A SONG FOR STAYING

NARRATIVE, ABSENCE AND MOURNING IN RURAL BOYACÁ

MÓNICA CUÉLLAR GEMPELER

Department of Anthropology, Faculty of Arts
McGill University
Montréal, QC, Canada

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Contents

Abstract

Set in the cold mountains of San Miguel de Sema, a town in Boyacá (Colombia) that has been gravely affected by rural migration, this dissertation seeks to understand what it is to *stay* in a relatively abandoned place—a place that tends to be described, and is often also experienced, as futureless. Without losing sight of the long history of rural migration and of shifting governmental policies toward the countryside that has given shape to the precarious present of this Colombian Andean town, it pays ethnographic attention to the practices and forms of storytelling by which *campesinos* (peasants) from this region give continuance to a rural world and to a peasant life, *una vida campesina*, that is felt to be ending. With the sense that *staying* is in important ways an effort of narrative, it does this by following the course of entangled words, verses, prayers and songs that, in their reaching for a somewhere or someone whose loss is in some way impending, unfold against the current of the still dominant narrative of progress that relentlessly pushes us to move "forward"; the same narrative that has long informed the understanding of Colombia's countryside as left "behind." This exploration brings us to observe practices of mourning through which people from San Miguel weave the dead into their lives, it also requires recognizing forgotten deaths and losses that cannot be fully mourned, and it asks us to takes seriously ways of inhabiting the world that cannot easily be situated in either side of the dualism between resignation and resistance, as it has tended to be understood in the study of peasant life. Thus pushing our imaginations beyond our habituated 'progressive' ways of thinking, this ethnography aims to attune itself with subtle interruptions of forward-marching temporalities; to perform and give continuance to a delay where we can be together, and in place, even when the world feels to be ending, and even though we might lose it all the same.

Resumen

Desde las montañas de San Miguel de Sema, un pueblo de Boyacá (Colombia) que ha sido duramente afectado por la migración rural, esta tesis busca entender la experiencia de *quedarse* en un lugar relativamente abandonado; un lugar del que se suele decir que se está quedando sin futuro. Sin perder de vista la larga historia de migración rural y de cambiantes políticas gubernamentales respecto al campo que ha dado forma al presente de este pueblo, presta atención a las prácticas y formas narrativas con las que los campesinos de esta región le dan continuidad a un mundo rural y a una vida campesina que a veces parecieran estarse acabando. Bajo la intuición de que *quedarse* es en gran parte un esfuerzo narrativo, hace esto a partir de perseguir el curso de palabras, coplas, rezos y canciones que, en su búsqueda por alguien o algo cuya pérdida es de alguna manera inminente, se desenvuelven contra la corriente de la aún dominante narrativa del progreso que nos sigue empujando hacia "adelante"; la misma narrativa que antes sustentó la compresión del campo colombiano como un lugar congelado en el pasado. Esta exploración etnográfica nos lleva a observar las prácticas de duelo con las que la gente de San Miguel entreteje su vida con los muertos, también requiere reconocer muertes y pérdidas olvidadas por las que no se puede hacer un duelo propiamente, y nos pide considerar seriamente formas de habitar el mundo que no se dejan situar en ningún polo del dualismo entre la resistencia y la resignación, tal como este se ha tendido a entender en el estudio de la vida campesina. Al llevar nuestras imaginaciones más allá de nuestra habituada forma 'progresista' de pensar, esta etnografía finalmente busca entrar en sintonía con sutiles formas de interrumpir el tipo de temporalidades que sólo andan hacia delante; de habitar y darle continuidad a un tipo de pausa que nos permite estar juntos, y asentados, aun cuando el mundo pareciera estarse acabando, y a pesar de que quizás, en todo caso, lo perdamos.

Résumé

Cette dissertation, prenant place dans un village rural de Colombie appelé San Miguel de Sema (Boyacá)—un village où une longue histoire de migration rurale a formé le sentiment collectif d'avoir perdu tout futur—cherche à comprendre l'expérience de *rester* dans un lieu quasiment abandonné. Sans perdre de vue comment cette histoire migratoire, en articulation avec des politiques gouvernementales changeantes envers le monde rural, contribue à la précarité du présent de ce village, cette ethnographie étudie les pratiques et formes narratives à travers lesquelles les paysans (*campesinos*) de cette région donne continuité à un monde rural et à une vie paysanne, *una vida campesina*, qui semblent sur le point de finir. Partant de l'intuition que *rester* est de manière importante un effort narratif, cette étude suit des mots, vers, prières et chansons qui, en cherchant un être ou un lieu dont la perte est imminente, vont à contre-courant des discours du progrès qui pousse toujours « en avant ». Cette exploration nous amène à observer les pratiques du deuil par lesquelles les personnes entrelacent leurs vies avec les morts, aussi à reconnaître les morts oubliées et les pertes pour lesquelles aucun deuil ne peut pas se faire, et elle exige que nous prenions au sérieux des façons d'habiter le monde qui ne peuvent pas être facilement localisées dans un pôle ou l'autre du dualisme entre résistance et résignation, telles qu'elles sont habituellement comprises dans l'étude de la vie rurale. En amenant nos imaginations au-delà de notre manière 'progressiste' de penser, cette ethnographie cherche finalement à se mettre au diapason des subtiles interruptions du temps qui court en avant ; de donner une continuité à un délai qui nous permet d'être ensemble, en un lieu, même quand le monde semble sur le point de se terminer, et même si nous savons que, peut-être, nous le perdrons de toute façon.

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Mucho he pensado que me hubiera gustado escribir esta tesis en español. Tendría una forma distinta, en ese caso; menos cursivas, quizás más canciones, y la textura que se le da a las palabras en las tierras boyacenses. Hacerme extranjera de mi propia lengua me distancia de la realidad de la que escribo, en un sentido que me apena; mis amigos de Boyacá, por ejemplo, no podrán leer enteramente este texto, por ahora. Espero que, si les da por ojear estas páginas, sepan que cada palabra en este escrito resuena por ellos. Que a este texto lo sostiene el placer de conversar y pensar juntos. Que este trabajo no va a estar completo hasta que no regrese a la lengua que compartimos.

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The first person to read this thesis as a whole was my brother, Nicolás. He printed all of the chapters, and he told me that he read the whole thing "as a novel." He read it also with a loving thoughtfulness that is characteristic of him, and a source of continuous amazement and admiration for me. The kind of reality he thus gave to these pages, the kind he gives to every story he immerses himself in, is the most wonderful gift. The more I try to explore the possibilities of storytelling the more I realize how my approach to the world is influenced by him and by my father, Camilo, whose way of caring for us has always involved telling and re-telling the stories of our lives, encouraging us to see how in the most mundane moments is the stuff of fantasy. This is something I will always be thankful for. I know that my mother, Juanita, will laugh when she reads how happy it makes me that someone happens to read my work as literature; she was the first to tell me she thought I could be read in this way, and, all those years ago, wanting to be taken seriously "as a social scientist," it made me furious. As usual, she perceived something that would matter deeply to me, before I was ready to know it myself. How grateful I am for her way of caring for me and

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Introduction

Now that my dogs have all died

Now that my house is left alone

Tomorrow, it's my turn to die

And everything will be gone.

Ya se murieron mis perros

Ya quedó mi rancho solo

Mañana me muero yo

Para que se acabe todo

I imagine this single-verse poem, this old folk *copla*, written by hand; I know it was sent as a letter to the short-lived radio program called "*Canta el Pueblo*" (The People Sing), the 4th of October of 1980. The date is marked on the old cassette tape where I heard it, a tape that has been stored for years in a metal cake box. The authors of this letter were three sisters from Boyacá; "the Three Maries," *las Tres Marías*, says the voice on the radio. It strikes me that nearly forty years have passed since these women felt their world to be ending, since they gave voice to this feeling through this copla *popular*. Most of the people I met in San Miguel de Sema during my fieldwork must have been in their twenties by the time this verse was recited on air, some were not even born yet. I wonder if they heard the radio show, or if they had heard this copla before (not that I know of). I wonder if they felt it so early on, this coming end that some people still predict for the rural life of this Colombian Andean town. The end of a house, of a life, of a rural world, was proclaimed

for tomorrow. Somehow, forty years later, it still sometimes seems to be just one day, just one death ahead. It is an end that is felt to be impending, but it is also an end delayed.

This thesis takes place right in the space rendered liveable by this delay. It asks how it is given its precarious duration; how people inhabit a temporality where "tomorrow […] everything will be gone" in a way that nonetheless makes it possible to be in place and with each other, for a little while longer. It also asks how they tell the story of this *staying with*, and how it is partly in the way that people tell these stories that they give continuance to a peasant life, *una vida campesina*, that often feels to be fading into absence, or oblivion.

The copla that the *Three Maries* bring to our attention anticipates the death of the last inhabitant of a house nearly abandoned, but not her departure. Gathering themselves in a single voice, these women give us a glimpse at an instant in the life of someone who, standing in a place that everyone else seems to have left, speaking with the awareness of her coming death, appears to be determined to stay. The way I read it, this copla is as much about a world that is reaching its own end, a world emptied out through the abandonment of the countryside, as it is about belonging to it, wanting to die with it. And it is the thought of death which articulates in language a future, however fragile, emplaced: the end of everything, in that house "left alone," one day from today. The future thus seems to take shape in an anticipated kind of mourning, perhaps because this is a death that will otherwise be without grievers. Or perhaps this is because staying in a place felt to have been left "behind," and against the orientation of a dominant narrative pushing us to move "forward," requires finding forms of storytelling that can entertain the thought of death, and take seriously the ways in which we make our lives with the dead.

I think we can understand this copla itself as a form of staying; a form to be in place, at least until dawn. A way for us to stay with the thought of that last inhabitant that the three sisters lent their voices to, of her dead dogs, of her abandonment. It enacts a pause that we too can inhabit. As I said, this is the kind of space that this thesis occupies; it is a space that offers a momentary relief from the overwhelming narrative of progress, and where the boundaries between life and death, absence and presence, become blurred in generative, yet often painful ways. In occupying it, however, this text also seeks to take part in the effort of finding words for the pleasure, the liveliness, the resonance of its duration, and of giving continuance to it.

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This copla sustains a calm voice, one that appears to come from a quiet contemplation. When, later in the radio show, it was brought into a song, it was sung in the brief silence between the sound of string instruments that would resume their strumming over the long vocals of the last verse, and it sounded like an old, prolonged lament. This is not the voice of someone taken by surprise; quite on the contrary, the speaker almost seems to have been expecting this instance, this "now" that releases the poem into itself; "now that my dogs have all died, now that my house is left alone." And, as it unravels, however briefly, and even though it predicts the end of the world, the verse never takes the hasty rhythm of a crisis. This single-verse poem portrays a reality marked by an abandonment so old that it has become ordinary; an abandonment that is expected to continue, uninterrupted, taking its own course. The speaker in the copla seems to have refused to follow its direction—she does not leave, does not abandon her house—but neither is she fighting against it.

She rather seems to ease into it; she appears to have found a way to die within it, but also in her own terms ("it's *my* turn to die").

In this thesis, I seek to attend to this way of being in place, this way of claiming one's place in the world that cannot be easily situated in either side of the opposition between resignation and resistance, as it has tended to be understood in the study of peasant life. And I want to explore how it thus pushes our imaginations beyond our habituated terms, with the sense that, in doing so, it might help us better grasp what it is to *stay* in places that have been portrayed, and that are often also experienced, as futureless. With the sense, that is, that it might help us appreciate and engage with ways of relating to place, to time, and to each other, that can recuperate the world, and our place in it, right when its loss feels to be impending, and even though we might lose it all the same.

I am trying to hang on to this copla, to this old folk single-verse poem that the *Three Maries* bring to our memory, in an attempt to speak of a situation so old and so broad that it is often taken for granted, or lost in a bird's eye view. When the last agrarian census addressed it, when it "revealed" that, given the sustained migration of the youth out of the countryside, the population of Colombia's rural areas was ageing, it also affirmed that the *departamento* with the highest rates of population ageing in rural areas was Boyacá (DANE 2016:35)—the departamento of which San Miguel de Sema, the *municipio* where I conducted fieldwork, is a part. For those familiar with this region, this felt like the "discovering," as we say in Spanish, of "warm water," *descubrir el agua tibia*; the confirmation of a truth we all already knew, if not statistically. It is a reality that people from San Miguel often brought to my attention through the memory of the many elderly

campesinos from this town who, having refused to leave their homes, and just like we can imagine of that last inhabitant in the verse of the three sisters, have died alone. [1]

The lateness of this census, which took place forty-five years after the one that precedes it, was in turn a clear illustration of how the abandonment of the countryside involves not only rural migration—a movement that does not necessarily involve the moral valence implied in the word *abandonment*—, but mainly a historical neglect on the part of the state; a state that was officially blind to Colombia's rural areas for nearly half a century and which has been unable, throughout the history of the country, to significantly change the structural conditions constraining the lives of rural inhabitants. Its particular timing was also illuminating in another way; it took place in 2014, right in the middle of the peace talks between the government and the FARC guerrilla, later serving as the base for the proposal of a rural reform that constitutes the first chapter of the peace agreements that were meant to put an end to a sixty-year-old internal war, and which were eventually achieved in 2016. In the formulation of this rural reform, which is only beginning to be implemented (and precariously so), there was the recognition that Colombia's internal war was partly based on the state abandonment of the countryside, that its long life had been sustained by

[1] In this dissertation, I prefer to use the Spanish term *campesinos* in order to speak in general of the people of San Miguel, although I sometimes use the English term *peasant*, especially as an adjective, to speak of their ways of life, when it facilitates the reading. *Campesino* or *campesina* are the words that most inhabitants of San Miguel use to describe themselves, and those who do not (for instance, some of the people who now live in the urban center and who do not work in agriculture or with cattle anymore) understand themselves as having peasant roots and as living within a peasant community. While the word *campesino* has been dismissed as an essentialist label (that misses the variations in space and time in the forms of life of rural inhabitants), in Colombia this term is used by the people who identify with it as a means to claim for the recognition of their shared history of subjugation, of attachment to the land, and of political struggle. It is also associated to the recognition of a way of working the land, based on ancient practices and knowledges transmitted through the family, and of these knowledges and practices themselves (see Tocancipá-Falla 2005; ICANH 2017).

consequently unresolved inequalities, and that its persistence had blocked the view of this fundamental situation, as well as the possibility to address it.[2]

This recognition generated a real hope that we could now, finally, attend to realities that the armed conflict had long overshadowed; that we could now acknowledge old wounds that we still need to heal within and beyond this conflict, and that we could learn from the forms of restoring ravaged worlds that are already going on in the country's rural areas. It is with this hope that I presented the proposal for this dissertation in 2016. I also did so, however, with the disquieting knowledge that, in the plebiscite for the national acceptance of the peace agreements, more than fifty percent of voters of San Miguel de Sema, of this *municipio* that has not been directly affected by the armed conflict, voted "no." During my fieldwork, which took place between January of 2017 and the middle of 2018, I slowly understood that such a majoritarian refusal was charged with a profound mistrust in the state, and with the communal sense that they have been continuously left out of the national narrative. For instance, even those who supported these agreements did not trust that the rural reform would ever take place; even less did they believe that, oriented as it is to places directly

[2] The introductory considerations of the first chapter of the "*Acuerdo Final para la Terminación del Conflicto y la Construcción de una Paz Estable y Duradera*" ("Final Agreement to End the Armed Conflict and Build a Stable and Lasting Peace"), which is entitled "*Hacia un Nuevo Campo Colombiano: Reforma Rural Integral*" ("Towards a New Colombian Countryside: Comprehensive Rural Reform"), read: "In the opinion of the Government, this transformation must help to reverse the effects of the conflict and to change the conditions that have facilitated the persistence of violence in Colombia's territories. In the opinion of the FARC-EP, this transformation must help to resolve the historical causes of the conflict, such as the unresolved issue of land ownership and, in particular, the concentration thereof, the exclusion of the rural population and the underdevelopment of rural communities, that especially affects women, girls, and boys" (Mesa de Conversaciones 2017:10). Throughout the document, the effects of the conflict are equated with those of the abandonment of the countryside; for instance, this comprehensive rural reform is meant to "reverse the effects of the conflict and of abandonment on communities and territories" (Ibid:13). Finally, the idea that the armed conflict had overshadowed the possibility to address old inequalities and forms of neglect was expressed by Humberto de la Calle, the chief negotiator from the government in the peace talks, in his discourse from Habana, Cuba, on the day the final agreement was published: "Surely, some ideas come from the past. But it is the absence of the conflict which can now make it possible to achieve substantial achievements" (de la Calle 2016).

affected by the internal war, it would ever include them. Their predicament is to be in the shadow of a country in which war continues to be the lens through which we understand ourselves as a society. Because they are considered lucky, through this lens, and regardless of the conditions of their lives and deaths, to be able to die of old age.

But one is then reminded of Elizabeth Povinelli's claim for the need to understand "how difficult it is to experience the ethical call [to respond to] events that do not strike us as catastrophic or sublime" (2011:152); how easily our urgency for "ethical reflection" and response rests when confronted with the abandonment of lives that can be portrayed as having reached their own ends "due to the vagary of "natural causes"" (Ibid:4). These are lives that become exhausted in ways "ordinary, chronic and cruddy" (Ibid:13) that are themselves often experienced as natural, "agentless" (Ibid:145), and unremarkable. Lives, such as those of campesinos of San Miguel, who tend to suffer from arthrosis sometimes as early as in their forties, having been charged with a physically demanding routine since they were able to walk; of people who also tend to get chronic lung diseases after a lifetime of cooking on woodstoves inside windowless houses—lives of campesinos who, due to these ordinary illnesses and to ways in which their everyday worlds have become empty of people, struggle to sustain their farms on their own for as long as they can, until their bodies, or their will to stay, become fully exhausted. People from this place say that solitude "crawls into them," *les entra soledad*; that their solitude poses a threat to their lives. Of those people who have died alone in their homes it is said that they died of loneliness. But this is a claim, to retake Povinelli's words, that does not indicate something catastrophic or sublime. Even when coming from a critical view of how it is also the result of a historical abandonment, it is rather

narrated as a *natural* part of what it is to inhabit the countryside of Boyacá; something that can be expected, "now that my dogs have all died…" [3]

We might want, as Povinelli notes, to render the uneventful visible by highlighting its gravity through the use, for instance, of statistics, hoping that by showing it as a demographically significant fact it can take the status of a crisis. But, in doing so, she writes, "rather than understand this kind of lethality within its own terms (its dailiness, ordinariness, livedness), we demand that it conform to the spectacular event and its ethical dictates of empathic identification" (2011:153). In consequence, she continues, "nothing new happens. No alternative ethical formations are initiated" (Ibid). What we tend to miss, in the process, is not only the ordinariness of these forms

[3] I am referring to the notion of *the uneventful* that Povinelli (2011) uses to describe the forms of suffering and of endurance that characterize the quality of alternative forms of life in the time she calls *late liberalism*—a chronotope that refers to "the shape that liberal governmentality has taken" in its belated response to the pressure exerted by social movements that, since the 1950s, have claimed that the legitimacy frameworks and forms of care "for the colonized and subaltern" are paternalistic, excluding, and ultimately aggravate and produce new inequalities (Ibid:25). Povinelli highlights that the response of states around the world to this pressure was to implement policies of cultural recognition where the question was "how to allow cultures a space within liberalism without rupturing the core frameworks of liberal justice" (Ibid:26). But the idea of "justice" that, according to this formulation, is to be protected is already entwined with neoliberalist logics; with the view that forms of life that do not produce value according to market logics are to be "allowed to die" (Ibid:22)—and the immediate suffering this implies is to be bracketed, to be *justified* from the perspective of a future world for which the misery of the past will have been necessary for the prosperity of the present. The suffering and slow forms of dying that people endure between these brackets take place in zones of abandonment where alternative social projects and lives (ways of life that do not neatly fit late liberalism's limited notions of the self or of the cultural other) are left to exhaust themselves. And their exhaustion occurs in *uneventful* ways that are so slow and so subtle that they remain "below the level of accountability" (Ibid:144). Povinelli describes this most viscerally in relation to the precarious conditions of Indigenous housing in Australia, where people and their state-granted houses, she writes, "slowly decompose according to a rhythm that feels natural" (Ibid:137). The fact that these houses are afforded by the government shows how the responsibility for this people's slow dying is deferred; since, after all, they are given a place to live, whose fault is it, if not their own, if they fail to make a living within it? What "feels natural" is not only the rhythm of their dying but also the way it is justified—its naturalization makes it apparently ethically sound. Thus understood, and given its slow unfolding, it does not lead to an *event* that might motivates us to respond. The question, in fact, is "whether anyone will notice the decomposition occurring" (Ibid:142) in the first place.

of suffering, and of lives that can take the quality of slow deaths, but also how people endure in a world that feels to be ending; how their commitment "to be durative" (Ibid:130)—rather than "transitive" or defiant—is what makes the world liveable for them. The challenge this presents us with is to be able to appreciate how in this way of being, which expresses itself from a most elusive uneventfulness, there is, "at its deepest if also its most tenuous and subtle" (Ibid:154), the effort to sustain alternative forms of living (or, in Povinelli's terms, *to be otherwise*). And it seems to me that learning how to appreciate this also challenges our progressive habits of thought—the same kind of thinking that has lead us to understand peasant life either in terms of resignation or resistance, understanding the first as a stubborn passivity and the second as revolutionary action, both leading toward visible "events" in the moment they are perceived as either blocking or breaking into particular kinds of futures, and especially those that have been prescribed by the narrative of progress.

As Anna Tsing argues, progress might be an idea of the nineteenth century, but it is still shaping the way we dream, fail, and understand our history (2015:20–21).[4] It has not only left a myriad of

[4] Raymond Williams notes that up until the 18th century the word *progress* did not have a "necessary ideological implication"(1983:244): it denoted simply "a discoverable sequence" (Ibid). It was in the 18th century, alongside the ideas of history and civilization, that the word began to be associated with a movement "from worse to better" (Ibid). William writes that "it was the abstraction of this movement, as a discoverable historical pattern, that produced **Progress** as a general idea, in close association with the ideas of CIVILIZATION and of IMPROVEMENT" (Ibid). And it was with the political and industrial revolutions of the 18th and 19th centuries, he notes, that the idea of progress "as a law of history ('you can't stop progress')" (Ibid:245) took full shape. His account of the word progress seems to coincide with the history of the word in Spanish, *progreso*: up until 1852, the dictionaries gathered in the "*Nuevo Tesoro Lexicográfico de la Lengua Española*" by the Spanish Royal Academy (2001) define it as the "continuation" or the "successive movement forward" of a thing. Starting in 1853 and until the present, the word takes on the additional meaning of "perfecting" something (RAE 2014), and while moving "forward" persists as central to its definition, its association with "continuance" has become lost. In a few dictionary entries from the 1850s, it was also defined as "the slow and successive march of human generations by virtue of which they gain increasing glory, become more illustrated, gain more rights, more freedom, and more pleasures" (Domínguez 1853)—a definition that, although no longer present in current definitions, seems to still have real traction in the world today.

worlds in "ruins," has not only motivated the abandonment of places around the world where the possibility of development is spent or doubtful (Ibid:6), but has also given us "progressive," and hopeful, political causes (Ibid:24). When Tsing writes "progress felt great, there was always something better ahead […] I hardly know how to think about justice without progress" (Ibid:24-25), she suggests that thinking without this concept does not only involve the recognition of the social, environmental and intimate damage it has inflicted, but also the loss of the "handrails" (Ibid:2) it has offered us for the imagination of a "better life." This is a loss we might need to learn how to mourn, within the social sciences and beyond, as we face the difficulty of finding other ways of relating to the world and to each other—as we try to learn from alternative forms of living and storytelling towards which the master narrative of progress, and, in the case of Colombia, the war, and, in general, our tendency to attend to evident moments of crisis or revolution, have made us "blind" (Ibid:viii); forms of living and of dying that we have not yet let permeate our ethical reflections and which might help us learn, to borrow the words of Donna Haraway, how to "stay with the trouble" (2016).

I am inspired by Haraway's notion of *staying with the trouble* as a call to think outside of what she calls "futurisms" (Ibid:4); the sense that things will get better as long as we continue moving toward the futures we already have imagined for ourselves, or that they will not, and we can do nothing other than sit and wait for the apocalypse. "Staying with the trouble," she writes, "does not requires such a relationship to times called the future. In fact, staying with the trouble requires learning to be truly present" (Ibid:1).[5] The way I understand it, this is not about eschewing the

[5] The need to learn how "to be truly present" is also central to the work of Tsing I have been quoting, where she addresses this need through the lens of *precarity*. The notion of precarity that Tsing works with takes on the dual meaning it has come to acquire in anthropological theory. In one sense, it refers to the social, economic, and often painful condition, expanding across national frontiers and histories, of living "without

future altogether, but about reimagining its relation to other times; the notion of "trouble," as Haraway uses it, denotes a generative, and subtle, disturbance. It is the trouble that we find ourselves in when we try to learn how to tell and give continuance to what Haraway calls "good stories" (Ibid:49, 125): stories "that don't know how to finish," that do not strive for the resolution of their knots and plots, but rather "reach into rich pasts to sustain thick presents to keep the story going for those who come after" (Ibid:125). Stories, just like the copla remembered by the *Three Maries*, that make us pause, together with the dead and with the knowledge of our own mortality, just long enough to be there when the sun comes up.[6]

*

the promise of stability" (Tsing 2015:2) or of "progressive betterment" (Allison 2016). In another sense, one that tends to draw from the work of Judith Butler (2004), this concept (sometimes reformulated as "precariousness") has also come to describe a "condition of exposure and interdependency" that is "common to all beings, by virtue of an embodied existence" (Han 2018:332). In both of these facets of precarity, the future cannot be taken for granted. In the first sense, as Anne Allison writes, "the future is distant or opaque" because "the present is all-consuming" in contexts marked by the impossibility of following capitalist progress; in places where "a sometime/someplace else has been shut off," and where simply "getting by demands all one's energies" (Allison 2016; see also Millar 2014). In the second sense, if we consider how our exposure to others makes us both dependent of them and vulnerable to be transformed by them, then it becomes visible how the future is something we cannot chart in advance, as our paths are unpredictably changing within shared presents (Tsing 2015:27). Attending to the precarity of lives therefore requires us, to quote Raymond Williams, "to find other terms for the undeniable experience of the present" (1977:128)—terms that might allow us to attend to the forms of living and storytelling that are taking shape within particular historical constraints, and which, permeable as they are to unexpected encounters, are constantly changing. In this thesis, I go about this search through paying ethnographic attention to forms of narrative and of being in place and with each other that delay forward-marching temporalities.

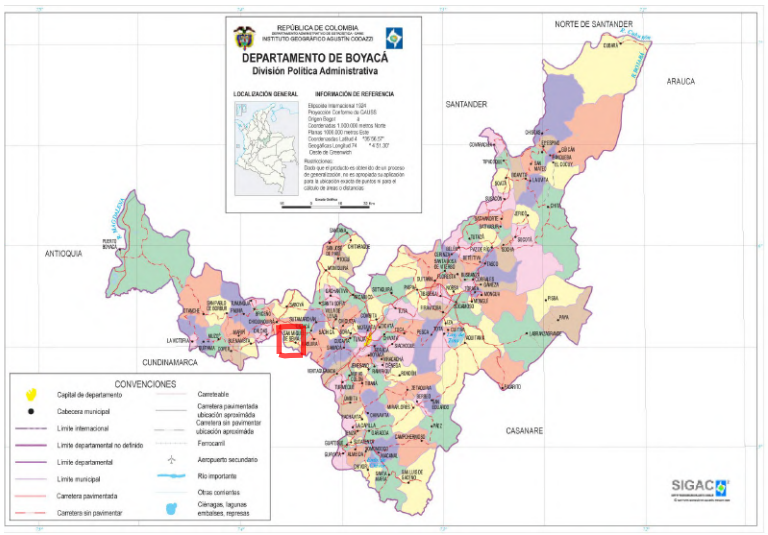
[6] This kind of delay is what I have in mind when I speak of "continuity" in this thesis; making a moment last, a little bit longer. I am aware, however, that this term, *continuity*, is related to the notion progress in ways that might seem problematic; indeed, at least until 1853, Spanish dictionaries defined progress as the "continuation" of a thing (see footnote 4). The kind of continuity I speak of does not precisely contradict this, because it does take place within that temporality for which "tomorrow […] everything will be gone"—the kind of temporality that predicts the end of a peasant way of life. At the same time, however, it delays its unfolding (and thus prolongs, gives continuance to, that which is supposed to be ending). It is in this subtle yet powerful way that I see it working against the current of the narrative of progress, even while it also takes shape in relation to it.

This thesis is about *staying* as a way of being together in place, and also as an orientation that allows for us to attend to this form of being. In its most basic sense, however, this thesis is about the experience of staying in a place that everyone else seems to be leaving. As I have been indicating, it is situated in the cold mountains of San Miguel de Sema; a *municipio* in western Boyacá (see figure 1) that has been gravely affected by a long history of rural migration that extends at least over a hundred years, and three generations.

Map 1

(IGAC 2012 my emphasis, highlighting Boyacá)

Map 2



(IGAC 2003 my emphasis, highlighting San Miguel de Sema)

FIGURE 1. In Colombia (Map 1), the mountain chain of the Andes splits in three; in its oriental deviation sits the *departamento* of Boyacá (Map 2); in the western region of this departamento, bordering to the south with the lagoon of Fúquene at the cold altitude of 2615 meters above sea level, is the *municipio* of San Miguel de Sema. This municipio, to which I refer simply as "San Miguel" throughout this thesis, and which I call colloquially a "town" (in reference to how people call it a *pueblo* in Spanish), is mainly rural; apart from the small urban center that consists of 21 hectares and that has around 400 inhabitants, over ninety percent of its territory expands over the countryside, where its remaining 4000 inhabitants live, in small farms that are scattered across the mountainous landscape (Concejo Municipal 2016:5). This extensive rural territory (consisting of 9023 hectares) is subdivided in seven *veredas* (the smallest administrative unit in Colombia for rural areas). Up until 1936, these veredas belonged to the municipio of Tinjacá, with which San Miguel now borders to the east (where it also borders with the municipio of Ráquira). From that time until 1960, when San Miguel finally became an independent municipio, they were a part of Chiquinquirá, the city with which this town now borders to the north. To the west, San Miguel borders with two municipios of the departamento of Cundinamarca; Susa and Simijaca.

A history of migration therefore underlies this dissertation; I should note, however, that the focus of this research is not precisely to understand what migration is, or the relation between migration and its opposite (or complement); it rather seeks to explore how staying is a world-making practice that involves learning how to live with a myriad of absences, how to hold on to the presence of the dead, and how to bring this experience into language—a practice that in all these ways stands in tension with the narrative of progress that has been so predominant in the understanding of Colombia's countryside as left "behind." While in this particular context *staying* is partly formulated in contrast to rural migration, it is not fully determined by this contrast. As the stories I engage with in this thesis show, the possibility of staying cannot be taken for granted (as something that simply happens if one does not to leave, or as something that one can sustain in time), just as the place itself where one might want to stay is constantly put into question (as

unviable or without a future). Moreover, staying, as I understand it here, rarely relies on staying still.[7]

Quite on the contrary, staying in San Miguel requires a real effort. It involves learning how to navigate an unstable economy that revolves around cattle ranching, milking and selling raw milk to the trucks that, coming from large enterprises in nearby cities, stumble early every morning through the unpaved roads. It involves learning how to make it through the end of the month with the by-weekly pay the truck-drivers distribute, and with the fluctuating prices of the few agricultural products that campesinos are able to yield given the lack of hired hands, the cold, mountainous and isolated landscape of the *veredas* (the rural areas) they inhabit, and the insufficient size of peasant farms that rarely extend over more than six hectares and can be as small as one. There are those who have stores in the small urban center, small stores stocked with products brought from nearby cities, which make up for the lack of a farmer's market in town. There are those who sporadically manage to secure jobs with the municipio's administration, people who have a car or a motorbike are sometimes able to find jobs for a daily wage in nearby towns, and a few people work milking the cows of the haciendas; the few large estates of absentee landowners that, according to my field observations, can extend over more than thirty hectares and

[7] This thesis thus takes distance from the anthropology of migration, which has focused on crafting tools to follow and understand migrant trajectories, in a way that becomes limiting when seeking to approach what could be called "communities of origin" and which, through such framework, often only become visible through the imaginations of migrants (this, especially before a more recent and capacious turn, that builds on the literature on transnationalism and mobility, toward the study of "uprootings and regroundings" (Ahmed et al. 2003)). In the context of Colombian anthropology, studies of migration have tended to focus on the study of forced displacement in relation to the country's armed conflict (see for instance Riaño 2008; Salcedo Fidalgo 2008; Aparicio 2005; Castillejo 2000; Meertens 2000) and, while this focus is undoubtedly necessary, it presents yet another limit to the purposes of this thesis, preoccupied as it is with the understanding of realities that the armed conflict has overshadowed.

have over one hundred cows.[8] But payed jobs are scarce, they also tend to be temporary, and so inhabitants of this town, campesinos who usually own at least one cow and rarely more than a dozen, live in a precarious economic independence, one that involves no social security, and which keeps them at the verge of poverty.[9]

To stay in San Miguel involves also learning how to live with the myriad of absences of those who have left; how to keep up a farm, as one grows old, without the possibility of relegating work to younger generations; how to walk long distances to reach the lots where people keep their cows, and then the main road that the milk trucks daily travel, with joints becoming exhausted from a lifetime of walking; how to care, in the midst of an already physically demanding routine, for elderly parents or grandparents, or for the children of those who have left to try their luck, to "find their own future," *su propio futuro*, in the city. The deserted lots, and houses, and rooms that seem to only become more numerous with the passing of time demand also learning to live in a world that often feels as though it had been deserted; how to keep one's footing and drive when days can pass without seeing another human face. People from the most deserted veredas of San Miguel sometimes feel trapped in a kind of vacuum, a most intense isolation out of which they are able to break every now and then, when they walk to visit the urban center to do errands, to attend Sunday masses, to attend someone's burial or the mournful celebration of the anniversary of someone's

[8] Until the middle of the twentieth century, these haciendas could expand over 300 hectares. The reduction of their size is related to the agrarian reform of 1961, as well as to previous processes of land redistribution that hacendados seem to have undertaken in an effort to secure hired labor for the maintenance of their properties (see chapter 1). This being said, the unequal distribution of the land is still significant in a way that continues to nurture the dualism between hacendados and campesinos, the "rich" and the "poor," which informs much of the identity of peasants in this region and their ways of relating to their history (see chapter 4). This might also explain why the term "hacendados" is used to speak of wealthy people who have large country houses, regardless of the size of their properties (see footnotes 85 and 86 of this thesis).

[9] By 2016, 96.5% of working inhabitants of San Miguel worked in the informal sector, and the index of multidimensional poverty was of 70.9% (Concejo Municipal 2016:11).

death. There is no congregation as lively in San Miguel as that brought about by mourning. The association of its life with death is also present, however, in the sense of being prematurely buried in this place; in the sense that this place sometimes "looks like a cemetery."

