

When Forests Run Amok

War and its Afterlives in Indigenous and Afro-Colombian Territories

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WHEN FORESTS RUN AMOK

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Abstract

In this dissertation, I examine certain human and non-human relationships that unfold in a context of armed violence, drawing attention to the harm that war has inflicted on the manifold relations that Afro-Colombian and indigenous peoples, living in Bajo Atrato, cultivate with their territories and with the myriad existences these places harbour. I then describe a series of damages extending beyond the human in order to explore the extent that concepts such as human rights, reparation or even damage might have in our understanding of violence and its afterlives. From wandering spirits of those who have suffered brutal deaths and whose bodies were not properly buried, to wicked jaguars drawn by the taste of human flesh, to evil beings that have wreaked havoc since being released by powerful shamans in their attempt to protect communities from guerrilla and paramilitary armies, these kinds of events cannot be fully grasped without understanding the relational constitution between these communities and their surrounding worlds, or more precisely, their traditional territories. It is argued that this co-constitution blurs the divide between natural and cultural realms as two distinct ontological categories, which is a divide that pervades both the possibility of understanding the intersubjective experiences of war in this region and, therefore, the possibility of redressing its damages. What kinds of justice and reconciliation are conceivable when armed violence results in an experience shared by multiple kinds of human and non-human beings? How can an understanding of war that extends beyond human losses and environmental damages establish the necessary conditions for a form of politics that includes the abundance of non-human beings that inhabit the world? Consideration of these questions may prove vital in the context of the current transitional justice framework in Colombia, particularly when the country's government and various recently demobilized armed groups are seeking to establish the conditions under which victimized indigenous and Afro-Colombian communities—as well as their territories—can heal.

QUAND LES FORÊTS SE DÉCHAÎNENT

La guerre et ses séquelles dans les territoires des peuples autochtones et afro-colombiens

Résumé

Dans cette thèse, j'examine certaines relations entre humains et non-humains qui se déroulent dans un contexte de violence armée, portant l'attention sur les dommages que la guerre a infligés sur les nombreuses relations que les communautés autochtones et afro-colombiennes, habitant dans le Bajo Atrato, entretiennent avec leurs territoires et les myriades d'existences qui les peuplent. Je décris une série de blessures qui vont au-delà de l'humain pour explorer dans quelle mesure des concepts tels que droits humains, réparation ou même dommage peuvent avoir sur notre compréhension de la violence et de ses séquelles. Des esprits errants de ceux qui ont péri d'une mort brutale et dont les corps n'ont pas été enterrés de manière appropriée, aux jaguars malicieux attirés par le goût de la chair humaine, en passant par les créatures malfaisantes qui ont fait des ravages depuis leur libération par de puissants shamans qui essayaient de protéger leurs communautés des armées de la guérilla et des paramilitaires, ces types d'événements ne peuvent être complètement saisis sans la compréhension de l'ontologie relationnelle que ces communautés entretiennent avec leurs territoires traditionnels. Cette approche relationnelle rend poreuse la division entre les domaines naturels et culturels en tant que deux catégories ontologiques distinctes, division qui envahit à la fois la possibilité de comprendre les expériences intersubjectives de la guerre dans cette région et, par conséquent, la possibilité de réparer les ravages qu'elle a causés. Quels types de justice et de réconciliation sont envisageables quand la violence armée conduit à une expérience partagée par de multiples types d'humains et de non-humains? Comment une compréhension de la guerre qui dépasse les pertes humaines et les dommages environnementaux fonde les conditions nécessaires pour une forme politique qui prenne en compte l'abondance d'êtres non-humains qui peuplent la Terre? Prendre en compte ces questions pourrait s'avérer vital dans le processus d'institutionnalisation de la justice transitionnelle en Colombie, en particulier lorsque le gouvernement et divers groupes armés récemment démobilisés cherchent à établir les conditions permettant aux communautés victimes, autochtones et afro-colombiennes, ainsi qu'à leurs territoires, de guérir.

LA SELVA DESBOCADA

La Guerra y sus Muchas Vidas en Territorios Indígenas y Afrocolombianos

Resumen

Con el fin de examinar los daños que la guerra ha generado en la forma en que comunidades indígenas y afrocolombianas del Bajo Atrato (Departamento de Chocó, Colombia) se relacionan con sus territorios colectivos, en esta tesis describo algunas de las relaciones que humanos y no-humanos tejen en un contexto de violencia armada. Describo entonces una serie de daños que se extienden más allá de los humanos con el objetivo de explorar la pertinencia que conceptos como los derechos humanos, reparaciones e incluso daño tienen en la comprensión de la guerra y sus muchas manifestaciones. Desde los espíritus que sufrieron una mala muerte y cuyos cuerpos nunca fueron enterrados, pasando por crueles jaguares acostumbrados al sabor de la carne humana, o por seres malignos que se salieron de control luego de que algunos chamanes los invocasen para proteger sus caseríos de los ataques guerrilleros y paramilitares, sugiero que este tipo de eventos no pueden entenderse sin tener en cuenta la relacionalidad constitutiva de las comunidades indígenas y afrocolombianas con sus territorios colectivos. Dicha relacionalidad, argumento, vuelve porosa la consideración de la naturaleza y la cultura como dos esferas ontológicas diferentes, la cual constituye una separación que pervierte las posibilidades de entender la naturaleza intersubjetiva de la violencia y, en consecuencia, sus posibilidades de reparación. ¿Qué tipo de justicia y reconciliación son posibles cuando el conflicto armado es una experiencia compartida por humanos y no-humanos? ¿Cómo puede una comprensión de los efectos de la guerra más allá de los derechos humanos ayudarnos a establecer las condiciones para un tipo de política en la que tenga cabida los muchos seres no-humanos que constituyen el mundo? La respuesta a estas preguntas resulta vital en un escenario de justicia transicional y más aún que el estado y algunos grupos desmovilizados buscan crear las condiciones para que las víctimas de las comunidades afrocolombianas e indígenas, al igual que sus territorios, puedan sanar.

Abbreviations and Acronyms

ACIA	Asociación Campesina Integral del Bajo Atrato
ACCU	Autodefensas Campesinas de Córdoba y Urabá (Peasant Self-Defenders of Córdoba and Urabá)
AGC	Autodefensas Gaitanistas de Colombia (Gaitanista Self Defence Forces of Colombia)
ASCOBA	Asociación de Consejos Comunitarios y Organizaciones del Bajo Atrato (Association of Community Councils and Organizations of the Bajo Atrato)
AUC	Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia (United Self-Defense Groups of Colombia)
BACRIM	Bandas Criminales (Criminal Bands)
CAVIDA	Comunidades de Autodeterminación, Vida y Dignidad del Cacarica (Community for Self-Determination, Life, and Dignity of the Cacarica River)
CCAN	Comisión Consultiva de Alto Nivel para las Comunidades Afrocolombianas, Raizales y Palenqueras (High Level Consultative Commission of Black, Afrocolombian, Raizal, and Palenquera Communities)
CIJP	Comisión Inter-Eclesial de Justicia y Paz (Interchurch Justice and Peace Commission)
CNMH	Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica (National Centre for Historical Memory)
CNOA	Conferencia Nacional de Organizaciones Afrocolombianas (National Conference of Afro-Colombian Organizations)
CJL	Corporación Jurídica Libertad (Corporation for Judicial Freedom)
CODECHOCÓ	Corporación Autónoma Regional para el Desarrollo del Chocó (Chocó Autonomous Regional Development Corporation)
CODHES	Consultoría para los Derechos Humanos y el Desplazamiento (Consultancy on Human Rights and Displacement)
CORPOURABÁ	Corporación para el Desarrollo Sostenible del Urabá (Urabá Sustainable Development Corporation)
DANE	Departamento Administrativo Nacional de Estadísticas (Colombian National Administrative Department of Statistics)
ELN	Ejército de Liberación Nacional (National Liberation Army)
FARC	Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia)
FFMM	Fuerzas Militares de Colombia (Military Forces of Colombia)
FISCH	Foro Interétnico Solidaridad Chocó (Inter-Ethnic Solidarity Chocó Forum)
IAHCR	Inter-American Court of Human Rights
ICTJ	The International Center for Transitional Justice
IGAC	Instituto Geográfico Agustín Codazzi (Geographic Institute Agustín Codazzi)

INCODER	Instituto Colombiano de Desarrollo Rural (Colombian Institute of Rural Development)
INCORA	Instituto Colombiano de Reforma Agraria (Colombian Institute of Agrarian Reform)
INVIAS	Instituto Nacional de Vías (National Roads Institute)
JEP	Jurisdicción Especial de Paz (Special Jurisdiction for Peace)
MAMA-U	Centro Cultural Mama-U (Mama-U Cultural Centre)
MINTIC	Ministerio de Tecnologías de la Información y las Comunicaciones (Ministry of Information Technologies and Communications)
MPC	Mesa Nacional de Concertación (Permanent Panel for Concertation with Indigenous Peoples and Organizations)
OIM	Organización Internacional para las Migraciones (International Organization for Migration)
PAS	Programa Aéreo de la Dirección Seccional de Salud (Healthcare Air Program)
PCN	Proceso de Comunidades Negras (Process of the Black Communities)
RUV	Registro Único de Víctimas (Victims Single Registry)
UAIRV	Unidad de Atención Integral y Reparación de Víctimas (Unit for Victims Attention and Reparation)
UNCHR	United Nations Commission on Human Rights
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
UAIRV	Unidad de Atención Integral y Reparación a Víctimas (Unit for Victim's Attention and Reparation)

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When Forests Run Amok

War and its Afterlives in Indigenous and Afro-Colombian Territories

INTRODUCTION

In the forests and rivers of Bajo Atrato, a multitude of abrasive presences disrupt the proper rhythms of life and death: wandering spirits of those who have suffered a bad death and whose bodies were not properly buried; wicked jaguars drawn by the taste of human flesh; *palizadas* or river blockages that resemble floating cemeteries of trees and prevent people from pursuing their journeys; ravaged fields, abandoned hamlets, and military waste that amplify people's uncertainties about their lives and their future; evil beings that drown people and devour their nose and fingers, wreaking havoc since being released by powerful traditional healers called *jaibanas* in their attempt to protect communities from the raids carried out by guerrilla and paramilitary groups. These are only some of the wounds caused by armed conflict in a region predominantly inhabited by Afro-Colombian communities and Emberá and Wounaan indigenous peoples. Besides the most blatant abuses, including violations of fundamental human rights and the plundering of natural resources, the war waged in the territories of these communities during the last 25 years has overturned the web of relationships these peoples weave with animals, plants, spirits and other beings. In this dissertation, I draw attention to the significant harm that armed conflict has inflicted on the manifold relations these peoples cultivate with their traditional territories and with the myriad existences these places harbor. I then describe a series of damages extending beyond the human in order to explore the extent that concepts such as human rights, reparation or even damage might have in our understanding of violence and its aftermath. I hold that consideration of these forms of harm may prove vital in the context of the current transitional justice framework in Colombia, particularly now that the country's government and some recently demobilized armed groups are seeking to create the conditions under which victimized indigenous and Afro-Colombian communities—as well as their territories—can heal.

In this dissertation, I analyze some of the ruinous aftermath of armed conflict by shifting my ethnographic scope beyond the most flagrant violations of human

rights, material and cultural losses, and its traumatic effects. Instead, I focus my attention on the transformations that Afro-Colombian and indigenous communities from Bajo Atrato have experienced in terms of both the relationships they cultivate in and with their territories, and their connections with various non-human beings that inhabit their forests and rivers. Perhaps the damages I describe are not necessarily the most spectacular nor the sort typically documented in human rights reports. And yet the events I describe are enmeshed in everyday life, not because they have been normalized, banalized or otherwise rendered predictable, but because they belong to the realm of the ordinary, or in other words, the worldly. As I intend to show, haunting ghosts or primeval, aquatic spirits that look after their descendants are just as relevant in the world of these people as dangerous jaguars or eroded rivers: they also have, as Isabelle Stengers (2010) would suggest in relation to the participation of non-humans in political philosophy, world-making power. These existences, and here I borrow Veena Das' words (2006), "descend into the ordinary" as they induce encounters, reveal attachments, and create horizons of possibility that may sometimes echo the acts of annihilation carried out by death squads but might also at times align with the strategies these communities employ to resist war.

In this ethnography, I aim then to understand the destructive drives of war in terms of the damages inflicted to what Afro-Colombian and indigenous communities call their traditional territories. In Bajo Atrato, territory is a broad concept that describes a cluster of heterogeneous relationships: sentient landscapes, emplaced experiences, local knowledge, the quality of places, the characteristics of their human and non-human inhabitants. Territory might also be conceived as the possibilities of being and becoming in a shared, living place; the practices of care, reciprocity or even animosity people maintain with beings such as animals, *avichuchos* or bugs, birds, trees, spirits, rivers, fish, *fieras* or aquatic beasts, lands, mines, ancestors, the wind, the sky, the rain; the decisions made about what, where, and when to plant; the villages, gardens, *plataneras*, swidden plots, homes of game animals, the wilderness; the *trasmallos* or fishing nets whose threads and shape fit the geometry and

movements of fishes; the burial of newborns' navel cords and the places where this afterbirth rests; the knowledge of treating diseases or summoning forest spirits that enhance shamanic powers; the culinary and medicinal herbs cultivated by women in their *azoteas*, raised-bed gardens made of old *champas* or decayed dugout canoes (Camacho 2001); the funerary rites and the *alabaos*, songs that appease the souls of the deceased; when people play dominoes or bingo; when kids swim or women do laundering in the river; when leaders of *consejos comunitarios* meet to discuss their response to the implementation of neoliberal policies promoted by both private companies and the state; celebrations of *La Virgen del Carmén* festival or the *bundes*, dancing processions performed in the wee hours to the rhythm of drums that used to be made with peccary skin. I argue that these practices, these ways of living are not just embedded in the territory, they also act upon it and contribute to its creation. Conceived as an ensemble of relationships and beings that come together in a place experienced as an "existential space of self-reference" (Escobar 2003, 53) and a catalyst of collective identity, the territory does not merely serve as a setting for the lives unfolding in its forests and rivers. Instead the territory is what emerges from these relations, rendering possible the specific manner in which Afro-Colombian and indigenous communities exist in the world.

Territory is also a differentiated right recognized by the state and protected by Colombian law. Both indigenous and Afro-Colombians enjoy collective land tenure as part of their collective *resguardos* (indigenous reserves) and *territorios colectivos* (collective territories of black communities). In Bajo Atrato for example, the collective lands belonging to Afro-Colombian communities comprise more than 647,000 hectares. But this right to territory, understood as the enjoyment of collective property and the claims to autonomy and self-determination made by indigenous and Afro-Colombian communities, has been seriously hindered as a result of armed conflict and the rapacious economic policies of Colombian neoliberal governments. Indeed, as this dissertation intends to demonstrate, war and state-sponsored violence are not mere phenomena unfolding in the ethnic territories of Bajo Atrato but, rather, forces producing these territories. Forced displacement, land dispossession,

plundering of natural resources, pillage, loss of crops and of biodiversity are some of the most rampant impacts that war has produced in this region. I argue that even though such violations compromise the rights of use and enjoyment of collective property, they do not completely account for the violent transformation these territories have undergone. Through my experiences with the Emberá, Wounaan, and Afro-Colombian peoples, I have come to see that armed conflict also causes fundamental damage to the territory. It has provoked the disappearance of the masters of game animals; the anger of spirits that, in turn, brings about new kinds of diseases; and the madness of snakes and other poisonous animals. In short, the territory is harmed when people are prevented from performing the practices and maintaining the relationships that help them cultivate their humanness and their emplaced collective sense of being.

Given the intimate relationships that indigenous and Afro-Colombian communities maintain with their territories and with the myriad non-human beings these places render meaningful, this dissertation describes how war causes damage that extends beyond humans and the intersubjectivity of its destruction and suffering, involving people, non-humans, and even places. I am proposing then a kind of epistemic shift: one that enables us to see our human destructive acts in terms of their cosmic effects. By so doing, I bring to attention the relational constitution between people and their surrounding worlds, or more precisely, between Afro-Colombian and indigenous communities and what they call their traditional territories. This co-constitution, I aim to show, renders porous the divide between natural and cultural realms as two distinct ontological categories, a divide that pervades both the possibility of understanding the experiences of war in Bajo Atrato and, therefore, the possibility of redressing damages. Inspired by the resurgence of ontological thinking in anthropology and standing on the shoulders of refined ethnographers that have shown the fallacy of abstracting humans from other forms of life, in this ethnography I address human and non-human relationships in the context of armed violence. I then ask: What kind of justice and reconciliation are conceivable when armed violence results in an experience shared by multiple kinds of human

and non-human beings? How can an understanding of war that extends beyond human losses and environmental damages establish the conditions for a form of politics that includes the non-human beings that inhabit the world?

In this introduction I pursue a dual aim: first, I delineate the conceptual framework behind my understanding of war and its afterlives in Bajo Atrato; second, I introduce the ethnographic setting. The latter is described through three stories or acts that, in my opinion, reveal some of the convolutions of everyday life: the realm where violence, as Michael Taussig (1984) reminds us, “enters into active social circulation and meaningful existence.” (Ibid., 464) I alternate these stories with some key definitions that will both help us navigate the intricacies of indigenous and Afro-Colombian territories and introduce the numerous beings whose lives have been affected by war.

Act I: “Don’t you know who I am?”

The scene occurs outside a nightclub situated in an exclusive neighbourhood in Bogotá, the capital city of Colombia. It became a viral video and took place some weeks before I traveled to Bajo Atrato in 2015 in order to complete field work. An angry and visibly drunk man argues with and pushes two policemen. They were called because the man in question was threatening to come to blows with a bar employee. The man taunts both police officers, pushes them repeatedly while they, in a rather unusual stoic attitude, see how the now defiant man stands in front of one of them, face to face, and slaps him. “Don’t you know who I am?” he cries. The man slaps the policeman again. “I’m President Gaviria’s nephew. If I make a call and talk to the General, you will be working in Chocó.” The man’s accent and the family ties he claims to have with a former President reveals his social status. Perhaps the policemen really fear the loss of their jobs and they decide not to react to the abuse. In a country where power is still associated with lineages and skin colour, the family name of this haughty individual assures him a privileged treatment before the law, or at least that is what both the policemen and this young upstart

believe. Everything makes this scene a shameful event. The drunk man continues to utter his insults and threats, and even dares to ask one of the officers if he ever went to school, while the submissive officers just ask him to calm down. But on the verge of my trip to Chocó, what really upsets me is the fact that despite being one of the richest biodiversity hotspots in the world and a cradle of peerless cultural wealth, going to this region is considered a severe punishment.

“I will send you to Chocó”, declared the arriviste several times. The threats uttered by this man, who turned out to be a liar, as former President Gaviria denied any relationship with him, bring to mind the designation of some regions of the world as places of exile and punishment for those who did not recognize authority. Zeus, for example, exiled the Titans who fought against him to the deep abyss of Tartarus; the Jews of Yemen were banished to the desert in 1679 by King al-Mahdi Ahmad; the British imprisoned Napoleon on Saint Helena, a volcanic tropical island in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean; the French did the same with their undesirable political adversaries in L’île du Diable during the nineteenth and twentieth century; and Siberia and its infamous gulags were an instrument of political repression during the Stalin era.

The very idea that Chocó could be an adequate location to serve a prison sentence points to the role this region occupies in the Colombian social imagination. One hundred years before this incident, a local official described Chocó as a “miserable” and “stunted” place “inhabited by wretched people who live far from God or the Law” (quoted by Leal 2018, 172). These ideas remain stubbornly persistent, as evidenced by the kinds of news that circulated during the same week this man hurled his curses. Several newspapers documented the Chocó Department’s high infant mortality rates, where between January and March 2015 more than 20 children died because of diarrhea and malnutrition (El Espectador, March 4 2015). It was no coincidence that the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs reported that at least 655 indigenous and Afro-Colombian peasants were expelled from their lands as a consequence of the constant skirmishes between

paramilitary and guerrilla armies (El Tiempo, March 5 2015). While it is true that violence and malnutrition are part of Chocó's daily life, the way in which these stories are reported—the threats of an unscrupulous man towards two policemen who lack the upbringing and accent he boasts, or news victimizing citizens rather than identifying the root causes of such occurrences—plays an important role in understanding what makes this region, according to non-*Chocoano* people, an unviable location. The Department of Chocó seems to possess all the attributes that city folks would consider the reverse of a desirable nation: backwardness, isolation, poverty, disease, violence. These characteristics are constantly highlighted and overrepresented by an elite class of wealthy entrepreneurs and corrupted politicians who see the region as a place to be exploited, to be depleted rather than cherished since, as declared by a former deputy of the Provincial Assembly of Antioquia (the Chocó Department's affluent neighbour), “investing money in Chocó is like applying perfume to crap.”(El Colombiano, May 8 2012)

And it is in Chocó where this research takes place.

The Bajo Atrato Region

Colombia is composed of 32 administrative and political divisions called departments, which can be understood as equivalent to U.S. states or Canadian provinces. Chocó is one of these departments, one of sharp contrasts indeed. Alongside accounts depicting its natural exuberance, immense biodiversity, and outstanding level of rainfall, it is always possible to find abundant portrayals of poverty, violence, and corruption. For example, Chocó is one of the world's most important biodiversity hotspots (Gentry 1986, Groombridge and Jenkins 2002, Mittermeier et al. 2005), being the home of numerous precinctive lifeforms: approximately a quarter of 4,525 plant species found here are endemic (Rangel 2015), the region has one of the highest level of bird endemism in the world (Gentry 1986), and at least 5% of all herpetofauna known worldwide exists only in this region (Proyecto Biopacífico 1998). Other “endemisms”, if one sticks to what official and historical sources

report, seem to be poverty and marginality. According to various socioeconomic indicators elaborated by the Colombian National Administrative Department of Statistics (DANE), Chocó is the poorest department in the country: 80% of its population lives on much less than a dollar a day; 75% of its population, mostly in rural areas, lack access to basic services such as safe drinking water, sanitation facilities or schools; its infant mortality rate of 43 per 1,000 is the highest in the country, three times higher than the national average (DANE 20164). But there has always been human agency behind these so-called endemisms. If Chocó today seems to epitomize thriving forests and biological diversity, it is mainly because its inhabitants have historically utilized different socioeconomic strategies that supported the maintenance of ecosystems and the proliferation of life. If Chocó seems to represent backwardness and poverty, it is in part due to the greed and corruption of its rulers. The very first governor of Chocó, Francisco de Ibero (1726-1730), and the most recent one, Efrén Palacios (2013-2015), were accused of misuse of power and unjust enrichment. The former was appointed by the Spanish Crown with the hope of stopping gold contraband but was dismissed from his post due to fraud and complicity with gold smugglers (Werner 2000, 86). The latter was democratically elected and is currently under investigation for the embezzlement of about \$4 million from public funds (El Colombiano, November 23 2015).

Like every Colombian department, Chocó is divided into municipalities. A municipality is a decentralized political and administrative subdivision led by an elected mayor and a municipal council. There are thirty different municipalities in Chocó and my research took place mainly in two of them: Carmen del Darién and Riosucio. Both also share their names with their principal towns, located at the riverbanks of the lower Atrato River. Besides the municipal capitals or *cabeceras municipales*, each municipality encompasses a large group of rural villages and hamlets, which local people simply refer to as communities. There are about 130 of these communities in both municipalities, including indigenous and Afro-Colombian communities, which are all distributed along eight different river basins: Cacarica, La Larga-Tumaradó, Salaquí, Truandó, Pedeguita-Mancilla, Domingodó, Curvaradó,

and Jiguamiandó. It is along these rivers and their tributaries where all rural communities are located and where most of my field work was conducted.

Bajo Atrato is a region of rivers, swamps, forests, and freshwater swamp forests with an estimated area of 15,000 square kilometres. Historically, this region has been known as Urabá Chocoano, meaning that portion of the great Urabá region that belongs to the department of Chocó. Urabá was the coastal region where in 1510 Spanish conquistadors founded the first city in mainland America—Santa María La Antigua del Darién—and corresponds also to the name of a gulf in the Caribbean Sea, close to where the isthmus of Panama and the South American continent connect. In colonial times, the region was a frontier zone, considered by authorities an ungovernable space of profuse nature and prevalent violence. During the 16th and 17th centuries, attempts at colonization and the establishment of mining operations encountered ferocious resistance from indigenous populations (Leal 2018, Vargas 1993, Werner 2000). The region was, and still is, inhabited by indigenous Emberá, Wounaan, and Tule. The latter are also known as Kuna and today most of them inhabit the Darién Province of Panama, after moving from the middle and lower Atrato River due to conflicts with the Spanish and the Emberá and Wounaan peoples. Both Emberá and Wounaan were referred to in early colonial documents as Chokó people, a name that seems to come from the word for bowls containing the fermented beverage with which these communities first welcomed the European foreigners (Vargas 1993).

During the colonial period, Chocó was a mining frontier and for its exploitation, like everywhere else throughout the Americas, European mine owners relied on the forced labour of both indigenous populations and African enslaved peoples. Besides the military resistance made by Kuna, Wounaan and Emberá peoples, factors such as their high mortality rates, their patterns of scattered settlement and official mandates forbidding certain kinds of coerced labour of indigenous populations, obliged the Spanish Crown at the beginning of 18th century to bring in African enslaved labour to work in the mines. Some historical figures show how the presence

of these enslaved peoples increased exponentially in only a few decades: there were about 600 slaves in 1704, 2,000 in 1724, and more than 7,000 in 1782 (Sharp 1976, 21). After that period, official censuses show a significant decrease of this population and although disease was one of the reasons, most scholars (Leal 2018, Sharp 1976, Williams 2005) agree that manumission and the establishment of maroon settlements were the predominant factors. In 1782, for example, an official census included almost 4,000 *libres* or freedmen, former slaves who purchased their own freedom through their independent work in the mines (Sharp 1976, 22). Historians have argued that the existence of immense forests, wetlands, and rivers; the limited presence of colonial authorities and settlements; and the establishment of an extractive economy heavily dependent on the commodification of natural resources such as gold, platinum, rubber and vegetable ivory, contributed to the emergence of a “rainforest peasantry” (Leal 2018, 12), that is, a post-emancipatory black society that, unlike others in the colonial Americas, reached high levels of autonomy. The capacity of these communities to decide how to use “their bodies, their time, and the spaces they lived in without having to follow orders” (Ibid., 12) hinged to a large extent upon the alliances they forged with Embera and Wounaan indigenous peoples (Losonczy 2006) as well as upon the knowledge they accumulated about forests, soils, rivers, and wetlands. This in turn allowed these communities to develop their own subsistence practices such as crop cultivation, fishing, hunting, and timber harvesting.

Chocó is today known as the Afro-Colombian department, although it is also inhabited by some indigenous peoples whose *resguardos* or communal territories constitute almost 29% of the department (MINTIC 2017). Bajo Atrato, in particular, is characterized by the presence of large communities of mestizo peasants or *chilapos*, a local term used to describe the peasant population that migrated from the Sinú River region, in the department of Córdoba, to the great Urabá region since the first half of 20th century (Ruiz Serna 2006, Villa 2013). The rural settlements of these mestizo communities have been incorporated into the collective territories granted to the Afro-Colombian rural populations, which mean these mestizo peasants are

part of local community councils and also enjoy collective land tenure.

In recent years, the name Bajo Atrato has been gaining popularity in both specialized literature and media as a means to differentiate the historical, economic, and social processes of this particular region from the rest of Urabá, an area mainly located in the affluent department of Antioquia. By speaking of Bajo Atrato instead of Urabá Chocoano, local grassroots organizations also seek to characterize this region as an ethnic territory, that is, as an existential place where indigenous and Afro-Colombian communities have set in motion alternative society models and different ways of being that have been recognized, as mentioned earlier, by the Colombian state under the figures of indigenous reserves and collective lands of black communities. In legal terms, these reserves and collective lands are what local communities refer to as their territory.

Territory

“Territory” is a complex concept with multiple meanings applied in different contexts. As I have pointed out, territory is a legal right: indigenous and Afro-Colombian communities enjoy imprescriptible, inalienable, and non-seizable collective land tenure, which enables its protection and management. Colombian law has made the right to territory the cornerstone of the protection of these peoples, since territory is considered “the material possibility for ethnic groups to exercise their rights to cultural identity and autonomy, insofar as this is the physical space in which their culture can survive.” (Corte Constitucional de Colombia, Sentencia T-380-1993, §12). Understood as “material possibility” or “physical space”, territory might be initially conceptualized in substantial terms: it comprises the assortment of places a given community inhabits and renders socially meaningful, as well as the resources it appropriates for its livelihood. Needless to say, this appropriation is a historical and cultural process, embedded in a wider array of practices and relations that make up a society. This means that even in its material dimension, territory is not given but constructed. A definition emphasizing the economic and material means for secur-

ing basic necessities has been successfully mobilized since the early 1980s by some *chocoano* organizations. At the time, these organizations identified themselves as peasant movements and demanded that the government halt the predatory activities of certain timber companies that were threatening the very means of peasants' social and economic reproduction (ACIA 2002, Asher 2009, Escobar 2008, Restrepo 2013). In this context, territory is primarily mobilized by regional organizations in an attempt to call into question the exploitative models fostered by regional and national authorities.

The Bajo Atrato region was not exempt from this rapacious development model. As a concept, territory in this region first emerged hand in hand with the work carried out by the most progressive wing of the Catholic Church, which at the end of the 1980s supported initiatives undertaken by local organizations that wanted to raise awareness about the lumber industry's economic and environmental impacts. At this juncture, local communities were making land claims and conceiving strategies for land tenure other than individual private properties, mainly because this form of ownership could not secure the customary use of what they considered communal forests, the very areas the government and regional environmental authorities were adjudicating to timber companies (Restrepo 2013). What was at stake was mainly a struggle over natural resource use under the form of a twofold demand: the legal recognition of the lands these communities had been occupying and the implementation of sustainable development policies. Implicit to these demands, therefore, is a notion of territory as a place where communities have been historically developing unique economic practices that are at odds with the rapacious models implemented by foreign companies.

It is since the constitutional reform of 1991—which recognizes and protects the multiethnic and multicultural composition of the country—that *chocoano* peasant movements became ethnic organizations. It is also at this moment when their struggles for land and control of natural resources took the shape of demands for territorial rights. More concretely, in 1993 Law 70 granted collective land tenure to the

Afro-Colombian communities inhabiting the Pacific basin, lands which were hitherto considered *baldías*, that is, vacant, barren or idle lands without owners. With the reforms, Afro-Colombians were officially recognized as an ethnic group, which means they collectively become subjects with special rights, including maintaining their culture and securing their economic and social development. With their lands and rivers protected by the law and with their ethnicity dignified by the state, the lands traditionally inhabited by these communities began to be considered an ethnic territory, that is to say, as the quintessential component of their collective identities and the focus of their political actions for the defence of their cultures. If the Constitution of 1991 allowed Afro-Colombian communities to gain political, legal, and cultural visibility, the right to territory has led social movements in Chocó to articulate various political demands that aim to strengthen their authority and exclusivity in matters of decision-making regarding land and resource uses. Autonomy and self-determination emerge then as concomitant territorial rights, which is the way local organizations attempt to materialize rights of regulation, jurisdiction, and prior consultation over their territories (García Hierro 2004).

However, the recognition of these new ethnic identities and cultural rights did not make an immediate impact in Bajo Atrato. Before starting the actual titling process through which local communities legally defined and delimited their collective lands, the region became a major war zone. In 1997, hundreds of communities were forcibly displaced by the actions of paramilitary and guerrilla armies. During the almost two years that *bajoatrateño* communities were demanding that the state guarantee safe conditions for return to their lands, the allocation of legal titles became a crucial point in the agenda of local organizations. Armed conflict and forced displacement were threatening not only the newly gained cultural rights but also the very lives of these communities: lives henceforth understood as collectively meaningful insofar as they take place and shape in specific localities. In this way, the defence of the territory overlaps with the defence of basic human rights, including the very life these peoples embody. This confluence becomes evident in the *motto* of the regional Afro-Colombian organization, ASCOBA (Great Community

Council of Bajo Atrato). It was established in 2003, shortly after most communities returned to their lands, assuming as its principal task “the defence of life in our territory.” Territory emerges then not just as a socially meaningful place invested with specific cultural values but, overall, as a place central to people’s existence. In this sense, the political project of *bajoatrateño* communities is articulated around the defence of their territories, which is conceived as the only setting in which their collective identities can fully flourish. ASCOBA’s *motto* exemplifies the transition that local organizations made from a struggle based on class identity for the use and allocation of natural resources—before the reforms of 1991, grassroots organizations identified themselves as peasant organizations—to an identity based on ethnicity in which what is at stake is the protection of their existential places—Afro-Colombian organizations defending their traditional territories.

Territory epitomizes the political struggles around the defence of ethnic identities and cultural rights. It articulates different but interconnected objectives: from the securing of the livelihood of local communities to the political projects of regional social movements; from the possibilities of maintaining traditional and sustainable economic practices to the defence of collective rights; from the development of proper forms of governability to the autonomy to make decisions about development policies. Property rights and collective land ownership, access to natural resources, protection of sustainable livelihoods, conservation of local knowledge and traditional practices of production, protection of the environment, defence of traditional cultures, the experience of place and a deep sense of belonging, and the goal of attaining self-determination are some of the key aspects included within the struggles undertaken by communities in Bajo Atrato to defend their territory. Thus, what’s at stake when discussing territory is an alternative model of society and life. For local communities, however, the region constitutes not only a territory of life, but also a living territory. Let me explain.

In 2005, on the verge of a transcendental decision from the state regarding the rights of ownership over the lands that oil palm companies violently seized from

the titled collective territories, ASCOBA delineated some key principles about territory and its meaning:

Territory is the space appropriated for our physical, social, and cultural production. It is the physical space, the plants and the animals; it is the space we name, use, walk, and travel. It is the form villages and households are emplaced, the economy, the ways of living and working, the days for cultural and religious celebrations, the social relationships, our traditional authorities, and our worldview. All these actions are unfolded in the space and they create territoriality, which in turn, help building the territory [...] The territory is a space to produce life and culture, it reflects our worldview. In the fields we work, in the social and family relations we keep, in the symbolic aspects of our thinking, the territory is materialized [...] Territory is not only land because it extends far beyond the physical space granted by the law. (Valencia 2005, 15-20)

I would like to emphasize three aspects of this beautiful and powerful definition. First, social practices and relationships (i.e. “ways of working”, “cultural and religious celebrations”, “traditional authorities” or “social and family relations”) are not only developed in the territory, rather, they contribute to the creation of the territory. Second, territory and communities are mutually linked and reciprocally constituted: many practices express the attributes of particular places and the territory itself reflects the qualities of its inhabitants (“in the fields we work, in the social and family relations we keep, in the symbolic aspects of our thinking, the territory is materialized”). Third, territory cannot be understood in abstraction from the experience of being, and belonging to, an Afro-Colombian rural community (“it is the space we name, use, walk, and travel”). This is a sophisticated conceptualization that underscores the way territory participates essentially and not just contingently in the generation of a collective being, how it provides a particular placement to social experiences, and more importantly to the argument I wish to develop, how territory does not necessarily pre-exist the relations and practices that constitute it. In other words, the definition applies a relational approach: territory is enacted and experienced rather than provided, emerging as such by virtue of the practices people can undertake, as much as communities actualize their life projects by the kinds of relations the territory favours. What is at stake in this understanding of territory

is not just some sort of intimate interconnectedness of people and their places but the conditions through which both territory and communities come into existence.

I build on these tenets and make reference to a school of philosophical and anthropological thought that stresses relations and practices as ontologically primary—and entities or substances as ontologically derivative (Blaser 2009a, Deleuze and Guattari [1980] 2004, Ingold 2000, Haraway 2008, 2017; Ingold 2000, Latour 1996, 1999; Mol 2002, Rose 1992, Tsing 2005, Vilaça 2005, Viveiros de Castro 1998, 2010; Wildman 2010)—in order to better understand the co-constitutionality of people and their territories. This co-constitution, I argue, needs to be explored beyond the human aspects of the socio-material world (Kohn 2013) and must include a wider assemblage of beings that also participate in the generation of sociality in *bajoatrato* territories. By assemblage, I refer to the constantly emergent associations between human and non-human entities (Blaser 2014, Latour 2004), which is another way of saying that in Bajo Atrato, existence with other-than-humans is a condition and not a choice (Bingham 2006, Blaser 2014), and that territory is always in the making (Escobar 2001, 2008, 2016), that is to say, it is the outcome of intimate but asymmetrical relations between heterogeneous entities (Blaser 2014, Ingold 2011, Kohn 2007, Latour 2005, Ogden et al. 2013). Along these lines, territory can be understood as the creation and flourishing of emplaced relations between humans and non-humans. As a concept, territory is a way of underscoring that these assemblages of beings do not take place in the abstract but always, at the risk of sounding redundant, in a particular place and under specific socio-historical conditions. Territory, to expand the terms of relational thinking, might be conceived as a sort of emergent property: it arises out of the contingent relations that humans and non-humans establish in particular places and these relations constitute the conditions for its existence.

From this conceptualization, it follows that an understanding of war in Bajo Atrato can hardly be attained without taking into consideration the effects armed violence has provoked in the wider assemblages of human and non-human entities. Specific-

ally, through rivers, spirits, jaguars, snakes, and the attributes of particular places, I describe in this ethnography how the territories of indigenous and Afro-Colombian communities have been violently transformed. My goal is not merely an attempt to include animals or the environment in our accounts of human destructive acts, but to understand the violent drives of war in terms other than human rights. I then explore the worldly effects violence produces in the manifold beings and relations that constitute the *bajoatrateño* territory. From rivers prevented from reaching their full flow to forests running amok, I undertake an ethnographic description of the harmful effects armed conflict has caused to some non-human existences. This is my humble response to the challenges indigenous and Afro-Colombian victims have presented in regard to the construction of justice and a long-lasting peace. In particular, I take seriously the claims these communities have been making about the damages that war has caused to their territories and to the other-than-human beings that said territories harbour. This is a concern successfully addressed by indigenous and Afro-Colombian communities when they formulated their own laws for the attention and reparation of victims (Decree-Laws 4633 and 4635 of 2011). In these laws, they introduced the idea that besides the harms caused to people, the territory should be considered another victim of armed conflict. This consideration demands from us, on one hand, to expand our understanding of war as an experience shared by different entities, with humans only one of the beings damaged, and on the other hand, to cease conceiving nature and culture as two divergent ontological domains. I therefore explore whether the suffering of rivers, forests, spirits, jaguars or *madres de agua* can tell us something about what it means to consider the territory a victim.

When indigenous and Afro-Colombian communities compel us to consider their own territories as victims of war, we are forced to pay attention not only to the damages that extend beyond the human but also to the way their own humanness is constituted through the various emplaced relations they cultivate with non-humans. More importantly, through the damages experienced by their territories they are addressing concerns about the constitution of the world itself and the nature of the

beings that comprise it. If the effects of war are so far-reaching, can we redress the suffering of non-human entities by using a human rights framework? Do we need to extend rights to the territory itself or to the non-human beings that participate equally in its making? Is it through the recognition of rights to beings endowed with agentive capacities that we can better establish conditions for sharing the world with our significant non-human neighbours? These questions matter because their potential answers might help us to determine the conditions under which both indigenous and Afro-Colombian communities and their territories can heal.

By examining the role that territory occupies in the so-called Victims' Laws, I argue that the language of law sometimes opens up new political possibilities or diplomatic arrangements for the recognition of not only particular ways of being in the world but also for the recognition of different kinds of beings inhabiting the world. Following Stengers (2005a, 2005b, 2010) and Latour (2004, 2013), by diplomacy I mean the possibility the state—as legitimate representative of mainstream society and Western modern epistemology—and indigenous and Afro-Colombian peoples have for forging a common ground: one in which the experiences the latter have derived from war cease to be flatly translated into the language of cultural relativism, which is another way of saying that their experiences of violence and suffering correspond to their own worldviews but not to what happens to the world itself. In an ideal diplomatic arrangement, the suffering of spirits or forests would not be restricted to the realm of cultural representations of the world. Instead, that suffering could persuade us to slow down certain ways of thinking and decision-making (Stengers 2005b) and make room for justice and reparations otherwise (Blaser 2013b, Escobar 2007).

Diplomatic arrangements regarding the experiences indigenous and Afro-Colombian communities derive from their territories have been implicitly celebrated by the law: first, when territory becomes a right, and later when it is considered a victim of armed conflict. Consider for instance the prevalence that notions such as “spiritual relationships” or “spiritual values” have in the jurisprudence of the Con-

stitutional Court of Colombia or in the Inter-American Court of Human Rights (see for instance the sentence T-129-2011 or the case of the Kichwa indigenous people of Sarayaku v. Ecuador¹). “Spiritual values” are employed to describe the kinds of relations that extend beyond the material or instrumental significance that indigenous peoples assign to their territories. In fact, these “spiritual relations” are one of the key elements frequently included to legitimate the granting of territorial rights to these peoples. According to Alexandre Surrallés (2017), the concept of spirituality integrated in these types of laws, including the UN human rights system, explicitly recognizes the arrangements of social relations through which indigenous peoples interact with a wide variety of life, including non-humans, which are considered in most Amerindian ontologies as beings endowed with some kind of agency and personhood. In other words, spirituality in the context of territorial rights is associated with the importance indigenous communities ascribe to the relations they keep with other-than-human entities for the preservation of harmonic relations with and within their lands. In this way, if the right to territory is usually justified in terms of the spiritual connections indigenous peoples cultivate with their lands, and if spiritual relations encompass the ties these peoples share with non-human entities, it follows that protection of the right to territory is also protection of the existence of these non-human entities. To put it in other terms, the notion of spirituality recognizes a form of affective link between humans and other beings, that is,

a fabric of social relations linking together humans and nonhumans in a particular territory. It is this socioterritorial space that is considered necessary for the survival of the indigenous peoples as a people, which, de facto, comes to mean a group comprising humans and the nonhumans to which the former are attached. (Ibid., 227)

Thus, when the so-called spiritual life of indigenous peoples serves to describe and justify their right to territory, the law is implicitly accepting the established forms of social and ontological organization these communities enact in their territories, including the role that non-human entities play in the life of those communities.

¹ See Corte Constitucional de Colombia: Sentencia de Tutela T-129/11 or Inter-American Court of Human Rights: Case of the Kichwa Indigenous People of Sarayaku v. Ecuador, Judgment of June 27, 2012

Consequently, the defence of the right to territory via the defence of indigenous rights would include “a nascent extension” of rights to non-humans (Ibid., 230). This potential extension of rights is more evident in the consideration of the territory as a victim. According to the Victims’ Law for indigenous peoples,

The territory, understood as a living entity and foundation of identity and harmony, in accordance with the very cosmovision of the indigenous peoples and by virtue of the special and collective link that they hold with same, suffers a damage when it is violated or desecrated by the internal armed conflict and its underlying and related factors (Congreso de Colombia, Decreto-Ley 4633, Art. 45).

What this law describes as “the special spiritual relationship that indigenous peoples have with their territory” (Ibid., Art. 8) or the “special and collective link that connects them to Mother Earth” (Ibid., Art. 3), might then be considered an implicit recognition of non-humans and their well-being. This is why the legislation regarding the territory, either as a right or as a victim, can be considered a sort of diplomatic arrangement: it celebrates the uniqueness of some peoples while taking into consideration non-human beings, partially connecting the apparently disparate realms of the objective and the cultural, the known and the believed, or the real and the constructed. What I propose in this ethnography is a form of attention, diplomatic if you will, to an array of damages experienced by indigenous and Afro-Colombian territories whose manifestations cannot be fully grasped without understanding the inherent connection between humans and the worlds in which they exist.

Act II: An app to visit the warmest places

There are all kinds of useful travel apps: specialized guides suggesting hotels, restaurants, tours or museums; others that allow you to document your experience, to share photos or travel tips and comments; there are apps recommending useful items for the exploration of mountains and others to calculate tips according to local currency rates and customs. There are also GPS navigation apps with accurate geo-tagged maps full of historical information about buildings and places. The

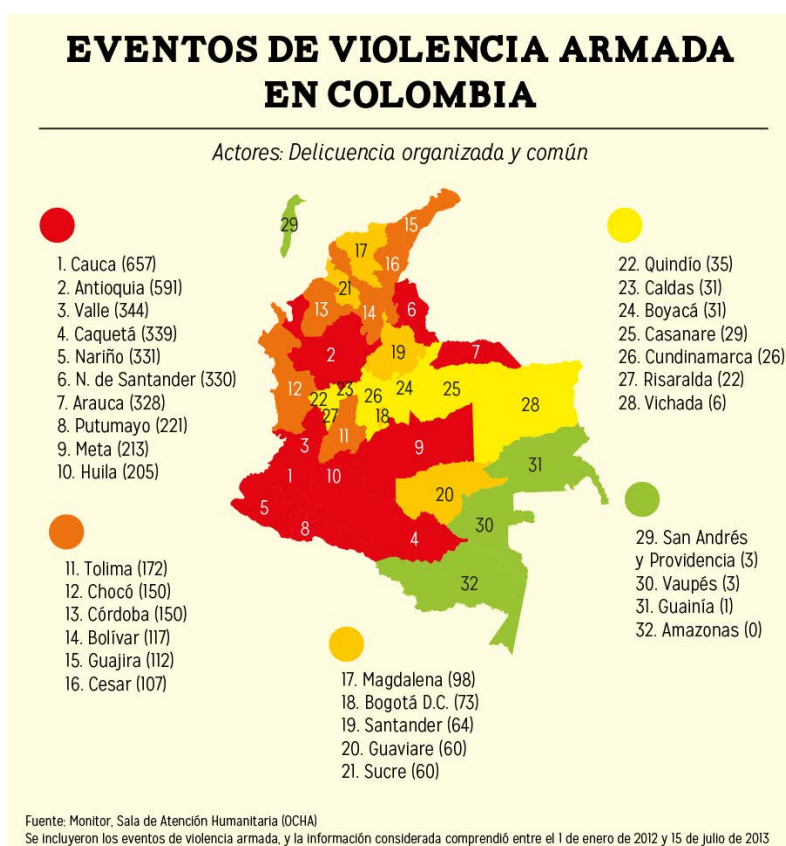
app I chose when making one of my trips from Bogotá to Riosucio allowed me to identify places where massacres were committed. Perhaps this is not the most attractive travel app for planning a trip in a country that has been ravaged by decades of violent conflict. But I used it because I wondered if I could calculate the distance between these two places in terms of unlawful deaths, by which I mean premeditated murder of civilians perpetrated by state officials or by paramilitary and guerrilla armies. And I could. During the more than 835 km between Bogotá and Riosucio, I was warned 51 times by my phone.

These 51 massacres and about 728 more committed throughout the country have been documented by *Rutas del Conflicto*—Roads of the Armed Conflict—an app and database created by the National Centre for Historical Memory (CNMH) and the news website Verdad Abierta. In 2017, this online platform won the Data Journalism Awards for its outstanding commitment to, in the words of the jury, “enlighten the public and honour the memory of victims.” (Data Journalism Awards 2017). *Rutas del Conflicto* gathers information from armed conflict events that had not been included in news from traditional media or in official statements from the government. Users of the app will find information about the circumstances that led to the massacres, lists with victims’ names, the armed groups involved, and coordinates of the exact location where the massacres were committed. By using geo-referenced data, one may find out about the massacres committed as well as the distance to the location. For example, I received the first warning when leaving Bogotá, in a place called Mondoñedo where six people were kidnapped, tortured, and killed in 1996 by police officials. For this crime, I learned from the app, four perpetrators, including a colonel, were sentenced to 40 years in prison.

