and so we said, 'OK, we've got good material, let's go to the city and have a good time!'."[6]

The Indigenous inhabitants of Iquitos generally maintain close connections with their remote riverine communities of origin (Gasche 2014; Santos-Granero and Fabiano 2023), which they utilize for further minor forms of salvage accumulation,

including fishing, hunting, and small-scale logging. Most of the produce is sold in the numerous riverside markets of Iquitos, primarily the immense market of Belén. Multiple salvage practices are likewise undertaken by subaltern subjects within the city. These include the collection of recyclable cans and bottles from piles of uncollected trash on the street; the scavenging of garbage dumps for sellable and consumable materials; and the theft of manhole covers and electricity cables, both of which are sold for scrap. Additional local salvage activities include fishing and the gathering of firewood in the depleted rivers and forests immediately surrounding Iquitos and temporary farming on the floodplains exposed in the dry season, which are fertilized by minerals from the Andes and the untreated sewage of the city. In the words of one elderly inhabitant of Bajo Belén, which convey the lifestyle of improvisation and autonomy characteristic of salvage accumulation: "The *belenino* is a wood-gather, a fisherman, a chicken-skinner. He plants [on the floodplains], and there his watermelon, cucumber, melon and coriander are born. He does a bit of everything in his life here. It is his own life."[7]

This commitment to autonomy is combined with an equally widespread commitment to the immediate enjoyment of any fleeting influx of monetary wealth, instead of its pragmatic saving and reinvestment. This is an element of the philosophy referred to locally as *día a día* (living from one day to the next). At one level, *día a día* is an acknowledgement of the extreme precarity of subaltern survival in the city, where extensive economic informality forces people to improvise a range of ways each day to feed their families that night. But *día a día* also implies that on days when involvement in salvage accumulation results in better returns, the surplus should be spent immediately in communal excess. On a crate of beer to be shared with neighbors shouting over ear-splitting cumbias in the narrow streets of the informal settlements, for example—a tradition in which I regularly participated in the barrio where I lived. This subaltern commitment to seizing all opportunities for enjoyment in defiance of bourgeois calculations of profit and utility perfectly expresses the ethos of expenditure, which "instead of locking up life as money is locked in a safe, spends it without counting" (Bataille 1985, 82). The complex relationship of this form of expenditure to the cannibal capitalist system in which it is entangled was ultimately conveyed by Zevallos in her performance of *The Banquet*. The exploited woman depicted in the painting initially repudiated the pillage underway around her. But she ended up joining the cannibal feast, forcing the flesh of the fruit into her mouth, and squeezing the juice until it was pouring down her arms. In Zevallos's words, "In the end, as much as you are part of the wealth, you also exploit it, and you also need it … Or maybe it was an act of rebellion on her part. She chews the fruit because she realizes that the whole world does the same."[8]

3 | Architecture

Three kilometers down the only highway out of Iquitos, a banner hung along the roadside celebrates the first anniversary of the community of Dos de Octubre (Second of October), which was founded in an armed invasion of privately held land. The banner reproduces the cadastral map confirming the community's recently awarded status as a "Human Settlement"—a lime green rhombus surrounded by white rectangles of private property and bypassed by the red line of the road: "Area: 8 hectares 2490.47 m^2. Perimeter: 1427.45 m." Within these abstract coordinates a rebel social world is being created amid the charred stumps of trees cleared by chainsaw and machete in the aftermath of the invasion. Plastic bunting fashioned from shredded advertisements stripped from billboards has been strung across the streets of the makeshift settlement for its anniversary celebrations, infusing the blasted wasteland with fragments of Coca-Cola logos and verdant jungle scenes. Laughing women bathe with mock eroticism beneath water pumped by hand from a freshly bored well. The huge upside-down face of a white male model torn from a city-centre billboard is twisted into a grimace of bourgeois horror, trapped between the rusted roofing panels of an improvised wall (Figure 1).

Dos de Octubre is one of the countless so-called "invasions" through which Iquitos has expanded over the past 50 years in the effective absence of urban planning and social housing programs. This process first gathered pace in the late 1970s and early 1980s, when Iquitos was flooded with the families of 15,000 unemployed oil workers who had lost their jobs after abandoning their homes along the riverbanks of Loreto to join the fleeting oil boom. The workers formed Maoist organizations and occupied privately held land on the outskirts of the city, taking advantage of land reform legislation that facilitated such ad hoc processes of redistribution (Santos-Granero and Barclay 2015). Since then, the city has expanded through multiple invasions of this kind (Nájar 1999). But the politics of the invasions changed in the late 1990s, as they reached the city limits and began extending along the stretch of high unflooded land opened by the completion of a road to the nearby town of Nauta (IIAP 2002; Wilson 2025b). Criminal gangs took control of the process and commodified it, seizing land not in the name of social justice, but to sell it to a constant influx of Indigenous and mestizo peasants seeking the opportunities promised by the city (Nájar 2005). Over time, these mafia-led invasions have evolved into a cannibal capitalist structure that simultaneously advances and undermines the logic of capital by organizing a flourishing urban land market through a relentless series of frontal attacks on privately held land.