Staying in San Miguel is also about finding ways to voice the desire to remain in place, a desire that is easily overwhelmed in conversation as soon as the many difficulties that this action involves are enumerated; this long list of difficulties that add up to the conclusion that this place is without a future, and that, if one is to move "forward" and reach "a better life" —if one does not want to be stuck in a past where one's life is threatened to fall into oblivion— then one should also leave, let go of its solitary lands. It involves finding ways to convey this want to stay nonetheless, to insist in it, to make words work in such a way that they allow for one to step out of a conversation that is so firmly grounded in the still dominant narrative of progress. How to release oneself from that kind of talk, how to refuse the also insisting invitation to leave, or sometimes the mandate to leave, which can even be voiced caringly by concerned family members seeking to bring their loved ones closer. How to speak with words weighty enough to change the course of conversation in a way that coincides with the course one wants to take, how to speak a line that can open "a narrative space" (Stewart 1996) capacious enough for other, more precarious, differently oriented stories to take place.[10]

[10] Kathleen Stewart's notion of *narrative space* takes shape in tense relation with what she calls "master narratives" (a word we could indeed use to describe the narrative of progress). In *A Space on the Side of the Road* (1996), Stewart describes master narratives, through the words of Roland Barthes, as "second-order semiological systems" or "myths". Barthes' understanding of myth could perhaps be described as a semiotic interpretation of Marx's notion of ideology. Myth, Barthes says, is a kind of "metalanguage" (1991:114), proper of the bourgeois imagination, which conceals its own history. In other words, it makes a historically determined order of things appear as eternal, as natural. The way it manages to do this, according to Barthes, is by taking signs from a first-order semiological system (which he understands through Saussure's semiotics as third terms composed of a signifier and a signified) and using them as "mere signifiers" of a second-order system, in such a way that "things lose the memory that they once were

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I begin to address this last question, broad as it is, and charged as it is with the sense that staying in San Miguel is in important ways an effort of narrative, in the first chapter of this thesis. Moving between uneventful moments anchored in the present, I do so by delving into the thick vocabulary nested within the verb *amañarse*—a word that is at the heart of stories about *staying* in this town, that cannot easily be translated without losing the sense of its entangled meanings, and which gives this chapter its title: "*Amañarse* in San Miguel." Beyond dictionary definitions of this word—which describe it in relation to "adaptation" and "habituation"— I explore the ways in which amañarse is "about staying," *de quedarse*, about "wanting to stay," *querer quedarse*, and I attend to its unravelings, at once in practice and in narrative.

In order to understand what amañarse is and what it does, I argue that we first need to grasp some of the history that informs its voicings; the long history of migration that traverses the present life of San Miguel. Following the orientation of amañarse (of this verb that is "about staying"), I approach this history in terms of how the departure of *others* has shaped the lives of those who have continued to inhabit this place. Through this brief historical sketch, it becomes visible how

made" (Ibid:142). Stewart, who is centrally concerned with the nationalist myth of "America" and of its constitutive "otherness," explores how people living in the coal camps of West Virginia (a place that appears to embody the "otherness" of the American imagination) manage to open and re-open a gap between these first-order and second-order semiological systems; how they fashion this gap through forms of storytelling that proliferate in an unending attention to everyday scenes, and which, spinning from the present towards the incessant narration of old memories, are infilled with history. Stewart understands the opening of this gap as the "fabulation" of a *narrative space* that does not allow itself to be captured by the order of myths, that makes apparent the history myths conceal, and where, in contrast to the fixed mythical otherness these people are made to embody, as Stewart says with the words of literature scholar Ross Chambers, "there is room for maneuver" (1996:3).

San Miguel is inscribed in a broader national context of diverging views toward the countryside and of failed agrarian reforms that, without being focused on the countryside of Boyacá, have carved out the paths inhabitants from this departamento have tended to take. It further shows how these departures have molded the conditions of life of those who have continued to stay. At the base of this history are the unequal distribution of the land and the unresolved, if also shifting, dependencies between haciendas and peasant farms—dependencies that, on a local scale, became sharper with the drainage of the lagoon of Fúquene; the body of water with which San Miguel borders to the south (see figure 1), and which was partially dried out through a myriad of draining projects headed by hacendados of this region (by a handful of absentee owners who, until the first decades of the twentieth century, owned the majority of the land of San Miguel), in their search to expand their already ample farms. Over the flat land surrounding the lagoon was established the milk industry on which the lives of campesinos from San Miguel largely revolve; an industry built on a territory that is therefore especially vulnerable to flooding. In recent years, the recurrent floods have intensified the migration of the youth, adding to the diverse factors that, as I aim to show in this historical sketch, have given shape to the communal sense that San Miguel is futureless.

It is in tension with this narrative, and charged with the experiential knowledge of this history, that people speak of amañarse, of "wanting to stay." Without contradicting the terms in which this history is told, they do this in a way that pauses the impulse to explain away their enduring desire to remain in place. And, within this pause, they make room for something else to "unravel," *desenvolverse*. Through the lens of amañarse, staying does not look like an exercise in stasis, but rather seems to depend on the possibility of mutual transformations; on a porous unraveling toward that which one wants to stay with. I find this in the poetic sensibility with which people tap into

the thick vocabulary condensed within amañarse: in the constellation of meanings that they deploy in their different uses of this word and that range from "staying," to "incorporating a skill" or a habit, to the shared pleasure of "killing time." Amañarse is a word difficult to explain. I suggest that it is precisely in this way, however, that it manages to anchor us in the present long enough to imagine a different way of relating to time, to perform a kind of narrative where neither the past nor the future are to be looked at from a distance—one where there is no moving "forward" or staying "behind." As I learn through an unpublished song and songs only half-remembered, it is in the mutual unravelings of amañarse, in this *becoming-with* (Haraway 2016)[11] through which we come to bear the marks of a shared history, that we can request a future "always in relation to the Other" (Butler 2004:46).[12]

This first chapter is, in a way, an ethnography of a word, and of how people give continuance to the world through it. It is also an ethnography about how people sustain a commitment to simply *being* in place, rather than moving to any future we might have already imagined. While it shows

[11] In *becoming-with* another, Haraway writes, "who is/are to be in/of the world is constituted in intra-and inter-action. The partners do not precede the knotting" (2016:13). By foregrounding that who we are does not pre-exist our entanglement with others (be they human or not, living or not), this is a concept that challenges the idea that we are self-contained beings, and it brings our attention to the possibilities that become enabled when we act on the base of the knowledge that we are made and unmade by each other.

[12] I am borrowing here the words that Butler uses to describe, in a way that echoes Haraway's notion of *becoming-with*, the implications of recognizing that "our relations with others hold us […] in ways that challenge the very notion of ourselves as autonomous and in control" (2004:23). In the recognition of a vulnerability that implicates me in the possibility of the existence of another, there is a claim about her being in the world that I cannot easily argue against (not without putting my own existence into doubt) and about the need, upon her loss, to mourn her; to recognize that something in me has become lost as well. It is a recognition, then, for which the future is "always in relation to the Other," even if that future is marked by death; what matters is that this would be a *grievable* death, a death in relation to which one could not remain unchanged. In Butler's words: "To ask for recognition, or to offer it, is precisely not to ask for recognition for what one already is. It is to solicit a becoming, to instigate a transformation, to petition the future always in relation to the Other" (Ibid:46).

the difficulty of this endeavor, it also seeks to convey the simple pleasure of holding on to the sweet uneventfulness of aimless moments spent together.

An aimlessness of this kind was essential to the ethnographic method that gave shape to this research, in a sense that involved pausing the search for information that is sometimes associated to ethnographic fieldwork. It involved slowing down in the sense that Isabelle Stengers (2005) offers us: as a way "to create a space for hesitation" and to create also, in this manner, "an opportunity to arouse a slightly different awareness of the problems and situations mobilizing us" (Ibid:994).[13] Ethnography, the way I came to understand it in my time in San Miguel, centrally involves this effort; pausing the search for information, the search to resolve the questions that motivate us, and allowing them to remain open, to proliferate, to leave us and then find us changed—to find us thinking with someone else about shared concerns, about life and death, about ourselves and our others, about that which we cannot fully say, about that which requires silent listening; about everything and nothing in particular. I think of slowing down as a way "to be truly present," to again borrow Haraway's words; a way to question, to maybe even forget the ends for which we thought our inquiry would be a means, and to consider, as Stengers says thinking with Deleuze, that perhaps "there is something more important" (2005:994).[14]

[13] I am here also echoing Lisa Stevenson when, writing about "uncertainty as mode" (2014:1), she says "I want to consider a mode on anthropological listening that makes room for hesitation—a way of listening for that which persistently disrupts the security of what is known for sure" (Ibid:2). This also reminds of Angela Garcia's (2010) call for allowing for uncertainties and vulnerabilities to remain unresolved in our thinking and in our writing (Ibid:35).

[14] Stengers is here thinking with Deleuze's treatment of Dostoyevsky's "idiot"; "the one who always slows the others down, who resists the consensual way in which the situation is presented and in which emergencies mobilize thought or action" (2005:994). The idiot, in the context of this brief comment on ethnography, would be the ethnographer who can no longer make sense of her research's objectives and methods, and who cannot shake off the sense that there might be "something more important".

During my fieldwork, I spent a lot of my time in the small stores of San Miguel where people gather throughout the day, sharing coffee with friends and with strangers, letting one conversation lead me to another. Following the advice of the people I met there to go visit this or that person that they thought could help me better understand the histories that have given shape to this place, my everyday world slowly broadened and took me farther and farther away from the urban center, towards the isolated veredas of San Miguel. As I walked through the countryside, I began sketching the many abandoned houses that I found across the landscape; I made these sketches, which are interspersed with the chapters of this thesis, as a way to pause my attention on the sight of that persistent abandonment the awareness of which seems to easily fade into the background.[15] Navigating the social world of this small town also led me to participate and help in several meetings, events and workshops organized by the municipal administration, and I attended every religious ritual I was able to. My days, however, were soon filled not with formal events, interviews and the drafting of the kinship charts that helped me comprehend the family histories of migration from San Miguel, but with keeping the promise to visit people again (a promise that is at each time renewed with that question that seems to close every encounter in the countryside of Boyacá; *¿Y cuándo vuelve?*, "So when can we expect you back?"). Returning, for no reason other than the

[15] Sketching as a fieldwork practice, Carol Hendrickson suggests, can become "an exercise in slowing down and thinking-while-seeing-while-drawing" (2008:119). Hendrickson develops this idea in contact with the work of Tim Ingold, who speaks of drawing as a sentient process of thinking (2013:128)—a characterization that, in turn, resembles Michael Taussig's suggestion that drawings are able to capture "the knowing that anthropological fieldwork produces […] knowledge not so much as an inert record, but as something quite different, something alive" (2011:xii). Following this trail of thought, I do not take drawing as a method of documentation but as a form of thinking that asks for us to slow down in order to give our prolonged and focused attention to things, places, and practices. As Ingold writes, drawings "call for close and attuned observation" (2013:126).

return itself, with no purpose other than spending time together, always seemed to be more important.[16]

This, the importance and the intricacies of returning, is something that I understood more fully through the moments and the stories that I describe in the second chapter, "It takes you back (re-signation)." In this chapter, I continue the keyword exploration (Williams 1983) that began with amañarse by attending to the initially disconcerting way in which people in San Miguel use the word *resignation*.[17] In contrast to the uses of amañarse, which are predicated on desire, I here begin to turn my attention to how staying in this town involves also a work of mourning, as well as the inability to mourn losses that cannot be fully named. The chapter opens with a shared

[16] As James Davies (2010) argues, any "method productive of formal interview, statistical, or inventory data" (Ibid:23) is only temporary. In reality, Davies argues, when conducting ethnographic fieldwork we spend most of our time in the spaces "between" "self-contained methods"; spaces where our "personality or posture, so to speak, bends itself back to its habitual form" (Ibid). Along with the contributors to the edited volume *Emotions in the field: the Psychology and Anthropology of Fieldwork Experience* (Davies and Spencer 2010), Davies considers these spaces as the most insightful of the research process, challenging the notion that "subjectivity has only a corrosive effect upon the process of research" (2010:2), and that the construction of knowledge is only possible through rational detachment (Ibid). Quite on the contrary, contributors to this volume asks us to consider the affective and sensory forms of knowing, and the ethical and political possibilities that become available to us when we allow for our pose as "researchers" to dissolve, and when we take seriously how the relations we forge during fieldwork extend beyond the scope of our work. The "aimlessness" that I speak of echoes this idea.

[17] In tune with Williams's exploration in *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (1983), I approach the words *resignation* and *amañarse* within and beyond dictionary definitions—which, as Williams writes, are "much better on range and variation than on connection and interaction" (Ibid:19)—and with particular attention to everyday speech, both in terms of how these words are used and how they are talked about. My intention is not to define these words or to argue for or against their "proper" or their "incorrect" uses and meanings, but rather to explore how the different meanings associated to each of them relate to each other in complex ways, associated to particular histories that extend beyond these particular words. I do not want, however, and also in tune with Williams, to lose sight of how "the words themselves" are "elements of the problems" (Ibid:16)—or of the possibilities—they relate to. Williams describes his work in *Keywords* as the exploration of "a vocabulary to use, to find our own ways in, to change as we find it necessary to change it, as we go on making our own language and history" (Ibid:24-25). In the first two chapters of this dissertation, I seek to see, through an ethnographic lens, how people from San Miguel are doing this themselves; how they are "finding their own ways" in a vocabulary that might thus be made to coincide with their needs and desires, as they search to inhabit a language, a history, and a place in their own terms.

contemplation of abandoned houses, a mapping of the myriad of absences that spread across the landscape of San Miguel, some of which are so old that they have already become nameless, some of which were brought about by the departure of people who have already been forgotten. It is from within this cartographic effort that I hear the disquieting claim that "the problem" at the root of the continuous migration of the youth is the fact that "there's no resignation anymore," *no hay resignación ya*. In order to live in the countryside, I am told, "you have to be resigned," *debe ser es resignado*.

This claim takes me back in time to trace how the word *resignation* has been understood in the social sciences. Focusing especially in the work of Colombian social scientists, I explore how it partook of representations of campesinos from before the 1970s, within the modernizing framework that interpreted their ways of life as "backwards" and which still nurtures the sense that places like San Miguel have been left "behind." Social scientists and politicians writing before this decade described resignation as part of a passive attitude that hindered the ability of indigenous peoples and of campesinos to enter the path of progress, and which therefore posed a threat to the development of the nation. Following this logic, it had to be corrected. At the core of such an understanding of resignation was the notion of "indigenous melancholia," which was understood as a pathological attachment to long past losses that indigenous peoples, and their descendants, were unwilling to move away from. The times where these ideas were held are times that we now look at with critical eyes, and also with shame, from within a discipline that, in Colombia, took a critical turn in the 1970s—a discipline that moved towards a language of *resistance* through a self-reflexive process by which the word "resignation" vanished from the vocabulary of anthropological writings on peasant life.

With the knowledge of this history, it is difficult to take in the affirmation that, in order to live in the countryside, "you have to be resigned." And yet it seems that we need to learn how to take this idea on its own terms; that we need to find a way to do this without falling back into a modernizing and paternalistic framework. I thus ask if perhaps we can slow down our judgement and drop the evaluation of resignation as something that needs to be "corrected" or "cured" from within or from without, in favor of revolution or of reformation. In order to do this, I turn back to the notion of *melancholia* that long underlay the social sciences' understanding of peasant societies, noticing that it coincides with how Freud's early understanding of this affect has tended to be interpreted; namely, as the opposite of mourning—or, more precisely, the incapacity to mourn the loss of the loved object (Freud 2001). If this opposition is at the core of the pathological understanding of resignation (based as it is on melancholia), then perhaps, I suggest, we can find a way out of it by reformulating the relation between these terms. This suggestion, in turn, comes from the fact that, in San Miguel, resignation is understood as an integral part of mourning. As I learn through reading a line from the nine-day prayers for the dead (the Catholic *novenario*), resignation speaks of how mourning requires a delay, a movement "back" in time and space through which we are able to read and re-read our losses into our understanding of ourselves.

The question that remains open, however, is how to understand losses that cannot be fully mourned, how to attend to instances where melancholy prolongs to the point where it becomes naturalized, just as it happens in the affirmation that, in order to live in the countryside, "you have to be resigned." Drawing from Judith Butler's "cultural engagement with psychoanalytic theory" (1997:138), I thus reflect on what happens when we consider the loss of a peasant way of life, and

of campesinos and indigenous peoples' attachment to the land, as constitutive of the narrative of progress. When we consider, that is, how these losses cannot be fully recognized as such without putting into doubt the necessity of progressing. Through this lens, the prolongation of grief does not seem to come from a "pathology" of the ego, but rather from a narrative that confirms itself through it. And resignation, in turn, looks like a way to live with losses that cannot be mourned, but which have left their mark in the intimate (and perhaps melancholic) landscapes of a peasant way of life—a kind of life to which people give continuance by insisting in drawing themselves, and our attention, back to the sites and the forgotten stories that, as a modernizing framework would have it, we should simply "let go" of.

As this second chapter comes to an end, this thesis thus begins to turn towards an exploration of how the blurry limits between absence and presence, life and death, are dwelled upon as a part of a continuous effort to hold on to a place like San Miguel. In the third chapter, "To stay with a story," I address this by attending to the trouble of understanding "what absence is." Rather than aiming for a definition, this chapter moves between moments where the question of what it is to live in a world marked by absence throws us into the imagination of death. In this exploration, it becomes visible how the absence of others, carved out in a place where people age without secure webs of care or any significant form of social security, can weaken the life force, can even pose a threat to the lives of those who have continued to stay. This brings me to attend to instants where words seem to be out of reach, but I also find myself within odd forms of narrative that seem to allow for people to secure their hold on the world while they also reach for the company of the dead.

The chapter revolves around different practices of mourning, paying particular attention to the recitation of the rosary and to the rituals surrounding burials, including the burials of people who only returned to San Miguel after death and who seem to bring life back to this place. Dwelling in (narrative) spaces where the limits separating the world of the dead from that of the living become blurred, I attend to the difficulty that comes with the awareness that one's life is predicated on death—with the realization of that irresolvable contradiction that cannot be grasped within our common language-games; an experience that philosopher Cora Diamond (2003) calls a "difficulty of reality." I also seek to understand, however, how death can be emplacing (Stevenson 2017:71) and how accepting the world "as something that exists for us only in its loss (you might say its absence)" (Cavell 1986:109) can be sustaining.

Between the lines of this chapter, it becomes evident just how important Catholicism is in the lives of the inhabitants of this town. Its encompassing presence cannot be overstated, seeing how so much of San Miguel's history and everyday life revolves around it. It is said that the name of this place, for instance, pays tribute to the priest Miguel de Jesús Medina from the town of Tinjacá who, before San Miguel became an independent municipio, founded the first chapel of these rural areas and visited regularly to offer mass (Silva 2011:43)—a man who thus helped to gather a visible community that would eventually claim its own administrative and ecclesiastical autonomy. Likewise, the lands upon which the center of San Miguel was built were donated by the community of the Augustinian Recollects, who thus had an important influence in the architecture of this place (of which I speak in chapter 4). Some veredas that I speak of in this thesis, namely San Cayetano and Quicagota, belong administratively to the town of Ráquira, but ecclesiastically to San Miguel, and this is the broader community their inhabitants relate to most

regularly, since it is mainly Catholic practices that bring together the people who live scattered across the countryside. This being said, describing precisely how the Catholic church intervenes in or plays a part in shaping people's lives exceeds the scope of this thesis, but I am interested throughout in seeing how much there is to learn from appreciating how Catholic practices, writings and rituals are occupied as meditative spaces that people use to elaborate their own, unique theories about what it is to live our mortal lives in this frail world (and grasping such theories, with the rigor with which we tend to approach "theory as such" (Garcia 2010), is crucial to this ethnography).[18]

The fourth and final chapter of this thesis explores one such space through the contemplation of a mystery. It is a "strange mystery," *un misterio raro*, that some people see in the myriad of abandoned peasant mud houses, a clear material register of the history of migration from this place, that scatter across the landscape of San Miguel. Houses, I am told, "'feel' like us," *sienten como uno*, and, because of a lack of "human warmth," deteriorate and eventually crumble down. Their deterioration is so rapid that some houses simply cease to "exist", *dejan de existir*; it has happened more than once that people go looking for an old family house to "see it one last time", *para verla*

[18] With this, I am suggesting that I also want to understand ethnography as a theoretical effort, one that is not oriented towards the documentation of another way of life but rather based on a commitment to thinking *with* others, and, as Claudia Platarrueda beautifully argues, allowing for their knowledge of themselves to change us (in her words; "*dejarse aleccionar por los otros en su conocimiento de sí mismos*" (2019:41)). That ethnography can be understood as a way to participate in author-full and open-ended theory-making processes that are already taking shape in everyday worlds, is something that I learned from the work of Luis Guillermo Vasco (2002) and Luis Alberto Suárez (2019a), and which I have continued to understand through reading the work of anthropologists like Angela Garcia (2010), Robert Desjarlais (2016), Lisa Stevenson (2014), and Stefania Pandolfo (2018). I am also inspired by Eduardo Kohn's (2013) proposal to think with the "living thoughts" of the world beyond us, and by Stuart McLean's engagement with the forms of creativity that extend beyond our human worlds and histories (2007; 2009). This is something that I begin to consider in the last chapter of this thesis, where I try broaden my attention to consider a world that extends well beyond ourselves; this is also, however, something that I am still only able to hint at.

una última vez, and cannot find it. They soon conclude that, because of that mystery, those houses "already became earth", *ya se volvieron tierra*.

Seeking to understand what is at stake in the contemplation of this mystery, in this chapter, "The mystery of abandoned houses," I attend to the materials that have held the lives and the deaths of "the oldest" inhabitants of San Miguel. In conversation with the town's carpenter and gravedigger, I am asked to consider the sharp contrast between the abandoned houses and graves of hacendados and those of campesinos; the first still standing despite the passing of time, despite the absence of their owners and mourners, the second literally disappearing into the ground. It is a contrast that can be traced back to the colonial history of this region, to the materials of life of the Muiscas, the indigenous group that inhabited these lands in prehispanic times, and those of the Spaniards that subjugated them in ways that are still brought into the present to describe the relations between haciendas and peasant farms, as well as the motivating factors behind the abandonment of the countryside. Looking through the lens of the mystery, it becomes visible how these sustained inequalities have given shape to our ways of forgetting, how remnants of a colonial past still "weigh […] on the future" (Stoler 2013a:9) of inhabitants of this town, and how the register of peasant life is not only literally falling out of sight but also out of our official histories.

There is a kind of despair in this observation, the sense of an irretrievable end generated by our limited forms of memory and of history-making, but the awareness of the mystery only begins there; in the contemplation of an absence. As it slows down our tired attention, encouraging us to recognize ourselves in a crumbling mud house that "'feels' like us"—in a house made out of earth that crumbles back into the earth— the consideration of the mystery moves us toward an

appreciation of a geological temporality where ends open into new beginnings, where death nurtures life, and in which resonates the catholic sense that dust we are and to dust we will return. Without losing sight of how this temporality, a "time before time" (McLean 2007), coexists with our politically charged temporalities and histories, in closing this thesis I thus attempt to follow the dissolution of the materials of life and death into the earth, slowly enough to be there when bits of bones, of poetry, and of life spring anew from it.

*

The stories that give life to this thesis are not exactly hopeful (not oriented towards the idea that things will be better in the future), but they offer a delay that we can hold on to, just when it feels, as it often does, that the view ahead is increasingly opaque. It seems to me that there is much to learn from the commitment to make a moment last for the sake of being together, a little while longer. From finding ways to stay with each other, and together with the dead, even when the world seems to be coming to an end. The kind of end that the stories in this thesis ask us to attend to is one that can be easily overlooked because it has been slowly coming, gradually unfolding over decades, felt in some lives more than others; it has been sensed in places left alone, on the site of deaths that have gone unwitnessed, of deaths that might have even been left without grievers. It is an end predicated on the same narrative that prevents us from seeing it—on the old and overarching narrative of progress that has oriented the understanding and the intervention of Colombia's countryside, and which seems to be deeply engrained in our ways of thinking. As it limits our perception of the uneventful forms of suffering that it generates, it also prevents us from noticing the repetitive ways of recuperating the world that are already occurring within it. This

dissertation, *A Song for Staying,* seeks to see what it would be like to bring these stories into our understanding of ourselves. It tries to hold open a space, a generative delay, where we can hear the resonance of their life-sustaining yet mournful singing, and begin to imagine how to respond to it.


Fachada del
Lote abandonado al frente
de la escuela
tejas de barro
la pintura
era blanca.
Al pelarse
revela otra
capa de pintu-
ra azul y
una madera
verdosa
las ventanas
todavía se
entienden por los
marcos de madera
pero están cubiertas
con ladrillos.

1. *Amañarse* in San Miguel

¿Y usted sí se amaña por acá?

It was quiet middle of the day, like most in San Miguel, when everyone seemed to be resting. It came right after an early lunch, this restful moment, and just before almost everyone had to go back outside to feed and milk their cattle. I was sitting in the store of my friend Claudia Pineda, right in front of the park of the church, looking out into the empty streets that would replenish in just a few moments with the crowd of uniformed students getting ready to walk back home or to wait for the bus that, for two thousand pesos, would take them to the farther veredas of San Miguel. I was often asked to notice that, as soon as they graduate high school, they all tend to leave this place—they leave, like the generation before them, and the one before that, in search for "opportunities" to some city that might offer a "better life." They leave, and their departure feeds into the communal sense that, in this town, "there is no future."

"Isn't it kind of dead today?" Claudia said, also staring into the vacant streets. She was resting her head on her arms and her arms on the wooden counter that, she suspects, must be around her age—a bit over thirty years old. She had been standing up since the break of dawn, tending to the familiar customers that come to drink coffee and eat cheese-filled arepas before parting for work. The store then quieted down, but later in the morning it had picked up its rhythm for a moment, as people came to buy last-minute things to cook for lunch, to have more coffee and maybe one of the pastries made by Claudia's husband—his name is Hermen Molina, but everyone calls him el Paisa. We had just had lunch with him and with their daughters, who were three and seven years old at the time, and they had already left to rest in the house that they were finishing a few blocks down.

Claudia had stayed, just in case someone else happened to come to buy something, and I had stayed with her. We were sipping on coffee to fight the heaviness that weighed on our eyelids, only half awake. But then, breaking the quiet that neared stillness, she asked me a question that I cannot fully translate, a question that would come back, time and again, in those lazy noon hours. She asked me:

¿Y usted sí se amaña por acá?

She is wondering if I adapt, if I cozy up, if I am able to imagine my own life in this place. She must know I do, I think she trusts my unchanged answer, but there is something that keeps bringing us back to that questioning, to that verb, *amañarse*, in that moment of the day. Then we simply let it go and continue talking about everything and nothing, spending time together over the sleepy slowness that sways us into the beginning of the afternoon. We let it go, but now I know it will continue coming back to us—that it will come back in other half dreams of other middays. *¿Y usted sí se amaña por acá?*

About staying

Amañarse, the word at the heart of Claudia's repeating question, is a reflexive verb, and some of the meanings that the Spanish Royal Academy (2014a) recognizes for it is "to adapt or to find comfort"—"*adaptarse, acomodarse*"—or "to habituate to a new place"—"*acostumbrarse, adaptarse a la novedad de un ambiente o a una actividad*"—. In San Miguel, I often heard that verb: it was the word that people used when they explained why, despite the unclear sight of a future, they decided to try and stay in this town. They say it with a slight raise of the shoulders, a

slight tilting of the head: *me amañé*. This could be translated into "I adapted" or "I cozied up," yet, when I asked people what this verb meant to them, they all offered an explanation similar to the one my friend Edilma Ruiz voiced: "It's wanting to stay. It's that you liked some place so much that you want to stay. It's about staying," *...querer quedarse. Que le gustó tanto que quiere quedarse. Es de quedarse.*

Amañarse, beyond adaptation and habituation, is to find a liking for something or someone, and also a want, a desire, to stay with a person or in a particular place. It speaks of an attachment that needs not to be explained; it is often voiced, in fact, as a way to claim one's attachment in a way that pauses the impulse to demand for further explanation. It is what my friend Natalia Mateus, who had a vegetable store next to Claudia's business during the time of my fieldwork, said to her aunt when, visiting from a bustling town near Bogotá, asked her how she could ever imagine having a life in San Miguel: "*me amañé.*" It is what Don Félix Roberto, a man in his eighties, told me, right after narrating his many travels across Colombia, the many opportunities he had to make a life somewhere else, and his decision, once he retired from his work as an electrician in Bogotá, to return for good to San Miguel: "I have been everywhere in Colombia, and I couldn't *amañarme* anywhere else," *yo conozco casi toda Colombia y no encontré amaño en ninguna parte*. It was also with the vocabulary of amañarse that Don Pioquinto Salinas responded to his family when they asked him to stay with them in the city, after he spent some time there recuperating from a heart attack, a clear sign that keeping up a farm on his own in his eighties was taking a toll on his health: "I just can't *amañarme* over there," *yo no me amaño por allá.* And Doña Esperanza Parra turned to this verb too, speaking of why she insisted on staying with her grandmother in the old family farm when, in the middle of the twentieth century, her mother and all of her sisters left to

work as cleaning ladies for wealthy families in Bogotá: "I was really *amañada* to my grandma, and she could no longer *amañarse* without myself," *yo me amañaba mucho con mi abuelita y ella ya no se amañaba sin yo*.

There is something anchoring about the way people use this word, this reflexive verb that is amañarse, be it as a statement or as a question; there is a weight to it that keeps people grounded even when others are literally, even if lovingly, trying to pull them away. And it gives continuity to lives lived in San Miguel, just as it gives continuity to the day as Claudia and I drink coffee in those lazy noon hours. As my friend Inés Dorado said when I asked her what amañarse meant to her, right after lunch and before she had to go milk her cows, sitting near the maize garden, looking out into the hills that gave way to ample pasturelands and the silver hint of the lagoon of Fúquene: "amañarse is being like we are right now, together, peacefully," *amañarse es estar así como estamos, las dos, tranquilas*. To be amañadas is to be emplaced and with each other, letting time pass by, letting the afternoon reach us. If San Miguel is without a future, its concurrent presents are continuously rendered possible, and speakable, through this weighty verb, this way of being in place that pauses the impulse to explain away the remaining desire to stay.

Amañarse, as Edilma says, is "about staying." Rather than being simply about inhabiting a place, it is formulated in contrast to leaving, to the sense that we perhaps should be leaving, moving towards a shifting elsewhere that most often seems to be determined by its frail relation to the changing geographical configurations of progress. In the first half of the twentieth century, this elsewhere was, for San Miguel, the expanding agricultural frontier in the north of the departamento of Tolima; ever since the 1970s, it has been the growing city of Bogotá and its surrounding rural

areas. These are the regions towards which young campesinos of San Miguel have tended to gravitate in the last hundred years, shaping, with their departure, the lives of those who have continued to stay. The mention of amañarse cannot easily be disentangled from this centenary history of migration—the voicing of this word is informed by such a history; in some ways, it also reformulates its terms. To understand the workings of amañarse, the forms of narrative and of being in place that it makes room for, it thus seems necessary to first grasp some of its historical depth. To explore, that is, how the departure of others has given a particular shape to what it means to *stay* in San Miguel.

The departure of others

The farthest memory that people in San Miguel still hold of the youth leaving this place dates back to the decade of the 1920s. In this time, the main inhabitants of the rural areas that now compose San Miguel de Sema were campesinos who, for the most part, worked for haciendas; large estates owned by wealthy families that usually came from nearby cities, such as Bogotá. The haciendas expanded over most of the land, and campesinos, with few exceptions, tended to inhabit small plots within these properties in exchange for unpaid days of work. These days of work were referred to as *la obligación*, "the obligation," and this tenancy arrangement, one of the major types of tenancy in Colombia and which persisted until after the middle of the last century (Ocampo et al. 1987:290), was called *arrendamiento*. The living and working conditions of tenants were extremely limited by regulations that constrained their ability to produce commercial crops or to expand the plots allotted to them (LeGrand 1986:88–89). In San Miguel, while peasant farms were relegated to broken and eroded hills isolated from the main roads and "some of the least productive soils in terms of agriculture" (Langebaek Rueda 1995:59), the haciendas monopolized the flat land

that surrounds the lagoon of Fúquene—a most fertile land that was coveted also because of its potential to expand through the drainage of this body of water.[19] Given the restrictions enforced by the haciendas, tenants "remained near the poverty level with little hope for significant improvement in living conditions" (LeGrand 1986:89), and they were forced to comply to the sometimes unreasonable demands of hacendados under the threat, as elderly inhabitants of San Miguel still remember, of losing their homes (see Franco García 2007:64).

It was partly in response to such limited living and working conditions that young campesinos began migrating in the beginning of the 1920s toward the northern lands of the departamento of Tolima—a zone of agricultural expansion where a recently established coffee industry was burgeoning beyond the local availability of hired labor (Ramírez and Tobasura 2004; LeGrand 1986:23).[20] Especially for harvesting seasons, owners of coffee haciendas in Tolima had started sending their administrators to the countryside of Boyacá, offering payed transportation and good salaries for temporary workers—a recruiting practice called *enganche* ("hooking") (Ramírez and Tobasura 2004:236–237; see also LeGrand 1986:38). Seasonal migrations, however, soon became

[19] Draining projects date back to the beginning of the nineteenth century: in 1822, the land underneath the lagoon—understood as flooded, workable land—was first conceded to José Ignacio París, who was thus charged with the task of "recuperating" these lands for agriculture and dairy farming through the drainage of this body of water (Franco García 2007:92). This concession gave way to a "tradition of private property" (Ibid: 91-98) over the lagoon, which continued justifying multiple draining projects until after the middle of the twentieth century. The environmental and social history that revolves around the drainage of Fúquene has been thoroughly studied by Roberto Franco García (2007), Patricia Vargas Sarmiento (2016), and Paula K. Guerrero-García (2014; 2010).

[20] In his sociological study of Boyacá, Orlando Fals Borda traces the migration of people from this departamento to Tolima back to 1918 (1957:32). As he notes, the youth of Boyacá also tended to gravitate toward the departamento of Caldas; in the case of San Miguel, however, based on the stories of migration I gathered during my fieldwork, it seems that Tolima was by far the main destination for young campesinos in the first half of the twentieth century. Fals Borda also points out that it was mainly men who were hired as seasonal workers, while women tended to leave to the city in search for jobs in the domestic sector (Ibid). Following the stories gathered during my fieldwork, as I mention later in this chapter, it seems that the migration of women from San Miguel to large cities like Bogotá only became prominent in the second half of the twentieth century.

permanent, as campesinos from Boyacá tended to desert their jobs in the coffee haciendas to settle in higher colder lands further north in Tolima where there was a chance to buy cheap lands and good salaries to work in agriculture, and they often brought with them their siblings or their entire families who still worked as tenants for the haciendas (Ramírez and Tobasura 2004:239). The *enganche*, that is, beyond offering remunerated jobs, had traced a path to escape seemingly immovable repressive conditions of life—and once that route was carved out and well known, it was travelled for all sorts of reasons. In the veredas of San Miguel, I heard stories of children who, before their teenage years, left to Tolima tired of frequent beatings from parents or teachers; it was also common for families to move to this region, the people of which tended to the liberal pole of the political spectrum, looking to escape the persecution of fervent followers of the Conservative party, which was prominent in Boyacá (Ibid:243).