The app was also a useful device for calculating the “thermodynamics of the armed conflict”, an expression I borrow from Nicolas Espinosa (2010, 33) to describe the range of heat that people use to depict the perceived security conditions of a given region. In Colombia, some areas are hotter than others and this social temperature might be related to various indicators, such as the presence of armed groups, the

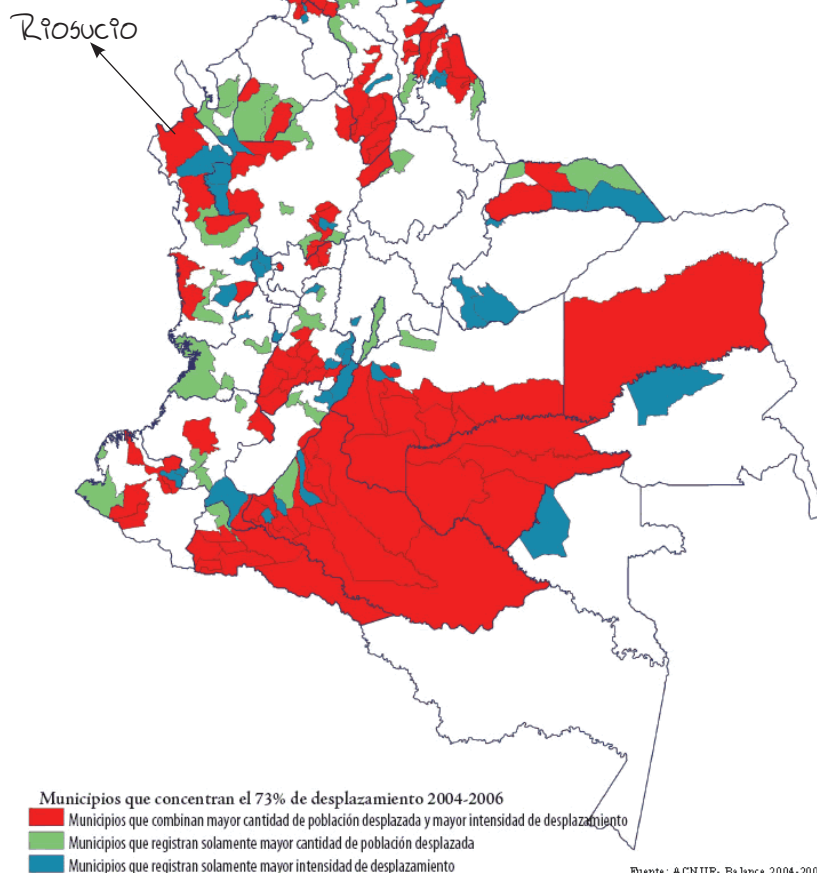
number of people displaced or human rights abuses. The use of the adjective “hot” to describe a region as more likely to be violent is often accompanied by visual representations such as those seen in Figures 1 and 2. The red colour indicates, of course, the regions with the most conflict and the change in the colour palette shows a decrease in the chosen indicator. Based on these maps, one may say that Chocó is hotter than Bogotá or that Riosucio is one of the hottest municipalities in the country. The use of a vocabulary of colours to assign characteristics to places is not just an exercise of qualitative abstraction carried out by cartographers and scholars: it justifies policies and interventions. The red zones often become locations where the control and guarantees of judicial order might be suspended, regions where the rule of law is displaced by the state of exception (Agamben 2005, Mbembe 2003). In daily life, people often refer to a given place or its potential for violence in terms of its thermal properties. In this way, places that are perceived as being dangerous are simply referred to as *zonas rojas* or *zonas calientes*, that is, red zones or hot zones. In Riosucio, for example, I was warned several times about the

FIGURE 1.
The most violent
departments
Source: CODHES 2013



Principales zonas de expulsión de población desplazada 2004-2006

FIGURE 2.
Force displacement
Source: CODHES 2013



risk of visiting certain villages or about the impossibility of going at particular times due to excessive heat.

By measuring the thermodynamics of the armed conflict with my app, one ought to say that municipalities like Riosucio—where 6 massacres took place and 63 people were killed—or Apartadó—10 massacres and 122 people murdered—are hotter than a municipality like Santuario, where 5 people were killed during the one massacre that took place in 1996. My app, I realized, was an appalling trip advisor, insofar as it warned me to avoid so many “hot spots” that if I had used it as a travel app, I would have had to avoid 13 of the 29 municipalities I travelled through. That said, it proved to be a powerful tool, providing valuable information about topics related

to my research, mainly the way certain forms of violence manage to, paraphrasing Keith Basso (1996), sit in places: they are deeply intertwined with the ways places are imagined, represented, and enacted.

But once I arrived in Riosucio, my experience with the location tracking component of the app was not entirely rewarding. Unfortunately, the app was only useful inside the town because in rural areas the mobile phone signal becomes very poor, practically nonexistent. As a matter of fact, the six documented massacres of Riosucio took place in rural areas where the app was no longer functional. So, unlike the other municipalities where I used the app, in Riosucio it was impossible to determine the actual locations of the massacres. In all six documented massacres, the arrow icon that serves as a location symbol only pointed to an indeterminate place to the east of town, as if all these events took place somewhere on the riverbanks, in front of the very location where the town is located. This vagueness bothered me because the arrow placed in the middle of the Atrato River was simply pointing out some sort of *terra ignota* or unknown land. The impossibility of using my app to determine where the massacres actually took place not only rubbed my nose in the well known dictum, “a map is not the territory” (Korzybski 1933, 58), but also inspired me to create a new one: “an app is always transitory”, meaning it only bestows transient instances of information that heavily depend on the quality of internet connection and unpredictable mobile devices. I realized then that in order to know more about the places where these massacres were committed, I needed to go through what the map could not describe. In particular, I wanted to know the location of the following events described in my app:

RIOSUCIO'S MASSACRE, CHOCÓ, 1999



Municipality: Riosucio

Hamlet or Village:
Villahermosa and Clavellino

Department: Chocó
Armed Group: Paramilitaries from the Élder Cárdenas Front (1995-2006)

Date: April 1999

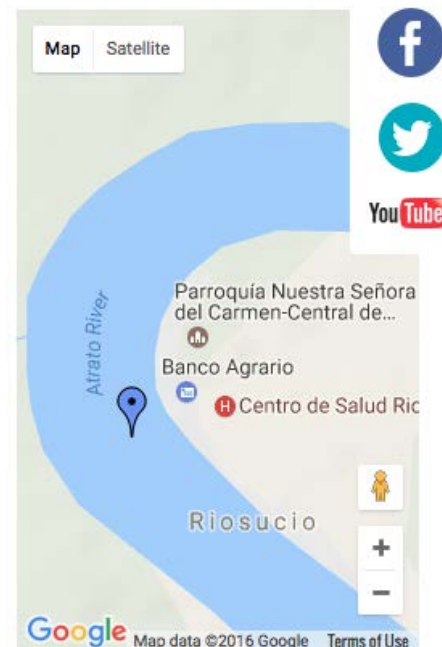
On April 9th 1999, a group of paramilitary soldiers from the Élder Cárdenas Front arrived in the hamlets of

Villahermosa and Clavellino, in the municipality of Riosucio, Chocó, and took 13 peasants from their houses. They were taken away by force and later were killed.

There was a six-year-old boy among the victims but his identity could not be determined. The paramilitaries left the corpses in different places near the hamlets. Some of these bodies exhibited evidence of torture. Since 1997, communities of the Riosucio region were victims of different massacres perpetrated by the paramilitaries. In 1997 alone, more than 4000 inhabitants of this municipality were forcibly displaced to Antioquia.

Riosucio is located in the Bajo Atrato region. This region used to be the stronghold of paramilitaries from the Élder Cárdenas Front of the United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia (AUC) and the 5th, 57th and 58th Fronts of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC). The paramilitaries committed all kinds of crimes in this region since 1995 under the command of Freddy Rendón Herrera, aka "El Alemán." At the beginning, this group was known as "Los Velengues" but in 1997 when they joined the United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia they called themselves the Élder Cárdenas Front.

UBICACIÓN GEOGRÁFICA



[Ver mapa más grande](#)

LIST OF VICTIMS

Jesús Arias
Floriberto Hurtado
Luis Enrique N.
Jorge Correa
Jorge Enrique Murillo
Luis Felipe Lambertino
Jesús Ángel Cárdenas
Jorge Ramos
Macario Córdoba Asprilla
Belardino Salas Chalá
Victor Girón
Alejandro Betancourt

[INICIO](#) | [EL PROYECTO](#) | [DESTACADOS](#) | [GEOGRAFÍA DEL TERROR](#) | [YO SOBREVIVÍ](#)

[REALIZA TU BÚSQUEDA >](#)

ABOUT THE ARMED GROUP

Paramilitaries from the Élder Cárdenas Front (1995-2006)

This Front began as a criminal band called "Los Velengues", founded by Freddy Rendón Herrera, aka "El Alemán," and Élder Cárdenas. In 1995 these commandants met Carlos Castaño, top commandant of the Peasant Self-Defenders of Córdoba and Urabá and together the men agreed to become part of the AUC. Mr. Cárdenas was killed two years later and "El Alemán" decided to give his name to this Front. This group received funding thanks to drug trafficking and extortion of entrepreneurs in Antioquia and Chocó. This Front also committed all kinds of crimes against peasants who they accused of being part of the guerrilla movement, as well as against those who refused to be conscripted by the AUC.

Commandant: Freddy Rendón Herrera, aka "El Alemán".

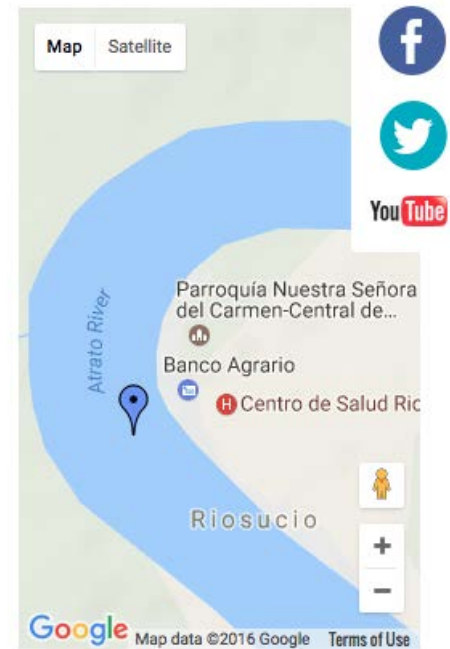
Zones under its influence: Northern Urabá, municipalities of San Pedro, San Juan, Necoclí and Arboletes. Upper and Bajo Atrato, Unguía, Acandí, and Bojayá. Southern Urabá, municipalities of Mutatá, Dabeiba and Uramita.

[Twitter](#)

<TU MEMORIA CUENTA>

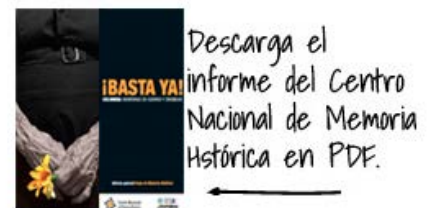
[Aporta información para ampliar la documentación de esta masacre.](#)

UBICACIÓN GEOGRÁFICA



[Ver mapa más grande](#)

DESCARGAS



I wanted to know where this massacre took place because I did know both villages mentioned and even recognized a couple of names that appear on the list of victims. I was a close friend of one of the survivors of this massacre who told me what the app could not. The following is a rough translation of his account of events:

After being forcefully displaced to Paravandó, we returned to Villahermosa in January 1998. Our goal was to go back to our land and we returned collectively due to security reasons. Six different communities decided to settle in a single village settlement. We chose Villahermosa because it was at the centre of the six communities and because there were several houses to accommodate all people. Another advantage of that settlement was the permanent availability of water because the Guineo River, which flows near Villahermosa, has good water levels in summer. Once settled, we decided that people were not to work individually, and that each community had to organize work teams of 10 to 15 members to sow maize, rice, and other essential crops. Each person was also able to travel from Villahermosa to their own community to visit their houses and to check the land and crops we had to abandon. We would come and go all the time and we would bring plantain from our villages because the plantain available at Villahermosa was not enough for all us.

In November 1998 some FARC militia members arrived. We told them we were part of a community peace process, that is, that we were non-partisan in the conflict. It did not mean we were enemies to one side or another. It meant that the FARC were to observe the community rules and those rules included that nobody was to help them and they were not to stay in our settlement. That is what we told them, but you know how those holding guns behave and they decided to stay in the surrounding areas terrifying people. In one encounter, they took two young people who allegedly had direct links to paramilitary members in Riosucio. Actually, I don't know what those young people were involved in. I knew their families but I really don't know whether they were guilty of such accusations. Those young people were taken and we have not heard anything about them ever since. They disappeared and never returned home.

In April 1999 the *Autodefensas* groups initiated a military operation and two thousand armed men arrived in ships. I think there were two thousand men because during this operation they managed to set up well armed troops in every hamlet they crossed through. The first men arrived at Balsas, killed three people there and took three other people. Then, in the Arenal community, they killed other people, including a boy who was not normal. I mean, he was not right in the head, he was a little scatterbrained and came to Arenal to buy some cigarettes. They told him he was not allowed to pass. But he did not understand things right and did not listen to them, so they shot him. That boy was called Alejandro Betancourt. A man named Jorge also died in Arenal. He was riding a horse and intended to head back

as soon as he saw the paramilitary. But then they shot him and a 5-year-old boy he was carrying in his arms. The horse also died.

The paramilitary continued their operation and went through several communities until they reached Villahermosa in the wee hours. At 2 a.m. they had already surrounded the entire village and at 6 a.m. they woke everybody up. They gathered us at the soccer field. Then we saw a man called Catalino and everybody panicked. Catalino was a peasant, a man who had been displaced with us. He had been a leader and participated in the entire community peace process that helped us return to our lands. He used to participate in the activities organized by the NGOs that facilitated the return to our lands. But it seems he had had a quarrel with the Parish of Riosucio, who had supported us through the entire process. They say that he was receiving supporting documents in order to travel to Ecuador as a refugee. I don't know the details but I know that he even came to blows with a priest. Then we heard he had joined the *Autodefensas*. That day when the paramilitaries arrived, he was the one accusing people. Since Catalino knew all about the work done by the leaders and how we decided to not take any part in the armed conflict nor to pass information or aid to any armed group, we were terrified when we saw him wearing a uniform and holding an assault rifle. He started to call from a list, and I was surprised when he called me. Then, I approached him and asked why I was on that list. He shouted at me and told me I had to obey his orders. Then another paramilitary by his side unlocked the rifle, threw me on the ground and tied me up. They told me to be quiet.

Everybody was at the soccer field, including women and children. Using the list, they called and tied up about 20 people, both men and women. After they tied us up, the paramilitary told women to leave with their children, but none of them left. They all stayed to see what would happen to us. I remember those with long hair were given a haircut by the paramilitary. They started to release several people and in the end we were about 10 people tied up. The paramilitary looted all the houses and all the valuable goods were taken, namely, wallets, food, and clothing.

A paramilitary soldier asked me how many guerrilla members were among us. He said he would spare my life if I was able to point to one of them. I told myself I would die if I had to, but under no circumstances would I point at someone who was innocent. Whenever there are evil people, there are always one or two good people too. It is a fact that some paramilitary members joined to earn some money and that is all. I remember one of them approached me and said: "Easy pal, not everybody is getting killed here. Some are being taken to talk to Carlos Castaño²". To me, this man's gesture of reaching out to me showed me that fundamentally, he was a good person. They took all the people they tied up from Villahermosa. We crossed the river and started to walk through the forest.

² Carlos Castaño Gil was the founder of the ACCU, Peasant Self-Defenders of Córdoba and Urabá, the paramilitary organization controlling Bajo Atrato. At the time, he was its top commander.

I remember noticing that some men were quiet while we were walking through the forest, and they were not aggressive or rude to us. Since I had been in the compulsory military service, I was able to recognize the uniforms and I noticed that some of them were in active military service. I observed their badges: some read AUC, others ACCU, and some read BG17 Vélez Battalion. They were all mixed: regular soldiers, army soldiers, paramilitary soldiers.

The group of tied-up people was divided. I was taken with three other people and they made two other groups of prisoners. After about one hour of walking, one prisoner was taken under a *guamo* tree. Then they took Luis Felipe, known as “El Gordo”; Jorge, whose father still lives in Riosucio; and Ángel Cárdenas, who was a muleteer. These three prisoners were then taken to some rice crops at the foot of a hill. I remember that ducks used to go there to eat rice. We kept waiting for a while. Then we heard a shot. Bang! Then a second shot. Bang! And a last shot. I looked at one of my partners and told him the same would happen to us. He said they were merely shooting ducks. His words got me so angry! I told him not to be a fool: “No ducks at all, we are not in times of peace.”

Those men were shot in the back of the neck, what they call a “coup de grace”. But they were also tortured. I later found out that Jorge’s body had been *rezado* (safeguarded) and that the paramilitaries had a hard time killing that man. You know, some people here prepare their bodies, they learn secrets and prayers to protect them in the eventuality of a fight or an assault. Jorge knew such sorcery and he had safeguarded his body. Thus he was hard to kill. The three men were stabbed with bayonets and the throat of one of them was cut with a machete. They were given coups de grace so that we would understand they had been killed, since we were not seeing it. But they had actually already killed them by stabbing them.

We were forced to keep walking and then they took another three men: Jorge Eliécer Correa; my *compadre*, Jesus María Arias; and Floriberto Hurtado. We were told to keep walking. I assumed we were all going to get killed, but not at the same place. I was not scared. It was not like I was shitting myself at all. Instead I had resigned myself to die. We kept walking and the three were left behind. Afterwards they caught up with us, and when I saw them I wanted to cry. They were tied up with a rope and had been terribly beaten. I saw a paramilitary giving Jorge a cookie the same way a priest gives a host at church. Then I really wanted to cry. The last time I saw them, they were on top of a hill we now call the Three Crosses Hill. They were killed there. We were forced to keep walking and then heard a shot. Bang! After a while, a second shot. And then a last shot. It was suspicious that the paramilitary were taking so long just to shoot them. They surely did something else to them before shooting them. Then one of my partners stood up and spoke to one of the commanders. He said: “Listen man, I want you to tell us why you are going to kill us”. He said: “What the fuck are you talking about? If we wanted to kill you, we would have killed you a long time ago, so we did not have to carry you around anymore!”

Nobody else was killed that day. In the end, it was true that the paramilitaries wanted to take my friend and the other men somewhere else in order to meet Carlos Castaño, founder and top commander of the paramilitary groups that controlled the region. My friend and the other survivors were released three weeks later after a hard and painful march through the forests and swamps of Bajo Atrato.

I use this account of the massacre as a means to overcome the discomfort provoked by my app in Riosucio, particularly the indeterminacy of that arrow icon mischievously floating in the middle of the Atrato River. Through that arrow, I realized that indeterminacy and uncertainty are what make these massacres so disturbing, because it does not matter how much you learn about one of these events, there is always something that resists knowledge; no matter how spectacular a massacre might be, its violence and destruction hide what is essential. To overcome the geographical indeterminacy conveyed by the app, I visited the hill where Jorge, Jesus, and Floriberto were executed.

FIGURE 3.
Three Crosses Hill
Photo by author



This is now called “Three Crosses Hill”, a place that has never existed on any map. The crosses not only mark a site of death but also of memory and, ultimately, of ethical commitment. They symbolize the commitment of Jorge, Jesus, and Floriber-

to's families and communities to remember, to not let the world forget when and why this happened. They refuse to accept that such a collective tragedy becomes just another casualty statistic. Similar to the *descansos* described by Angela Garcia (2010) in her book on heroin addiction in the Southwestern United States, memorials erected at the places where someone has died become part of the relationships people cultivate with both their own past and the places they inhabit. To name the mountain "Three Crosses Hill" is to let a violent event permeate local topography, to let collective memory sit in places. To erect three crosses at that location is to care about the relation these deaths and this place have with people's everyday lives. And this is true not only for those who know about the actual events but also those passing by that mountain who are forced to slow their pace and pay silent tribute to those souls no longer in the land of the living but now belonging to the soil of that particular land.

Armed conflict, structural violence, and the politics of everyday life

There is no novelty in writing about violence in Colombia. Indeed, violence is such a pervasive topic in Colombian social sciences that it even exists as a school of thinking and research: violentology. As the title of this dissertation points out, I could hardly get away from that pervasiveness. And yet, inspired by the work of Natalia Quiceno (2015), my aim is to make violence a point to be attained, something to be demonstrated through ethnographic sensibility instead of an obvious analytical starting point. I then focus more on everyday violence and its associated ontological meanings rather than on the spectacle that armed conflict may assume: massacres, humanitarian crises, power dynamics among the actors involved. While I have tried to reflect such an approach in my writing, there are instances in which testimonies of suffering and survival (like the one above) or the thorough discussion of economic and political aspects of war become indispensable means to better delineate the forms in which people in Bajo Atrato go about their daily lives. Even in such instances, I have committed to prioritizing the meanings people assign to their own

experiences of violence rather than presenting conclusive explanations of armed conflict in terms of the instrumental or ideological drives of the involved actors.

In Bajo Atrato, political violence adopts diverse manifestations and is performed by different actors embodying different beliefs. The most evident manifestation of political violence is the armed conflict: a war that has pitted a range of distinct armed groups against each other, a war that has been waged against the indigenous and Afro-Colombian populations and against the modes of being they embody. By this, I mean that the so-called civilian casualties and collateral damages associated with the actions of armed groups have not been incidental to conflict but fundamental to the aims pursued by these groups. The numerous loyalties of these groups are shown by the acronyms they adopt: FARC, ELN, ACCU, AUC, BACRIM, AGC, FFMM. The most common interpretation of war in Bajo Atrato is that it pitted a communist guerrilla (the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia–FARC) against right-wing paramilitary armies (initially the Peasant Self-Defence Forces of Córdoba and Urabá–ACCU—which later became part of the United Self-Defence Forces of Colombia–AUC). From that limited perspective, the state, through its military forces (army and police–FFMM) fought these illegal armies in order to enforce its constitutional duty of protecting people’s life, dignity, property, rights, and freedoms. Unfortunately, that has not been the commitment of the Colombian state. As will be later explained, the recent local history contains many examples of the involvement of both army and police officials in cases of serious human rights violations. As a matter of fact, several top commanders have been condemned, or are under investigation, for arming and collaborating with paramilitary death squads in Chocó (Salinas and Zarama 2012, Vargas 2016).

By the way events have unfolded in Bajo Atrato, there is little doubt that the army and the paramilitary, along with the political elites, wealthy financiers, entrepreneurs, and companies that systematically funded the counter-insurgency war launched by paramilitaries for years, formed strategic alliances in order to extirpate all guerrilla influence in the region and gain economic power through dispos-

session of people's lands. The so-called counter-insurgency war waged in the region adopted the classic "drain the water" strategy, that is to say, to catch guerillas (the fish) by polluting or drying up their milieu, in this case by eliminating their alleged supporters—the civil population. The apex of such violence was the 1997-2002 period, when the campaigns launched by both paramilitary and army forces resulted not in the diminishing of guerrilla power but in the banishment of several Afro-Colombian communities from their traditional territories. My friend's account accurately describes the kinds of threats people had to face during that difficult period. Even today, many communities have not succeeded in returning to their lands under appropriate conditions of safety, dignity, and sustainability because fights between paramilitary armies and communist guerrillas are still happening, although these groups have adopted new names and new identities.

Armed conflict, however, has not been a counter-insurgency war only. A most complex image emerges when drug trafficking, gunrunning, land grabbing, agribusiness, megaprojects and mining enter the picture. When armed groups promote such activities and earn substantial money from them, war becomes the continuation of political and economic neo-liberalist agendas by other means. Armed conflict in Bajo Atrato is not a binary conflict; it eludes any Manichaeian interpretation. It demonstrates that politics and economic considerations are not always discrete motivations, that some actions undertaken by armed groups are not necessarily aligned to ideological discourses or related to their strategic goals (Kalyvas 2003). This is particularly true when one finds that the counter-revolutionary motivations of paramilitary groups conflated with the goals of certain political and economic elites, as well as with the desire of state security forces to "clean up" purported insurgent areas; or when depletion of natural resources and forced displacement of entire communities were instrumental to guerrillas' own economic interests and political agenda; or when the violence exerted against particular targets—like the victims of the Three Crosses Hill massacre—was inconsistent with the dominant discourse of war—the man making accusations was a former peasant leader and seemed to be settling an old score rather than pursuing a purely political motivation.

Despite the demobilization of paramilitary forces and efforts to reach peace agreements with guerrillas, in particular the FARC peace accord in 2016, the armed conflict is still an ongoing event. In 2006, after official demobilization of the paramilitaries, new armed groups occupied the structures of power left behind by the AUC in Bajo Atrato. Although the government insists in calling these groups gangs or BACRIM (criminal bands), they still exert the violent power of their predecessors under an euphemistic new name: Gaitanistas Self-Defence Group of Colombia (AGC³). Something similar has happened to the FARC since from the very moment the peace talks with the government were announced in 2012, the ELN guerrilla group (National Liberation Army) began occupying the areas that were under FARC influence. What is common to all these armed actors, regardless of their purported ideological affiliations, is that they engage in economic activities such as contraband, logging, drug trafficking, illegal mining or whatever allows them to fuel their war machines. They also share common strategies for terrorizing and disciplining populations: forced displacement, selective assassinations, extortion, threats, and economic blockades.

Although the armed participants involved in the conflict have received a wide variety of labels and treatment from the state—sometimes they have been called and treated as terrorists, gangs or drug cartels; other times they have received belligerent status, and still other times they have been the target of military operations intent on their annihilation—and although the armed conflict itself has sometimes been denied or understood as a legitimate campaign, I maintain that armed conflict in Bajo Atrato is over all a politically motivated activity. This is because each armed group represents a particular ideology and organizes their actions to either modify or perpetuate certain power structures. More importantly, the armed conflict is an expression of political violence in the sense that the values and practices system-

³ The Autodefensas Gaitanistas de Colombia, a right-wing paramilitary group, got its name from Jorge Eliécer Gaitán, a charismatic politician and populist leader that was running for President when he was assassinated in 1948. His death led to the historical period known simply as La Violencia, a large-scale political violence instigated by the conservative government against opposition parties. That violence claimed between 200,000 and 300,000 lives (Carroll 2011, Hristov 2009; LeGrand 2003). Gaitán was a strong proponent of workers' rights and fought to help the disenfranchised population against the status quo.

atically driven, fostered, embodied or reproduced by armed actors are most times at odds with the ways of being that are cherished by indigenous and Afro-Colombian communities. As politics is partly concerned with power and organizing control over a given population, there is little doubt that armed conflict in Bajo Atrato is but a form of political violence: all armed actors aim, by one means or another, to exert power over local communities.

This broad definition of politics—a means of exerting power—leads me to consider that other structural manifestations of violence such as poverty, exclusion or discrimination are also political: they constrain people's possibilities of being. In a place like Bajo Atrato, structural violence—the chronic and historically entrenched social, political, and economic arrangements that disadvantage and harm populations—might be considered a form of political violence, since practices such as racism, marginalization, and exploitation have been institutionalized by economic and political elites, to the extent that such practices are powerful forces shaping the way the state conceives of, regulates relations, and rules the region and its inhabitants. As Paul Farmer (2004) argues, gross human rights violations are not random in distribution but they are intimately linked to “the social conditions that so often determine who will suffer abuse and who will be shielded from harm” (Ibid, 7). Structural violence, despite its subtleties and commonness, is strategic and warlike: it maintains and reproduces power-laden relations, it disciplines people, it naturalizes poverty, it constrains agency. Therefore, when I talk of political violence I make reference to both armed conflict and structural violence.

In Bajo Atrato, both kinds of violence are part of the fundamental routine of daily life. The armed conflict is ubiquitous not because armed groups are present everywhere or because combats are taking place constantly—indeed one of the characteristics of these groups is their hiddenness—but because it pervades all type of decisions: where to go, where to live, what and where to cultivate, what to say, what to expect, what to yearn for. Similarly, despite many political efforts, social changes, legal arrangements, and democratic transformations, structural violence is such a

big part of people's lives that it seems that poverty, isolation, racism and exclusion have become the very conditions for the allowance of other people's privileges. Finally, my approach to the concept of political violence also concerns the role the state, as a convergence of power relations, plays in both armed conflict and structural violence. Therefore, I see the violence perpetrated by the state in Bajo Atrato as a type of politics not greatly informed by a state discourse and practice on the control and regulation of life–biopolitics–but on state permissiveness to death–thanatopolitics–or what Achille Mbembe (2003) characterizes as necropolitics: “the subjugation of life to the power of death” (Ibid., 39). Political violence is then a practice of defining “who matters and who does not, who is disposable and who is not” (Mbembe 2003, 27), of carrying death and letting it happen to particular peoples embodying particular modes of being in particular places.

Act III: Ofelia's fate

Ofelia lurched through the doorway and into her aunt's house. She asked if she could stay for a while and asked her aunt to please keep the windows and doors closed. It was mid-morning and Ofelia was supposed to be at work. Clara, Ofelia's aunt, was worried and asked what was going on. Ofelia answered tersely and locked herself in one of the rooms. When I met Clara later that day she had left Ofelia in hiding and was on her way to Ofelia's home, hoping to find someone who could help her to handle the situation. She promised me she would explain everything to me later but that now she had to find one of her relatives. I was still worried because even if Clara had never been particularly talkative she was usually in a good mood, not sweaty and tearful as I found her. Later that day I met my friend Cecilia, a community leader who happened to be one of Ofelia's cousins. I asked her if she knew something about Clara or Ofelia. She told me she did and explained that it was imperative to get Ofelia out of Riosucio because she was in imminent danger.

Later that day when I was finally able to reconstruct Ofelia's story, I realized that what was happening was connected to another story I had heard a couple of months

earlier, when I was visiting a village upstream on the Atrato River. The story shocked me and I recorded it in my fieldnotes:

July 14th. R. told me one of her cousins died. He was 24 and he wanted to attend a seminary school. But before doing so he was conscripted. He spent more than a year in a military garrison in Tunja and just a week before he was to be released, he was found dead in a bathroom. The military said he committed suicide. Nobody in his family believes that version of events. The boy was found on the weekend, when the soldiers usually have permission to leave, but for some unknown reason that weekend his permission was revoked. He was very close to finishing his compulsory military service and gaining the coveted "libreta militar" he needed in order to pursue his studies. R. told me her cousin had talked with her mother the same weekend he was found dead and that he had seemed very excited with the idea of going back to Riosucio and paying a visit to the family. Nobody understands what happened. His body was sent home by public transportation, which was considered an outrage since his family believe he deserved to be transported and honoured as all members of the military are. R. says that her aunt believes the military made up that whole suicide story but she has no means to prove it. I agreed with her aunt and I felt sorry because for her, as for most people here in Choco, to challenge the official version of events requires the mobilization of resources that they cannot afford: a lawyer, a forensic doctor, witnesses, several trips. In short, the means to set in motion an independent investigation. I believe that the doubt about what really happened will stay in the family forever and I cannot help but thinking that that death represents the injustice of a system that does little to help the poor protect themselves. Even if that guy did commit suicide, his death was surely provoked by the abuse of authority many conscripted soldiers complain about, just like Petra's son in Riosucio, who shot himself because he was tired of being harassed by one of his superiors.

Ofelia was a cousin of the soldier who had supposedly committed suicide and just like his mother, she did not believe at all what the military said. She had decided to start her own investigation. Apparently, when the family received the body, they got instructions not to open the coffin because the soldier's face was disfigured. But they did open it and found a wound in the chest that did not correspond to the way the military said the suicide had occurred. There was also the strange way in which the body had been delivered to the family. Why did the military send the body by public transportation? Why was it that the family had to go to another city in order to pick it up if the military were obliged by law to deliver it directly to his family? These irregularities, this treatment of one of the "heroes of the country", as soldiers

are constantly called by high military officials, mortified the family. What did he do to deserve such treatment? Later the family gave other details that inspired doubt: in the suicide note he gave precise instructions about his burial, using words like obsequies rather than funeral, words that are too formal and are not usually used by people in Chocó; his mother said he finished the note with “I adore you so much”, an expression he had never used before.

People remember that Ofelia was particularly sad after the funeral and that she claimed she would take revenge against anyone messing with her family. But they thought her behaviour was no more than a symptom of personal mourning. Then Ofelia decided to write letters of complaint to the local prosecutor’s office and to tell the story to different journalists in Bogotá. Some weeks later she was contacted by a colonel, or at least that was how the man introduced himself. He got in touch through Facebook and they kept communication through Whatsapp, rather than by using any formal means. Over the course of several conversations, the man managed to glean some personal information about Ofelia and he even invited her to meet him by going together on vacation to the beach. He said he would assume all her travel expenses. She thought it would be a bad idea and decided to stop any communication with that man. Then some time later she was contacted by an unknown man who said he had seen some of her photos on Facebook and wanted to become her friend because he found her “very hot.” They exchanged some messages and after doing a little research, Ofelia learned that the man was a member of the military unit working in Tunja, the city where her cousin had been conscripted. And then, the day Ofelia arrived so startled and frightened at her aunt Clara’s place, it was because she had been told by her neighbours that two different men had arrived at her house asking for her.

The first of these men introduced himself as a salesman wanting to contact Ofelia. He did not carry any kind of merchandise and the neighbour who told him that Ofelia was not at home remarked that it was extremely rare that salesmen came to that part of the town, braving all the shaky bridges that lead to that neighbourhood.

The second man arrived some hours later with a paper in his hand, asking for a girl whose description corresponded to Ofelia. Both men were outsiders, white guys with military haircuts. That attracted the attention of Ofelia's neighbours, one of whom went to look for her at her place of work in order to warn her.

When Ofelia arrived at Clara's house, she was extremely frightened. The only thing she said to her aunt at that moment was that someone was looking for her in order to kill her. That was all she said and told Clara that she should not talk with anyone but her sister. She then asked Clara to please go for her and to not tell anyone where she was hiding. That was the moment Clara and I bumped into each other on the street. My friend Cecilia and her brother Oscar had told me they knew Ofelia had written letters and gone to the prosecutor's office. Oscar had advised her several times not to do so because it could be dangerous, especially in a place like Riosucio where military men, paramilitaries, and judges were all connected. On one occasion, Ofelia forwarded one of the messages she got from the colonel to Cecilia but Cecilia deleted it because she thought it was just spam. Ofelia later said the message was important because it was evidence of what that colonel was attempting to do. Cecilia did not initially understand what she had meant but now realized that something serious could happen.

As a communitarian leader, Cecilia had some contacts that could help Ofelia. The immediate risk was the men that were going after her. Cecilia explained the situation to the president of a local grassroots organization and together they talked with a commissioner from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) who was in Riosucio that day. The idea was that they could get Ofelia out of town using safe transportation, although one of the UN officials pointed out that Ofelia would not be under their protection once out of town and that to take her to another city where she had no friends or family would make her even more vulnerable. He was right and unfortunately nobody from Ofelia's family was ready to accompany her. However, at that point something else started to draw everyone's attention: Ofelia seemed to have lost her mind.

Ofelia locked herself in a room and did not accept visits, not even from her sister. Clara heard her sobbing and shedding tears. But she did not talk anymore. Other relatives got involved with the intention of easing her concerns but she did not welcome anyone and stayed in the room. Only at night, after many supplications, she let in a friend under the condition that she enter the room completely naked. The friend accepted and once in the room Ofelia anointed her entire body with oil. After a long talk with this friend, Ofelia finally decided to leave the room. She was now wearing only black clothes, the ones Clara had used when her husband had passed away. Then she started to pour oil on all the chairs, more abundantly on the one where she sat. Every time someone started to talk to her, she got up from her chair and applied some oil to their face and hands. Then she started speaking what Clara described to me as “flabbergasting drivel”: claiming that she was really Hugo Chávez, the deceased president of Venezuela; that the clothes she was wearing could not be washed in the river because they belonged to a saint; that she had a power that could not be contained; that everyone was conspiring against her and that she knew it because when she was a baby her father hit her mom; that one of the former parish priests that lived in Riosucio did not like singing sacred songs; that her boss was jealous of her success; that her boyfriend was cheating on her and she knew it because his mistress was in that very same room wondering what to make for dinner that night; that one of her cousins was happy about everything that was happening; and that she would be protected by her dead cousin. As she talked, she was moving all the pots and cutlery in the kitchen, reorganizing their positions incessantly. Her voice began getting louder and louder and at some point it was no longer hers but a penetrating, croaky man-like voice. Everyone panicked. Ofelia started moving violently and one of the visitors stopped her. Then a minister from the Pentecostal Church who was there lifted up his hands in prayer and asked the voice that was coming from Ofelia’s mouth to reveal its true identity. The disembodied voice answered he was a priest and started screaming. Realizing that what Ofelia was experiencing was beyond common effects of stress and fear, one of her relatives decided she needed to be sedated. Two men tried to lay her down but

she resisted with an incredible strength. To all witnesses, there was no doubt that Ofelia was being inhabited by a spiritual alien force. Clara told me that five men were required to put Ofelia to bed and that it was only after the sedative shot that she became calm, sleeping all night long.

When Clara told me about Ofelia's strange behaviour, I could not help but think of Ofelia's reaction to the events. She was under incredible stress and I interpreted everything in her behaviour as a need to decrease anxiety: anointing and pouring oil in an aseptic way, as if trying to keep an invisible threat away from her body and from those around her; asking people to undress in order to make sure they would not hurt her; obsessively moving and arranging the kitchen materials in an attempt to arrange everything under her own control and according to her will. Even her strange speech, I recognized, suggested a paranoia heavily influenced by the fear she was experiencing: the idea that her family was conspiring against her; that friends were enjoying her misfortune; that everything was part of a master plan that had begun when she was a small child. I think Ofelia felt overwhelmed by a mighty fear, which is why she introduced herself first as a president and later as a priest, both relatively untouchable male figures of power. I believed Ofelia's nervous breakdown was her embodiment of a generalized adversity linked with the realization of her own impotence: her desire for knowledge had led her to confront a sort of ubiquitous, male threat represented by the military that subsequently tried to lure her, seduce her, and finally eliminate her. Confronted with her own vulnerability, Ofelia surrendered to a great helplessness that ultimately resulted in her loss of spirit.

To Ofelia's relatives and most of her friends, she had literally lost her spirit. When they witnessed a more powerful voice speaking through her at Clara's house, what they saw was an episode of possession: the presence of a strange force taking away both Ofelia's will and her sanity. To them, her symptoms were not simply indicating the stress she was experiencing. Instead, the way she found to express her fear—her “flabbergasting drivel” and odd behaviour—was an extension of the violence and

terror that people see the military are capable of. According to them, what Ofelia was experiencing was *cosa hecha*, a thing made, a kind of sorcery, essentially an evil spell cast upon her. Thus, what Ofelia was feeling was not merely an expression of her inner world but something done to her. While Ofelia's relatives and friends recognized that her behaviour was triggered by the threat represented by the military men, what I had interpreted as the military's failure—they did not find her and could not cause her harm—they saw as the military's success, although by other means. Whereas I was worried for the potential physical harm that the military could inflict upon her, others saw that an esoteric harm had already been done. Whereas I interpreted Ofelia's nervous breakdown as a somatic expression of her fear, to her friends and relatives she was embodying something else.

Ofelia's odd behaviour was not simply related to stress or anxiety, as these are ultimately manifestations associated with our inner worlds, internalized impressions of external events that appear as physical symptoms. Rather, the nature of the harm inflicted on Ofelia was simultaneously situated inside and outside herself. I understand that kind of damage as an expression of contiguity between that being represented—the extreme fear felt by Ofelia—and the means to represent it—her purported madness. This contiguity recalls the kind of properties that Charles Sanders Peirce (1998 [1894]) assigned to icons, those signs that denote their objects by virtue of a quality that is shared by them. Just like an icon signifies its object by means of resemblance or imitation, fear seems to manifest and spread itself in similar ways. This process of mimicry is, according to Taussig (1992), one of the trademarks of terror: its capacity to keep in apposition the means of representation “as contiguous with that being represented and not as suspended above and distant from the represented” (Ibid., 10). That means that Ofelia's reaction—perceived by her entourage as the damage inflicted on her—did not stand apart from the source of her fear, namely the military that pursued her, nor distant from the properties typically associated with that source.

The idea that Ofelia was a victim of some kind of sorcery made more and more

sense after details of her attitude in the weeks leading up to her breakdown began to be known: she had sent strange emails to her boss and to her boss's boss; she was repeatedly late for work and during meetings seemed very distracted; she made up stories about men that were wooing her; her conversation topics were unusual; she spoke often of her family, about the pain she felt since her cousin died and about what would happen to those messing with her loved ones. For Ofelia's relatives and friends there was no doubt she was under the influence of a spiritual alien force.

In places like Riosucio, where people live in a permanent "state of emergency" that, to quote Walter Benjamin (1930), is not "the exception but the rule" (Ibid., 257), it was not hard at all to believe that the military wanted to harm Ofelia. What intrigued me were the capabilities people attributed to them. I could no longer distinguish between the certainty of a public threat—the fact that she was being sought by some unknown men—and the ambiguity of a damage inflicted through esoteric means. That enmeshment of what Das (2006) calls the ordinary and the extraordinary that is so characteristic of everyday life during conflict (Segal 2016) blurred the lines between facts and values, the individual and the collective, the eventful and the habitual. The role that sorcery and spirits were playing in the whole story alarmed me because it obscured things to the point where I was no longer sure what to be afraid of. Perhaps that uncertainty, the impossibility of determining the facts of the matter, was what made this story so sinister, so uncanny in the sense Sigmund Freud (2003 [1919]) gave to the term: that variation of fear that comes from something that is unconcealed, that is familiar to us and yet turns into something completely eerie by virtue of its very revelation, because it inadvertently comes to light when it was supposed to remain mysterious, hidden. That being said, I had been paying such attention to the fact that military men wanted to harm Ofelia—an apparent normality created by the chronic state of siege that characterizes conflict-affected places like Riosucio—that I disregarded the means they were using to do so, particularly the invocation of spirits, a power that in Bajo Atrato is considered part of the repertoire of actions that all armed groups, whether military, paramilitary or guerrilla, might employ.

When I talked to my friends Clara and Cecilia, I explained my worries to them, namely, that too much attention was being paid to how Ofelia had behaved and to the supposed sorcery, and that as a result everybody was forgetting there were two men with unknown intentions looking for her. Of course, the two women recognized that those men represented a tangible threat, but they explained that while her friends and relatives could protect Ofelia by their own means, humbly, by hiding her from the military, she needed to be protected from the spirits as well. Ofelia was going mad and, according to my friends, it was not only because of fear. After all, fear is unfortunately something that people have become accustomed to living with, although only a few had actually succumbed the way Ofelia had. Clara and Cecilia then told me that Ofelia needed to be protected quickly because things were getting worse. When Ofelia woke after that first night at Clara's house, she had told her aunt that she was feeling better and things seemed to be back to normal. Ofelia said she wanted to get some clean clothes at her house so she and her sister left. But when out on the street, Ofelia simply ran off and was quickly out of sight. Her sister finally found her after a few hours of searching, hidden in another friend's house, once again locked and weeping in a room. Ofelia's behaviour confirmed she was not in her right mind.

Her family knew they had to do something but were not sure what: should they bring a powerful sorcerer from another city or hospitalize Ofelia somewhere outside of Riosucio? Both of these alternatives offered potential cures for the *cosa hecha* but given the immediate circumstances, Ofelia's family disagreed about the best way to help her: to wait days for the sorcerer or take her immediately to a safe place where her symptoms could be temporarily alleviated. They finally decided to hospitalize Ofelia in another city, feeling she urgently needed treatment for her nerves but also because such treatment did not exclude the possibility of calling a sorcerer later. That same week, and only after Ofelia's mother had agreed, Ofelia left Riosucio in a bulletproof pickup truck with tinted windows: the one the government had assigned two years ago to a leader of a local grassroots organization. I could not help but consider the irony of needing to be protected from members of the Colombian

army by using a vehicle provided by the government and driven by bodyguards who were probably trained by the military.

The more I think about Ofelia's sad story the more I feel I cannot do justice to the complexity of the events. This is a story of fear and terror but also of someone losing her mind after realizing she is suspended in webs of violence she has not woven. Perhaps fear lies in the uncertainty of the events: nobody knows for sure what really happened to Ofelia's cousin, nor what she discovered during her research, nor the exact means military were using to harm her. This lack of factuality, the mystery about what really happened to Ofelia and her cousin is what sows the seeds of uncertainty where fear can grow. I like to see in Ofelia's story the determination of a brave woman to figure out what happened to her cousin. Her courage and thirst for knowledge bring to mind the women from Soacha (a municipality near Bogotá) whose sons were killed by the army and who refused the official accounts of the military. These women succeeded in bringing to light the so-called "false positives" scandal, a series of systematic murders in which the military, including high ranking officers, had dressed several poor or mentally impaired civilians in military fatigues and presented them as *guerrilleros* killed in battle. In my opinion, which also seemed to be shared by Ofelia's entourage, the threat against her fuelled suspicions about the weird circumstances of her cousin's death. The issue became how to deal with the power of such a revelation since it was leading Ofelia towards madness and putting her family at risk.

Given the current state of violence in Colombia, the idea that the military had made up the suicide story is entirely credible. In light of this, Oscar, one of Ofelia's cousins, did not interpret Ofelia's search for truth as an act of courage but of incredible naïveté, particularly because she sent letters and sought help from the local prosecutor's office. In Riosucio, I was told and later understood that those who are supposed to uphold the laws cannot be trusted. This was precisely Oscar's advice once he knew Ofelia's intentions: you must never go to the law in Riosucio with a problem concerning the military or the paramilitary because the law protects them,

just as these armed forces protect the interests of law-makers, politicians, and economic elites.

I see that in the process of questioning the official version of her cousin's fate, Ofelia unleashed an overwhelming power, a force that did threaten her very life. To her family as to many others I talked to, the only way to come to terms with injustices such as befell Ofelia's cousin is not to directly confront the powerful people who pull the strings behind these events. I perceive Ofelia as a grieving woman trying to deal with an armed force that rather than providing satisfactory responses to her questions, threatened her instead. When confronted by men with clearly dangerous intentions, I see a frightened woman who loses her composure. I see a woman mad with grief and impotence, encountering an all-powerful military capable of reaching people by any means necessary. Ultimately, Ofelia's story both reflects how military and paramilitary forces exert power in a place like Bajo Atrato and the way people see them as representative of state terror.

Assessing damages, embodying suffering

In Bajo Atrato, some elders claim that the continuous presence of armed soldiers has frightened away the *encantos* or enchanted creatures, the *fieras* or aquatic beasts, and other beings that used to live in the forests and rivers that are part of the collective territories of Afro-Colombian communities. Indigenous leaders of the Emberá-Katío communities from the Alto Andágueda in Chocó report the risk to which their food sovereignty has been exposed due to air bombings launched by the army. Those attacks allegedly infuriated the *jaís*, spirits that protect certain game animals and that decided to keep *guaguas* (*Cuniculus paca*) inaccessible to people (J.L. Quiroga, personal communication, Bogotá, August 2015). In the San Juan River, also in Chocó, indigenous Wounaan leaders say that battles between the ELN guerrillas (National Liberation Army) and the paramilitaries from the AGC (Gaitanistas Self-Defence Group of Colombia) have displeased Êwandam, the creator of people, who is no longer capable of distinguishing between those that make

war and those who do not. As a result, no new Êwandam messengers have been born during the last 20 years, meaning that the community lacks now an appropriate traditional healer capable of communicating with divine forces (El Espectador, August 7 2017). An indigenous Wiwa from the Sierra Nevada of Santa Marta, in the north of the country, says that the presence of armed groups has abused and butchered their sacred territories: “Because of the violence, our spiritual fathers who live in the water, the trees, the plants, and the rocks can no longer be felt so much.”(CNMH 2015)

These examples demonstrate that for some indigenous and Afro-Colombian communities, the experiences of armed conflict are not restricted to the damages caused to people but that its consequences are also engraved upon their territories and the myriad beings that inhabit them. The disappearance of *encantos*, spiritual protectors of game animals, messengers of gods, and spiritual leaders corresponds then to a series of effects that transcend human spheres, affecting the web of relationships people weave with animals, spirits, plants, ancestors, and places. Such relations bring the worlds of human and non-humans to life, particularly in settings such as the traditional territories of Afro-Colombian and indigenous peoples. In other words, the lives of people, spirits, deities, and places seem to have been equally suppressed by the destructive drives of war.

In the context of policies that paved the way for the recognition of rights for victims of Colombia’s armed conflict, indigenous and Afro-Colombian organizations managed to forge a series of laws with the state for the assistance, reparation, and restitution of territorial rights in 2011. In particular, the Decree-Law 4633 of 2011, also known as the Victims’ Law for indigenous peoples, incorporates the notion of territory as a victim. This victimization, according to the law, happens when the territory is “violated or desecrated by the internal armed conflict” (Art. 45). Dealing with “the special spiritual relationship [...] that indigenous peoples have with their territory” (Art. 8), the law recognizes the importance of the territory as a guarantor of the survival of these peoples. The aforementioned examples seem to suggest that

the inclusion of the territory as a victim of armed conflict goes hand in hand with the possibility of recognizing damages that extend beyond the human and the recognition of the territory as an agent or “living entity” (Art. 45), in the parlance of the law. In other words, the law theoretically paves the way for the recognition of the territory as an eventual subject of rights.