This apparent assault on the cardinal bourgeois principle of private property is furiously condemned by the local press, which represents the interests of the Iquitos bourgeoisie—a class largely comprised of landlords, loggers, and construction company owners with close ties to regional government and well-documented connections to illegal industries (Brehaut 2024). "Iquitos Has Become a No-Man's Land!" screamed a typical headline in October 2022 (*La Región* 2022c), reporting on the recent wave of invasions of which the foundation of Dos de Octubre formed a part. But most of the land along this initial stretch of the Iquitos–Nauta highway is in fact state property (originally stolen from Indigenous peoples in the colonial and post-independence periods), which was fraudulently acquired by local and national elites, with the collusion of corrupt functionaries of the Ministry of Agriculture. Back in the 1980s, when the road was just a muddy track, these elites took advantage of agrarian reform laws, posing as peasant farmers to freely obtain usufruct rights over large extensions of land, which were conditional on it being put to agricultural use (Alvarez 1999). In the majority of cases, they instead stripped the land of precious

FIGURE 1 | Grimace of bourgeois horror trapped in improvised wall (photo by author).

timber and deployed it as a speculative asset while bribing officials to overlook the use to which it was being put. But the mafias have countered with a corrupt system of their own by bribing bureaucrats in the Loreto Directorate of Legal Agrarian Property Formalization (DISAFILPA), who inform them of the legal status of the properties they are targeting for invasion and initiate the process of reverting these properties to the state once the invasions have taken place, after which the state can reassign them to the invaders. The costs are included in the instalments paid by the inhabitants of the invasions for their lots. They also pay the mafias to bribe municipal authorities to grant them "Human Settlement" status, which gives them rights to services including water and electricity.

Meanwhile, the displaced landholders seek to evict the invasions and regain control of the land, bribing the corrupt local police force to conduct the evictions (*La Región* 2022a) and assembling gangs of hired thugs known as *matones* (killers), who burn down and dismantle the settlements once their inhabitants have been removed by the cops. Following their retreat, however, the inhabitants often reinvade the land, leading to further evictions in which the same violent pattern is played out again. This process can be repeated several times until the invaders give up the struggle, or until the landholder shifts their strategy to pursuing a court order or seeking to negotiate the illegal sale of the land to the inhabitants. At the same time, the inhabitants are extorted by leaders installed by the mafias that organized their invasions, who charge increasingly exorbitant fees for supposed legal processes related to land reversion and the acquisition of Human Settlement status, which frequently transpire to be false. Those who fail to make the payments face intimidation and ultimately violent eviction by the mafias themselves, unless they can collectively organize to expel them and take control of the land.[9]

The inhabitants of the invasions thus typically find themselves fighting battles on three fronts simultaneously—against the landholders, corrupt state actors, and the mafias—in their struggles to salvage the land from the cannibal capitalist system in which it has been ensnared. Through their struggles they constitute themselves as what Kosnoski (2022, 53) calls "salvage communities … the squats, barrios and occupations that spring from the ruins left by capitalism." As Kosnoski (2022, 50–51) argues, "Autogestion, or autonomous self-rule, often comes to be the organizing principle of these salvage efforts … to collectively recuperate their physical and social environment." In the case of the invasions, autogestion is organized in accordance with the Indigenous practice of *minga*, a form of communal labor that has itself been salvaged from its riverine origins for deployment in this urban context (Gasche 2014). *Mingas* are held regularly in most invasions, following assemblies at which the challenges facing the community are discussed, and decisions on necessary actions are taken. Collections are made for the purchase of materials for projects such as the opening of roads, the building of wells and water towers, and the creation of football pitches and other public spaces, all of which are constructed in common. As the leader of one such settlement put it: "The people collaborate, work, and advance by ourselves. We only need the state for its documents. We build our settlements with our own effort, our own money, our own time."[10] Another leader told me: "Everything you can see in our community is thanks to ourselves … With our cement, with our sand, we have constructed everything. Out of necessity we have come together as a community and have advanced step by step."[11]

Through collective autonomous practices of this kind, salvage communities can give rise to "political salvage," in which "salvage as a survival strategy [is transformed] into salvage as an act of resistance … [and] salvage-based insurrection"