Seeing its lands becoming depleted of workers, the Assembly of Boyacá attempted to prohibit the displacement of people out of its borders (LeGrand 1986:104), and it was not uncommon for death threats to be made to the recruiting agents who seasonally visited the region (Ramírez and Tobasura 2004:238). Yet, since at the heart of this demographic movement was the unequal distribution of the land, these efforts proved insufficient, and, in some cases, the haciendas were forced to improve the working and living conditions of their tenants (LeGrand 1986:104; Ramírez and Tobasura 2004:237). This coincides with the fact that, most likely to secure a force of labor that was evidently threatened, in the late 1920s and the beginning of the 1930s some haciendas of San Miguel began to offer a modest salary to their tenants and, in some cases, even sold to them parcels of land. Don Pablo Alarcón, for instance, a ninety-year-old campesino, remembers that, in the 1930s, while his parents and older brothers had left to Tolima, his grandparents were able to

buy land in the vereda of Quintoque in San Miguel, where he still lives. Joaquina Rodríguez, who is today in her eighties, also remembers that, in the late 1930s, her father already owned his own farm. In his research on the environmental history of this region, Roberto Franco García estimates that the parceling of large estates in the region surrounding the lagoon of Fúquene became more common in the 1940s (2007:63). The coincidence between this redistribution of the land and the migration of campesinos suggests that the departure of the youth to northern Tolima might have played an important part in shaking, if only slightly, the foundations of an economic system which, as their migration made evident, had begun to work against itself. [21]

Despite this implying a significant change, it was not without limitations. As José García said, a man in his seventies who works as the gravedigger of San Miguel, although people were now offered a modest salary, it was still "very uncommon for people to have their own land," *era muy raro que alguien tuviera su propia tierra*. Don José's parents and grandparents, for instance, were tenants their entire lives. Moreover, when hacendados did sell parcels of land, they tended to sell plots big enough to produce for self-consumption but unfit for commercial agriculture; they thus ensured hired hands for the haciendas, their monopoly of the commerce and, in consequence, campesinos' dependency to the scant salaries they now offered. The dependencies of peasant farms to the haciendas were worsened by the fact that campesinos most often bought land through

[21] The redistribution of the haciendas in turn coincides with the first governmental program for the parceling of unproductive large estates or conflict-laden haciendas, which was put in practice in 1931 as a response to the revolts of campesinos living in zones of agricultural expansion; of colonists who were fighting against the abuse of landowners and for their right to own the land they cleared, worked and inhabited (this time of peasant protest has been thoroughly described and analized by LeGrand 1986). As historian José Antonio Ocampo notes, in a context of worldwide economic crisis, given the opportunity to sell uncleared and unused parcels of land at commercial prices, and seeking to guarantee hired labor for their fields, landowners whose properties remained marginal to the areas of both promise and conflict, just like Boyacá, voluntarily adhered to the parceling program between the 1930s and the 1940s (Ocampo 1987:231).

acquiring loans with the government, loans that could extend over thirty years (LeGrand 1986:139–140).[22] Burdened with debts, they could not easily expand their farms which, through the inheritance of the land to new generations, tended to became smaller and smaller with the passing of time. If not as prominently as before, the youth continued gradually leaving to Tolima, traveling now familiar paths, and especially to the town of Murillo where there now was a strong community of people from Boyacá (Ramírez and Tobasura 2004).[23]

In the years leading to the 1950s, however, when the violence of the undeclared civil war known as *La Violencia* (1948-1958) intensified in the countryside of Tolima, people from Boyacá who had settled in that region started to come back. Such was the case with the father of Don Agustín Mendieta, in whose home I lived during my fieldwork: having left to northern Tolima in the early 1920s, "because that's where the jobs were," *allá es donde había trabajo*, in 1948, "when the violence exacerbated," *cuando se exasperó la violencia*, his father came back to a land he had inherited from his parents and which, by then, had been abandoned for years. Or take the story of Don Floro Chacón, who today is a communal leader in the vereda El Charco of San Miguel; his parents had migrated in the 1920s to the countryside of Tolima, close to Murillo, where he was born. After Don Floro finished his compulsory military service, also in the late 1940s, his brother

[22] This loan-based form of parceling out and redistributing conflict-laden or unproductive estates continued operating in the countryside with the incorporation of the law 200 of 1936 (entitled *Ley de Tierras*, "the Land Act," sometimes referred to as the first modern agrarian reform in Colombia), and, as I will note later in the text of this chapter, it resembles the forms of land redistribution incorporated into the law 135 of 1961 (known as the Agrarian Reform Law) (see Machado C. 2009:152).

[23] Fals Borda also noted the relation between the insufficient size of peasant farms, which was aggravated through the inheritance of the land, and the migration of young campesinos (1957:146). Writing in the late 1950s, he suggested that central to understand this insufficiency was also the unequal quality of the land that haciendas and peasant farms occupied; the first located on flat fertile land, the second on highly eroded and mountainous territories. As I noted earlier in this chapter, this was the case in San Miguel. Fals Borda suggested that it was "almost axiomatic" throughout Boyacá (Ibid:143-144).

warned him that, being a young man with military training, one side or the other of the civil war would try to recruit him. "At this time," he told him, "you have one foot in jail and the other one in a grave," *tiene un pie en la cárcel y el otro en la tumba*. He thus came back to San Miguel—"back" to his parents' homeland, but for the very first time. Not everyone, however, was so lucky. Many people from San Miguel lost their lives in those freshly colonized highlands. Azucena Ibagué, who was also born in northern Tolima, remembers her family's hasty escape after her uncles were killed and her father received a death threat; they packed whatever they could, in the middle of the night, and they returned to Boyacá to the house of her paternal grandmother who, as doña Azucena remembers it, could not bear losing her last living son. The lands of San Miguel had suddenly become a place of refuge, perhaps even of re-birth. "If I could be born again," Doña Azucena says, "I would be born in San Miguel," *si yo volviera a nacer, nacería en San Miguel*.

But, soon after people had started returning from el Tolima, others started leaving to Bogotá—all the children of Don Agustín, Don Floro and Doña Azucena, for example, eventually followed this path—and this shift seems to be related to the government's changing policies toward the countryside. With the end of *La Violencia* in 1958 had come a short decade of agrarian reform, since the government sought to heal the wounds of the war and to prevent the spread of communism by adopting a policy of social and economic transformation of the countryside (of which I speak more in detail in chapter 2 of this thesis). With the creation of the INCORA (the Colombian Agrarian Reform Institute) through the law 135 of 1961—a governmental agency devoted to the parceling out of conflict-laden haciendas and unproductive large-estates—peasants' ownership of the land in San Miguel became generalized (see Franco García 2007:63–64). The redistribution of the land, however, followed the same indebting logic that had operated in the

1930s, which prevented campesinos from holding on to enough land to produce for commercial purposes.[24] As Araseli Salinas, a woman in her sixties who lives in the vereda of San Isidro, told me: "Maybe if we had bigger farms we could produce, produce to sell. But here, no, not here, because our farms are way too small. Each of us, we hardly have a tiny piece of land, just barely enough to survive."[25]

Whatever hopes campesinos from this region had of obtaining support from the government to expand or improve the production of their farms seem to have become frustrated in relation to the counter-reformist policies that began to unravel in the decade of the 1970s, and which involved a governmental shift toward privileging urban development, the mechanization of agriculture, and the cattle and dairy industries. This was achieved partly through withdrawing support toward small producers and encouraging the migration of peasants to cities (Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica 2016:175).[26] Following this logic, Lauchlin Currie, who was advising the presidency at

[24] As various authors have noted, the agrarian reforms of 1936 and 1961 did increase the number of small producers, minimally reducing the unequal distribution of the land, but left unaltered the structural conditions oppressing poor rural inhabitants (Ocampo 1987; LeGrand 1986; Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica 2016). About the first agrarian reform, which materialized in the law 200 of 1936, LeGrand notes that this law "intended to foster exploitation of the land. But the law contradicted the aim of breaking down latifundia [large unproductive estates], which constituted the keystone of agrarian reform. It did not address the problem of inequality in the distribution of landed property in Colombia" (1986:152). Researchers of the National Center of Historic Memory of Colombia support this statement, and make a similar reading of the law 135 of 1961 (the second agrarian reform); they note that, since the approval of this law took so many concessions to the elites, in its final version it was far from radical in its reach (2016:122). In other words, the policies and decrees that could unsettle the monopoly of hacendados and the maintenance of unproductive large estates were not put in practice, partly because the law included so many exceptions that the general rule was eventually contradicted (Ibid:124, 223). In consequence, historians Safford and Palacios would note that "Nearly forty years after the enactment of the [agrarian reform law of 1961], land in Colombia continues to be among the most concentrated in the world" (2002:309). By 2014, 1% of landowners in Colombia exploited 81% of the land (Guereña 2017).

[25] "*fincas grandes de pronto, que producieran, de pronto sí podrían vender así. Pero acá no, acá no porque son fincas muy pequeñas. Cada quien tiene apenas un pedacito poquito como para sobrevivir.*"

[26] It is important to note, however, that the decade of the 1970s saw the rise of an organized peasant movement; specifically, the radicalization of the National Association of Peasant Users—Asociación Nacional de Usuarios Campesinos, ANUC—, the formation of which had been buttressed by the

the time, famously argued for the need to "provide urban employment for rural workers" (1976:351). If development could reach the countryside, it was in spite of campesinos' permanence in it; if progress was available for campesinos, it was to be found in the growing cities of the country.[27]

It is within this context of national transformation, and within an official narrative pressing campesinos to move "forward," that Bogotá became the main center toward which the youth of San Miguel began to gravitate in the second half of the twentieth century. On a local scale, the continuous migration of the youth is also related to how the haciendas, which until the middle of the twentieth century had devoted most of the flat land to agriculture, began to transition toward the milk industry that was already prominent in neighboring cities, such as Ubaté.

government in the late-1960s looking to further the agrarian reform. With the counter-reformist shifts in governmental policy, ANUC continued to push and fight for the parceling of unproductive large estates and for the protection of colonists and of small producers (see Zamosc 1986). I should also note that in the decade of the 1970s there were several governmental policies aimed at fostering rural development (if not agrarian reform) in areas of minifundia (see Berry 2017:67-72). What I want to highlight with this, is that the shift in governmental policies did not simply put a stop to the search for social change that had been set in motion in previous decades, nor did it fully imply the government's abandonment of small producers. This being said, the abandonment of the agrarian reform did imply that the structural inequalities constraining the lives of campesinos remained largely unchanged. Moreover, as I explain in this chapter, the governmental narrative for which progress was intimately linked to urban development, which took special force in the 1970s, seems to have had a profound impact in the local history of San Miguel.

[27] "Currie's capitalist radicalism diagnosed, with implacable reasoning, that these people were not only unnecessary for the countryside, but were also an obstruction; that they not only barely survived in the eroded mountain lands of the country without finding as labor force its efficient economic use, but that they also impeded, through their desperate competition which was susceptible of reducing their income to the lowest limits, the full development of capitalism in the countryside" (Arrubla 1976:10). My translation of: "*El radicalismo capitalista de Currie diagnostica con razonamientos implacables que esta gente no sólo sobra en el campo sino que estorba, no sólo sobrevive precariamente en las laderas erosionadas del país sin encontrar como fuerza de trabajo su uso económico eficiente, sino que impide, en su competencia desesperada, susceptible de reducir su ingreso a límites bajísimos, el cabal desarrollo del capitalismo en el campo*."

Dairy farming began to take over the lands of San Miguel especially after 1953, when the construction of the road connecting this region with the cities of Ubaté and Chiquinquirá enabled the transportation of perishable goods (Franco García 2007:76). The milk industry expanded initially over the property of hacendados, on the flat land surrounding the lagoon of Fúquene that had previously been used to cultivate wheat, potato, peas (*arveja*) and *bola roja* beans, and which had continued to grow as the lagoon's water receded under private draining projects. Given the unresolved dependencies between haciendas and peasant farms, it became an essential source of income for campesinos. Paying jobs, however, became scarcer than in earlier times, since the milk industry did not require much manual labour, especially with the introduction of milking machines. The haciendas, in addition, tended to hire mostly men and, for the administration of their farms, hacendados preferred to hire married couples. In contrast to the first half of the twentieth century, in the second half it was significantly young woman, often single mothers, who were leaving Boyacá to work in the city, usually in the domestic sector.[28]

Many of those who continued to stay in San Miguel, all the while working for the haciendas, had begun to try to establish themselves as small producers of agricultural products such as blackberries, *uchuva* berries, and *bola roja* beans, but they soon dropped their agricultural projects to take care of their own cattle. The interest of dairy enterprises in the region enabled this transformation, as milk trucks started to transit the unpaved roads and to reach isolated rural areas. Inhabitants from San Miguel, however, do not remember this transition as a harnessing of new opportunities, but mainly as a series of disappointments. Since peasant agriculture largely revolved

[28] Regarding the region encompassing Boyacá and Cundinamarca, see Puyana V. and Orduz (1998); for a perspective at a national level, see Safford and Palacios (2002:303).

around the family, with the continuous migration of young campesinos it became necessary to hire workers in order to maintain productive farms, but the money invested in hired hands, seeds, fertilizers and fungicides, usually through loans, they did not manage to recuperate with the low prices established by intermediaries. When the weather damaged the crops, they could not rebuild their fields for another harvest, and even with favorable weather, the fluctuating prices established by intermediaries and the difficulty of finding manual laborers frustrated so many projects that campesinos simply stopped trying. Keeping a few milking cows, sometimes even just one, offered a more secure source of income—one that was becoming increasingly necessary since people were no longer able to produce enough food for self-consumption.[29] Given that peasant farms continue to be in their majority located on broken and isolated landscapes, campesinos often need to buy grass from large estates settled on the flat land to keep their milking cows and, in order to afford it, they work for daily wages, *al jornal*, in the haciendas. In these ways, campesinos from San Miguel still remain relatively dependent on the large properties of "the rich" that are settled on the flat land surrounding the lagoon.

All that territory, however, all that land that used to underlie the lagoon of Fúquene, is especially vulnerable to flooding—the lagoon, people say, "takes back her territory," *recupera su territorio*,

[29] Rural migration has motivated a turn from agriculture to milking all throughout the region encompassing the departamentos of Boyacá and Cundinamarca, given that milking requires less hired hands and less inputs than agriculture, while it offers a steady, if limited, income (Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica 2016:444–446). More generally, as Laura López noticed "between the silences and chocked words of the elderly" who talked with her about the loss of ancient potato seeds in Boyacá (2015:184), the relation between youth migration and the loss of agricultural practices is common throughout the region. I should note, however, that people living in the countryside still keep small gardens near their houses, where they tend to grow maize, beans, potato, and various kinds of vegetables for self-consumption. Their home-grown products are especially valued, but are not enough to live by. People therefore buy most of the food they consume in the urban center of San Miguel, Ráquira or in the city of Chiquinquirá, or to the trucks that travel to the farther veredas selling groceries.

with each rainy season. The flooding of the plateaus around the lagoon have been common at least since the early twentieth century (Flórez Malagón 2005:53), but people remember no inundation as devastating as that of 2006; that year, the heavy rains associated to the climatic phenomenon known as "La Niña" caused the lagoon to overflow and its waters reached the foot of the mountains, drowned the cattle, rotted the grass, and left campesinos without their main source of income. Some of them, those who kept their cattle in rented lots from the haciendas, lost their own cattle, and most of them lost their jobs. Those who attempted to rebuild their businesses, lost them again under three subsequent floods that took place between 2010 and 2012. In the years that followed, the migration of the youth intensified, and young campesinos were not only leaving to the city, looking for jobs, higher education and upward mobility, but also to work in nearby rural areas that had not been affected by the successive rainy seasons; in the ceramic factories of Ráquira, the onion industry of Aquitania, the coal mines of Guachetá, the flower industries of El Rosal.

In the meantime, the population of San Miguel has slowly aged, just like most of the countryside of Boyacá which, according to the last national agrarian census, has the highest rates of ageing in rural areas (DANE 2016:35). Today, inhabitants of San Miguel devote their days to milking cows and selling the raw milk—they sell it to trucks that, coming from nearby cities, stumble daily through the unpaved roads, offering the by-weekly pay with which most peasant families make it through the end of the month. Because of a lack of sources of paying jobs—other than those which large estates, few wealthy families, and the municipo's administration can sporadically offer—they depend on prices set by intermediaries to whom they also sell agraz berries, an acid and wild kind of Andean blueberries (*Vaccinium merdionale swartz*). Even though there are those who have

set up shop in town, those who weave wool or baskets of a local reed called *esparto*, and those who work in the tomato greenhouses of the neighboring town of Tinjacá, people say that, other than milking, and when the agraz berry season is spent, "there's nothing left to do," *no hay nada qué hacer*. And, once it is formulated, this nothingness quickly expands beyond the lack of labor diversity; no opportunities, no enterprises, no youth, no hired hands, no progress; no future. There's nothing to do, they seem to suggest, except for leaving—and staying, from within this formulation, is to stay "behind."

Unravelings

It is in tension with this narrative, charged with the experiential knowledge of this centennial history of migration, that people speak of amañarse: of "wanting to stay." In doing so, they don't precisely contradict the terms through which that history is told; the terms through which San Miguel, understood as left "behind," is deemed to be futureless. Those who, having become amañados to this place, have continued to stay, have also helped their children and grandchildren to leave in search for "a future"; in staying, some people claim to be the last inhabitants of the rural areas where they live (chapter 2); others claim that campesinos from this region are dying of loneliness and of sadness (chapter 3); and, in their observation of the many abandoned mud houses that are crumbling down, there are those who see the register of peasant life disappearing into the ground (chapter 4). The mention of amañarse does not speak against the sense that, as time moves forward, rural life in San Miguel seems to be reaching a kind of end. It does, however, release the speaker from the dynamic of argumentation. Amañarse, "wanting to stay," involves its own kind of truth; it is not up for debate. One cannot but trust, once a person claims it, that she has indeed become amañada to someone or somewhere.

And yet, just as there is something conclusive in the mention of amañarse, there is also something generative in its utterance; the enactment of a pause, one that slows down the rhythm of a conversation that already knows its own conclusions. Perhaps, in Kathleen Stewart's terms, it slows down "the quick jump to representational thinking" (2007:4)—a jump through which we easily fix an ever-emerging present life within a master narrative such as progress, or development (or, as Stewarts writes, "the five or seven or ten characteristics used to summarize and define […] in shorthand [the situation we find ourselves in]" (Ibid:1)). And within this pause, in the space otherwise missed through such a jump, there is room for something else to "unravel." This is the word that Edilma used as we continued to reflect about the meanings of amañarse; right after saying that amañarse is "about staying," she also described it as an "unraveling"; as the ability to unravel oneself, *poder desenvolverse*, in a particular place.

Being able, or skillful, is a meaning that lies at the root of amañarse; in the word *maña*. One of the meanings of maña is "skill," and, according to the Spanish Royal Academy (2014b), this word comes from the vulgar Latin word for "manual skill," ***mania*. Being skillful is also implied in one of the synonyms for amañarse: *darse maña*, which results in an awkward translation: "to give oneself *maña*"—to incorporate ("give oneself") a specific skill. You would say that you "give yourself maña" to do something difficult in particular, in order to express that you have found the trick to make something work; for example, the trick to open a difficult lock—and "trick" is another meaning people use for *maña*. And, while *darse maña* means that you have incorporated the skill that a certain thing requires, of that thing that requires *maña* you would say that "it has maña," *tiene mañita*. The word *maña*, then, can mean skill, trick or habit; accordingly, *darse maña*

is to incorporate some of the habits, some of the tricky ways of being of something or someone, in order to be able to relate to them. Indeed, the two meanings of amañarse I have addressed thus far—adapting or finding comfort, and darse maña—are reflexive: they speak of actions we take upon ourselves. And, taking into account that amañarse is always amañarse to something or someone, and that you always give yourself maña—incorporate the skill—to do something in particular, these are actions we take upon ourselves in relation to something that exceeds us; actions to change in relation to it. Thinking of both meanings together, and together with the ways in which amañarse is "about staying," maybe in this action we cultivate the skill to perform an "unraveling" of ourselves toward something or someone that we want to stay with.

Those who have continued to stay in the countryside of San Miguel, they speak of the practices through which they make such staying possible with this vocabulary. In the case of milking, Doña Inés says that amañarse is about "relaxing," *relajarse*: about learning how to relax one's muscles while also exerting the pressure necessary to get a stable flow of milk from the cow's teats to the bucket. This relaxation, it is also a kind of bodily attention; identifying the cow's need for strength, or for gentleness, pulling at her in ways that are also forms of reception—of incorporating the mañas that each cow both has and requires. Agraz berry picking is also about learning mañas. Since people have not yet found a way to cultivate agraz bushes, these are still growing in the scrublands of the mountain land "by themselves"; in order to pick agraz berries, people therefore have to observe the mañas of the bushes, taking long walks through uneven paths from which they often come back empty-handed, and adapt to each of their particular rhythms. And it is by alternating between these practices, between milking and picking agraz, that campesinos manage to sustain, if only precariously, their lives in the countryside: the money gathered from the milk

sold is almost entirely reinvested in the cattle, some of the milk is kept for self-consumption, and the little cash left is added to that gathered through picking agraz or from working a few days for the haciendas. This is, in other words, how they are able to amañarse in the sense of incorporating (giving themselves) the mañas—the habits, the tricks, the skills—necessary to stay: how they render a delimited space, both economically and geographically constrained, continuously inhabitable.

"You have to write this down, Mónica: people from Boyacá are full of deep-seated habits, and their mañas have stuck with el Paisa," *tiene que anotar esto, Mónica: el boyacense es muy resabiado, y al Paisa se le pegaron las mañas*.

We were speaking about his and Claudia's life together building their store, that day when el Paisa said these words; he was explaining to me why, in this corner store that is known as "a bakery," they sell all kinds of products, ranging from toothbrushes to chicken to brooms; at one point, they even sold furniture. With the mañas he mentioned, he was speaking of the ways in which owners of stores in the urban center of San Miguel, most of whom come from the rural areas of this municipio, are constantly listening to what people need or want, looking to stay afloat within an unstable economy, and changing in relation to their needs and desires. As a result, most businesses in town are packed with such a variety of products and practices that they exceed a definition: there is another "bakery" that is also a hairdressing salon, a "clothing store" doubles as a drinking spot, the woman who used to run the mail made uniforms for children, the kindergarten teacher makes cheese and rents the first floor of her house. The space of businesses and for people's lives do not expand, they rather diversify from within—and they do this so often, so quickly, that it is

difficult to keep track. I once tried to map Claudia and el Paisa's store in my notebook, but my sketch was not accurate within a month; new products appeared, cabinets moved around, and their quotidian choreography adapted to the new arrangement. If amañarse is an unraveling of oneself in relation to that which one wants to stay with, that which we move toward also changes in this process.

And this too is contained in the thick vocabulary that is condensed within amañarse. For example, when you say that something—say, a survey—is *amañada*, it means that it has been corrupted; that it has changed in relation to someone's desire. Despite the moral valence implied in this way of speaking of amañarse, it further shows that this action implies a movement between the lines of the official way of doing things. Along these lines, "amañarse" can also mean to live in concubinage, in *concubinato*— "in sin" with a partner. Amañarse, then, is not only about staying, not only about learning to unravel, to change in relation to a place in such a way that it becomes inhabitable; it is also about making a life in ways that sneak between the official, the expected ways of relating to each other and to the worlds we inhabit. It is about making a life driven by a want to "stay with," by a desire that cannot be easily explained within an official narrative encouraging us to move "forward" —except, that is, through the dense vocabulary of amañarse, of this weighty yet sneaky verb that, just like the Puerto Rican word *bregar*, as writer Arcadio Díaz Quiñones understands it (a word that condenses meanings ranging from "working," to "struggling," to "kneading"), helps to see "how a place is constituted, at once elusive and specific, where the subject is able to speak" (2000:13).[30]

[30] My translation of "*cómo se constituye el lugar, a la vez elusivo y específico, en el que el sujeto es capaz de tomar la palabra*". Díaz Quiñones's profound literary exploration into "the art" of *bregar* showed me the possibility of following the intricate vocabularies and histories condensed within a single word, and the way it is deployed in a world marked by migration and instability, as a way to become attuned with how

Perhaps because of the multiple meanings condensed within amañarse, this word is so difficult to explain for Spanish speakers; it's as though we mainly had a feel for its meaning. Yet it seems that its emplacing power relies precisely in this convoluted nature that cannot be easily explained away: with all its related meanings, in the mention of amañarse one's desire (wanting to stay) becomes consubstantial with the unraveling of a way to be in place (incorporating its mañas in a mutual transformation), and also with the constitution of such a place where one wants to stay (a place that, through amañarse, is rendered inhabitable). There is something holistic about amañarse, a constellation that can be expressed with one single breath in such a way that it holds desires and practices and places together, all lodged within a single word that allows for no clear means and ends; it is a way of speaking, of being together and emplaced, and of giving continuity to a place, that does not follow a linear temporality. The mention of this word pauses speech and also clocks; the capitalist clock time along with the modern rationality that have led to the paradoxical formulation according to which, in the name of progress, *campesinos* (understood plainly as "rural workers") should let go of their lives in the countryside. Because there is no moving forward, in the performance of amañarse; there is no staying behind.

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people manage to act and to speak, and to thus find relief, within extremely constrained conditions of life. His essay became a central inspiration for this chapter, and, as I delved into the workings of *amañarse*, the similarities between the use of this word and that of *bregar* continuously surprised me. *Bregar*, Díaz Quiñones writes, could be understood as "another order of knowledge, a diffuse and modest method for navigating an everyday life where everything is extremely precarious, changing or violent" (2000:20). It allows for subtle yet pivotal actions to go unnoticed, to take place without confrontation, and it shifts the course of conversations, enabling a relation between "that which at the moment seemed distant or incompatible" (Ibid:22). *Bregar*, says Díaz Quiñones, "has its own truth" (Ibid:23), and it makes equal room for both reason and desire (Ibid:24). It is deeply inscribed and shaped by the remnants of a colonial history (Ibid:27) and yet, just like amañarse, it makes room for hopeful uncertainties (Ibid:32).

It thus seems perfectly fitting that, in yet another formulation of amañarse, when you say that you are "making maña," *haciendo mañita*, it means that you are "killing time"—another way we would say this in Spanish is "burning time," *quemando el tiempo*; giving continuance to a moment that has no purpose, no meaning, no point other than being there, for a little while longer. This is how the afternoon reaches us, Claudia and I, as we drink coffee in her store in the quiet of San Miguel's middays; this is what we were doing, that day with Doña Inés when we spoke of amañarse. In those moments, there was nothing to do—nothing, except for leaving, some would say—but, amañadas nonetheless, making our own purposeless maña, we were able to hold on to the sweet uneventfulness. It was just like Luis Alberto Suárez described it, in an essay about the fruitful fallings of the mountainous world of the Andes; mañas, he writes, are the "stubbornness of a life that rejoices at itself," *empecinamientos de la vida que se regocija en sí misma* (2019b:7).

And there certainly is pleasure in amañarse. It is a kind of pleasure that comes, however, from learning how to ease into something difficult. Remember that amañarse, in each of its formulations, is about learning how to make something difficult work; just like learning how to open a tricky lock, amañarse in San Miguel is about easing into structural constraints that, as far as history has shown, are not going to change in the near future. And that near future, it cannot be taken for granted—not within the communal sense that San Miguel, a place "behind," becomes unreachable if one continues moving forward. While amañarse, this way of being in place and with each other, this way of telling the story of such *staying with*, offers a relief from the progressive narrative that renders San Miguel futureless, it also brings our attention to the difficulty and the pain implied in inhabiting a world that falls out of its prescriptive rhythms and temporality.

An exact lament

Doña Joaquina was lying in bed. That day in November of 2017, she was feeling sick. We were in her home, in the urban center of San Miguel. From the window, I could see the house where she grew up; she told me to look at it, but her eyes were fixated on the ceilings. At eighty-five, she was recalling what it was like to live and work there, sometime around the 1940s. In that time, San Miguel had yet to become a milking town and Doña Joaquina's family, just like most families in the region, devoted their days to subsistence agriculture. In some ways, however, the situation of her family was uncommon; her father was one of the campesinos who managed to buy his own land before the 1960s. Perhaps this is why he did not stay in northern Tolima, even though he lived there for a while; perhaps this is why they were able to afford tens of workers to help with the maintenance of their ample maize crops, or maybe it was because, as Doña Joaquina faintly remembers, her father sometimes managed to sell cows. But she remembers there being no money, other than that which she and her sisters gathered from selling wool in the market of Chiquinquirá. Despite the hired workers, who were mainly neighbors and members of their extended family, she remembers that her entire family "worked ferociously," *acá se trabajaba ferozmente*.

"Yes, there was a lot to eat," *sí, eso era mucho comer*, Doña Joaquina said, remembering the potatoes, pumpkins, broad beans (habas), *bola roja* beans, peas, turnips, onions, carrots, coriander, barley, and maize, so much maize, that grew on their lands. There was a lot to eat, and there was still a lot of people too—entire families lived and worked together to sustain their farms. It was, in a sense, a time of abundance, "but it screwed you up a lot, too," Doña Joaquina said, *pero mucho*

lo friegan a uno. She and her siblings worked since they were able to walk and, along with her sisters, she had to grind maize daily with a stone, well before the arrival of mills, in order to make food and drinks for the family and for the workers. Doña Joaquina passed her fingers through the edges of her callused hands: "It was… blood oozed from our fingertips, and here, in our hands, here. It was like that; we were covered in blisters. It was with a stone! It wasn't with a machine, or so many things, no; it was suffering. Yes." *Eso era, que uno brotaba sangre de las yemas de los dedos y de esto, así las manos, aquí. Eso era así, se volvía cada vejiga, ¡eso era en piedra! No era en máquina ni era con tanta cosa, sino eso era sufriendo. Sí.*

Doña Joaquina also retains in her body the memory of muddy and bloody feet. The roads connecting peasant farms to other towns or markets were narrow, long and difficult. She had to walk long hours to Chiquinquirá; four to get there, four to get back. When the day was clear, the intense sun exhausted her; when it was rainy, her *alpargatas*, a kind of espadrilles, would get stuck in the mud of the unpaved roads, and her feet would bleed as she stumbled through stones. When she got back home, having sold threaded wool in the market and bought sheep's skin to thread some more, she sometimes had to stay up all night, feeding the fire where the maize soup, the *mute*, for the breakfast of the workers was slowly cooking. She remembers she and her sisters would sing throughout the night, trying to stay awake. She forgot the songs they sang because she hasn't sung in a very long time.

Still, she tried to remember, and, as she pushed her memory, something else came to mind; a different song, one that she heard a little while back. It is a song, she said, that "describes exactly what we suffered," *igualito como sufríamos*. That day, however, Doña Joaquina could not

remember the name and, seeing her tired and frail, I soon left to let her rest. It was only a few weeks later, when I came back to visit, that, with the help of her daughter, she was able to place the song that had been on her mind. It is called *Camino de herradura*, "Bridle Path," written by Los Filipichines, a group of musicians from the neighboring town of Tinjacá. This later day, Doña Joaquina was feeling better; she was sitting in the kitchen while her daughter and son-in-law cooked lunch. Her daughter encouraged her to sing the song to us but, since she refused, we started looking for it on my phone. We eventually found it, and we played it out loud.

The rhythm of the song, a *merengue campesino*, is fast and upbeat, it's the kind of music that provokes dancing. The lyrics, in contrast, describe a nostalgic contemplation. They speak about a man from Tinjacá who "left to look for a better life," *a buscar vida mejor*, and who comes back "only to remember," *solamente a recordar*, the suffering he endured as a campesino walking that path that no longer exists. The song describes a tough life, and it really does describe it "exactly" as Doña Joaquina had chosen to narrate it: it sings of the exhausting sun, the rain and the muddy paths, the hurt feet, the narrow roads, the daily peasant fatigue. It also conveys, however, a lament for the loss of a way of life. This might be why, as we listened, it brought tears to Doña Joaquina's eyes. That lament, in other words, also seemed to be exact:

Lonely houses weep, there is no heat,
Many died of abandonment and loneliness.
Those of us who left looking for a better life,
We now come back, but only to remember.
Lloran los ranchos solitarios, no hay calor
Muchos murieron de abandono y soledad,

Los que nos fuimos a buscar vida mejor,

Hoy regresamos solamente a recordar.

Starting with a mumble, Doña Joaquina began to recite the lyrics. But soon, her mumble turned into song; Doña Joaquina was singing along, with a rusty, powerful voice. And, once she started singing, she didn't want to stop. She sang songs that she remembered hearing as a child in the market of Chiquinquirá, songs that she learned from women who came from Santander to visit that city's church; she sang songs that she learned when she sang with the choir of the church of Tinjacá; she sang songs that she simply liked singing; she sang scattered verses of songs that she only distantly remembered. It was as if her voice was reaching out to memories that she had until then been unable to utter, unable to say except sustained by resonances that came to her as a shared lament—a kind of company that allowed for the expression of a bittersweet longing that could now, finally, *take place*.[31]

Tiple Viejo (a song for staying)

I was thinking about Doña Joaquina's rusty voice, about Edilma's thoughtful definitions of amañarse, and about that question that Claudia tends to ask me in quiet middays, when I came across a song that seems to bring them all together. It is an unpublished song about a twelve-string instrument that always accompanies peasant music from the Colombian Andes: a *tiple*. The song

[31] My way of thinking about this moment with Doña Joaquina draws inspiration from Lisa Stevenson's conception of *song*, understood as a way to seek the other with one's voice "as company, as a presence"(2014:163), and especially from her suggestion that, in listening to a song thus sung, we can find ourselves in restoring company with others (Ibid:154-155, 157). I am also thinking of her attention to how songs themselves can be understood as companions (Stevenson 2017:66).
In this instance, I am also echoing a moment in Stefania Pandolfo's "Testimony in Counterpoint" (2018) when, writing "at the margins" of the story of a woman, Amina, who speaks of herself as having being "absent" to her own experience of madness and abandonment, she attends to this woman's singing and describes how the absence and the agony that pain her can finally ""take place" through her song" (Ibid:74).

is called "*Tiple Viejo*" (Old Tiple), and it was first played live in the radio program "*Canta el Pueblo*" (The People Sing), which was broadcasted live from Chiquinquirá once a week at the beginning of the 1980s. The program was headed by the music group Los Carrangueros de Ráquira. Their name, "*los carrangueros*," makes reference to the practice of selling the meat of animals who died of old age, and suggests that the musicians were taking back for life a music that they felt to be dying: *la música campesina*, the music of campesinos and of the countryside. In one section of the program, Los Carrangueros would ask campesinos to send original verses, a local kind of verses called coplas, they would read those sent to them in handwritten letters during the week, and they would turn a few of them into song at the pace of different rhythms of peasant music from the region of the Andes. "Tiple Viejo" was one of those songs that were created for the moment, with original verses sent by Abraham Forero, a truck driver and poet who would often send his poems to the program (Velosa 2013:123).

Jorge Velosa, the lead singer of Los Carrangueros and a poet himself, would later become friends with Forero, and in 1981 he wrote an article about his life entitled "Don Abraham Forero, Poeta" (1981). There, he gives ample room for Forero to narrate his own story; he speaks of his childhood in the rural municipio of Lenguazaque (Cundinamarca), his escape to Bogotá as a ten-year-old avoiding an announced beating from his elders, his job as a child for a baker in the city, as a teenager growing potatoes in Tolima, as a soldier during *La Violencia*, with the police after the war. He speaks of how he gathered the money to buy his beloved truck, "*La Molleja,*" of his travels around the country transporting coal and cane—of how, for him, writing poems is something like driving his truck and going in reverse, following and going back to the idea of a verse, "*darle pa'delante y p'atrás*" (in Velosa 1981:7). Forero also speaks about his fascination with the

anonymous coplas he learned as a child, and with the dictionary, the only book he owned at the time. In the end, he speaks of his home in the city of Chía, near Bogotá, where he finally settled down. By the middle of the 1990s, Forero had already published four books (see, for instance, Forero Rodríguez 1992), and hundreds of poems about his life as a campesino. The first he ever made public, however, was that poem about an old tiple that, in the program Canta el Pueblo, the 11th of October of 1980, Los Carrangueros brought into song.