The process through which the territories of Colombia’s indigenous peoples are included in the Victims’ Law share similarities with struggles undertaken by various social movements in countries such as Ecuador and Bolivia and the so-called “bio-centric turns” (Gudynas 2009) of their respective Constitutions⁴; and with disputes between the state and indigenous peoples in countries including Brazil, Paraguay, Peru or Canada, where demands for the recognition of land rights use language like kinship and spiritual connection with the landscape rather than ownership (Blaser 2013, De la Cadena 2015). Bruce Braun and Sarah Whatmore (2010) argue that the way different lifeforms contribute to the world we all share must enter into our current understanding of politics (Ibid., ix). In a similar vein, Marisol De la Cadena (2010) illustrates that the ways some indigenous peoples articulate their demands challenge our existing conception of politics, as their relationships, practices, materialities, and entities raise questions about the radical separation modern states have established between the realms of nature—with science as its legitimate representative— and the realms of the human—with politics as its principal ally (Ibid., 341-342). In this way, the language adopted in the Victims’ Law would seem to shift a series of beings—*encantos*, *jaïs*, masters of game animals—from the private sphere of particular cosmologies to the public sphere of law, eroding the already porous borders between the living and the material, between subjects and objects, or between what Bruno Latour (2004) describes as facts—the given, the natural, the real—and values—the constructed, the social, the believed. In the context of truth,

⁴ The Constitution of Ecuador dedicates its entire seventh chapter to the rights of Nature or *Pacha Mama*. The Constitution of Bolivia recognizes “the existing plurality of all things [mountains, rivers, lakes] and our diversity as beings and cultures.” (Political Constitution of Bolivia, preamble 1) I must clarify that the socio-legal effects of these constitutional recognitions are substantially different to the Colombian case since the Decree-Law 4633 is merely a normative text through which the Congress of the Republic grants faculties of executive power for the attention, assistance, and reparation to the victims among the indigenous peoples. Although it has the force of law, the Decree-Law ranks below a political constitution, the ultimate rule of law.

justice, and reparation, how would this type of recognition cause indigenous and Afro-Colombian organizations to react? What political actions would it raise from the state? In the Colombian multiculturalist framework, how could an agenda of rights that seem to decentralize the human be implemented and what type of policy would be possible when such concepts are put into effect? These are some of the questions that have inspired this ethnography.

I see the inclusion of the territory as a victim as something akin to what Stengers (2005b) describes as a cosmopolitical proposal: an opportunity to understand the divergent but always partially connected realms of *kósmos*—the universe, or in another sense, the given, the immanent, the objective, the natural—and *politikós*—the particular, the instituted, the transcendent, the subjective, the social. I therefore interpret such an inclusion as a seed liable to disrupt the way in which the state has been regulating the relationships—and building boundaries in the process—between “reality” and beliefs or between “the real” and cultural representations. Like Stengers (2005b), my own expectation is that this seed will be capable of inhibiting a certain way of reasoning and creating “an opportunity to arouse a slightly different awareness of the problems and situations mobilizing us.” (Ibid.,994) By revealing certain attachments and obligations that communities in Bajo Atrato maintain with non-humans, I hope to cultivate “a mode of wonder” (Ogden et al. 2013, 17) that might make room for less human-centric ethics, that is to say, a kind of ethics not necessarily related to the extension of moral considerations towards non-humans but one in which, as Deborah Bird Rose (2004) maintains, privileges encounter, recognition, and wonder. This is an ethics that takes as starting point the human condition of living with and for others, which besides forcing us to reconsider certain ontological distinctions between people and other beings, raises awareness that humans and many non-humans are already brought into being by others.

The inclusion of the territory as a victim and the recognition of damages that extend to a variety of non-human beings, pose a series of challenges to the cultural policies promoted under the banner of multiculturalism, as well as to the implementation

of appropriate policies of truth, justice, and reparation for indigenous and Afro-Colombian communities. How do we think about these policies when war has been an experience transforming not only a human society but a collectivity of diverse sentient beings? Besides being a project documenting the costs of war that exceed certain anthropocentric and utilitarian understandings of human rights, this dissertation aims to explore how the idea of territory as a victim makes sense in a place like Bajo Atrato. I argue that even if environmental degradation is at the core of how damages to the territory are being addressed, the armed conflict has left deep and long-lasting consequences which should expand reparations beyond the restitution of human and territorial rights. I strongly believe that understanding the aftermath of war in terms of the harm caused to the territory and the non-humans existing there is fundamental to considering a framework of ethical and political relationships that both state and mainstream society can establish with these peoples and these territories. I also consider that the disappearance of the spiritual fathers of rocks and rivers, of sylvan *encantos* and of spiritual protectors of game animals says as much about the values and sensibilities of those who describe the damages of war in these terms, as about the world itself and how it can be known.

In this dissertation, I explore the extent to which damages caused to non-human entities in Bajo Atrato fit within the legal and ontological framework that considers the territory as a victim. I argue that the recognition of the territory as a victim would enable actions for the protection of not only the cultural frameworks with which certain communities derive their relationship with the world, but also for the recognition of diverse groups of beings and worlds whose existence transcend the realms of what in law are normally considered cosmologies or religions. I seriously wonder whether the inclusion of the territory as a victim can tell us something not only about the damages caused to the worldviews of indigenous and Afro-Colombian communities but also about the very nature of the destruction caused by war, its impact in the world, and possibilities for reparation. I thus pursue a slightly different understanding of the violent transformations provoked by armed conflict in order to explore damages that extend beyond the human but at the same time could

not simply be ascribed to, or circumscribed by, discrete spheres of environment or cultural beliefs.

I describe then a variety of socially entangled human and non-human connections in which the privileged status of humans as the only actors capable of generating and making sense of actions is decentralized. Such an approach takes into consideration the view that interactions with non-humans are a condition, not a choice (Bingham 2006), that worlds inhabitable by humans are always constituted in relations with different kinds of non-human others (Tsing 2013), and that such a relationality creates particular connections that both demand and enable responses (Lyons 2008, 2016; Ogden et al. 2013). This approach blurs the divide between nature and culture, animate and inanimate, and beings and their environments that often characterize our understanding of war and its abuses to indigenous and Afro-Colombian populations. It also proves appropriate for understanding the entangled nature of associations and exchanges people in Bajo Atrato forge with beings such as snakes, the dead, jaguars, rivers, and spirits. In the coming chapters, I aim to describe how these associations between humans and non-humans generate actions, create obligations, and provide logic to the practices that are vital for *bajoatrateño* communities in developing both their territories and life within them.

I see these kinds of co-constitutive associations between humans and non-humans as something akin to what Latour (2004) refers to as an assemblage. Briefly, more than a collection of beings and things, an assemblage is a socio-material ordering of entities connected together to form a new whole (Blaser 2013a, Ogden et al. 2013). In an assemblage, the properties of the collectivity exceed the properties of its constitutive elements. Another way of putting this is by saying that the constituents of an assemblage partake in relational and dynamic associations, and they do so in a way that what comes out of these relations exceeds the properties of the elements as individually considered (Ogden et al. 2013). Inspired by the work of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari (2004 [1980]1), I call the excess produced by these entangled associations an emergent territoriality, a concept I use to emphasize the two different

but complementary properties of territory, as I have previously conceptualized it: relationality and emergence. Let me break these ideas down.

Roughly speaking, emergence makes reference to the relational effects of a given assemblage: an emergent property is what arises out of the specific relations kept by the constituents of an assemblage (Georgiou 2003, Mitchell 2012). What results from these relations is not reducible with respect to the elements of the assemblage, which means, as I mentioned earlier, that when the beings that make up an assemblage are taken independently or separately, they do not have the properties the assemblage has. Now, when they emerge as such, assemblages establish their own territories. In this case, “territories” is how Deleuze and Guattari describe the sets of emplaced processes through which the entities that make up a given assemblage meet, organize, and stay together. Territory, therefore, is not given but constituted, a force holding things together rather than a substance or a setting. Territory, in other words, is what results from a particular ordering. In this ordering, Deleuze and Guattari argue, it is possible to track processes of deterritorialization—the breaking of conditions or habits that favour the organization of assemblages—and reterritorialization—the formation of new conditions or habits to bring together said assemblages. These concepts are best illustrated with an example.

Most rivers of Bajo Atrato are inhabited by a category of dangerous beings called *fieras*. *Fieras* are animals like turtles, fish, snakes or caimans that grow excessively in size and are capable of provoking much havoc: sinking boats, creating dangerous undertows or inducing floods. *Fieras* are also unusual beings such as *vacas de agua*, *sierpes* or *indios de agua* that are capable of drowning and devouring people. *Fieras* generally live in the rapids and sharp bends of rivers, and some create sudden floods that allow them to travel up and down rivers. The existence of *fieras* is embedded in, and to some degree dependent on, the materiality of rivers. A deep pool or a sharp twist is simultaneously the place a *fiera* inhabits and an extension of its own body; floods, swirls, and waves are attributes of rivers but also substantiations of a *fiera*’s presence. The form and the manifestation of a *fiera* are then

intermingled, so that the presence of *fierras* amplifies some riparian features that contribute to the generation of their being. For example, a *sierpe* is simultaneously both a sudden flood and the *fiera* that moves with the flowing waters; a *fiera* might be a very pronounced turn in the river and the being that inhabits it. Another way of putting this is by saying that in a *fiera* its form and its substantiated attributes meet, or that their existence or substance and their spatial manifestations or relations are one single thing. As I explain in chapter one, the connection between *fierras* and certain features of rivers demonstrates that these beings are not self-contained entities whose existence is independent from people, rivers or particular encounters. Rather, *fierras*, as I have argued in relation to territory, simply occur, by which I mean they emerge and come into being as a result of the relationships rivers favour. Therefore, a change in relations between rivers, *fierras* or people may result in a transformation of the conditions that nurture their existences. This is what war has done in many cases, as I will later explain: it has severely transformed rivers and with them the conditions under which some *fierras* come into being, but in other cases *fierras* have been attacked by armed groups, transforming the attributes of some rivers. When this happens, other kinds of territorialities emerge and they bring about other versions of rivers, *fierras* or people.

In an emergent territoriality, the myriad entities people relate with do not always pre-exist the relations that constitute them, so that the transformation of conditions engendering these relations creates new kinds of territorialities—and even new kinds of entities. Another way of understanding the relational features of what I call emergent territoriality is by saying that certain beings are rendered actual, by which I mean possible, by virtue of the particular relations and ecologies that nurture their emergence. This means, as I explained at the beginning of this introduction, that in the territories of Bajo Atrato the relations between beings are ontologically more fundamental than the beings themselves (Wildman 2010), so that beings, their environments, and their relations constitute each other's conditions for existence (Ingold 2011). To put it in other terms, assuming the territories of indigenous and Afro-Colombian communities are emergent territorialities means

that beings that comprise this territory—both humans and non-humans—are their relations, so these beings do not exist prior to said relations (Escobar 2016, 18). Relationality and emergence, as can be noticed, are closely intertwined since they suppose that the beings that make up *bajotrateño* territories—many of which have been affected by armed conflict—are not independent from their surroundings or ecologies. My point is that damage to the territory is simultaneously a harm caused to the setting in which certain existences flourish as well as impairment to the relations that sustain their coming into being.

I base this notion of emergent territoriality on the concepts used by three different authors. The first concept is “ecology of selves” as developed by Eduardo Kohn (2007, 2013), which he describes as a relational web of multiple sentient beings engaging with each other through the frame of their own phenomenal worlds. In an ecology of selves, the world—alongside its purpose (*telos* and significance)—is no longer an objective substratum in which humans, as bearers of culture, “are in a unique position to give meaning to it” (2007, 5). When humans are decentralized as privileged interpreters, it becomes important to know how significant non-human selves interpret the world. To become aware of how they see humans may prove vital since these understandings shape the kinds of interactions people and non-humans can forge with each other. Awareness of the distinctive representational qualities that characterize different kinds of beings resonates with what Stengers (2005a) describes as “ecology of practices”, the second concept I apply. In her work, the term ecology makes reference to both *oikos*—the environment in which a particular practice takes place—and *ethos*—the fundamental values and dispositions embodied by its practitioners. Practice, which can be understood as any act of pursuing, engaging or realizing something in the world, has to be therefore characterized as irreducible in respect to its particular *ethos* and *oikos* since “there is no identity of a practice independent of its environment” (Ibid., 187). This simply means that both practices and environments are necessary to create the obligations and relationships of different beings. As particular settings enable specific practices and values, transformation of the conditions under which a given practice is developed changes the nature of the practice

itself and the *ethos* or values of its practitioners. The reverse, as I hope to show in this dissertation, is also true: the surge of new practices—such as those associated with war—creates other kinds of *oikos*, that is to say, new types of environments that require an adjustment of practices. Finally, I borrow from Kristina Lyons (2008) the notion of “ecology of place” in order to highlight the embeddedness, the emplacement of both beings and the associations they forge. According to her, ecology of place refers to “the densely and uniquely woven threads of home, livelihood, landscape, ecosystems, body, community, memories, expectations and desires that weave together biophysical, cultural and technoeconomic practices and histories” (Ibid., 100).

These three concepts—ecology of selves, ecology of practices, and ecology of place—emphasize the relational and emergent attributes of the notion of territory: a notion that, as I have explained, extends beyond the biophysical space of the collective lands granted by the state to indigenous and Afro-Colombian communities, and that encompasses the multiple associations between heterogeneous assemblages of sentient, agentive beings that constitute each other’s conditions for existence and whose interconnected relations create a unique aggregate of qualities. This is why forests, rivers, local knowledges, the dead, fish, livelihoods, floods, spirits, ceremonies, soils, game animals, plants, travels, crops, humans, healing, rains, ancestors, fear, and *consejos comunitarios*, among other things, are not merely existing in the territory but also creating it and reflecting its qualities. With the idea of an emergent territoriality, I seek to expand the understanding of war and its aftermath beyond human actors and the forces they exert. I also use this concept to highlight the contingent nature of associations that humans and non-humans develop, which means that in a place like Bajo Atrato human and non-human assemblages are not the result of any transcendental driving force, as if they had always been possible and had always existed there. Rather, I conceive of the relations people weave with non-humans as contingent, that is, occurring or existing under certain social and historical circumstances, with war as only one of the forces mediating in the kinds of connections indigenous and Afro-Colombian communities establish with the other-than-human beings inhabiting their territories.

By considering the relational and emergent qualities of the territory, we might also bypass a divide implicit in the way the state has been legally reinforcing the consideration of the territory as a victim: the idea that damages affecting communities are sharply discernible from the damages provoked to the territory itself, particularly when it is understood in biophysical terms only. This divide becomes evident, for example, when environmental damages are taken into consideration only in relation to how they affect or impede the enjoyment of particular human rights. In this dissertation, I show that even if some particular actions of armed actors seem to have targeted what might be considered natural resources or the environment, the consequences of such activities are embedded in the people as much as within the larger community of beings in which humans participate. Therefore, redressing the so-called environmental damages is only possible when the object of reparation becomes the web of relationships that diverse beings are able to develop with each other, rather than the restoration of a given physical setting's environmental conditions.

Through the lenses of armed violence, I then focus my attention on the transformations to relationships that communities in Bajo Atrato maintain with the beings that span their territory. As violence can be considered a social experience, it has implications for the way people relate with the constituents of their socio-material worlds: rivers, crops, animals, forests, spirits, ancestors, and others. By conceiving it as a social experience, violence becomes framed within a particular cultural context and even within specific places. Consequently, people in Bajo Atrato often explain the presence and actions of armed groups by describing phenomena not usually connected with the rationale of politics and war: some soldiers have supposedly made pacts with evil spirits, others have allegedly acquired shamanic powers in the forest, while others attack their enemies through sorcery. Similarly, various other intensely vivid experiences are framed within the logic of war and perceived to be a result of the armed conflict: poisonous snakes infesting places, game animals becoming sparse, and the increasing difficulty of navigating rivers or working the land. My assertion is that such accounts do not merely denote a particular

cultural interpretation about the effects of violence in both people's lives and their territories. Rather, as Ofelia's story shows, such events manifest, embody, and render intelligible the means through which violence finds its conveyance of meaning. Inspired by my reading of Das' work (1997, 1998, 2006), I see that local experiences such as the appearance of avenging spirits, the madness of certain victims, and the existence of haunted places are not only collective interpretations of suffering or symptoms of other conditions involving human worlds. Instead, such expressions shape and transform the very experience of violence by revealing events that have worldly effects. That being said, the intimate relations people cultivate with certain non-humans raises the possibility of understanding suffering, or at least the kind of suffering unleashed by war in Bajo Atrato, as not being exclusively circumscribed to the human sphere.

In this sense and following the interpretation Das (1997) draws from Wittgenstein's idea suggesting someone might experience her own pain "in another person's body" (Ibid., 68), I suggest that the effects of war are also embodied by beings like jaguars, masters of game animals or *jaïs*, and that such suffering also affects the quality of the places inhabited by both humans and these non-humans. To say it in the legal language of damages used in the realm of victims of armed conflict in Colombia, just as the effects of suffering provoked by violence may be expressed through symptoms such as stress or trauma and damage to an individual's physical and moral integrity, a part of the collective social body of indigenous and Afro-Colombian communities, in this case the territory, might also experience the consequences of this kind of violence.

Collective and intersubjective experiences of pain and suffering challenge assumptions regarding selfhood, bodies, agency, and, of course, the possibilities of reparation, recovery, and the regaining of agency in contexts of obvious suffering. These are also some of the topics to be discussed in the following pages.

Overview of chapters

Bajo Atrato is above all an aquatic universe. “Above all” is a spatial metaphor I use to stress the overwhelming primacy of water, although in this region water and its multiple manifestations—substantial precipitation, overflowing waterways, extreme humidity—are also below, inside, behind, in front, outside, and around all things. I then begin to describe the prevalence of water, paying attention to rivers and to the ways their flow and movement support particular modes of existence: as rivers are the principal transportation routes, they have produced particular settlement patterns and economic practices; they bind together communities; they have shaped a particular sense of place that, at the same time, has forged the emergence of certain place-based identities that constitute the core of social and political mobilization. One of the premises of Chapter One, *Under the Gaze of Rivers*, is that in Bajo Atrato rivers and people create the possibilities of each other’s existence. In this sense, rivers are not just flowing waterways found in nature that are taken for granted, nor a sort of cultural backdrop to which communities have assigned meaning and value. More than mere repositories of traditions and history, I see rivers as presences that are nurtured by particular practices, such as *embarcar*, that is to say, to embark in their waters, and *limpieza*, maintenance of the rivers. I pay attention to how certain damages provoked by the rapacious economic interests of paramilitary armies and timber companies have prevented the enactment of said practices, which are vital to the actualization of the territory. *Embarcar*, which in Bajo Atrato means both to go on board a boat and, by extension, to travel, is the quintessential means these people weave an array of relationships, from kinship and economic relations to political and ontological ones. Needless to say, the enactment of these relations is what brings life to communities in their territories, bringing the territory into existence in the process. When forest depletion and damming of rivers heavily transform the landscape, what is at stake is not just environmental degradation but also the possibilities of traveling and of cultivating the relationships that make Bajo Atrato a place of distinction and otherworldly possibilities. *Limpieza*, that is to say, the maintenance of rivers, is examined through its negative counterpart, *pali-*

zadas: dams or river blockages caused by heavy rains and the accumulation of huge rafts of wooden debris. Through the clearing of *palizadas*, communities bring into existence a particular version of their rivers: one that is attuned with the idea of embarking. But without the works of *limpieza*, other disturbing versions of rivers manifest, giving rise to floods, diversion of waters or sedimentation. *Palizadas* also illustrate how the violent transformation of forests can create drastic changes in the reciprocal relations different beings may experience. *Fieras*—the often colossal aquatic entities capable of creating extensive destruction—are a case in point. The existence of these *fieras* has been threatened by war, implying an impoverishment of these people's worlds, as without *fieras* the territory experiences a sort of disenchantment and certain physical attributes of the rivers are drastically altered.

The transformation of places as a result of certain ghostly presences is the subject of Chapter Two, *The Ecumene of the Living and the Dead*. As previously indicated, I do not pursue an understanding of armed conflict only in terms of what it prevents, hinders or destroys. Without necessarily idealizing violence as creative, in this chapter I describe how the destruction and death delivered by war have produced new presences that have compelled some communities to establish new kinds of relationships with the places they inhabit. In particular, I examine how the restless spirits of certain paramilitary soldiers that experienced a bad death have transformed the qualities of the places where some peasant families built their houses. Bad death in this case relates to the fact that the bodies of these soldiers were not properly buried and that their deaths were not ritually processed. These spirits thus represent a problem to the families who returned to their lands after being forcibly displaced by paramilitary armies. In order to appease these spirits and retrieve the desirable qualities of their territory, communities have envisaged a reconciliation proposal, that I call ecumenical, which aims to create a common ground for the dead and the living—involving in this case the families living near these trapped spirits but also the relatives of these killed soldiers. If I discuss in the first chapter the flow of rivers and the flowing of values and modes of being set in motion through the act of embarking, in this second chapter I deal with the flow of time, or

more precisely the problems associated with the spirits of the dead, conceived of as stagnant presences that are trapped in place and incapable of adequately entering the flow of life. As coming to terms with these ghostly beings is considered a condition of reaching peace and justice in their territories, I show the importance that some communities give to reconciliation with these spirits. In order to understand the power of this ecumenical proposal, I make a sort of detour through the recent history of armed conflict in Bajo Atrato. This history provides additional context to the following chapters while maintaining my dissertation's objective of making violence not an analytical starting point but rather something attained or demonstrated through the stories and situations that I have woven into my ethnographic description. At least this is my explicit intention for chapters three and four.

In Chapter Three, *Madre de Agua*, the aquatic universe and the world of spirits meet. Here I describe the powers of an evil being that assaults people in the rivers. Known in Spanish as *madre de agua*, a name I have roughly translated as Water Mother, this primordial spirit represents a means of shamanic aggression set in motion by *jaibanas*, the traditional Embera healers. While the presence of the spirits of those who suffered a bad death are an outcome of the armed conflict waged in Bajo Atrato, *madres de agua* are more ancient than warfare. What is different in this case is the way these spirits participate in the armed conflict and its aftermath. When the violence exerted by the official armed forces, guerrillas and paramilitaries alike attained one of its highest peaks in the period 1997-2003, some *jaibanas* mobilized these evil spirits in an attempt to protect their own communities from the attacks of armed groups. However, the very nature of the violence unleashed by these groups—leaving destroyed villages, murdered citizens, and unburied corpses in its wake—and the fact that *jaibanas* themselves were targeted several times by the paramilitaries, caused many of these spirits to run amok. As their powers could not always be contained, some *madres de agua* are still wandering and causing damage. Moreover, they are no longer capable of discriminating between those that make war and those that do not. In this chapter, I tell the story of one of these attacks. Given the fact that I am dealing with some non-normative presences and beings,

I engage in a type of writing in which uncertainty helps me be attuned with the events. In order to describe the events associated to *madres de agua*, I do not follow a conventional academic structure—an introduction, a theoretical framework and conclusions—but I dive directly into the waters of these beings in an attempt to prioritize, through a sort of literary construction, both local interpretations and my own involvement in an attack suffered by someone I met.

Chapter Four, called *A Jaguar and a Half*, also reflects this experimental style of writing. Here I strive to convey the intensive manifestations of war in an assemblage made of humans and jaguars. In particular, I describe the events unleashed by a man-eating jaguar and the assorted misunderstandings and responses this provokes among different people involved: politicians, environmental authorities, local communities, and armed groups. By using the word “intensive” I want to characterize the effects of armed conflict as transformative and affective rather than merely negative. In this case, “negative” expresses some moral values that might constrain our understanding of the jaguar’s actions. The title of the chapter makes reference to a form of excess present in this man-eating jaguar: this is a being prone to hunting and eating more than what is normally observed in jaguars; he manifests an excessive behaviour that transgresses what scientist know about jaguars as an animal species, demonstrating traits and preferences that transcend how jaguars have historically conducted themselves in Bajo Atrato. In brief, the jaguar epitomizes an excess that shows how violence has transformed the territory of indigenous and Afro-Colombian communities. This excess creates new forms of vulnerability as the man-eating jaguar caused the death of several human victims and exacerbated a state of fear among those who rely on forest resources for their livelihood. At the same time, jaguars became the target of retaliatory actions from some locals. In this chapter, I track these deaths in order to show the pervasiveness of war in Bajo Atrato and the perversity of certain warlords who manage to involve sylvan beings in their deadly business.

To some extent, these four chapters pave the way for the discussion I conduct in chapter five, *The Territory as a Victim*. Here I present an in-depth description of the Victims' Laws regarding indigenous and Afro-Colombian communities, paying attention to the way they were formulated and to the recognitions these laws enact. I argue that beyond the enforcement of territorial rights, the consideration of the territory as a victim goes hand in hand with the possibility of recognizing damages that extend beyond the human. What would then be at stake is not just the protection of these indigenous and Afro-Colombian communities' worldviews—which is what a multicultural framework already accomplishes—but the awareness of damages provoked by entities that modern ontology tends to relegate to the spheres of the world's cultural representations rather than to the world itself. I see in the Victims' Laws a possibility for recognizing the harm caused by war in terms other than human rights, which also constitutes a challenge for implementing policies of justice and reparation. By using a framework that Mario Blaser (2009a, 2009b, 2012) identifies as political ontology, I examine how the experiences that Afro-Colombian and indigenous peoples derive from their territories might shape the way the state, as representative of modern ontology, conceives of “the nature of things in general” and the “limits and contents of what is human in particular” (Surrallés 2017, 212). While I move in this chapter towards a sort of speculative thinking, it must be asserted that the ontology of the state is already somehow changing. In May 2017, the Constitutional Court granted certain legal rights to the Atrato River, specifically the rights of conservation, protection, maintenance, and restoration. I see in this recognition an extension of what the Victims' Law started: that which can be described as a victim—the territory—might therefore be considered a subject deserving rights. And yet, as I explain in this chapter, the extension of these rights seems to privilege a kind of anthropocentric approach because the rights awarded to the river are still related to its benefits to people, not the fact that its very existence might be considered equal to the existence and dignity that humans enjoy (Mount 2017).

In Chapter Six, *Reparation Policies and the Unkept Promises of Law*, I explore some of the social consequences resulting from the Victims' Laws in Bajo Atrato. I focus on

the challenges associated with the formulation and implementation of the so-called collective reparations plans: a policy conceived by the state to redress human rights abuses experienced by indigenous and Afro-Colombian communities. These plans are intended to be a response to particular harms done to these peoples by considering both their distinctive cultural rights and their unique perspectives regarding the effects of violence in their territories. In so doing, state agencies are attempting to involve concerned communities in the formulation of concrete reparation measures, but they face several issues ranging from lack of financial resources and institutional coordination to the complexities of rendering the specific content of the law culturally meaningful to these communities. But if the conception of these plans proves to be challenging, their implementation—the adoption of reparative and restorative measures—is even more full of difficulties, mainly because armed conflict has not ceased in the region and because the state has offered little to no support to the communities in need of reparation. Despite this difficult context, or perhaps because of it, *bajoatrateño* indigenous and Afro-Colombian social organizations have set in motion their own participatory processes and the formulation of their own collective reparations plans. I describe then how these plans are being conceived, paying particular attention to how the notion of territory as a victim is mobilized and to the proposals for redressing the damages caused to it. Two elements guide my analysis: first, the plans are being designed in a context characterized by poverty and precariousness, which makes it challenging to differentiate, in practice, the actual measures to redress the rights of specific victimized communities from the broader development policies aimed to eradicate widespread poverty and inequality throughout the country. This differentiation proves to be crucial for establishing both state accountability in regard to violence and proper measures of justice, truth, restitution, and guarantees of non-reoccurrence for the victims. Second, the pervasive local conditions of scarcity, uncertainty, and insecurity encourage the re-victimization of these communities, making difficult the formulation of proposals that transcend the frame of their own human rights, which was one of the ontological possibilities I identified in the law. In this sense, I

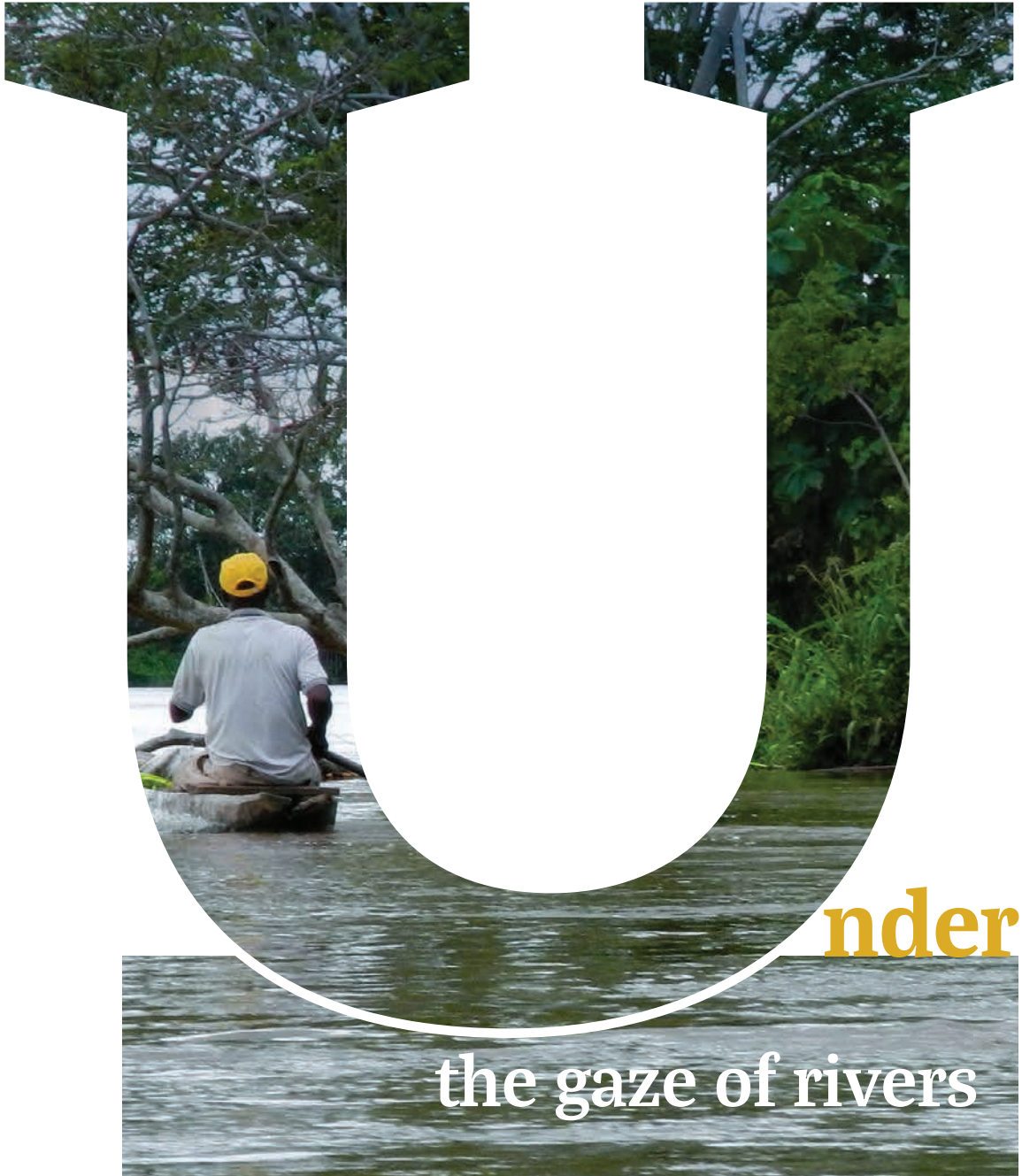
am interested in showing how the violence of armed conflict has exacerbated other manifestations of a deeper historical and structural violence, and how the aftermath of war is traceable in the material conditions of these communities, including the destruction, abandonment, and ruination of their territories.

The afterlife of desolation and the material traces left by war are the subject of the last chapter: *Rubble, Absences, and Disappearances*. This chapter might be better defined as a photo essay, or more precisely, an imagistic essay in which I animate my analysis and ethnographic description with some photos and drawings I have made. Images do not merely illustrate my argument, but are part of it because aside from their own visual content, they harness some of the affective qualities of the disrupted material worlds in which human and non-human relations can flourish. I begin by describing the way in which forced displacement has transformed the attributes of certain places, and I show how the abandonment of houses, villages, fields, or trails has allowed the forest to re-grow and rot to set in. I hold that war is not just a phenomenon unfolding in particular places, but rather a force producing such places, and it is perhaps through the examination of destruction, abandonment, and ruination processes associated with armed conflict that this production can be better captured. Moreover, these are processes in which certain non-human beings participate in developing new kinds of relations with humans in the process. As paradoxical as it may sound, war has contributed to the flourishing of other forms of life, and in some cases, the absence of people has given a reprieve to forests and their non-human inhabitants. This is a phenomenon people often interpret in terms of a struggle between the warmth they bring through their presence and the coldness produced by the forest. To some extent, the forest and its thermal properties are always opposing the efforts made by people to render places suitable for human endeavours. This antagonism is amplified by war. This is, of course, another form of damage inflicted upon the territory, and I wanted to capture it through the use of images. In the second part of this essay, I shift my focus from the transformation of places and their non-human constituents to the memories associated with and released by particular places related to the history of armed conflict in

Bajo Atrato. Here, I intertwine histories of suffering and resilience with images and texts from archives, and discuss how places might be perceived as forces capable of orchestrating the instruments of memory, healing, and even political action.

Before going into the heart of this ethnography, I must say a word about the title. The war waged in indigenous and Afro-Colombian traditional territories has produced countless harms. As I expect to demonstrate, these effects extend beyond people and threaten the very worlds that are both constitutive of and constituted through the social relations which indigenous and Afro-Colombian communities maintain with non-humans. The harm of this armed conflict has not ceased, so that which follows destruction, killing, or forced displacement still reverberates in the lives of the myriad beings that constitute *bajoatrateño* territories. Afterlives then make reference to an unending existence of violence, as well as the manifold forms of existence—human and other-than-human—that war has endangered. At stake in Bajo Atrato is life itself and the possibilities of fostering a life lived in different kinds of worlds, including the sylvan ones. When forests and rivers run amok, their ecologies become erratic and often unpredictable, but more so, they amplify the properties that different beings have for causing havoc. When forests run amok, a violent form of indeterminacy permeates the places and beings that render life meaningful in Bajo Atrato. Although rivers do not appear in the title, they are part of the forest's ecology and their presence, as the reader will notice, is constantly flowing throughout the chapters of this ethnography. Let us then dive into their waters and walk the muddy trails that cross the forests of Bajo Atrato.

CHAPTER 1



In his novel *The Magic Mountain*, German writer Thomas Mann describes space as wielding the powers we generally ascribe to time. Time, he says, is Lethe, that river of the underworld that, according to Greek mythology, provoked forgetfulness in all those who drank from it. During travel, argues Mann, space rolls and revolves, “setting us bodily free from our surroundings”. But if space brings about changes in a less thorough manner than time, it “does so more quickly.” (Mann [1924] 1958, 4). I find Mann catches the spirit of travel: going from one place to another only to find oneself captivated by and even lost in one’s experiences and discoveries en route. This experience of betweenness, of letting the space engender its own changes, is what makes the journey as important as the destination itself. In Bajo Atrato, that betweenness, that space linking different surroundings and making transformation possible, has a particular materialization: rivers.

Rivers are the main transportation route in the Bajo Atrato region. They epitomize flow and movement, connecting towns and villages, making possible the circulation of people and goods, permitting all kind of journeys—from family visits to pilgrimages—and of social processes—from economic activities to political organization. Just as a society might be described as a network of social relationships, the landscape in Bajo Atrato might be conceived of as a network of rivers. Of rivers but also of torrents, streams, creeks, canals, natural levees, floodplain lagoons, lakes, and swamps. People constantly move through both social and aquatic networks. Relationships among people living in different hamlets or among communities belonging to different river basins are often determined by the mobility of the actors, by the connections they can establish. In a landscape made up of large aquatic networks, rivers are what provide said mobility and open up the possibility of connection. In this fashion, I argue that social relationships are established, maintained, and reproduced thanks to the journeys that rivers allow. To clarify: rivers are not simply associated with social ties; they in fact permit such ties. Rivers do not just represent flow or movement. Rather, their actuality, their thereness render them flow and movement.



FIGURE 4.
Flow
Photo by author

Bearing this in mind, I see the everyday social relationships in Bajo Atrato as an entangled network of people and rivers, or better, of people and what geographer Ulrich Oslender calls “aquatic spaces”, meaning the manifold aquatic elements associated with the specific tropical rainforest environment of this region: intricate river networks, high levels of precipitation, large tidal ranges, seasonal inundations (Oslender 2004, 2008, 2016). Following Tim Ingold (2006), I use the word entanglement to describe a meshwork of interwoven “lines of growth and movement” through which “beings are instantiated in the world.” (Ibid., 14) That means I see flow and flux as essential to understand the processes—or lines, as Ingold calls them—that set the conditions of possibility—or movement—and of becoming—or growth—through which communities and aquatic networks constitute each other. In other words, by describing social relationships in Bajo Atrato as an entangled domain of people and rivers, I highlight the fact that both are mutually constituted through outward practices and that their own conditions for existence are defined by the relations that constitute them (Escobar 2016, 18).

In this chapter I focus on rivers in order to highlight the main social practices they allow as well as the values associated to such practices. One of these values has to do with traveling and with the maintenance and creation of social connections. In

Bajo Atrato, to travel necessarily means to use the river networks as a transportation route, and to travel by river means, inexorably, to embark, which etymologically means to go aboard a barque, to get on a boat. To embark, that is, *embarcar* as the word is used in this region, is then to travel and to travel is, needless to say, to move. This chapter is then about river travel, particularly about the possibilities and impossibilities of embarking in times of war.

In the following pages, I aim to show that part of what defines a river is peoples' use of river networks to embark and that this use of the aquatic space has been seriously hindered by war. Inspired by the works of Marilyn Strathern (2005) and Marisol de la Cadena (2015), I see rivers affording particular relationships but also as being constituted by the relations people weave with them. Through rivers, one might not only "perceive relations between things but also perceive things as relations." (Strathern 2005, 63) Thus, besides being natural geographical features, rivers are also enacted, brought into a particular mode of being through some practices. The chapter is divided into four parts. In the first I depict the role rivers play in the region, placing particular emphasis on the way they favour certain relationships—from kinship and social exchanges to the development of economic and political networks. As I attempt to depict the multitude of ways in which rivers connect people, and given the importance I attribute to what I call their *thereness*—by which I mean their nearness to people, their quality of being there, the state of being present and participating in manifold social activities and relations—I have included some photos that help harness certain aspects of their actuality: flow, movement, ubiquity. Although photos are, by definition, a capture of light in a determined space and time, or as John Berger (1982) puts it, they "arrest the flow of time in which the event photographed once existed" (Ibid., 86), through the use of the chosen images I hope to show that attributes such as flow or movement contribute to the maintenance of both social and aquatic networks. Sometimes these photos are not intended to merely illustrate my arguments, rather they are invoked to convey other meanings and their own way of telling: one that may exceed the ability of my own writing.

In the second part, I describe a particular, routinely kind of work: *la limpieza de los ríos*, that is, the cleaning of rivers, the maintenance of their navigability. My aim is to show that through cleaning people engage in a practice of care, stewardly working in and with their territories. This practice is what allows travel and what keeps, in the last instance, the social life of rivers. It also puts into evidence that in Bajo Atrato, and here I am paraphrasing Borg Rasmussen (2016), many activities are done with the rivers rather than to them (Ibid., 207). After having described how people care for rivers, in the third part I explore *palizadas*, that is, natural dams or river blockages which create the need for said care. Inspired by the work of Gastón Gordillo (2004) on landscapes and memory, I see that rivers and their meanings are often based on interactions of contrast and opposition to another aquatic feature: *palizadas*. *Palizadas* may be seen as the antithesis of rivers, and yet *palizadas* are important in the process through which rivers gain social significance. In the last part, I describe *feras*, a special and often marvelous set of beings inhabiting the rivers. They embody some of the river's properties—a river's potential danger, the mystery of what lies under a river's surface, the uncertainty of the travels a river allows. I aim to show that even if *feras* are considered very dangerous entities, they are a constitutive part of the relations of care people engage in when they engage with rivers. Unfortunately, the conditions that favour such existences are at stake on account of the driving forces of war.

The actuality of rivers

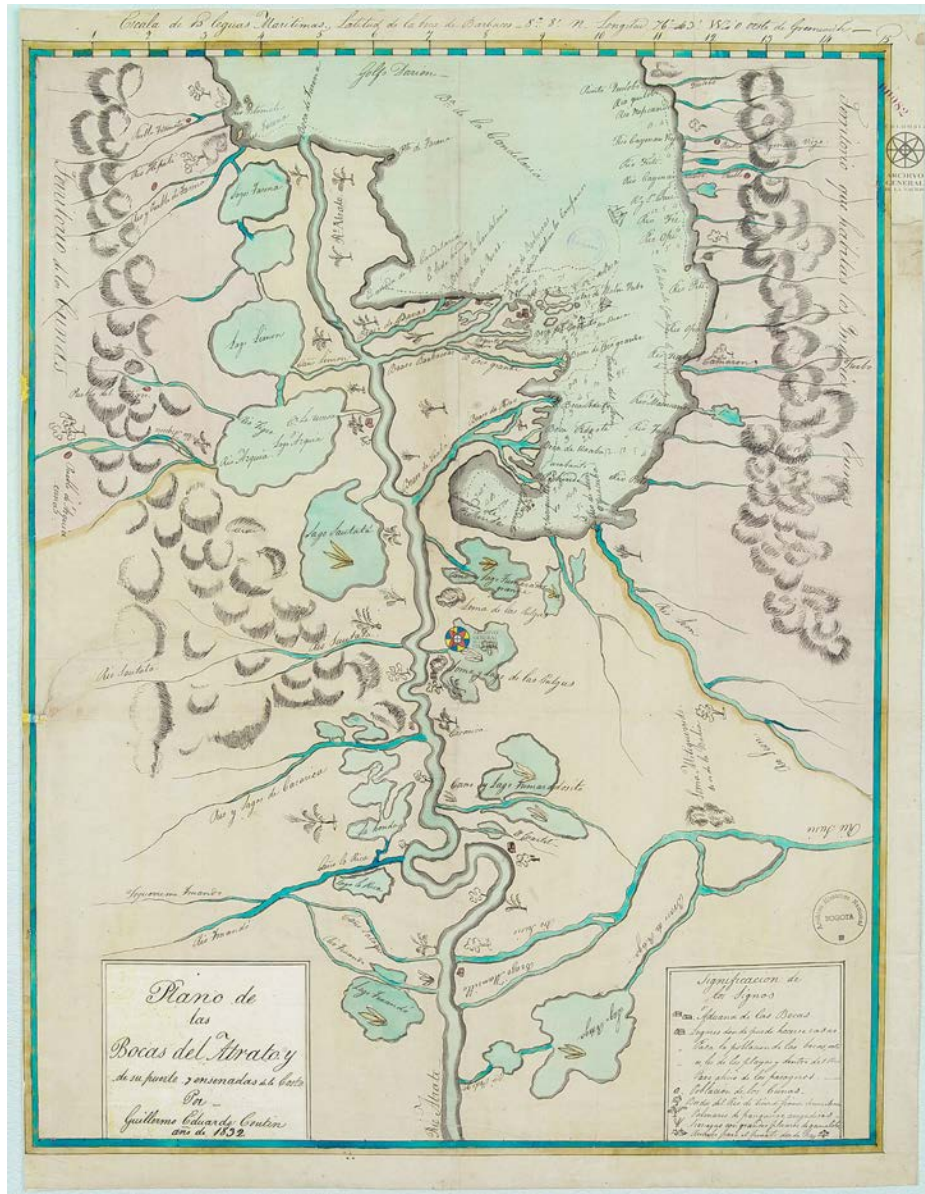
There are nine main rivers in the Bajo Atrato region, each with their respective river basin: Cacarica, La Larga-Tumaradó, Salaquí, Truandó, Pedeguita-Mancilla, Domingodó, Curvaradó, Jiguamiandó, and Atrato. The suffix “dó” comes from the Emberá language, one of the two languages that still survive from the Chocó language family, and it means “river”. The paradigmatic river in the region is the Atrato River. The origin of its name is unclear. Some scholars suggest that the name started to be used in 1536 (IGAC 1995) but that it became popular at the beginning of the 18th century. Atrato could mean “the river of the Citará people” (Isacsson 1975), an

interpretation based on the fact that the word “Atrato” may be decomposed into the suffix “to”, a Hispanicization of the Emberá word for river, and “atara”, a contraction of the name the Spaniards gave to some indigenous peoples they found in Chocó, that is, the Citará people, who are also referred to as Tirabará or Atará (Ibid., 97-98). Then if we treat “atara” as an ethnonym, “Atrato” would simply mean “the river of people”.

FIGURE 5.
The river of people
Photo by author



This imposing, incredibly muddy, and slow-moving river has more than 3,000 different tributaries and is considered the river with the highest volume of water in the world when compared to its length, which is 650 kilometres (IGAC 1992). Throughout all its course, the Atrato River barely descends 43 meters, a fact that has led some travelers to describe it as “a large lake in slow motion” (Leal 2018, 20). A friend and I used to call it “The Silent Giant”, and I tried as hard as I could to tune my ear to its sound but its flow is so silent that I never was able to hear it at all. The Atrato River has an average discharge of 4,000-5,000 cubic metres per second (IGAC 1992, 23) and it is estimated that it discharges about 344 million cubic meters of brown water every day into the Gulf of Urabá, where its 18 mouths form a large, swampy delta (Proyecto Biopacífico 1998, West 1957).



Different scholars have pointed to the importance that rivers on the Colombian Pacific coast have had as the setting and condition for an array of different social processes (see for example Escobar 2008, 2016; Leal 2018, Oslender 2004, 2016; Sharp 1976, Werner 2000, West 1957). Historically, rivers allowed exploration, economic exploitation, and settlement of the region. For instance, during the colonial period Chocó was a mining frontier. For the exploitation, as everywhere throughout the Americas, Spanish mine owners relied on forced labor of slaves of African descent and Indians. The gold mining work was mostly organized around *cuadrillas*, groups of African slaves and indigenous peoples under the command, at least

in theory, of a Spanish *capitán*. These *cuadrillas* lived in camps established along different watercourses, where they could easily get access to food—fish, manatees, but also crops and game animals—and to transportation and communication with urban settlements.

Unlike other colonial mining centres in the Americas, Chocó was not truly settled by European descendants since mine owners and officials showed little interest in establishing permanent residence in the region (Leal 2018, Sharp 1976, Werner 2000). During the 18th century, royal officials often complained about the climate, describing it as fever-ridden, incredibly humid, and so hot that it was not healthy for white settlers (Sharp 1976). Many officials resigned due to these conditions and the Spanish crown had to offer better pay to its functionaries in order to foster white presence in the region (Sharp 1976, Werner 2000). Chocó was somehow seen by Spanish officials as a place to make a quick fortune in order to retire later to what they considered to be more suitable areas, that is to say, away from low lands and humid forests. With time, major gold mines came to be owned by absentee Spanish proprietors, headed by free black “captains,” and operated by enslaved Africans and their descendants (Leal 2018, Sharp 1976, Werner 2000, Williams 2005). In this way, mine exploitation relied on the establishment of fixed quotas of raw gold calculated on the assessment of each mine’s likely productivity (Restall and Lane 2011, 162). Under such circumstances, once their quotas were reached, enslaved peoples in Chocó enjoyed a certain autonomy. They could work independently whether in other mining camps—where they collected gold in order to purchase manumission with their own funds—or on their own farms where they tried commercial agriculture, mainly of maize and plantains, as supplying sufficient food was always a problem for the *cuadrillas*’ overseers (Leal 2018, Sharp 1976, Werner 2000).

The connection of the Atrato River with the Caribbean Sea and the weak presence of royal authorities created a major problem for the Spanish crown: contraband. Dutch, Scottish, French, and English pirates and filibusters constantly navigated the Atrato River in search of gold, establishing military and commercial alliances

with indigenous and maroon communities, who often received from these contrabandists all sorts of commodities—clothing, machetes, axes, alcohol—that the Spanish officers were reluctant to offer (Whitten 1974). In order to counter the danger of such alliances, in some instances the Spanish crown ended up exempting free slaves and indigenous communities from tribute in exchange for their agreeing not to ally themselves with these foreigners (Restall and Lane 2011, 168). Contraband was such a serious problem that the Atrato River was closed to maritime commerce between 1698 and 1784 (Leal 2018, Werner 2000). However, the closing of the main transportation route only rendered the problem worse, as necessary goods and staples became scarce and, therefore, expensive. The situation forced mine owners, maroon, and indigenous communities alike to find new ways of pursuing contraband trade with the myriad merchants and marauders who were always willing to exchange supplies for gold. The Atrato River, despite the intentions of Spanish authorities, always remained the main economic link between the resources gathered by local communities and the opportunistic merchants who had the capital to trade for them and transport them.