(Kosnoski 2022, 5, 13). This is well illustrated by the case of Villa Cruz, which occupies 12 ha of land lying two kilometers down a track that branches off the sixth kilometer of the Iquitos–Nauta highway. Unlike most recent invasions, in this case the land was not initially invaded by a mafia and then sold off to landless people but was directly seized by a group of landless people themselves, following their displacement from another informal settlement by a flood in 2012. Long before their occupation of the land, it had been granted to a powerful member of the local bourgeoisie. But he had not developed it, and in 2014 the community succeeded in getting it reverted to the state. The landlord, however, challenged the legality of the reversion, and in 2020, a court in Lima ruled in his favor. According to the inhabitants I spoke to, there was no legal basis for this decision, and corruption was thus the only explanation. Villa Cruz had grown in the interim period to become a flourishing Human Settlement of 2500 inhabitants, with two-story concrete houses, electricity, and its own primary school. However, in April 2023, its inhabitants received notice that a judicial order had been issued for their eviction the very next day. They had built the community from nothing on abandoned land that belonged to the state. Why should they allow their home to be taken from them by an illegitimate landlord and a corrupt judicial system? In the words of a woman who teaches at the local primary school, speaking on the morning of the eviction: "They are coming with cops, bulldozers, and *matones* ... We are humble families. We are ordinary people who are here to defend justice. They say there's no such thing as justice. But today we want to make justice a reality."[12]

Soon news arrives that the police are amassing at the far end of the track leading from the highway to the entrance to Villa Cruz. We leave the makeshift settlement and advance along the track. Trees are hacked down with machetes to form instant barricades. Suddenly, we see 400 riot police rounding a distant curve and advancing down the straight dirt road, followed by a line of bulldozers. The handful of masked youths in their path seem momentarily perplexed by the monstrous inequality of the inevitable battle. Then the first teargas canisters are fired and the cops are approaching fast. Fireworks are launched from the nearest barricade. Someone shouts that the police are armed with shotguns. Several men plunge into the roadside jungle carrying a beer crate of Molotov cocktails which are lit and thrown towards the cops, exploding in flames along the road. The police fire into the forest and advance again. A masked man is using a metal pole to break up the concrete path that runs alongside the track—salvaging ammunition to be thrown and shot from catapults. Another round of teargas is launched, the canisters landing on the ground around us as we run. Women with their faces covered with bandanas are running to the frontline with plastic bottles of water mixed with vinegar to douse the faces of those worst affected by the teargas. A man loads a homemade gun with a shotgun shell and fires.

The cops have reached a barricade alongside a patch of jungle. The growl of a chainsaw being fired up as they start cutting their way through. More masked men charge to the front armed with makeshift guns welded together out of chunks of metal tubing. The atmosphere is infused with the expenditure of violent revolt, "a bloody and in no way limited social expenditure ... that threatens the very existence of the masters" (Bataille 1985, 121, 126). The teacher I spoke to earlier dashes past and flings a branch onto the nearest barricade, shouting "Come on! Come on! No fear!" A shirtless man calls over to me laughing: "How do you like our revolution?" He has a buckshot wound in his bicep. "If they get through us they'll destroy everything [in Villa Cruz]!", he yells. "But they're not going to get through!"

The air is filled with teargas and gunfire. Blood pisses down the face of someone hit with buckshot. The bleeding man is loaded onto the back of a motorbike that speeds back to Villa Cruz, through clouds of teargas and chaotic motion. There are calls for "more cartridges" for the frontline and the bike comes roaring back with further ammunition. And almost imperceptibly at first, but with ever-increasing clarity, the cops are beginning to fall back. They have been coming under heavy fire from behind the barricades and inside the jungle, and several have been injured (Ampuero 2023). Then the shout goes up: "They're retreating! Come on neighbours! Come on!" And now we are all running forward. The road is filled with broken bottles, spent cartridges, teargas cannisters. The verges are charred and smouldering. The cops retreat slowly, firing teargas as they go. Then there are shouts of horror and indignation and I see that someone just in front of us has collapsed and is bleeding heavily from his stomach. He's been shot—not with buckshot this time but with a proper bullet. Four others pick him up and run back through the barricades. The motorbike roars forward to collect him but they can't get him on and instead they try to treat him on the road; "They've shot him and he's dying," says one man. "He's fucking dying in front of us," says another. A woman is running the other way in tears: "I don't know where my husband is," she says. Someone points in the direction of the cops and says: "He's in the front."

But the road ahead is open. The police have retreated into the distance, the odd plume of teargas still punctuating the skyline. People are carrying shotguns back from the frontline after chasing the rapidly retreating cops all the way back to the highway. The atmosphere is sombre because of their fallen comrade, who everyone assumes has died, and we walk towards the main road in silence. But then chants go up: "Villa Cruz! Villa Cruz!" A man standing on the roadside brandishes a homemade gun and roars. "We're going to make the corrupt governments respect us motherfucker!" The crowd swells as we pass through the communities created by similar invasions that line the last stretch of road approaching the highway, and the sense of collective indignant triumph grows. The inhabitants of the other invasions have gathered along the roadside and are cheering us along. By the time we hit the highway the cops have gone, and a spontaneous street party blocks the road amidst the detritus of incinerated tires in the blazing midday heat. Many of the renegades are still masked and still carry wooden clubs and chunks of concrete torn from the broken road. Everyone is jumping in unison, shaking their fists in the air, chanting the name of Villa Cruz, and roaring their affirmation of the unity and victory of the people. A hundred rebel bodies leaping on the molten asphalt in raging celebration of their impossible victory (Figure 2).[13]