Los Carrangueros sang the verses of Tiple Viejo at the pace of a melancholic *guabina*, a derivation of the European waltz, traditional to the Colombian Andes, that tends to be played with a tiple, among other string instruments. I heard the song in a tape recording of the program made by the family of one of the group's members, the late Javier Moreno, and lent for safekeeping to my partner, Marco, who is also a musician. Slowly, sometimes dragging its vocals through various notes, the song sings:

Necesito un tiple viejo	I need an old tiple
De Don Jeremías Padilla	Made by Don Jeremías Padilla
Necesito un tiple viejo	I need an old tiple
De Don Jeremías Padilla	Made by Don Jeremías Padilla
Quien lo tenga en san alejo	Whoever has it in storage
Lo cambio por mi costilla	I will exchange it for my rib
Quien lo tenga en san alejo	Whoever has it in storage
Lo cambio por mi costilla	I will exchange it for my rib
[…]	[…]
A ver si nos damos maña	To see if we can give ourselves the maña
A ver si vuelve la vida	To see if life returns
A ver si nos damos maña	To see if we can give ourselves the maña
A ver si vuelve la vida	To see if life returns

Llamándola con recuerdos	We will call for it with memories
Al son de música antigua	To the sound of ancient music
Llamándola con recuerdos	We will call for it with memories
Al son de música antigua	To the sound of ancient music

There is a visceral request in this song, a man willing to give his own rib[32] in exchange for a string instrument, a tiple, made by Jeremías Padilla—a Colombian luthier who lived in Bogotá in the first decades of the 1900s and made the most famous tiples of his time, and some of the oldest ones still in circulation (Matallana Castellanos 2017:25–36). The man in the song, as he repeatedly sings, is thus asking for an old tiple, perhaps the oldest tiple—a kind of tiple, in any case, that might make life return. It might and it might not; this is something that we—a "we" that the song calls into being—will be looking to see, if we ever get a hold of that old tiple. If we do, we will first have to see whether we'll be able to give ourselves (to incorporate) the maña necessary to play that instrument, to evoke memories to the sound of ancient music. In light of the meanings of amañarse, maybe the question is whether we'll be skillful enough to perform an unraveling of ourselves towards a life that feels out of reach. What we know, for now, is that we need the tiple just so that we can ask this question, and that we need it badly. With the song, a "we" comes into being that calls for the need to make the past available to our senses (the hold of that old tiple, the rhythms of ancient music, the sound of our memories), probably a rural past (the life of the poet

[32] "My rib" is also an expression used to say "my wife"—so it might be that this man is willing to give his own wife in exchange for this old tiple, willing to make a vital sacrifice (life for life). Or perhaps the bone itself, the rib, having this biblical association with the creation of a partner (of company), could here be taken as a necessary exchange to "bring life back." As my supervisor Eduardo Kohn noticed when he read a draft of this chapter, the word *tiple* also has a resonance with the Spanish word for "gut," *tripa*, which is the material with which the strings of instruments used to be made. All of these possible associations give a sense of how the instrument that is here in question is not only needed viscerally (almost as a bodily part) but also requires a part of the body; just as it happens with *mañas* and *amañarse*, both the life of a tiple and the life that a tiple can restore seem to take shape in a mutual incorporation that blurs the boundaries between ourselves and our others; a mutual unraveling through which we become a part of one another.

in the countryside, the Andean peasant music that feels to be fainting and that is always accompanied by a tiple)—a kind of past that will allow us to ask, in a kind of experiment, with nothing but a hypothesis, if we can draw life back to us.

But isn't the song already bringing the textures of rural life into our present, as it calls for a tiple over the strumming of a tiple, as it asks for the rhythms of ancient music to the sound of ancient music? Is it not taking on the materials of the past, performing its own request? Is it not, to paraphrase Stanley Cavell, a language that matches our needs (2002:114)? Perhaps, in the occurrence of darse maña and amañarse, this is what the transformation we take upon ourselves is about; a "becoming-with" (Haraway 2016) a thing or a place or a person that we want to stay with, in such a way that as we approach each other, without even knowing the result of our encounter, we become a part of one another.[33] The encounter to which we could arrive through such approach would thus be something like a return; a coming 'back' to ourselves, since we are constituted by the other we are approaching. Perhaps this is what the return of life, about which the song wants to inquire, consists of.

I wonder, as I re-listen the song, as I re-read its lyrics, what kind of relation it proposes with the past, why does this person need the materials of the past to perform this movement that might move life back to us, back within that freshly summoned "us." It occurs to me that, in part, what the song convokes is not simply a shared life. Rather, it is convoking the possibility of life in the countryside, a peasant life, *una vida campesina* which seems to be out of reach in the present,

[33] This idea also resonates with Stevenson's words when she writes: "It seems that to sing a song—to be moved by a song—is to participate in, draw close to oneself, a being beyond oneself" (2017:67).

which seems to be in the past—at least in the terms of the narrative of progress, but also in the narrative of the migrant. This is a kind of life, then, that cannot come into being by moving forward, towards a future that seems to have become unavailable in places like San Miguel: it requires us to perform a different narrative in which neither the past nor the future are to be looked at from a distance. The past, in amañarse, as the song brings into view, is in a way taking shape as we approach each other, allowing ourselves to be affected, to be transformed by that which we are looking to encounter, again even if for the very first time, already bearing the marks of a shared history. At the same time, in our unraveling, we are asking: "will life come back?" There is something we are looking to see, *a ver si vuelve la vida*, there is an opening: there is an incipient future. To borrow the words of Judith Butler, there is the petition of a future "always in relation to the Other" (2004:46).

I close this chapter with this opening, and with this petition. It is a request that, in different narrative forms, will continue coming back to us in the following pages of this thesis—just like the verses of this song, which repeat themselves, just like that question that Claudia asks me time and again, at noon, in San Miguel.

¿Y usted sí se amaña por acá?


Camino a San Isidro
Otra casa abandonada
De tejas metálicas oxidadas
Lunes 19 de Junio 2017
propiedad privada
no hay luz (ni calor)
la luz

2. It takes you back (re-signation)

The last inhabitants of San Isidro

I took a right when I saw the wooden cross Doña Araseli had described to me over the phone, and an old house so long abandoned no one I know remembers who ever lived there. It was a forty-minute walk up and down an uneven path, at the heart of the vereda of San Isidro. It was a lonely walk too, passing by empty houses and lots. In a hill, to my left, there was Doña Araseli standing outside of her house, so I could see her. She greeted me in her garden of *papayuela* trees and orange flowered marmalade bushes. I thought it was beautiful, I told her, she said it used to be prettier when her daughters were around to help cut the grass, before they all moved out to live in the urban centers of San Miguel and Ráquira. Her grandchildren ran around us, playing with improvised bows and arrows, on a short stay with their grandparents while on a break from school. As we walked inside, to the kitchen, Doña Araseli brought into narrative those vacant farms I had noticed on my walk:

> There was plenty of people in this vereda, plenty of people, and now, well, from one moment to the next people didn't feel satisfied [*conforme*] anymore, they suddenly thought that they had found a better life, that maybe they didn't have to work so much and get better money and they started emigrating to other places, maybe sometimes for money, others for health; they left and they started to leave, and now, here, in this region, there are many homes left alone, and in others maybe there's one eighty-year-

> old man with, maybe a daughter that stayed, or with a seventy-year-old wife, and that's sort of what you find here in this region. [34]

"They left and they started to leave," Doña Araseli said: it was not through a sudden wave of migration that young people left this region, it has rather been a gradual process, as it usually is in Colombia's history of rural migration—gradual but relentless, of no clear beginnings and no foreseeable ends. Now, Doña Araseli told me, there are just a few young people around, but they usually work in rural areas of other towns; in Tinjacá or in Chiquinquirá. They only eat and sleep here, and their parents have to manage on their own throughout the day. "It's the same," she said, as living alone, and "it's the same" in each household of this vereda. Pointing toward houses hidden along the mountainous landscape, she continued to map the shape that the absence of the youth, an unsatisfied youth, has taken around her:

> There are only two people here, and, over there, our neighbors, it's just two persons, and now everywhere it's just… there, on the other side, it's another two persons and that's it. And over there, those who live there, they're around our age, and it's just the two of them, the same thing, because their children work near Chiquinquirá in the haciendas. […] And, as the story goes, a bit farther that way there is another, an old man. And, over there, it's the same thing; next to the school […] there's a man who lives alone. And in the next house, walking down, another two people in their eighties and their seventies. A woman and a man. Further down, a father with his

[34] *"[…] es bastante gente la que existía acá en esta vereda, bastante gente, y ya pues, de un momento a otro ya, la gente no se sintió conforme, ya pensaron que encontraron vida mejor, que de pronto no trabajar tanto y conseguir mejor dinero y empezaron a emigrar para otros lados, que unos a, a de pronto que por plata, que otros por bienestar; se fueron y ya fueron dejando y ya por acá por la región ya hay muchas viviendas que quedaron solas, y otras por lo menos apenas hay un señor por ahí de ochenta y por ahí con un, de pronto una hija que se quedó por ahí, o con la esposa de unos setenta, y así más o menos es lo que ya se encuentra aquí en esta región."*

> daughter, the father is around ninety years old and the daughter must be around forty or fifty, and it's just the two of them alone. And so it goes on, everyone from around here, there's practically only old people, and just one or two. One or two in each home.[35]

Doña Araseli has a good sense of why things have gotten to this point, to this end of sorts, where she feels, as she often tells her daughters, that she and her neighbors might be the last inhabitants of this vereda ("These lands where we live," she said that morning, "in a few years, if we die, if all of us who live here were to die or if some circumstance forced us to leave, then who's going to come back to them?"). [36] From her own experience, she has developed a vision and a critique of the broader national scene ("you get to know what's good and what's bad when you've lived through it," *ya sabe uno qué es bueno y qué es malo porque lo ha vivido*), and her view is that the solitude of this vereda is the product of a series of related factors: a lack of support from the government toward small producers,

> …because there is no help, I mean, as the story goes, if the government helped to maybe cheapen agricultural inputs so that we could work, that would be good.[37]

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[35] *"Ya no son sino dos personas acá, ya, allí, los vecinos, dos personas, y en todo lado ya... son, ahí al otro lado, son otras dos personas no más. Ahí del lado de allá, los que viven, pues son igual de más o menos de la edad de nosotros, y solos, lo mismo, porque los hijos trabajan para cerquita de Chiquinquirá, por ahí en las haciendas. Todos por allá. Y, dijo el cuento, entonces prácticamente por allá, ahí más allacito vive otro, otro viejito solo y, bueno, por allí por el otro lado lo mismo, por el lado de la escuela, para acá, por ese lado también prácticamente, aquí a la parte de arriba, vive un señor solo, más sigue para abajo otros dos señores que ya están de ochenta y setenta años. Una señora y un señor. Más abajito, el papá y una hija, que el papá tiene como noventa años y la hija tiene por ahí como unos cuarenta o cincuenta años, los dos solitos, y sigue así, toda esa gente acá, prácticamente no hay sino ya viejitos, y ya uno o dos. Uno o dos en cada vivienda."*

[36] *"Es como estas tierras donde uno vive, yo así digo, en unos, por ejemplo, en unos años si se, que se muera, ya nos muramos nosotros los que vivimos acá, o cualquier circunstancia lo obligue a uno a irse, y eso ya, quién, quién va a esto."*

[37] *"Porque no hay ayuda, pues, dijo el dicho, el gobierno ayudara de pronto en, a bajarle, a que se abarataran los insumos pa' poder trabajar uno, sería bueno."*

Young people's frustration with working so hard to get nothing more than food,

> …and then people would say, wait! Why am I killing myself here? What am I killing myself for? Just to be able to eat.[38]

The sense that there is a better life somewhere else,

> …and, worst of all, when people who had left came back, and they were so pretty, so well-dressed, they had good clothing […] and hands without so much suffering of, of being covered in blisters…[39]

And the fact that public education in rural areas discourages children from learning their parents' forms of work,

> That's the problem, that [the teachers] say: no, if the kid's studying, if the kid is this or that, he has no business helping his father work […] But I don't think it's wrong to teach them to work and to be with us. The thing is, for example, that if they have a cow, they should learn how to milk it, that if there's a garden, they should know how to sow a plant.[40]

But, beneath this entanglement of causes, Doña Araseli senses that at the root of this problem, of the migration of the youth, is the fact that, here, "there's no resignation anymore," *no hay resignación ya*:

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[38] *"entonces pues la gente ya decía, ¡no! ¿yo por qué me estoy matando aquí? ¿Me estoy matando por qué? Por, solamente por comer"*

[39] *"y lo peor de todo era que cuando la gente que se había ido venía, y venían bien bonitos, bien vestidos, y ya venían con buena ropita…y las manitas sin tanto sufrimiento de, de estar todas llenas de ampollas, ni nada de eso"*

[40] *"…ese es el problema de que, como, ah no, que si el niño está estudiando o que si el niño no sé qué, no tiene por qué estar ayudándole al papá a trabajar. No, que el niño no tiene que estar con los papás trabajando. […] Pero yo no me parece que sea malo enseñarlos a trabajar y que estén con uno. Es que, cuando, por ejemplo: que si tienen una vaca, que aprendan a ordeñarla, que si hay una huertica, que aprendan a sembrar una mata…"*

> Now, no one wants to live, not badly, but, maybe with more restrictions, you know? No one wants to live that. No, now, it has to be more than enough […] And [in the countryside] that's the reality, because money, real money, it can't give you that. It's barely enough to pass the day. To pass the day, and you have to resign yourself [*resignarse uno*]. Be resigned [*ser resignado*]. A person, to live in the countryside, I'm telling you, she has to be resigned. If we can have a feast with good food and good clothes, great, but when we can't, well just tighten your belt, the saying goes, and endure [*aguantar*] with what you've got. And that's the law of the countryside. […] You have to adapt to that.[41]

Later that same morning, Doña Araseli's husband, Don Lucio, came back from feeding the cattle, and, as we sat around the table to have breakfast together, I asked them both to tell me more about what this "law of the countryside" meant to them. It's about patience, Doña Araseli said, "the resignation of waiting, of knowing that the time of a good harvest will come." This is a knowledge that you gain through nurturing your crops, she explained: if you plant a maize plant, for example, you see it grow, you see it dry under the sun, you see it suffer during a hailstorm, and you know what to expect, and you learn how to adapt. Don Lucio described resignation in terms of hope, "hope that if things are difficult now, it will get better. You have to wait for the harvest and enjoy it […] with the hope that something good will come out. And, if it doesn't, well you resign yourself and wait for the next." The countryside will not give you the means to become rich, but it will give

[41] *"Ya nadies quiere vivir, como, no mal, sino de pronto con más restricciones ¿no? No lo quiere vivir nadies. No, sino ya, sobradamente toca. Y es la realidad, porque eso sí, dinero, dinero, que dé, no. Apenas da pa' pasar uno el día. Para pasar el día, y pues resignarse uno. Ser resignado. Una persona para vivir en el campo, le digo que debe ser es resignado, que cuando haiga como para festejar con buena comida y con buen vestuario, bien, y cuando no, pues toca apretar, dijo el dicho, y aguantarse con lo que alcance. Y esa es la ley del campo. Cuando haiga, bien, y cuando no, pues también, dijo el cuento. Adaptarse uno a eso."*

you the means to live, Don Lucio said, and Doña Araseli added, "you resign yourself to have a life in the countryside." "Only by resigning yourself," they both agreed, "you can move on," *usted resignándose puede seguir*.

Don Lucio soon got back to work, I started picking up the dishes, and, as Doña Araseli began to wash them, she brought back our conversation to where it had begun:

> With my brother […], we sometimes spend time together, we talk to each other, and I tell him "but can you see how this region used to be, and now in that house over there, so many people lived in that house, so many people, and today… where are they all?" Those who didn't die here left, and, as the story goes, they forgot about us and we forgot about them. But we see the houses, or the farms that were left alone, and we say, "Ah! So many people use to live there and all those people… they all disappeared. We're the only resigned and foolish ones who stayed!"[42]

She laughed with those last words. I asked her how the loneliness she was describing was also a shared experience, thinking about her and her brother contemplating, together, the deserted landscape, but before I finished voicing my question her fluent narrative had already continued its own course:

> So, yes, we sometimes start analyzing things and say, "Yes, in that house there were this many people… and now that house has been left alone. And over there, this many

[42] *"yo a veces con mi hermano, así a veces con […] pue' a veces compartimos y nos hablamos y así le dijo yo, le digo "pero sí ve cómo era esta región y allí aquella casa, cuánta gente había en aquella otra casa, tanta gente, y hoy día ¿dónde está esa gente?" Toda los que no, dijo el cuento, los que no se murieron acá se fueron a otros sitios y, por allá, dijo el cuento, sin más ni menos, ya nosotros, dijo el cuento, ya ni ellos se acordaron de nosotros ni nosotros de ellos. Pero vemos las casitas o, esto, los ranchitos que quedaron ahí, dice uno "¡ah! Si de tanta que había ahí y toda esa gente ya, toda desapareció por acá, ¡nosotros hemos sido los únicos resignados y pendejos que nos hemos quedado por acá!"*

people…" And then, one day someone said that there were forty people, forty inhabitants in this vereda of San Isidro, and I said, "But where are those forty homes?" I said, "Forty?" I mean, again, yes, maybe there are forty people in total, but it's just one of them in each home, no more." [43]

Re-signation

I want to think of Doña Araseli's understanding of resignation alongside her gesture of pointing toward the empty houses that surround her, of situating on the landscape the register of the departure of those who have left, forgetting and forgotten ("they forgot about us and we forgot about them"), but not without leaving a mark. The separate etymology of the components of the word re-signation almost suggest this relationship; "RE- + *signāre* SIGN" (Hoad 1996:400), where "*re*" denotes a return, and "*signāre*" the gesture of signaling something or marking something with a sign. [44] In that conversation between Doña Araseli and her brother, and in my conversation with her, she performs a return when she signals the marks of the past on the landscape ("but we see

[43] *"Sí, así nosotros a veces nos ponemos a analizar, decimos, "sí, allá en esa casa vivían tantos, juepucha, y ahorita se quedó esa casa sola. Y aquí tantos…" y que dicen que… un día que se ofrecían que decían que habían cuarenta personas, habitantes aquí en la vereda de San Isidro. Dije yo, "pero ¿a'ónde están esos cuarenta hogares, cuarenta esto?", dije yo, ¿cuarenta?, pero vuelvo y digo que sí pueden haber cuarenta personas en cada casa una y dos, pero de allá más no".*

[44] Resignation, both in English and in Spanish, comes from the Latin *resignāre*, which can mean "unseal," "cancel," or "give up" (Corominas and Pascual 1983:210). As we know, its current meaning is related to surrender, to the acceptance of something unpleasant, and also to the renunciation of a benefit, be it religious or otherwise. I am not here suggesting, then, that this word carries the meaning of "returning and signaling," or that the idea of this kind of action is at the origin of this word (although the renunciation that resignation involves can be understood as a return; "returning or canceling a privilege," *devolver o anular un privilegio*, or "handing back a right that one previously possessed," *entregar un derecho que se tenia* (Treviño Rodríguez n.d.)). I should also note that a proper etymological exploration certainly escapes by abilities and the scope of this thesis. My intention is simply to point out that there is a coincidence between the components of this word and the workings of resignation (which I will describe more clearly in the course of this chapter); that the way this word is deployed in the world, the kind of movement that it motivates, is somehow already present in the word itself. I am interested in how this makes it malleable as a concept that can thus help us re-read the realities it has been historically used to describe.

the houses"), guiding our gaze to touch the memory of an old history of rural migration and of governmental neglect that is still shaping her life and this place, where she continually chooses to stay.

The word "resignation" is also a part of that history, it is a constituent part of how campesinos were represented before the 1970s within the modernizing framework that interpreted their ways of life as "backwards," and which still nurtures the sense that places like San Miguel have been left "behind." Social scientists and politicians writing before this decade described resignation as part of a passive attitude that hindered the ability of indigenous peoples and of campesinos to enter the path of progress, and which therefore posed a threat to the development of the nation. Following this logic, it had to be corrected. When I hear the word "resignation" in Doña Araseli's narrative, I see it perhaps like she sees those empty houses; as a sign that brings our attention to that story of which the social sciences have now become critical, but which is still shaping the lives of campesinos. As I hear it, it makes me come back to this story, and, without letting go of a critical reading of the framework within which it took shape, without adhering to its conclusions either, ask how to *stay* with something of it—how to retain, following Doña Araseli's suggestion, the idea that thinking through resignation can help us understand the way campesinos have continued to inhabit Colombia's countryside.

Indigenous melancholia

So let me go back to a scene from 1928, in the *Teatro Municipal*, the first theater of Bogotá. It was the fifth day of June, and the stone building was hosting not a play, but a conference. The speaker was the then leader of the Colombian conservative party, Laureano Gómez, who would become president of Colombia in 1950. His talk was entitled "Interrogations about the Progress of

Colombia" (1981 [1928]). In its written form, it is still often quoted in anthropological writings about Colombia as "a moment of danger" (Benjamin 2007:255) when the view that all racial and cultural indigenous heritage should be renounced and, ultimately, gotten rid of, took center stage in the national conversation (See, for example, Caviedes 2007:47; Vasco 2002:132).[45] That day in 1928, as Mauricio Caviedes has noted (2011:32), the audience belonged to the economic and political elite of the country.

Gómez began his conference from a bird's eye view, describing the nation's forests as beautiful but regrettably unexploited territories that fostered a savage population; a race "disconcerted and depressed" by the overwhelming greatness of nature (1981 [1928]:10). The "soul of men", he argued, could not "free itself from its own animality" in such an environment (Ibid) where instinct inevitably predominated over intellect (Ibid:17). According to Gómez, one of the "barbaric elements" of the nation, second only to peoples of African descent, was the "indigenous race" (Ibid: 20). He argued that indigenous peoples were hopelessly marked by the loss of their territories, unable in their instinctive nature to vanquish the fear and rancor of their defeat, and

[45] In his "Theses on the Philosophy of History" (2007), concerned with "cut[ting] through" (Ibid:255) a progressive conception of history that moves along "homogeneous empty time" (Ibid:261), leaving the past and the dead behind, Benjamin envisions a kind of historical materialism capable of offering "a unique experience with the past" (Ibid:262)—one that depends on the past being "recognized by the present as one of its own concerns" (Ibid:255) (otherwise, Benjamin suggests, the past "threatens to disappear irretrievably" and the present to become "a tool of the ruling classes" (Ibid:255)). The past, however, is not simply there for anyone to grab: "it can only be seized as an image which flashes up at the instant when it can be recognized" (Ibid)—and this instant is "a moment of danger" (Ibid). What I am suggesting here, by quoting Benjamin, is that Gómez's talk is often brought to the present in this manner; "as one of its own concerns," and from within moments of danger that someone suddenly finds to be mirrored in that specific moment of Colombia's past, when the racist conception of melancholia was allowed to take center stage. I also want to note that cutting through homogeneous empty time, to use Benjamin's vocabulary, is a concern that is present throughout this chapter. More specifically, I have been inspired by Benjamin's work in my efforts to understand how thinking through resignation is about bringing our gaze to the past in a way that also interrupts the flow of time. Resignation, as I will argue later in this chapter, moves us "back" in a way that makes us pause; in a way that "arrests the flow of thoughts" (Ibid:262).

"narcotized by the sadness of the dessert, drunk with the melancholy of their *páramos* and forests" (Ibid). Gómez understood such melancholy as hereditary, he saw it flowing through Colombians' mestizo veins and "through the palpitations of national life" as a "complete indifference" that he also called resignation. These people, he declared, "seem resigned to misery and to insignificance" (Ibid).

For Gómez, mixed races still "preserved too many indigenous defects" and therefore were of "no use" for "the political and economic unity of America" (Ibid:21). However controversial his statement proved that day, it coincided with the prevalent view from before the 1940s holding that peasant and indigenous populations were incapable of economic development (Escobar 1995:22).[46] Following this idea, Gómez (1981 [1928]) continued, if Colombia was to achieve a future as a civilized nation, it first had to "correct" (Ibid:6) and "perfect" (Ibid:7) its indigenous traits and to amplify its Spanish heritage, and he implied that in order to do so it was necessary not only to prevent the reproduction of indigenous "defects" in coming generations, but also to adapt the landscape so that it could foster a "real culture" (Ibid:8). As Caviedes (2011) explains, what was at stake in this racist and terrifying conception of melancholia, present in both conservative and liberal views of Colombia at the time, was indigenous peoples' attachment to the land and unwillingness to exploit their territories through a capitalist rationality. This was seen as revenge and they, along with their descendants (such as campesinos from Boyacá, people who are not indigenous but whose ancestors were), were seen as obstacles to progress.

[46] Gómez's conference sparked "such profound controversy" that he was invited to expand on his ideas in the same theater on the 3rd of august of the same year (in Gómez 1981:5). This suggests that it was not precisely indignation what nurtured such controversy, and it further shows how such a racist conception of progress was literally, and repeatedly, invited to take center stage.

In the time of Gómez's speech, however, there was already an alternative position holding that indigenous melancholia was an issue not of race, but of culture (Caviedes 2011:36). Through this lens, the melancholic attachment of indigenous peoples and of mestizos to their lands was seen romantically and with admiration, and it lead to the argument that the consolidation of the nation required recognizing and valuing the existence of indigenous peoples, articulating them to national society, and gradually molding their ways toward a rational use of their territories. From this point of view, which Caviedes finds in the writings of economist Antonio García and historian Juan Friede, indigenous peoples and their descendants were represented as victims of a history at once "epic and dramatic," the representation of which was tinged with "feelings of shame" on the part of the writers who ultimately "attributed to the state the power to emancipate [indigenous peoples] and at the same time consolidate the nation" (Ibid).[47]

Whether it was seen from a racial or a cultural perspective, as Caviedes explains, the melancholia of indigenous peoples and of their descendants was similarly understood as a problem that could be solved, but only through direct intervention of the state (2011:36). In the view of writer Armando Solano, who with a heavy romantic tint admired the inherited indigenous melancholia permeating the life of campesinos in Boyacá, it was also necessary that the Catholic church intervened in the "fundamental transformation" that would awaken this "taciturn" people (1935:45–46).

[47] Such a melancholic portrait, meant at once as an admiring contemplation of the mystic antiquity of a nation and as an argument for the consolidation of a modern nation, was also strongly present in the representation of Mexican campesinos, as Roger Bartra (1987) has noted. Thinking with the work of Bartra, Kristin Norget (2006) highlights that central to the melancholic stereotype of Mexican campesinos was their indifference toward death. The notion of fatalism was also central to representations of Colombian campesinos, as I note later in this chapter. As Norget writes, this melancholic and fatalistic "character" is often Janus-faced, coupled with an indifference toward the deaths of campesinos: "Their lives do not matter; they must know this, and act accordingly—voilà, in a nutshell, the famous "character" (Ibid:9).

A resigned passivity

As the discourse of development began to take shape in the aftermath of the Second World War, the view of indigenous melancholia as an issue of race seems to have retreated from the public scene. As Caviedes argues (2011:36–38), its understanding as a cultural problem nonetheless continued to inform public policy and the work of social scientists. Perhaps in order to confirm the opposition of this persistent view to its racist counterargument, the "problem" was no longer presented in terms of melancholia, but of *passivity*.

The early writings of Colombian sociologist Orlando Fals Borda, who had been trained in the US and who pioneered in the sociological studies of Colombian campesinos, illustrate this conceptual shift. Writing in the 1950s, Fals Borda argued that "the 'racially conditioned,' atavistic melancholy of the peasant is a myth" (1955a:214). In contrast, he suggested that "[the peasant] has been forced to *become* almost half-witted, austere, and passive by the concatenation and accumulation of negative cultural factors preserved in, and largely transmitted by, the family" (Ibid, emphasis in the original). Among such "negative cultural factors", Fals Borda seemed particularly frustrated with the deep-seated resignation of campesinos. Resignation, he suggested, was central to the passivity he was trying to describe; he referred to it as a "resigned passivity" (Ibid:226).

In line with the view of Solano, Fals Borda argued that this "negative factor" needed to be understood in relation to peasants' religious faith. In his study of the inhabitants of a vereda of Chocontá in the departamento of Cundinamarca (which borders Boyacá) called Saucío, he wrote:

> An attitude of extreme resignation is one result of the Saucite's complete trust in God. "The Lord giveth, the Lord taketh away." A good crop this year, a bad one next, all fits the wondrous pattern of God. The consequent behavior is that of negative stubbornness, a lack of desire to improve conditions, especially if this effort goes beyond the nearest boundaries of physical, mental, and financial capacities. Instead, campesinos are content to leave such matters to God's supernatural forces, and they find it easy to run away from facing specific issues (Ibid:224).

The stubbornness and contentment that came from this resigned attitude made campesinos, in Fals Borda's view, a fatalistic people for whom "Suffering is life, and life is suffering" (Ibid:227). Habituated to surrender all "responsibility and initiative" to religious institutions, they had become "content with their physical distress" (Ibid)—in the Spanish edition of this work he says "content with their misery and scarcity" (1961:280)—and they had also become "resigned and impotent in the face of death" (1955a:225). In consequence, Fals Borda feared, they had no interest in modernizing their ways of life. While recognizing that Catholic faith was also "soothing" for campesinos and thus contributed to their well-being (Ibid:219), he therefore argued that the resignation with which they clung to the will of God "adversely affected the spirit of enterprise and progress among the farmers" (Ibid:220).

Such a resigned acceptance of poverty, suffering and death as inescapable parts of life also had an important historical component; in order to understand it, Fals Borda argued, it was also necessary to recognize a long history of "traumatic experiences" produced by political events and institutions (Ibid:232-233). In his reading of the history of campesinos from Saucío, he suggested that the Conquest had tamed their initial active and resisting character; that the inflexible conditions of

colonial life and Catholic evangelization had nurtured their resignation, fatalism, and docility; and that, taking advantage of this docility, political parties had subjugated them and forced them into sociopolitical conflicts during the republican period (Ibid: 245). In the course of this history, Fals Borda proposed, inhabitants of Saucío—which he was approaching as exemplars of campesinos of the Andes—had accumulated a series of collective traumas (the trauma of defeat, subjugation and political violence) that ultimately produced what he called an "ethos of passivity": "that quality of moving only when acted upon by an outside force, or of receiving and enduring with little or no reaction" (Ibid).

As Catherine LeGrand notes, this view of peasant life was predominant in the study of Latin America's rural life in the 1950s and 1960s and it was often expressed under the label of "tradition": "modernization theorists", she writes, "commonly applied the term *traditional* both to the structure of landholding and to the country people. By *traditional*, they meant archaic, resistant to change, and lacking in economic values" (1986:xii). According to Arturo Escobar, this dualism between tradition and modernity served to articulate "the economy of visibilities" of the discourse of development; a progressive spectrum in which small rural producers were becoming more and more visible as they were increasingly understood to be capable of advancing toward modernity (1995:157). "Since the mid-1960s," Escobar writes, "economists studying small farmers had not ceased to emphasize that the same backward peasants they had discounted in previous decades would behave like good and decent capitalist farmers *if* they were provided with the necessary conditions for doing so" (Ibid:157-158, my emphasis). This "if" was unavoidable: as LeGrand explains, social scientists from this time predominantly "insisted that the impulse for change,

whether it be economic modernization or political mobilization, must come from without" (1986:xii).

The prevalence of this view in Colombian social sciences during the decades of the 1960s and the 1970s is better understood in relation to the particular national context within which it took shape. More specifically, it becomes more clear when considered in light of its relation to three historical events: the end of the undeclared civil war of the 1950s between followers of the Colombian Conservative Party and the Colombian Liberal Party that gravely affected the countryside in the middle of the twentieth century; the "Alliance of Progress" that was established in the 1960s between Colombia and the US; and the establishment of the first sociology and anthropology departments of the country.

In the 1960s, Colombia was recuperating from a ten-year-long extremely violent period of undeclared civil war known as *La Violencia* (1948-1958), the end of which was achieved through the consolidation of the *Frente Nacional* (National Front): an agreement between Liberal and Conservative parties to distribute power evenly between them and intercalate presidential terms. In order to heal the wounds of the war, which was fought mainly in the rural areas of the country, the National Front initially adopted a policy of social and economic transformation of the countryside (Jimeno 1984:13) through the implementation of agrarian reforms. This effort, in turn, was buttressed and encouraged by the "Alliance for Progress" established between the US and several Latin American countries, which largely sought to prevent the spread of communism. The inverse relation between progress in terms of development and communism was frequently formulated in the period following World War II, and especially after the Cuban Revolution, under

the assumption that "if poor countries were not rescued from their poverty, they would succumb to communism" (Escobar 1995:34). Following this logic, it has been argued that the Alliance sought in great part to "deactivate" the revolutionary potential of rural societies through programs of modernization and rural development, the most prominent of which was the agrarian reform of 1961 (Florián Guzmán 2013).

Now, in order to design and implement the transformation of the countryside, the government required new professionals trained in the social sciences. In response to this need, the first programs of sociology and anthropology departments became established (Friedemann 1987:147; Jimeno 1984:13; Pineda Camacho 2005:17), with an unprecedented interest in peasant societies (Tocancipá-Falla 1998). It is therefore no surprise that, as Myriam Jimeno notices, "some of the pioneers of anthropology actively supported new state "development" institutions, including those concerned with land reform and [the study of indigenous populations]" (2008:80). Furthermore, she continues, "the anthropologists of the time saw themselves as bureaucratic agents assigned to assimilate the indigenous peoples, who were considered to be marginalized individuals who needed to be put on the path to progress" (Ibid). This task also included the integration of campesinos: as Tocancipá (1998) suggests, anthropologists were now studying peasant communities *as a means* to achieve the modernization of their ways of life through education and agrarian reforms, at once encouraging the progress of the nation and preventing an agrarian revolution. Their argument was that, as long as campesinos were not motivated to move forward, toward "the progressive communities they may well become" (Fals Borda 1955a:X), they would remain stuck in the past of modern, civilized society.

This is how Colombian anthropologist Virginia Gutiérrez de Pineda described Colombia's rural population: "their patterns of behavior, where agriculture has not yet evolved," she wrote, "belong to the past" (1958:3). Her hypothesis was that, ever since de Colony, the only stability peasant and indigenous peoples knew was the land, and therefore they continued to cultivate it and, on it, their old beliefs and practices, as a way to find continuity and cohesion within a history of change and dispossession (Ibid:8-10). A central reference in Gutiérrez de Pineda's work was Fals Borda, who also described rural Colombia and, more specifically, the countryside of Boyacá, as places congealed in time. Boyacá was a place, he wrote, that retained a strange portrait "of eighteenth and nineteenth century life in the middle of the twentieth century" (1955b:5). He saw this in the possessions of peasants from Boyacá, in their tools and practices, in their language, their clothing, their households, and especially in their stubborn attachment to the land, all of which, he wrote, "have the musty odor of antiquity" (Ibid).

These descriptions further exemplify Caviedes' argument that melancholia, understood as an attachment to the land and to the past that hindered the development of the country, continued to permeate the writings of social scientists up until the 1970s, even if it was framed in a different vocabulary. It becomes obvious, too, that, in this notion of the countryside as "stuck behind" there was implied a prescriptive temporality according to which the future could only be found in moving toward progress. For this kind of movement, the passive and resigned attitude of campesinos was seen as a crucial obstacle, and it was understood in relation to the communal traumas of a past that continued to shape their fatalistic ways of life. Their attachment to the land, in other words, was understood as synonymous to their attachment to a shared past marked by losses, the wounds of which peasants were unwilling to move forward from. From this lens, as

Escobar explains, the defense of development held that "third worlders" were "caught in a chronic pathological condition," and thus "the scientist, like a good doctor, [had] the moral obligation to intervene in order to cure the diseased (social) body" (1995:159).

Rupture

In the beginnings of the 1970s, however, the orientation of Colombian anthropology would change radically, as anthropologists and students of the social sciences began to take a critical stance against the notions of development and cultural integration. Various factors coalesced to make this shift happen: the disappointment of anthropologists with the agrarian reform of 1961 which, as their fieldwork experiences made apparent, had left untouched the unequal distribution of the land (Friedemann 1987:147); the pressure of anthropology and sociology students who, inspired by the Cuban Revolution and enraged with the intrusion of the US in Latin American universities, promoted "the interrogation of anthropology as a colonial product, and of their professors as docile followers of such orientation" (Jimeno 2008:80); and the retirement of several professor from their academic posts, who would then adhere to militant organizations in response to their growing awareness of the responsibility of the state and the elites in the maintenance of structural inequalities and in the political violence of the 1950s.