In addition to having an important influence on the economic development of the region, the river network also shaped settlement patterns in the region. Both runaway slaves and *libres*—freedmen who managed to buy their freedom from their masters—took advantage of the immense forests and the weak presence of colonial authorities in order to reach lands located upstream, that is to say, away from urban settlements and commercial warehouses. To go up the river meant, and still means, to move towards less inhabited areas, to explore territories out of the reach of authorities, to reach untilled lands and abundant forests. Whether as maroons or as freedmen, settling upriver was a way to attain enough lands for crops, to access woodlands and rivers to fish, hunt or get supplies of wood, to create a place to raise one's own family, and to share life with others that had gone through similar experiences. From the very moment maroons and *libres* began travelling the rivers of their own accord and in search of lands for their own autonomous projects, they started their journey from enslavement to freedom. According to environmental

historian Claudia Leal (2018), the access enslaved peoples gained to wide forested lands, wetlands (*ciénagas* and mangroves), and rivers set the conditions for the flourishing of a “rainforest peasantry” (Ibid., 12), that is, a postemancipatory society that enjoyed much more autonomy than its peers elsewhere in Latin America. Historically speaking, mobility along watercourses opened up the possibilities for a life free from the colonial gaze. Even today in Bajo Atrato, many communities are able to trace their historical foundation to the journeys undertaken by their ancestors many years ago, when they settled new lands in order to exploit vegetable ivory palms or trade maize, plantains, bushmeat, and fish.

The pattern of settlement following watercourses produced in some regions what Nina S. de Friedemann (1974) identified as *trancos*, literally trunks. *Trancos* are defined as groups of families with rights to live and work in a specific territory inherited from ancestors who had previously taken possession of the land (Friedemann 1985, 204). Although *trancos* as defined by this author are specific to mining communities located elsewhere in the Pacific coast, some characteristics of these *trancos* are nevertheless present among communities that, like in Bajo Atrato, were settled during a more recent period. These settlements, simply called *comunidades*, that is, communities, are villages inhabited by people who control land and inherit property under a set of rules of descent. Whether by patrilineal or matrilineal affiliations, members of a community maintain a connection to the group, as well as to land rights by virtue of being considered a descendant of someone who demonstrates historical ties to the territory. In sum, a community is a group of families sharing a common territory and, most of the time, kinship; who live in a village along a given river; who develop a sense of belonging strongly associated with a particular river; who share collective rights to land and resources; and who identify themselves as being part of an organizational and political unity called a Community Council to which the state has granted full land tenure rights.

In Bajo Atrato, when one asks elders about their history in the region they always talk about the *arribeños*, ancestors living somewhere upstream on the Atrato River

and who travelled downstream in the first half of the 20th century in order to settle these lands. The origin of most current communities in this region is then traced back to the voyage undertaken by someone, to their will to embark in a boat and travel down the Atrato River in order to enhance their economic possibilities and enlarge their social ties. To people living near the mouth of the Atrato River, the people living upstream are seen as possessing a certain ancestry, that is to say, as having a kind of primal knowledge developed during the historical time of the first maroons and freedmen. The lands themselves are seen to contain the strength and skills developed by these first *libres* (Quiceno 2015). Accordingly, to come from up the Atrato River constitutes a historical and existential experience qualitatively different from that of being from down this river. Importantly, travel in this region is not only a means to settle new regions and eventually to found a village or become part of a new community; travel is also a way to move through the kinship network of relatives who have established themselves on other rivers; to voyage via the rivers was and still is to participate in social and economic networks. To travel, in short, is both to enlarge and to actualize one's territory, to foster a particular sense of place in which emplaced memories, practices, and experiences are entangled with kinship ties, productive practices, social organizations, symbolic manifestations, and even political aspirations.

Some scholars (Hoffman 2004, Quiceno 2015, Wade 1990) have pointed out how on the Pacific coast mobility has also influenced the constitution of kinship groups or extended families, which in turn links various portions of a river and facilitates access and exploitation of different resources. Extended families are often the result of what Norman Whitten (1974) characterizes as “serial polygyny”, a practice in which a man may have different wives and overlapping households at the same time. Extended families constitute a flexible kinship network which may be used by individuals to assert social ties and rights within a particular territory, as well as to mobilize affective ties or influence within a given community. Parents, sons, brothers, sisters, siblings, grandparents, grandsons, godfathers, godparents, all weave a web of relationships that enlarge one's social and territorial ties. At the same time,

the definition of family is often extended to include the entire community and classificatory kinship terms such as cousins, uncles, aunts, nieces or nephews serve to describe an extended number of people with whom one shares some kind of kinship ties, even fictive ones. It is not unusual to hear someone who arrives to a village greeting everybody, even those who are not actually blood relatives, by simply calling them family. As noted by anthropologist Natalia Quiceno (2015), kinship networks and the act of travelling through them is what creates a sense of territory, as much as the pattern of rivers, watercourses, and settlements is what shapes the experiences people cultivate with their own families, lands or communities.

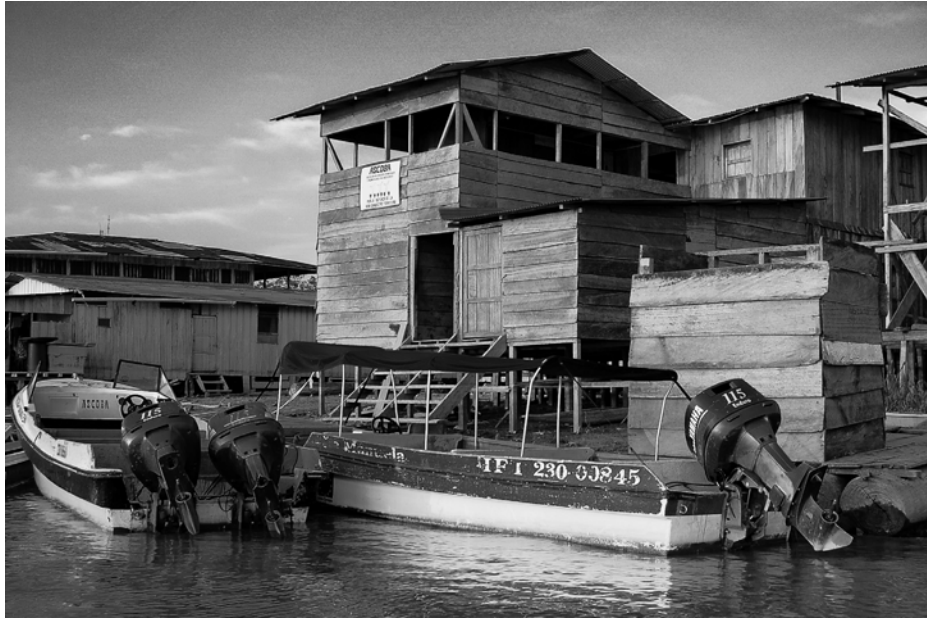
In Bajo Atrato, each community is situated on the shores of a particular river and has adopted the name of said watercourse. For example, the communities of Chicao or La Madre are situated near the mouths of the Chicao and La Madre rivers, small rivers that disembody into the Domingodó River. Some other communities like La Grande or Pedeguita, for instance, are located along the Atrato River but they have taken their names from the swamps and lakes located near their villages. Rivers provide a strong sense of individual and collective belonging. People often identify themselves as belonging to a particular river—“I’m from the Curvaradó River”, “My community is located on the Truandó River”—alternatively, communities may identify as being part of a specific basin: Chicao and La Madre each have their own Community Council but both communities belong to the Domingodó basin, which has its own Great Council, an organizational instance that brings together and represents all communities living along this river basin. In Bajo Atrato, collective property titles were distributed during 1996 and 2000 by the government to the communities of river basins which were organized into both Community Councils and Great Councils. Both Community Councils and Great Councils constitute administrative and political organizations responsible for the use and protection of these collective lands.

As it has been described by Oslender (2004, 2008), the geography of the intricate river networks in the region constitutes the spatial organising structure of afro-des-

cent communities on Colombia's Pacific coast. This is true on different levels, from the most pragmatic—settlement or economic exploitation, for instance—to social levels—for example kinship alliances or group solidarity based on affiliation with a specific place—or political ones—communities have created Community Councils along river basins. As Oslender highlights, the mobile practices of these communities and their interaction with rivers has helped to forge local and regional connections: “[T]he aquatic space can be thought of as providing the specific place-based context in which social movements are generated and consequently mobilised.” (Ibid., 2004, 962) For example, Afro-Colombian political movements in Chocó call themselves ethnic-territorial organisations, articulating in this way cultural and political struggles—the recognition of particular rights associated with their ethnic identities—with the defense of their lands (Asher 2009, Escobar 2008). Drawing on social movement literature, Oslender shows how on the Pacific coast the Afro-Colombian organizations that fight for the defence of their territories consider the rivers and the communities located along different river basins to be the place-specific context of their mobilisation (Oslender 2004, 2008).

Since the very first time I set foot in this region in 2003, I bore witness to what it meant to conceive of rivers as main referents of collective identity and territorial attachment. At that time many rural communities were organizing the means for returning to their territories after they had been forcedly displaced by guerrilla and paramilitary armies. I recorded on one of my field diaries the way people often described that return: they were going back to their rivers. What they were yearning for was not only their lands—their hamlets, their gardens, their fields, and their forests—but their rivers, that is, their possibilities of embarking and bringing the territory into existence through their manifold travels. If homeland is the name many people give to the place they regard as home, maybe in Bajo Atrato one has to invent a compound word like *homeriver* to describe people's place of birth, residence, and deep attachment.

FIGURE 7.
Headquarters of
ASCOBA. Association of
Community Councils of
Bajo Atrato located at the
banks of the Atrato River
in Riosucio.
Photo by author



Rivers also constitute a privileged place for daily social interactions. Key domestic activities such as bathing, laundering or dishwashing take place there. The washing of clothes and the cleaning of dishes and cooking utensils are activities relegated almost exclusively to women, who rarely go alone to perform such tasks. Even if they do, they usually find someone else in the river. These domestic activities are thus performed publicly and they take place in the rafts located near the shore of rivers.

FIGURE 8.
Washed clothes
Photo by author





FIGURE 9.
Lavanderas
Photo by author

Rafts or *balsas* are multipurpose devices made of the soft and light wood from the *Balso* tree (*Ochroma pyramidale*). Given their use for matters of housekeeping (for example the washing of clothes and dishes), they are often considered by local people to be feminine places. Paola Mameli (2014) sees rafts as an extension of kitchens: while the latter are private domestic places, the former are public. Rafts do not have owners and in towns they are usually built and maintained by the neighbourhood men. Rafts are indispensable devices and they are visited all day long, starting in the wee hours when women arrive to wash up cutlery, pots, and dishes used the night before. The morning is usually the rush hour since everyone bathes there, and as it is also the favourite moment for doing laundry, because the air temperature is still cool.



FIGURE 10.
Rafts
Photo by author

Although rafts are public places, a given raft is frequented by the same group of people living in a given vicinity. Rafts are divided into two spaces: one used for washing and the other used as a toilet. The toilet area is recognizable because there is a hole in the floor. The best rafts have a roof and a small enclosed room made of wood or zinc corrugated roofing sheets that explicitly divide the toilet from the rest of the space. The quality of a raft may ease the work of women as roofed rafts protect them from sunlight, just as those rafts with an enclosed toilet ensure greater privacy for their users.

FIGURE 11.
Carrying *chocoros*
Photo by author



Rivers are also children's favourite places to play...



FIGURE 12.
Playground
Photo by author

... although they may become dangerous, particularly to little kids. Despite the constant supervision of adults, accidents are always possible on or near the rafts. Occasionally, children who are not yet good swimmers may fall and be dragged underwater by the current. I remember one weekend the streets of Riosucio were full of posters of a missing boy who had been sent to run errands. In those days there were also rumours of people kidnapping children for the organ trade and everybody was expecting the worst, which indeed happened but for other reasons: the kid had wanted to buy some candies with the money left over from his errands and he had made a detour on his way home. The last time he was seen he was crossing a bridge from a raft. His little body was found on Monday, close to the river shore, turning and turning in a kind of whirlpool where most of the garbage thrown into the river ends up.

Rivers shape life in Bajo Atrato and on occasion they may also take life. During the summer or dry season, when there is a wind that blows all the time, the surface of the otherwise quite and calm Atrato River becomes a

pointed field of small waves that complicate navigation. Accidents, therefore, are frequent. On one occasion, a small fibreglass boat going at full speed capsized and two men were dragged underwater by waves provoked by the strong winds. As a matter of fact, drowned bodies drift downward until they reach the bottom and they only emerge on their own when gases from decomposition cause them to rise to the surface. Only then can the bodies be found. The day after this fatal accident there was an unusually cloudy sky and the weather was quite cold, on what was other-

FIGURE 13.
Cemetery of Riosucio
Photo by author



wise a normal summer day. Many people explained to me that the reason for that change was the death of those two men. Their bodies drifted by two days later on the surface of the water a couple of kilometres downstream. From the moment they were found, the waves and wind calmed down. The river, it was explained to me, had satiated its fury and it would be peaceful for the rest of the season. There were no more drowning victims that year.

The aquatic space also plays an important role in the economy of the region. Fishing, for instance, is a subsistence practice that provides crucial food to many people—although everybody in Bajo Atrato holds that fish is not as abundant as it used to be. Mostly undertaken by individual fishing households, this activity is carried out by men in the lakes and swamps nearby the villages. It is an artisanal practice involving the use of gillnets known as *trasmallos*, which are set in areas frequented by fishes. Fishermen use to commence their fishing trips very early in the morning, before dawn. They embark either in their motorboats or in their dugout canoes or *champas*, make the trip to their fishing spots, check the gillnets, harvest the fish, set their nets again in appropriate places until the next day, and go back to their villages to gut, wash, cure, and store all harvested fish.



FIGURE 14.
Trasmallos
Photo by author

Despite the decrease of fish attributed to pollution caused by mining exploitation, fishing still produces some surplus for local trade. There are about 118 different species in the Atrato basin and at least 50% of them are endemic (Jaramillo-Villa and Jiménez-Segura 2008). The most captured species are *doncella* (some species from the *Pimelodidae* family), *quitcharo* (*Hoplias* sp.), *guacuco* (*Pterygoplichtys* sp.), and mainly *bocachico* (*Prochilodus magdalenae*), a migratory freshwater fish that feeds on the fine organic material suspended at the bottom of the water.

FIGURE 15.
Bocachicos
Photo by author



Logging is also a river-based activity since the driving of logs is only possible by using watercourses. Indeed, timber rafting is the main method of log transportation and it heavily depends on floods, tides or other changes in the river's flow. Some other economic activities like cash crop farming also depend indirectly on rivers not only as a means of transportation but also because rivers' flow and flooding cycles determine which lands are suitable for cultivation.

Being the main transportation routes, rivers bind together villages, communities, and towns, but also connect regions with other regions. People have to travel for multiple reasons: in order to access their crop plots since cultivated areas are rare-

ly adjacent to the villages; to visit relatives and friends; to go to any of the annual patronage festivals; to participate in meetings or soccer tournaments; to look for healers or midwives; to fish or to log; or simply to go to the towns in order to take care of their affairs. Rivers, in sum, provide different social possibilities, which in turn give rise to a particular trait of the Afro-Colombian ethos: mobility and the importance these rural communities give to the act of embarking. To embark, as I have pointed out, is to travel and to do so is to set things in motion: to link different communities together, to expand kinship and social networks, to enhance economic opportunities, to spread one's sense of belonging, to situate oneself within historical processes and community patterns (Almario 2001, Chavarro 2012, Escobar 2008, Friedemann 1974, Hoffmann 2004, Losonczy 2006, Oslender 2004 and 2008, Quiceno 2015). When embarking, people are not just travelling around their territories, they are bringing them into existence, cultivating a life in which mobility, flow, and connection are indispensable to the creation of strong social, economic, symbolic, and riparian networks. Embarking conveys the idea that rivers and movement, or even better, that territory and flow are simultaneously produced "in and through relations" (Escobar 2008, 26). There is so much life happening in the river—bathing, working, playing, resting—that even if people do not travel, rivers do not cease their thereness, their embodiment of movement: flowing, changing its current and form, flooding over lands, carrying things. Just as this flowing allows communities in Bajo Atrato to attain what they consider to be a good life, the counterpart of flowing, in this case, stagnation, threatens the very practices that allow people bring their territories into existence.

Working the land, working the water

In Bajo Atrato, local Community Councils hold meetings on a regular basis. I remember the agenda of one of these meetings in a community on the Salaquí River, when one of the points discussed was the imperative need to convene all men to a collective work day. These work days are intended to be used to do whatever work the community may need: to improve and keep up trails; to maintain the school or

its soccer field; to look after collective crops; to repair boats, outboard motors, electric generators or any other collectively owned equipment; to prepare the hamlet for gatherings or celebrations. This time the goal of that collective work was to clean the main transportation route. As I myself had taken that route on my way to that meeting and endured the difficulties of transportation, I agreed the route urgently needed cleaning and maintenance. All the men in the community were supposed to attend that work day as it would involve a lot of hard work. I volunteered but I warned people that my skills may not be the most suitable for the required tasks as I knew that more than an ordinary cleaning involving people equipped with brooms, rakes, trash pickers or garbage cans, this work would require machetes, axes, chainsaws, and sharpening steels. During that collective work day our goal was to take away the tons and tons of woody debris—from broken branches, sticks and fallen trees to rotten tree trunks, stumps, log blocks and all kinds of driftwood—that the flow of the Salaquí River had been dragging downstream over the course of recent weeks and that, due to its accumulation near the river shores, were now blocking the access for motorboats and dugout canoes.

These *palizadas*—dams or river blockages provoked by heavy rains and the constant overflowing of rivers—are made of huge rafts of woody debris that obstruct navigation. *Palizadas* are not a banal issue in a region where it may rain from 20 to 25 days each month and that receives an average annual rainfall of 11,770 mm (Proyecto Biopacífico 1998). Chocó is one of those rare places in the world where annual rainfall can be measured in metres instead of in millimetres, as hydrologists and climatologists usually do. In Bajo Atrato, water is an overwhelming element that assaults your body and your senses, manifesting itself everywhere: coming from the heavens in the form of clouds, rains, downpours, deluges, dewes, drizzles, and *serenos*; flowing through rivers of all sizes and depths, or through water bodies of all kinds of shapes, from floodplain lagoons to swamps and shallow lakes; moving down into the ground, permeating the land and saturating soils; steamily floating in the air in the form of a heavy moisture that permeates your clothes, skin, and pretty much everything you touch; or simply coming from inside your body because you sweat

so much that your clothes get easily drenched and can never dry out.

With the huge amount of water flowing in the Bajo Atrato, it is common that heavy rains and tides drag with them incommensurable quantities of debris that end up clogging the rivers. There are different kinds of dams or *palizadas*. Every rain, regardless of its intensity, causes some tree branches and logs to get dragged down the river. This debris sometimes gets stuck in meanders or simply entangled on the riverbanks. Other *palizadas* are the result of heavy rains and sudden floods, especially in the headwaters of the rivers, when the torrent drags a large pool of organic materials including soil, plants, fallen trees, and even animals down the river. These *palizadas* may cause trouble if for any reason they become jammed and block the flow of the river. Once they get stuck they are more likely to grow in size whether because of the accumulation of more materials dragged along by the river, or because of new rains and floods tugging more and more debris downstream.



FIGURE 16.
Palizada
Photo by author

Floodplain lagoons and swamps are another important source of materials that often become part of river blockages. These places are populated by aquatic plants such as *arracacho* (*Montrichardia arborescens*), *lechugas*, and *orejiburros* (both from the *Pistia* genus), plants that have roots barely submersed beneath the water's surface and that may easily break away from their root system when the water level increases. I have seen entire forests of *Pistia* plants blocking waterways, and floating islands of *arracachos* traveling down the Atrato River.

FIGURE 17.
A sea of *arracacho* plants
Photo by author



Palizadas are not an exception but rather a normal condition of navigation on the rivers of this region. Depending on the kind and the size of the *palizada*, there are different ways for river travellers to deal with it. The most common *palizadas* are just fallen trees or branches going across from one of the riverbanks to the other. In these cases and depending on the water level, or the weight of the boat and its cargo, boats may simply cross under or above the obstacle, always being pushed and pulled by the people traveling on board. If a *palizada* is not too thick, trees and branches are cut and left to be drifted away by the river. This is why it is so important to carry at least a machete every time one travels. But if the *palizada* is big and has a lot of debris, the boat has to break through it by taking away and cutting into pieces the most manageable trunks and logs, just enough to make room for the boat.

The real difficulty here depends on whether you are going downstream or upstream through these *palizadas*. When going down, as a friend I met in Chocó used to say, “even the stones roll”, but going up, in a boat full of goods, as the boats usually are when people travel from the town to their hamlets, things become harder. Here is when two other instruments become indispensable: paddles or *canaletes*, and a *palanca*, a large, hard wooden stick forked on one of its ends. Both tools are used to propel or to push the boat.

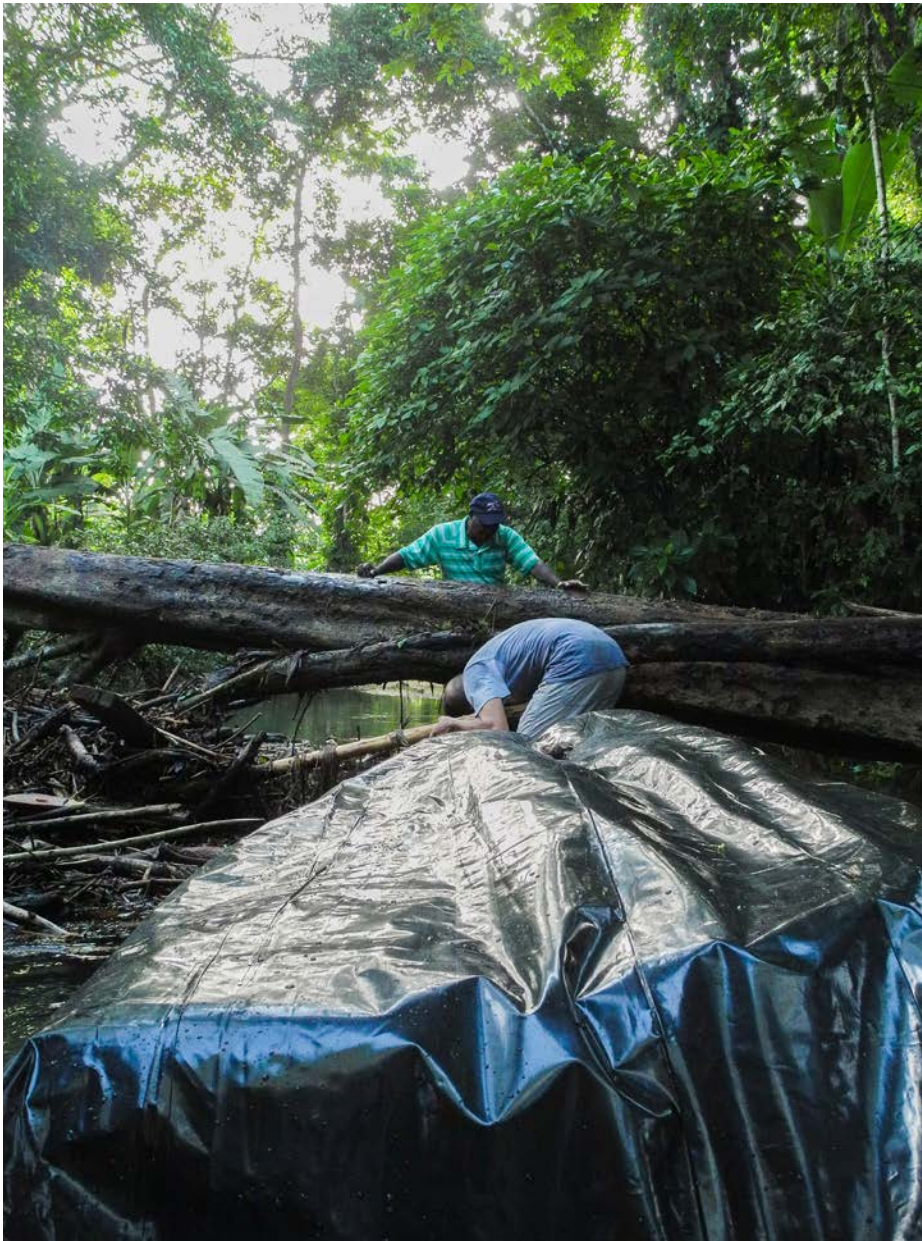


FIGURE 18.
A boat driver and his
anthropologist trying to
overcome a palizada
Photo by author

Even if you do not encounter true *palizadas* during your travels, the rivers are always full of logs, branches and pieces of wood floating around, sometimes hidden just beneath the surface. This unseen debris is the most dangerous, as it might break or overturn boats, or cause serious damage to the lower unit or *pata* of the outboard motor. These kinds of accidents are quite frequent and one constantly hears stories of people losing bags, food, animals, goods, and even outboard motors during their river travels. There have also been some fatal accidents caused by these unseen tips of branches stuck in the riverbed. Even the most experienced boat drivers are not exempt from these accidents and in order to avoid any breakdown of their outboard

FIGURE 19.
A *puntero* holding a
palanca
Photo by author



motors they always carry a set of nails to repair the propeller drive-shaft or an extra propeller, which are the pieces that break most often when navigating the rivers of this region. Boat drivers are very dexterous and even if the wooden boats that navigate these rivers do not move quickly, drivers must react quickly to the presence of any debris and constantly tilt the engine out of the water in order to avoid the gear-box hitting a tree trunk or other debris. When navigating, there is usually a *puntero* on board, a person that sits in the front and indicates to the driver the presence of any obstacle or debris and that with the *palanca* helps the boat to turn quickly in the most pronounced river curves.

Now I turn back my attention to the *limpieza*, the cleaning of the *palizada* in the Salaquí River. Most men attended the work day convoked by the community council. Those who did not had to pay a fine. The work started early in the morning and men were carrying their indispensable tools: sharpening steels, machetes, and axes. There were also a couple of chainsaws as well as some ropes. The procedure for unblocking the river seems simple in its logic but it involves a lot of hard, physical work. Branches and small logs must be taken away and put on the riverbanks, but not too close to the river as the idea is to avoid tides or sudden floods dragging all that wood downriver again. In order to take all this debris out of the water some men jumped into the river while others, including myself, formed a human chain on the river bank and started to pass logs from one to another, accumulating a pile of wet and rotten wood. Sometimes those in the water had to dive in order to better push the heavy stump pieces out of the water. But this is not always doable because the depth of the river might render it difficult to find a fixed point from which a person could lift said stumps in order to get them to the river bank. When the strength of a single man was not enough or the piece of wood was too heavy to be lifted, men dove in order to tie a rope around the stumps, which were then pulled by the men onto the shore and later cut into pieces using chainsaws. In this way, these pieces became manageable and could then be placed beside the piles of wood. By cutting wood into small pieces, people made sure that if this debris was dragged away again by the water it would not get easily stuck.

Meanwhile, the chainsaw operators worked on the bigger logs: those that due to their size impeded the rest of debris from going downstream. As rafts of debris continue to accumulate every day with the force of the river, these logs become more and more jammed together and the rafts themselves become very thick. Indeed, it is often possible to walk over these *palizadas* without sinking. Standing on those stumps, chainsaw operators proceed by cutting the big logs into pieces. It is not an easy task as operators have to avoid getting their chainsaw's engine wet. Also, when the chainsaw's bar hits the water, the saw-chain starts to splash water violently, so the operator has to know very well where to stand in order to avoid getting excessively wet or blinded because of the splatter. It is hard and very noisy work, especially when there are three or four chainsaws working at the same time. Once a main log has been cut and released, the whole raft starts to loosen and branches and small logs are more easily taken away. Finally, the small debris is left to be dragged along by the stream.

The *palizada* in the Salagüí River was about one kilometre long and it took four days for more than fifty men to make the river, if not totally clean, at least navigable again. When performing this task, people are constantly wet because they are repeatedly getting splashed by the water or getting themselves soaked while pulling logs onto land. To be wet while you are over-heated or sweating is a condition that people in the Bajo Atrato avoid as much as possible because it makes them sick. This is particularly true for the chainsaw operators who are carrying a heavy machine, getting over-heated because of the proximity of the hot engine, and soaked because of the water splashing them. Nothing is worse, people hold, than the cold of water, whether from rain or rivers, when one is *enfogado*, literally on fire, full of heat. This threatens the appropriate thermal balance the body must have in order to be in good health. In Chocó, most illnesses are associated with a temperature and classified as either hot or cold diseases. Their treatment, therefore, involves plants, medicine or procedures which are intended to control the excess of one of these thermal properties. In the case of people getting cold because of the water while working, they experience, in the short term, headaches, fever and cold. But

in the long term, the accumulated exposure to changes between heat and cold provoke joint pain and stiffness, just the kind of pain that senior lumberjacks complain about. Other risks involved with working in the *palizadas* are stepping on a stingray and being stung by its tail, or being bitten by some snake hidden in the debris since, according to local accounts, *mapana* snakes (*Bothrops atrox*) like to sun themselves on branches and logs near the water's edge and they even use this debris to travel downriver and migrate to new areas.



FIGURE 20.
Palizadas dragging
dead animals
Photo by author

The work of enabling navigability, of taking away *palizadas* is described as cleaning, as *limpieza* of rivers. It has to be done on a regular basis. Sometimes this work is the result of an individual initiative, like when someone traveling or transporting plantain or timber needs to cross and decides to clear debris. On other occasions, the work is done by members of a local community council because the *palizada* is affecting them collectively. In the case of a vast *palizada* like the one found on the Salaquí River, the intervention of the Great Community Council, a council that brings together all the 14 local councils from this basin, was necessary. The Great Council took charge of all the required logistical aspects for this collective work, from fuel for transportation and chainsaws to food for all workers. Men who were not available to work contributed with fuel or with fish or pigs that were consumed as food.

Through my experience in the Bajo Atrato I came to realize that the cleaning of rivers is part of the work that characterizes peasant life. Navigability is not always an intrinsic feature of rivers but is, at least in this region, the result of people's work and their engagement with their landscapes. Just as people prepare land for cultivation, they also take charge of the preparation of the rivers for transportation. In order to plant crops, the land needs to be cleared and cleaned, that is, woodlands have to be slashed and let to rot or be burned. This work, as well as that of caring for and maintaining the crops once they have been cultivated, is considered a form of *limpieza*, a cleaning. Something similar happens to the rivers. They need to be cleaned, to be maintained, and cared for. Failure to control *palizadas*, that is, to clean or *limpiar* the river, might imply not only difficulties for transportation but also make it impossible for people to continue to live there.

Big *palizadas* clog riverbeds and streams, affecting the direction of the water, altering flow velocity, forcing water out of its natural stream, and flooding lands that people need for crops. *Palizadas* can also increase the intensity and duration of floods; they can channel and spread water across riverbanks, increasing sedimentation but also erosion problems that lead to undercut banks, more flooding, and

loss of cultivable lands. *Palizadas* can create wetlands, increase turbidity, and jeopardize water quality; they change the distribution of the soil and of the organic sediment carried in the water as when there are huge *palizadas* this sediment tends to settle to the bottom of rivers. In brief, if they are not dealt with appropriately, *palizadas* may become major ecological disasters with profound social and economic impacts, from the destruction of crops and loss of livestock to the clogging of communication and transport routes. *Palizadas* and the troubles they create may be seen to represent stagnation: the antithesis of both the values rivers embody and the practices they normally allow.



FIGURE 21.
A cemetery of trees
Photo by author

In her work on violence and social movements in Chocó, Quiceno (2015) describes how people conceive of “the good life” as one of frequent embarkations, that is, as a life where it is possible to travel in order to visit family, meet people, go to work as well as to incorporate new patches of land into agricultural production. Through all these voyages by river, people travel across their territory and in the process they create a unique sense of place: “To live is to embark and to embark is a way of bringing the territory into existence.” (Ibid., 102) As I have pointed out previously, in Bajo Atrato to embark and to travel tend to be conflated. To embark not only means to travel via a river but also to move through networks of kinship and collect-

ive work. In other words, rivers open up the possibility of attaining diverse social and economic ideals, in sum, of living the good life or *vida sabrosa* that communities from Chocó aspire to. *Palizadas* impede this good life, blocking the appropriate flow of both rivers and people, making water stagnant, inactive, lacking freshness and, therefore, life. *Palizadas* leave people without the possibility of embarking and without the chance of pursuing the journeys and activities that bring the territory into existence. *Palizadas* might thus deny the possibility of cultivating a sense of place, of creating territoriality.

Along with all these social meanings which are derived from river travel, the amount of work, energy, and resources put into an ordinary activity such as the cleaning of rivers leads me to believe that rivers are not just natural flowing watercourses found out there in “nature” but that they are enacted or brought into a particular form of being through different human practices. One such practice is that of cleaning the *palizadas* that form in these rivers. In a sense that is not completely figurative, people work their lands as much as they work their waters, as they take care of rivers. *Palizadas* are then part of a double social bind: they convene people to work collectively, they rouse manifestations of solidarity between neighbours and between communities, they accentuate the practices of stewardship, in sum, they summon people to take care of their rivers. But if there are instances in which such indispensable work could not be done, *palizadas* might also harm the territory. This is exactly what happened in rivers such as the Truandó, Salaquí, and Jiguamiandó where paramilitary and guerrilla armies alike coerced entire communities to move away from their traditional territories and livelihoods.

Stagnation

Scottish Enlightenment philosopher Adam Ferguson described humankind as endowed with a perpetual capacity to invent and improve. “We mistake human nature,” he wrote, “if we wish for a termination of labour, or a scene of repose.” To him, “a passing stream, not a stagnating pool” was the emblem of humanity (Ferguson

[1767] 1995, 13). Flowing streams and still waters are two powerful images: one which evokes progression, and the other the lack of it. The imagery of rivers has been very useful when thinking about a vast array of human concerns, from the irreversibility of time to the everlasting nature of change. No doubt, the actuality of rivers, their presence and existence, their thereness renders them, if we employ the well-known Lévi-Straussian formula, “good to think with”. The move from stagnating pools to passing streams conveys the idea of progression as an increase, as a process of developing towards a more advanced state. The opposite, passing from streams to stagnant waters, seems to imply deceleration, a decrease of circulation, inactivity. However, between flowing streams and stagnant waters, or vice versa, there is a zone of exchange in which something of one passes into the other: even if a *palizada* conveys stagnation, this stagnation cannot occur without the constant flowing of debris carried by rivers; after crossing through *palizadas*, water changes its quality and the river some of its properties. In this section I explore the conditions that favoured the emergence of some epic *palizadas* in order to show that their stagnation may be considered a kind of absence: the lack of people to take care of their rivers and the lack of boats circulating due to the forced displacement experienced by many communities. *Palizadas* may also be seen as a form of dispossession: the loss of rivers and hence of the possibilities of embarking and undertaking the kinds of journeys that bring the territory into existence. A last way of seeing *palizadas* is to conceive of the apparent deceleration, the decrease or inactivity they embody as representative of the increase of another kind of activity: activities such as war, plunder of forests, and state abandonment.

As it was mentioned in the introduction, the armed conflict in Bajo Atrato reached its peak during the 1997-2005 period, when the paramilitary forces from the ACCU (Peasant Self-Defense Forces of Córdoba and Urabá) seized the town of Riosucio and launched, alongside the 17th Brigade of the National Army, a violent military campaign against the rural communities inhabiting the different basins of the region. As entire communities were driven from their lands and had to live in conditions of forced displacement for up to four years, paramilitaries set the conditions

for the exploitation of the collective territories of Afro-Colombian communities, establishing criminal alliances with timber companies and fostering settlement of people from outside the region who helped them to carry out the abusive depletion of forests. During this same period, those communities that managed to return to their lands faced threats and crimes against their leaders and organizations, and experienced all sort of repressive tactics from economic blockages to confinement and land dispossession.

Even ordinary activities such as going to work in the crops plots or travelling between communities became highly risky endeavours. The economic blockade included restrictions on the circulation of boats and people, which along with the forced displacement of communities contributed to a progressive abandonment of rivers as the people were no longer able to care for the rivers in the way that rivers require. As rivers were less and less travelled and there were not enough people willing to carry out the cleaning of watercourses, *palizadas* started to grow and to propagate. That was particularly true in rivers such as Cacarica, Truandó and Salaquí, where at the same time the systematic depletion of forests became very noticeable.

Along these rivers, timber companies established logging camps on the abandoned lands without any sort of consent from local authorities (Vargas 2016). In a similar vein, in 2005 the commander of the paramilitaries in Riosucio gave more than 87 chainsaws, sometimes to his own combatants, sometimes to people who were not from the region, to be used in the exploitation of timber. These foreign lumbermen worked under conditions of debt peonage: they received tools and supplies from the paramilitary warlords, who also were timber buyers, paying below the market price and keeping lumbermen in debt (Ruiz González 2012, Semana 2006). Paramilitaries and timber companies took advantage of the abandoned lands and of the vulnerability of exiled communities in order to pursue their own economic interests, leaving a wake of ruined forests wherever their chainsaws passed. Indiscriminate logging not only ruined entire patches of forests but also created

large amounts of woody debris that led to the apparition of new *palizadas* every time there was a heavy rain and the river overflowed. With forest depletion, *palizadas* just jammed and jammed. In the Salaquí River some *palizadas* grew to two kilometres long, while in Truandó they reached up to four kilometres. Those rivers were partially unblocked by the same companies and people depleting forests but they did so only as part of their interest for transporting the exploited timber. Once communities started returning to their territories in 1999, they found several watercourses clogged and even diverted. It was only with the return of people to their own communities that these rivers were finally cleaned. But the same was not possible in the Jiguamiandó River, where the *palizada* reached epic proportions.

In order to understand what happened in Jiguamiandó, let us consider this. Geologically speaking, rivers are significant shapers of landscapes. Their main goal is to get from headwaters to sea level in an efficient way, always taking the path of least resistance. If a river finds any obstacle that cannot be easily broken down by the strength of water, it will simply skirt around it, whether these obstacles be rocks, a mountain or a *palizada*. Now, if the *palizada* reaches a disproportionate size because of a lack of people to work on the rivers, the landscape will change radically, and the river may cease to be an ally for the people who live near it. That was the case of the Jiguamiandó River, a river that lost about twenty kilometres of its navigable area because of deposition and sedimentation that arose after the forced displacement of the communities living in this basin.

Jiguamiandó, meaning “River of the fevers” in the Emberá language, has a length of 74 kilometres and more than fifteen different tributaries, including the Uradá, Ancadía, Jarapetó, Coredó, and Guamal rivers. Its headwaters are located in the mountains of the Paramillo Massif, at the northern end of the Colombian West Andes. It has an average width of 56 meters and its basin extends over more than 46,000 hectares (Proyecto Biopacífico 1998). The Jiguamiandó River has what hydrologists call a low form factor—0.46 in this case—form factor being the ratio of depth to width of a given river, a measure indicating the flow intensity of a basin for a defined

area. That means that due to its morphology this particular river has a low tendency to flood (Proyecto Biopacífico 1998). However, after a 7.2 magnitude earthquake that took place in 1992, the river started to change. The earthquake produced several landslides that discharged tons of mud and sand that ended up filling some portions of the Jiguamiandó River, creating large patches of sedimentation that severely transformed the depth of several pools and meanders, which became quite shallow waters. This of course rendered navigation difficult, particularly during the dry season. Accounts of people having to pull boats for hours and hours or having to wait for rains in order to pass through these patches of heavy sedimentation were common among those traveling this river. But the situation worsened after the escalation of paramilitary violence, when the massive forced displacement left the basin without people who could take care of the river, by preventing damming and clearing the usual *palizadas* carried there by the rains. According to Manuel Denis Blandón, communitarian leader of this region, in 2000 the *palizada* was 300 metres long but in 2015 it had reached 21 kilometres (Contagio Radio 2015).

Two things contributed to the creation of such an epic *palizada*. First, as I mentioned above, the forced displacement of communities living in the Jiguamiandó area. Second, forest depletion carried out by logging companies. After the attack launched by the army and paramilitary forces in 1997, communities from the Jiguamiandó basin had to abandon their settlements and livelihoods. Many simply left the region and of those who did not, about 2,500 according to some figures (Valencia 2013, 62), had to live hidden in the wilderness, away from their hamlets and cultivated areas and making of forests a refuge from the constant military and paramilitary raids. None or very few dared to travel via the Jiguamiandó River, except some paramilitary boats that continued using that route. An inhabitant of this region recalls:

We could go to the river only when they [paramilitaries] wanted let us go. When they did not allow us, we could not even go to do laundry because they used to say that they were not responsible for those of us who dared to be in the river. There were many times when we could not go downstream. (Comisión Intereclesial de Justicia y Paz 2005, 28)

When armed groups impede access of people to the rivers, these armed groups are not only violating people's freedom of movement and their right to travel. As well, armed groups are impeding people from performing the very acts that sustain their sociability and livelihood. Not being allowed to be in the river implies, among other things, loss of access to the rafts and therefore to the possibility of laundering, dishwashing and bathing; lack of water during the dry season; and the impossibility of freely embarking, that is, of travelling in order to buy indispensable goods or to go to work in their cultivated areas. The impossibility of embarking and the imposed restrictions on the performance of daily activities in the rivers are some of the reasons people sometimes refer to armed groups as "those that block the rivers" (Quiceno 2015, 16), meaning that by blocking the rivers in such a despotic way these groups prevent boats and people from circulating, which at the same time entails the cut-off of supplies and communications.

To these communities, transiting the Jiguamiandó River became a very dangerous activity as they knew they could be kidnapped or killed while traveling, just as had happened many times to others in the neighboring Curvaradó River. Communities from the Jiguamiandó basin preferred to avoid this route even if it meant their own isolation. In this way, the river was gradually abandoned to its own fate: no one went downstream, no one cleaned its debris and with every rain there was a new tide and with it, the *palizada* just grew and grew. To some extent the abandonment of the river became instrumental to the security of people: the *palizadas* prevented attacks from military and paramilitary armies as these groups also relied on the river to access local communities. Due to the *palizadas* these armed actors no longer had said access.

The second factor that led to the apparition of this huge *palizada* was deforestation. Even before forced displacement had begun, timber companies were depleting wood and fine timbers, leaving behind all kinds of debris, from stumps to branches and tree tops:

The [Jiguamiandó] River was not as it is today [2005]. The river had a clean course, it was wide and you could travel any time you wanted to. There was no risk at all as it was a clean river. But the Maderas del Darién Company took possession of a place called Calderón and they started there to log all kinds of woods. Once the Company left, the river started to get dry and we think it was because they left many stumps and logs to rot and sink to the bottom of the river. That was one of the reasons there was so much sedimentation. (Comisión Intereclesial de Justicia y Paz 2005,18)

Deforestation continued during the terrible years of terror and the paramilitary armies themselves exploited all available wood. Forest debris became the feedstock of new and bigger *palizadas* once these residues were dragged down the river by the rains and the usual river tides.

Two other things have been decisive in the perpetuation of the infamous *palizada* on the Jiguamiandó River: on one hand, bureaucratic indolence and negligence; on the other hand and more broadly speaking, the state politics of abandonment. Local and national authorities have shown little willingness to solve the problem once the paramilitary armies were demobilized in 2006. The Colombian state only took action after an order of the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights issued in 2003. In this order, the Commission called upon the state to adopt forthwith provisional measures to protect the lives and safety of the communities living in the Jiguamiandó River, including the recovery of this river navigability. However, this action was constantly postponed until 2007, when the damming had reached 12 kilometres long. At that time the National Roads Institute–Invias–conducted some studies and approved a 10,000 million Colombian pesos (almost USD\$4 million) budget to unblock the river. However, the work was not immediately set into motion because of different bureaucratic procedures, mainly because the Ministry of Transportation, the National Roads Institute, the National Planning Department and the municipal government were all passing the responsibility for the management of the project back and forth with no department willing to take full charge (Corte Suprema de Justicia 2010). In 2010, communities from the Jiguamiandó River presented a writ for the protection of their constitutional rights and they ob-

tained a court judgement from the Supreme Court of Justice which ordered national and local authorities to quickly adopt concrete, doable, and scheduled measures to unblock the river. In 2013, when the work finally started, the *palizada* had reached a length of 19 kilometres and the initially-approved budget was no longer enough. Moreover, whether because of inefficiency, mismanagement or simply because of corruption, the contractor hired by the municipal government only cleared 8 kilometres of the initially projected 12 kilometres they were supposed to clear. In 2015 the *palizada* had not only returned to its original huge size but it continued growing with each new tide.

The existence of such *palizada* puts into evidence the politics of abandonment that has been the hallmark of states politics vis-à-vis communities from Chocó. Government negligence of this issue demonstrates once again the indifference of national authorities to the precariousness that shapes people's lives in this region, perpetuating a state of affairs in which poverty, isolation, and structural violence are normalized. The blocking of the river is not a natural phenomenon even if tides, flooding or heavy rains are part of the natural world. People in this region have always known how to deal with *palizadas*. There is, however, nothing natural in forced displacement impeding people from travelling their rivers, in violence causing people to abandon their daily activities on their lands and in their rivers, in the negligence of a state that lets the river die. All these actions not only jeopardize the livelihoods of these communities, they threaten the possibility of life these communities represent. In the case of the damming of the Jiguamiandó River, human agency is determinant and this damming reveals not only the traits of a failed or fragmented state, as the Colombian State has been often characterized (Bushnell 1993, Chomsky 2006, Safford and Palacios 2002), but mainly the power of a state that, through "the subjugation of life to the power of death" (Mbembe 2003, 39), deprives inhabitants of their livelihoods and allows death to happen to certain populations and to particular landscapes.

Today, the landscape of the Jiguamiandó River changes radically as one travels from its mouth to the communities living upstream. In the areas near its mouth in the Atrato River, the water that comes from the Jiguamiandó River merges with the streams of the big lakes and swamps where people still fish. Here the river is still a part of the life that fishermen have traditionally cultivated. As one travels upstream, the river channel becomes narrower and its banks become more well-defined. On both sides, the surrounding green forest rises imposingly and through its leafy canopy the sound of cicadas and birds emerges. But as you continue upstream, the forest presents a more desolate aspect. Trees are still standing but their branches are dried and without a single leaf. “It looks like it’s been fumigated, or like there’s been a forest fire,” says one of the inhabitants of this region when describing the ruined landscape (Comisión Justicia y Paz 2012). Then comes the *palizada*: so big, so grey, and so thick that it seems to be the forgotten rubble of an exhausted forest. Perhaps this is what a *palizada* is after all: a floating cemetery of trees.

The stillness of the *palizada* creates the effect of the river being a stagnant body of water but in fact water is being diverted by the *palizada*, uninterruptedly overflowing both sides of the river, staying at the foot of the murdered trees, leaving a barrenness that seems beyond repair. Dead wood floating on the river, decaying trees on the riverbanks: there is something sinister about that landscape. Some leaders calculate there are about 10,000 hectares of ruined forests (Contagio Radio 2015). That means almost one quarter of the total area covered by this basin. People also say game animals have withdrawn because of the diverted waters. The damage has extended to both cultivated areas and settlements. There are now muddy areas where people cannot plant anything. Hamlets have become flooded and they are riddled with makeshift bridges that people built in order to avoid walking in the mud. Hamlets are now constantly flooded and not just temporarily waterlogged like they used to be before the forced displacement. Those are just some of the long-lasting effects that violence has carved in the landscape, effects that are still growing with every new rain and every new tide.



FIGURE 22.
Ramona
Photo by author

Fieras

Ramona loved smoking unfiltered cigarettes and she used to do so by keeping the lit end in her mouth. Holding the thick smoke of tobacco and burned paper inside her mouth, she extended to the max the experience of every puff. During one of my visits to her home in Domingodó and while she was lighting up one of the cigarettes I had given her as a gift, Ramona told me about the *fieras* of the Atrato River: those aquatic, huge and often voracious beings capable of causing a lot of havoc. She then told me about a giant turtle that dug a hole in a ravine on the edge of the river, taking away a considerable amount of soil and leaving the town completely exposed to floods; she also depicted fishes such as *quícharos* and *pelmás* that become so huge that they could sink dugout canoes and even ships; and groupers that had eaten people up. “Groupers,” she said, “cry at night. When a grouper comes across a dug-out canoe bigger than it, it goes away crying.”

A *fiera* is a special kind of being that lives in rivers. Sometimes a *fiera* is an ordinary fish, like *quícharos* or *beringos*, that has grown excessively in size. *Fieras* may also be the caimans; the stingrays with their sharp barbs; the *pejesapo*, a fish that causes warts when you touch it; some giant turtles that live in river meanders; the *sierpe*,

an enormous snake that can sink boats; or *vacas de agua*, cows similar to domestic cattle but that live underwater, sunbathe at beaches, and eventually devour animals that drink water at rivers. *Fieras* usually inhabit swirls, rapids, and sharp bends of rivers. They use trunks or sunken trees to build their lairs deep down in these places. The presence of *fieras* is often indicated by the accumulated foam in these places or by the bubbles emerging from time to time.