4 | Art

The rain rages ecstatically on the thin tin roof of an ultraviolet bar filled with fluorescent murals of psychedelic vines, humanoid

FIGURE 2 | Rebels in raging celebration of impossible victory (photo by author).

dolphins, alluring medusas, and neon landscapes in which the surrounding jungle seems to shine with all the necrotic luster of the commodities it once so plentifully contained. The trees are indigo and violet and washed in lime green sunlight, as if the sun itself were made of 100 dollar bills. The imagined forest seethes with fantastical beasts whose value in the exotic animal trade has transformed them into the spiritualized embodiments of the alchemical power of money. Gathered on the riverbank in utopian abundance, jaguars blaze with hallucinatory intensity and alligators cavort with lascivious mermaids. In the distant center of the oceanic river, ramshackle oil barges, illegal gold-dredging rigs, and listing cargo boats laden with timber and cocaine lurch towards the silhouetted city that crouches on the radiant horizon. Through the wood-barred window on the far side of the bar, beyond the dilapidated dock, the dark red dust of the timberyards accumulates along the riverbank like blood congealing on a slaughterhouse floor.

These murals were painted by Lewis Sakiray, one of several untrained commercial artists who have collectively infused the peripheral barrios of Iquitos with "a living, colourful, unprejudiced, libertine, excessive and overflowing art" (Bendayán and Villar 2014, 11). Sakiray and his fellow street artists received their first commissions in the dual oil and cocaine booms of the late 1970s and early 1980s, when the musicians of Iquitos were experimenting with the psychedelic cumbia that is still blasted throughout the informal settlements of the city today (Buntinx 2019). Both art and music celebrated the extractive wealth of the jungle. The hook of the most famous cumbia from this time is "This is the dance of the oil worker, where the black gold spurts!"[14] and Sakiray's murals likewise represent Loreto as an endless feast of cannibal capitalism, salvage accumulation and subaltern expenditure.

Christian Bendayán, the creator of *Indios Antropófagos*, was inspired by these murals and other street art that he witnessed as a young man growing up in Iquitos in the early 1990s, which he experienced as "exuberant, voluptuous, explosive, decadent, piercing, joyous, erotic, and delirious ... a flow of vibrant images in which the feelings, thoughts, and dreams of the people are made flesh" (Bendayán 2011, 30). As illustrated by the trans protagonists of *Indios Antropófagos*, his work also takes inspiration from the trans culture of Iquitos (Daly 2017). In the early 1990s, gay men, sex workers, and transgender people fled to Iquitos to escape Sendero Luminoso and other guerrilla groups fighting in the Peruvian civil war, who labelled them "undesirables" and issued death threats, expelling them from their areas of influence (Jaúregui 2018; López 2016). These groups committed multiple massacres of trans people, many of whom found acceptance in the libertine popular culture of Iquitos. The LGBTQ+ community has since become an integral element of peripheral barrios like Bajo Belén, and its members have been elected to leadership positions in Human Settlements along the road to Nauta. The role of Iquitos as a refuge for this persecuted minority was also recently explored by Kay Zevallos—the Iquitos-born artist whose performance was looted by the inhabitants of Bajo Belén. In "The Undesirables: Cartography of Desire", Zevallos displayed seductive photographs of local trans women on the exterior walls of an exclusive restaurant in the centre of the city (Zevallos 2022). Within hours of its installation, however, this provocative disruption of the aesthetic and moral order of the bourgeois core of Iquitos was removed by police on the instruction of the local minister of culture, in an act that Bendayán—the curator of the exhibition—condemned as an attempt "to keep the LGBTQ+ community in clandestinity at the margins of the city" (quoted in *La Región* 2022b).

These margins have also served as a refuge for Indigenous peoples, including the Yagua, Tikuna, Ocaina, Kukama, Kichwa, Omagua, Shuar, Achuar, Shawi, and Shipibo, as well as the Huitoto and Bora—the groups most brutalized during the rubber boom. Ever since the end of that boom, as already

discussed, the peripheral barrios of Iquitos have received waves of Indigenous migrants escaping the destructive impacts of extractive industries and pursuing the promises of urban modernity (Burga Cabrera 2014; Espinosa de Rivero 2009). Many disguise their identities to avoid discrimination in the context of the racist power structures of this settler colonial city, but in recent years, a distinctively urban Indigenous art has emerged in Iquitos. The Shipibo artist Daysi Ramírez, for example, fuses the ayahuasca-influenced patterns of Shipibo textiles with the fluorescent iconography of hand-painted advertisements for legendary Iquitos nightclubs like *Ilusión* (Delusion) and cumbia bands like *Explosión* (Explosion) and *Kaliente* (Hot), creating apparent publicity posters that convey unsettling messages of libidinal and political expenditure: "In Iquitos we love euphorically because life is a Delusion"; "The Jungle is Hot! Soon there will be an Explosion in the Amazon."[15]