Such was the case even with professors who had previously held fairly conservative ideas, and most famously with Fals Borda who, after being centrally involved in the agrarian reform and co-founding the first sociology department of the country, eventually quit the university and

drastically reoriented the political positioning of his work.[48] From their new perspective, former professors and activists proposed novel forms of militant, collaborative, or solidary research—an "engaged social science," *una ciencia social comprometida* (Bonilla et al. 1972:17).

This form of research was not fully recognized in its own time or persisted in the mainstream—Vasco (2002:434) and Caviedes (2007:39–40) have even claimed that it was actively marginalized and disarticulated from within the discipline.[49] Nonetheless, it marked a definitive rupture between Colombian anthropology and the paternalistic language of reformation, as well as with the representation of ethnic minorities and campesinos as passive and resigned. From that moment

[48] As Alexander Pereira Fernández (2008) argues, the factors that motivated Fals Borda to quit the university and reorient his work were manifold. After nearly two decades working in collaboration with the government and for the implementation of the agrarian reform, by the beginning of the 1960s he had already begun to slowly rupture his commitment with the state and to lose his hope in the liberal elite's willingness and capacity to fight against social injustice (Ibid:385). His change of political stance began to become apparent with the publication of the first volume of *La Violencia en Colombia*, in 1962, which he co-authored; this was a collaborative work that held the elites and the state responsible for the civil war that had left indelible marks in the country's rural areas. A few years later, when, in the aftermath of the civil war a group of campesinos refused to disarm, contributors to *La Violencia…* formed the "*Comisión de Paz Independiente*", the Independent Commission of Peace, seeking to contribute to a peaceful agreement between campesinos and the government (Ibid:389). The Comission eventually dissolved, and in 1964 the government bombed the town of Marquetalia, where the communist group was enclaved. This event is regarded as the origin of the consolidation of the FARC guerrilla, and it attracted many scholars and students to join the rising armed opposition. One of them was Camilo Torres Restrepo, a sociologist and Catholic priest who had co-founded the sociology department with Fals Borda and who in 1966 joined the guerrilla group known as the Ejército de Liberación Nacional (ELN). Pereira Fernández suggests that the disappearance and early death of Camilo Torres, who was killed in combat only a few months after joining the ELN, deeply affected Fals Borda. He took an academic leave from the Universidad Nacional, during which he published a book in memory of Torres. There, he presented for the first time his belief in the need of popular subversion. Fals Borda eventually formally left his academic post, and he began to work closely with peasant organizations. In the late 1960s, he co-founded La Rosca de Investigación y Acción Social, an organization which proposed and promoted a novel kind of "militant research" (Bonilla et al. 1972) that eventually came to be known as Participatory Action Research (PAR). As Jafte Dilean Robles Lomeli and Joanne Rappaport explain: "Largely but not entirely historical in focus, the approach [of this organization] combined activism with rigorous empirical research, with the aim of unearthing the forgotten history of popular struggles in order to re-signify them through activism" (2018:597).

[49] I am here overly simplifying a long story that involved different groups of researchers who were often in tension with each other. For a detailed and critical view of this moment in the history of anthropology in Colombia, see Caviedes 2007.

forward, it became central to anthropology in Colombia to bring into view and support the ways in which these peoples mobilize and resist structural and political inequalities and violence.[50] In the case of anthropological studies on campesinos, it became a tendency to focus on social movements and processes of everyday resistance (Tocancipá-Falla, Perafán, and Martínez 2016:591). Ever since then, the word "resignation," which had so prominently partaken of the representation of peasant societies, vanished from the vocabulary of the social sciences.

But there it was, sounding and resounding in the kitchen of Doña Araseli, that day in 2017 when she made the disquieting claim that "in order to live in the countryside […] you have to be resigned." It is a claim that, having jumped back in time and then back to that present, is difficult to take in, difficult to listen to without the urge to re-conceptualize it as a kind of everyday resistance. This was, indeed, the advice I was often given when I spoke with people inside and outside of academia about how to come to terms with the strong presence of this word, "resignation," in my fieldwork. Yet it seems to me that reframing resignation as resistance would miss the point of Doña Araseli's narrative—her knowledge that living within the limited conditions of peasant life requires resigning oneself to these limitations, enduring rather than resisting, adapting to them rather than fighting against them.

This makes me wonder if, through the process by which we banished the word resignation from our vocabularies, we have inadvertently become deaf to some of the certainties that campesinos

[50] This does not mean, however, that anthropologists are still mainly working with those movements or privileging an activist position over an academic one, as it initially was the case in the 1970s. In the view of Jimeno, "there has been a shift in the function of commitment, which is no longer understood as being a political and moral bond with local communities. Instead, it is now seen as fostering political debate at the national level" (2008:84–85).

sustain, if we perhaps are missing something central about the way in which campesinos have continued to make a life in Colombia's rural areas. The difficulty this presents us with is how to firmly maintain the rupture with a paternalistic and modernizing framework, an effort that is undoubtedly necessary, without adhering to the radical shift that produced the rupture in the first place. How to decisively oppose the notion that peasants are in need of top-down reform, while also taking seriously the ways in which they are *not* resisting or mobilizing to transform the conditions of their lives? Can we slow down our judgement and drop the evaluation of resignation as something that needs to be "corrected" or "cured," whether it be from within or from without, in favor of revolution or of reformation?

As we saw above, the sense that solving the resignation of peasant communities requires experts to provide a "cure" is consonant with the kind of melancholia that social scientists described until the 1970s—a "pathological" attachment to the past and to long-past losses that have given shape to a fatalistic view of life. This notion of melancholia coincides with Sigmund Freud's (2001) early writings on the subject, where he described this affect as the inability of the ego to let go of a loved lost object, and where he suggested that it could be understood as a pathology by situating it in contrast to what he called the "normal affect" of mourning (Ibid: 243). In mourning, the ego ultimately, if painfully, comes to terms with the loss of a loved object; in melancholia, in contrast, the ego identifies with what it has lost—it is shaped by it, "shadowed" by it ("the shadow of the object fell upon the ego" (Ibid:249)). According to this formulation, the effort of a social scientist should therefore be oriented towards turning melancholia into mourning, helping a "diseased (social) body," as Escobar described it, "let go."

The way that people from San Miguel speak of resignation, however, unsettles this sharp contrast between mourning and melancholia; it does so in a way that might help us listen to and take seriously a claim like that of Doña Araseli. In San Miguel, in tension with the sense that it is part of a melancholic attitude, resignation is voiced as a wish for those who have suffered the loss of a loved one: as necessary for mourning. When approaching a person who is grieving people will say *mucha fuerza y resignación*; "much strength and resignation for you." So perhaps if we think through resignation, allowing it to alter our understanding of what mourning is, we can "depathologize" melancholia (Eng and Kazanjian 2003:3) and, without losing sight of how painful it might be, consider what it might offer. It was my friend Claudia who showed me how this relation between mourning and resignation works, one afternoon, on my last week of living in San Miguel.

It takes you back

We had already drunk five cups of coffee, that afternoon. Each little cup was an excuse to keep on talking about everything and nothing, anticipating it was going to be weird not seeing each other every day. The flow of the conversation had us now staring at a piece of paper, thinking about our styles of handwriting. We scribbled our names, we drew random sentences, we thought about our different ways of drawing the letter "a," in what direction we wrote our "eights," how we each connected letters to make up words. We wrote and copied each other's handwriting, we embossed, mindlessly, already written words.

Over our sketching, Claudia asked me how I was doing with the writing of the stories I had been gathering throughout the year. I told her that, lately, I had been thinking about the way people had

talked to me about resignation. I mentioned I had just talked about it with her husband, el Paisa; he had told me it's about persisting with the knowledge that things might get better, a knowledge, he said, that you only gain if you devote yourself to God. "Sure," Claudia said, "God knows how He does things, and He rewards you if you persist." After a scribbling silence, she mentioned that this reminded her of a passage from the *novena* for the dead, a nine-day ritual of payer that is held when someone dies. It's a passage, she says, "that explains to you what death is," *a uno le explica qué es la muerte*. It says something about a grain of maize. Or was it about wheat? She tried to remember. Something about how in order for a plant to grow it needs for other plants to die and rot, something about how "you have to die for others to be born," *que usted tiene que morir para que otros nazcan*. She remembered her mother says something similar about visits, "that if those who come to visit her never left, she would never have a full house," *que si no se fueran, nunca tendría llena la casa*. "How do you think this all relates to resignation?" I asked. She said: "It sort of gives you back a sense of calm," *como que le devuelve la calma*.

We dropped our pens, took our phones, and started looking for that passage. While we searched for it, Claudia said "[that passage] takes you back, it takes anyone back," *la devuelve, a cualquiera lo devuelve*. When el Paisa reads it out loud on his daily readings of the bible, she explained, she always has to stop what she is doing and ask him to read it again. Is this how it gives "back" a sense of calm? Claudia used the same word: *devolverse*. Is this, like *amañarse*, a performative language, a language, to once again paraphrase Cavell (2002:114), that matches our needs, in the face of loss or at the brink of it? Could it be the tracing of a path that, like our sketching that day, leads us back to where we are being somehow pulled away from?

We had to browse through different versions of the *novenario*, until we finally found one that included that sentence she remembered. It was on the prayers for the second day of the novena, taken from the twelfth chapter of St John, and read "if a kernel of wheat does not fall to the ground and dies, it remains alone, but if it dies it brings forth much fruit," *si el grano de trigo no cae en tierra y muere, queda él solo, pero si muere da mucho fruto* (quoted in Catarino Casarrubias n.d.:3). Claudia laughed when I re-read the sentence wondering what it meant, confused with the strange negation within it, with its counterfactual statement: "if a kernel of wheat does *not* fall to the ground…" — "You see? It took you back!" *¡la devolvió!*

We kept on reading the reflection of that second day of prayers. A paragraph further down seemed to convey the way Claudia interpreted the sentence about the kernel of wheat, I read it out loud: "to die at each instant in order to then live is a condition of all life. We die and live in our children, in each friend that leaves, in each decision that entails rupture. We die in each trip we undertake and complete" (Ibid).[51] This explains what death is, Claudia had just mentioned, but now she said: "it makes you understand what life is," *le hace entender a uno qué es la vida*.

Archaeological remainders

We gain "back" a sense of calm, and we understand what life is, Claudia suggests, when we allow ourselves to be "taken back" in a kind of tracing, in a bodily movement against the current yet coincident with our desire. Literally following lines on the page, in this way of reading resignation there is an interruption of narrative, a suspension of its forward marching rhythm, a delay that

[51] My translation of "[…] *morir a cada instante para después vivir es condición de toda vida. Morimos y vivimos en los hijos, en el amigo que se va, en cada elección que significa una ruptura. Morimos en cada viaje que emprendemos y concluimos*" (Catarino Casarrubias n.d.:3).

works against the prescriptive temporality of progress. There is something melancholic about this movement, in this unwillingness to follow forward-marching time and its corresponding spatial orientation. And yet, as Claudia so insightfully illustrates, it takes part in the process of mourning. This is a kind of mourning, however, that does not look exactly like "letting go."

In order to think about this, I have found useful Judith Butler's reading of Freud's later writings of melancholia. In this posterior work, as Butler notes, Freud "reverses his position" (1997:133) on the subject and, in the process, "changes what it means to "let an object go […]"" (Ibid:134). In *The Ego and the Id* (1960), addressing his previous work, Freud writes that melancholic identification (the process by which the ego comes to perceive the void produced by the loss of a loved object as a void within itself) is far more "common" and "typical" than he had previously thought (Ibid:23), and he suggests that it might even be a necessary condition for mourning (Ibid:24). Freud's argumentation comes from the realization that melancholic identification "has a great share in determining the form taken by the ego" (Ibid:23)—that our losses, in simpler words, give shape to who we are and, in this way, are not exactly let go in the sense of "breaking" an attachment (Butler 1997:134). What we find, as Butler writes, is a kind of letting go that involves "the incorporation of the attachment *as* identification" (Ibid). Freud's suggestion, as Butler explains unraveling this last sentence, is that "melancholic identification permits the loss of the object in the external world precisely because it provides a way to *preserve* the object as part of the ego and, hence, to avert the loss as a complete loss" (Ibid). The work of mourning, from this perspective, depends on our capacity to preserve our losses in a melancholic incorporation through which these become a part of ourselves. Following this logic, in Butler's words, Freud comes to

understand the character of the ego as "the sedimentation of objects loved and lost, the archaeological remainder, as it were, of unresolved grief" (Ibid:133).[52]

I think that resignation, the way Claudia talks about it, speaks of the temporality of this process; of the ways in which it requires a delay, a movement "back" in time and space, reading and re-reading our losses into our understanding of ourselves. Loss is not avoided; it is rather dwelled upon and, in this dwelling, in the performance of this *staying with* the thought of "what death is" we come to see "what life is." [53] Perhaps resignation is about finding the shape that our lives can take after each death we experience, after each loss that makes us die a little, each absence that becomes a part of us. We are thus able to imagine, thinking with Freud's reformulation and with Claudia's reading of resignation, that melancholia and resignation are not necessarily pathological, that they are not opposed to mourning, and that they offer a possibility for living with loss and absence. Yet, coming back to Doña Araseli's narrative, to her sense that resignation is the "law of the countryside," a question remains open:

[52] In her book *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (2004), Butler writes: "I do not think that successful grieving implies that one has forgotten another person or that something else has come along to take its place [...] Perhaps, rather, one mourns when one accepts that by the loss one undergoes one will be changed, possibly forever" (Ibid:21).

[53] Rather than something we own or create for ourselves (as a neoliberal idiom would formulate it), life here appears as something that we find in the recognition of how we are unmade by our others. I want to thank my supervisor Lisa Stevenson for helping me notice how the ways of resignation call into question what it means to "have" a life. This is an idea that I still have to explore more deeply, but I want to highlight that while resignation allows us to appreciate a form of mourning different from "letting go," it also brings to our attention a way of being that involves "letting go" of our control over our own lives; letting go of the idea that our lives are meaningful as long as we are in control of them (as long as we "have" them). In resignation, life seems to become intelligible, and meaningful, through a kind of dispossession that recognizes the depth of our vulnerability to others. In this instance, I am again echoing Butler's words when she writes "Let's face it. We're undone by each other. And if we're not, we're missing something" (2004:23).

If thinking of melancholia and resignation as other than pathological implies seeing them as temporary and oriented towards mourning, then how can we understand instances where mourning cannot be achieved (as in the sense that resignation permeates everyday life in Boyacá or in the idea that melancholia prolongs across generations in Colombia's rural inhabitants)? Are we inevitably taken back into the discourse of internal conflicts that require external cures? Is there a way to recognize an ongoing sense of loss without seeing it as an inability stemming from a pathos of the individual or the community who endure it?

Once again, I take insight from Butler, this time from her "cultural engagement with psychoanalytic theory" (1997:138). Moving from understanding the workings of melancholic identification toward cases where "melancholia takes on cultural dimensions" (Ibid:139), Butler suggests that when the loss of particular attachments becomes constitutive of the way a "culture" understands itself, then within this culture these losses become impossible to mourn. Butler is especially concerned with gender identification and, in particular, with what she calls the "heterosexual matrix": the "cultural logic" according to which gender is "achieved and stabilized" with the heterosexualization of desire—an achievement that, in turn, "demands" the loss of homosexual attachments (Ibid:135). She understands this demand as a prohibition on mourning: the loss of these attachments should "*not* be avowed, and *not* be grieved" (Ibid) because their loss is constitutive of this heterosexual matrix that has become "culturally prevalent" (Ibid:139), a matrix that has been absorbed by "cultural forms of life" (Ibid:136). Butler explains that the fact that this prohibition is "culturally prevalent" implies that it is "naturalized" (Ibid:138) and also that "there is no public recognition or discourse through which such a loss might be named and mourned" (Ibid:139). It is a loss that therefore becomes "ungrievable" (Ibid)—melancholy

becomes pervasive, it prolongs. What I find central to Butler's argumentation is that, from this point of view, we are able to see that the inability to mourn does not stem from a pathology of the ego: it is rather the result of a prohibition formulated by a culture that confirms itself through it.

Perhaps we could understand the narrative of progress that framed the notion of indigenous melancholia from before the 1970s in these terms. Through the affirmation that the consolidation of the nation required moving "forward," the loss of that which it associated with the past could not count as loss, it could not be fully recognized as such without putting into question the necessity of progressing. Within this narrative, what gets associated with the past is the attachment of indigenous and peasant peoples to the land, their "unprogressive" ways of inhabiting the countryside, and, ultimately, the countryside itself. Remember that, from Fals Borda's early perspective, the countryside of Boyacá is seen as a place left "behind" and congealed in time. The linear temporality of progress in this way takes on a geographical dimension which, coupled with the failure of the agrarian reforms (see chapter 1) that have left untouched the structural inequalities constraining the lives of campesinos, implies that moving forward ("letting go") requires leaving rural areas. Unable, unwilling to follow the temporality and the geography of progress, indigenous and peasant peoples are thus diagnosed as melancholic—but this melancholia, as Butler allows us to see, stems from the prohibition through which progress confirms and "naturalizes" itself. And so resignation, as a way to live with the ungrievable loss of a peasant way of life, as a way to live with the absences of all those who have left the countryside, becomes, as Doña Araseli said, a "law," almost a "natural" law: the law of the countryside.

"But we see the houses…"

"But we see the houses," Doña Araseli says, mapping the myriad of absences that populate the vereda of San Isidro, the rural area of which she considers herself and her neighbors to be the last inhabitants, showing how these losses are nonetheless inscribed on the landscape, how they have given shape to this place. Could we take the archaeological metaphor that Butler uses to describe the "character of the ego" literally? Could we understand the land upon which a "modern" or "progressive" nation is built as "the sedimentation of objects loved and lost, the archaeological remainder, as it were, of unresolved grief" (1997:133)? Perhaps this is a "melancholic landscape," to echo the words of Yael Navaro-Yashin (2012): a place that retains losses that cannot be fully named, that have not registered in official history or in collective memories.[54] As Doña Araseli said, "we forgot about them and they forgot about us"—this is not exactly about remembering.[55] It rather seems to be about sensing the mark of a loss that we cannot clearly situate in our history, a loss that seems to be impending, too, in the future; a loss impossible to let go of without leaving

[54] In ethnography of Northern Cyprus, Navaro-Yashin (2012) shifts the question of melancholic identification from the formation of the ego to the formation of the state—specifically, the Turkish-Cypriot state. In conversation with Butler, she explores how the loss of "the enemy" (the Greek-Cypriots who were displaced, disappeared, or killed during Turkish invasion of Cyprus in 1974) is at once disavowed by and foundational to this state—how it is literally inscribed on the ground upon which the Turkish-Cyrpiot state was built, in the form of the material objects left "behind" by Greek-Cypriots (houses, things, pets, gardens, even place-names) and in the remnants of the war (Ibid:173-174). Here, the metaphor that Butler uses when she describes the "character of the ego" as an archaeological remainder also becomes literal. "In this case," Navaro-Yashin writes, "the lost object (the person) is present in the life of the melancholic in the form of an actual material (or non-human) object" (Ibid:174).

[55] This idea also resonates with the work of Valentina Napolitano (2015) about "ethnographic traces". Drawing from the work of Michel de Certeau, Napolitano suggests that an ethnographic trace exists when different marginal stories (marginal in the sense that they "may not fit into a 'meaningful' master-narrative of the present" (Ibid:52)) condense in one single space. Condensation, here, refers to Freud's term for "a process of compromise and convergence of multiple stories into a knot" (Ibid:57). This knot, for Napolitano, is a trace—and it is powerful because it stands for histories and stories that are not only multiple but also "forgotten" by official history (Ibid). A trace can only be perceived affectively through its material form, Napolitano suggests, because the histories it condenses have not yet taken a narrative form: it manifests a "gap" in narrative, "a loss of meaning and a form of violence" (Ibid:58).

this place also, leaving the lands of San Isidro to which, as Doña Araseli said, no one will then come back. In staying, in resignation, she delays that moment, she interrupts the narrative of progress, and she makes us look back, return and signal, resign ourselves to stay with the thought of this place as it stands, today, at once admitting and pausing the sense of its own end.

To be re-signed

The act of resignation, just like amañarse, is reflexive—spoken as a verb, it refers to an action we take upon ourselves ("you have to resign yourself," Doña Araseli says). But, in reading Doña Araseli's narrative alongside her way of pointing towards all the empty houses that surround her, by reading it like Claudia reads the sentence about the kernel of wheat in the *novenario*, it seems that resignation is also involved in the way that people in San Miguel relate to the remaining register of absent others—how they sense the register that their departure has left on the landscape, or within themselves, prolonging a kind of mourning that is also an effort to continue to stay in place and with the thought of those who have left. In this understanding of re-signation that I am suggesting, "to be resigned" might also be related to the need to have others recognize our own absence, of having others mourn our own lives—of us being re-signed by them. I want to close this chapter with the unravelling of this last thought through a short conversation I had with Doris LaVerde about her extraordinarily messy bedroom.

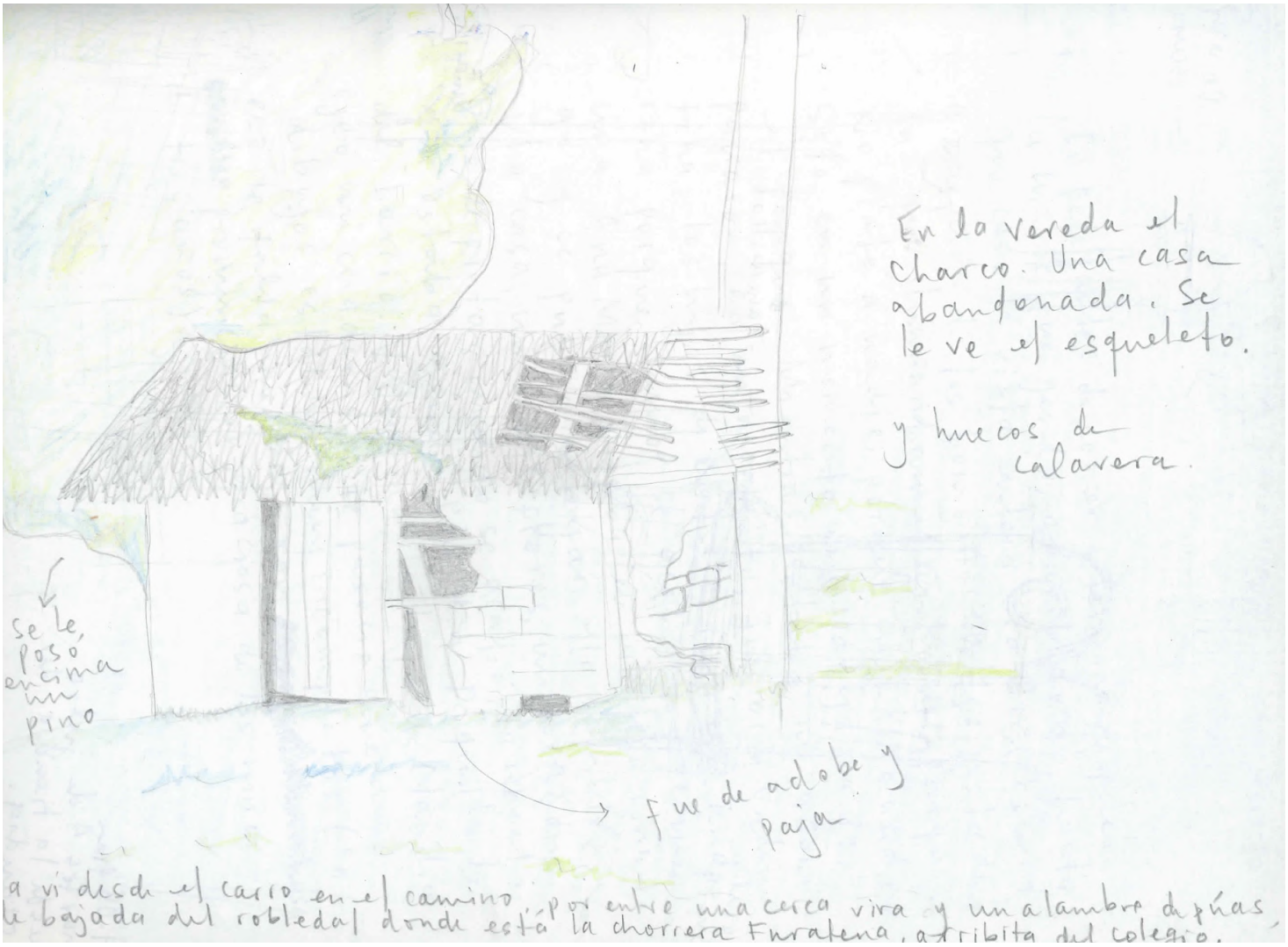
We were drinking coffee and eating churros in Claudia's store when Doña Doris mentioned that, if I were ever to look into the chaos that is her bedroom, I would be scared away: *Usted ve mi cuarto y ¡da miedo!* She keeps it like that on purpose, she said, ever since she and her husband, Don Gil Mateus, were robbed. It happened almost ten years ago. They were in the house where

they work and live alone, ever since their daughters left to make their own lives with their partners. Even though their eldest lives in San Miguel, the separation, for Doña Doris, was devastating. More than once she told me that is the most difficult experience she has gone through—that, and, in a different way, the robbery. It was a traumatic event. Their hands were tied, shots were fired, and a bullet even grazed Don Gil's head, near his eye. Don Gil fully recovered from this wound, which, miraculously, Doña Doris explained, was not physically deep, and they both eventually recuperated their sense of calm and safety. Yet what Doña Doris cannot get over is that, once the thieves entered their home, the place was so neatly organized that she made it easy for them to find everything she had of value. Ever since then, she makes an effort to make of her room a dreadful mess.

Important documents, like medical records and receipts, she stocks in jumbled piles with irrelevant pieces of paper. Everything she thinks of as her own treasures, she carefully places in a careless manner, scattered throughout the room, and, to make things worse, she sometimes drops a scarf or a piece of cloth on top of everything. "If someone comes looking for my stuff," she said, "they will have to go to great pains to find them," *que les cueste trabajo encontrarlas*. Yet, for her, everything is in the right place. If someone moves the tiniest thing, she notices it. She has a couple of notebooks where she keeps track of her belongings, and, now that she feels she is starting to lose her sight, she is even training herself to move throughout her room with eyes closed, touching her way throughout the perfectly disorganized space.

"When I die," she said, "my family won't be able to throw away my things and be done with it. They will have to go through them one by one," *cuando me muera, mi familia no va a poder botar*

mis cosas y ya. Les va a tocar revisarlas una por una. They will have to sit down to read her notebooks, she added. They will have to learn how to navigate her secretive mess. They won't be able to simply "move on," "let go," throw away what is left of her. It something like the tricky negation in the sentence about the kernel of wheat on the second day of the prayers for the dead: it will take them back from that impulse, if they were to have it, and they will have to sit down, come back to her and stay, and take the time to re-read her. In the end, this room, this dreadful mess, does not seem to be mainly an antidote against robbery. It rather seems to be a request for a melancholic attachment, in the occurrence of grief. There is something fatalistic about this, a molding of a life in resignation (in renunciation) to death, a premature surrender to the will of God. But it also expresses the wish for a delay, for the prolongation of bereavement—for a kind of shared dwelling that Doña Doris cannot ask of her daughters just yet. It asks for a wish to be re-visited, re-cognized, re-signed—read, again, after death.



a vi desde el carro en el camino. ¿Por entre una cerca viva y un alambre de púas le bajada del robledal donde está la chorrera Furatena, arribita del colegio.

3. To stay with a story

Into the mountains, at night

Doña Inés remembers she found it strange when her sister went down to the creek, one afternoon, almost fifty years ago. She must have been around five years old and her sister Flor, no more than eight.

> That afternoon, she did all of her chores, and she was rushing, flying through them—bringing wood, this and that. And then she went to the creek, because, back then […], that's where we had a pool of sorts to wash ourselves, to do the dishes, the laundry, everything. And there she went, it must have been around six in the afternoon, and she was taking a bath. And I was like, hm? Those strange ideas [*como ideas tan raras*].
>
> And the next day, by five in the morning she was already gone, [*ya no estaba*]. She said nothing. She left early. And those people, people say they'd walk down to the road, they would get into the bushes and then, as soon as they saw the bus come by, when it was really close, they'd jump to the road to get in.[56]

"Why did they hide in the bushes?" —I asked. "To make sure no one would see them?"

[56] "*Y esa tarde hizo los oficios, eso mejor dicho, no, eso era que volaba; traía leña, esto… y ya ella se fue pa'l, como en esa época se… uno lavaba aquí abajo donde están las terneras en esa zanjita, ahí era donde había la piscina de agua pa' bañarse uno y pa' todo. Pa' lavar y todo. Y allá fue y cuando, que eran como las seis de la tarde y se estaba bañando. Y ¿pero qué? ¿hm? Como ideas tan raras.*
Y al otro día eso ya a las cinco de la mañana ya no estaba. Nada, salió temprano. Y esa gente se dice que se bajaba y se metía al monte y apenas vía que pasaba, y venía el bus cerquitica, y salía a la carretera y cogía el bus."

> Sure, because the neighbors, they knew them, and they could say, "that kid seems to be leaving." Hm? And then asking around, no news nor someone to deliver them, [*ni razón ni el que la dé*]. Hm? [57]

Doña Inés uttered those wordless questions — "hm?"— with lips bent down, shoulders raised up, as if saying *who knows*. "We thought she had left for some town, but we knew nothing, nothing of her, not until she came back." Her parents, she said, "they asked around, they asked the neighbors if maybe they had seen her, if maybe they knew where she was. But, hm? No." This was a time when there was no electricity, let alone telephones, in this region, and Flor must have barely known how to sign her own name—it was unlikely she would ever send a letter. I asked Doña Inés what Flor imagined as her destination when she left, when she secretly escaped. Had she planned where she was going?

> Nothing! It was like… hm? That's what she says: wherever the bus took her. I don't know. […] [58]

Then, talking to herself, she added:

> Not even knowing which way to go… it's like walking into the mountains, at night, not knowing where you'll find yourself when you come out [...*como meterse de noche en una montaña sin saber a dónde va a salir*]. [59]

Doña Inés, the youngest of ten siblings, was the only woman who stayed on at the family farm, right at the border between the veredas of San Cayetano and Quicagota that belong administratively to the town of Ráquira but ecclesiastically to San Miguel de Sema. In staying, she

[57] "*Claro, po' ahí los vecinos, conocían, "fulana tal es que se va". ¿Hm? Y ahí pregunte y ni razón ni el que la dé. ¿Hm?*"
[58] "*¡Nada!! Sino que, ¿hm? Así como dice, donde la llevara el bus. ¡Yo no sé!*"
[59] "*Ni saber para dónde coger, como meterse de noche en una montaña sin saber a dónde va a salir.*"

lived without knowing about the paths her six sisters had taken, each in their own time, once they moved beyond the mountains that frame the landscape of her life.

Looking back, however, Doña Inés can now reconstruct their stories: she now knows that, when they left, they were escaping the demanding routine she too had to endure, one that had them "dizzy," *mareadas*, by the middle of the day from working without rest under the sun, hoeing the land, helping with household chores, carrying heavy bags of manure— "and the weakness you felt in your legs after carrying two ounces of shit up the mountain!," *¡es un desaliento en esas piernas para esa subida con unas dos onzas de mierda!* She knows they had heard over the radio and from the neighbors of the possibility of working in the city "to earn their own money," and she knows that, "at that time, they would reach a town and as soon as people saw them, they would hire them." She knows most of them got jobs as domestic workers for wealthy homes in different towns and cities, in Bogotá, in Chiquinquirá, in Guachetá. And everything she knows now, she learned as her sisters started to be able to come back, one by one, to visit them at the farm.

But how long did it take for her sisters to come home, for them to know what had happened to them? Doña Inés thought about this for a moment. Flor was seven or eight when she left, and she must have been in her twenties when she first returned.

Imagining absence, imagining death

In the middle of June of 2018, Doña Inés invited my brother, Nicolás, and I, along with our partners, to have a barbecue at her house with her family. Her two sons were there, Jaime and Javier, as well as Jaime's young wife and Doña Inés's daughter, Johana, with her one-and-a-half-

year-old-son Dylan. Doña Rosa, the oldest of the Dorado sisters and the only one who eventually came back to stay, had walked to join us from her own farm, and so had Doña Oliva, the widow of their oldest brother, Don Campoelías. With us was also Don Gerardo, Doña Inés's brother who, like her, never married, and, with her, always stayed at the family farm. We all gathered in the late morning and spent the sunny day in the hill by the corn field, drinking beer under the shade of bushes, telling stories among the fluctuating clouds of the smoke from the fire where Doña Inés cooked lunch—the lamb she had been preparing since the day before, a blood rice called *chanfaina*, plenty of potatoes, and freshly picked corn on the cob.

For the past few months, my brother and I had been filming the everyday routine of Doña Inés and Don Gerardo, following them in the long walks they daily make across the field, through the oak forest, to the lot that Don Gerardo bought from the hacienda where he used to work and which used to encompass the better part of these veredas—they would walk daily to that lot where they keep and milk the cattle when there is no more grass in the land they inherited from their parents.[60] We had been trying to capture how patiently Don Gerardo, in his late seventies, stabilizes his steps along the broken path with the help of two walking sticks he uses daily since he had to have his knee replaced due to arthrosis; a condition that campesinos tend to get at an early age, sometimes as soon as in their forties, because of the demanding physical work they are charged with from

[60] That land they inherited was also a part of that same hacienda, which was only parceled up in the decade of the nineteen sixties through the intervention of the INCORA (the state agency that divided large estates and redistributed the land as part of the agrarian reform of 1961). It was then that Doña Inés and Don Gerardo's parents were able to acquire the land the family had already inhabited for generations through the working arrangement called *la obligación*, which required the men of the family to work for the hacienda in exchange for the right to inhabit and cultivate the land. In contrast to Doña Inés and her sisters, their brothers—Campoelías, Roberto and Gerardo—had the chance to work for this hacienda from a very early age—payed jobs, since *la obligación* started to decompose in the nineteen seventies—and, partly because of this, they never left the region.

childhood. Doña Inés had been feeling some pain in her joints too and, even though this worried her deeply, and although her concern was perhaps latent in the long silences she and Don Gerardo shared as they worked, it was imperceptible in her secure and hasty way of walking through the uneven landscape and of milking their half dozen cows—of moving through the day to secure enough raw milk to sell. In those days, Johana spent most of her mornings in the kitchen, preparing breakfast and lunch and taking care of Dylan, and Javier was helping out with the farm while he looked for a job.

On the day of the barbecue, Doña Inés wanted to share with her family the videos we had been making, and so, after our outside lunch, we gathered in the dining room, an ample room that remains closed except when there are too many guests to accommodate in the kitchen. The last shot we saw was of Johana, who had to leave before our improvised screening to milk some cows in a nearby farm where she had recently been hired, and had left Dylan in the care of his grandmother. It is a long shot of her, sitting in the corridor just outside the dining room, listening to a message on her cellphone. Her arms are on her lap, her head resting on her hand, her eyes fixated on the floor.

Dylan seemed fascinated by the image: he pointed to the screen, looked at Doña Inés, looked back to the screen, looked around him, and he laughed, and we laughed with him. But then, in a matter of seconds, his laughter turned into weeping, his lament got louder, and suddenly he was crying inconsolably. Doña Inés hugged him, playfully trying to calm him down, but then she started crying too. When she was able to find her words, she said: "he's understanding what absence is," *está entendiendo qué es la ausencia*.