Depending on their origin, *fieras* might be classified as types or as tokens. The former are all the individuals of a class that is considered dangerous because its members share pernicious attributes such as their propensity for harming or devouring people, or because they can cause havoc due to their huge size. That is the case of groupers or alligators: every grouper and every alligator is an instance of a *fiera* type, that is to say, all the individuals of the class grouper or the class alligator possess perilous characteristics and behaviours. *Fieras* as tokens are the particular individuals from a class that is not necessarily considered dangerous but that eventually might develop some features that turn them into menaces. For example, the *quicharo*, a type of fish usually included in the diet of people, is not considered a *fiera* but an individual *quicharo*—a token—may become a *fiera* if it grows to an exceptionally large size and becomes capable of provoking huge waves or sinking boats.

Having said that, all *fieras*—whether types or tokens—are born to be *fieras*, meaning that their ‘fiereness’ is not a trait acquired over time. For example, the individuals from usually harmless fish types such as *beringos* or *pelmás* that are born to be *fieras* have physical features different than those common to fish of their class: “The bad *quicharo*,” an elder told me, “is born bad, you can see the baby fish moves differently from others and produces foam around the mouth.” After asking what caused some individuals to become *fieras*, Macario, another elder participating in the conversation, answered:

Some become fieras because each one faces its doom, they become huge. You can tell the difference between a *fiera* and others through their size because fieras grow bigger. They have a different spirit since the very moment they are born. It is just like a family where you can find good and bad people. Brothers and sisters

belong to the same family but each one is born with a particular spirit, although they all come from the same root (Macario, in discussion with the author. Salaquí River).

One last example of ‘fiereness’: caimans are all deemed to be *fieras* and following the metaphor of good and bad people in the family, Macario explained to me that caimans were a family in which everyone was born wicked. Due to the importance that rivers and watercourses have in the region, *fieras* are an important element of danger for people. Several people told me some caimans are so huge and so old that plants may grow on their backs, so they are often mistaken for trunks or branches dragged along by a flood. Caimans prefer living in deep rivers and a couple of years ago it was common to see them sunbathing at the beaches. Kempes, a man who lives on the Salaquí River, told me there were two classes of caimans: *agujeto* and *sapo*. The former attacks only on land, while the latter attacks both on land and water. I also heard that caimans keep in their stomachs the jewels of the people they have eaten up. Some time ago caimans were hunted and former hunters told me that, while preparing the caiman skins, they used to find necklaces, bracelets or earrings, as well as hair inside their stomachs since they are unable to expel them.

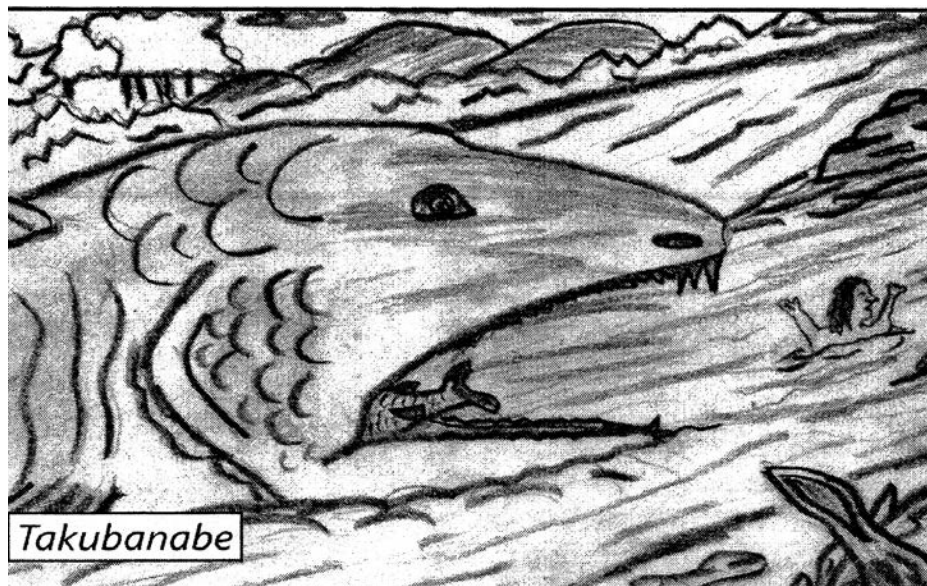
The aquatic world is plagued by *fieras* to the extent that each community has to deal with some *fiera* living near its riparian settlement. Some people hold that in a meander of the Salaquí River there is a huge turtle that has sunk several boats but it has not been seen again since the *palizadas* blocked a large part of the river. In the Cacarica River, near its mouth, several people have seen the huge back of a *fiera*, which they have not been able to identify but it produces massive waves every time it comes out. I was also told that the place where the Truandó and Salaquí rivers meet is the lair of a *fiera* that has taken several fishing nets away. Near a village called Vigía de Curvaradó, fishermen say there is a *sierpe* living in a swirl and that this giant snake has sunk several dugout canoes. *Sierpes* usually are born at the shore of any stream or river and although they can grow in shallow pools, they need deeper waters when they grow up. So, in order to reach such places, *sierpes* may provoke sudden floods by moving in such a violent way that they agitate and over-

flow the waters. *Sierpes* then go downstream and as they have become so large, they can drag anything on their way. I was told that sometimes the debris forming *pali-zadas* are actually the trees dragged by *sierpes* during their travels down the river.

Similar *feras* capable of provoking floods but also storms are described by Katio and Chamí peoples. Priest Constancio Pinto (1978, 244), a missionary who wrote one of the most detailed linguistic works on the Katio language, describes the *jepá*, a giant serpent provoking swirls, sinking boats, and devouring shipwrecked sailors. Father Hector Castrillón (2010, 196-197) mentions the *je* and the *takubanbe*, beings living at the bottom of whirlpools, that have the shape of a big canoe and that may provoke very strong winds. Anthropologist Patricia Vargas (2016) includes a map designed by some Wounaan elders in which they drew the places inhabited by some epic *feras* that during mythical times rendered difficult the navigation of the rivers followed by these indigenous people when they settled in the region.

One of the most common and fearsome *fiera* is the grouper. The grouper is a fish of the *Epinephelus* genus that becomes *fiera* when it grows to colossal sizes. The grouper lives in the sea and rivers and is a great predator since, according to people, it devours not only fish but also people. I was told that they can absorb anything in their path through their gills, and as Ramona said at the beginning of this section, they

FIGURE 23.
A *fiera*.
Source: Castrillon 2010



are known to cry like a little child. Several people told me the story of a woman who was bathing her child in the river by holding him by the arms in order to submerge him underwater. When she pulled her child back up, he had been cut in half as a grouper had bitten off the child's legs in a single bite. Each person who told me this story added new details but nobody knew who the woman was and every person said the event had happened at a different location.

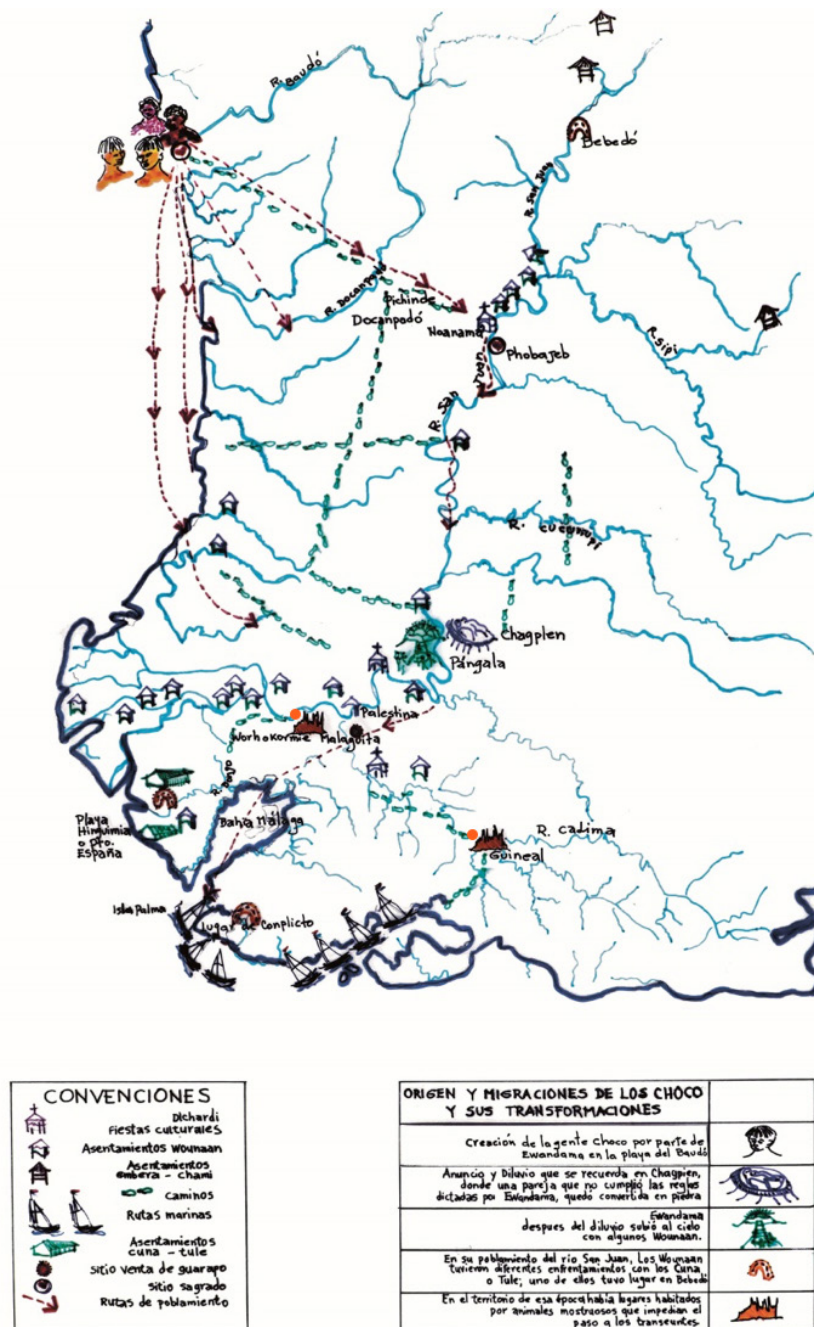


FIGURE 24.
A map showing the location
of some mythical fieras
(see the orange dots)
Source: Vargas 2016

There is another kind of *fiera* called *vaca de agua*, which literally means water cow. Pinto (1978, 247) says this being is called *dopaca* in Katío language and that it provokes fever and vomiting in those who see it. *Vacas de agua* look like common cows but their horns are much more curved and their sharp ends point to each other. They have very big ears and live underwater. People establish their presence through the sudden appearance of swirls. They go out to river beaches to sunbathe during certain seasons, and although they do not eat people, *vacas de agua* can drown them if they feel threatened. Few people have managed to see them due to their outstanding hearing: as soon as they perceive people around, they dive deep into the river. Many claim that the presence of *vacas de agua* is more and more exceptional because they like living in faraway places, close to virgin forests and far from human settlements. Thus, land occupation and logging works developed in remote areas have pushed *vacas de agua* to live increasingly farther away.

Before describing some other *fieras*, I would like draw attention to the fact that these beings and some riparian features are not always mutually discernable. For instance, the *sierpe* is simultaneously a huge snake living under water and the flood it provokes; a pronounced, deep meander might be the preferred place of a *fiera* but also might be an extension of its body. Perhaps another way of conceptualizing what *fieras* are is by tying together their form and their instantiated attributes; that is, by considering their existence as a such and their spatial manifestations as one single thing. A *fiera* is content and container: it is a sudden flood and the *sierpe* that moves with the flowing water; it is a very pronounced meander and the *fiera* that inhabits it and which mere presence amplifies such a riparian feature. Following Gilles Deleuze (2001) one might then consider a *fiera* more a becoming than a being, or even better, a form that is emergent within the field of river relations. And yet such relations are not only social—*fieras* do not have their origin in the realm of human ideas that are imposed upon the materiality of rivers—since the specific tropical conditions of the rainforest environment of Bajo Atrato also play a part in the constituency of *fieras*, in their coming into existence. In this way, swirls, rapids or floods are not just the manifestations of a *fiera*'s presence but they participate

in its generation of being. An instantiated attribute of rivers but also a particular kind of existence populating the aquatic world, *fieras* are usually intelligible by the trajectories of their movements (Ingold 2015).

That is the case of what is perhaps the most representative *fiera* of Bajo Atrato: a fish that inhabits a swirl in the Domingodó River. I talked to several people who have seen it, and it is allegedly a grouper, although no one knows for sure since they have only managed to see a section of its black back and a huge dorsal fin. When this *fiera* swims close to the town, it produces waves that even reach the houses and damage the rafts. Perhaps Domingodó is inhabited by more than one *fiera* because there is also a cave on the shoreline which has caused the collapse of several houses. That cave, dug by an unknown *fiera* in a ravine on the edge of the river, has provoked the detachment and removal of soil by the water, to the point that the town has actually lost several meters of its shoreline.



FIGURE 25.
Sinking houses in
Domingodó
Photo by author

However, the sighting of these and other *fieras* as well as the damages they used to provoke tend to be less frequent than they were previously. On one hand, it seems that the constant traffic of boats and fuel and oil smells may have driven them away. On the other hand, pollution has made them no longer wild: “Those animals,” ex-

plained a woman, “have been tamed by the soap one uses when washing as well as by the glass and garbage one throws into the river. It looks like they may get cut, so they have become a bit more docile.” This said docility has prevented *feras* from causing the kind of havoc they used to cause and it has rendered their presence, therefore, more and more unnoticed. According to multiple testimonies I have collected, it was easier to meet a *fiera* when the Atrato River was crossed by non-motorized boats, but nowadays, due to the noise of engines and fuel pollution, *feras* have been progressively driven away and have even left the areas people usually travel through:

Formerly we did not have so much technological stuff. We used to go from the Atrato’s mouth to Quibdó by rowing and in those days the water was not so polluted. I do not know where those *feras* are going but if you believe what our grandfathers used to say, there are very few *feras* today. I remember that there used to be a huge and quite dangerous swirl near Tanguí, my hometown, but last time I visited, it had already dried up. It is gone. There used to be a lot of *feras* there (Zurdo, in discussion with the author. Riosucio).

People assume that *feras* have moved further downstream, nearer to the Atrato mouths or even into the sea. Those *feras* that still inhabit the rivers probably remain in the deepest parts since they cannot inhabit headwaters or shallow waters. In any case, their sporadic sightings account for a kind of disenchanting world, a disenchantment which may be associated with the footprints of human presence in the landscape, to the constant traffic of vessels, to the garbage and fuel thrown into rivers, or even to the effect of military presence. Ramona told me this story about the grouper that used to be seen near Domingodó:

There was a black and ugly grouper in the Atrato River. It was huge and hunch-backed. But it is either gone or dead because when we had to leave to Pavandó I remember there were military aircrafts throwing bombs. The river was agitated and after one of those bombs fell, some dirty water was stirred up. That day the grouper died. (Ramona Rentería, in discussion with the author. Domingodó)

When Ramona talks about Pavandó, she is referring to the forced displacement that affected more than 6000 inhabitants of Bajo Atrato, when in 1997 paramilitary and military operations obliged communities to abandon their lands. At that time,

air strikes became part of people's lives and these attacks caused so much damage that, if one listens to what Ramona says and what many others attest to, they affected the landscape as well as the different beings that inhabit the rivers and forests of this region. The grouper's disappearance mentioned by Ramona is representative of a series of impacts that war has had not only on people's lives but also on the lives of other living beings inhabiting these territories. Even more importantly, the grouper's disappearance transforms the possibilities these communities have found to relate with the multiple non-human agents inhabiting their territories, agents who intimately participate in the sense of place Afro-Colombian communities have cultivated within their territories.

The disappearance of a *fiera* as a result of military strikes is substantially different from a *fiera* travelling further downstream because of human presence on the river or because of the effects of fuel, garbage or chainsaw noise. When people describe the fewer sightings of *fieras* due to human presence, they are saying *fieras* are moving away, not disappearing. This difference may be described as one of remoteness versus disappearance or scarcity as opposed to extinction, which are contrasts that inform about the relationships people in Bajo Atrato establish with the natural world. Several scholars who have worked on the Colombian Pacific coast (Escobar 2008, Losonczy 1993, Restrepo 1996) have described the presence of a specific "grammar of the environment" (Escobar 2005, 152), meaning there is a series of ontological assumptions that guide how rural Afro-Colombian communities classify, sort, and hierarchize different living beings. A basic notion of this grammar is *renaciente*, literally those who are to be reborn. It is a concept that entails a kind of succession, a continuity between the offspring of different beings. *Renacientes* may be defined as new generations: young people and children, descendants of adults who were, in turn, *renacientes* of the previous generation. *Renacientes* may also be animals' offspring, as well as plantain and manioc suckers as these plants grow from propagules made from parts of mature stems. "*Renacientes*," as was explained to me by a man from the Salaquí River, "are the living beings of each generation. You know, there is always a bud after a bud. So there is a time when we old people

die and our *renacientes*, our children, take over.” The concept establishes a sort of grammar in which life is seen as an eternal rebirth of what exists (Escobar 2008). *Renaciente* implies a constant flow where past, present, and future are tied together (Almario 2001) because the living beings, those that exist now, are but *renacientes* of former beings, those who were before. People are born again through their children, plants are born again through their seeds, and animals are born again through their offspring. *Renaciente* is therefore a genealogical notion—descendance—but it is also historical—the *renacientes* assume, represent, and continue with the legacy of former generations—and teleological—it is the continuation, the projection of something that existed before. The term, in a sense, bridges the gap between the history, the present and the becoming since the *renaciente* is the perpetual succession of a being throughout time and space, the natural extension of something sharing the same origin, the same root, the same history.

As in this particular ontology beings are in a constant reborn, there is little place for concepts such as finitude or even extinction. For example, wild game, fish or timber never disappear; they simply move away, they leave, they all go to places deep in the forest or move to other rivers; they stay in places that are inaccessible or never visited by people (Restrepo 1995). That is exactly the case of *vacas de agua*, *sierpes*, and other *fieras* that people used to see in rivers: they have moved somewhere else. People’s practices such as hunting, fishing, logging or boat travel are not dooming these beings to extinction: *fieras* are simply displaced or tamed. Conversely, according to people’s accounts, war has actually caused such irremediable impacts: it has made *fieras* disappear. As Ramona described it, an air strike killed a *fiera* that lived near Domingodó. In La Honda, a river of the Salaquí basin, paramilitaries killed another *fiera*. According to some people, that *fiera* was a very fierce stingray, which would come out and produce a lot of waves when boats stopped close to the place it inhabited. But some paramilitary soldiers threw a grenade at it, and then the deep meander where the *fiera* lived began to dry up.

Fieras are more than mythical beings. Although they are rarely seen, their presence

becomes manifest by their flow and trajectories: *sierpes* can provoke floods in order to migrate; an unknown *fiera*, presumably a giant turtle, has caused the town of Domingodó to lose several meters of its shoreline; stingrays, groupers, *quicharos* and *pelmás* not only inhabit deep pools or swirls along the rivers, they create such riparian features and hydrological phenomena with their mere presence. In this way, *fieras*, particular places and some otherwise unexplainable riparian phenomena are often mutually linked and reciprocally constituted, as evidenced by the aforementioned example of La Honda River: the attack that killed the *fiera* also transformed the landscape as the deep meander it inhabited simply dried up. The connection between *fieras* and certain features of rivers demonstrates that these beings are not supra-realities or self-contained entities independent from people, from places or from particular contexts or encounters. Rather, *fieras* happen, they emerge, they come into being by virtue of the relationships rivers create. Therefore, any abrupt change in the kind of practices people participate in, as may happen in the context of war, may result in a severe transformation of the conditions that favour the existence of both rivers and *fieras*.

Undoubtedly, *fieras* are dangerous beings for most people because they can devour humans, sink vessels, and even ruin the shores of rural settlements. Nevertheless, killing *fieras* is not part of the actions that black communities want to take against these beings. These annihilating actions are rather part of the logic of war. Although the sightings of *fieras* are increasingly rare, people assume they continue to live in rivers as they are an intrinsic part of this aquatic universe. People have learned how to live with these *fieras*, they are able to notice the presence of these beings and thanks to the intimate relationship people have cultivated with their rivers, they are able to prevent the harm that a *fiera* could potentially cause. *Fieras*, regardless of how dangerous they might become, are accepted as a constitutive part of their territories. Their existence is evidence of a very intimate link between people and the places they inhabit and care for. The presence of *fieras* opens up possibilities of dwelling and being in the world that have now been hindered by the profound devaluation and disenchantment that war, through its annihilating actions, tends to foster.

The flow of the selves

In this chapter, I have pointed to a set of relationships favoured by rivers, as well as to the damages derived from the impeding of their appropriate flow. When rivers divert or stagnate because of *palizadas*, the possibilities of embarking are at stake. Without embarking, the travels that tie places and people together; expand social, economic, and kinship networks; or strengthen collective identities and territorial stewardship, cease to be possible. Although *palizadas* are a very common phenomenon linked to the specific tropical conditions of the Bajo Atrato, they are not entirely natural as human agency might be behind their growing. That is quite clear in the case of the epic *palizadas* that damaged the Jiguamiandó River. Sedimentation, diverted waters, pollution, the clogging of watercourses, the ruination of forests, or the disappearance of game animals are more than just environmental damages provoked by war. Instead, they severely affect the possibilities of being and becoming that communities have historically cultivated in and with their territories.

By exploring the intimate ties of rivers and people, my aim is not simply to evince how the environmental consequences of the presence of armed groups and their economic interests end up jeopardizing the human rights of the communities living in Bajo Atrato. I rather propose to understand the damages provoked by war in a way that takes into consideration the co-constitutive, existential bind between these communities and their territories. In this manner, what happens to the places that favours the unfolding of collective, essential practices is not disconnected from what happens to the people who belong to and dwell in said places, and whatever happens to the people hinders the possibilities of the territory to exist. Thus, war not only harms recognized rights, but mainly the existence of qualities and relations—flow, movement, connection, social, and riparian networks— as well as of beings—rivers, *fierras*, communities.

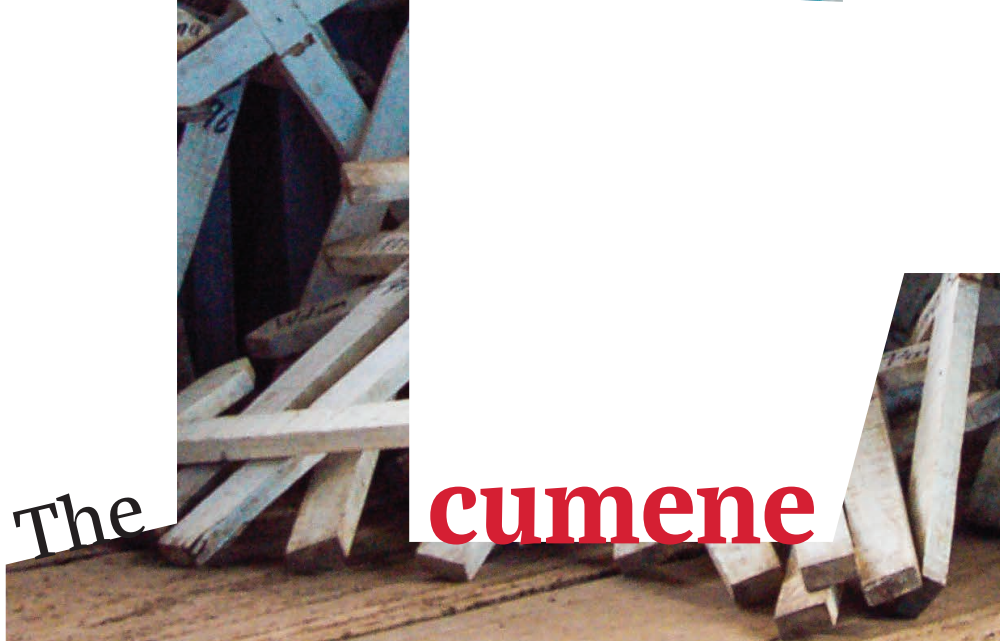
This realization may bring up a slightly different kind of awareness of the destructive human acts associated with war and, as I hope to discuss throughout the follow-

ing chapters, their possibilities of reparation. Existences such as those of rivers or *fieras* should not radically differ from the possibilities of existence we cherish when advocating for the protection of rights, mainly because the potentiality of being which indigenous and Afro-Colombian communities define as true and estimable for themselves is hardly conceivable outside the existence of these non-humans. Moreover, when territory is experienced as a domain of co-constitutive relations and manifold practices with the power of enacting beings and possibilities of becoming, the boundaries between people and their places, or between humans and their environments, are rendered porous. Territory then expresses an occurrence of relations and practices. Territory happens (Casey 1996, 27), and it does so because it is constituted within a relational network in which different kinds of beings—both human and non-human—participate (Escobar 2016). When considering the territory to be “more an event than a thing” (Escobar 2001, 143), approaches examining the aftermath of war in terms of environmental or sociocultural damage then cease to be accurate.

Thinking of war through rivers is also an attempt to overcome the divide between people and their vital places. It is a way of exploring the worldly consequences of armed conflict. By worldly, I mean the power of war to overturn existences and the worlds associated with these. *Fieras* are a case in point. Most of them have retreated because of the constant presence of boats, which is seen as a consequence of the expected social and economic interactions in which people engage, but some *fieras* have been annihilated on account of military operations. As I have explored, such acts do violence not only to the worldviews of some Afro-Colombian communities—when the attributes of the places these *fieras* used to occupy are violently transformed, the conditions that favour their emergence and existence also change. The logic of war, which is at odds with the principle of *renacientes*—beings in constant rebirth—sets the conditions so that the world can never see *fieras* or their kind again, and if they disappear, the world will be poorer for it.

At the beginning of this chapter, I suggested the meaning of the word Atrato: the river of the people. If Citará, which was the name that identified the indigenous peoples living in Chocó at the time of the Spanish conquest, was what these peoples called themselves, Citará would not be just an ethnonym but, as in many Amerindian languages, a deictic word—a “reflexive or apperceptive schematism” by which people apprehend themselves (Viveiros de Castro 1998, 478). In that case, Citará would be a marker of position, a self-reflexive term that identifies the speaker as a person, a linguistic deictic marker denoting an I—a self. Along these lines, Atrato might then be translated as the river of the selves, or even better, the flow of the I. As flow and movement are not just qualities attributed to rivers, but also social instances facilitated and made possible by them, *palizadas* constrain the flow of the activities allowing people to cultivate their humanness, their collective self. To cultivate, if we follow its etymological sense, means to till, to labor, to care for tilled places (Oxford Dictionary). Therefore, to cultivate—to have a culture—is to inhabit a place sufficiently intensive to attend to it caringly (Casey 1986), which is, after all, the kind of relation epic *palizadas* prevent to set in motion in indigenous and Afro-Colombian territories.

CHAPTER 2



The

cumene

of the Living and the Dead

Some things that happen in the forest leave subtle traces, such as footprints on the muddy ground, a cut branch or, even more ephemerally, the scent that follows a herd of peccaries. There are other kinds of events that leave even less palpable marks. And yet these occurrences may have more lasting effects, as when someone walks in the forest and at a particular place she suddenly feels her hair standing on end; or when the cornucopia of plants and shrubs that characterizes the rainforest of Bajo Atrato simply stops growing in a particular spot. This chapter is about misplaced incidents of suffering and violence that may produce such lasting effects. The aftermath of suffering and violence, I argue, are inscribed in both places and memory. My claim, however, is that what remains in a given place is not always reducible to memory or to the stories created about places. While it is true that knowledge about certain events can influence how people perceive places, I maintain that intangible features associated with places—i.e. senses, experiences, feelings, thoughts—are able to shape not only memory but also sensibility and political action. A short example may illustrate my point.

Some years ago, near a small village next to the Salaquí River, there was a skirmish between paramilitary and guerrilla armies. After hours of combat, the surviving paramilitary soldiers arrived at the village, shouting and swearing at the villagers, accusing them of hiding information about the guerrillas' presence. Then they went house to house, breaking down doors and pulling out men in order to force them into the forest and retrieve the corpses of the dead paramilitary combatants. Adults and teenagers alike were made to carry several corpses at a time, which were then stacked like cordwood in the shadow of a tree, right in the middle of the village. "That very spot is now a haunted place," recounted the young man who told me the story. "One can hear noises and footsteps at night. You can hear things and you cannot explain where they come from." Places may become connected with the memory of particular events and thereafter inspire associated feelings, experiences, and thoughts. But phenomena like these mysterious footsteps or quiet wails heard near this tree are not merely stories people tell. Rather, these incidents are confined within the places they occur and are, to some extent, independent from human in-

tentionality. Therefore, it follows that places may become intrinsically meaningful, having the ability to affect and to dispense their unique imprints upon people.

In this chapter, I explore a variety of interactions between people and places, in particular places that have been scarred or destroyed because of war. Some of these places have become inhabited by ghostly presences with which people have had to learn to deal. One such place is Caño Claro, a small river that disembogues into the Curvaradó River. This location is central to my analysis because the way its human and other-than-human inhabitants intermingle epitomizes the ability that some places have to orchestrate the living and the dead into what Edward Casey (1996) calls “an arena of common engagement” (Ibid., 26). This common engagement is what I refer to as an *ecumene*, a Greek word (οἰκουμένη, *oikoumenê*) meaning the inhabited world, the known world, or as I prefer, the habitable world (Oxford Dictionaries 2016). *Oikoumenê* comes from *oikeô*, the same Greek prefix one finds in ecology or economy, meaning simultaneously the family and the household. According to French philosopher Augustin Berque (1987), *ecumene*—the inhabited world—was considered by ancient Greeks to have come about via a dual process of habitation, through which the earth is humanized, and by which humanity is rendered earthly (Ibid., 16). As I aspire to show, it is this dual process that makes places like Caño Claro habitable. I then describe the existing associations between certain places and military destruction in order to illustrate, first, that the people who live in these places must also relate with the death that pollutes them and, second, that interaction between the partially connected worlds of the living and the dead is a precondition for creating that acceptably habitable world—or what I describe as an *ecumenic peace*.

The chapter is divided into six sections. The first one describes the core elements of my theoretical frame. With these elements, I intend to interpret various instances of social suffering—the collective lived experiences of distress and injustice produced by war and systematic political violence (Kleinman, Das and Lock 1997)—and to position them in realms that are not necessarily circumscribed by human sub-

jectivities. By considering phenomenological approaches, Science and Technology Studies (STS), and affect theory, I come to understand some collective experiences of violence as being connected with the affective pull of material environments, meaning that there are places that need to be considered not only as a terrain on which war has been waged but also as a medium through which violence was conducted (in the past) and remembered (in the present). In the second section, I describe the events that transformed Caño Claro into a haunted place and in the next section I take a short detour to historically contextualize these events within the history of paramilitary violence in Bajo Atrato. Section four depicts the encounters peasants have had with the ghostly presences inhabiting Caño Claro, portraying these presences as anguished spirits of those who experienced a violent death. Next I describe the rituals and mourning practices with which Afro-Colombian communities honour their dead, intending to better understand the profound impression usually left by violent death and the existential dilemmas faced when dealing with the ghostly presences of those who in life perpetrated horrendous crimes. Finally, I detail the conditions that some communities have identified as crucial for healing their territories, which are also essential for attaining what I call a cosmic peace, that is, an entente between the living and the dead.

Places gather things

I base my interpretation of ghostly apparitions and their interactions with people on three different but complementary theoretical frameworks: phenomenological approaches to places; Science and Technology Studies (STS), particularly its relation to semiotics and the conjunction of human and non-human actors on a common plane of immanence; and affect theory, or what is now known as the affective turn. I would like to highlight two trends shared by these approaches: first, the paradigm of embodiment, that is, the centrality of body and embodied experiences as the starting point for knowing the world. Second, the sidestepping of the subject-object dichotomy, specifically the understanding of sense and meaning as something arising from the conjunction of embodied agents and the world. This perspective

locates experience within relationships and between agents, making reality an outcome, a sort of emergent dynamic that arises from the multiple interactions of heterogeneous assemblages of agents, whether human or non-human. These approaches allow me to situate the spirits of the dead and their relation with places as not just the byproduct of human representation and memory but as a part of an indissoluble bond in which people, places, and a myriad beings equally participate.

The basis of my argument is that places are more than an assemblage of things. A place gathers not only material and organic things but also intangible things: memories, experiences, meanings. Consider the following example. The first time I visited Pavarandó, a small town that in 1997 became a refugee camp for thousands of families that were expelled from their lands in the Bajo Atrato region, I went with Paolo and Elber, two friends who lived in that camp for almost two years. That trip to Pavarandó was one of my attempts to obtain first-hand knowledge of places associated with political violence and experiences of fear and terror. For me, Pavarandó had assumed a kind of mythical status because from my first visits to Bajo Atrato in 2003, I had heard stories of the many misadventures experienced by peasants during their forced displacement as well as accounts of abuses suffered while staying in this town. Despite having found a temporary refuge from the paramilitary violence in Pavarandó, violence reached them through other means. When we visited in 2015, neither Paolo nor Elber had been in that town for more than 17 years, since the time when they had been able to return to their homelands. As we walked through the streets—I decided to conduct my interviews during these walks—they began describing in detail various meaningful events that had occurred during their extended stay: when everyone had gathered around the only available TV to watch a soccer game of the national team, when unknown armed persons killed several dogs that were later found floating on the river, and when the army had struck a woman in her face for crossing one of the invisible frontiers set up to prevent people from leaving the town. The interviews I conducted during our walks in Pavarandó were not only a means to access attitudes and memories about this place, but also to help me understand the biographical connections people main-

tain with it. Throughout our visit to Pavarandó, I heard descriptions of events that neither Paolo, Elber nor anyone else had told me before. During our walks, I felt like the streets released these memories. In a sense this was not merely metaphorical, the streets were holding these memories within their contours, as if waiting for my friends' presence to emerge—and for me to listen to them. During these walks, I began to wonder how much of these memories belonged to my friends and how much to the streets.

This story allows me to introduce one of the fundamental tenets of phenomenology, that is, there does not exist a world that is independent from our experience of it (Desjarlais and Throop 2011). In other words, subjective and individual instances of knowledge cannot be considered intelligible in abstraction from the outside world (Taylor 1995). The destabilization of a knowable world that is external to and independent of the agents that perceive it goes hand-in-hand with the idea that places are essentially and not just contingently involved in matters of experience (Casey 1996). In the same vein that the materiality of bodies “adds sentience and sensibility” to our notions of culture and history (Csordas 1994, 4), places add material emplacement to the modalities of human experience (Desjarlais and Throop 2011). Thus, places participate actively in the generation of the real (Escobar 2001) and they do so by providing but also constraining sense. In an attempt to overcome what Charles Taylor (1993) calls the atomism of knowledge—the Cartesian idea that we know the world through detached observation and that we engage with it through the ideas formed in our minds—French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty (2002 [1945]) describes perception as a corporeal exchange between embodied, emplaced agents and an intrusive world. To him, the world conveys an “emerging sense, a natural *telos*” (Ibid., 275) and what we perceive is neither out there waiting to be picked up nor something fabricated by ourselves. Rather, sense is motivated, it “arises *à deux*” (Ibid., 275. Italics in the original), it is conveyed by the world through our embodied and emplaced dispositions.

Merleau-Ponty calls this conveyance depth, Edmund Husserl horizon, and Martin Heidegger dwelling. Briefly, depths make reference to “a certain indissoluble link between things and myself by which I am placed in front of them” (Merleau-Ponty 2002, 298), while horizon is a form of “*induction* which belongs essentially to every experience and is inseparable from it, being in the experience itself” (Husserl 1970 [1900], 32; italics in the original). The idea of being inducted into the world by means of corporeal and emplaced experiences blurs boundaries between knowing subjects and that which is known. It also recalls the notions of being-in-the-world and dwelling as formulated by Heidegger (1998 [1927]). Being-in-the-world is a state in which the world itself is part of our ontological constitution, an experience of being that is not detached from a world of objects (Ibid., 2008), whereas dwelling makes reference to a state of being in which we are not merely spatially situated in a given place but also belonging to it, remaining in an entangled manner with things that cannot be separated from our biographies (Thomas 1993, Tilley 1994). Dwelling, in Heideggerian terms, conveys a sense of continuous being in which subjects are tied to their own places: “Heidegger intends that by this term we understand a staying with things, cultivating, building, but also the frame of mind that arises from being alongside things and ‘letting them be’. We do not dwell because we have built, the world we construct around us is part of our dwelling” (Thomas 1993, 28).

The idea of a world that is able to convey some kind of sense independently undermines certain traditional philosophical approaches, such as empiricism, rationalism, solipsism and skepticism, which consider meaning to emerge only through the infusion of determinate epistemic processes—judgment, reason, logic. According to Casey (1996), the sense of the world, a matter that involves embodied agents and emplaced experiences, is at the same time “senseful”: things and places are configured in a particular way that “[p]laces are not added to sensations any more than they are imposed on spaces. Both sensations and spaces are themselves emplaced from the very first moment, and at every subsequent moment as well” (Ibid., 18). Thus, more than a container of things with well-established boundaries, Casey shows that a place must be considered as an event, not a thing (Ibid, 26). It is an

event of epistemic and ontological proportions since “we are not only in places but of them” (Ibid, 19): “More even than earthlings, we are placelings, and our very perceptual apparatus, our sensing body, reflects the kinds of places we inhabit. The ongoing reliability and general veracity of perception [...] entail a continual attunement to place” (Ibid., 19). This emplaced, bodily perception is what Casey calls local knowledge, that is, not only the knowledge about a place but the way our experiences are imbued and shaped by the senses, sensibilities, and meanings that already exist in a place.

Arguing against the metaphysical neutrality of places—the view that they are an “empty substratum to which cultural predicates come to be attached” (Ibid., 46)—Casey holds that places gather things, experiencing bodies as well as “unbodylike entities” (Ibid., 25) such as sensibilities, memories or even languages and thoughts. By gathering, he means the power places have for both lodging things in a specified position and conferring upon them particular senses: “To gather placewise is to have a peculiar hold on what is presented (as well as represented) in a given place. Not just the contents but the very mode of containment is held by a place” (Ibid., 25). In other words, the hold of place, its gathering action, is its capacity to bestow sense upon things. Here sense must be understood in its etymological sense, that is, as meaning—“the contents”—and direction—“the mode of containment”. This capacity for holding that places have thus leads us to consider that sense and meaning are not just the outcome of a human, volitional process of representation but that there is something “out there” beyond our human agency, something that “invites” us to experience the world as we do. This tenet, as I later examine, finds an echo in contemporary theories of affect. The idea that places contain sense—meaning and *telos*—is an invitation to consider that there is not always arbitrariness between the particularities of a given place and the way it is experienced and represented.

To sum up, phenomenologically minded anthropologists consider both lived bodies and objects not as discrete, self-contained entities but rather as assemblages, entanglements or even events. When Casey, for instance, defines places as events he is

pointing out that they belong to the realm of the becoming rather than to the realm of the given. From this perspective, what makes phenomenological arguments so attractive in the anthropological understanding of places is that they allow us to see the relations people have with places from a new perspective: there is a reciprocal, configurative process between contents or dwellers–things and people–and containers–places. The force of this configuration, the “holding” as Casey calls it, is such that “a given place takes on the qualities of its occupants, reflecting these qualities in its own constitution and description and expressing them in their occurrence as an event: places not only are, they happen” (Ibid., 27). The inverse argument is also true, that is, a place has its own “operative intentionality” as Merleau-Ponty claims (2002, 208), extending its own influence back onto its subjects (Casey 1996, 22). Places can thus be seen to imprint their unique qualities onto people, while people in turn reflect the particularities of the places they inhabit.

Far from being a sophisticated version of a new kind of environmental determinism, the idea that places are able to convey certain affects is an invitation to conceive of places as a network of emplaced associations rather than resolute spaces containing objects or events with well-defined positions and directions. This premise echoes that of actor-network theory–ANT (Callon 1999; Latour 1999, 2005; Law 2007). Sometimes referred to as Actant-Rhizome Ontology (Latour 1999), this theoretical and methodological framework “treat[s] everything in the social and natural worlds as a continuously generated effect of the webs of relations within which they are located.” (Law 2007, 141) The “everything” refers to humans as well as to non-human elements, which are considered as equal actors, that is, as having the capacity for generating action, to associate with or disassociate from other agents: “An actor in ANT is a semiotic definition—an actant—that is something that acts or to which activity is granted by another [...] an actant can literally be anything, provided it is granted to be the source of action” (Latour 1996, 373). Agency here is decoupled from intentionality, subjectivity, and free-will (Sayes 2014) and is understood instead as the capacity a given agent, whether human or non-human, has to affect and be affected, or as Patricia Clough (2007) puts it, “the augmentation or

diminution of a body's capacity to act, to engage, and to connect" (ibid., 2). The idea that this kind of agency is not an exclusive attribute of humans allows us to shift from a subject-centred approach to an object-oriented one that is able to highlight the mutual entanglements between subjects and objects. Adopted by Science and Technology Studies–STS–this premise presupposes, among other things, that existence with non-humans is a condition, not a choice (Bingham 2006); that everything in the social world consists of associations, that is, a continuously generated result of the webs of relations within which humans and non-humans are located (Law 2008); and that actors are simultaneously networks—an actor is networking heterogeneous elements—and vice versa—a network is able to redefine and transform what it is made of (Callon 1987, 93).

The semiotic definition of what actors are—in semiotics, signs acquire meaning only in relation to other signs—implies a move from objects and beings as self-contained entities to beings as attributes, as the result of the action that flows from one actor to another. In my analysis of the spirits of the dead in this chapter, the emphasis on the flow of actions implies that more than the mere determination of social contexts or supra realities that encompass participants (i.e. the circumstances of an event in which some people were killed or beliefs in their ghostly presences), my approach seeks “the tracing of associations”, the “type of connections” (Latour 2005, 5) between people and various ghostly presences. I thus focus on the kinds of actions that reciprocally nourish people and the existential dilemmas of spirits as an attempt to situate the actions of spirits beyond the paradigm of representation, meaning beyond the idea that ghostly presences are but expressions of people's inner experiences. The spirits of the dead come to life through particular practices, constituted within a relational web of multiple associations, and yet their existence is not exclusively based in subjective experience.

At this point it is important to highlight that the entanglement of things and people proposed by STS cannot be understood in abstract terms, like a kind of “natural” or existential outcome of person-object relationships. Rather, as shown by Yael Na-

varo-Yashin (2009), this entanglement manifests itself as something deeply shaped and embedded within particular historical and social processes. Interested in understanding how Turkish-Cypriots relate to the objects and places left behind by the Greek-Cypriots during the partition war of 1974, Navaro-Yashin describes how the Turkish-Cypriots refer to the houses allocated to them as being deeply embedded in a feeling of melancholy. She maintains that the abjection and melancholia associated with these places and objects must be understood in relation to their “historical contingency and political specificity”:

In my case, the Turkish-Cypriot’s relations with looted objects is an assemblage of sorts forged in the aftermath of an act of sovereignty: a declaration of war, the erection of a border to delineate distinction between two ethnically defined communities, and a long-term state of emergency. (Ibid., 9)

Therefore if persons and objects are assembled in a certain manner, it “is not because they always, already, or anyway would do so. Rather, ‘assemblages’ of subjects and objects must be read as specific in their politics and history” (Ibid., 9). The historical and political foundation of these associations becomes important when it comes to understanding the possible relations people in Bajo Atrato may establish with the spirits of those who suffered a violent death: while spirits are the outcome of particular events, I will show that the relations people keep with them are forged within a context in which political identities and recent history play a key role.

By incorporating STS premises, I call attention to Bruno Latour’s (1999) effort to overcome the subject-object divide. In an attempt to bypass the discussion on whether reality might be conceived of as “facts” that are purely autonomous and external from subjects, or instead conceived of as “fetishes”, that is, reifications of our subjectivities, Latour argues that what exists is always in between the subject-object divide because what we call a “fact” or reality “is better conceived of as a ‘factish’ in which objectivity and subjectivity [...] are entangled with each other in an indissoluble knot” (Blaser 2009b, 11). Emphasizing the performative value of practices, one of the key ideas in ANT is that “reality does not precede the mundane practices, but is rather shaped by these practices” (Mol 1999: 75). A factish might

be understood therefore not as an autonomous object or the reified projection of a subject but as a performance in which objectivity and subjectivity are entangled. In ANT and STS, these assumptions imply a kind of material semiotic formulation in which reality is the outcome of always-emergent heterogeneous assemblages of humans and non-humans. This emergent property of things is also a common trend in current theories of affects.

“Affect” is an elusive concept that during recent years has gained an important place in anthropology, sociology, and cultural studies. One way to understand what affects are is by saying what they are not. Affects are not feelings as in the psychological definition, feelings are subjective and conscious experiences, private to the individual. Anthropologists reject such an introspective approach because, among other reasons, it “deflects attention from social life and its possible implication in the very language of emotion” (Abu-Lughod and Lutz 1990, 3). Affects are not emotions either, as they have often been linked to deeper psychological processes (Ibid., 4) belonging more to the “natural and biological provinces of human experience” (Lutz and White 1986, 405) and hence reinforcing the assumption of a relative uniformity in their meanings and processes. The anthropological turn from emotions to affects is due to the recognition that emotions are reproduced in individuals in the form of embodied experiences (Ibid., 12), that they are also deeply intersubjective, situated within relationships and between persons (Jackson 1996), and that they are “neither an intrinsic property of human nature nor of the individual subject, but culturally embedded in forms of interpersonal and intersubjective relationship” (Ibid., 26). Thus, the emphasis on affects is closely linked to phenomenological approaches to intersubjectivity and experience, representing an attempt to understand how “feelings” are generated in dialogue with the lifeworld (Pelkmans 2013), the multiple ways bodily and sensorial experiences link us to the outside world (Stewart 2007), and for demonstrating the connectedness of the material and the imaginary (Navaro- Yashin 2009).

In the same way ANT does, theories of affects tend to decentralize humans as both the primary sources and principal destinations of action and meaning. This approach suggests that the material world—which from the phenomenological point of view is not entirely material nor totally separated from human bodies—also participates in the generation of sense or, in this case, affects. Affect, in its more basic sense, is a capacity “to affect and to be affected” (Stewart 2007, 2). Following the work of Baruch Spinoza and Gilles Deleuze’s reading of it, Brian Massumi (2002) defines affect as a felt bodily intensity, as the feeling of having a feeling. Hence, affects pass between all kinds of bodies, human as well as non-human (Seyfert 2012), “bodies defined not by an outer skin-envelope or other surface boundary but by their potential to reciprocate or co-participate in the passage of affect” (Seigworth and Gregg 2010, 2). This capacity to affect or to be affected recalls what ANT conceives of as agency, situating affects neither in human subjects nor in non-human “objects” but in the heterogeneous associations they form. For example, in her book *Ordinary Affects*, Kathleen Stewart (2007) sometimes refers to objects in terms of “little worlds, bad impulses, events alive with some kind of charge” (Ibid., 68). For her, it is like things acquire a “hint of energy” (Ibid., 70) and to make sense of ordinary affects is to “find ways of approaching the complex and uncertain objects” that “literally hit us or exert a pull on us” (Ibid., 4). Affects seem to be or to participate in an animated circuit that revolves around the ordinary world of things and people: “[I]t’s ordinary affects that give things the quality of a *something* to inhabit and animate” (Ibid., 15; emphasis in the original).

Divides such as sense and thought or mind and body seem to be inoperative within the affective turn. Moreover, affects provide a helpful means for understanding the kinds of relations people cultivate with places that have been ruined through armed conflict. In the aforementioned work on melancholic objects and affective places, Navaro-Yashin (2009) describes the melancholic world of those Turkish-Cypriots who now live in the houses left behind by their former compatriots. Affects allow her to treat human interior and exterior worlds as inextricably intertwined, and to show how this intertwining produces what Pelkmans (2013) calls “publicly emotive

charges.” (Ibid., par. 6). Navaro-Yashin moves beyond a subject-centred approach in order to better describe the “atmosphere discharged” upon people by places (Navaro-Yashin 2009, 11), to analyze the emergent “energies” of people and things (Ibid., 4), and to consider the affective potentialities of both environments and objects. Later on *The Make-Believe Space: Affective Geography in a Postwar Polity*, Navaro-Yashin (2012), adopts her argument in order to assert that the transmission of affect is produced “neither by materialities nor by the inner world alone; it is produced through their interaction” (Ibid., 159), so that what becomes the centre of her ethnographic focus is both the way in which “an environment of ruins discharges an affect of melancholy” and how people’s subjectivities “were shaped by and embroiled in the ruins that surrounded them.” (Ibid., 172). Affects and the conceptualization of “forces” and “energies” such as fear, melancholy or loathing as being co-constituted by both humans and their surrounding worlds is very relevant as an approach since, in the case of the interactions between people and the spirits of the dead, it helps us trace some of the non-material aftermath of armed conflict and make sense of the ghostly presences and gloomy atmosphere of places that, like Caño Claro, have been blasted by acts of military violence. Consider the following example.