The margins of Iquitos have also provided a sanctuary for those with criminal convictions, who were likewise identified as "undesirables" during the Peruvian civil war. This is the context in which Luis Cueva Manchego—aka Lucuma—arrived in Iquitos in the 1990s. Following his release from prison in Lima, where he claims to have served a 20-year sentence for murder, Sendero Luminoso allegedly banished him to Iquitos under threat of death. For Lucuma, Iquitos was therefore "a beautiful place, a marvellous place. A place where I have been able to find peace. It's a paradise for me. A refuge" (quoted in Bendayán 2007). He had taught himself to paint while in prison, and soon established himself alongside Sakiray as one of the most prominent street artists of the city. But whereas Sakiray's art celebrates the forms of salvage accumulation and expenditure associated with cannibal capitalism, Lucuma paints apocalyptic condemnations of the decadence and corruption of the cannibal capitalist system. *The Dragon of the Apocalypse*, for example, depicts a multiheaded serpent devouring the bloodied heads of seven corrupt Peruvian presidents, while *Lucuma Murdering Alan García* portrays the artist pinning one of these presidents to the ground and stabbing him to death.[16]

Lucuma's work is illustrative of a more general trend in subversive Latin American art that Cole Rizki (2023, 686) calls "gore aesthetics," understood as an obscene critique of cannibal/gore capitalism, based on "humour, parody, excess, grotesquerie and camp." Such aesthetics are a spontaneous feature of much of the everyday street art of Iquitos. One of the many performers busking on the buses of the city begins his act by hanging himself from a handrail on the ceiling of the bus, with the rope breaking just in time, before inviting laughing passengers to be hung in the same way. Another reads fake urban horror stories of murder and political corruption from the pages of a tabloid newspaper, spiked with twisted humor and dark double entendre. Fire eaters, acrobats dressed as skeletons, jugglers of flaming torches and rusty machetes give exuberantly apocalyptic performances amidst thick diesel fumes at gridlocked traffic lights throughout the center of the city. A mutilated man with one good arm and only stumps for legs breakdances on the boulevard with passionate abandon.

These forms of popular entertainment give displaced poetic expression to the multiple violences permeating the social fabric of Iquitos, interspersed with quotidian objects that express a common salvage aesthetic: trash cans welded together from motorcycle sprockets ground down by the sand of the city streets; rocking chairs fashioned from offcuts of rebar wrapped in lengths of nylon washing line. The buses are second-hand Hyundai vans shipped down from Lima, pared back to chassis, engine, and windscreen, then rebuilt for the jungle. Their open-sided exteriors are fashioned from sheets of tin and illegal hardwood sprayed purple and orange and adorned with growling lions, leaping jaguars, and psychedelic eagles. An immense image of a river winding through unspoilt jungle is shredded by the torn tin wall to which it has been affixed. Technicolour hawk dissolves into spectral black and white behind freshly plastered posters of a leering politician. Faded leopard launches into tangled traffic. On the wall of a roadside bar, a raging shark decants cold beer into its black gut.

As these examples illustrate, the subaltern street art of Iquitos is central to the cannibal-salvage-expenditure style of the city, spontaneously providing "an aesthetic unity to shops, buses, hairdressers, restaurants, bars, barges, moto-taxis, concert posters ... discotheques, brothels [and] nightclubs" (Bendayán 2011, 32). This style achieves its most complex and concentrated expression in the annual carnival celebrations in Bajo Belén. Carnival was introduced to the Peruvian Amazon by Jesuit missionaries in the 17th century, as a means of controlling the Indigenous population. Long before the rubber boom, Iquitos was founded by the Jesuits as one of their *reducciones*—a colonial form of settlement in which multiple dispersed Indigenous communities were agglomerated, indoctrinated, and put to work. Carnival was a crucial element of this project. The priests transformed the *supays*—morally ambiguous jungle spirits venerated by the local Indigenous population—into devils, drawing on the tradition of masked dances that predated their arrival in order to stage battles in which the *supays* became demons symbolically defeated by the Church. The masked dances were performed around a *humisha*—a palm tree whose branches the Jesuits filled with ironwork tools and other artefacts of colonial civilization, and which the dancers took turns to swing at with an axe. When the *humisha* finally fell everyone would leap upon the spoils, with the promise of these gifts drawing isolated Indigenous groups into the influence of the Church and the Spanish Crown. But the departure of the Jesuits from Loreto in the late 18th century significantly weakened colonial control over the Indigenous population. In their absence, the *supays* of the precolonial masked dances were openly venerated once again, while remaining symbolically identified with the devil, creating an apparent form of devil worship that is better understood as a disguised revindication of Indigenous identity.[17]

In majority-Indigenous barrios like Bajo Belén today, every masked dancer pledges to dance for 12 years in honor of the *supay*/devil, who provides them with good fortune in return, while those who break their pledge are said to die soon after. Most of the dancers are men, who dance for six of these years dressed as demons, and the other six in drag as the demons' companions, along with trans women from across Iquitos, who likewise take the pledge but always dress as women, often wearing elaborate costumes reminiscent of those made famous by the Rio carnival. According to a representative of the trans community and member of one of the masked gangs, the community's participation in carnival has played an important role in their

integration into Bajo Belén, and "in the moment of the masked dance you feel your power increase. It changes your state of being as the euphoria rises (*la euforia sale*)"[18] (Figure 3).