With a broken voice, she tried to explain the profound contradiction she thought Dylan was experiencing: seeing his mother and, at the same time, being unable to find her, seeing her there, on the screen, and realizing she's not really there in the room with him.

Then, with a seamless shift of narrative (or perhaps there was no shift at all), Doña Inés was speaking of her own mother: of how unsettled she feels when she sees her in a photograph. Seeing her there, but knowing she's not there. She repeatedly clasped her fingers, as if trying to grab something in the air. She remembered the day of her mother's death, taking her to the hospital, seeing her dead body and being unable to believe she had died. She remembered riding in someone's car back to the farm with her body in a coffin, and being unable to cry. Doña Rosa sat quietly next to her, acknowledging, in brief sentences, that Doña Inés was especially close to their mother, having been the only daughter who stayed and who took care of her in her old age. But words were now pouring out of Doña Inés: she spoke of how she delivered Johana on her own, lying on the kitchen floor, of the difficulty of raising three children without help, of losing both her parents in the lapse of one year, of her constant struggle to make ends meet. In between sobs, she told stories I had heard from her before in pragmatic tones, but which for a brief moment, that afternoon, she appeared to find impossibly difficult to fathom.

It was the story of her life, what was flowing out of Doña Inés, what was brought about by that juxtaposition of images—the image of Johana, in her temporary absence, and the thought of the photographs of her mother, seen after her death. And it was as if Dylan's inability to wrap his head

around the idea of Johana's absence had unhinged Doña Inés's practical grasp of her own losses, had put her in contact, too, with the visceral and unsettling understanding of what absence is.

Dead and alive

For a moment, in that brief encounter between Dylan, Doña Inés, and the images of their absent mothers, words appeared to be out of reach. Dylan could not yet pronounce a single word and Doña Inés seemed to be struggling to articulate in language the distress they both suddenly experienced. But she *was* trying to find the right words that could convey what she was feeling—she was clasping her fingers, she was trying to grab something in the air—and instead she abandoned herself to the telling of her own life story, as if she could not give us a verbal hint of her present aching without exposing herself entirely. Dylan, to quote philosopher Cora Diamond (2003), "was not yet in the [language-]game," and Doña Inés, I think she "could no longer speak within the game."[61]

I am borrowing the words that Diamond uses to describe ""the contradictory permanent horrors" […] of the imagination of death" (Ibid:2)—a phrase that she in turn borrows from Ted Hughes's poem "Six Young Men" (1957). The poem is the contemplation of a photograph picturing six young men who are standing in a "familiar spot"; both the poem and the photograph give a paused regard at the lives of these men with the knowledge that they died only six months after the photo

[61] A language-game, in Wittgenstein's terms, consists "of language and the actions into which it is woven" (1958:para. 7). As he explains: "[…] the term "*language-game*" is meant to bring into prominence the fact that the *speaking* of language is part of an activity, or of a form of life" (Ibid: para. 23). To be "outside" of a language-game is to find oneself outside of a form of life; it is to find oneself in a situation where the words one uses, the way one uses them, are failing to become meaningful. To be "*outside* a particular language-game," Wittgenstein explains, "is like what a boy once did, who had to say whether the verbs in certain sentences were in the active or passive voice, and who racked his brains over the question whether the verb "to sleep" meant something active or passive" (Ibid: para. 47).

was taken. “In the photograph,” Diamond writes, “there is thinkable, there is seeable, the death of the men” (2003:1), but at the same time their life seems pulsing and undeniable. To feel this contradiction, the speaker in the poem suggests, is to feel one’s body become detached from its precarious life. Diamond is interested in how the poem shows “the experience of the mind’s not being able to encompass something which it encounters” (Ibid:2), the failed attempt at bringing “together in thought what cannot be thought” (Ibid). She calls this experience “the difficulty of reality”—a difficulty that involves the fact that what we find impossible to think might seem, for others, utterly ordinary: the fact that “it is plainly possible to describe the photo so it does not seem boggling at all” (Ibid).

It is to explain what she means by this last sentence that Diamond writes the words I have just borrowed, and which seem to reflect that moment between Dylan and Doña Inés. As she considers what it would be like to teach a child to understand that a dead person can be smiling in a photograph, she writes:

> If she asks “Why is he smiling if he’s dead?”, she might be told that he was smiling when the picture was taken, because he was not dead then, and that he died later. The child is being taught the language-game, being shown how the problem disappears as she comes to see how things are spoken of in the game. The point of view from which she sees a problem is not yet in the game; while that from which the horrible contradiction impresses itself on the poet-speaker is that of someone who can no longer speak within the game. Language is shouldered out from the game, as the body from its instant and heat (2003:2).

The question that runs through Diamond's essay is how to listen to a speaker like that of the poem, a person who finds herself outside of language and of the life we live in language, without resolving the contradiction that is hurting her (like one would do with a child in the impulse to teach her the language-game). This is a question that Diamond leaves unsettled, but in each of the examples she addresses, the speaker asks for a kind of imagination that can inhabit a wounded body—a body that, for an instant, is "dead and alive at the same time" (Ibid:22).

I find this helpful to understand that moment of juxtaposing images, where Doña Inés was a mother caught in-between motherly absence and death. She was the daughter who stayed, seeing the death of her mother; she was the mother that stayed, staring into her daughter's absence. She was present and alive but also, as if captured in a play of mirrors, she was dead and absent—viscerally and also, as Diamond helps us see, in the sense of becoming separated from "our ordinary life with our concepts" (Ibid:12). And so the question of how to receive in our imaginations a wounded body, a body freshly shaken out of life, must also be about how to build "a shared language" (Das 2007:8) that might allow us to grasp the disturbing knowledge of *what absence is*; a kind of language capacious enough to make room for a person in the experience of inhabiting a world so profoundly marked by absence that it can put her own presence, her entire life, into doubt.

The sense of this doubt echoes throughout the opening scene in Robert Desjarlais' (2016) reflections on Buddhist conceptions of life and death, a scene that also mirrors this moment of shared unsettlement between Dylan and Doña Inés. Desjarlais describes a two-year old boy, a boy who is busy playing amongst familiar people, and who has yet to realize that his mother has left the room. An uncle of the boy calls for his attention and, along with a hand gesture that represents

a presence only to show how it turns into an absence, he says, "*Āmā, khoi?*"—a phrase in Nepali that Desjarlais translates as "your mother" (*āmā*), "what happened to her?" (*khoi?*) (Ibid:2). Seeing the repetition of this gesture, hearing the warmth of the first word (*āmā*) next to the sharpness of the second (*khoi?*), the boy finally realizes his mother is gone. Struck by a sudden despair, he anxiously searches for her. Desjarlais suggests, in conversation with his Hyolmo Buddhist friends, that, by gaining awareness of this absence, the boy "is coming to form, as we all do, a relation to death" (Ibid:5). But it is his own death which seems to be in question: "To learn that one's mother can disappear or be taken away", Desjarlais continues, "is to learn that one's world can disappear, that nothing is certain or stable, including the formations of one's own self and family" (Ibid:5). The imagination of absence can throw us into the imagination of death—of our own death, in relation to that of our others. Especially in a world marked by absence, it can throw our own existence into doubt.

A world marked by absence—I understand this in the sense that the parting of others, be it because of death or because of migration, carves out an absence, chips away bits from the place or from the body that is the site of their departure. The notion of absence we are confronted with, then, relates to loss, even though this might only be a part of it; in some ways, and at different moments, the absence of others can also be sustaining. We could, for instance, go back to the story of the sisters of Doña Inés: at the time of their departure, in the early nineteen seventies, it was extremely common for young girls, under eight years old, to leave the countryside to take jobs as domestic workers in the growing cities; although their departure was often a way to escape demanding working routines or the beatings of parents and teachers, it also regularly happened that it was their parents who would find a job for them and motivated their migration, looking to secure an extra

source of income for the family (Puyana V. and Orduz 1998). If we go further back, to the time when young campesinos from this region migrated towards zones of agricultural expansion in the departamento of Tolima, we could also note that, especially in the 1920s, these were often seasonal migrations that helped sustained the lives of those who stayed in San Miguel or in Boyacá more broadly (Ramírez and Tobasura 2004). Yet, in staying, there are people who have experienced three generations of the youth leaving, however connected they have remained to their loved ones, in such a way that they have seen their everyday world become empty of people. And the embodied awareness of this experience, as Doña Inés brings to our attention, can shake us suddenly out of language, and it can weaken our hold on life.

The difficulty of this experience also registers in subtler, more ordinary ways. I am thinking, for instance, of that common and early arthrosis that is exhausting the bodies of Don Gerardo and Doña Inés. It can be traced back through their life stories, to the working routines they have endured since they were children, and also through the structural inequalities constraining the conditions of their lives (which I addressed in the first chapter of this thesis). These are the very inequalities that have largely nurtured the departure of others, of their sisters, of their neighbors, the slow exodus that has implied that the workload of those who stayed, which used to be distributed among numerous family members, has increased. And, at an age when people tend to reduce the weight of their work by delegating it to younger generations, they have to keep at it—even if it hurts, even if it requires not one but two walking sticks, even though it literally chips their bones away.

I am also thinking of the abandoned lots and houses and rooms in family homes, of the ways in which they create a kind of vacuum that isolates those who live surrounded by them. Don Vicente, Claudia's father, complains that, when his wife has to stay in town to take care of their youngest daughter who has a tendency to get sick, days and days can pass with no one passing by, without him seeing another person. "I'm done, I'm sucked dry", he said, *yo ya estoy mamado, estoy mamado*, of all that walking through empty fields without seeing a single human face, of having to walk for over an hour towards the urban center of San Miguel just to see someone else. He was so tired that, in order to move to town, he was trying to sell his lands, even if below their fair price and even though he has been struggling throughout his life, and against the current, to sustain the kind of life he finds worth living—a life in the countryside, working his own land with his own hands. To borrow the words of Povinelli, he found he had "exhausted" his "will to be otherwise" (2011:119).[62]

So when I say that the absence of others puts in doubt the presence of those who stay, I want to note that there is something quite literal about this: that the absence of others, carved out through

[62] In Povinelli's work (2011), *the otherwise* refers to alternative forms of living that precariously persist at the margins of late liberalism's limited definition of cultural difference. *The otherwise*, that is, refers to the forms of life that persist, and the new political and ethical orientations that are potentially emerging, in spaces occupied by those who have failed to fit the definition of difference that would make them intelligible to the state as subjects of "special" rights and of care; of those who, being also unable or unwilling to produce value in the terms of a neoliberal economy, are relatively abandoned—left to exhaust themselves. These spaces are marked by an "indeterminacy" so intense that, in it, life and death "oscillate," and even "coincide"; where life is often experienced as a slow kind of dying (Ibid:10). And this seems to be as true of the Indigenous Australian communities that Povinelli works and thinks with as it is of peasant life in Colombia; a form of life that does not fit the ethnical "otherness" through which cultural difference becomes intelligible in this country, and that is understood as an obstacle for capitalist progress. In this context, *the will* to be otherwise is not necessarily about desire or even about choice; it is rather about continuing to search for ways to endure in such a space, and against the odds. One of the challenges that Povinelli presents us with, and which I have been trying to engage with throughout this thesis, is how to appreciate the potentiality of this form of being while also foregrounding the material, and often painful, conditions of this endurance (Ibid:110).

the abandonment of the countryside, takes bits away from people's lives, that it pulls them away from their worlds they want to inhabit, and that, in some ways, it can even pose a threat to their lives. Some of the nuances of this threat became visible through a conversation I had with Azael Castellanos, the carpenter of San Miguel, later in the morning of an uneventful day. I now turn to this conversation, while keeping in mind the unresolved question of what kind of storytelling can secure our presence in the world just when it feels to be fading into absence.

Waiting for Teodoro

We had just finished drafting the kinship chart of his family and, after making an effort to remember stories all the way to his great grandparents while he finished polishing a bed frame, Don Azael had suggested we take a break. In the store just across the street from his workshop, we were now resting our eyes on the messy sketch on my notebook. Some names were missing, like that of his paternal grandmother's siblings. Just a few minutes earlier he had told me that he never learned their names because he never knew them, since, as far as he knows, they always lived in northern Tolima. "That's where everyone from the generation of my parents and grandparents used to go," Don Azael had said, "and from my generation forward, everyone goes to Bogotá."

The thought of the different moments of migration that have gradually emptied the countryside of San Miguel kept coming into our conversation during our mid-morning break, and it eventually brought our imagination to the many elderly peasants who are living alone in the countryside. "There are so many of them living alone!" Don Azael said, and then:

> Here, in my town, old people die alone. There, in the countryside. They don't want to leave. Now there's even a home for the elderly, but they refuse to come here.

> That's how they pass the time, until they die: in the countryside, alone. Maybe a grandchild comes to see them once in a while.[63]

It took me by surprise when his narrative seemingly shifted: "not long ago an old woman that lived alone was killed. She was killed, that poor old woman," *porque ahí mataron a una viejita por allá arriba que vivía sola. Mataron a la viejita*. This has happened more than once, Don Azael explained, that elderly peasants living alone are murdered, and it usually happens that people blame their family members for their deaths, under the suspicion that they wanted to use or sell the land of the deceased. In the story of the woman he had just mentioned, it was her grandson, that grandchild that "maybe comes once in a while," who was supposed to have killed her.

San Miguel was shaken by one of these chilling murders during the time I lived there: an elderly woman was found dead in her house and the rumor spread that she had been killed by her own son. On the day of the mass and the burial, old memories of similar disturbing incidents, spread in time, circulated around town. Each time, a family member or someone who worked for the deceased, someone who knew them was held responsible, at least in the rumors in circulation, for the murder. "These things happen here," Don Azael said that morning, *eso también por aquí pasan cosas*: a violence that seems at odds with the quietness of San Miguel, but which is not unrelated to the relative abandonment of its rural areas.

In the home for the elderly that Don Azael had just mentioned, the desire for land that underlies this violence appeared to be a common theme of conversation. There, I briefly met a woman, she

[63] "*Aquí en mi pueblo han muerto viejitos solos, allá en el campo, y no se han querido… ahora que hay ancianato, no se han querido venir. Ahí se la pasan, hasta que se mueren en el campo: solos. De vez en cuando po'allá va el nieto a verlos.*"

must have been in her eighties, who told me she took care of her mother for eighteen years, having been the only one of her siblings who stayed to take care of their parents in their old age, since she never married or had children. Once her mother died, she was left alone, *me quedé sola*, but she managed to get by until an advanced arthrosis prevented her from walking— "and that was most necessary for me," she said, *era lo más necesario*, since she lived on the milk she sold from a couple of cows, and this required her to walk long distances to reach the road that the milk truck daily travelled. That's how she got there, to the home for the elderly, since she was not close to the rest of her family and did not want to move in with them in the city. "They never come to visit. Not even to say hi," she said, "they're upset because I haven't died yet," *están delicados porque no me he muerto*. I asked her what she meant, and another elderly woman, sitting next to her, answered: "They're just waiting to get their hands on our belongings," *están detrás de los teneres*.

This fleeting moment between strangers also brings into view the limit of the webs of care that would otherwise sustain campesinos in their old age and secure their presence in the places they want to inhabit. In Colombia, there is extremely limited social welfare for rural inhabitants, who work in the informal sector and therefore tend to have no pension, which means that in their old age, when they are no longer able to work, they largely depend on whatever limited care their family members can provide (see Departamento Nacional de Planeación 2015:36–39). Yet, within this long history of migration, families thin down to the point where it is only one person who stays to take care of the elderly—usually, it is someone who never married nor had kids who stays or who is asked to come back to take care of their ageing parents. In many cases that I got to know during my fieldwork, the person who stays is also someone who has some kind of undiagnosed cognitive disability (presumably associated with meningitis or with autism); I heard stories, for

example, of people who had an accident as children that "left them special," *quedó especial* (with some kind of disability), and were thus "left to take care of their parents," *quedó para cuidar a los papás*. It is therefore often caregivers who then find themselves at the end of the forms of care that a family is expected to uphold, who have no near kin to rely on once their bodies become exhausted in a way that, in consequence, also exhausts their possibility to inhabit their own homes.

This is a kind of limit that people recognize when they say, thinking of neighbors who are taking care of their parents by themselves, and who are ageing alongside them, that "solitude will soon crawl into them," *en menos les va a entrar soledad*. And this solitude that crawls into people, that "enters them," it poses, by itself, yet another threat to their lives. Don Azael was also thinking about this as we sipped on warm tea across the street from his workshop. As we continued to reflect on all those elderly people who are living alone in the countryside, he emphasized that sometimes "loneliness kills them," *los mata la soledad*.

I heard these words often during my fieldwork, I heard them within stories of older peasants who died alone and whose neighbors only learned about their deaths upon realizing that for a few days they had not seen any smoke coming out of the chimneys of their houses—the smoke that usually comes out throughout the day from the woodstoves that are most common in old peasant houses. Even though these people were old and were known to suffer from some illness, that late realization of their deaths, the isolation that surrounded them and that image of the smokeless house, they all amounted to that same conclusion: that they died of loneliness—some even claim that they died of sadness. And, more than it happened with memories of old murders, stories of

deaths of loneliness proliferated in San Miguel: everyone seemed to have known someone who faced this kind of end.

These deaths of loneliness, however, are also spoken of in relation to the force of attachments. Edgar Velosa, who was the first person to bring my attention to the fact that people in this region "tend to die of sadness," he also claimed that he would die of sadness if he were forced to leave the farm where he lives alone. Don Azael had also mentioned this that day, during our mid-morning break: all those people who live alone "they don't want to leave"; for as long as they can, "they refuse" to leave their homes in the countryside. [64] I asked him if maybe this had happened with someone in his family, if someone had refused to leave their homes and, as a result, had died

[64] Seeing just how widespread is the knowledge of these lonely deaths, I am continuously surprised to find no register of them in the media or, more broadly, in the written history of Colombia. My sense is that this is related to how stories about deaths of loneliness are also about attachment; that this has to do with the fact that, as both Don Azael and Don Edgar bring to our attention, those who have died alone had often also refused to leave their homes (a refusal that is only partly about choice; as Don Edgar mentions, it is rather understood as a vital need). To quote Povinelli's reflection on the ways in which states in late liberalism wait until alternative social projects "exhaust" themselves, "because it appears to be their choice, no one seems to be killing their will to be otherwise" (Ibid:119). No one seems to be killing them, all those people who die of loneliness, for that matter. In consequence, following Povinelli's argument, their uneventful passing does not "seem to necessitate ethical reflection" (Ibid:13) or "response" (Ibid:14).

On this note, I find it revealing to consider the lack of register about deaths of loneliness in Colombia in relation to the ample media coverage of "lonely deaths" in Japan, which has been discussed by authors like Anne Allison (2013) and Jason Danely (2019). As Allison explains, these deaths, inscribed in a historical moment of unprecedented social insecurity and a fading sense of community, express most painfully how the precarity of Japan registers on people's lives. In the context of Japan, Allison explains, precarity needs to be understood in relation to post-Fordism; to the loss of the social and economic stability that used to characterize in tandem the economy, the family life, and the personal paths of people in Japan—to "the loss of something that only certain countries, at certain historical periods, and certain workers ever had in the first place" (Ibid: 7). Indeed, if we understand precarity in these terms, it could be argued, as Kathleen M. Millar notes, that "in many countries of the global South, precarious work has […] always been a part of the experience of the laboring poor" (2014:34). So while in a place like Japan something changed, and people noticed (even if they have yet to find ways to appropriately respond), in places like Colombia there is nothing to notice in this sense, except for an abandonment so old that it has become ordinary—and that, therefore, to return to Povinelli's argument, seems to require no ethical reflection or response (see Introduction).

alone. He said no and, with the same breath, he began to tell me the story of his paternal grandmother, Custodia.

> She lived alone for a while, my grandmother Custodia. For ten years she lived alone. It was when her husband died [Don Azael's grandfather, Teodoro]. And that's how things are! Listen to what life's like in the countryside: she was alone for a while, living alone.[65]
>
> […]
>
> And my grandmother said that, around six in the afternoon, she went to bed and started listening to the rosary on the radio, and she felt that Teodoro came to be with her. That she could feel it, that she could feel it, and she stayed with that story! She stayed with that story, that woman [*se quedó con ese cuento la señora*]. That Teodoro came to be with her every night! That he came, that he, the deceased [*el finado*] came to be with her, that she could feel when he arrived, that he kept her company, and then she would go to sleep… she would sleep soundly until five in the morning when she'd wake up to the sound of the morning mass on the radio, to drink her coffee…[66]
>
> […]
>
> We were at a party once, at my aunt's house. And people were saying that my grandmother should spend the night there, that she should stay there for the night.

[65] "*Mi bisabuela duró un rato sola [M: su bisabuela cuál…], mi abuela Custodia. Duró como diez años sola, se murió el marido y… ¡como es la cosa! Póngale cuidado cómo es la vida allá. Estuvo un rato sola, viviendo sola.*"

[66] "*Decía mi abuela que se acostaba a las seis y escuchaba po' allá el rosario, y que ella sentía que el Teodoro venía a acompañarla. Que ella sentía y que ella sentía y ¡se quedó con ese cuento! Se quedó con ese cuento la señora. ¡Que Teodoro venía a acompañarla en la noche! Que venía, que venía el finado a acompañarla, que ella sentía que llegaba, que la acompañaba, y ya dormía… hasta las cinco de la mañana se despertaba a escuchar la misa por la emisora. Se levantaba ya al tinto.*"

> And she said "no, no, I have to leave because, can't you see that Teodoro is coming?". And all of us, her grandchildren, laughing. But she insisted, that yes, yes, that he was coming, that she could feel that, and that's why she never wanted to leave the house. […] Then one day there was an accident, someone was killed near her house, and that's when she got scared. She was suddenly scared of living alone.[67]

The "accident," as Don Azael explained, was that a neighbor was killed by gunshot for reasons that were never fully resolved, at least publically. It must have been something personal, he thought, maybe he owed someone money.[68] But, even if this was an incident unrelated to his grandmother, it was then that she realized how vulnerable she was as an elderly person living by herself and that she agreed to leave the house, caving into her children's concerns for her safety. From that moment on, she lived in turns in her children's homes, some months in the countryside of San Miguel, some in the urban center of this municipio, still some in the city of Bogotá. From that moment on, the old family house was left alone in the countryside. Doña Custodia died in one of her daughter's house. Upon her death, she was buried in the cemetery of San Miguel.

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[67] "*Estábamos en una fiesta donde una tía una vez; "que mi abuelita se queda esta noche", "que mi mamá se queda aquí." Dijo "no, no, yo me voy porque ¿no ve que Teodoro llega?" Y los nietos toteados de la risa. Que sí, que llegaba y dijo que sí, que sí, que ella sentía eso, que por eso no se quería salir.* […] *Entonces un día fue un accidente y mataron a una persona por allá cerca y ya se asustó. Ya se asustó ella. Vivía sola.*"

[68] Don Azael's mention of the "personal" marks a difference with the organized violence associated to narco-traffic and to the political violence of Colombia's armed conflict, none of which have ever taken place in San Miguel de Sema. This is not to say, however, that this place, or any corner of Colombia, can be safely described as untouched by the country's internal conflict. Quite on the contrary, as I discussed in the Introduction, the abandonment of the countryside—in terms of the state's disregard towards the inequalities of the countryside and rural inhabitant's precarious conditions of life—is both at the origin of the rise of this conflict and one of its most widespread consequences. As I also noted in the Introduction, this is acknowledged in the peace agreements between the Colombian state and the FARC guerrilla, the first chapter of which consists of a proposal for an "integral rural reform" (Mesa de Conversaciones 2017) which has only recently begun to be implemented.

"But for ten years she lived alone!" Don Azael said again, for ten years Doña Custodia delayed that moment of abandonment, in her resolve to be there for *el finado* Teodoro. "That's what she said, my grandmother Custodia. "I'm not going because, can't you see that Teodoro will come and he won't find me?" *No me voy porque ¿no ve que viene Teodoro y no me encuentra?*

To stay with a story

Don Azael says that his grandmother Custodia "stayed with that story," *se quedó con ese cuento la señora*, with the story of the late Teodoro's nightly returns, meaning, at least in one sense, that despite her grandchildren's disbelief and her children's concerns for her safety, she insisted on it. But the way Don Azael tells his memory of his grandmother leaves room to think that she also literally stayed with it, that she stayed in telling that story, in performing that narrative space where Teodoro could return and find her—where his death was not at odds with his presence, as it often is in "our ordinary life with our concepts" (Diamond 2003:12), as it was in that moment at the party when all of her grandchildren were laughing.

By saying that Doña Custodia's story creates a *narrative space* for Teodoro's return, I do not mean to put into doubt the reality of his presence. I think, on the contrary, that we can take seriously the fact that he was actually there, every evening, keeping her company. And it seems to me no coincidence that Teodoro would return just as she was listening to the rosary—a series of prayers, proper to Roman Catholicism, that are meant to motivate a meditation on the mysteries of the life of Jesus as seen by the Virgin Mary, which unsettle the linearity of time and, in turn, blur the boundaries between the living and the dead. This is apparent in the very structure of the rosary,

which is composed of fifteen series of prayers, each consisting of the repetition of ten Hail Marys called "decades." The decades, in turn, are grouped into three "chaplets," and, finally, each chaplet is devoted to the contemplation of the mysteries of a particular moment in the life of Christ. The rosary thus involves a movement through time—back to the time of Christ and throughout the different stages of his life, his death, and his resurrection. Yet praying the rosary is not mainly a task of remembrance but of actualization. In his apostolic letter "*Rosarium Virgins Mariae*," the pope John Paul II (2002) wrote that the memories of Mary constitute the rosary, and then he clarified: "We need to understand this word [*remembering*] in the biblical sense of remembrance (*zakar*) as a making present of the works brought about by God in the history of salvation" (Ibid:7).

My friend Edilma explained to me that you always pray to the rosary with an intention, a particular reason to ask for the Virgin's intercession related to whatever is concerning you at the time. The same apostolic letter also speaks about this: it encourages devotees to "embrace in the decades of the Rosary […] all the events that make up the lives of individuals," and suggests that, in doing so, the rosary can ""mark the rhythm of human life" […] bringing it into harmony with the "rhythm" of God's own life" (2002:15) . The recitation of the rosary, then, allows for the harmonization of different rhythms or temporalities; it involves an attunement with the afterlife while, at the same time, as Ellen Badone writes, it motivates those who are praying to "contemplate death and meditate on life's fragility" (2017:205). I mentioned this last idea to Edilma and she said that this made sense to her: when she prayed the rosary with her family, they often prayed for the well-being of their family members, alive and dead, and often simply for the souls of loved ones

who had died, *las almas benditas*.[69] She also mentioned that the recitation of the rosary is always present in the *novenario*—the nine days of prayers for the dead that I mentioned in the previous chapter of this thesis, which motivates a contemplation of one's own death in relation to the loss of others, and which speaks of the ways in which experiencing someone's absence is to die a little ("we die and live […] in each friend that leaves…."). This attunement with the presence of death in life also seems to be contemplated in this form of prayer: in her essay on the meditations of the rosary, Badone further suggests that, because this practice involves a temporary renunciation of the body in order to let the mind wander over the rhythmic chanting of the decades, it offers "something like a foretaste of death" (2017:203).

The way people keep track of the decades, while their minds stray away, is by counting the wooden or plastic beads of a necklace that is also called "a rosary." They pick one bead at the time, as they chant one of the prayers, and the rest of the beads hang in the air, or are held in a roll on the palms of their hands. As they pass from one Hail Mary to the next, they slide their fingers from one bead to the other. It is a practice that has an odd resemblance to the way people pick agraz berries, those wild Andean blueberries, the selling of which helps people make a living in this place (see chapter 1); it resembles how they gently press the berries with the tips of their fingers, roll them off the thin agraz-bush branches, and let them fall into their cupped hands. As people pick agraz, their minds also roam around—Doña Inés, for instance, says that when she feels overwhelmed with her thoughts, she goes out to pick agraz and to "talk to the plants," *hablar con las maticas*. And, just as it happens with praying to the rosary, agraz berry picking is a practice that elderly campesinos

[69] "*uno reza con una intención, está pidiendo la intercesión de la Virgen. Que todos estemos bien. O por las almas benditas. Uno piensa en eso mientras reza, y reza siguiendo el Rosario en la emisora. Hoy en día la gente ha dejado de rezar porque eso se hacía en familia y como ya todos los hijos se van…*"

can engage with, when their ageing bodies do not allow them to take part in other everyday tasks. In San Miguel, I have heard people say that going out to pick agraz helps to "make pain bearable," *hace el dolor llevadero*. I have also heard that it is something that people turn to, in search for calm, after the loss of a loved one.[70]

Thinking about the rosary alongside agraz berry picking, which is a practice that is thus sometimes associated with mourning, makes me think that there is something intensely earthly about this form of prayer, a wish to be in the world without losing touch with the afterlife. Perhaps both of these practices—praying to the rosary and picking agraz—allow for us to stay with our pain, with the thought of death, and even with the dead, while we also strive to grab on to the world one berry, one bead, one prayer at a time. Remember Doña Inés clasping her fingers in the air. It seems that we sometimes need to be able to be "dead and alive at the same time" (Diamond 2003:22) in a way that poses no resolvable contradiction, and the recitation of the rosary, for a moment sustained through a kind of repetitive chanting that both grounds us and frees us from our earthly selves, there comes into being a space where this is feasible; a narrative space (perhaps another kind of language-game) where the dead are not entirely gone and the living are not entirely alive.

[70] I want to thank Marco Villarreal for bringing to my attention this wonderful ethnographic insight about the relation between agraz berry picking and the recitation of the rosary; something he suggested right when he finished reading the manuscript for an article I wrote that revolves around agraz berry picking, boredom, and mourning, and which is based on my MA thesis (Cuéllar Gempeler, 2014). In these writings, I speak about how agraz berry picking offers "alternate rhythms" (Desjarlais 2016:119) to bereavement and death. I borrow this phrase from Desjarlais' reflections about the ways in which the presence and movement of others, and the chanting and dancing that are performed in Hyolmo Buddhist funerary rituals, "suggest rhythms distinct from those solely of grief" (Ibid:117). These alternate rhythms, Desjarlais writes, "offer strands of awareness that bring a person back to the world" (Ibid:117).

It thus makes sense that it was precisely in this moment that the late Teodoro could find his way back to his house and to Doña Custodia's side. And yet she had to be there for him to find her (that was her concern, as Don Azael remembers it: "can't you see that Teodoro is coming and he won't find me?"), and the possibility of her being there became possible by insisting in that same story that allowed for him to come back. What I am suggesting is that, by engaging in a form of storytelling that made room for Teodoro's company, by performing her own kind of chanting that kept her grounded in place long enough to be reached by him, Doña Custodia also made it possible for her house in the countryside to remain inhabited and inhabitable for a bit longer—that she *stayed with that story*.

Second burials

There is something at once generative and fracturing about the moments when the limits separating the worlds of the living and of the dead become blurred. In the forms of narrative that sustain the story of Doña Custodia, not only are the dead called upon by the living, but also the world of the living is restored in communion with the dead, and, just as the dead come into their world, the living come a little closer to death. It's not that the fragility of a life, in its precarious attachment to a place, is suddenly strengthened. It's not that we can fully or permanently bring back the dead. But a story like that of the late Custodia—who "insisted that yes, yes, that he is coming"—in the repetition of that story, just like in the rhythmic and repetitive chanting of the decades, in all these repetitions that *insist*, there is a kind of movement against the inevitability of nonetheless impending losses. There is the possibility of pulling oneself close to that which one is about to

lose, even though one might lose it all the same, and even though one might lose a little life in the process.[71]

This makes me think of the ways in which San Miguel comes to life in relation to mourning; when there is a burial or when there is a mass in commemoration of someone's death, which is usually held one month after their death, and in some anniversaries of their passing (the first and second years, the fifth year, the tenth year…). On these occasions, the streets that tend to be quiet, so quiet that dogs can sleep their long naps undisturbed in the middle of the main road, are suddenly busy with cars and vans that evidently come from the city. People coming from nearby rural areas walk in large groups through the unpaved roads, and pickup trucks, and even trucks that are usually used to transport livestock, arrive full of people from farther veredas. Often there are not enough seats for everyone in the church, despite additional rows of plastic white chairs, and although tens of people listen to the mass standing up, there is not enough room for the multitudes that appear to pay their respects to the family of the deceased. The crowd of the mass overflows down the stairs of the church and into the park, and then, as soon as the mass is over, it gathers in a thick procession that packs the streets leading to the hill of the cemetery.

There, after the burial or the mass, the procession disintegrates, but it stays within the cemetery, as people tend to take the opportunity to visit their deceased loved ones. Sometimes it is the other way around: people attend someone else's burial or mass because of the opportunity to visit their

[71] This reminds of Angela Garcia's (2016) reflections on *death as a resource for life*. In an essay thus entitled, where she thinks through fragments of memories from a family of women marked by heroin addiction and various forms of loss and dispossession, she writes: "death-in-life is not a morbid manifestation that is somehow opposed to life, but rather a vital experience that provides a basis for life's meaningful unfolding, even generating hope for a future. However, as the future is expressed through loss, doubt is also cast upon any possibility of its coming to pass" (Ibid:316).

family's graves. They scatter in small groups, or wander on their own, and spend some time near familiar tombs. They then gather to eat roasted chicken and to drink cases and cases of tepid beer.[72] Just as it happens earlier in the church, the stores and restaurants in town cannot host the number of people that suddenly appear, and so sidewalks and streets become full of chattering crowds. It all lasts for a few hours and then, as my friend Natalia told me, they "sweep the town," *eso barren el pueblo*, back to its usual quietness; they leave the town so rapidly that their movement lifts and sweeps away the dust and, with it, the noise of the fleeting crowd.

Some of the people buried in the cemetery of San Miguel, however, and who are visited in the occasion of the death of others, did not die in this place. As part of the long history of migration that underlies the stories of this thesis, it happens that people from San Miguel die elsewhere, but with the dying wish to come back after death. I was there, in the cemetery, when a woman arrived with her husband's remains: ten years had passed since his death and burial in Bogotá, where they met and got married over forty years ago. Once the permitted time had passed for the exhumation of his body, she traveled with his ashes by bus to finally fulfill his dying wish of being buried in his natal town, next to his grandfather and his brother. That day, José García, the town's gravedigger, told me that just a few weeks ago there had been a burial for a woman who had just died in Bogotá, and who was also brought here to be buried. He told me that the opposite, however,

[72] Although mourning rituals in San Miguel are essentially Catholic, it is likely that this last (and ineludible) part of funerary gatherings comes from the mourning practices of the Muiscas—the *Chibcha*-speaking indigenous group that used to inhabit the region now encompassed by the departamentos of Boyacá and Cundinamarca. As Marta Herrera Ángel (2005) relates, Muisca funerals were always followed by a *biohote*: a sacred gathering that involved dancing and the singing of verses that retold events from the past, and which revolved around the consumption of a fermented maize drink called *chicha* (the Spaniards, in consequence, referred to the biohote as "a drinking party," *una borrachera*). This was also the preferred drink for inhabitants of San Miguel—it still is, for gatherings held in people's homes—but, since its artisanal fabrication has been banned since late 1940s, its consumption in public spaces has been largely replaced by that of beer.

also happens. He invited me to witness the exhumation of bodies that were taken to Chiquinquirá or to Bogotá, to be re-buried near family members who had long settled in those cities. They were exhumed unceremoniously, their scant remains placed in small wooden ossuaries, and taken in bus rides down the mountain, following the paths that, as someone mentioned during an exhumation, they had often refused to travel when they were still alive.