In Bajo Atrato, some people navigating a river called Balsas have witnessed how sudden waves jolt the usually quiet stream. These waves, similar to those provoked by a boat moving at full tilt, are attributed to the ghostly presence of a man who was killed by guerrilla soldiers. The story goes that in 1997, just before the paramilitary forces attacked some villages that were frequented by guerrilla soldiers, a man who successfully managed to get his family away from the imminent danger, decided to return to the village to collect money he had lent to some *guerrilleros*. Instead of paying it back, they decided to kill him. After throwing his corpse into the river and stealing his outboard motor, the *guerrilleros* fled and abandoned the boat and the man’s belongings in the same place he had left them. Since then, and especially at night, many people have heard a boat and seen the waves left in its wake without actually seeing any kind of boat. The person who first told me this story had wit-

nessed the presence of this ghostly boat during his very first trip to this village and had only learned about the man's fate after he had recounted the strange incident to the villagers. The point is that what he saw and felt on his way to that village was unrelated to knowledge about what had happened at that site, so his experience was not just a reified outcome of his own thinking but rather a particular energy transmitted by that place. In other words, the pull of affects contained in that place cannot always be reducible to being a mere reflection of someone's memories or traumatic experiences.

Other stories that I have been able to collect similarly emphasize the noises and even the smells that come from specific places where people have been killed. These accounts further demonstrate that some experiences of terror are not necessarily the result of stories told about places. According to my research, the significance that certain places acquire and that is corroborated by the bodies of different witnesses is not just "village folklore". Such experiences are in many cases the result of embodied and emplaced knowledge, which may be fostered by some kind of cultural sensibility and yet be irreducible to human agency and feelings. There are thus certain meanings or senses that emanate from particular places and travel back and forth between bodies and places. The source of such experiences, I believe, is neither locatable in places nor human bodies but somewhere in between, in what Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari (2004) call *becomings*: the acquired relations between people and places or the emergent unit that exists between what we have described as embodied experiences and dwellings. In this way, experiences of terror and violence might acquire their own independent ontological status.

To recapitulate, the affective turn moves the arising of feelings and emotions beyond subjectivity and self. According to Deleuze (2004), affects are treated as a quality, "an orientation toward the objects we come into contact with." (Ahmed 2010, 32) Affects can then be conceived of as simultaneously pertaining to the subject and the material world; a "coming together" (Stewart 2007, 2) of people, things, and environments; an emergent force that arises out of the specific relations between people and their

surrounding environments. Affects are based in materiality and yet they are ethereal, arising in the midst of what Gregory Seigworth and Melissa Gregg (2010) call “in-between-ness” (Ibid., 3). By considering spirits through the lens of affects, I focus not merely on people’s subjective impressions but also the sensations that may move through them, through places, and through objects. In this way, affects and spirits may be understood as emergent properties: a particular form arising from the specific relations between people, places, and objects and yet irreducible to them. By showing the affective potentialities of non-humans, I emphasize the co-constituted character of people and their surrounding worlds. In a more profound sense, phenomenology, STS, and affects resonate with the kinds of relations that some people in Bajo Atrato cultivate with their territory, since most of their experiences are not detached from the world of objects and places. In this sense, the three aforementioned frameworks extend the understanding of the world to be a living entity that participates, in many different ways and to many different degrees, in the generation of sense and meaning.

A good lottery number

The aftermath of what happened in Caño Claro remain in this place despite the return of the forest and its myriad vines, shrubs, palms, and trees. The aftermath is palpable even when many peasant families have succeeded in returning after an eight-year period of being violently displaced from their lands. Since their return, these families have been working heavily to restore their ruined houses and replant their gardens and crops. And yet, traces of what happened in Caño Claro are still present. Despite the elapsed time and the limited number of witnesses to the atrocities, echoes of the deaths of dozens, perhaps hundreds, of people can still be heard. Perhaps as a result of memories of the event lingering among a few, the will of peasants to recuperate their fields, and the forest reclaiming its place, ramifications of what happened at the mouth of Caño Claro are still present. I walked around this spot with Taquito and Pontus, two leaders from the Curvaradó basin, but my eyes could not find anything out of place. All I identified was the stubble of some maize fields, a couple of old coconut palms, and a rusty but still red oil drum in the undergrowth.



FIGURE 26.
A rusty oil drum
Source: C JL 2015

Before this visit to Caño Claro, I had heard various accounts of what had happened there in the past and what still happens to the people living there. But this visit with Pontus and Taquito was actually my first time in that notorious location. We stopped close to a roofless shack where Pontus began to remember the past events, although his memories at first seemed a crude account of casualties: “They would have been about 60 paramilitary soldiers,” he said. According to him, those who survived had to cross the river, swimming and leaving behind all their gear. The corpses were either left there to be eaten by vultures or simply thrown into the river. We followed the muddy track leading to the mouth of Caño Claro in the Curvaradó River, the place where the paramilitaries had built a camp. Curvaradó is a wide river and I tried to imagine how hard it must have been to cross its swift current amid the hail of bullets unleashed by the guerrilla soldiers who ambushed them.

This battle between guerrilla and paramilitary armies took place at some point in early 2002. I have visited archives seeking written information about this event in vain. I believe the reason for the lack of official or press reports is that the combat involved illegal armies and there were no civilian casualties. Moreover, it happened during a period of terror when very few people dared to travel by the Curvaradó River and everybody was afraid to speak out. According to people I talked to, the

raid was conducted by a squad of guerrilla soldiers that ambushed a temporary paramilitary base. The paramilitary soldiers had established a camp that was used as a checkpoint for controlling the transit of boats and people who were, according to them, supplying the guerrilla armies. The location at Caño Claro's mouth allowed them to seize control of an area that was fundamental to their economic interests: a huge plantation of oil palm that had been planted in the Curvaradó River basin shortly after people were expelled from their lands by these same paramilitary armies. The paramilitaries were ambushed one night during a sudden and violent raid that left no chance for them to react. Some people say that more than one hundred paramilitary soldiers were killed. While no one knows for sure, in any case the violent attack left numerous corpses, some floating downstream into the Curvaradó River and others simply going rotten and becoming food for scavenger birds.

Although the fields at Caño Claro's mouth theoretically seemed to be just another empty plot of land used for crop rotation, after a closer examination of the site I noticed that the owner of these fields had deliberately decided not to use them. It was odd because of the fertility associated with floodplains such as these, where plantains or bananas are often cultivated along the stream banks. But this was not the case here. The hut where we stopped to chat had no roof, which I had initially assumed was because it was under construction but later realized that the aluminum roof-tile panels had been removed to be used elsewhere. In other words, the place had been deliberately abandoned due to, as I later found out, the aftermath of war experienced in the Curvaradó basin.

Later that day, just after Taquito started the motor of our small boat for our departure, Pontus pointed to an object stuck into the steep river cliff. As we got closer, Pontus stepped onto the bow of our rather unstable boat and began to dig into the bank with his bare hands. He pulled out a small, dirty piece of a green fabric. This ripped fabric turned out to be a mosquito net and its olive green colour left no doubt that it had once belonged to the military. Dusting off this fabric and thinking about stories I had heard, I realized that this place was not only ravaged by the effects of



FIGURE 27.
A roofless hut
Photo by author

paramilitary and guerrilla combats but still contained the remnants of an incident of long-lasting and worldly proportions. Through that piece of mosquito net that I still keep in my own war museum, I gained a glimpse into the process of that place's ruination. The net reminded me of the importance of such objects in the daily lives of people living in rural Chocó, where a large diversity of mosquitoes and flies swarm like a horde of desperate blood-thirsty devotees at night as well as during the day. In places like the Curvaradó basin, a mosquito net becomes a frontier between those who enjoy a calm and restful night and those who will eventually get sick with malaria, yellow fever, chikungunya virus, dengue fever or Zika virus. Having to live in the forest, as irregular armies usually do, a mosquito net is not an accessory but a matter of life and death. In the context of Caño Claro's event, the abandonment of such an object suggests either the despair of a sudden flight or the unexpected arrival of death surrounded by one's belongings.



FIGURE 28.
The remnants of a
mosquito net
Photo by author

Through my interviews with people living in the Curvaradó basin, I also learned about other traces of past violence that are still discovered in Caño Claro. Doña Liliana, a widow in her late fifties who lives near the river's mouth, told me about something she found as she was digging for fishing worms. She found a *cédula*, the official Colombian ID card: "That guy, I remember, his name was Ovidio, I think. His family name was Monterrosa. The owner of that *cédula* came from Necoclí. I kept that *cédula* because I wanted to preserve it but someone at home threw it away. I told myself that with the identification number of that gentleman I could have the chance of picking a good lottery number." Rusty military cooking sets, empty bullet cases, and even a Galil rifle are some of the objects that have been found in this area. People have also found the skulls and bones of those who died there. Pontus remembers he found, some years ago, a couple of small mounds: landmarks of two improperly buried corpses. Someone else found a skull after ploughing and decided to play a joke on Doña Liliana by placing it on top of a stick and telling her there was someone waiting for her on the path. She was not afraid upon seeing the skull, instead offering a lower jaw bone she had found earlier that day to the mischievous man: "Here you are—take it and make that skull smile. And he did, that miscreant!".



FIGURE 29.
Exploded ordnance
Photo by author

However, encounters with death are sometimes gloomier than a smiling skull on a stick. Some people have heard wails during the nights or felt sudden cold breezes while crossing those fields. I was once told the story of a girl who found an enamel iron mug at that place—like the ones military use—hanging over a pile of rotting logs. At the very moment she took it, she heard in the woods the sounds of a heavy presence breaking branches and running towards her. Scared, she ran and dove into the river, trying to swim without losing the mug. That proved difficult, so she dropped it and reached the shore as fast as she could. The next day, the person who told me the story decided to return to that place where he found the iron mug over the very same logs where it had previously hung. These kinds of ghostly encounters are examples of the aftermath of a war that has overturned not only the lives of people but also the distinguishing features of certain places. The uncanny nature of these experiences might be better understood by examining the history of the paramilitary presence in the Curvaradó and the Bajo Atrato region.

Warlords

In 2012, former Colombian Army general Rito Alejo Del Río was sentenced to 25 years in prison. Some of the charges included murder, reliance on death squads, and complicity with paramilitary crimes. Del Río, a graduate of the U.S. Army School of the Americas, was the Commander of the 17th Brigade, the military unit operating in the Urabá and Bajo Atrato regions. Since 1998, the former U.S. ambassador to Colombia had reported to the Department of State that Del Río's "systematic arming and equipping of aggressive regional paramilitaries was pivotal to his military success" (National Security Archive 2010). Under Del Río's orders, *Operación Génesis* was executed: a huge official military campaign intended to capture members of the guerrilla armies but that was conducted in collaboration with paramilitary forces. This campaign involved multiple cases of killing, torture, disappearances, and forced displacement in Afro-Colombian and indigenous communities from Bajo Atrato. The Inter-American Court of Human Rights condemned the Colombian State for that military operation in 2013. Del Río's case became emblematic because it showed not only how some military commanders turned a blind eye to the paramilitaries' crimes but also how in Bajo Atrato some officers in the highest ranks systematically armed, equipped and assisted these criminal groups.

Operación Génesis is a milestone in the history of political violence in Bajo Atrato. In December 2006, several paramilitary squads from the so-called ACCU (Peasant Self-Defense Forces of Córdoba and Urabá) took control of the town of Riosucio using economic blockades, abduction, torture, and systematic killings. The paramilitary commanders have always maintained that their aim was to undermine the presence of the FARC's (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia) 57th Front but the course of events reveals otherwise. As Bajo Atrato is situated at a crucial point for accessing oceangoing drug and weapon routes, guerrilla groups have always had a presence in the region. Moreover, the vast forests and extreme inaccessibility made the region a sort of haven where guerrillas could take a respite from army offensives. Guerrilla armies also used to keep many of their kidnapped civilians in this region.

On February 24th 1997, the army launched a vast air attack on multiple villages along the Cacarica, Salaquí, and Truandó Rivers. Peasants fled as soon as they could: some took refuge in the forest, hiding in trees and spending several nights in the wilderness; others undertook a long march across forests, swamps, and rivers to reach a safer place. The airstrike lasted three days. No one knows for sure how many people died during the bombardments but multiple accounts describe the hardships faced during that flight: “There were people who died in the forest because they fainted, they were hit or they got sick. No one could help them because when you run with fear nobody looks behind.” According to another: “We had to cross several rivers and follow paths in the forest. Everyone carried the few belongings they could and we just tried to go ahead. I had never seen in my entire life so many people wounded by barbed wires” (Quoted by Valencia 2013, 61). People also remember seeing soldiers from both the army and the paramilitary forces patrolling together and sharing transportation. The attacks, which extended to other basins like Domingodó, Curvaradó, and Jiguamiandó, succeeded in forcing the guerrillas away from main towns and villages but it also drove between 12,000 and 15,000 people from their traditional lands, according to the UN Commission on Human Rights (UNCHR 1998, ¶ 103).

The indiscriminate airstrike and attack on Riosucio were just the beginning of a campaign of terror launched by the paramilitaries in collusion with Colombian military forces. From February to March 1997, the paramilitaries went village to village pillaging houses, stealing cattle, burning crops, threatening people, and killing leaders. The death of Marino López Mena, an Afro-Colombian peasant from the Cacarica River, epitomizes the atrocities committed against civilians: he was beheaded in front of his community and the perpetrators played soccer with his head (IAHCR 2013, 44). People from the different basins organized themselves in order to leave their lands and march towards towns where their situation would not be ignored by regional and national authorities. More than 3,000 peasants arrived at the town of Turbo, in the Department of Antioquia; in Paya, a small town of 565 inhabitants located in Panamanian Darién Province, there were about 450 displaced

people; at least 6,000 peasants arrived at Pavarandó, also in Antioquia (Valencia 2013). According to several sources (Arbeláez 2001, IAHCR 1999, Giraldo 1997, Hernández 2008, Valencia 2013), the town of Pavarandó became the largest camp of displaced persons in Colombian history, with rows and rows of tents bearing insignias of humanitarian organizations that provided food and some medical care. But not everyone left the communities under attack. Some peasants—about 2,500 according to some figures (Valencia 2013, 62)—managed to hide for many months in the forest, especially in the Jiguamiandó basin, living under the cover of the dense roots of immense trees, using plastic or large-leafed plants that could be easily installed and taken down in order to flee when necessary (Comisión Intereclesial de Justicia y Paz 2005).

In Turbo, people took over the municipal amphitheatre and lived there for about three years (CAVIDA 2002). In Pavarandó, people improvised rickety camps and stayed for almost two years (Valencia 2013). Those who arrived in Panama were mostly deported (IAHCR1999). I would like to highlight that this massive displacement was not a collateral effect of the war waged against communist guerrillas. Instead, forced displacement directly benefited a large group of entrepreneurs who took advantage of the humanitarian crisis to illegally seize Afro-Colombian collective lands and forest resources. For example, Maderas del Darien, one of Colombia's biggest timber companies, established itself at a paramilitary base and systematically exploited and depleted native forests in the Cacarica, Truandó, and Salquí basins (Defensoría del Pueblo 2002 and 2014). Other companies—some of them even receiving government subsidies (Internal Displacement Monitoring Center 2007)—implemented oil palm plantations in huge tracts of Afro-Colombian collective lands, especially near the Jiguamiandó and Curvaradó Rivers. In these areas, more than 14,000 hectares of land were illegally seized for palm cultivators, who made criminal alliances with paramilitaries, businessmen, security forces and governmental agencies (Comisión Intereclesial de Justicia y Paz 2005, Franco and Restrepo 2011, Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre 2007, Mingorance et al. 2004, Ruiz-Serna 2005).

In fact, the paramilitary armies played an important role in the consolidation of such huge oil palm plantations. This is not just an open secret but a blatant admission, as one paramilitary top commandant declared in 2005:

We have been developing some entrepreneurial models that we would like to set in motion at a national level. In Urabá [and the Curvaradó basin] we have plantations of oil palm. I myself searched for entrepreneurs that could support that project. Our idea is to get the wealthy there and in other zones throughout the country since once they arrive, state institutions arrive as well (Semana 2005, 1205).

In order to carry out the oil palm projects, paramilitaries and entrepreneurs were able to legally take over lands through the support of corrupt officials from the former Colombian Institute of Agrarian Reform (INCORA), public notaries and governmental funding agencies (Comisión Intereclesial de Justicia y Paz 2005, Franco and Restrepo 2011, Mingorance et al. 2004). Some of these entrepreneurs have been sentenced for crimes of conspiracy, forced displacement and the invasion of protected areas but the majority of Curvaradó palm companies are still awaiting trial.

From the very beginning of their banishment, communities set in motion different organizational strategies in order to return to their lands and to attain the full respect of their rights. They declared their neutrality with respect to all armed groups and organized a gradual return process to different provisional settlements (Arbeláez 2001). In 2001, after a long legal struggle for the recognition of their rights to land ownership, Afro-Colombian communities received title deeds from the President of the Republic that supported their collective property ownership. But things did not necessarily improve once people managed to go back to their lands. Between 1999—when the first return process started—and 2002, at least 130 homicides and 19 forced disappearances were documented (Observatorio del Programa Presidencial de Derechos Humanos 2003, 14). Attacks against indigenous and Afro-Colombian communities included looting, burning of crops and houses, arbitrary detentions, death threats, and economic blockades. Between 1999 and 2006, when the paramilitaries from the ACCU were finally demobilized, there were at least 119 killings, 41 disappearances, and 32 people tortured (Cinep 2016). In the Curvaradó

and Jiguamiandó basins alone, the cradle of the oil palm project, more than one hundred crimes against their inhabitants were reported between 1999 and 2005, all committed by paramilitary groups who worked if not in collusion with, then at least with the assent of, the National Army from the 17th Brigade (Comisión Intereclesial de Justicia y Paz 2005, 57-77).

Far from merely leading a counterinsurgency fight, the paramilitary armies have been instrumental in helping the interests of regional politicians, powerful cattlemen and landowners, traditional wealthy families, and drug traffickers (Romero 2002). According to some scholars (Salinas y Zarama 2012), in regions where the paramilitaries from the ACCU actively waged war (those regions include the Departments of Chocó, Antioquia, Bolívar, Sucre, and Córdoba), more than 3 million hectares of land were abandoned. Most of these lands were illegally seized and the peasant economy in these territories was severely damaged. Food crop plantations were replaced by biofuel crops or cattle ranches. Revealingly, the zones from which people were forcibly displaced overlapped with areas of strategic interest for mining, industrial forestry or mega-infrastructure, such as dams, highways, and cargo ports (Espinosa 2012, Salinas y Zarama 2012). The paramilitary actions in Bajo Atrato demonstrated a pattern of violence that repeated itself throughout the country. First, the primary targets of their military actions were mostly civilians, and not guerrilla combatants; second, the forced displacement of local populations was instrumental to the economic interests of local warlords and certain regional wealthy elites; third, systematic killings, threats, and dispossession of lands were designed to not only discipline local populations but also establish political and economic regimes that were useful to the paramilitary agenda; and finally, regions under paramilitary influence progressively became the focus of economic models linked to national and international neoliberal agendas (Dufort 2014, Duncan 2007, Espinosa 2012, Romero 2002, Salinas y Zarama 2012).

Paramilitaries set in motion a vast and violent agrarian and land counter-reform in Colombia. They have been historically allied with right-wing politicians defending

elitist property rights. Paramilitaries even presumed their political power by claiming that they managed to control about 35% of the elected Congress in 2002 (Álvaro 2009, López 2005). In 2007, at least 66 politicians, including congressmen, governors, mayors, and even a minister, were indicted for colluding with these paramilitary forces (Semana 2007, 1290). Between 2003 and 2006, former President Álvaro Uribe led a heavily criticized demobilization process with these paramilitary armies. A law approved by the Colombian Congress made broad concessions to combatants and commanders, limiting sentences to a maximum of eight years and raising serious concerns about the legal framework under which members involved in violations of human rights and international humanitarian law were brought to trial (IAHCR 2004). Although the law provided reduced sentences to paramilitaries in return for honest disclosures, reparation to victims, and promises to not return to lawlessness, fewer than 10% of those demobilized applied for benefits and those who actually did “offered no significant information on illegal acts or crimes committed by the paramilitary units to which they belonged” (IAHCR 2008, ¶ 34). As a result, most paramilitary members enjoyed relative impunity, including those commanders accused of such crimes as massacres of defenseless civilians, forced displacement, and selective assassinations of social leaders, trade unionists, human right defenders, judicial officers, journalist and members of LGBT communities. For example, the commander of the ACCU, Freddy Rendón Herrera, alias ‘El Alemán’, never took full responsibility for the crimes committed by his armed group in Chocó during his free confessions. Some of these crimes include the Bojayá massacre, a horrendous crime in which more than 119 Afro-Colombian civilians were killed inside a church during the combats that the ACCU waged with the FARC guerrillas in May 2002. ‘El Alemán’ was released in 2015 after being imprisoned less than nine years for crimes related to drug trafficking and homicide. He was never condemned for crimes directly related to the armed conflict, such as forced displacement, killing of civilians, forced disappearances or military use of children.

Paramilitary groups remain active in many regions of the country, with the Bajo At-rato being a site of some of the bloodiest confrontations between new illegal armed

groups and guerillas. In 2008, the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights reported that paramilitary armies, often under new names, continued operating and committing violations in supposedly demobilized areas (IAHCR 2004). Human Rights Watch reported in 2010 that these successor groups “have taken on many of the same roles, often with some of the same personnel, in some cases with the same counterinsurgency objectives” of former paramilitary forces (Human Rights Watch 2010, 18). That report also identified substantial evidence that portions of paramilitary groups have remained active, describing how members of the groups who had supposedly demobilized were still engaged in illegal activities (Ibid., 19). Today in Bajo Atrato, paramilitaries have adopted different names (Autodefensas Gaitanistas de Colombia, Aguilas Negras, Los Urabeños, Clan Úsuga) but all of them have their roots in the ACCU and they are still engaged in drug trafficking, mining, forced displacement, and selective assassinations. As long as drug trafficking persists as a lucrative business, these armed groups and new ones will continue doing what they know best: dodging the law and threatening the collective interests of Afro-Colombian and indigenous communities.

Muddy, ghostly encounters in Caño Claro

As a part of their war strategy, paramilitaries blockaded the Curvaradó River between 1999 and 2003, aiming to cut off the guerrillas’ supply lines. Paramilitaries held that these supplies were carried by peasants in the boats they usually used for their own transportation. The blockade did not only affect the movement of boats but essentially removed the people’s access to subsistence goods. Paramilitaries set strict limits on the amounts of food and goods like candles or batteries that peasants could transport. In their attempt to uncover evidence of people’s involvement with guerrillas, paramilitaries set up a checkpoint at the Caño Claro’s mouth. Peasants had to stop at this checkpoint every time they wanted to bring in their food as boats could only circulate after first obtaining authorization from the paramilitaries. The interrogation, verbal abuse and searches peasants faced at this checkpoint effectively prevented them from travelling. As I have mentioned, Caño Claro was

a strategic location because the river marked the point between lands used for oil palm plantation and those lands that had not yet been seized.

In Caño Claro and other similarly occupied places, paramilitary armies lived in abandoned houses or built their own shelters by helping themselves to the communities' roofs, walls, and floors. Over several months, Caño Claro's checkpoint became a paramilitary camp, hosting several combatants. Although paramilitaries experienced some military success at the beginning of their campaign in expelling guerrillas from particular areas, the guerrilla return was only a matter of time. One night, during the first rainy months of 2002, the paramilitary camp was heavily attacked by guerrilla squads. The ambush, according to some testimonies, was a lethal and well-planned attack, leaving no chance for the paramilitaries to react. After a few hours, the paramilitaries who were not killed were forced to flee. As I mentioned earlier, no one knows for sure how many people died. According to some testimonies, the guerrillas took their own dead comrades and left behind the corpses of the paramilitaries soldiers. Many of these corpses were simply left on the ground to be eaten by vultures while others floated downstream on the Curvaradó River. Fearing a new attack, no other paramilitary squad dared to look for the corpses. Peasants also dared not bury or even touch any of these corpses as doing so would have been interpreted by the guerrillas as exhibiting some sort of empathy or political allegiance to the paramilitaries.

At the time of that attack, people like Pontus and Taquito, who lived away from their lands in temporary settlements established by international humanitarian organizations, started to organize the definitive return to their lands. When Pontus decided to return to his family's land, he found it full of oil palm. To be exact, his entire village had been converted into a vast field of palms that extended farther than the eye could see. The plantation owners had left no stone unturned and even the cemetery had been brutally desecrated. Taquito had to rebuild his house, working very hard to keep the forest that had invaded his family's farm at bay, and to once again plant their staple foods. What followed the guerrillas' raid at Caño Claro's mouth

only worsened the already harsh situation that they and other returning families were experiencing. The paramilitaries chose to retaliate and many peasants were individually targeted. Many were accused and threatened for supposedly being part of the guerrilla armies. New pillages, economic blockades, and selective assassinations affected all returning people. As usual in an irregular war, what resulted from the attack at Caño Claro was a retaliation against civilians rather than against combatants.

Even if the paramilitaries were expelled from Caño Claro, their influence and control over the Curvaradó basin was never undermined. Besides protecting the oil palm plantations and impeding circulation of people and goods, the paramilitaries exerted violent social control over the communities that little by little returned to their lands. This return was entirely the result of the displaced peasants' tireless efforts to return to their traditional livelihoods. During 2002, hundreds of families managed to take back most of their stolen lands. Sometimes they just came back and hastily built makeshift shelters amidst the oil palm plantations. Other times they organized demonstrations and marches to reclaim their lands. With the support of some NGOs, they also carried out lawsuits before national and international courts. After several months of tenacious, hard work, the families that returned succeeded to *sanear*, literally to heal, their fields, and to make their lands suitable again for their own crops. In Colombian law, *saneamiento* corresponds to the process through which authorities establish the legality of title deeds and confer rights to ownership of property. In Bajo Atrato, *sanear* signified acknowledgement of the illegality of violent land grabbing perpetrated by entrepreneurs and warlords, but in a more profound way it was also the process undertaken by peasant families to take care of their lands, that is, healing them by making them habitable and productive once again, bringing them into the form and order of their traditional livelihoods.

However, these efforts have been constantly hindered by the paramilitaries, whose presence and power have persisted long since 2006, the year when the official demobilization of the ACCU took place. Leaders like Taquito and Pontus have re-



FIGURE 30.
Healing the land and
getting rid of palm trees
Photo by author

ceived multiple death threats and during our time together in 2015 they were even under the protection of a government program designed to prevent harm against threatened human rights activists. The situation for the communities living in the Curvaradó basin is so delicate that since 2003 the Inter-American Court of Human Rights granted precautionary measures of injunction to protect families returning to their lands. These measures, granted to those in grave and imminent danger, were ratified in 2009 and once again in 2013.

To peasants living close to Caño Claro, paramilitary presence did not stop after the guerrilla ambush. Their presence is still felt in different forms: those who died during the guerrilla raid are now spirits in pain, haunting presences inhabiting the place. Encounters with these ghostly presences are deeply emplaced, that is, the encounters take place in a limited, specific area and they occur when people work in or simply walk across Caño Claro's delta. For example, Doña Liliana told me that once when she was fishing near that location, she heard human-like voices coming from the riverbank. She saw nothing and as she thought it was one of her neighbours trying to scare her, she remained concentrated on her task. Then a lump of earth fell into her dugout canoe, close to the place where she was seated. She looked again towards the riverbank and still she saw nothing. She was not scared but after

returning home and asking her neighbour why he was being so annoying, he told her he had not gone to the river that day. She then realized that what she had experienced was something uncanny. When I asked her if she thought it was a spirit, she expressed no doubts about it: “That is a place that scares you. Someone is in pain.” She also told me that one of the things that stunned her most was that she had never before seen in Caño Claro a lump of earth like the one thrown on her leg: that kind of muddy, glue-like, black earth simply did not exist in the region.

I see in that foreign lump of earth irrefutable evidence of the nature of ghostly presences inhabiting Caño Claro. It is earth that does not belong to that land, like the paramilitary soldiers who occupied that place. Most of those soldiers were no more than mercenaries, unemployed young adults hired by powerful warlords. These soldiers came from other regions, as the ID card found by Doña Liliana proves. Many ended up meeting their death far from their homelands and those who died in Caño Claro did not even find a proper piece of land to rest in peace. Foreign bodies without proper burial in a foreign land. Through a lump of muddy, black earth that does not exist in the region, these ghostly presences seem to be claiming what violent death and the lack of proper burial have denied them: the possibility of remaining in one’s home soil.

Another story I heard involved someone walking across the former paramilitary camp. He heard steps of something coming from the opposite direction, like someone who was forcing his way through the bushes. He could not see anything but he heard how this presence suddenly stopped some meters in front of him. Some others have described how they have heard loud movements of invisible presences, noises of something like a big animal forcing its way through the forest and diving hastily into the river. There is also the aforementioned story of the girl who found an iron mug and was scared by something that forced her to run away. Doña Liliana told me that she had had these kinds of encounters not once but three times and that during the last one she decided to confront those invisible presences: “The day they scared me, I started to insult them, to tell them a lot of things like ‘Because of you

we have had such a hard life, you are the ones to be blamed for everything we have lost.” Like many others, Doña Liliana was a victim of paramilitary violence, having to endure forced displacement and the many losses that eviction imply. Her insults were a grievance against the perpetrators of her own suffering. She explained to me the situation she faced after returning to her land with her family:

I’m an old, tired woman and when we came back we had to start over again to cut down this forest. That day I said a lot of nonsense and I must have looked like a crazy woman: “It was because of you [paramilitaries] that our bouillon became creamier; you never worked and you never let us work.” Now that I’ve come back to my land they don’t want to let us work again.¹

Although these ghostly presences are causing trouble, people have found ways to deal with them. One way is to never show fear. While they may be able to cause some physical harm, the primary intention of these spirits is not to hurt anyone but rather to call people’s attention to an unresolved situation. These spirits are, as Doña Liliana described them, souls in pain, *animas penando*. Even if she had been frightened during her last encounter with these spirits, she nevertheless felt the need to reproach these paramilitaries—or what remains of them—for all she has suffered because of them. The spirits did seem to hear her reproaches, as they stopped assaulting her. Doña Liliana’s reaction does not mean that she was not listening to these spirits in pain but rather that she, like the hundreds of people who have suffered paramilitary violence, has trouble empathizing with the fate of these restless souls.

The image of an *anima en pena*, a soul in pain, is a frequently recurring subject in various mythologies, as documented by Robert Hertz (1909) in his celebrated essay on the collective representation of death. At least in Bajo Atrato where the Christian tradition plays an important role in the spiritual life of Afro-Colombian and mestizo communities alike, the image of a soul in pain is associated with the restless spirit

¹ El día que me asustaron yo empecé a insultarlos, a decirles un poco de cosas: que por ellos uno ha pasado tanto trabajo, que por ellos uno perdió tantas cosas. Uno ya está cansado, imagínese uno tener que volver a romper aquí nuevamente. Ese día yo hablé un poco de disparates, sola, que parecía una loca: “Por ustedes se nos puso el caldo tan espeso; ustedes no trabajaban ni dejaban trabajar.” Y vea que ahora que retorné a mis tierras ellos ya no dejan otra vez trabajar.

of someone who died but cannot reach the afterlife. These spirits in pain seek assistance from the living to alleviate a kind of suffering, often associated with violent death. For communities in Bajo Atrato, violent death, as I later discuss, signifies a collective social dilemma because the souls of those who died violently will not be able to reach their final destination, unless they were the object of proper funerary rituals. For the paramilitaries that died in Caño Claro whose bodies were simply stranded in the forest, this is precisely the case. Consequently, “their unquiet and spiteful souls roam the earth” (Hertz 1960, 85), unable to make their journey to the afterlife. These spirits are thus condemned to linger in the place where they died.

Ghostly presences have been reported in other contexts of armed conflict and political violence where violent death was common. Sasanka Perera (2001) describes how in Sri Lanka after the harsh clash between the communist guerrillas from the People’s Liberation Front (Janata Vimukti Peramuna-JVP) and the counterinsurgency forces of the state, many villagers from the southern regions of the country have encountered the ghosts of those who died during the war years (1988-1991). Additionally, those who directly experienced terror were more likely to be possessed by spirits capable of displaying an ill will. As in Caño Claro, these ghostly encounters occur in places that have been specifically demarcated by violent death: sites where the corpses of young men were set on fire, buildings where people were tortured, waters where others drowned in their attempts to hide (Perera 2001, 171-173). Perera sees in the nature of these encounters a “symbolic reference to the problem of conscience and guilt among both survivors of terror and the perpetrators” (Ibid., 162). According to him, the guilty conscience results from the people’s feelings of powerlessness in being unable to prevent, in any way, the violent murders that occurred. Perera believes that these experiences with ghosts and the ensuing narratives,

are mechanisms by which a community remembers the people it has lost, a mechanism that helps place in perspective the community’s collective losses and memories of the violent past. Such memories are also constructed as expressions of the guilt of the living over the dead, a desire for justice and revenge, and the need to alleviate the otherworldly suffering of those who died unnatural deaths. (Ibid., 197)

In this vein, ghosts, possessions, and haunted places are epiphenomenal manifestations of collective and individual trauma, cultural processes through which a tormented and unhealed collective conscience expresses its suffering and its aspirations for justice and preservation of memories. Although ghosts and haunted places are manifestations of violent experiences and difficulties with coping, Perra's approach tends to pathologize this "supernatural activity" (Ibid., 197) by situating encounters with spirits and experiences of haunted places exclusively within people's inner worlds. Thus, once provided with the adequate means "to come to grips with the experiences of the past," (Ibid., 170) people will stop seeing the spirits of the dead and places will stop being haunted. My critique of this stance is that the overlapping of trauma as psychological damage with the enchantment attributed to some places obliterates one of the theoretical tenets I discussed at the beginning of this chapter: places are not only endowed with the meanings and memories that people create for them, but are also active agents in the creation of a certain sensibility, especially when people have to deal with experiences of violence, terror, and social suffering. I see, therefore, that spirits and haunted places are part of the nature of the world and how violence might be experienced, not merely a way for disturbed people to reconcile themselves with an overwhelming reality. Let me explain. When dealing with suffering and pain, Das (1998) argues that a statement like "I am in pain" is not only a statement of fact but also "an expression of the fact" (Ibid., 191), meaning that experiences of pain are not just expressed but shaped by the very means one uses to communicate them. In the same vein, I consider that particular experiences with spirits and places are not just cultural expressions of social suffering but that they shape the very possibilities of how people experience suffering and envisage reconciliation and peace.

The ghostly experiences recounted in southern Sri Lanka and Caño Claro may be contrasted in another way: in the latter, people are not witnessing ghosts belonging to the dead of their own communities. Quite the opposite: people are seeing the unquiet spirits of their perpetrators, of those who, recalling Doña Liliana's words, were responsible for everything they have lost. This is why I do not think these

haunted presences can be interpreted as “reflections of the distraught conscience of the community” (Perera 2001, 170), since it would understandably be hard for Bajo Atrato’s residents to feel guilty about the fate of paramilitaries who threatened their lives and expelled them from their lands. The problem with empathizing with such spirits can be seen in the treatment that some people give to the remains of paramilitaries found in Caño Claro. As mentioned by Doña Liliana, there was a man who found a skull and decided to play a joke by hanging it on top of a stick to scare her. She responded by giving him the lower jaw bone she had previously found, intending to make the skull smile. Perhaps under other circumstances or in another place that skull would have been treated differently, but in this case the playing with these remains was like a little revenge against those who had caused them so much damage. But lack of empathy for the suffering of these wandering spirits does not mean that people like Doña Liliana are unaware of their needs. People do understand that unless they make appropriate burials, these spirits will continue inhabiting Caño Claro, scaring people and making it difficult to work and live there. In this sense, the experiences that people in Caño Claro have with these spirits may be more comparable with the relations that Heonik Kwon (2008) describes between people, spiritual ancestors, and ghosts of war in Vietnam.

Deeply embedded within the Buddhist tradition of ancestor worship, ghosts in Vietnam are considered to be the products of painful and violent deaths that occurred far from home. The term used in reference to them, *nguoì ngoai*, is similar to the word for strangers, since ghosts are in essence outsiders in the world of the dead (Kwon 2008, 20). According to Kwon, ghosts of war have a double liminal identity: on one hand, they are neither severed from the living world nor fully integrated in the world of the dead; on the other hand, they are not completely separated from the place where they died nor assimilated to the positive and transcendental space that people confer to other dead people, like their ancestors: “The misery of being a ghost is in fact all about not having a specified place to relate to; a place where their historical identities are remembered and their grievances consoled” (Ibid., 152). Contrary to the aforementioned interpretation of ghostly presences in Sri Lanka,

but closer to the experiences of people in Bajo Atrato, the ghosts in Vietnam are perceived to be a “natural” phenomenon, that is, they do not merely reflect a traumatic engagement with reality. Instead, it is an ontological concern as ghosts are perceived to be an integral part of the nature of being and becoming in the world (Ibid., 16). People care about ghosts of war because they understand that proper respect for the dead is a primary condition for the wellbeing and prosperity of the living.

Considering that ghosts of war suffer the double alienation of having to wander between the margins of the afterlife and the periphery of this world while also lacking an adequate location to anchor their memory (Ibid., 20), people perform a series of rituals that are meant to appease the suffering of these ghosts: people build graves and shrines, address prayers and offer oblations in the places associated with the appearance of these wandering spirits. In many cases, people succeed in identifying the lost families of these ghosts and reburial rituals are performed. But when that is not possible, people may create a fictional kinship tie with these ghosts in order to incorporate them into the ambit of familial, local ancestors. In such cases, ghosts become ascending spirits that are treated by families as both kin and deity. According to Kwon, these spirits aspire to demonstrate to their adoptive families and communities that their membership is productive: they are therefore attentive to the social affairs and material conditions of the living world, they intercede before deities on behalf of their adoptive families, and they even mediate between deities and other ghosts.

This manner of treating ghosts in Vietnam shares certain similarities with how people in Bajo Atrato aspire to interact with spirits of those who experienced a bad death. In both places, it is understood that these apparitions are associated with demands for adequate burial so people cannot respond with complete indifference. The violent circumstances of their deaths not only confine these spirits to the places where their tragedies occurred but also binds them to a particular flow of time, dooming them to repeat their vicious demise over and over again. The principal aim of appropriate burials and prayers, or of oblations and rituals as in Viet-

nam, is thus to liberate these ghosts from this dismal situation, to insert them in the proper flow of time. In one way or another, people participate in alleviating the suffering of these spirits because the absence of remembrance or other action from their living relations aggravates the condition of the dead. There exists then in both Vietnam and Bajo Atrato a kind of ethical commitment towards the dead. However, the main concern of people in Caño Claro is that they do not want to be responsible for performing such essential duties. The central reason for this is that these ghostly presences are still associated with a painful and very recent past. On the contrary, in Vietnam the identities of these ghosts are no longer relevant because people give little importance to which side of the war the combatants sacrificed their lives to. According to some worshippers quoted by Kwon, the dead have forgotten the ideology of war: “[G]hosts of war do not give a damn about wars”; “There is no enmity in the cemetery” (Ibid., 27). Consequently, regardless of whether these are the ghosts of U.S. or Vietnamese soldiers, or of combatants from the official army or from the Viet Cong, people are most concerned that all experienced a bad death and may be forgotten by their loved ones. What matters above all is the practice of remembering since, as it is described by a worshipper, “Dead people don’t fight. They are not really even angry. They simply want to be remembered. They want someone to know what they went through” (Ibid., 40). It is important to bear in mind that one of the reasons for the very different commitments to the dead between the Vietnamese and people of Bajo Atrato is due to what Mircea Eliade (1971) calls the “terror of history”, the inexorable march of events and time: the Vietnam War finished 40 years ago while the aftermath of the on-going conflict in Colombia are still fresh. However, and as I will discuss further, there are other ways through which people in Caño Claro establish empathetic connections with these spirits.

Before finishing this section, I would like to suggest the possibility that those who violently died in Bajo Atrato may actually improve the material conditions of the living. This was insinuated by Doña Liliana through her intention of playing the lottery with the ID number of the card she found. As this number had belonged to someone who had not yet left this world nor entered into the realm of the death, it

was believed it may offer good luck. These spirits embody an ambiguous message of suffering and release from suffering: they wander in pain but their fate may always be redeemed. The connection between these *ánimas en pena* and magic practices has been pointed out elsewhere by Taussig (1992). According to him, the haunting that results from those who suffered violent deaths also contains “a quotient of magical force” (Ibid., 27). Belief in these magical forces of the dead can be seen in several regions throughout Colombia, as people often make earnest requests to these spirits for help in matters of unemployment, love, health or poverty. In some cemeteries in Bogotá, for example, people visit the tombs of the unknown dead on Mondays, carrying flowers, candles, and even music in order to ask for some kind of miraculous intercession on their behalf (Trujillo Molano 2012). Similarly but in a context of political violence, inhabitants of Puerto Berrío, a town where violence between paramilitary groups, drug gangs, and guerrilla forces reached inordinate heights, people began rescuing the hundreds of unknown bodies that floated on the Magdalena River. The villagers adopted these anonymous dead, giving them names, headstones, and adequate burials. They take care of these lost souls by offering masses and prayers, always with the aim of obtaining some kind of divine intervention because these dead in their penitential and reverent condition are believed to accomplish miracles (Nieto 2012, Echevarría 2013). In Caño Claro these dead are far from considered objects of veneration; however their presence, or in Doña Liliana’s case the number found in their belongings, may lead to good fortune. What is at stake in the relationship between people and spirits is the possibility of a mutually beneficial arrangement: through rituals of remembrance the suffering of these wandering spirits may be appeased and in exchange, they may intervene in the divine sphere to improve people’s fortunes.

Death does not occur in one instant

Among Afro-Colombian communities, death is considered a continuous process rather than a single, isolated event. One’s death is often preceded by multiple manifestations: the plaintive howls of dogs in the middle of the night, the song of a *guaco*,

the Laughing Falcon in the forest (Serrano 1994), ants walking around the kitchen (Velásquez 1961), the sudden movements of *Palma de Cristo*'s leaves. Even before any sign of illness or bodily decay, one's soul may start venturing about on its own, visiting friends, family or places of importance in dreams. Life is not simply something that one has or does not have but something that one may have in determined quantities. For example, life decreases a little when the soul wanders in dreams. Similarly, death may occur little by little, *morir de a poquitos*, not because one gradually loses one's own physical or mental faculties but because there are parts of the self that may fall away before one actually dies. Similarly, even after the body ceases to be the depository of life, there are parts of one's self that do not completely leave the world unless people carry out appropriate rites.

These rites have the obvious function of reinforcing both collective bonds and shared social values. They are also indispensable ways of taking care of the dead and their souls. Among Afro-Colombian communities, death does not imply the extinction or nonexistence of the self, but rather a severe transformation of it. People, like trees, plants, game animals or fish, are considered *renacientes*, literally reborn, and as such they are subjects of rebirth (Friedemann 1974, Escobar 2008). However, as I explained in the previous chapter, this rebirth has nothing to do with any sort of metempsychotic event in which a person's soul is reincarnated in a new body. Instead, the concept is one of a permanent resprouting of life for the constant emergence of new forms of being. Death is then considered an inexorable transformation of the state of the self, which must be accompanied by a series of procedures conducted by the living that help the soul adequately transfer from one state to another. A failure in this transition may cause one's soul to lose its path toward the afterlife and perhaps remain wandering in one's favourite place, or perhaps in the forest or cemeteries, persistently appearing to and haunting the living.

There are good and bad deaths. A good death in Chocó is one that happens surrounded by family, at home or close to your homeland, and when the departure has been accompanied by appropriate funeral traditions (Quiceno 2015, Serrano 1994,

Velásquez 1961). A bad death, on the contrary, is one that has happened suddenly or violently, or one that has not received proper burial rituals. Without these rituals that allow for the graceful departure of the soul, an ordinary death may turn into a bad death. Closely tied to Christian cosmology, traditional Afro-Colombian funeral rites involve a period of wake, a mass, a procession of mourners, and a burial. Although its form may resemble the Catholic tradition, the Afro-Colombian funeral is imbued with a particular spirituality and the wake is especially unique: it is a social gathering that takes place over the course of nine nights following the burial.

The burial, the ritualistic disposition of a corpse to a consecrated place, represents the completion of ceremonies dealing with a dead body. But the burial does not mark the complete departure of the dead. Their souls, in the form of an ethereal presence wandering among the living, will only leave this world at the end of the nine-day wake or *novena*. Until recent years, this *novena* was a huge, well-attended gathering in which people sang and prayed around an altar built in the living room of the deceased's house. Abundant food, coffee, *aguardiente*, and cigarettes helped people stay awake until dawn. Today, because of the high costs associated with such a gathering, only a few can fully support a *novena*. But the essence of this important ritual is still present. A sober but solemn altar is usually built in the house of the deceased or in that of one of their relatives. The altar is dedicated to their soul and may contain images of the Virgin Mary and saints to whom the deceased expressed devotion. It is also adorned with candles, a glass of water, and a vase of flowers or *Palma de Cristo*'s leaves. It is believed that the soul comes to this altar every night until it finishes the process of *recoger sus pasos*, collecting or following its own steps. People gather around this altar to pray or sing their dirges and *alabaos*. Outside the house, people play dominoes or cards, listening to music and drinking coffee or *aguardiente* in order to both stay awake and combat the cold expelled by the dead. One of the most significant moments of this *novena* takes place during the last night, when the soul of the deceased makes its last visit to the realm of the living. That night, just before dawn, the soul leaves this world and it is only then that the dead really die. It is a solemn moment where people cry, mourn, and say their last

goodbyes. Just before sunrise, the altar is fully dismantled, which marks the full departure of the soul (Losonczy 2006, Serrano 1994, Velásquez 1961, Whitten 1974).

To mestizo peasants living in the Bajo Atrato, whether Catholics or Evangelical Christians, death also involves an elaborate set of procedures whose object is to ensure the full transition of the soul to the afterlife. These ritual procedures, based in historical Christian burial tradition, are always collective events that aim to give to the dead an appropriate end in a duly consecrated place. As previously noted, failure to do so may compromise the proper journey of the soul. To be buried, to be mourned by loved ones, and to be accompanied during the time the soul collects its steps are factors contributing to a good death. Therefore, the soul of someone who dies suddenly, violently or away from their homeland, does not have the chance to collect their footsteps so will wander mournfully in the places considered the boundaries of the proper world of the living, such as forests, cemeteries or even in the very location where the bad death took place (Losonczy 2006, 220). This is precisely the problem in Caño Claro, where the paramilitary combatants who died there were not given any of the aforementioned proceedings. These deaths, as well as all of those whose corpses have not been recuperated, represent an issue to those still living in the places: on one hand, the dead cannot completely leave the human realm and will be compelled to wander between worlds until their deaths are appropriately honoured; on the other hand, people are obliged to deal with these presences and with the kind of haunted manifestations associated with the dead.

Violent death, as highlighted by some of the anthropological literature dealing with mourning, memory, coping, trauma or recovery in contexts of political violence, leaves a deep mark that usually transcends the nature of the event itself (Das 1998, Hertz 1960, Perera 2001). By definition, violent death violates the cultural norms that govern good death. Thus, it cannot be coped with through conventional means. In Bajo Atrato, wandering spirits are the outcomes of such violent deaths. I define these kinds of spirits as the disembodied presence of the dead, as traces left by those who suffered a bad death. These spirits are deeply emplaced sensory impressions

and as they are enmeshed within particular places, they are considered part of the world rather than mere collective illusions. Spirits are also an ontological concern as they represent both a potential state of being and an undesirable possibility of becoming. These spirits represent some sort of failure, anomalies that rudely disrupt the proper flow of life and time. They interrupt the flow of life because they stand at the threshold between the realm of the living and the realm of the dead, becoming liminal beings that wander unwittingly between worlds. These spirits disrupt time because they are obstinate apparitions, like a fixity, like “a tragedy condemned to repeat itself time and again” (del Toro 2001). I borrow Guillermo del Toro’s words, particularly the definition of a ghost that one of his characters in *The Devil’s Backbone* states. One of the heroes in the movie speculates that a ghost is “an instant of pain, [...] something dead which still seems to be alive. An emotion suspended in time. Like a blurred photograph. Like an insect trapped in amber.” Ghostly presences like the ones of Caño Claro are stagnant both in time and place, ambivalent beings that emanate but also contain the affects of those who violently died.

The spirits of those who experienced bad death cannot but relate to the world through similarly disruptive, violent means. The violence with which these spirits manifest themselves is, however, of a different order since it is not inherently intentional, agential. Rather, their violence is no more than a consequence triggered by their mere presence. When these spirits manifest themselves, they produce a sort of bump in the flow of time, a distortion in the consistency of a place, an alteration of what has been called the gathering properties of places. I compare the manifestations of these spirits’ apparitions with the waves caused by the many motor boats that travel the rivers of the Bajo Atrato: in the same way those waves ripple the river’s surface, ghostly presences create a kind of track as they move through space and manifest themselves in places. These waves and ripples, these distortions and trajectories are somewhat violent simply because they disturb something that would otherwise remain still.