The largest and most notorious gang of masked dancers in Bajo Belén is based in the area known as Pueblo Libre. The "captain" of this gang is a Kukama man known locally as Hueso (Bones). Like the leaders of most of the masked gangs, Hueso is not wealthy or powerful, but became captain due to seniority, having participated in the masked dances since he was 10 years old. For most of the year, he works skinning chickens in Belén market. But during carnival, his word is law for the 500 members of his gang, regardless of their social standing. When carnival was prohibited under the lockdown imposed during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2021 (Wilson 2025a), Hueso was approached by several members of his gang, who feared breaking their promise to the *supay*/devil more than they feared the virus itself. He agreed to violate the lockdown and the dance went ahead. "Five hundred of us!", he told me laughing. "And [the cops] didn't do anything! They disappeared. They completely disappeared. And we danced at every *humisha* and nothing happened to us at all!"[19]

The staging of equality during carnival is enhanced by the masks, through their concealment and transformation of identity. In recent times the masks of Indigenous tradition have been replaced with the latex Halloween merchandise of Western consumer culture. But this is not a simple case of the erosion of local customs by the homogenizing forces of global capitalism. Instead, the masks are grotesquely modified in accordance with the surrealist aesthetic of the Iquitos street. Meanwhile the *humishas* are now torn from the surrounding jungle and sold in the city as a further form of salvage accumulation. They are adorned with plastic household goods and erected on every corner, before being hacked down and looted at the carnival's conclusion. This irreverent appropriation and reconfiguration of carnival tradition epitomizes the cannibalistic process affirmed by the *Manifesto Antropófago*: "Cannibalism. The permanent transformation of taboo into totem … We were never catechized. What we really made was Carnival … We already had communism. We already had the surrealist language" (Andrade 1991, 40).

Carnival Sunday in Bajo Belén in 2023. I get to the port of Pueblo Libre at around midday. A gang of masked dancers are drinking *aguardiente*. One of them passes me the bottle and tells me what the devil means to him: "I believe in him. He's a cool guy. The devil sorts you out." He asks for the devil's help "to keep me working instead of stealing." Meanwhile, the port is filling with hundreds of inebriated dancers who storm towards a warehouse in which they change into their costumes. They change in the dark, so the crowds outside will not know who they are when they emerge, or which one among them is the real devil. They say the *supay*/devil himself joins them here and slips out alongside them undetected as the warehouse door is flung open and they rush into the light. Purple skeletons, red-eyed apes, decomposing clowns. A dissolute rabble of leprous demons escorting a luscious retinue of transgender courtesans. They fling themselves around the nearest *humisha* laden with the glut of plastic goods that will be plundered at the carnival's conclusion. Now it is surrounded by a throng of monsters flailing to a mutant mashed-up modern version of the traditional carnival flute and drums fed through a distorted sound system to become a heavy electronica (Figure 4).

Hueso gives a sharp whistle, and the swarm of motley beings seethes on to the next *humisha*, buckets of river water hurled upon them from the upper floors. The air is thick with the sickly scent of marijuana. Haggard trolls gyrate with rampant

FIGURE 3 | Carnival "changes your state of being as the euphoria rises" (photo by author).

FIGURE 4 | Monsters flail around humisha laden with glut of plastic goods (photo by author).

werewolves. Gagging gimps cavort with slavering simians. We drink bowls of *masato* and cups of *aguardiente* distributed for free from barrels by the roadside, and scrabble for handfuls of candy chucked from makeshift balconies. Fat goblins slowly kick and stamp at the center of the circle, while trans women kick off their heels and sprint around its outer limits. Firecrackers explode under the dancers' feet. Wooden phalluses and rubber dildos are thrusted and waved. A werewolf throws his partner onto her back and mounts her, turning his blindly lolling snout towards the leering crowd. Masks are torn off and thrown around like decapitated heads. There is no more circling in homage to the *humisha*. Just crepuscular monsters raving in the dusk.