It thus seems that a person's resting place is not fully determined until the moment of their second burial, and this resting place, which a person can reach long after her death, marks a kind of center towards which the living will gravitate.[73] Burying someone in San Miguel, or asking to be buried there, is in this sense a way to bring life into this place, to draw life back to it. These are instances, to borrow the words of Lisa Stevenson, where death "seems to actually constitute the habitable world, to somehow emplace the world instead of marking its limit" (2017:71). Just as it happens with Doña Custodia in her waiting for Teodoro, in the same effort of insisting in keeping the dead in their lives, people give continuity to a world they can share with them (one prayer, one bead, one berry at the time). And, in doing so, they give continuance to the life of San Miguel, to this place where they can therefore also stay, in unison with the dead.

This echoes what Stevenson calls "mournful life": "a way of imagining life […] that refuses to ignore the dead (or our desire for the dead), and that takes very seriously the way we bear the dead along" (2014:124). This form of imagination, Stevenson continues through her reading of Freud's work on mourning, "also calls into question what it is possible to know for sure" (Ibid): our

[73] As I will explore in the next chapter, however, caring for the dead also has a limit: in the cemetery, there are also many abandoned graves.

relationship to our lost loved ones is often at odds with a way of seeing the world that involves the "sure knowledge" that the dead are simply gone and should be let go of. As I noted in the previous chapter of this thesis, this way of understanding our relation to loss, about which Freud himself was ambivalent, is consonant with the narrative of progress that is unable to imagine a meaningful life except as one that marches forward, leaving the past, and the dead, and the places where the promise of development is spent or doubtful, "behind." To call this into question, to attempt a different narrative, is also to attempt another way of inhabiting the world. In this case, this alternative way of being in place is also similar to what Veena Das describes as "inhabiting [the world] in a gesture of mourning for it" (2007:77).

Das, just like Diamond in the essay I addressed earlier in this chapter, is here thinking with the work of Stanley Cavell, who suggests that "the world must be regained every day, in repetition, regained as gone" (1986:109). The loss of the world that preoccupies Cavell refers mainly to the ways in which the "ordinary language" of philosophical skepticism can only admit a world that can be "known for sure," in such a way that it pulls our thinking away from that which can only be "acknowledged" (Ibid). In the vocabulary of Diamond, this would be the *difficulties of reality* that we cannot resolve through argumentation but can only "stay" with, as opposed to "deflecting" from them (she writes: "[…] we can here see deflection as deflection from a path we need to find and *stay on*" (2003:18 my emphasis)). It seems to me that we can also think in these terms of the "ordinary language" of progress, keeping in mind that, as Anna Tsing (2015) argues, its linear orientation and expectations of regularity are blinding. Progress, Tsing says, blinds us to other temporalities and forms of living that might help us learn how stay in place, and with each other, and with the stories we tell each other.

There is a force, in other words, against which these stories are told, even if no one is attempting an act of resistance—a force that pushes against these mourning gestures of recuperation; a force against which we sometimes need to insist. "Here," Cavell continues, "here" within his reading of mourning against the force of skepticism, "is a way of seeing what it means that Freud too thinks of mourning as an essentially repetitive exercise"(1986:109). Here, the question is not so much how mourning can prolong into melancholia, but rather how it must be performed repeatedly in order, not to "move on," but to stay within a world that we only get to "know" (or to see, in Tsing's terms, or to bring into "our ordinary life with our concepts," in Diamond's terms) through the same means through which we lose it. This is how I interpret Cavell's understanding of mourning as a response to skepticism, when he describes it as "the path of accepting the loss of the world (you might say, accepting its loss of presence), accepting it as something that exists for us only in its loss (you might say its absence), or what presents itself as loss" (Ibid:109). To learn how to mourn, he consequently suggests, "might be the achievement of a lifetime": we regain the world "as in mourning" for our own lives (Ibid).

Yet it seems important to remember that there is another side to this: that staying in a place that becomes possible through mourning and in relation to death comes with the sense to be living in a place that, at certain moments, as Claudia said in one of those slow afternoons in San Miguel, "looks like a cemetery," *esto parece un cementerio*. It comes with the danger of being caught in a play of mirrors, like Doña Inés in that moment of juxtaposing images that began this chapter, where she not only seemed to be caught between life and death, but also between absence and presence. (It seems that the challenge is to be able to hold our presence in the world, to grab on to

the world with everything we've got, even when our lives are predicated on death and on keeping company with the dead).

It's like Janky, a woman in her thirties, told me after a long day of working yet one more temporary job that was coming to an end:

"I wish I could die here…
But sometimes I feel, ugh. I buried myself in San Miguel."
Yo me quiero morir acá…
Pero a veces pienso, aj. Me enterré en San Miguel.

Enero 4 del 2018

Me encontré las flores que doña Isabel ve siempre al lado de las casas abandonadas, y ahora yo también, en el cementerio. Me di cuenta que son enredaderas, tan tupidas que parecen surgir de una oscuridad verde y profunda.

4. The mystery of abandoned houses

A strange mystery

The first time I visited the refuge of San José, a centennial hacienda of the order of the Augustinian Recollects, Doña Doris, who with her husband, Don Gil, has administered this place for over a decade, invited me to make a tour of the house. She guided me through the long corridors that surround two indoor patios and, as we passed, with a heavy keychain in hand, she opened every one of the wooden doors of the old manor. She opened the doors of the dining room, the living room, the bathrooms, even of every one of thirteen identical and vacant bedrooms, and she invited me to enter each room, despite the fact that there was not much to see given the Recollect austerity that Doña Doris so deeply admires. Each time she opened curtains and windows, just long enough for me to glance at the view of the thick oak forest from all different angles, and then she closed them up again. The beds were made, the floors swept, and even each bathroom had spare toilet paper, as if someone was about to spend the night. But Doña Doris told me that months can pass before someone comes to stay in this ancient adobe house, and, since she is informed of upcoming visits well in advance, she knew nobody was coming in the foreseeable future. Nonetheless, she said, every now and then she makes the same tour we were making together, opening and closing doors, and she unmakes and remakes the beds, and she sweeps and mops the floors, and she dusts curtains, chairs and desks, and she returns the old hacienda to its impeccable wait for infrequent guests.

By the end of our exhaustive tour we found our way down the stairs, right after seeing a balcony meant for Catholic contemplation, and into the kitchen. Doña Doris made coffee, and we both sat

down to eat some sugar cookies that had remained from the Christmas holidays that had just recently passed. Now, she wanted to tell me about her own house. It is only ten minutes away from the refuge, and she and Don Gil go there every day to feed their chickens and their rabbits, to sweep and dust surfaces, and to nurture the myriad of plants and flowers Doña Doris has planted in the yard. It is a big house, big enough to host their relatives when they come to visit, and it stands on the verge of a hill that overlooks the cemetery of San Miguel. The lot is surrounded by *eugenia* bushes that Doña Doris keeps at the right height to get some privacy without hiding the house from her neighbors. "Gossipers," she said, "have always proved useful," *los chismosos han servido toda la vida*. That's how she knows there is always someone keeping an eye on her place, which remains vacant throughout the night. She and Don Gil, Doña Doris mentioned, rarely sleep in their own house; they spend every night in this ample adobe refuge.[74] Without me asking why, she unraveled an explanation:

> Anyway, since the point is to keep the house with warmth; with the warmth of people. If there's no people moving around, houses crumble down really fast, they begin to crack. That's a mystery, but there has to be people for a house to stay upright […] Empty houses, it's a strange mystery, but there's no denying

[74] Up until the nineteen seventies, the refuge of San José was known as "the pantry," *la despensa*, of the Convento de la Candelaria (a well-known convent of the Augustinian community that is located in the desert of la Candelaria, in the neighboring town of Ráquira). This is because this hacienda, which, as I explain later in this chapter, used to expand over 300 hectares, used to be devoted to the cultivation of wheat, barely, maize, and potato, and it had over a hundred cows for the production of milk and cheese, all of which were mainly meant for the consumption of the residents of the Convento de la Candelaria (Restrepo Mesa 1989). Even though the old manor of San José was ample since its beginnings, it has never had more than a couple of permanent residents; the Augusitian Recollects who were charged with its administration until the middle of the twentieth century, and the administrators of peasant origin, such as Doña Doris and Don Gil, who have been hired to take care of this place ever since, given the reduction of its size (which I also explain later in this chapter), it transitioned from being a productive hacienda to becoming a refuge for religious retreats.

that it's true [*pero que es cierto, es cierto*]: that if there's no one living there,

that if there's no people coming in and out of rooms, opening doors… [75]

In short, Doña Doris said, there has to be people "screwing around" for a house to stay standing. The expression she used was *jodiendo la vida*, "screwing around with life"—moving life around. Otherwise, she said, just as it has happened with many old mud houses of San Miguel, they simply "cease to exist," *dejan de existir*.

I had heard these same words a few months earlier from Eyanira Peralta, a woman who lives in the urban center of San Miguel, one morning we spent talking about her family's history. We were in her store, near the town's church, when she remembered the mud house of her grandmother, in the vereda of San Isidro. Her mother, Doña Clemencia, grew up there, and there she lived until her teenage years when she left with her husband, like many of their generation, to try their luck in the expanding agricultural frontier of northern Tolima. Doña Clemencia returned in the beginnings of the nineteen fifties, escaping the violence of the undeclared civil war that so deeply affected that region, the sound of which had made her hide trembling with fear, holding her newborn son. When she returned, her father, Eyanira's grandfather, lent her a small mud house with a thatched roof, while she remade her life. Both houses were left alone once Eyanira's grandparents died and her mother moved to town, where she bought from an uncle this store that eventually Eyanira bought from her. With the passing of time and with a lack of tenants, Eyanira told me, those houses "ceased to exist." I asked her what she meant by this, and she said:

[75] "*Igual como la gracia es mantener la casa con calor; con calor de gente. Si no hay gente moviéndose de aquí pa' allá, a toda mecha se derrumban las casas, les salen grietas. Eso es un misterio. Pero tiene que haber gente para que se mantenga una casa* […] *Las casas vacías, es un misterio raro, pero que es cierto, es cierto. Que si no hay un viviente, que la gente esté entrando, saliendo, abriendo puertas…*".

> When houses are left alone, they become undone [*se deshacen*]. It's curious. The same happens with buildings, with everything. When people stop living there, they deteriorate and they fall down [*como que se dañan y se caen*].[76]

That same day, when I got back home, I asked Doña Isabel—Isabel Sierra, in whose home I lived during my fieldwork—what she thought about these disappearing houses. We were taking in the midday sun in the indoor patio of her house; a square roofless space just between the kitchen and the room at the back that was my room for over a year. We were surrounded by vines and flowers that Doña Isabel has planted in ceramic and plastic pots, and we were standing around a bush that sprung from a hole on the cement floor that she and her husband, Don Agustín, hadn't been able to fix yet. It's a beautiful bush called *zarcillo* (*Fuchsia magellanica*) of magenta flowers and purple edible fruits. We usually gather around it, when the shade of sunny days is freezing, and we nibble on the fruits and talk about our lives, our work, our families. Every now and then, however, Doña Isabel asks Don Agustín to cut it down, but it soon springs back up, and she lets it grow to about her short height before asking him to cut it down once more. That day, it had already become overgrown, and there we were, around it, with our shoes off to let the warmth enter our toes, when I asked her about the inevitable decay of old houses. She said:

> It's because there's no one living there. That's what happens with houses. It's the lack of human warmth. Or who knows what it is; it's a mystery. When people leave, you start to see branches, leaves…for example, my grandparent's house, the stairs were alright, the floors were alright, it was fine, it was firm…[77]

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[76] "*Cuando las casas se dejan solas, se deshacen. Es curioso. Lo mismo pasa con los edificios, con todo. Cuando la gente deja de vivir ahí, como que se dañan y se caen*".

[77] "*Porque no hay nadie viviendo ahí. Es que eso les pasa a las casas. Es el calor humano. Quién sabe qué será; es un misterio. Cuando la gente se va uno empieza a ver que las ramitas, que las hojitas… por ejemplo la casa de mis abuelitos, la escalera estaba bien, el piso estaba bien, firme*".

Doña Isabel was talking about the house of her maternal grandparents, in the vereda of Torres, in Ráquira, where her family lived until, in the middle of the last century, they moved to the urban center of San Miguel. The house in Ráquira was left vacant, and, although they continued going to see it every once in a while, their visits became more and more sporadic once her parents and uncles left to live in Bogotá and her grandparents settled permanently in town, where Doña Isabel also made her house and her life. It was then that the structure of the old family house began to "loosen," *a aflojarse*, and for the first time they had to make some restorations. That house that had been "alright" for nearly a century suddenly had loose stairs and cracks on the walls. "It's human life," Doña Isabel thought, what keeps a house firmly in place. "That's how it is with all houses. When you leave them, they grow spider webs, they feel like us [*sienten como uno*], they start growing moss." Eventually, she said, "they disappear," *desaparecen.*

This is something that she also learned through experience: a few years ago she went with one of her daughters to see the house of her grandparents "one last time," but when they reached the lot they used to own in Ráquira, they couldn't find it. It was gone. Because of that strange mystery, Doña Isabel imagined, that house "had already become earth," *seguramente ya se había vuelto tierra*.

Mud houses

All those houses, however, were made out of earth. They were made of *bahareque*, a mixture of clay, sand and water, structured with wood and natural fibers. It was Don Azael who explained to me precisely how these houses were built. Even though he is mainly a carpenter, he also works building houses, and what he knows he learned "by doing," *haciendo*, and by observing his

grandfather, Teodoro, and his father, Cervando, who were both masons, *albañiles*, as well as laborers for the hacienda Paicagüita, in the vereda of Peña Blanca. On the day I visited him at his workshop to talk about this, he first made sure I was ready to take notes of his precise words, and then, while he finished the details of a wooden door, he began to tell me about "the oldest houses of this town."

"Those houses," he said, "were made out of the same earth where the house was built." Don Azael said "*la misma tierra*": the same earth, the same dirt, the same land—these are all the same word in Spanish. Those houses were made out of the very same material of the surface that would sustain the house, the same earth that people worked and which provided food for the family and for those who helped to build the house; they were made out of the same earth from which grew the trees that gave the wood to structure the mud, and also the natural fibers used to make a thick rope to tie the wood together. "It was all the same earth," Don Azael emphasized, and even though it was made into a house with the help of workers, these were usually friends or extended family of the future inhabitants of the house who also participated in its building.

In order to make the bahareque, Don Azael continued, they first had to chip away at the soil to get a mixture of clay and sand that they would hydrate with water from nearby creeks, and then they would tread the mud down with their own feet, or with a donkey. With oak or alder trees, they fashioned wooden posts, *horcones*, which they buried in the ground on the base of stones that would prevent the wood from rotting. Don Azael explained to me that the structure of the walls, which were made with branches from these same trees, was similar to that of a basket; it was a double-layered grid of thin branches tied together with *cuan*, a rope made out of ichu grass (called

iche in Spanish). [78] That grid would be filled with the treaded mud, and the walls would be plastered with mud too, as well as with horse dung, *cagajón de cabalgar*. For the rooftops, they would make a structure of wood threaded with a local cane called *caña brava*, the wood lengthwise and the cane broadwise, and through that grid they would fix fibers such as straw (*paja* and *puntero*) for the thatched roofs. The floors were usually "left in dirt," *se dejaban en tierra*: the land was cleared but not covered with any other material. These bahareque houses, Don Azael noticed, rarely had more than one room and, more often than not, were windowless. In his sociological study on the lives of campesinos of the Andes, Fals Borda also noted the lack of windows in peasant homes; when he asked people from the region why, they responded it was to keep their warmth (1961:172).

Those were "the oldest houses," Don Azael had said, but then he clarified that those were the houses of "the poor"—of peasants who, just like his parents and grandparents, worked their entire lives for the haciendas. He suspected that this way of making mud houses came from prehispanic times, from the Muiscas who first peopled these lands.[79] In contrast, it must have been the Spaniards, he suggested, who brought the technique for making adobe bricks. This was initially the material for the houses of hacendados, of "the rich": ample colonial buildings with multiple rooms, indoor patios and wooden or mud-tile floors. To make the adobe bricks, *las panelas*, Don

[78] The scientific name of ichu grass is *Stipa ichu*. In her study on the devolution of mudbrick in the Bolivian Andes, archaeologist Melissa Goodman-Elgar notes that this fiber has also been used as temper for mudbrick and plaster (2008:3063). In Boyacá, there is also a tradition of weaving baskets and strainers with this material. In San Miguel and Tinjacá, this is mainly done by older peasant women.

[79] While certain students of earthen Colombian architecture would support Don Azael's supposition (see for example Sánchez Gama 2007:242), there is some discussion on whether the Muiscas employed mud in the constructions of their houses in prehispanic times. Fals Borda (1961), for example, noting that there is no clear evidence in colonial writings of the use of mud in the building of houses by the Chibchas (the larger linguistic indigenous family to which the Muiscas belong), suggested that bahareque walls are the product of a mixture of Indigenous and Spanish construction techniques (Ibid: 65).

Azael explained, construction workers would first have to fashion a wooden mold, *una gavera*. The mud had to be treaded down more firmly than for the bahareque in order to evenly fill the mold, and it was then left to dry in the sun. For the structure of the house, they would dig a trench, *se hacía chamba*, that delineated the house's perimeter, and that trench would be filled with stones that would sustain the adobe brick walls. The roof was finished with mud tiles that had to be brought from nearby towns, and which were placed over the treaded mud that covered the wood and cane grid of the roof.

With the passing of time, campesinos also started making their own adobe bricks to build their homes, a transition that made a bit less sharp the distinctions that Don Azael so precisely noted between the materials that held the life of the poor and of the rich. Yet this transition partly occurred on the base of those same material distinctions: since the use of bahareque was a marker of poverty, it often happened that, when hacendados sold or donated land to peasants, they did so under the condition that they used adobe bricks and mud tiles to build their houses.[80] This was the case, for example, with the many lands that the Augustinian Recollects donated or sold near the middle of the twentieth century; by 1924 the refuge of San José expanded over more than 300 hectares, but by 1958 it had reduced down to 33 (Restrepo Mesa 1989:489–490). Most of these lands were sold between 1951 and 1958 (Ibid), but their selling and donation had been occurring gradually since the 1930s. People from San Miguel remember that one of the priests who administered the farm in the first decades of the last century, brother Luis Sáenz Ureta, sold land to many peasants "for no more than a bag of groceries," *por ahí por un mercado*. It was also brother

[80] For an ethnographic discussion about how mud is made into a social marker, indicative of class, and how its undeniable materiality is used to naturalize the "political structures of oppression" that shape the bodies and the lives of those who work the land, see Luisa Cortesi's article "The Muddy Semiotics of Mud" (2018).

Luis Sáenz who was in front of the donation of the lands that would become the urban center of San Miguel de Sema, in 1915. The scriptures of this donation included a clear description of what the lands should be used for, and it also specified "that no buildings or houses should be made of bahareque, and no roofs with straw" (transcribed in Silva 2011:237).

According to Don Azael, this transition toward the use of adobe is also related to the way that bahareque walls deteriorate: bahareque houses age more slowly than those of adobe, *se demoran más en ajar*, but once they start deteriorating "it is a headache to fix them back," *eso es un dolor de cabeza arreglarlas*. The problem, he explained, is that "as soon as you touch them, they crack," *uno las toca y se parten*. In consequence, once a bahareque house began to need repairs, people would instead build an entirely new adobe house next to the old one that was thus left vacant, or which would become a warehouse. Other times, new additions to the house were built, and the old rooms were used as storage. Since the middle of the last century, however, everyone started building with what Don Azael called "material"—industrial bricks, cement, iron posts and zinc tiles—because it is less time consuming and, for that reason, less expensive.[81] Walking through the veredas of San Miguel, I found houses that still register the passing of all these architectural times; houses with old bahareque walls attached to more recent walls made of adobe, all mended with "material."

[81] Don Azael calculated the timing of this last transition toward the use of "material" in reference to the arrival of the Institute of Territorial Credit (*Instituto de Crédito Territorial*), a state institute created in 1939 and initially charged with the task of improving the "functional, hygienic and aesthetic" aspects of rural houses (see Ramírez Nieto 2019). The modernizing mentality behind this project is visible in Fals Borda's essay on the psychological and social aspects of Colombian rural households, where, describing the perspective of this institute (with which he seemed to only partially agree), he writes: "In sum, the situation of Colombian households is in general adverse to progress, is not conducive to hygienic practices, and is deteriorating the moral of the family" (1956:208).

Perhaps, as Tim Ingold suggests, houses are always in the making (2013:48). "But here," Don Azael continued, "houses were never finished, young lady," *Pero esas casas no se terminaban nunca, sumercé*. "It was a matter of making walls and roofs, and taking refuge. People didn't finish their houses," *Eso era echar paredes y techo y meterse. Eso no se alcanzaban a terminar*. Campesinos, he was implying, would often inhabit their bahareque homes without plastering walls, without floors or bathrooms, which could rarely, if ever, be afforded. As long as they had roofs, walls and also a stove, even if just a place to make a fire and over three stones place a ceramic pot, the house was inhabitable enough. In the present, while the adobe haciendas are restored and valued as part of the material history of San Miguel, or while they are used as country houses and kept warm by hiring administrators such as Doña Doris and Don Gil, many of those unfinished bahareque houses are abandoned as a result of decades of migration, crumbling down in lots that are neither used nor sold.[82] It could be said that they are gradually succumbing to their "strange mystery," but Don Azael would not agree to that: he says that there is "no mystery" to the deterioration of a house, *eso no tiene misterio*. Rather, in his opinion, the vital opinion of a technician, the problem begins when the roofs are left unattended and rainwater enters the mud buildings—that, he said, is "what ends them," *lo que las acaba*.

[82] During my fieldwork, I heard of two reasons why these lots are neither used or sold. Sometimes, this is because the last inhabitants of these homes, elderly peasants whose entire families have already settled in the city, have refused to sell their land, for it is all they have to inherit to their children. It also happens that those who have inherited these abandoned lots, people who have no intention of coming back or settling down in San Miguel, are unwilling to sell these because owning real estate is what allows them to secure credit. And there are also cases of relative abandonment: some people, having left the countryside and left their family homes to crumble down, nonetheless continue to sell the grass of their lots (they allow others to keep their cows there to feed on the grass). It also happens that people steal the grass of otherwise abandoned lots.

But how can it "end," a house that is "never finished"? How can it "become earth," a house made out of "the same earth"? If we admit for a moment the mystery that Don Azael denies, we could imagine that such imprecise endings are determined by the lack of human warmth; but human warmth, the life of those who heated the houses that eventually disappeared, also depended on that earth, that land, that dirt. This is what Don Azael suggested, in his observation that the earth that serves to build a house is "the same earth" that sustains the lives of those who will inhabit it. It is also suggested in that old Catholic prediction according to which we are made out of earth, and to it, eventually, we return. *Dust you are and to dust you will return*. Is this why, as Doña Isabel claims, houses "feel like us"?

Returning to dust

The cemetery of San Miguel stands on a modest hill, up the road from the municipio's administration building. The entrance is made of high brick walls; its perimeter is enclosed with barbed wire. Inside, a cement path leads through ossuaries and tombs down to a meadow where only a few crosses stand. Yet that grass-covered hill that looks relatively deserted is, in reality, as Don José, the town's gravedigger, told me, "mined with dead bodies," *está minada de muertos*. "If you dig a hole," he said, "you'll find a cadaver," *se encuentra un cadáver*.

These imperceptible burials used to be marked with crosses made out of wood—this, Don José explained, was the material that marked the deaths of "the poorest" inhabitants of this town, the same people that lived in those bahareque houses the building of which Don Azael described; the peasants who worked for the haciendas. Not unlike Don Azael, Don José wanted to note how the material conditions of people's lives determined the materials of their deaths, and he also

distributed these distinctions within the sharp binary between the rich and the poor, hacendados and campesinos. As we walked around the oldest burials of the cemetery, he asked me to notice the contrast between old peasant wooden crosses and the stone crosses of intricate engravings that mark the graves of the rich. While the first were made on site, he explained, the latter had to be brought from the city. This must have been terribly expensive, Don José imagined, because people had to bring these crosses on the train that operated until the nineteen seventies. In order to reach the cemetery, they would further have to make a small trip by boat, given that until the middle of the twentieth century the lagoon of Fúquene, which now looks like a faded silver line on the landscape, still bordered the hills of San Miguel.

These heavy stone crosses remain standing despite the passing of time, marking old burials that date back as far as 1918; the year when the cemetery was founded. In contrast, the oldest wooden crosses of the poor have long since decomposed. Their unmarked graves, Don José said, "no longer have mourners," *ya no hay dolientes*, or whatever mourners they ever had "have all left" this town, *se han ido todos*. Since there was no one to restore or change the crosses that marked their burials, to change them for the cement crosses covered in ceramic tiles that today are the most common materials to mark graves in San Miguel, the wood began to rot and, eventually, their graves "became lost," *se perdieron*.

More than once it has happened, Don José mentioned, that, just as it occurs with abandoned bahareque houses, people come from afar to visit an old burial and cannot find it. "They lose the dead!" he said laughing, *¡se les pierden los muertos!* He also told me that, in his routinely maintenance of the cemetery, he sometimes accidentally digs out already anonymous bones that,

he supposes, belong to deceased peasants whose bodies "have already become earth," *ya se volvieron tierra*.

I was there, in the cemetery, one day when Don José dug up by accident an old burial. Seeing that I was interested in funerary practices, he had invited me to witness an exhumation. It was only when I arrived that I learned it was going to be a disquieting occasion: the woman whose body was being exhumed had been killed two decades ago. "It was something personal," Don José explained to me; an incident that responded to personal conflicts, or maybe it was because she witnessed a robbery. I remember her name, engraved on her tombstone; Leonor.

As is mandatory, the family of the late Leonor was there, and, as Don José chipped away at the edges of the vault to get at the casket, they began to narrate, without me asking a single question, the terrible conditions of her death. They asked me to write it down, but the story only took shape in short sentences that came and went, within long and tense silences.

"She was killed twenty-two years ago," *a ella la mataron hace veintidós años*.
"Thrown into a creek," *la botaron a un vallado*.
"They filled her pants with stones," *le quitaron los pantalones y se los llenaron de piedras*.
"She was twenty-three when she died," *tenía vientitrés años cuando murió*.
"She was thrown to the water, they wanted her to disappear," *la querían desaparecer*.
"She was found nine days later, but the way she was, no one was allowed to see her," *así, no la dejaron ver*.

"We are taking her to Chiquinquirá because she has no one else in this town," *nos la llevamos a Chiquinquirá porque no tiene a nadie más acá*.

Don José finally found his way to the wooden casket that had almost entirely disintegrated, and he pulled on the white sheet that covered the late Leonor's body. He had assured us all, since we were a bit nervous about the exhumation, that we would find nothing but earth and undiscernible bones—that it would be like finding "twigs and dirt," *ramitas y tierra*. But something surprised Don José: "It's heavy," he said, while he made the effort to drag the white sheet out of the vault. He realized that, beneath the sheet, the body was wrapped in plastic. When he opened the plastic cover, we all jumped back, as a thick and muddy liquid spilled all over the cement floor and into the grass. "It's full of water… Maybe she was buried with the water," Don José said, *de pronto la enterraron con agua y todo*. And within that water, the body of the late, *la finada* Leonor, had not fully decomposed. Her family ran to wait by the entrance of the cemetery, covering their faces with their hands. Someone said: "She was killed. Her death was not natural," *a ella la mataron, su muerte no fue natural*.

I also moved away from the scene of the exhumation, but I stayed close enough to talk with Don José, who continued his work, methodically. His mind was focused on technicalities: he was wondering what to do with the remains that he could not fit into the ossuary. He decided he would have to bury the unsettling mass of human mud, and soon he began to dig a hole. "Look what I found!" he said, holding up a bone so that I could see it from a distance. "I cannot dig any more or I'll be bothered with more remains. There it is: a casket. Who knows who's buried there. There was no cross. And there, look! Another bone."

Along with those anonymous remains, which really did look like twigs and dirt, Don José buried what was to stay in San Miguel of the late Leonor's body. There was something calming about the thought of the muddy mass returning to the dry soil, about seeing Don José help her body become undone. There was, perhaps, something "natural" about the idea that she, too, would now finally become earth. [83]

A tired regard

Dust you are and to dust you will return. It is as though the earth embraced at once the origin and the end of both houses and human life, it is as though that "strange mystery" that Doña Doris, Eyanira and Doña Isabel bring to our attention appeared not only in the contemplation of crumbling mud houses but also of this fundamental consubstantiality. It is a disquieting observation, because in it we can see human life taking shape and crumbling down, we see our own lives as a single instant within a geological process that, to borrow the words of Don Azael, "is never finished," even though, for each of us, it inevitably comes to an end. There is also, however, something

[83] I think we can understand this moment, this undoing of Leonor's body, as a practice of care—a kind of caring practice that Robert Desjarlais has called a "poiesis of cessation" (2016:14). In his ethnography on Hyolmo Buddhist understandings and practices of mourning, Desjarlais meticulously describes this practice through the work that Hyolmo people put into the dissolution of the self; "a making of unmaking, a calm forging of undoing" (Ibid:41). In the Buddhist world he seeks to understand, this work involves not only the person who is dying, and who has often sought to learn how to die well, but also her loved ones, who will carefully "dissolve the body" upon her death (Ibid:130); who will "eradicate the lifeless heap in a respectful, generative way" (Ibid:131). Even though Desjarlais is here speaking in relation to a place and a philosophy of life and death that is worlds away from the Catholic reality of San Miguel, he brings to our attention the possibility to consider how our vulnerability to be "undone" by the other is not only marked by injury and violence, as it tends to be understood, for example, in the literature on precarity (see, for instance, Butler 2004). This violence is terribly visible in the death of Leonor, whose death was brought upon by someone who, as her family says, "wanted her to disappear." But Leonor did not disappear; twenty years later she was still there, still dying, still, in a way, drowning in the water. Is this not an expression of the depth of the violence that was inflicted on her? And how could that violence lose its power if not through the careful dissolution of her self into the earth?

calming about it. Something that, when interrupted, as the exhumation of the late Leonor shows, we realize we expect of ourselves and of our others.

It must require the slowest regard, this observation, a paused attention that I often attempted during my fieldwork by drawing the abandoned houses that I found as I walked through the veredas of San Miguel. It must require a slowness that might allow us to become attuned with a geological temporality where new forms are constantly coming into being and soon becoming undone; what Stuart McLean describes as a "time before time" that is strangely contemporaneous with our own (2007:63–64).[84] It must require a slowness in which, perhaps, as Pablo Neruda writes in a poem where a man is "navigating waters of origin and ashes," one "becomes tired of being [human]" (2004:121). With such tiredness also seems to write Ingold (2013) in his critique of the tendency to think of the things we live with in terms of finished objects that begin where humans end. To think of things and people in these terms, Ingold suggests, is to reap them off the "currents of life" (Ibid:19) that he wants us to understand as the continuous flow of materials; a flow that gives its

[84] In his essay, "'To Dream Profoundly': Irish Boglands and the Imagination of Matter" (2007), McLean submerges his attention into the slowly flowing waters of the Irish bogs where the remains of thousands of years of animal and vegetation history have been almost flawlessly preserved. Following the work of sculptors and of poets who have allowed for the archaic presences and unstable layers of the boglands to nurture their imagination, he explores the historical, political and poetic forms that are enabled, or rendered visible, by the "threshold" between "form and formlessness" that takes place in those muddy soils (Ibid:65). It is in this ambiguous landscape (which McLean approaches in an effort to bring our imagination beyond the modern Western dualisms between culture and nature, language and matter, mind and body), that he finds hints of another temporality; a time where everything is in a state of becoming, where "new forms and new configurations of order are continuously born" (Ibid:64), and where ever emerging forms soon dissolve into formlessness. Thinking with the work of Michel Serres, McLean describes this time as "an abiding reservoir of new possibilities" (Ibid) and as the "unacknowledged precondition" (Ibid) of our own historical time. Serres, as McLean notices, called this time 'basic time'; in his book *Genesis* (1995) he described his sense of it as "a mad murmur" that traversed him, one that "speaks to me of my ashes, perhaps, the ones whence I came, the ones to which I will return" (Ibid:7). He also described it as a kind of mystery; of this time, he writes, we can only have "the vaguest idea" (Ibid:5). What I will suggest here is that in the observation of the slow decay of mud peasant houses there is also a hint at this other time that both exceeds us, traverses us, and sustains us—one which, as I note later in this chapter, might help us read differently our own human histories.

impermanent shape to the body of everyone and every thing (Ibid:21). The forms of life, from this perspective, look like temporary gatherings of materials that will eventually follow their own paths. And human life, as the poet José Joaquín Casas wrote, looks like a "long demise" (1950:13):

[…]

and the farewell will only be finished

when in genuine life comes to an end

this long demise that is called living!

[…]

y sólo acabará la despedida

cuando en la vida verdadera acabe

este largo morir que llaman vida!

I first came across this verse in the old cemetery of Usaquén, carved out in the stone arch of its entrance. Usaquén is a *localidad* of Bogotá that used to be a rural town before the rapid growth of the city came to encompass it—the city now extends for over one hundred blocks passing it to the north. This is also the path one would take to get to Boyacá, where Casas, the poet, was from. He was native of Chiquinquirá, the city that borders San Miguel to the north. Casas, it seems, was fond of cemeteries. In a poem called "*A Solas*" (1950:7) ("On My Own") he wrote of walking through a "country cemetery," losing himself in "deserted paths," listening to the echoes of old prayers (Ibid) (the word he uses is *salterio*, which is also a way to call the rosary, that repetitive prayer that blurs the boundaries separating the living and the dead (see chapter 3)). The speaker-poet, he hears these prayers in "voices" that come from the "edges of the mystery," *de los lindes del misterio*. And within their resonance, reaching the borders of that mystery, he claims, "Ah! This is not dying: this is life," *Ah! No es esto morir: la vida es ésta* (Ibid).

A similar insight seems to come upon Ingold (2013) when he writes of lying down on the ground of an open field, like a dead person would, like a tired person would, taking the posture of a "mound," switching his "perspective from moving towards an empty place on the horizon to merging with it in the world of earth and sky" (Ibid: 82). While this shift, he writes, is "associated with the transition from life to death" (Ibid), Ingold suggests that, in another sense, it allows us to see a kind of mystery: the mound, he says, "epitomizes the mystery of life itself […] signifying the unknowable nothing from which everything comes" (Ibid). This is not dying, this is life. "Origins and ashes" (Neruda 2004:121) merge in the cemetery, in the mound, and in the crumbling mud house.

But just as "the edges" of the mystery become perceptible, by the same process through which we can come to recognize ourselves in the collapsing materials of a house that "feels like us," the oldest peasant houses and graves of San Miguel are gradually falling out of sight. In this place, "the mystery of life itself" seems to become perceptible "by virtue of an absence" (Kohn 2013:37): it is the slow disappearance of houses and crosses into the earth that allows us to sense it. It is the lack of human warmth that explains the inevitable decay of bahareque houses. It is the absence of the dead, lost in unmarked graves, that shows us just how literally we eventually become dirt. It is the absence of this return, as happened with the body of the late Leonor, which shows our visceral necessity for it. And, while the houses and crosses of "the rich" still stand, as if impermeable to time, to rainwater, and to their absentee owners and mourners, it is the abandonment of peasant houses and graves that renders perceptible this mysterious return of the stuff of human life into the

ground—that it becomes perceptible within a lifetime despite the fact that it occurs in a temporality that exceeds us.