Wandering spirits in Bajo Atrato also represent an existential failure. They are the opposite of *andar*, which means to move, to walk, to embark, and to travel. Life is movement: rivers, animals, clouds, trees, the wind, and the sun are all alive. The lack of motion is associated with death: stagnant waters, rocks, *palizadas*, decayed tree trunks (Velásquez 1961). While living beings travel, others like the spirits of those who experienced violent death, are stagnant in place. These spirits therefore stand in contradiction to the positive values associated with travelling and embarking. As I discussed in Chapter 1, travelling in Chocó satisfies several needs: to connect people with forests, rivers, and swamps where they learn how to cope with the environment and the beings inhabiting it (Whitten 1974); to maintain the ties of kinship by visiting one's extended family, meeting relatives living in and outside the region and creating new familial ties (Quiceno 2015); to economically link rural settlements and towns through the sale and exchange of goods; to participate in important religious celebrations that only take place in particular villages; and to take part in political meetings, workshops or assemblies held by local organizations (Escobar 2008, Oslender 2008). To travel is to cultivate particular cultural values, as it is how people nourish all kinds of social relationships. It is also the means for learning one's way around the forest, acquiring skills for interacting with both the social and natural worlds. But spirits are no longer able to travel, therefore they do not really know or learn about the world. In this sense, spirits also lack agency. The uncanny means through which they relate with the world are neither evil nor good, which are moral, human terms. Spirits only do what they are condemned to do: stagnate in the places where they violently died in order to redeem themselves from this tragic fate. *Andar*, as to embark, is to live and to exert one's own will: "The living walk, the dead wander" (Whitten 1974, 125).

Before concluding this section, I would like to address an apparent contradiction of these spirits. They are suspended in time and space but their spatial stagnation has little to do with a positive value like dwelling, by which I mean the sense of belonging to a territory. By dwelling in their territories, people nurture and build a particular sense of place that ghostly presences cannot. Building and nurturing implies a

back-and-forth relationship between people and their places—the attributes of each are mutually constituted—whereas spirits do not participate in this co-constituted circuit and only take away without reciprocating. These spirits, therefore, do not belong to places, but instead they are trapped within a place's contours because what their suffering ultimately signifies, is the impossibility of finding a place to rest, of having a place to care about. As the people of Bajo Atrato are well aware, the suffering of having to be away from one's home soil can doom any existence.

The apparitions of dead paramilitary soldiers produce considerable repercussions for the lives of people inhabiting Caño Claro. Although these spirits might exert some influence upon people, they do not have full agency, as ghostly spirits cannot choose how to exert such influences. When they were alive, paramilitaries could decide how to exert power and affect people but their spirits lack this capacity. They are doomed to temporal and spatial stagnation. People may thus seek to establish positive relationships with these spiteful spirits with the goal of inserting them into the appropriate flow of history and place.

A cosmic peace

Invisible frontiers. That is what the presence of antagonistic armed groups create when they converge in the same region. Sometimes implicitly, sometimes explicitly, they make arrangements to demarcate the zones under their influence: a river, a road, a village. The presence of an armed group in a given zone attaches a certain stigma to that zone's inhabitants, as if they were painted with a mark indicating their supposed allegiance with the armed group. During the hardest years of the war in Bajo Atrato, villagers inhabiting a region under the control of paramilitary forces could not go to regions where guerrilla forces were present, and vice versa. To do so meant becoming a military target. These stigmas did not disappear once the groups demobilized or left these zones, making it important to still know which group controlled which zone when travelling, working in or inhabiting a particular place.

Doña Lucía, a woman in her early forties who occasionally hires workers to help her harvest her crops, told me of the difficulties she sometimes experiences when she goes to the town: “If you need a labourer they always ask where do you live. Then they say: ‘At the mouth of Caño Claro? There? I’ll not go to that place. That’s full of guerrilla armies.’ You always receive a resounding ‘No’.” Pontus explained to me that the idea of Caño Claro as a guerrilla haven comes from the massacre that took place there, even though guerrillas never managed to establish a permanent presence in this zone: “As they were the ones who won in that terrain, then that idea of their presence is still present.” Others add that they have been struggling against that mark of infamy every time they go to the town, that what happened in Caño Claro has created a terrible reputation for the place and, of course, its inhabitants. Some people I talked to during my visits to the Curvaradó’s basin have expressed their worries about that situation. The stigma has discouraged some peasants from returning to their lands and a few, such as the owner of an abandoned shelter located at the mouth of the river, have even preferred to make their departure permanent.

The aftermath of that infamous military raid are experienced by Caño Claro’s inhabitants on two different levels: one concerns the negative ways that inhabitants are perceived by some outsiders. In this sense, the aftermath has crossed this location’s boundaries. The other concerns the aforementioned relations with the dead and their multiple manifestations, whose aftermath remains inside this place. Although these registers are qualitatively distinct, they do not belong to two independent realms, but rather, like the Möbius strip, both belong to the same domain of undistinguishable surfaces and blurred boundaries. Both are public, knowable arenas that express particular obligations, values, relations, and modes of representation. Both compel people to action. Both deal with memory and its worldly consequences. Both are concerned with how to appropriately connect beings to the world: on one hand, the relations of villagers from Caño Claro with their neighbours, on the other, the relationship between people and spirits. In other words, both are part of the same way of conceiving politics: a politics in which what is at stake is not only power relations but the creation of these relations among different forms of beings and different worlds.

According to my sources, the main problem in Caño Claro is uncertainty: nobody knows how many people have died during the conflict, much less their identities. These dead combatants became souls in torment, *almas en pena*, souls whose transit was never accompanied by the memories and prayers of their significant others. Nobody cared for them: locals could not or were not interested in doing so and their families do not know for sure if they are alive or dead. Away from their loved ones, from their homelands, and entangled in a dense forest that harbours everything people do not consider properly human, these dead combatants, along with the others that experienced and still experience the same kind of suffering, are condemned to wander and haunt places. Their inconsolable state of abandonment is epitomized by the phrase people often use to describe the lamentable fate of dying alone in the forest: they became carrion for the vultures.

Human bodies, regardless of who they were during their lives, do not deserve such a tragic end. To be abandoned in the forest and not receive appropriate burial has compromised their souls. During my discussion with Taquito, Pontus, and Doña Liliana, a crucial point emerged that resulted in unanimous agreement, an opinion also shared by other leaders of the Curvaradó basin I later met: if the corpses of those who died in Caño Claro are identified and their remains given back to their mothers or relatives, their ghostly presences will simply disappear. “What we need,” Taquito told me, “is some sort of act to publicly dignify what happened there. Only then will our land be consecrated again.” Then Pontus gave me a more in-depth explanation. According to what elders say, the forest is inhabited by *encantos*, spirits that are strongly attached to places or treasures. For instance, in the old times when the indigenous buried their dead, they also buried gold or *guacas* with them. The Spaniards also hid their fortunes in the forest but would first kill one of their slaves in the place of burial, in order to keep his spirit as guard. In both cases, buried treasures enchanted places as they became inhabited by guardian spirits. But when these treasures are removed, the enchantment disappears. As long as the treasure remains buried, the spiritual custodians will be attached to these places. Thus, as long as human remains are kept in Caño Claro, the souls of the combatants will

manifest themselves as wandering spirits in suffering, capable of scaring people. “This is why,” insisted Pontus, “we think and believe that by moving these corpses to another place, by taking them away, the land and its people will heal. Moreover, if it is the Colombian state that does this, it would help us to change these misunderstandings that the guerrillas live here.”

Dead bodies, no doubt, deserve a treatment better than becoming carrion for vultures or cadaveric pieces of flesh floating in the river. What prompted my interlocutors to request state intervention was not only their desire to change the stigma associated with Caño Claro and its inhabitants. There was also a need to come to terms with those ghostly presences and deal with that ruined place. And yet there was something else. The word dignity caught my attention when Taquito explained his point: digging into the ground where dozens of bodies are concealed within a thick forest and identifying those remains will help both the living and the dead regain some of their dignity. To the inhabitants of Caño Claro, an official exhumation will shed some light on the events, demonstrating that they had and have nothing to do with the guerrillas and their business, and eventually changing the way they are perceived by some outsiders. But the dignity of the dead and of their loved ones is also at stake: the former would finally be found, identified, and buried; the latter would finally find some relief from the profound grief that engulfs people when faced with the unknown whereabouts of their significant others.

What astonished me most was the kind of recognition that Taquito had for the humanity of these unburied paramilitary combatants, considering that they were surely sons of peasants like him, that they who would be searched for their loved ones just as some people from Caño Claro are seeking their own disappeared sons. That kind of recognition flabbergasted me because Taquito is a man who received several death threats, was banished by paramilitary forces, and still lives under the protection of a governmental agency because he is still considered a military target. I felt Taquito’s words like, to borrow these words, “like I was shot with a diamond, a diamond bullet right through my forehead” (Milius and Coppola 1979). I realized

that these paramilitary soldiers, despite the unspeakable crimes they committed in the region, were not seen as monsters. Taquito made his point clear as a diamond:

The war is not about poor people fighting against poor people. There are no children of the rich in the army, and there are no children of the rich in the guerrilla armies; there is not a single child of the rich in the paramilitary armies. There are but the children of us, the peasants. We are the ones who were banished from our lands by them [the rich] and later they took advantage of us and of our children who were in need. That is exactly the guilty conscience that inhabits Caño Claro. How many mothers are looking for those dead? One hundred mothers? Eighty? We don't know but we do know there are hopeful mothers out there (Taquito, in discussion with the author. Curvaradó River).

Taquito's words were a gift. He used the expression guilty conscience, *cargo de conciencia*, to describe what dwells at Caño Claro's mouth. That guilty conscience should not be confused with remorse—after all people do not feel guilty for what happened to the paramilitaries that violated their lands and threatened their lives—nor with any kind of moral judgment about the perpetrators of that deadly ambush. *Cargo de conciencia* is a burden carried by that place, it is a voice remaining within the place, a collection of impressions, of affects (Thrift 2008), “the hints of energy” (Stewart 2007, 70), “the forces and intensities” (Seigworth and Gregg 2010, 2), “the exuded feelings” (Navaro-Yashin's 2009, 11) discharged upon Caño Claro's inhabitants by the place itself. *Cargo de conciencia* says something about the state of helplessness most people experience—the multiple interests that linger over them and their lands, the state politics of abandonment, the power of the wealthy who invested their money in palm cultivation, the state of terror imposed by armed groups—but in essence that guilty conscience is not just an expression of their inner worlds since, as Taquito points out, guilty conscience inhabits that place. In this sense, it is like something hovering over people, something lying, floating, stalking when people dwell in that place. It is something through which the “place makes itself felt” (Hastrup 2010, 194; emphasis in the original).

Like any guilty feeling, what emanates from that place is some kind of suffering and injustice: the injustice committed against the peasants, who were persecuted

and murdered by those that violently occupied and fought for that place; injustice against the place itself since it was corrupted and diverted from its proper use; and the suffering of those whose corpses were abandoned and whose souls were left in oblivion. This is what makes Taquito's proposal—to remove the bodies of these perpetrators of violence in order to return them to their families—an ecumenic peace that binds together the different people, spirits, and places that have suffered violence. But I do not want to overemphasize a kind of empathy towards paramilitary soldiers. Pontus and the other leaders do not necessarily express sorrow for or solidarity with what happened to these combatants but more of an empathy towards the potential mourners, the mothers and relatives who, like many peasants in Bajo Atrato, still carry the suffering of having lost their loved ones without knowing their whereabouts. I witnessed what that kind of suffering might mean.

It was in a complete different setting, among a group of victims of the armed conflict participating in a reconciliation program run by volunteers, many of whom identify themselves as former victims. Some of the victims taking part in this program have created short autobiographic plays or what various authors call autobiographical performances (Heddon 2008), documentary theatre (Sotelo 2010) or even docudrama (Spence et al. 2013). More than conventional scripts, these performances use the actual memories and words of the victims, who are simultaneously presenting and representing their own experiences. In the case of those participating in the reconciliation program, these autobiographical performances have become a means to give testimony of their own suffering, raise awareness about the situation of many other victims, and of course, heal their own wounds. One of these performances, called *Anunciando la Ausencia* (Announcing the Absence), is enacted by a group of women who are in search of their disappeared relatives: sons, daughters, and husbands all victims of forced disappearance and whose whereabouts remain unknown after many years. They were abducted, kidnapped or forcibly recruited by guerrilla, paramilitary, and even official armies. These women, all of rural origin, perform their dramas wearing their traditional *llanero* costumes: a flowered,

ankle-length skirt; a white, long-sleeved blouse with a neckline that encircles their shoulders, and a collar decorated with ribbons and buttons the same colour as the skirt; ribbon ties adorning their heads; open-toed sandals with rubber soles. Only one accessory is not part of that traditional custom: a black mourning veil that they have tied to their waists.

The performance, which is more than a play as it does not only represent the suffering of these women but presents it theatrically, begins with what seems an invitation to travel: "Let's go women, let's look for them in the creeks," one says. "Let's look for them in the rivers. Let's look for them in the lakes, in the savannahs. Let's look for them in the cemeteries. Let's look for them under the rocks," the others answer. Then they start walking in circles around small mounds of leaves and red flowers. They repeat: "Let's look for them on the riverbanks, in the forest, under some tree they might be." One by one, without stopping walking, they list the towns of cemeteries where they have searched for their loved ones. "Let's keep searching women, let's not falter." Then one of them kneels in front of one of the mounds: "Here, I found a shirt. Whom does this shirt belong to?" One of the women answers: "It belonged to my son. He wore it the last New Year's Day he was with me. I remember we danced a lot that day. I remember too the saddest day of my life: it was on March 31st at 5:30 a.m. when they took him from his bed." She hugs the shirt and she speaks haltingly: "Here the dreams of my son end. Also his father's dreams as he died five years ago without acknowledgement of our son's fate." She stands up, catches her breath and says: "Let's keep searching." The women resume their march, always walking in circles, which somehow evokes their own search: turning again and again to the same starting point. One by one they go and kneel on the mounds, finding different clothes: a blouse, some pants, a poncho, a shirt. Each woman describes the owner of the clothes, the circumstances under which they disappeared, the effects of such a crime on their families. Each story is as sorrowful as any of the others: "I have been eleven years, nine months and five days looking for my daughter"; "My sons ask for their father's whereabouts and I don't know what to answer"; "As long as I don't find his remains, the suffering that consumes my soul

will not stop.” After enacting and sharing their suffering, they again resume their march while uttering in the saddest tone: “Let’s not stop searching. Let’s search in the lakes, let’s search in the rivers since surely they were thrown in one of those rivers.” I cannot write these lines without feeling grief. Walking always in circles they continue their search. Once again: “Let’s search in the rivers, let’s search in the forest, let’s search under the rocks.” A final t-shirt is found: it had belonged to Rosita’s son and they explain that she died of cancer last year without having found her son’s remains. “Let’s search for them in the savannahs, let’s search for them outside of Meta [their region], in other Departments because many of them were taken elsewhere.” Then they stop walking, they take the clothes, they put them on the ground and fold them. They kneel beside them wearing now their mourning veils. In a bowing posture they express their last laments: “They tore my son from my house but they will not tear him from my heart”; “My dear husband, I will not falter until I give you the burial you deserve.” They stand up once again, they take each other’s hands and speak in unison: “We want no more forced disappearances, we want no more false positives². Death to all these things that hurt us.” Someone else adds: “Mother Earth is tired of this bloodshed, the land is stained.”

Where to seek their disappeared? The women look for them unsuccessfully in different cemeteries, in mass graves. They have to turn to where the war is taking place: the forests, the savannahs. They might be in other regions, in other Departments. They might be under a rock, under a tree’s shade, in a river, in a lake. Those places may account for their whereabouts, after all the unburied ones are deeply entangled within their surroundings. Those dead, as described by one of the women, stain the land similarly to what Taquito described as a guilty conscience: a hint of energy inhabiting not only Caño Claro but also those other haunted places where the dead cannot rest. The stain pollutes the earth, harms the land, and haunts places. The stain is also a blemish on both places’ character and their inhabitants’ reputation. To remove that stain, to appease the voice within these places, to get rid of that

² The “false positives” were a series of systematic murders committed by members of the military against civilians who were later presented as guerrilla soldiers killed in battle. These murders allowed units to fabricate results and officers to gain promotion.

guilty conscience, is what Taquito and the other leaders aim for when they call for procedures that reconstitute the dignity of the dead and their families. In the post-conflict context of peace negotiation that is currently underway in Colombia, this is a win-win strategy in which humans and other-than-humans can only benefit.

The dignifying act Taquito and other leaders have in mind has nothing to do with mourning rituals, at least not mourning for the deceased paramilitary soldiers. They are not looking to come to terms with the people lost in their territory: paramilitary soldiers were simply not their people. The ghostly experiences are also not expressions of guilt felt by the living for the dead: the combatants that died were actually responsible to some extent for the many deaths and disappearances suffered by peasants in Bajo Atrato. The goal of the dignifying act proposed by peasants of Caño Claro is not only to support a healing process involving their inner experiences but also to alleviate the torments that spirits and places are capable of feeling. What they call a dignifying act aims to facilitate the transition of the spirits of the dead towards the afterlife but not necessarily through the means of any ritual procedure. Rather, by calling for state presence, peasants are pointing to a primarily secular, profane act: to exhume human remains and to give these remains back to their families.

As can be appreciated, the mediation of people is vital in the transition process of these spirits. It was human agency that triggered the events that led to the massacre so it will thus be human agency that restores these spirits to the flow of time and place. This centrality of human agency does not mean that the effects of these ghostly presences concern only people. Instead, spirits themselves and the places they haunt become objects of care because the effects of these violent deaths have been so far-reaching. On one hand, people in Caño Claro expect to reestablish broken connections with this place. On the other, they also expect these ghostly presences will establish adequate relations with the world of the living because otherwise they will not be able to pursue their proper path. At stake here is the alleviation of both the suffering of these unpleasant ghostly presences and the suffering of the

relatives who are still looking for their disappeared. In this sense, the dignifying act will help fulfill a more transcendental goal: the pursuit of a peaceful afterlife. Peasants will be able to recover and heal Caño Claro, and perhaps let others retrieve their dead. In this sense, the act will help reverse the incompleteness, suddenness, and lack of closure associated with the effects that violent death produces among both the living and the dead.

An intimate space

In this chapter, I have brought attention to the dilemmas faced by people of Caño Claro when confronting the ghostly presences of those who in life were mainly responsible for the violence that expelled entire communities from their traditional territories. At first glance, the appearance of these restless spirits and the haunting that pollutes the place peasants now want to retrieve seems to be an extension of the paramilitary violence communities from the Curvaradó River have suffered. Even after they are dead, Doña Liliana believes, the paramilitaries of Caño Claro continue making things difficult for the families returning to their lands. However, more than the overcoming of a violence that has not ceased or the coming to terms with a painful past, what is at stake for these peasants is the possibility of healing their territories and fulfilling a broader but indirect existential goal: to establish the conditions for letting those wandering spirits achieve peace and rest. This aim, partially inspired by a culture of kindness towards the dead, finds its *raison d'être* in an ethical, compassionate relation with the living, by which I mean the families of the former soldiers who are surely looking for their loved, disappeared ones. This compassionate approach arises from the painful experiences of the many peasants of Bajo Atrato who lost their own relatives during the war without having either the certainty of their deaths nor the opportunity of providing proper burials. Ultimately, what connects communities from Curvaradó with the wellbeing of the spirits in pain is empathy with the families of the dead paramilitary soldiers, understanding too well the pain of not knowing whether their respective dead have found a resting place.

In this vein, the haunting spirits of Caño Claro represent a kind of collective failure: of their comrades in arms, of course; of the local communities that lack the means, and sometimes the will, for taking care of these human remains; of their mourning families who lack the resources to know their whereabouts; of the state, which has showed little willingness to respond to the exhumation demands requested by communities; and perhaps, as Taquito pointed out, of the whole society, which has facilitated an unjust system that led poor young peasants to fight a war that favoured the interests of powerful elites and warlords. That collective failure haunts Caño Claro and makes it difficult for both local communities and their territories to heal. In the end, it seems that the political allegiances of these dead soldiers are not as important as the shared class identity and suffering that peasants in Bajo Atrato and other neighbouring regions have endured on account of the armed conflict.

The place of wandering spirits is then an existential concern for the people of Caño Claro: a proper physical space needs to be allocated to the spirits' human remains, which is what will liberate them from the painful condition that keeps them entangled and trapped within the contours of the place where their violent deaths occurred. Until this happens, the dead will continue haunting a place that the living want *sanear*, that is, to heal and to retrieve. People in Caño Claro know that it is the lack of care towards these spirits in pain that perpetuates their harm, which haunts and pervades this place, but it is difficult for these peasants to help such spirits find their way. People have understandable objections for cultivating mercy, compassion, and empathy towards these dead, particularly because their history and the consequences of their acts are still very present in the daily life of communities in Bajo Atrato. The presence of these spirits will then continue to be strongly attached to that place, where they are visible and almost palpable; where their existence is not always reducible to the beliefs or collective cultural representations of people. Without mourning rituals, these spirits will not find an alternative place to the world of the living, where they will do only what they know best: express their pain. But this expression as well as the spirits themselves are neither inherently good nor evil. There are only good or bad encounters with them. In this sense and paraphras-

ing Deleuze (1988), these ghostly presences participate in an order of compositions and decompositions of relations (Ibid., 19). It is thus up to the living to figure out how to find an adequate balance in these relations.

CHAPTER 3



A dead man fishing

Jonas was an indigenous Emberá who arrived in Riociego fleeing a punishment that he considered unfair. For the crime of threatening a neighbour with a machete in Acandí, his homeland, indigenous authorities had imposed a sentence that consisted of tying him to a *cepo*, that is, a pillory, for eight months. The *cepo*, a device which was introduced in colonial times for public punishment, is still used in some indigenous reserves to lock offenders of local laws to a heavy timber frame with holes for their wrists and neck. Rather than accepting his punishment, Jonas preferred to leave his land and relatives and to pursue work as a day labourer somewhere else. After many comings and goings, Jonas established himself in Riociego, a community located on the Salaquí River basin inhabited primarily by *chilapos*—mestizo peasants from the Department of Córdoba who settled the Bajo Atrato during the 1980's. He became known simply as “El Indio” and lived with his wife and two children in a house with a plastic sheet for a roof, just next to the small hamlet's Pentecostal Church.

The first time we spoke, he had just come from clearing a piece of forest where he was planning to grow plantains. He arrived wearing a large hat with a red handkerchief on his neck to protect himself from the intense sun. Soaked in sweat, he told us he had just killed a *mapana*, a lancehead snake (*Bothrops atrox*) that he had found while working with his machete. He had had a feeling he was going to have an encounter with a viper because of a bad dream he had had the previous night: in the dream he was running through the forest, pursuing two people who finally climbed a tree. The tree suddenly transformed into a giant rocky crag and Jonas shouted at the top of his lungs for them to come down. It was only after encountering the deadly serpent that the dream's meaning became apparent to him, convincing him to stop his work and return home. I did not see the connection between the snake, the tree, the rocky crag, and the characters of his dream but did not ask more. I do remember, however, what he said about his grandfather as we started to talk about the *mapana* he just killed. His grandfather had been a *jaibana* who had been killed

by a snake, supposedly sent by another *jaibana* rival. *Jaibanas*, as I will later explain, are shamans–medicine men with powers of curing disease and controlling spirits. According to Jonas, the rival that managed to kill his grandfather had been courting his grandmother who, before she died years later–also the victim of an act performed by another *jaibana*–made him promise that he would escape that land in order to live in a community not infested by evil.



FIGURE 31.
Pillories. Above: "Nègres
à tronco", watercolour
by Jean-Baptiste Debret
(1834).

Below: Every indigenous
village in Bajo Atrato has
a pillory. In some cases, it
may become a seesaw
Photo by author



A few weeks after our conversation, Jonas was found dead in the river, floating face down just in front of the family house where I was staying. At the bottom of a somewhat shallow pool they found his harpoon and lantern, still turned on. Jonas had left that night to fish, as he often did, using a technique known locally as *lentiari*, which consists of using a diving mask in order to harpoon big fish while submerged in the water. When they found him, his body was already rigid and his face had the pallor that only death provides. There were five small but deep marks on his forehead, like the ones serpents leave with their eyeteeth. He also had a cleft in one of his cheekbones, the kind someone might receive from a mighty blow with a stick. I saw these wounds myself in photographs that someone else took the night he was

found. Those who removed his body from the water informed me they had also seen two small clefts on his head.

The suspicious nature of Jonas's death made it the subject of great consternation in Riociego. He died in a shallow pool, a place that Jonas knew well. He often fished there and was by all reports an excellent swimmer, just like all the Emberá are supposed to be. He drowned, yes. But he did not even have time to take off his diving mask or call for help from those who lived right in front of the pool. Nobody heard anything and when they found him at dawn he had already been dead for several hours. Nevertheless, the wounds found on his face and head left little doubt about the nature of his death: Jonas had been attacked by a *madre de agua*.

The water mother

The dense network of rivers, streams, creeks, channels, floodplain lagoons, and marshes that exist in Bajo Atrato constitute an aquatic universe that, according to many elders, is inhabited by beings similar to those that populate the terrestrial and visible world in which humans live. According to some traditions shared by indigenous and Afro-Colombian communities from the Pacific region, the universe consists of three different worlds: the world of the above, inhabited by God, the Virgin, the saints, and the souls that have accumulated sufficient merits to ascend to heaven; the world of the middle, in which humans live and where everyday life takes place; and the underworld, inhabited by the *sinculo*: people without anus-es that feed on the smell that comes from cooked food (Escobar 2008, Losonczy 2006, Sánchez 2002). This underworld is also inhabited by spirits and *visiones* that under exceptional circumstances make themselves visible to the world of the middle. *Visiones* are a kind of being that scare people, induce misfortune or might even provoke illness. They are capable of adopting different forms in order to mislead people: a *visión* might be a human-like voice or a whistle one hears in the depth of the forest and that causes one to lose one's way; it might also be a monstrous specter inhabiting the heart of a forest or swamp. *Visiones* use to be associated with the

wilderness or with those places in which the traces of human occupation are less noticeable. Water bodies can also serve as portals for these beings, which are capable of causing a lot of havoc: from sinking boats and dugout canoes to devouring people. The *madre de agua* or water mother is one of these beings.

Indigenous, Afro-Colombian, and mestizo communities alike consider the *madre de agua* to be a harmful entity that someone creates, generally through acts of sorcery, in order to commit a mortal assault on another person. Among the Emberá, the *jaibanas* or traditional healers are the persons who have the power to create a *madre de agua*. Among many Afro-Colombian communities, it is believed that the apprentices of sorcery, also known as *chinangos* or *zánganos*, are the ones capable to create these beings. In any case, the *madre de agua* represents one of the most common dangers found in the rivers:

Madres de agua are especially common in Emberá communities, but there are also black people and *chilapos* that can make *madre de agua*. They are a kind of spirit that is used to cause harm by taking the form of animals: “There is a deer, there is a paca” and if you approach to catch it, the *madre de agua* catches you, she takes you and drowns you. Then she takes you to the land to eat your nose and fingers and then she leaves you there. (Josefina Arias, in conversation with the author. Domingodó)

Madre de agua can also be a beast that comes from the water to take you. For example, you go down to the river for a dip or to defecate, and it’s at that moment that the *madre de agua* catches you and drowns you. (Carlitos Blandon, in conversation with the author. Domingodó)

The person who is going to be attacked by a *madre de agua* feels a heat, a high temperature, and is compelled to go to the water to refresh themselves. That is when the *madre de agua* attacks them. (Zurdo, in conversation with the author. Riosucio)

For the Emberá, this being represents one of the manifestations of the aquatic world (Losonczy 2006b), whereas for the Afro-Colombians the *madre de agua* is a strong demonstration of the power they attribute to the Emberá. The French anthropologist Anne-Marie Losonczy describes the *madre de agua* as a type of shamanic aggression capable of trespassing interethnic borders:

The Emberá think that the interethnic aggression against Afro-Colombian people is transmitted by a primordial and very powerful spirit that they call in Spanish “madreagua”. This subaquatic jaï belongs to the underworld. They represent it as a hairy being of brilliant colour [...] They may capture and eat indigenous children, unless a shaman captures these spirits. However, for their extra-ethnic victims, this cannibal jaï has the features of a naked indigenous man who captures Afro-Colombian adults and drowns them in the river or who, following the orders of a shaman, throws magic missiles that devour their insides. (Losonczy 2006a: 346)

Madres de agua are created then by persons with shamanic knowledge who intend to cause harm or to take revenge for some perceived damage or offense. The assaults take place only in the water and even though in principle they are created to target one person in particular, if for some reason their creator becomes hurt, the *madre de agua* can turn into a dangerous being unable to identify her victims:

A *Madre de agua* can be made of anything: a leaf of a *guarumo* tree, a corn cob, a balsa tree. But when the *madre de agua*’s creator is killed, she remains disoriented, wandering from place to place. When she is confused, she can attack anyone. (Josefina Arias, in conversation with the author. Domingodó)

If an Emberá or any person suddenly wants to hurt or drown somebody, they can make a *madre de agua* that is destined for one person only. If she is going to hurt you, she goes and drowns you, but only you; she does not do harm to anybody else. Because of that, it is necessary to get along with the Emberá, to make them like you, to neither annoy them nor take their things. (Kempes, in conversation with the author. Salquí River)

The *madre de agua* is then created to target one specific victim. And yet she might lose her original purpose if her creator suffers some harm that impedes him to rule over her. In those cases, the *madre de agua* will continue roaming the rivers in search of new victims. A *madre de agua* has no definite form. Rather, she is a force in constant mutation, capable of adopting the form of an animal, of a plant or of an object that can drown her victims:

It can be a sloth, a leaf of a *guarumo* tree, or a person. For example, she paints herself as a sloth, her arms and her whole body. You approach the *madre de agua* thinking it is a sloth and you get close to touch it, but it is then when she catches you. If she is mad and attacks you, she takes you underwater and you will be found downstream, stranded on a beach, all injured, with the nose, the top of the mouth, and the fingers eaten up. (Martín, in conversation with the author. Domingodó River)

There was once a man in Baudó named Manuel Gringo. One day, somebody sent him a *madre de agua* in the form of a deer. He saw it and was going to kill it but as soon as he approached, it took him into the water and drowned him. He was with his wife, who was pregnant, but nothing happened to her. He was found the next day in a creek. That is also why it is not recommended to bring a pregnant woman with you to the forest. (Ramona, in conversation with the author. Domingodó)

Martín, the man who describes the *madre de agua* painting her body as a sloth, captures something very important about this being: her ability to hide her true being under the guise of an animal wrap. By painting, Manuel does not mean the *madre de agua* is imitating the shape of an animal but rather that she is inhabiting or activating another kind of body. It is this ability to become a game animal—a sloth or a deer—that allows her to get close to her victims. In her account, Ramona brings up the risk of being in the forest with a pregnant woman. In this case, the attack was perpetrated by one of those wanderer *madres de agua* that was somehow attracted by the presence of the woman. According to many people in Bajo Atrato, the bodies of pregnant and menstruating women exude a kind of heat that attracts sylvan beings, which are often associated with the characteristic coldness of the forest. Attacks of a *madre de agua* are identifiable by the marks she leaves on the victim's body: the nose, ears, mouth or fingers are devoured. The attacks can also be distinguished by where they take place: while bathing by the river banks, at common fishing spots or in shallow pools where the chances of drowning are very low. *Jaibanas* may also assault each other through *madres de agua*:

For instance, two sorcerers may wish to prove which one is the more powerful. To demonstrate his mastery, one might send a *madre de agua* to the other. If the recipient has superior skills, he would return it back to the sender. (Macario, in conversation with the author. Riosucio)

In those cases, the *madre de agua* may get out of control and start attacking anyone. Precisely because of these “constant shamanic assault exchanges” (Losonczy 2006b: 162) or the *jaibana* battles so often mentioned by the Emberá people, I was warned in some places to avoid going to the river at certain hours of the night. It is also because of the potential presence of some mad, disoriented *madre de agua* that

many people prefer to always go bathing with company, as *madres de agua* do not attack their victims unless they are alone.

The uncertainty of a coming attack

Victor, the first one to see Jonas's body floating in the river, was so afraid that he did not dare to touch it. Instead, he called his older brothers. The news spread, and some neighbours quickly arrived. However, nobody wanted to enter the water to retrieve the dead body. It was not until later when other Emberá neighbours arrived that Jonas was removed from the water. Then people discussed the necessity of telling his widow what had happened; however, not only did nobody want to give such terrible news but nobody was even willing to go because that meant to travel down the river. They were afraid that during that voyage they would find the being that attacked Jonas. After much discussion, they decided to form a committee of three people who went to Jonas' home. When they arrived, they found his wife already awake. She told them she knew something wrong had happened because some few hours before they arrived she had felt the footsteps of her husband, who took off his boots and left the fish in the kitchen, just as he had done so many times before. The people in the committee confirmed from this account what the Emberá man that had taken Jonas out of the river had told them when they were deciding whether or not to inform the widow: that she was probably aware of the bad news already. This same Emberá said that while taking Jonas's body out of the water he had felt something large and smooth rub against his leg. He believed the evil being that had killed Jonas was still out there. An old Emberá lady that was with them said that the victims of *madres de agua* are also identified by the bruises that appear on their bodies, the same ones that people saw the next morning on Jonas's arms and legs.

This knowledge of the cause of death nevertheless left two unresolved mysteries. First, they did not know if the *madre de agua* had been sent specifically to Jonas or if she was one of those that are disoriented by the death of her creator. As previously mentioned, although *madres de agua* are essentially directed towards one particu-

lar victim, there are instances in which they lose control and start attacking indiscriminately. This, of course, for the Riociego inhabitants was a reason to be worried. The second question to be answered was the form that the *madre de agua* had taken. Given the fact that she can assume different bodies, it was important to be able to distinguish this being from an ordinary animal. Victor and his brothers, who were the first ones to find Jonas, mentioned that they had seen an enormous log next to the body. At the time they did not pay it much attention because the river often carries a lot of fallen branches. After removing the body, however, they realized that the log was gone. Evaristo, Victor's brother, told me that Jonas' feet were very close to this trunk, and that although at first he thought they were entangled with it, he then realized that they were actually on the log, barely held above the surface. The next day they did not find any trace of this log, not even downriver where it could have been taken by the stream. They speculated then that the trunk was actually a giant serpent, the same one that had grazed the leg of the Emberá who helped to take Jonas's body out of the water. So the *madre de agua* was a snake but the mystery of whether or not the attack was targeted at Jonas could only be solved in the coming days. In the meantime, Riociego inhabitants had to wait uncertainly and see whether there would be another victim.

On *jaïs* and *jaibanas*

Water mother is how I have roughly translated the Spanish term *madre de agua*, which is what this being is called in Bajo Atrato. In the Emberá language, the water mother is called *andomía*, a term that is also used to refer to evil spirits in general (Pinto García 1978). This word is similar to that used to refer to a primordial being—Antumía—that has existed since the beginning of time and was banished, according to Emberá mythology, by the Creator to the underworld (Castrillón 1982, Losonczy 2006, Pinto García 1978, Vasco 1985). Antumía is a powerful entity, a fundamental spirit or *jaï* used by *jaibanas* to counteract attacks from other *jaibanas*. In the names *andomía* and Antumía the suffixes *do* and *tu* refer in the Emberá language to the word “river” in the same way as the suffixes that are found in the local toponymy:

Truandó, river of the leafcutter ant; Domingodó, river of the fork-tailed flycatcher bird; Curvaradó, river of bats; Pavarandó, clear river. When the Emberá translate the name of this entity into Spanish, they emphasize its feminine character—mother. In their use of the word mother, Emberá also designate her as a primordial being because she is not only the origin but also the owner or master of the evil spirits that inhabit the underworld. The Spanish article “de” in *madre de agua* indicates that she is both made of and a part of water. The association with the aquatic universe which is evident in its name describes then not only the underworld where she lives, but also the water as the quintessential means she uses to manifest because it is in the river that she attacks.

In conclusion, a *madre de agua* is fundamentally a primordial, evil, feminine being that lives in water and that might be used by the *jaibanas* as a means of shamanic aggression. The *jaibana*, literally “one who gathers a large number of *jaïs*” (Pinto García 1978, Vasco 1985), is a person of knowledge who serves as a traditional healer, a consultant and an advisor—in short, a spiritual leader able to diagnose illnesses and heal them with the help of the *jaïs* or spirits that he has learnt to control. These *jaïs* are invoked through chants and through the use of staffs that the *jaibanas* carve themselves. These staffs signify the type of spirits that the *jaibana* has as allies and the illnesses which he has the power to heal. The ceremonies in which the *jaïs* are invoked usually take place at night. The *jaibanas* congregate people in a house around a small altar, sharing food, drinks, and tobacco for several hours. The *jaibanas* perform their chants while seated on a stool that they themselves have carved, keeping their staffs in one hand and branches of medicine plants in the other. They drink large amounts of maize beer or of *aguardiente* that have been placed next to them on plantain leaves. They smoke almost uninterruptedly. Through their intoned chants, which are alternated with whistled melodies that seem to convey the shape, pattern or energy of the summoned *jaïs*, *jaibanas* talk to and negotiate with these spirits, who finally agree to act under the *jaibanas*’ guidance. This power makes *jaibanas* persons of ambiguous character: they are the ones who can detect and cure illness but also the ones who can inflict it.

Jaibanas can increase their power over time by attacking and weakening the *jaïs* that other *jaibanas* control. One of the *jaibanas* I interviewed explained to me that these battles happen in dreams, through chants after the ingestion of certain plants or simply when they are in the forest doing routine tasks. A *madre de agua* might then become one manifestation of these battles between *jaibanas*; probably the cruellest, because through this battle a *jaibana* seeks the rival's physical elimination, and with said rival's death, the control of all the *jaïs* that he had previously possessed.



FIGURE 32.
The *jaibana* Carlitos
and two of his staffs
Photo by author

The *madre de agua* is a powerful spirit, used not only to attack but also to defend. According to some stories, controlling a *madre de agua* is extremely difficult, and even the most expert *jaibanas* struggle to make these spirits direct their attacks exclusively on their enemies. And if for some reason the *jaibana* that controls a *madre de agua* is not able to submit her completely to his will, the *madre de agua* escapes, wandering the rivers and causing indiscriminate harm to anyone. There have been cases in which the *jaibanas*, or sometimes the *zánganos* or *chinangos* who have learnt the art of invoking these beings, are hired by someone to attack a particular victim. There are also times at which the *jaibanas* unleash the *madres de agua*'s fury with the goal of defending a village or a certain community against the

attacks of their enemies, be they Emberá, Afro-Colombians or mestizo; and whether they are civilians or armed groups.

Becoming a *mojano*

After the commotion that marked the first hours following the discovery of Jonas's body, the villagers started talking about certain omens that had anticipated the *madre de agua*'s attack. That same evening, another pair of fishermen had tried unsuccessfully to catch fish but quit their mission after the nylon they were using for their nets had broken three times. One of the Emberá said that he had decided not to leave his house because he had felt something out of the ordinary in the river, something he described simply as a bad energy. They even said that Jonas had heard the chant of a *jaĩ* the previous day and told his wife about it. Others who had seen Jonas in the hours before his death said that he had had an unusual attitude: when they greeted him, he replied without looking at them. Someone else explained that the evil spirit that attacked him was probably already inside him exerting his power. In this sense, the attacks of a *madre de agua* resemble any other death: it does not occur in one instant as there is often a sense of foreboding hanging over people and places. It is as if the attack itself was but the culmination of a process that had already started since, after all, in Bajo Atrato, death is not a single event with a terminal end but a long-term transformation that manifests itself with different kinds of omens.

As though it was not enough to deal with the *madre de agua* and the possibility of a new attack, the Riociego community also had to decide what to do with Jonas's body. For them, mostly evangelical protestants, it was not a trivial matter. Although they knew the body had to be buried, for many people the local cemetery was not the best place for an Emberá that had presumably died by a *jaibana* attack. Given that Jonas was not originally from Riociego and that he had to be buried far from his homeland and far from what locals considered his own people, some inhabitants of Riociego feared he would become a *mojano*, a sort of monstrous man-eating were-jaguar that

returns to life and starts devouring livestock, dogs, and people. Since nobody in Riociego wanted to take such a risk, people decided the best option would be to take the body to the town of Riosucio and give it to the Emberá regional organization.

In essence, a *mojano* is an indigenous person that comes back from death as a cannibal with a feline aspect. However, such an extraordinary metamorphosis is only performed by few powerful *jaibanas* and those who have accumulated a great deal of knowledge about a particular plant called *tonga* or *güibán* (Pinto 1978). People in Riociego knew that this was not Jonas' case and yet some prejudices prevailed and prevented them from allowing his body to be buried in the small, local cemetery. According to some researchers (Cheucerama et al. 2006, Sanchez 2002) *tonga* or *pilde* is a narcotic plant used by some Emberá traditional healers to diagnose and heal particular illnesses. But to many evangelicals, be they Afro-Colombian or mestizo peasants, the plant is but a means to enter into contact with powerful evil forces. It is through the ritual consumption of this plant that some are capable of turning into *mojanos* after they die. *Mojanos*, also called *Aribamia* in the Katío language (Pinto 1978), come bloodthirstily to life shortly after they have been buried and the only way of killing them is by plunging stakes of the palm *chonta* or *caña flecha* into their chests.

When the people of Riociego delivered Jonas' body to the Emberá leaders living in Riosucio, these leaders were reluctant to receive it because, according to them, even though Jonas was an Emberá, he was not from the region and had no relatives or close affiliations there. Moreover, according to the rules governing the *Cabildo* or Indigenous Council, those who leave their community of origin lose their status of residency after one year. For the indigenous organization, it was clear that Jonas belonged to the Riociego community and it was this village that should take care of the burial. However, for the people of Riociego, Jonas was, above all else, an indigenous person and the time he had lived among them was less important than the fact he was born and raised as an Emberá. Therefore, he should be buried by his people and according to their customs.

There were long discussions between the Emberá leaders and the people of Riociego because, in addition, no one had the resources to pay for the funeral. Together, the leaders of the indigenous organization and some inhabitants of Riociego eventually arranged to have the mayor of Riosucio donate a coffin. The indigenous organization decided then that Jonas should be buried in Barranco, an indigenous reserve located in the headwaters of the Salaquí River. According to one of the indigenous leaders that I interviewed, they chose that location because of economic issues: to bury Jonas in Riosucio's cemetery was too expensive whereas in Barranco they only had to pay for the transportation of the body. The people of Riociego were relieved by the idea that Jonas was going to be buried among his people, even if the truth was that he had never met anyone in Barranco and that he could not even be buried following the traditional Emberá custom, that is, with his most valuable belongings.

The combination of all forms of resistance

In order to understand Jonas' fate, we need to go back in time, to the period of the escalation of paramilitary violence. In 1997, after the paramilitary offensive and the exile of a huge majority of Afro-Colombian and mestizo communities of the Cacarica, Salaquí, Truandó, Domingodó and Curvaradó rivers, the indigenous regional authorities held several meetings with the intention of defining appropriate strategies for resisting both armed conflict and forced displacement. Despite the many threats against their leaders, the selective murders in their communities, the economic blockades that prevented people from traveling or going to work to their fields, and the pressure resulting from the presence of forest-dwelling armed men living in their territories, the regional indigenous organizations agreed that they would not leave their homes under any circumstance. They stated that they were not going to leave their ancestral territories at the mercy of paramilitary and private companies interests, and that they would resist and defend themselves just as their ancestors had done since the times of Spanish colonization of the Americas.

Indigenous communities planned their resistance on various levels: strengthening their social organizations, ensuring the community would respect local rules and traditional justice mechanisms, denouncing rights violations, demanding the state's presence, and avoiding any type of contact or transaction with the armed groups, including guerillas and the official national army. It was also agreed that the *jaibanas* would use their ancestral knowledge to mobilize both forest and river spirits in order to protect their people and their collective territories. Then, *jaibanas* who had the power to negotiate with the mothers or masters of animals released snakes, wasps, and poisonous ants so soldiers in the armed groups would experience difficulties in the forest. Others could send storms and winds to prevent the armed groups from reaching their villages. Some other *jaibanas* discussed the need to adopt more active forms of resistance and some retaliatory actions against those who assaulted their communities. It was at this point during a meeting of indigenous leaders that the idea of using thunder as a means of defence arose.

According to certain Emberá traditions, thunder is the noise produced by the drum of a very powerful *jaibana* who ascended into heaven in mythical times (Pinto García 1978, 216-218). Its sound precedes not only the arrival of the rains but also the arrival of great *jaibanas*, capable of using this element at their will. In Bajo Atrato, its usage against armed groups was unprecedented and not even the most experienced *jaibanas* were fully prepared for it. Dalila Conquista, a knowledgeable Emberá leader who worked for many years at the regional Great Council, told me about the day *jaibanas* decided to use thunder as a means of defense. According to her, not many *jaibanas* have the knowledge to master the use of thunder because it must be invoked through a plant that is associated with this particular *jai* and with the aid of very specific chants, which were restricted knowledge. Even though none of the *jaibanas* of Bajo Atrato had performed thunder attacks, they decided to at least give it a try to see if the chants and the invocation plants would work on this powerful *jai*. One of them announced the day and place in which they would do it: it would be in Riosucio, directly over the police station.

The police station was not a random target. As explained in the last chapter, connivance between the police and paramilitary death squads was always flagrant in Riosucio: paramilitary boats traveled at their leisure without ever being stopped by the authorities; assassinations occurred with total impunity under the gaze of military officials, and paramilitary commandants used to meet with police officials. Some late judicial investigations helped to establish that when the town was seized by paramilitaries in December 1996, the operation was jointly planned in a police station and that a colonel even offered his collaboration in order to make the jobs of the death squads easier (El Tiempo, December 22 1996; Verdad Abierta, September 28 2013). People also observed, during many armed assaults conducted in the rural areas, that soldiers belonging to paramilitary armies and to the state's formal armed forces were often the same men, carrying the same weapons and uniforms, although the patches and insignias of the former were slightly different than those of the latter.

Dalila said that the afternoon of the day marked for the conjuring of thunder was particularly sunny and that she was skeptically watching from her house to see what would happen at the police station. Suddenly, at the agreed upon time, she saw a bolt of black smoke descend near the station. The thunder did not hurt anyone, and although it did not hit the exact place that the *jaibana* had intended, he had made it happen: he had successfully conjured the thunder *jaí*. Dalila thinks he did not hit the target because, as with any weapon, it takes practice to learn to use it properly. After this event and having confirmed its power, the *jaibanas* agreed to use thunder as a weapon but only when they were being attacked by the enemy and not under any other circumstance.

The *madre de agua* was also part of the repertoire of forces *jaibanas* mobilized to protect themselves and their communities against the armed groups. Amaranto, a Riosucio inhabitant who worked for many years with the NGOs that supported the Indigenous Councils, told me the following story:

We were once in a ravine called Chorrillo, in the headwaters of the Chogoroto River, and a *madre de agua* was on a *pichindé* plant. It was around 6:00 pm. I saw a mass, a mass that fell in the water and that almost fell in our boat. I asked one of the Emberá what had fallen and he said it was a *madre de agua*. When he said that, I stood up and moved from the middle of the boat to the back where the driver sat because I was very afraid. When we arrived at the village I asked the leaders why they had placed a *madre de agua* there and they said that it was to support the people. It's a form of resistance: to use and invoke the things that they know. And that worked. I wished we the Afro-Colombians would do the same. (Amaranto, in conversation with the author. Riosucio)

Amaranto emphasizes the tenacious willingness that indigenous peoples have had in resisting the war without abandoning their territories, as most Afro-Colombian communities had to do. His "I wished we would do the same" is also a statement recognizing the intimate relation of indigenous peoples with the forest and their deep knowledge of the different kinds of beings dwelling in both this world and the underworld. That knowledge, in his eyes, represented a new way to counter the effects of the military presence. I heard similar stories about how some communities in the Domingodó River released *madres de agua* in order to prevent *kapunía*, literally non-indigenous people, from getting close to their villages. Reports abound about the effects that these and other spirits mobilized by the Emberá had on several paramilitary fighters. Some were attacked at night while on guard by the riverside, others felt possessed by spirits that were controlling their will. In Riosucio, for instance, paramilitaries who settled by the canal close to the hospital used to see a huge alligator that transformed into a long-haired Emberá man as soon as it touched the land. The Emberá would walk silently and calmly towards the soldiers, disobeying their orders to stop. When they would shoot, instead of hitting him with their bullets, they always ended up wounding one of their own fellow combatants.