5 | Conclusion

The first line of the *Manifesto Antropófago* reads: "Cannibalism alone unites us. Socially. Economically. Philosophically" (Andrade 1991, 38). To conclude this sprawling paper with maximum concision, this aphorism could be adapted as follows: "Cannibal salvage expenditure alone unites the subaltern inhabitants of the Peruvian Amazon. Accumulatively. Architecturally. Artistically." The paper has presented an ethnographically surrealist montage of materials across these three themes, through which cannibal salvage expenditure has emerged as a subversive example of the collective capacity of impoverished, marginalized, dispossessed, and brutalized human beings to survive in the ruins of capitalism with dignity and autonomy, and to affirm their precarious existence in delirious moments of festival and revolt. This mode of existence is inextricably entangled with the catastrophic dynamics of cannibal capitalism, which thrives parasitically on the multiple resource frontiers of Loreto, and on which the subaltern inhabitants of Iquitos feed opportunistically in turn. They seize what they can of its extractive spoils, collaborate with its mafias in the invasion of privately held land, and produce street art that celebrates the wealth that it plunders while cannibalizing its cultural products and spitting them back out in spontaneously surreal forms. Their relationship to this regime of accumulation is configured by multiple forms of salvage: despite their profoundly subordinate position within its exploitative structures, they deploy practices of salvage accumulation that claw back shards of value and lay claim to slivers of freedom; they kick out the invasion mafias and build salvage communities on the appropriated land; and they salvage Indigenous cultural practices and the refuse of the city in their street art and communal architecture. Despite the hardship and suffering that permeate this complex form of subaltern urbanism, it is equally infused with an ethos of collective expenditure, in contrast to both the capitalist commitment to endless accumulation and the pragmatic conservation of the scarce use values of the poor: the everyday philosophy of *día a día* stipulates that any surplus should be spent immediately in shared moments of excess; the street art of the city gives uninhibited expression to the libidinal energy of this constant collective discharge; and instances of looting and armed resistance to evictions embody the spirit of revolutionary expenditure in explosions of violent insurrection.

This subversive urban style may be unique to the historical geography of Iquitos (Jazeel 2019). But each of its elements resonates with similar processes in many different places. Comparable subaltern accommodations with cannibal capitalism have been described in the Venezuelan Amazon (Penfield 2019), in the Peruvian Andes (Vindal Ødegaard 2019), in the "pirate towns" of Johannesburg and Douala (Simone 2006), and in Buenos Aires, where they have been conceptualized in terms of "bottom-up neoliberalism" (Gago 2017). Similar forms of salvage community are being constructed in the Brazilian Amazon (Castriota 2024), and in cities across the Global South

(Caldeira 2017; Dovey 2025). And the monstrous expenditure of the Iquitos street is reminiscent of the apocalyptic everyday aesthetics of Kinshasa (De Boeck 2005) and the aforementioned "gore aesthetics" of Chilean trans art (Rizki 2023).

In a more general sense, as discussed in the introduction to this paper, cannibal salvage expenditure can be interpreted as an expression of *ch'ixi* modernity—the motley juxtaposition of multiple Indigenous and mestizo spatial practices that characterizes the urban political ecology of many contemporary Latin American cities and extended urban landscapes (Anthias 2017; Arboleda 2020; Cusicanqui 2012). Understood in these terms, cannibal salvage expenditure is aligned with those elements of the literature on Indigenous urbanism that oppose neat divisions between Indigenous modes of life and those of capitalist modernity; that are attentive to the messier realities of their interpenetration; and that are attuned to the emergence of "forms of resistance that do not rely on rigid identities but instead on liberatory practices that foreground the creation of alternative modes of being" (Dorries 2022, 116). The Belén carnival, for example, can be interpreted as delivering a powerful message of anarchic autonomy, despite not being explicitly framed as a political event. The police stay well away, and candy, alcohol and music are all laid on for free. The transgressions of the *supay*/devil dancers and trans women are a collective statement of emancipation from Church and State. And their performance of monstrosity can be seen as both an affirmation of their marginalized and pathologized identities and an implicit critique of the monstrosity of capital inscribed into the foundations of Iquitos by the genocidal crimes of the rubber boom that generated the original wealth of this "devil's paradise."

Cannibal salvage expenditure also resonates with Saidiya Hartman's (2019) concept of the wayward, which is based on her account of the Black ghettos of Philadelphia and New York in the early 20th century, and which tells a similar story of the rebellious assertion of the right to the city by a previously enslaved people. Like Bajo Belén and the invasions on the outskirts of Iquitos, Hartman (2019, 4) describes the ghetto as "an urban commons where the poor assemble, improvise forms of life, experiment with freedom, and refuse the menial existence scripted for them." Appropriating an expression used by racist elites to denigrate the ghetto inhabitants—like the colonial trope of the cannibal—Hartman celebrates their "waywardness" in terms that recall the subaltern style of the urban Peruvian Amazon, suggesting that variations of this style permeate the urbanisms of multiple oppressed peoples scattered across time and space: "Wayward, related to the family of words: errant, fugitive, recalcitrant, anarchic, wilful, reckless, troublesome, riotous, tumultuous, rebellious and wild ... The social poesis that sustains the dispossessed" (Hartman 2019, 227).