The observation of the mystery, as the stories that began this chapter show, is entangled with the history of migration from San Miguel, a history that is traversed by the unequal conditions of life and of death that both Don Azael and Don José asked me to notice. And these inequalities, as Don Azael suggested, can be traced back to the colonial relations between the Spanish hacendados and the Muiscas. It is not that these relations have remained unchanged; the presence of the Muiscas, for instance, has long subsumed into a peasant life that now implies a degree of independence from the haciendas and which involves its own hierarchies of power[85]; some of the haciendas that exist today were acquired after Independence and thus are not exactly rooted in the Colony[86]; and, as

[85] Historian Alberto Flórez Malagón, writing about the region of the Valley of Ubaté (a region East of San Miguel that also borders the lagoon of Fúquene), estimates that by the eighteenth century the indigenous population had a growth rate of 0% (2005:44). In this region, he further relates, the language of the Muiscas, the *Chibcha* language, was "practically extinct" by 1750 (Ibid:47). Some important factors in the process by which the Muiscas from this region transitioned towards becoming a peasant society include the high density of the Spanish population in Boyacá and Cundinamarca; the violent displacement of indigenous peoples towards eroded mountain lands unfit for agriculture, and the consequent fragmentation of their communities (Ibid:40-51).
In this same work, Flórez Malagón also offers a thorough analysis about the shifting hierarchies of power within peasant societies of this region in the middle of the twentieth century; a time when a middle sector composed in part by administrators of the haciendas (who had a status above poor campesinos and below rich absentee landlords) began to gain prominence as a local political and economic force. As his argument makes evident, to describe the relations of power of this region in terms of "the rich" and "the poor", or hacendados and campesinos, misses important nuances. What I want to note here, however, is that, despite the fact that peasant communities are politically complex and diverse, rural inhabitants of this region still use this dualism to describe themselves and to highlight their shared history of dispossession and subjugation. I therefore understand the persistent use of these associated dualisms (the Spaniards and the Muiscas, the rich and the poor, hacendados and campesinos) as a recognition of this shared past and of the way its traces are still visible in the inequities constraining the lives of campesinos in the present.
[86] Many of the old haciendas of San Miguel became established in the lands gained through the drainage of the lagoon of Fúquene, in the decades following Independence. I should also note that, in the present, the term "hacendados" is used to speak of wealthy people who have large country houses, regardless of the size of their properties. This being said, there is also a clear persistence of old colonial settlements in this region. Speaking of the Valleys of Fúquene and Susa (which encompass San Miguel), archaeologist Carl Langebaek has noted that "It is clear that the lands that surrounded the larger Muisca settlements at the time

we have seen, the materials that hold the lives and the deaths of "the rich" and of "the poor" have changed with the passing of time. But the dualism between campesinos and hacendados is nonetheless still operating, ongoing, in palpable ways that bear the trace of a colonial past; in the distribution of the land and the economic dependencies that keeps campesinos tied to the haciendas, in the consequently differential ways in which the abandonment of the countryside affects campesinos and absentee landowners, and in the way that the register of peasant life is left to dissolve on the landscape, shaping, in its decay, the lives of those who have continued to stay.

Remember Doña Araseli's contemplation of the abandoned houses that surround her (chapter 2), remember Don Vicente's sense of being trapped in a kind of void in a way that threw his continuance in the countryside into doubt (chapter 3); remember the sense that, in this isolation, solitude can "crawl" into people's bodies and pose a threat to their lives. As we saw in the previous chapter of this thesis, this is painfully registered in the knowledge that older campesinos of San Miguel are dying alone, that they are dying of loneliness and of sadness. No one learns about their deaths until days have passed, when some neighbor worries upon noticing that there is no smoke coming out of the chimneys of their houses. This is yet another revealing kind of absence; the absence of the smoke that would otherwise spring from old woodstoves throughout the day. The image of a death of loneliness is invariably a smokeless house.

And this, this smoke and these woodstoves, also has a place in the mystery that becomes apparent in the decay of mud houses: as Don Azael noted, a house is only inhabited when, in addition to a

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of the Spanish arrival soon were under the control of large haciendas. Furthermore, these lands still remain under the control of large haciendas today" (1995:137). Flórez Malagón notices something similar for the nearby Valley of Ubaté; "Still today", he writes, "some of the larger haciendas of the Valley are direct inheritances from the first *encomiendas*" (Flórez Malagón 2005:43).

roof and walls, it has a stove; even if only a place to make a fire and, over three stones, warm up the food that sustains the life of its tenants. The smoke of stoves also serves to keep a house warm, and people say that it plays an important part in keeping it firm since it drives away pests that could eat away at its wooden posts. That is what a man called Egidio told Daniel Ruiz-Serna in the Colombian region called Bajo Atrato; next to ruins devoured by the forest, he further claimed that "a house is doomed to disappear because there is no one to inhabit it and because of the smoke" (2018:356).

The lack of smoke thus indicates the beginning of the end of a house that, left alone, "is doomed to disappear," and it also indicates the death of someone who is doomed to be forgotten. This is what Don Edgar Velosa suggested with a verse, one day when he told me his memory of a woman named Dolores, an elderly peasant woman from Ráquira who died alone and who, Don Edgar claims, died of sadness.[87] "Two, three days" had passed after the death of Dolores when her neighbors, Don Edgar's family, came over to see why there was no smoke coming out of the chimney of her house. Don Edgar remembers her massless burial, and especially the fact that her death bed had to be improvised with laurel branches because there was no money to pay for a coffin. He remembers that the door of Dolores' kitchen was also made out of laurel branches, thin branches that she had tied together with a rope because she had no means to fix the door when it came undone; a coincidence that, he says, "shows you what life is like," *le muestra a uno cómo es la vida*. Immersed in the indelible memory of Dolores's dead body slowly disappearing into the falling dirt, Don Edgar recited this verse:

[87] A full description of Don Edgar's memory of the death of Dolores and his own analysis of how it still resonates, sixty years after her passing, in the present of this region, can be read in Cuéllar Gempeler (2014).

With the tolling of the bells

Your own people will come to say

May God forgive the deceased

And then they will forget

Con el doble de las campanas

Los mismos tuyos dirán

Dios te perdone difunto

Y en después te olvidarán

The disappearance of houses and the decomposition of wooden crosses might just be the material confirmation of this forgetfulness. As Gastón Gordillo writes, "[…] oblivion is nothing but the material and affective erasure of traces of the past from the geographies of the present"(2014:207). Thinking with the work of Ann Stoler, he further suggests that such an erasure "is usually shaped by orders to remember given by dominant social actors" (Ibid); orders such as that of restoring haciendas and writing them into San Miguel's history as the main material register of the past of this region (Silva 2011:99), orders such as that of prohibiting the use of bahareque in the building of peasant houses. The idea that these mandates, which have made the register of peasant life slowly disappear from the landscape, are rooted on structural inequalities that still bare traces of the colonial past is also a tiring thought; the idea that imperial relations of power are transformed but not dissolved, that they persist "in ruined landscapes and through the social ruination of people's lives" (Stoler 2013a:10).[88] If there is a "time before time," to once again borrow

[88] With the notion of *ruination*, Stoler moves away from a romantic vision of ruins towards treating them as "symptom and substance of history's destructive force" (2013b:IX), and she proposes a further move; a move away from the observation of the ruins themselves towards the ways in which the traces left by "imperial formations" continue to have an ongoing corrosive effect on the lives, bodies, minds and landscapes of people in the present (2013a:3). This corrosive process (which is less visible and less fix, but no less tangible, than a ruin) is what Stoler calls *ruination*—a term that is meant to contribute to the

McLean's words, it coexists with the politically charged temporality of our "human history-making" (2007:63).

In the coexistence of these temporalities, however, in the sense that what has becomes lost somehow lasts beyond our grasp, that which has become humanly invisible suddenly "acquire[s] a new historical legibility" (McLean 2007:63). It is a historical awareness that springs from the depths of the earth, just like the bodies that McLean describes resurging from the Irish boglands, sparking political and poetic imaginations (Ibid); just like that verse that Don Edgar recited, immersed in the memory of the late Dolores's body disappearing into the falling dirt; just like the bones that Don José accidentally finds in his quotidian maintenance of the cemetery. It springs from, it is even nurtured by the earth, this awareness, just like a kind of purple flowers that, as Doña Isabel has noted, always seem to grow in abandoned parcels of land into which old peasant houses are crumbling down.

Vinca

Those flowers have four petals, or maybe five, Doña Isabel said that afternoon when we found ourselves, once again, thinking of decaying bahareque houses. "It's curious," she said, but they're always there, and whenever she finds an old mud house in ruins she thinks that "at least they'll be

vocabulary of postcolonial studies in the search to address a "contemporary malaise" that bears traces of colonial pasts, without suggesting that "the contemporary world can be accounted for by colonial histories alone" (Ibid:7). The emphasis on ruination helps us gain awareness of decaying forms that are not recognized as ruins; as Stoler writes, "ruin-making endeavors are typically state projects, ones that are often strategic, nation building, and politically charged" (Ibid:21). It is a concept that thus allows us to attend to the corrosion, and the endurance, of forms of life that, in some ways, have been forgotten, or fallen out of sight. The process I have been here describing could be understood in this sense as a process of ruination. I am also interested, however, in seeing how it brings to our awareness a temporality that extends beyond, and might help us understand differently, our human histories.

plenty of those flowers," *por lo menos se va a llenar de esas florecitas*. She could not remember their name; what she knows, she said, is that these flowers "are classic of abandoned houses," *son clásicas de las casas abandonadas*. I soon started looking for these purple flowers on the landscape, and I indeed found them crawling around abandoned lots with vacant houses, in San Miguel and also in other rural areas of Boyacá and Cundinamarca. I took pictures of them and I showed these photographs to Doña Isabel, and she laughed, and she said that yes, that those were exactly the flowers she had mentioned. And those same flowers, I also came to find them in the cemetery of San Miguel, growing around old and new crosses, spreading through those fields that are "mined with dead bodies."

The scientific name for these plants, as Doña Isabel and I learned after a series of internet searches and a lot of asking around, is *Vinca major*. They are of the *Apocynaceae* family, and their common name in English is the big leaf periwinkle; in Colombia they are usually called "*doncellas*" ("maidens"), sometimes simply "vinca" (Sierra-Guerrero and Amarillo-Suárez 2014:14). These crawling plants are mainly ornamental, used to cover dusty grounds in gardens of both rural and urban houses. Little has been written about their presence in Colombia, but it is known that they are native to southern Europe and North Africa (Morales 2019) and, since they are a common ornamental plant in Spain, it is probable that they were brought to Colombia sometime during the Colony.[89] *Vinca major* grows in elevated places, between 1950 and 2665 meters above sea level, which is why in Colombia it is mostly present up the hills of the mountain chain of the Andes

[89] Naturalist Mateo Hernández mentioned to me that it is known that these plants have been cultivated in Colombia for between one and five centuries (personal communication, September 19th of 2019). While there is a chance, then, that they were introduced to the Colombian Andes well after the Colony, it is their importance in Spain as ornamental flowers that suggests that they might have been introduced to these lands before Independence.

(Ibid). Even though it is cultivated mainly for ornamental purposes, it often "escapes" cultivation (Ibid), and, rooting at the tips of its stems, it tends to spread like a weed. In Australia and New Zealand, and also in the U.S., for example, it is considered "a serious environmental weed" (Twyford and Baxter 1999:47), and "a very serious threat to the native vegetation" (Ibid). It is considered a threat because it rapidly spreads and tends to create "dense and extensive mats on the forest floor" (Cushman and Gaffney 2010:2767) in such a way that "can greatly reduce the ability of other plant species to colonize areas that have been invaded by this vine" (Ibid:2772).

It is likely that the presence of vinca plants in abandoned lots is related to their escape from cultivation and also to the nutrients that, with the decay of a mud house into the earth, come to enrich the soil; the big leaf periwinkle prefers richer moist soils (Arista Palmero and Ortiz Ballesteros 2012:107), but it is known to persist in almost any kind of soil, including heavy clay ones. Because of their resistant quality, in a catalogue of Spanish ornamental flora gardeners are advised to use these plants for "the forsaken areas of an orchard," *los lugares olvidados de un jardín* (López Lillo 2010:142). So perhaps these flowers were already there, planted on now fully abandoned gardens, growing and spreading around uninhabited and decaying peasant houses. And they could also have been purposely planted on the cemetery; even though I have not found register of this practice in Colombia, in Spain and in some places of the United States these *Vinca major* (and also other vinca plants, such as *Vinca minor* and *Vinca difformis*) have a history of being used as ground covers for graveyards. Archaeologist Lynn Rainville, for example, writes that, in Virginia, "periwinkle, or vinca, often indicates a historic cemetery" (2014:15).

Rainville advises her readers to be mindful of the presence of these flowers: sometimes they are the sole indicators of otherwise unmarked graves. Such is the case with the burial sites that are at the core of her research; the cemeteries of African American slaves in Virginia, most of which are abandoned and have fallen out of sight, at least for those who cannot tell their modest indicators—for those who fail to discern the living and subtle signs that African slaves secretly used to mark their graves, such as the presence of these resilient vines. In an interview for an article from 2018, Rainville suggests, with some trepidation given a lack of systematic data, that "the plant thrives in soil whose pH is altered by decaying bodies, and thus is unbothered by highly acidic or basic soil" (in Brown 2019). "But certainly for me," she says, "when I'm walking through the woods of Virginia looking for a cemetery and I don't have a good idea of where it is, paying attention to the distribution of periwinkle can be useful" (Ibid). In short, and to come back to Doña Isabel's words, these purple flowers have also been known to be "classic of abandoned cemeteries." Accordingly, in Spain certain vincas are called "flowers of cemeteries," *flor de cementerio*, and also "flowers of the dead," *flor de muerto* (López Lillo 2010:142, 143; Arista Palmero and Ortiz Ballesteros 2012:109).

The big leaf periwinkle goes by other names too; in Spain and in France they are called "violets of sorcerers," *violeta de los hechicheros*, or "violets of witches," *violeta de las brujas* (Arista Palmero and Ortiz Ballesteros 2012:107; López Lillo 2010:143), because they have been considered to keep evil spirits at bay.[90] This might be a reason why they have been planted on cemeteries; another one is because, since they quickly become a thick entangled ground cover,

[90] While the common names "flower of the dead" and "flower of cemeteries" are sometimes associated to *Vinca minor*, *Vinca major*, and *Vinca difformis*, the names "flower of sorcerers" and "of witches" seem to be solely used to refer to *Vinca major*.

they also keep away grass and weed eaters from burial grounds. This is why Rainville further advises those interested in the preservation of ancient cemeteries to plant periwinkle (2014:146). In the face of abandonment, in sites unmarked but haunted, confronted with the threat of evil spirits or of human neglect, these vinca flowers seem to spring and spread in ways that make of their weed-like properties instruments of protection.

This thought brings me back to the beginning of this chapter: to the conversations I had with Doña Doris and Doña Isabel about that strange mystery that becomes apparent in the decay of abandoned houses. All around us, and also in the surroundings of their narratives, there were all kinds of plants and flowers; the *eugenia* bushes that Doña Doris keeps just at the right height for her neighbors to be able to see into the nocturnal loneliness of her house; the flowers that she plants in her garden and which she comes to care for daily. She also mentioned, that day when we talked in the ample refuge, that, even though she is a bit of a collector of ancient objects, she likes it better to collect things that are alive. When her father died, she told me as an example, she only wanted to keep a few plants from his house: "I wanted something that was living," she said, "something where he could go on living," *quería algo vivo, donde él pudiera seguir vivo*. I am also thinking of the myriad of plants and flowers that Doña Isabel keeps in the indoor patio of her house; gifts and findings that she likes to care for and also to talk about—there is a plant that a friend gave to her because it is said to protect houses from bad energies; there is a kind of rose that only rarely flourishes. She also has aromatic herbs, and small plants of avocado and of an acid fruit called *lulo*. In this small indoor patio, there are also a few carrots growing in the same pot as a fern, and a plant of peas twists around red and pink flowers that she brought from the countryside. And there is that accidental *zarcillo* bush that grows from that hole that Doña Isabel and Don Agustín have

not been able to fix yet, that bush that Doña Isabel lets grow and determines when it is time to cut down again—that resilient bush of magenta flowers that was literally, physically, at the center of our conversation that day we talked about the mystery.

That day, when Doña Isabel said that houses "feel like us," she was speaking of the ways in which abandoned buildings are invaded by moss and spider webs, by trees, branches and plants. Her observation, that is, was not unrelated to the way she cares for the living things of her house; to the way that she, like Doña Doris, control their growth and continuously remember their origins, as well as the stories and the people tied to them. Their awareness of a mystery seems to come from a sensibility gained through the work of caring for houses, a form of care that centrally involves the regulation of the surrounding, living, material environment (that involves moving life around, "screwing with life around," as Doña Doris says, *joder la vida*). And I think it this same sensibility what has brought Doña Isabel's attention to the vinca flowers that grow in abandoned peasant lots. But, just as it happens with the considerations of those who, interested in the conservation of cemeteries, turn their attention to the presence of periwinkles, there is a kind of reversal in her observation; a movement from seeing the growth of plants and flowers in relation to abandoned houses as corrosive (as weeds) to seeing them as protective (of the memory of a house that is about to disappear, or to be forgotten?).

At least, Doña Isabel says upon seeing the impending loss of yet another peasant house, at least they'll be plenty of those flowers. This is what she says and, with this reflection, charged as it is with her own efforts to keep her house warm, with her and her neighbor's incessant struggle to continue rendering inhabitable a place that has been relatively hollowed out by migration, she taps

into a broader history that is unbeknownst to her; the history of these flowers that have long been markers of death, and which have even given a means to mark the deaths of people that would have otherwise become lost ("they lose the dead!")—ancient and recent deaths that would have otherwise, in Butler's words, remained "ungrievable" (Butler 2004).[91]

In pointing out the reversal from the corrosive to the protective character of vinca plants, however, I do not want to lose sight of their weed-like characteristics. Because it does seem to be significant that they exhibit a kind of disobedient behavior; that they "escape" cultivation, that they have been associated to maidens and to witches. My own way of suggesting these relations might be disobedient too; jumping between different contexts, making associations between places and times distant from each other. Perhaps we need a little disobedience in order to sneak between the lines, to spread within the gaps of our official histories.

[91] Butler's notion of the *ungrievable* refers to the inability to mourn losses that cannot be recognized as such within a dominant narrative for which such losses are constitutive. For example, as I explained in chapter 2, she speaks of the inability to grief a homosexual loss within a culture that confirms itself through the heterosexualization of desire (Butler 1997). As I suggested, this also helps to understand the difficulty to mourn the loss of that which is associated with "the past" in the process of building a "progressive" nation. This "failure of recognition" (2004:36), as Butler explains in *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (2004), is a violence sometimes inflicted "by omission" (Ibid:34); deaths that are anonymously enumerated, deceased persons that do not count as persons, deaths of people who had "already suffered the violence of derealization" (Ibid:33). These are deaths that are not only "poorly marked" but that become "unmarkable" (Ibid:35), and therefore impossible to mourn; ungrievable. The remains of deceased peasants that have been lost along with their earthen homes have in a very literal way become unmarkable, but also in the sense that Butler offers us; neither their lives nor their uneventful deaths have entered into our understandings of ourselves as a society. And yet, despite their absence in our official histories, these vinca plants offer us the possibility to regain a sense of their lingering presence in the world. The fact that Doña Isabel noted this, without knowing anything about the history of these flowers, speaks of the extent of their force (and also, of course, of the profoundness of Doña Isabel's sensibility).

The edges of the mystery

The mystery of houses is something we cannot fully know, but cannot deny either—something that we might find "strange," as Doña Doris says, but that "there's no denying that it's true," *de que es cierto, es cierto*. To borrow again Casas' words (1950:7), we can only perceive "the edges of the mystery," *los lindes del misterio*, and, with them, the limits of our lives, our knowledge, and our histories. I have here tried to follow some of these contours, attending to the building and slow decay of the houses and graves of San Miguel, and holding on to the question of why it is, as some people claim, that the lack of human warmth brings to an end that which, in another sense, is never finished.

This warmth that is at the heart of the mystery is palpable, physical (it is not, or not only, metaphorical); it is the warmth of people that inhabited windowless mud houses, keeping alive the fire of woodstoves, moving around the forms of life that would otherwise—would eventually—become corrosive. A house kept warm is a house infilled with life; the remains of a house left alone are not unlike a cold lifeless body—and they do speak to us of our own mortality, of our vulnerability to oblivion and to abandonment. As we have seen, the relation that the mystery suggests between human life and the life of a house (a house that "feels like us") seems to be based on the recognition of a consubstantiality; on the knowledge that the earth that sustained the life of campesinos was "the same earth" with which they built their houses. And the mud houses of San Miguel, those houses that, like the wooden crosses of the poor, are crumbling back into the earth, show how old inequalities continue to "weigh on the future" (Stoler 2013a:9) of those who have stayed in this place—of the fact that, if we all come from dust, we don't all return to it in quite the same way, or rhythm.

This is part of what we can know; the certainties that hover at the edges of the mystery seem to be inseparable from an awareness of the material forms of human exhaustion, marked as they are by persistent forms of abandonment and unequal relations of power. This might be why these are tiring thoughts. Or is it with a tiredness from moving forward, "from moving towards an empty place on the horizon," as Ingold says (2013:82)—from moving along "homogeneous empty time," as Walter Benjamin (2007:261) described the progressive conception of history, leaving the dead and the past of the "oppressed" (Ibid:263) behind—that we suddenly fall, as it were, into the awareness of a more capacious geological temporality? That we get a glimpse beyond the edges of the mystery, into something—a "time before time" (McLean 2007:63), "the unknowable nothing from which everything comes" (Ingold 2013:82)—that both sustains us and exceeds us (into that which is never finished)?

"This is not dying, this is life," *no es esto morir; la vida es esta*, Casas says (1950:7)—something similar seems to come to Doña Isabel's attention when she notices the vinca flowers that spring near abandoned houses, and which have also spread all throughout the cemetery of San Miguel. There is also something mysterious about these plants, about how they find their ways to forsaken burials and to the lots where mud peasant houses have already crumbled back into the earth. We can find some explanations by attending to their behavior (to their own *mañas*, we could say with the language of amañarse that I explored in chapter 1), but it is still strange how they have come to mark the abandoned sites of the forgotten dead—how they do this even in a place like San Miguel, where there is no evidence, no memory of the practice of planting these vines in graveyards. Even Rainville, who suspects their presence in historic cemeteries is related to how

the soil is altered by decaying bodies, speaks with trepidation, and then she says "but certainly for me […] paying attention to the distribution of periwinkle can be useful" (in Brown 2019). There is something strange, something that cannot yet be fully explained about why these plants have come to be the flowers of the dead, but there's no denying that this is true*, de que es cierto, es cierto*.

I want to say that these vinca plants retain the memory of the lives that have been forgotten, but it rather seems that they draw our attention to the gaps that have formed on the landscape and in our history, that they spread in ways that map the form of our oblivion—the limits of our memories and of our histories; the edges of the mystery. In doing so, however, they offer a path that we can follow, one that does not lead forward and leaves nothing behind; one that is attuned with a kind of time for which the future ultimately takes shape in the performance of a return; in a movement back to the earth, to that "same earth" that held the lives and deaths of the oldest and poorest inhabitants of San Miguel. This might not restore the memory of them, and I cannot tell where it might lead us, but I think that appreciating the strange mystery of abandoned houses, appreciating it along with the still unresolved mystery of these vinca plants, might help us find ways to listen to the anonymous stories that keep springing in this place, as if from the depths of the earth. As if resonating with the voices of the forgotten dead. It might help us be nurtured by them (be "contaminated" in our encounter (Tsing 2015:27)), and imagine a kind of storytelling—a weed-like kind of storytelling—capable of response.

Conclusion

I began this dissertation with an old verse, an old copla that still rings true today. In its four lines, this single-verse poem proclaimed the end of a rural world ("now that my dogs have died, now that my house is left alone"); one that, as the last inhabitant in the poem knows, will surely come, but not until tomorrow ("tomorrow it's my turn to die, and everything will be gone"). The three sisters that came to remember this verse, the *Three Maries*, offered in this way the space where this ethnography could take place—a space rendered liveable through the delay of a coming end. The search that has occupied these pages, moving between uneventful moments anchored in a present that is subtly prolonged, has been for the means to attend to and sustain such a generative suspension, along with the mournful and world-making possibilities of its duration. And, following the course of entangled words, verses, prayers and songs that unfold in a reaching for a somewhere or someone whose loss is in some way impending, it has been oriented towards understanding the emplacing force of the fragile yet repetitive (narrative) efforts through which people manage to stay together, if only for a little while longer, in a relatively abandoned place.

While the copla of the *Three Maries* gave this thesis the slow tempo it required to attend to a reality that is often, and in telling ways, taken for granted—namely, the lived experience of the abandonment of the countryside of Boyacá—it was the convoluted vocabulary nested within the weighty word of "amañarse" that allowed for me to formulate a question "about staying" in attunement with the ways in which it is frequently posed in San Miguel. In the first chapter of this thesis, "*Amañarse* in San Miguel," I delved into the unravelings of this verb, this action that is brought into language with a poetic sensibility attentive to the ways in which we are permeable to each other and to the places we inhabit, and I sought to do this without losing sight of the history

of migration in Colombia and of shifting policies toward the countryside that has given shape to the precarious present of this place. The use of amañarse, I suggested, is informed by this history but, without contradicting the terms through which it is told—the terms through which staying in San Miguel is made equivalent to staying "behind"—, it also makes room for different stories to unfold. These are stories where neither the past nor the future are to be looked at from a distance, stories that take the form of a return in search for a shared rural life that seems to become unavailable if one continues moving forward.

I described amañarse as a "weighty verb" that holds people in place, and in the present moment, through the voicing of a desire that refuses to be explained away; "wanting to stay" (*me amañé*). I described it also as a sneaky word, one that is used to speak of a way of being in the world that sneaks between the lines of official narratives, and of the expected way of doing things. And I focused on the fact that it is a reflexive verb: amañarse speaks of actions we take upon ourselves in relation to something that exceeds us, actions to change in relation to it. As Edilma helped me understand, amañarse is about being able to "unravel oneself," *desenvolverse*, in a particular place or in relation to a person. In the terms of the thick vocabulary condensed within this word, it involves the cultivation of the "skills," or the *mañas*, to incorporate the tricky "habits" (which, as we saw, are also called *mañas*) necessary to relate to an Other that we want to stay with. In the voicings and the performances of amañarse, there is an approach towards an encounter with an other that changes us, that "contaminates" us (Tsing 2015:27) in our unraveling. It is in this sense that amañarse involves a return; a coming back to ourselves, since we are being constituted by the other we are approaching. The possibility of a shared rural life, understood to have been left

"behind," is thus brought "back" into reach. And, in the anticipation of that encounter, an incipient future is suddenly made visible. *¿Y usted sí se amaña por acá?*

Thinking through the sound of the song *Tiple Viejo*, that poem written by Abraham Forero and musicalized by *Los Carrangueros de Ráquira*—that song in relation to which I sought to mold this thesis as *a song for staying*—, I said, paraphrasing Stanley Cavell (2002:114), that amañarse is a language that matches our needs. There is a real pleasure in finding words that can anchor us just where we feel we need to be. But there is also something melancholic about this, about needing to allow oneself to be taken back, in an effort to give continuity to a peasant life that feels to be ending. By attending to the ways in which people from San Miguel speak of *resignation* I began to address this mournful aspect of what it is to stay in this place, and this required confronting the history of how this term was taken up and then discarded by the social sciences—a historical exploration that in turn made evident how the dissolution of a peasant way of life, based on campesinos' attachment to the land, was long seen as necessary to bring the countryside of the nation into the path of progress.

In the second chapter, "It takes you back (re-signation)," trying to grapple with the claim that in order to live in the countryside "you have to be resigned," I thus went back to the writings on peasant life from before the 1970s, asking how we can learn from their insights into how resignation permeates the lives of campesinos, without falling back into the modernizing framework in which these writings were inscribed. There, resignation was described as a passive surrender to the will of God, as a fatalistic acceptance of present suffering and poverty, and as a melancholic attachment to long past losses—a series of "attitudes" that lead to the evaluation of

resignation as a "negative factor" in as much as it hindered campesinos' ability to modernize their ways of life (Fals Borda 1955a:214). In order to grasp the ways of resignation without falling into this or any other kind of evaluation, I set out to reread the understanding of the melancholic attachments to which it has been associated into a more capacious understanding of bereavement—one where mourning does not look exactly like "letting go" (where mourning is not at odds with melancholia). This is a form of mourning that I understood through that passage from the readings of the *novenario* that requires to be read twice; that passage that, as my friend Claudia says, "takes anyone back." It is a biblical passage taken from the twelfth chapter of St John, which, to borrow Claudia's words, "explains to you what death is," and "makes you understand what life is"—it is a passage that shows us how resignation is about finding the shape that our lives can take after each death that becomes a part of us, after each absence that makes us die a little.

Understanding how resignation is "a law of the countryside," however, involved also realizing that there are "ungrievable" (Butler 2004:148) losses that, being constitutive of the narrative of progress, cannot be recognized as such—not, that is, without putting into doubt the necessity of progressing. Thinking through melancholy as something other than pathological, the prolongation of grief in the countryside seems to be related to living with communal losses and absences that have become nameless, that have been forgotten in this sense, but not without leaving a mark. And resignation, that "law of the countryside," seems to be about drawing oneself back to a place shaped by those losses; a place from which campesinos have been pulled away from through the notion that they should "let go" of a past that encompasses their "antique" ways of life, based, as these have been understood to be, on their attachment to the land (Fals Borda 1957; see also Gutiérrez de Pineda 1958:8–19). And yet, thinking with the story of Doña Doris' messy

bedroom—that room of which she purposely makes a dreadful mess in order to prevent the traces of her life to be easily stolen or discarded upon her death—I also came to understand resignation as a request for a second reading that might delay the forgetting of ourselves; a wish to be re-cognized, re-signed; read, again, after death.

One of the challenges that the mention of resignation presents us with is how to appreciate as meaningful the ways in which people are *not* resisting, *not* fighting to improve the conditions of their lives. In this sense, resignation is not unlike amañarse, which, as I sought to show in the first chapter, is partly about learning how to ease into structural constraints that, as far as history has shown, are not going to change in the near future. This is a real challenge, as I mentioned in the Introduction, related to the difficulty of thinking outside of the narrative of progress for which "betterment" seems to be the only meaningful way of relating to time, to history, and to the places we inhabit. As Povinelli writes, we still need to find ways to take seriously the lives of people who are not trying to be "transitive" but rather committed to being "durative" (2011:130), and to experience their "ethical call" (Ibid:152). While this commitment is not oriented towards changing the order of things, it can, by itself, require all of one's strength, and it seems to involve a persistent effort to sustain a form of being that is not predicated on the future. In this sense, it involves insisting; as I understood through the stories that I attended to in the third chapter of this thesis, "To stay with a story," it seems to involve a work of repetition through which one is able to stay for a while longer with that which one is about to lose, even though one might lose it all the same.

Remember the story of the late Custodia, the grandmother of Don Azael, that story that she "stayed with" in her diligent waiting for the late-afternoon visits of her deceased husband Teodoro, which,

as Don Azael remembers it, always seemed to coincide with the moment when she sat down to pray to the rosary. It was always around six in the afternoon that she began to listen to the prayers and that, as she insisted to her skeptic children and grandchildren, who met her story with laughter, the late Teodoro came to be with her. Because of his visits Doña Custodia refused to leave her home where, after Teodoro's passing, she lived alone; "I'm not going because, can't you see that Teodoro will come and he won't find me?". This story that she insisted on ("she insisted that yes, yes, that he was coming, that she could feel that"), this story that seems to have been sustained by the chanting of the rosary's decades, this story brings to our attention how in the performance of a repetitive form of narrative there is the possibility to harmonize different temporalities, to bring ourselves closer to death and to the dead, in a way that also holds us in place. Understanding how death can be "emplacing" (Stevenson 2017), however, required also grasping how inhabiting a world marked by absence, by absences carved out in a countryside where people age without significant social security or strong webs of care, quite literally threatens the lives of those who have decided to stay.

This third chapter, then, sought to find ways to attend to how, in a place relatively abandoned through a long history of rural migration, the limits separating life and death, absence and presence, become blurred in a way that can present itself as a "difficulty of reality" (Diamond 2003); an experience that can suddenly shake us out of life and of our "ordinary life with our concepts" (Ibid:12), at the same time that, for others, it seems to be unremarkable (or even, as in the story of the late Custodia, laughable). Rather than aiming to solve the contradiction at the heart of this difficulty (which comes with the sense of being "dead and alive at the same time" (Ibid:22)), this chapter searched for the possibility of a "shared language" (Das 2007:8) that can allow us to stay

with it. And the insistence of Doña Custodia's story, her way of being there over the rhythmic repetition of the decades so that the late Teodoro could find her, seemed to offer just this kind of narrative space where we can take seriously how we make our lives with the dead, and which also provides the tools—be they prayers or beads or berries—to hang on to the world as we reach for them.

I described, in this third chapter, how San Miguel is infused with life in the commemoration of death. This brought into view how inhabitants of this place inhabit the world "in a gesture of mourning for it" (Das 2007:77), and, more broadly, how we often only get to restore our place in the world through the same means through which we lose it (as when that last inhabitant in the old copla voiced by the *Three Maries* says "it's *my* turn to die"). A place like San Miguel cannot be taken for granted; it needs to be repeatedly recuperated in a becoming-with (Haraway 2016) that unravels in a kind of mourning for our others and even for ourselves (Cavell 1986:109). So, when I speak here of *staying in San Miguel* I do not refer to being statically attached to a place that can be seen as a distinct figure, like figure 1 in the Introduction. I am rather trying to attend to something that we cannot easily fix in representation, not only because it is coming into being in concurrent presents that are sustained by shifting and fragile relations, but also because living in it also has to do with recognizing gaps, absences, forgotten peasant stories that have fallen out of our official histories; that have, in a way, fallen off the map. As I explore in chapter 4 of this thesis, "The mystery of abandoned houses," the register of peasant life is also slowly falling out of sight.

In that chapter, the last chapter of this thesis, seeking to understand what is at stake in the *mystery* that some people see in the slow dissolution of peasant mud houses into the earth, I turned to an

exploration of the materials of life and death of the "oldest" inhabitants of San Miguel. Guided by the practical knowledge of San Miguel's carpenter and gravedigger, I was taken to consider how the decay of houses and of graves brings into view unequal relations of power that, rooted in a colonial past, continue to "weigh […] on the future" (Stoler 2013a:9) of inhabitants of this town. In the contemplation of these decaying structures, it thus became evident how there is a material register to our politically-charged forms of forgetting. Thinking with that strange mystery that holds that "houses 'feel' like us," however, this contemplation also made tangible the sense that, as the Catholic formulation holds, dust we are and to dust we will return—the idea that, just like mud peasant houses, our lives are consubstantial with the earth. Following the geological temporality that this idea brings to our attention, and guided by the purple vinca flowers that Doña Isabel always seems to find spreading near abandoned houses, this chapter ended with an opening to the world that both exceeds us and sustains us, and which continues to unravel well beyond the limits of our collective memory. Attending to the unsettling moments when that slowest temporality becomes apparent in our own time, when it becomes apparent also how it is entangled with the temporality of our "human history-making" (McLean 2007:63), I finally asked how that which seems to have fallen out of our official history, out of our grasp, suddenly "acquire[s] a new historical legibility" (Ibid).

This, however, is not exactly about remembering. It is not, that is, about bringing the memory of neglected pasts back to fill "homogeneous empty time", as Walter Benjamin (2007) described the progressive conception of history. It rather seems to be about recognizing the gaps that have been formed in that linear narrative, and, like weeds that spread into the hollowed spaces of an abandoned house, easing with their own *mañas* into the structural constraints within which

campesinos have long struggled to live and die in their own terms, attempt a narrative that spreads to reach the traces of those peasant deaths that are about to be erased; tell a kind of story that cannot prevent, cannot reverse oblivion, but that draws life from the space left vacant, from the absences that our forgetfulness generates, and which thus bares their mark as its animating foundation. This would be, as I imagine it, a weed-like kind of storytelling. It would be mournful, but also fresh with life; it would reach for the forgotten dead and, in their company, and with the knowledge of our own mortality as well, it would allow for new forms of being with each other, of responding to each other, to emerge.

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