This social poesis possesses a utopian dimension. In the case of Iquitos, the local activist and autodidact historian Martín Reátegui Barta once described this dimension to me as "a utopia of the present, [a utopia] of right now. Now I am living well! Now I am enjoying!"[20] This utopian actuality is visible in every dimension of cannibal salvage expenditure discussed in this paper: salvage accumulation offers freedom from the drudgery of formal proletarian labour and bursts of abundance to be enjoyed in moments of communal expenditure; salvage communities are collectively constructed and defended, infusing these humble settlements with a quotidian utopian passion; and celebrations such as Belén carnival are eruptions of universal potlatch, in which the monstrous violence on which Iquitos was built is transmuted in the redemptive staging of the right to the city by its Indigenous inhabitants. It is this utopian spirit that ultimately distinguishes the wayward modernity staged in *"Indios Antropófagos"* from the melancholy visions of the apocalypse that permeated the European pavilions at the Venice Biennale. Perhaps this is because the end of the world that they respectively celebrate and mourn is really the end of a far more limited world—not the world as such, but only that of colonial dominion. In the words of Cusicanqui (2012, 96), the "upside-down world created by colonialism will return to its feet as history only if it can defeat those who are determined to preserve the past, with its burden of ill-gotten privileges." Perhaps this is the apocalypse to which Reátegui Bartra (2015, 41) was referring in his history of the rebel barrio of Belén when he wrote: "The end of the world will surely find this *pueblo* fighting, fucking, resisting ... refreshing their bodies in the storm."

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Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

Data Availability Statement

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 or ethical restrictions.

Endnotes

[1] *Indios Antropófagos* can be viewed at https://ginsberggaleria.com/CHRISTIAN-BENDAYAN.

[2] Bataille's concept was grounded in studies of Indigenous societies (Bataille 1988; Marcel 2003), and was influenced by the Cuban writer Alejo Carpentier, whose "Indigenous surrealism" rejected the idealism that dominated the movement in favor of a practice rooted in the materiality of capitalist and colonial modernities (Eburne 2021, 359; see also Rincón 2009). Expenditure is thus one of countless ideas that "run, like rivers, from the south to the north and are transformed into major tributaries of thought" (Cusicanqui 2012, 104).

[3] Over time my neighbors began sharing stories of their involvement in illegal forms of accumulation, and I was invited to participate in two events depicted in this paper: the armed resistance to the eviction in Villa Cruz and the rebel carnival in Bajo Belén. My privileged positionality as a white, Western, cisgender male evidently marked and limited my solidarity with these pathologized communities in their respective struggles (Garbe 2024). But it also facilitated my publication of articles on these events in one of the leading outlets of the elite-controlled local press, in which the representation of such events

is uniformly negative (Wilson 2023b, 2023c). In contrast to these dominant representations, my articles affirmed the most pathologized political and cultural practices of the most marginalized and denigrated sectors of the city and gave voice to their protagonists. The negotiation of such paradoxical power relations is inherent to what Shafique (2025) calls "dirty research."

[4] *The Banquet* is reproduced in Belaunde (2015, 543).

[5] Kay Zevallos, author interview, 15 January 2022.

[6] Illegal gold miner, author interview, 18 August 2022.

[7] Inhabitant of Bajo Belén, author interview, 22 December 2019. In addition to the sources cited, the information in this section is drawn from interviews, fieldnotes, and archival research.

[8] Kay Zevallos, author interview, 15 January 2022.

[9] The information in these paragraphs is drawn from interviews with members of local government, DISAFILPA functionaries, and leaders and inhabitants of several of the invasions themselves.

[10] General Secretary of the Human Settlement of 30 de Agosto, author interview, 28 January 2023.

[11] General Secretary of the Human Settlement of Nueva Generación, author interview, 14 November 2022. Like the leaders of the majority of the invasions I visited, both leaders quoted here were women.

[12] Primary school teacher, author interview, 18 April 2023. The history of Villa Cruz presented here is based on interviews with its inhabitants and those of other communities supporting their struggle, and with lawyers at DISAFILPA, as well as legal documents shared by the Villa Cruz leadership.

[13] The man shot by a bullet fortunately survived, as did those who suffered buckshot wounds. Following the failed eviction, the landholder offered to sell the land to the inhabitants of Villa Cruz for 7000 soles for each of the 420 lots, despite the fact that it was state property—almost 3,000,000 soles (US$900,000) in total. Eager to avoid another assault, the community were considering the proposal when my fieldwork concluded. But negotiations fell through, and two community leaders have since been imprisoned on charges related to the resistance to the eviction and alleged land theft and membership of a criminal organization. Other community members maintain their innocence and blame their arrest on bribes allegedly paid by the landowner.

[14] Los Wemblers de Iquitos, "La danza del petrolero": https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jBzUUUEjsA8.

[15] The latter work is reproduced in Villar (2025).

[16] These works are reproduced in Cortés (2015, 314 and 319).

[17] My account of the origins of carnival in Iquitos is based on the archival work of local historian Martín Reátegui Bartra (2020), and on three interviews conducted with him in 2022 and 2023.

[18] Trans activist and masked dancer, author interview, 8 February 2023.

[19] "Hueso," author interview, 9 February 2023.

[20] Martín Reátegui Barta, author interview, 9 February 2023.

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