Another story I heard involved a local, young paramilitary soldier—forcibly recruited by a commandant—who was appointed to stand guard one night on the shores of the Salaquí River. There he saw a human-like presence wearing a camouflage uniform at the other side of the river. The man knew the man was not one of his comrades in arms and, suspecting the person was a guerrilla soldier, he pointed his rifle at the

guy. At the very moment he shot, he fainted and got seriously sick. He was hospitalized for several days and his comrades never found any trace or sign of the presence the young man swore he saw. After that incident, the soldier started to be known as *maraña*, literally a thicket, a dense aggregation of entangled trees and tall shrubs. Often used to describe thick patches of forests, that nickname captures some of the effects people in Bajo Atrato attribute to the fact of having to spend a lot of time in the wilderness—just as paramilitary and guerrilla soldiers do: one loses discernment, one becomes a little bit raucous and frantic, a little bit savage.

The incidents of paramilitaries being affected by spirits, *visiones* and other sylvan beings were so abundant and frequent in Bajo Atrato, that they were not taken as the made-up stories of some superstitious soldiers. To fight back against these types of attacks, some paramilitary commandants decided to take two actions: the first was to threaten the *jaibanas* and anyone suspected of practicing anything they considered sorcery; secondly, they planned to counteract the actions undertaken by *jaibanas* with their own sorcery.

A latent threat

In the days following the events in Riociego, rumours started circulating. This time the rumors were not about the cause of Jonas's death, but about the possible perpetrators. According to some indigenous beliefs, in the case of attacks committed through acts of sorcery, the first person to find the dead body is actually the perpetrator. Victor, the young man who found Jonas' body, considered these accusations outrageous and defended himself demanding that the Emberá send a *jaibana* to determine who the real perpetrator was. He asked them to set in motion, and here I am using some of his own words, "their own kind of sorcery" and to send whatever "spirit they need to send" in order to determine who was behind Jonas' death. Victor insisted in that he was just a witness and that he had nothing to do with what had happened.

It was also said that there was a warning circulating among the Emberá to avoid going to Riociego because that community was plagued by evangelical *chilapos* that certainly knew secret tricks of their own. In this way, Jonas' death accentuated some racial and religious prejudices: for the people of Riociego, mostly devoted evangelicals who place great importance on living a moral life and on rigorously adhering to what the Bible prescribes, Emberá's beliefs and rituals are but a turn towards the devil. For the Emberá—suspicious of the strict religious observance of evangelicals and of their claims of being blessed by the Holy Spirit with gifts such as speaking in tongues, receiving direct revelations from God or divine healing—what had happened to Jonas might have been but a manifestation of the powers that evangelicals cultivate during their weekly worship services. In any case, the events reinforced existing prejudices in the region, especially among the non-indigenous people who believe it is better to keep their distance from the Emberá because “they know too much”, because many of them apparently are envious sorcerers. However, for the Emberá, the event demonstrated the lack of solidarity of the *chilapos* with a person who had lived in their village for a long time, as well as the existing discrimination towards indigenous peoples since evangelicals perceive themselves as endowed with a kind of superior moral sense that all non-evangelicals lack.

In Riociego everyone was wondering who would have wanted to kill Jonas because, despite some racial prejudices, they all remembered him as a hard worker who never had trouble with anyone. For them, the people behind his death were most likely some Emberá from Acandí, his hometown, who could have decided to take revenge for Jonas running away from his crime without punishment. It was later known that he had had another wife in Acandí and that he had not treated her well, leading people to speculate that it may have been her who ordered the attack in order to make Jonas suffer for his offenses.

When the indigenous people from the regional organization received Jonas's body in Riosucio and heard what had happened, they suspected that it was not an accident, and even though they assumed that it was an attack committed by a malevolent spir-

it, for them, it was not a *madre de agua* that had been sent explicitly to Jonas. According to some of the people I interviewed, Jonas had been drowned by one of the spirits of the underworld that inhabit the rivers and are disturbed from time to time. One of the indigenous leaders said that they had consulted with their *jaibanas*, who said that there was an evil force loose in Riociego, the same one that had drowned four people in recent years. For the Riociego inhabitants, this explanation gained validity because all those who had drowned had died under strange circumstances: one was a very skilled swimmer who died from an epileptic seizure when he was crossing the river; another drowned when he was bringing some wood to sell in town.

The indigenous authorities recommended that a *jaibana* go there to appease this being before there was a new victim. They said, however, that inhabitants of Riociego had to pay for the transportation expenses for the *jaibana* and his delegation. They did not charge any money but requested food, tobacco, and *aguardiente*—a local alcoholic beverage—in order to spend a few nights there and perform the *jai* chants they needed to appease that loose presence. But people in Riosucio were reluctant about that proposal because, as well-educated evangelicals, they would not pay from their own pocket for alcohol and cigarettes, even less so if they were going to be used in a ritual which they considered unholy.

Exorcisms

There are many stories about paramilitary fighters who were frightened during the night, who saw spirits in their camps and during their patrols of the forest, who began talking nonsense, or for some reason ended up shooting their own comrades. Dalila called these types of events *loquera*, madness, and even though some were related to the *jaibanas*' interventions, some were simply the typical appearances of the dangerous beings that live in the forest. According to her, these are spirits that manifest in the forms of humans but that are not human, and on other occasions they confuse the judgment, making people appear where there is nobody.

There was once a group of Claretian missionaries visiting a community in the Quiparadó River that helped treat a young paramilitary soldier who was very sick. He was spitting a thick, white slime from his mouth and had not been able to sleep for several nights. One day, in the midst of his despair, he started shooting his rifle all over the place, injuring one of his fellow paramilitaries. The priest that was travelling with the missionaries prayed several times and when he showed the young man a scapular featuring holy images, the soldier destroyed it just by looking at it. The priest then bathed him with holy water and sprinkled more around the village, making crosses at certain places. After this intervention, the young man partially recovered his sanity and the rest of his companions stopped feeling the spirit that was tormenting them. The events, nevertheless, resulted in an escalation of threats against the *jaibanas*, to the extent that a paramilitary commander threatened to wipe out an indigenous village if any more of his men got sick.

On another occasion, a group of paramilitaries arrived at the parish in Riosucio and asked to see one of the priests. They were looking for him to perform some type of cleansing ritual because many of them were seeing and hearing strange things at their campsite in the forest. This request was actually an order and the priest agreed to recite some prayers for them at the church, as long as they disarmed before entering. They closed the temple's doors and windows and the priest led some of the prayers that are commonly used to release evil spirits:

Spirit of our God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, Most Holy Trinity, Immaculate Virgin Mary, angels, archangels, and saints of heaven, descend upon me. Please purify me, Lord, mold me, fill me with yourself, use me. Banish all the forces of evil from me, destroy them, vanish them, so that I can be healthy and do good deeds. Banish from me all spells, witchcraft, black magic, malefice, ties, maledictions, and the evil eye; diabolic infestations, oppressions, possessions; all that is evil and sinful, jealousy, perfidy, envy; physical, psychological, moral, spiritual, diabolical ailments. Burn all these evils in hell, that they may never again touch me or any other creature in the entire world. I command and bid all the power who molest me—by the power of God all powerful, in the name of Jesus Christ our Savior, through the intercession of the Immaculate Virgin Mary—to leave me forever, and to be consigned into the everlasting hell, where they will be bound by Saint Michael the archangel, Saint Gabriel, Saint Raphael, our guardian angels, and where they will be crushed under the heel of the Immaculate Virgin Mary. Amen. (Amorth 1999, 200)

The Spanish version of this prayer, printed on a single sheet of a damp and wrinkled paper, was kept by one of the priests of Riosucio in a box, alongside his liturgical artifacts. The prayer was originally written in Italian by the Reverend Gabriele Amorth, a priest who belonged to the Diocese of Rome and who claimed to have performed hundreds and hundreds of exorcisms. The priest who performed the cleansing ceremony for the paramilitaries at the church told me that when he was throwing holy water on them, a foul smell began emanating from their bodies and that at some point the church's doors flung open violently.

I was intrigued by the powers a Catholic priest may have over a being such as a *madre de agua*, but according to the *jaibanas* whom I spoke with, it is perfectly normal for a priest to fight against evil *jaís* since these spirits come from the underworld and priests have been trained for many years to summon the divine forces inhabiting heaven. That hard and long training, one of the *jaibanas* told me, is as good as the training of *jaibanas*, who are prepared since they are little kids to become men of knowledge. Moreover, the Catholic pantheon is not seen by the Embera as being antagonistic to the Embera pantheon, as God, the Virgin, and the saints are mythically conceptualized as belonging to the domain of the primordial (Salomon and Schwartz 1999), that is, to a time before time that is partaken of by all deities, including the Emberá ones. That domain is constantly actualized through rituals or when people decide on paths of actions to face, for example, the abrupt changes brought about by the presence and threats of armed people. That Christian and Emberá divine forces are complementary and closely related, was made clearer to me during a visit to the *jaibana* Carlitos, who asked me to buy a bible and to bring it back to him so that he could learn the chants contained in that book. He used the word chants—as the ones *jaibanas* sing during their ceremonies—and not prayers because after all a catholic priest is like a *jaibana*: both know how to work with divine forces.

It was known that the paramilitaries were hiring their own sorcerers to counteract the effects of the attacks against them and to strike back against the *jaibanas* and

their *jaís*. I once met one of these sorcerers. He called himself “Maestro salamanqueño”, that is, Salamancan Master, a name that comes from the Spanish region of Salamanca. He had a shop on Riosucio’s main street and in it he offered all kind of herbs and procedures to bring back loved ones and stop infidelity; find jobs or lost objects; remove bad luck, black magic, curses, witchcraft or the evil eye; help to succeed in business or gambling; he also knew spells for mystical protection and how to reveal hidden enemies. During the short time his shop was open to the public, most of his clients were paramilitary soldiers. They arrived wearing civilian clothes, carrying bags full of new clothes, canned food or items of health and personal care. They looked for protection against snakes, scorpions, and other poisonous animals of the forest, but also for means to strengthen their bodies against bullets and protect themselves from the evil forces inhabiting the sylvan world. Sometimes a boat would arrive and take the Salamancan Master to the paramilitary camps in the forest, where he would spend several days doing his job among the troops. The paramilitaries were hiring healers, clairvoyants, psychics, and sorcerers like the Salamancan Master in order to better protect their soldiers but in the end their work proved to be not good enough because the attacks did not stop. Then some commanders decided it would be better to face the root cause instead: they threatened *jaibanas* and anyone they suspected of what they call sorcery.

Given the seriousness of the matter and because indigenous peoples did not want to endanger their *jaibanas*, the regional indigenous organization issued guidelines to stop the attacks against the armed groups. Following this, some paramilitary commanders and indigenous leaders met a few times to establish a sort of non-aggression pact and they established basic agreements to respect the communities’ rights. However, at this point in the conflict, the *jaibanas* had already unleashed furious sylvan and river forces and could no longer be entirely responsible for the damage these beings might cause.

The emplacement of death

I knew well the place where Jonas drowned. I had bathed there many times, in the shade of an immense tree that locals call *bonga*. Doña Viviana, the lady who lived there, had installed some boards that she used to wash clothes, pots, and other cooking utensils. Everyone in the house used to frequent that place because it was a shallow pool in which anyone could dive and swim at ease. After the fatal night, Doña Viviana decided to remove the boards and install them a little further down the river. She also stopped going to the river at night and began to always go with a companion. A couple of times, her sons challenged me to bathe there. I think they wanted to know whether I would dare or not and were curious to see if I, a “well-educated” outsider, believed in the stories that were circulating. I preferred not to push my luck and changed my bathing spot, just as everyone else in the house did.

Victor later told me that some time ago one of his brothers had been bitten by a snake that came out of the roots of that same *bonga* tree. For them, there was no doubt that this spot held some sort of mystery and after Jonas’ death they verified with astonishment that the roots had started to dry up. It was as if the tree was responding to the place’s enchantment and the death’s impact. My non-expert eye did not let me notice anything unusual: it was a tree that had its roots partially exposed due to being in a ravine on the edge of the river. It is true that the water’s reflection of the shape of its roots gave the place a peculiar look, but I could not notice anything particularly sinister there. I decided to get closer and take some pictures. My idea was to document the location’s appearance and contrast these photos with some that I would take a few months later, when I returned to finish my field work. When I compared the pictures, I realized that the tree actually was changing: some of the roots had rotted and the trunk’s base now had a reddish color. The change, according to Doña Viviana and her sons, was a result of the evil forces contained in that place.



FIGURE 33.
The place where
Jonas died.
Above: the tree in
September 2015.
Below: the same tree in
July 2016.
The shape of the roots
changed considerably.
Photo by author

Throughout my time in Bajo Atrato, I visited many locations that had experienced acts of extreme violence: places bombarded by the army, battlefields, abandoned villages, mass graves, destroyed cemeteries, houses of torture. They all carried some sort of material trace suggesting an indivisible knot between present time and such destructive events: military waste, ruined houses, small shrines, long forgotten objects. Some of these places, as I discussed in the previous chapter, are even inhabited by the spirits of those who died there. Similarly, that pool in front of Doña Viviana's house now contained the traces of Jonas' death: an event that not only

lived on in the memories of Riociego's inhabitants but that somehow also materialized in the landscape, particularly in that tree slowly but uninterruptedly drying up and dying off. Perhaps via some kind of mimetic faculty or contagion, the tree, and by extension the pool, started to participate in the fateful events related to Jonas's death. The place, as people interpret it, was not just a silent background where everything happened. Rather, it gathered a certain hint of energy, a particular affect that was not merely the outcome of some made-up stories. That makes me consider that through their affective materiality, places actively participate in the life of communities in Bajo Atrato and they do so not as mere depositories of pre-existing ideas but as agents with real effects on people and social relations (Tilley 2006). Let me break these ideas down.

In the previous chapter I described how, from a phenomenological perspective, places actively participate in the generation of sense, adding a material emplacement to our modalities of experience. In an effort to avoid reducing the relationship between humans and the world to either an idealist or realist perspective—in an idealist view the world is but a function of how people act on it, whereas in a realist perspective experiences are primarily constrained by what the world allows—phenomenologically-minded anthropologists interpret the relationships between people and places as mutually co-constituted, that is, as a holistic relation in which both people and places exist always together. Bearing in mind such premises, the imminent transformation of the pool where Jonas died leads me to consider two things: first, that through the decay of the tree the place somehow participated if not in the fatal event itself, at least in its aftermath—after all, death was toying with the roots. Second, that the place was not just a screen onto which inhabitants of Riociego projected their own memories and impressions of the event. Given the fact that in the world of their actual lived experiences people in Bajo Atrato do not neatly divide events and places—chapter one described how *fieras* and their presences are not always distinguishable from the places they occupy or the phenomena they provoke; in chapter two I conceptualized the ghostly presences of Caño Claro as a sort of emotion trapped in both time and space—the ethnographic challenge is then

to describe people-places' intimacy in a way that sidesteps any subject-object dichotomy. I turn then to the so-called affect theory as it may account for the kinds of transformations that violent events often unleash in particular landscapes.

Understanding how places may discharge particular moods or atmospheres upon people does not require a new kind of environmental determinism—such environmental determinism would just reify the subject-object dichotomy that affect theory may help us to dodge. Consider the kind of dejection Doña Viviana and her sons experienced when leaving the place where Jonas died. Whatever we call that sensuous impression—atmosphere, hint of energy, affect—it is neither the product of the material world alone nor the reifications of people's inner representations. Rather, such a mood is co-produced, it is what results from the interactions of people and their surrounding worlds. Spinoza (2001 [1677]) conceptualized affects as the capacity of being affected by other objects and the capacity to affect other objects, which means that affects are born in the “in-between-ness” of encounters between things (Seigworth and Gregg 2010) and that they belong to “pre-discursive relations through which bodies are always already made outwardly in relation to the world.” (Gordillo 2014, 22) When considered as forms of affect, the impressions people experience in places such as the pool in front of Doña Viviana's no longer need to be interpreted as either a fact or a belief: the dejection hanging over that place is simultaneously located in and intertwined with both people's subjectivities and the materiality of said place. In other words, the way the place affects people is neither the result of the material presence of a decayed tree alone nor the projection of certain beliefs onto an inert object of the landscape. Rather, what I describe as an atmosphere of dejection is always in between people and that place, is what emerges out of such embodied encounters.

It is worthwhile to note that these encounters are not produced in the abstract but through particular circumstances: what may emerge is the result of the habitual dispositions of people, which are in turn socially and historically constituted (Gordillo 2014, Navaro-Yashin 2012). In Bajo Atrato, war and violence, disappearances

and devastation, abandonment and ruination play a big role in the shaping of such dispositions. And yet the kinds of affects embedded in places of violence do not have a reality or form outside the enactment of certain relations: this is why my own behaviour—avoiding to ever take a bath again in that pool just as everyone else did—also contributed to the creation and maintenance of that feeling of dejection emanating from the place where Jonas was drowned. In the end, as Chakrabarty (2000) reminds us, it is our practices rather than our beliefs that bring events and beings into existence.

FIGURE 34.
An evil look?
Photo by author



To recapitulate: places such as the pool where Jonas died have the capacity to evoke particular sensuous impressions, so they cannot be considered mere terrains on which violence happened but rather must be thought of as mediums through which violence is conducted, experienced, and remembered (Gregory 2016). When people in Riociego look across that place through the lenses of what happened to Jonas, they are simultaneously looking across a tree, a pool, a burrow of snakes, a death, the potential presence of a *madre de agua*, and a sense of dejection pervading that location and causing the place to decay. All these things are in some way or another materialized in the landscape, which in turn attracts, repels, provokes, in sum, affects both humans and their social practices (Berque 2013, Gordillo 2014, Pedersen 2012, Stewart 2007).

A loose spirit

Between December 2002 and September 2003 there was a streak of suicides among the Emberá youth: seven of them took their own lives, including five girls between the ages of 12 and 15 who were found hanging from the beams that support the roofs of their houses. These deaths caused great distress, not only because of the victims' ages but also because suicide is very rare among the Emberá. According to some traditional authorities, the suicides were caused by evil spirits that inhabit the forest: some were being attracted by the violent actions of the armed groups while others had gotten out of control because of the large quantity of unburied corpses produced by the war. The evil actions of the warring people were unleashing and strengthening the sylvan evil forces to the point that even the beings that had been mobilized for protection had acquired so much power that the *jaibanas* could not dominate them anymore. The victims of these spirits were not only indigenous peoples—in Riosucio, some young Afro-Colombian girls suffered episodes of possession, suddenly fainting, losing consciousness, and speaking in voices that were not theirs. It was also learned that one of those spirits came very close to taking a girl out of her house through the window.

In order to remedy such tragedy, a meeting was held which *jaibanas* from not only the Chocó region but from all across the country attended. For six nights, the most powerful *jaibanas* sang their chants and after an intense battle with the *jaïs*, they managed to lock in the evil spirit they considered the mother of all others. They warned, however, that her offspring were still free and that in order to avoid their attacks it was necessary that there be no more fights or sorrow within the communities, that the youth respect their elders, that men respect their wives, that mothers not punish their children, and, of course, that the warring people stop bringing death and terror to the region.

During those long nights of chanting, the *jaibanas* also acknowledged that even though it was relatively easy to activate the forest spirits and ask them to defend their villages, it was also easy due to the circumstances of the war that these beings become endowed with powers that the *jaibanas* could no longer control. It was then agreed that the two most powerful *jaibanas* would ingest *tonga* with the purpose of examining the spirits owned by their colleagues in order to determine which *jaibanas* had sufficient power to control those spirits susceptible of getting out of control. Those who did not have that power would have all of their *jaïs* revoked through a special ceremony involving baths and several special chants. Dalila Conquista told me that the *jaibanas* said: “If I cannot control the *jaïs* I have, then wash me.” After several baths with medicinal plants and long nights of chanting to the *jaïs*, the power of certain *jaibanas* was removed and the former *jaibanas* became, according to Dalila, “not *jaibanas* anymore, but civilians, just like us.” By divesting many *jaibanas* of their authority and power to invoke *jaïs*, indigenous regional authorities could guarantee that not all of them could unleash the powerful forest forces that were running amok because of war. No less importantly, by becoming “civilians” many of them were in effect saving their own lives since guerrilla and paramilitary armies had already launched severe threats against all those that they considered sorcerers.

Even today in certain villages, people know that they cannot bathe in the river at certain times, nor frequent certain places presumably inhabited by *madres de agua* and other sylvan spirits that were unleashed during the worst years of war. The baths given to the *jaibanas*, the non-aggression agreements they made with the sorcerers hired by the paramilitaries, and the decision not to invoke these spirits in defence of their communities, have helped to appease the intensity of the damage that these beings usually inflict. These measures have attenuated the attacks but not entirely eliminated them as these beings are an inherent part of the sylvan and aquatic universe. Their presence continues to be a risk, especially when the existence of armed groups, mass graves, and unburied bodies establish conditions that are favourable to their emergence and fury. In this way, many of these beings continue to manifest themselves occasionally in the region, wandering forests and rivers, causing havoc and, of course, making fatal attacks on unguarded fishermen like Jonas.

Epilogue

Several months have passed without any new victims being reported in Riociego. In one of my last visits to this community, the inhabitants discussed once again the advice given by indigenous authorities that something should be done to expel that spirit from the region, because even though it was not attacking at that time, there was no guarantee that it would not do it again in five or eight years. The majority agreed because many of them had felt a strange presence going upstream and downstream along the river. Of Jonas I retain two images: the huge hat he was wearing that day I first met him and the cadaverous colour of his face in the picture I saw of the night he was found. His wife and children do not live in Riociego anymore and the indigenous Council leaders are still waiting for his family in Acandi to repay the money that the organization had to spent for his burial.

CHAPTER 4



To be in the gaze of an animal that would kill and eat you is to be aware of the indeterminacy of where one's self ends and where another self begins.

J. Metcalf

Seated behind his desk in a room with bare walls, Municipal Secretary of Turbo Ramón Pérez looks timidly at the camera and describes the events: “We are facing a very alarming situation indeed. On two separate occasions, two different persons were killed by a jaguar that has been attacking civilians.” (Noticias Urabá, May 25 2013) Mr. Pérez explains that the last victim was an elderly fisherman whose body was found by lumberjacks on a riverbank, close to the mouth of the Atrato River. “His name was Matías Escarpeta and the people of his village, when they noticed his lengthy absence, went to the forest in order to verify what was going on. In the place where they found his canoe, they also saw a jaguar that was at that very moment devouring his body” (Ibid., 2013).

In the same coverage, the reporter interviews the doctor responsible for the autopsy. His detailed description of the events is morbid: a beheaded and eviscerated corpse in a bloat stage of decomposition. He confirms that the man was attacked by a feline, but that he does not have enough evidence to state that it was a jaguar. Therefore, he cannot corroborate that it was the same animal blamed for killing another peasant some weeks before. Asked about that previous attack, the medical examiner replies that all they found was a head and a hand which were sent to Medellín, the departmental capital, for forensic identification. At the end of the coverage, Mr. Pérez explains that people are really afraid and that, while he is aware of the struggles faced by endangered species like jaguars, he cannot do anything except be in solidarity with “his human fellows”. In consequence, the mayoralty of Turbo, along with the Colombian Navy and the environmental authorities, will set in motion a plan to capture the jaguar and take it to another place where it cannot cause any more damage.

Almost a year later, another TV news report informs listeners that the regional environmental authority, Corpourabá, has forbidden the hunting of a jaguar that has

killed five peasants and attacked at least three marines. The jaguar, explains the Corpourabá spokesperson, is an endangered species and thus protected by international and national laws: “Actually, it is people who are invading the jaguar’s territory. Those are protected areas. People are not supposed to go and log there because it is strictly forbidden by law” (Teleantioquia Noticias, May 7 2014). The last feline’s attack caused the death of a lumberjack who was working in the forest with another man. A friend of the man who saw this attack told me how the witness described the incident: the jaguar caught the lumberjack by the head, and after having thrown his prey onto the ground, planted his sharp teeth directly behind the ears. The witness tried by all means to force the jaguar to release his friend, but only had an axe as a weapon. Then, the jaguar fled with the poor lumberjack in his mouth, but was followed by the witness who, without stopping, shouting loudly and brandishing his axe, successfully managed to get the jaguar to drop his friend—or what was left of him. I tried to visualize this raw scene: a powerful hunter running into the forest with an adult man in his jaws, a prey losing the strength of his last breath and becoming a piece of dead meat, and a desperate person going after them in an attempt to reestablish the weak certitude that we humans are not mere edible beings (Plumwood 2000).

According to the well-known zoologist and conservationist Alan Rabinowitz (2014), jaguars kill in a way that is different from other large felines: they do not take down their prey with a choke hold to the neck or attack their soft underbellies, but instead use their strong jaws to crunch bone either on the skull or the spine (Ibid., 106-107). The bite of a jaguar is more powerful than that of a tiger or a lion since jaguars have structurally reinforced canines—indeed, the most robust canines among all felines if they are compared by weight and size. The jaguar’s maximum bite force is almost 700 Newtons (Ibid., 168-169), a Newton being the force required to change the speed of one kilogram of mass at the rate of one metre per second squared. This means that the force of a jaguar’s bite would feel as though you were suddenly struck by a 75-kg body falling from a five-story building. There is little room for doubt: jaguars’ jaws are designed to overcome the prey’s resistance quickly, and

once caught between them, the prey has very little chance of survival.

People living near the mouth of the Atrato River observed the jaguar stalking prey in the forest several times and discovered that he was not alone: another jaguar and a cub were there with him. The fear increased: there was now an entire family of man-eating jaguars wandering in the forest. It also happened that one of these jaguars attacked three marines who were patrolling the area during one of their counter-guerrilla activities in the region. The Colonel responsible for the military unit explained that the marines received considerable injuries and were hospitalized because of a “feline attack” (Noticias Uno, May 10 2014). In order to avoid another lethal attack, officials of the Colombian Navy decided to hunt down the jaguar themselves. In another TV news broadcast, the reporter uses warfare metaphors to describe that hunt: “A tactical tracking and persecution operation which aimed to ambush the enemy” (Noticias Uno, May 10 2014). The military set a trap using a sheep as bait. To confirm the efficacy of their tactic, a marine hid in a nearby tree. Not only did the trap not work at all, but the marine almost became the prey himself. According to some local people, the marine committed a big mistake: he wanted to attack the jaguar from the left side. “A jaguar,” explains the peasant who tried to save the lumberjack who was killed, “must be attacked from the right side. Everybody knows that.” (Noticias Uno, May 10 2014)

The controversy of the whole story revolved around whether or not the jaguar should have been hunted. To the environmental authorities, the jaguar had to be protected no matter what—his ferocity was but a response to the threat humans and their activities represented to his natural environment. Jaguars do not attack, they defend themselves because humans, according to that narrative, are somehow outside and above the food chain. To try to hunt the jaguar was therefore proof of local ignorance: the peasants did not know that jaguars are an endangered species and that they only attack when people stray into their territories (Martínez Arango 2013; Noticias Urabá, May 25 2013). For the local people, both the ideas, that jaguars might one day become extinct and that they seldom go after humans, were

hard to grasp. They saw that particular jaguar as a dangerous threat, one that was jeopardizing their very livelihood since they were now afraid of going into the forest in order to earn their living. There was an ethical tension at stake here, captured by Mr. Pérez when he admitted that he had to take into consideration both the lives of “his human fellows” and the laws protecting jaguars. If co-habitation between people and a dangerous jaguar seemed implausible, someone needed to be taken out of the equation—but who, and under what premises? It seemed like a matter of ponderability between who deserved to live at ease in the forest and who deserved to die. Who has the authority to decide such a thing, and what are the tenets that would guide the course of their actions?

The diplomatic response of some local authorities—that the jaguar had to be captured and taken elsewhere—aimed to put as much distance as possible between the jaguar and people. The goal was to take the jaguar to the heart of the neighbouring Los Katíos National Park, a nearby protected area of about 72,000 hectares listed as a World Heritage Site by UNESCO in 1994. However, a translocation operation of this nature had never been performed in the region, and the few that had been done in the Americas were failures (Kelly and Silver 2009, Rabinowitz 2000). Ordinary people were more reluctant—why translocate a jaguar from one forest to a nearby forest? That would not prevent new attacks since, after all, where else could a jaguar go if everything surrounding the people’s subsistence gardens, their hamlets, and their houses is but the same, huge kind of forest? To translocate jaguars to a nearby forest where the only difference is its status as a protected area will not assure people’s security, as the jaguars could come back whenever they want. Did the experts from Corpourabá and the Ministry of the Environment not know that jaguars are dangerous animals? Why take the risk and make such an effort to track and capture a jaguar, only to leave him alive and set him free? These were some of the concerns raised by people in Riosucio. I remember the indignation of my friend Emma when we listened to a forestry expert working for Corpourabá on the radio. He made it clear that jaguars should not be hunted—they are not natural enemies of man, and if they sometimes appear to be, it is only because people have become a

hindrance to their having a free run of everything the forests have to offer. “I would like to see one of these professionals leaving their little kids playing or running their errands near these forests”, Emma said. “I would like to see if they will not feel afraid for their kids”. Emma made a good point: those professionals probably knew a lot, but they did not know best.

Jaguars, according to most people to whom I have talked, are wild, dangerous, and unreliable beasts. Their mere existence is a threat to humans because they feed on poultry, cattle, and even people if they have the chance. In Riosucio, I learned that jaguars become infinitely more dangerous under three circumstances: when a female has given birth, when they stalk prey around the hamlets, or when a jaguar has already dared to attack a dog or a human. In the case of the recent attacks, all three circumstances were fulfilled. Throughout my fieldwork, I have borne witness to the revered fear that the people in Bajo Atrato have for jaguars. They are the quintessential human predator and, along with poisonous snakes, they are considered a major threat of the forest. Stories abound about hunters encountering jaguars face to face, as well as jaguars killing hunting dogs, being able to smell people’s fear, taking chickens from hen houses, climbing trees, and fishing in the rivers. I even heard a story of a jaguar climbing into a dugout canoe manned by a fisherman crossing the Atrato River—apparently, the jaguar was crossing as well, but then felt tired and decided to swim towards the canoe and get on board. Yet, there was something different about these new stories of jaguars attacking and devouring people.

In Bajo Atrato, jaguars have occasionally attacked people, but never before had five different peasants been killed in such an incredibly short lapse of time. According to many people, jaguars do eat human flesh, and when they do, they are motivated by a kind of wicked pleasure because they have countless prey in the forest. If those jaguars dared to attack people, it was because they had either lost their fear or were experiencing an eagerness for something different. Jaguars getting close to hamlets or logging sites in the forest is not rare, but when this happens, the jaguars usually go after poultry or even dogs at night, never after people in the daytime. On several

occasions, I was told that a jaguar that eats dog flesh is more likely to eat human flesh, and even worse, once they have tasted human flesh, they acquire a taste for it and desire more. The attacks revealed a kind of ferocious appetite which was not easily satiated even after they had taken several dogs from different houses. No, those jaguars needed more—they wanted to go after humans, and they did not stop once they devoured the first one. The ravenous, ferocious jaguar, and now his family, was showing some kind of evil eagerness and perverse preference which extended beyond what local environmental authorities described as the natural reaction of jaguars feeling threatened.

There was something that got me thinking—the municipal secretary of Turbo said that the jaguar had killed some civilians, but why did he use the term “civilians”? Was it a slip of the tongue, one of those that, according to Freud (2003 [1901]), reveals some sort of subdued wish, restrained impulse, or repressed conflict? Do jaguars differentiate between armed forces and civilians? Was the jaguar violating the rules of war, namely International Humanitarian Law and the protection of people who are not participating in hostilities? Perhaps he simply did not find the appropriate word and was just using a metaphor, like the one used by the journalist who described the jaguar hunt in military terms: “A tactical operation to ambush the enemy”. Actually, in that case, the words described the way the military unit conceived the hunt—and perhaps this was the reason their operation failed since hunting, at least in the tropical forest, is more an act of mimicry than of persecution, a capacity of inhabiting another point of view rather than a rampant chase, the ability of becoming like the prey since, as another hunter describes it, “jaguars can read in the eyes what one will do, he sees what the eyes send, what one thinks [...] The good hunter must learn to see what the beast thinks” (Quoted by Romero 2005, 47). But that is quite another topic. What did Mr. Pérez mean by “civilians”? What if, after all, the Freudian slip did say something about the nature of that particular jaguar? Later, as I tried to make sense of these events and the so-called civilian casualties, I learned that the jaguar was indeed involved in matters of the armed conflict.

On jaguars and their enactment

In this chapter, I will describe the “more than one” but “less than many” jaguars brought into existence through the practices and interactions of diverse kinds of actors. Following Annemarie Mol’s (2002) work with atherosclerosis, the “more than one” refers to the way this disease emerges as a different entity under the gaze of the radiologist, the microscope of the pathologist, the interpretation of the physician, or the pain of the patient—and yet, these partial, different versions of atherosclerosis overlap in the patient’s body and are rendered somehow singular by virtue of heterogeneous health care practices. Similarly, the figure of the man-eating jaguar emerges not as a single, coherent jaguar roaming around and stalking in the forests of Bajo Atrato. Instead, and here I prefer to paraphrase Merleau-Ponty (2002 [1945]), it is a fabric into which different jaguars are woven. In the man-eating jaguar, we meet a diversity of jaguars being performed or enacted by different people. We have, for example, the endangered species biologist and environmental managers want to protect at all costs; the sylvan enemy ambushing military troops; the habitual *tigre* peasants want to avoid when they enter the forest; the animal that becomes a matter of political concern for authorities who want to simultaneously protect people’s livelihood without contravening natural resources laws; the feline whose existence must be assessed through the forensic medical examination of some alleged victims; or the wicked beast discharging all its fury upon unarmed fishermen. Each performed jaguar has some sort of world making power as each one reports different kinds of obligations, values, attachments, and rules of engagement from its practitioners—scientists, politicians, fishermen, or military officials. Each one encounters not a jaguar as a such, but a jaguar emerging in relation to their own material and conceptual apparatuses (Metcalf 2008): some encounter jaguars in zoological literature, some in environmentalist legislatures, some in oral stories, and a few on the trail. It is by virtue of these encounters that each actor defines what information about the jaguar may be accepted as relevant, that each of them allocates different sets of properties to jaguars, defining what matters most

and deciding, in the last instance, the kind of relations a jaguar entails, and therefore, the course of action to be taken.

And yet, these “more than one” jaguars become “less than many” in the actual figure of the jaguar—that is to say, by virtue of its very presence, its nearness to people’s lives, and its inherent capacity of shaping different social relations. A jaguar is a shaper of social relations when, for example, it behaves in one way rather than another: a jaguar stalking livestock reports different kinds of responses from people than a jaguar scratching trees in the forest. That difference is not just the outcome of people’s actions, but rather what shapes people’s responses. In this sense, the jaguar is emergent via its own actions and the configuration of the connections it establishes with people and other beings (Ogden et al. 2013). Moreover, like most animals in Bajo Atrato, jaguars relate to each other and to humans in social terms, that is, as conscious subjects capable of decision-making and intentional action. Therefore, rather than a pre-discursive existence, jaguars are defined for the actions and interactions of which they are capable, becoming a particular kind of being through their contingent relations with people. A jaguar is a jaguar because it tends to behave like a jaguar: it lives in the forest and hunts the prey this place has to offer; occasionally goes after poultry, swine, and dogs; sometimes crosses people’s paths when they are performing their work in the bush; and eventually goes after human prey. However, when the frequency of these activities changes, or when they are not properly performed, some ontological distinctions between jaguars and other-than-jaguars start to blur: what presents itself in the disguise of a jaguar might be a *mojano*, a monstrous were-jaguar that devours people; what seems to be a predator from the forest becomes an animal attacking “civilians”. The jaguar is then a “being-in-relation” (Benajmin 2015) which is defined by virtue of its actions and its engagement with the constituents of the world, people being but one of these constituents.

In the following pages, I will explore some instances of recognition—and of unrecognition—in which different jaguars emerge: the quintessential but wary predator of

zoologists, the greedy and gullible *tigre* of local oral traditions, the daring hunter of livestock that the peasants complain about, the endangered species of environmental managers, the feared man-eating feline of loggers and fishermen, and the pet and war device of warlords. Following Donna Haraway (2008), I see the forests of Bajo Atrato as a “contact zone”—a place for subject-shaping encounters, an instance of asymmetrical relations of power, mutual dependencies, and “mortal world-making entanglements” between species (Ibid., 4). It is in this contact zone, “fraught with power, knowledge and technique” (Ibid., 205), where jaguars meet and are met, where recognition and response are at stake, and where each actor, including jaguars of course, unfolds their own always contingent, learned, and historical rules of engagement. Even when some encounters do happen outside of the forest, as I will later describe, this is the place which, at the outset, shapes the possibilities of mutual recognition—or once again, of unrecognition.

Also inspired by the work of Latour (1993), I will interpret the events involving the man-eating jaguar as an instance in which hybridization of all kinds emerges: the contours between ecological, evolutionary, historical, and cultural aspects of the jaguar dissolve, resulting in a being of many natures, simultaneously cherished and feared, an animal to be controlled but also in need of protection, capable of great feats as well as of mean forcefulness. My attempt in this chapter is thus to show how all of these jaguars are not only possible, but produced by determined political, historical, and material conditions, the violence of war being but one of the instances setting the conditions of possibility for said jaguars.

A mind which attained complete composure

Jaguars (*Panthera onca*) are the largest cats in the Americas, and it is believed that their ancestors arrived on the continent some time during the Pleistocene era, about a million years ago (Rabinowitz 2014). This is not a minor detail since it means that, unlike big cats from Africa and Asia, jaguars did not encounter humans for a long time (Ibid., 179). Although they occupy different habitats, ranging from tropical moist

and dry forests to savannahs and grasslands, jaguars require forest cover for living and for stalking prey (Novack and Main 2012, Zeller 2007). As a matter of fact, their bodies are so well-adapted to the thickness and temperature of tropical forests—short limbs, short tail, deep chest, and stocky bone structure—that they are considered dwarves among the other felines from the *Panthera* genus such as lions, leopards, and tigers (Rabinowitz 2000). Their golden and blackish spotted pelage, adorned with inky-black broken rings called rosettes, constitute patterns that are unique to each individual and provide suitable camouflage in the forest (Mahler 2009).

Jaguars depend exclusively on meat for food, and more than 89 species of animals have been recorded as their prey—including large mammals like deer, peccaries, capybaras, tapirs, and calves; canopy species like birds and monkeys; as well as snakes, turtles, and even fish (Mejía 1995, Novack and Main 2012). Unlike other felines, jaguars are incredibly good swimmers—they travel frequently via watercourses, and they prefer areas near water where they often bathe, play, and hunt for fish, sometimes using their tails (Rabinowitz and Nottingham 1986).

Jaguars have often been described as nocturnal, and although their habits easily adjust to local prey behaviour, they are more likely to be active at dawn and dusk. It is known that jaguars tend to live alone and that they come together only during mating periods. Mothers care for their young for 1.5 years after birth, and although some researchers say that males play no part in raising cubs (Novack and Main 2012), others hold that both parents form temporary associations for rearing the young, at least until they have been weaned or are old enough to travel (Mahler 2009, Rabinowitz 2000). A jaguar's home range is incredibly huge—depending always on the abundance of game and seasonal land variation, some may maintain a territorial circuit of up to 1,200 square kilometres (Zeller 2007). Some researchers claim that jaguars have an extraordinary spatial memory and that they tend to develop specific hunting circuits, even though these circuits are not necessarily followed on a daily or weekly basis (Mahler 2009).

Jaguars have robust skulls, massive muscularity, oversized paws, powerful jaws, and structurally reinforced canines. Having almost no stored fat, jaguars are lean, but muscular and agile. Mostly terrestrial, their relatively short forelimbs allow them to climb trees as well. When stalking prey, jaguars rely more on stealth and surprise than on speed (Guynup 2009, Rabinowitz and Nottingham 1986). They are solitary and opportunistic hunters, stalking and ambushing their prey by piercing their skulls or spines. Indeed, jaguars have the strongest jaws and sharpest teeth among the big cats, and in relation to their size and weight, they also have the most powerful bite (Rabinowitz 2014). Jaguars have developed such refined, smooth hunting movements that they are able to get extremely close to their prey without being detected. A biologist summarizes this peculiarity in these terms: “[T]he jaguar has evolved a two-pronged approach to fetching dinner—stay virtually invisible to the last possible moment and then deliver an overwhelming blow.” (Mahler 2009, 36)

Able to overcome their prey in a single bound, jaguars are the quintessential agile and strong hunter. The jaguar’s four primary lethal fangs are accompanied by incisor teeth which allow them to scrape pieces of meat off the bone, while carnassial teeth work like scissors, slicing and cutting meat into smaller pieces (Ibid., 34). Their forelegs and retractile claws are also powerful tools used to keep prey enwrapped: the front claws, sharper than their canines, clutch prey while the hind ones disembowel it (Roe 1998). Just like other felines, they have glands between their toe pads which emit scent (Rabinowitz and Nottingham 1986) and it is believed that the concave inner surfaces of the curved claws lodge bacteria capable of produce blood infection (Roe 1998, 185). Jaguars have exceptional nocturnal vision and can hear across a wide range of frequencies imperceptible to humans. They also have a huge array of means of communication which grammar biologists still do not understand: scratch marks on trunks, odorific calls, oily body secretions, as well as low-pitched roars, short snorts, growls, and hisses. Some of these signs serve to mark territory, but also work as warnings against possible competitors (Guynup 2009, Rabinowitz and Nottingham 1986, Zeller 2007). In fact, ethologists recognize jaguars as strangely mild-mannered creatures, since they do not show

strong aggression or territorial defence against other jaguars and other cats. Moreover they rarely engage in fights against human hunters and their dogs. According to Rabinowitz (2000, 2014), this reluctance to directly confront adverse situations is an attribute, a fundamental trait of their “jaguarness”.

Rabinowitz argues that jaguars are remarkable warriors and that, “like all great warriors, their success and longevity comes not from the number of fights fought, but the number of fights avoided.” (Ibid. 2014, 185) That means that during the classic “fight or flight” response—that reaction which occurs when animals face a perceived harmful event—jaguars often choose not to engage in a fight. They do so not because of lack of ferocity, but because avoiding a wound in an environment like the tropical rainforest may make the difference between a healthy, solitary predator and a potentially impaired hunter. Often interpreted as a kind of cowardice, this propensity to flee from danger is a sound survival strategy since in warm and moist climates, any damaged muscle, deep cut, or broken tooth may easily get infected, become a serious injury, or simply provoke a severe impairment that solitary hunters cannot always afford to have.

“Jaguars,” says Rabinowitz, “never rush into something. The jaguar watches, waits and evaluates.” (Interview with E. Niiler 2014, ¶4) Even if they have both the strength and skills to easily break their adversaries’ necks, they often prefer to flee when pursued. Jaguarness then has to do with the fact that they are more alert and cautious than other felines; that they are always watching, searching, or looking for something; that they are confident, persistent, and efficient, “like a long-distance athlete. If a jaguar moves, something is going on and he is going to get what he wants.” (Rabinowitz 2014, 177)

Jaguars are always stealthy, extremely vigilant, and persistently wary. Jaguars, argues Rabinowitz, cannot be tamed in the manner that lions or tigers can, and people who have worked with captive jaguars describe them as unreliable, secretive, unpredictable, and untamable (Ibid., 178): “You’ll never see a jaguar tamer in

the circus. If you do, buy a ticket, because that'll be a one-time show." (Mahler 2009, 32) Even in zoos, they are not good exhibition animals, and aspects of their jaguar-ness are beautifully captured by Ted Hughes' poem when he describes the jaguar who, "on a short fierce fuse" acts as if "there's no cage to him", and "his stride is wildernesses of freedom." (Hughes 1957, 4) In sum, the adjectives "audacious" and "imperturbable" come to mind when describing jaguar-ness:

The term *fudōshin* is used to describe the state of mind of only the most advanced practitioners of Japanese martial arts. It denotes a determined, immovable spirit, a state of imperturbability. This immovable spirit is part of what has made up the audacity of this species, the jaguar-ness. (Rabinowitz 2014, 179)

The duped Uncle

Jaguars are one of the most frequent symbols presented in the art and mythology of indigenous peoples throughout the Americas. Often associated with warfare, hunting, shamanism, and pre-eminent social status, jaguar imagery—including a large array of humans with feline attributes and jaguar-like creatures—are found in a significant number of spatially and chronologically separated societies (Benson 1998, Saunders 1998). Because they are the ultimate and unbeatable predator, jaguars are the quintessential model of both physical and spiritual power: their fierceness and strength have been equally mobilized as symbols of courage in hunting and warfare but also as spiritual protectors and custodians of shamanic knowledge (Benson 1998). Jaguar-warriors, jaguar-rulers, jaguar-hunters, jaguar-shamans, jaguar-lords: all these figures conjure a particular conception of socio-political power in which master-ownership relations and the maintenance of the positions between hunters and prey, chiefs and followers, or subjects and objects are always at stake (Costa and Fausto 2010). But if in Mesoamerica and the Amazon jaguars are endowed with powerful characteristics that situate them on the top of socio-political relations, these very same traits become a matter of derision in the oral literature of Afro-Colombian communities.

In their oral stories and traditional tales, the people from the Bajo Atrato describe jaguariness in very different terms than those used by natural scientists. Called Uncle Tiger, the jaguar is the protagonist of different misadventures in which his antagonist, Uncle Rabbit, takes advantage of his supposed avidity, lack of self-restraint, and even naïveté. The first time I heard about these characters, I was with my friend Ives. It was during one of my first visits to the villages of the Truandó River, and one night, to pass the time while we were both engaged in swatting mosquitoes that managed to penetrate our mosquito nets, he told me about the incredible stratagem used by Uncle Rabbit in order to convince Uncle Tiger to “shell” his own testicles. Taking different versions into account (Camawa 2005, Castrillón 2010, Mama-U 2002, Pineda 2002, Vanín 1993, Velásquez 1959), the story goes that Uncle Tiger wanted to hunt Uncle Rabbit, and that he found him eating some nuts with great pleasure. As the rabbit noticed the tiger’s presence, and the tiger felt ashamed of catching his prey via an easy, head-on approach, the tiger only dared to ask where he had found such appetizing nuts. The rabbit answered that he got them from his own body, that he had shelled them by squeezing his own balls with two rocks. The rabbit persuaded the tiger by saying that if he had gotten so many and such tempting nuts from his own tiny testicles, the tiger would obtain greater and better nuts from his own big body. The tiger agreed, reasoning that as he had been raised eating so much meat, he would have tastier nuts. Then, he took two rocks and proceeded with such strength and vigour that he immediately fainted after the impact. Finally, the rabbit ran away and the tiger cried out for revenge.

In another tale, Uncle Rabbit challenged Uncle Tiger to a contest of strength. After having been chased and caught, the rabbit asked for the tiger’s mercy, saying that he would accept being eaten if the tiger were capable of defeating him in a tug of war. Confident about his own strength, the tiger accepted, and both agreed to meet the next day at the seashore. Before the appointed time, the rabbit went to the beach and asked a whale if it was true that she was as strong as everybody said and if she would accept to demonstrate it by engaging in a tug of war with him. She acquiesced. Then, the rabbit gave her one end of the rope and told her he would take the

other end, which he had left behind some shrubberies. There, the rabbit met Uncle Tiger and asked him to take the rope's end and to wait for his signal once he took the opposite end, which was supposedly on the beach. The rabbit hid in the shrubberies, pulled the rope and tiger and whale engaged in a fierce contest in which neither of them succeeded in taking any significant advantage from the other. Whale and tiger realized that rabbit was not as weak as they had initially thought, and when Uncle Rabbit saw they were tired enough, he came out and made fun of them both (Mama-U 2002, Pineda 2002, Vanín 1993, Velásquez 1959).

Another story goes that Uncle Rabbit saw Uncle Tiger going home while carrying some bundles full of food. As many animals were facing famine, the rabbit decided to play a trick on the tiger. He laid down on the path, playing dead, but the first time the tiger saw the rabbit, he ignored the "gift" and preferred to keep going with his heavy bundles. The rabbit got up, took a shortcut and played dead again further along the tiger's route. The tiger wondered if there were some kind of plague in the forest and said to himself that if he had not been carrying so many bundles he would have taken this and the other rabbit he had previously found. The tiger continued along his way, and the rabbit played his trick for a third time. This time, the tiger decided to take the rabbit and the previous prey, leaving all his bundles on the ground and going back, first of all, to where he had found the other dead rabbits. Meanwhile, Uncle Rabbit stole Uncle Tiger's bundles (Vanín 1993, Velásquez 1959).

Uncle Tiger and Uncle Rabbit are important symbolic characters in Bajo Atrato, although strictly speaking there are neither tigers nor rabbits in this region. Tiger, *tigre*, is the common name people assign to the jaguar and rabbit, *conejo*, is the name used in tales and oral traditions when referring to other rodents which do exist in the region and belong to the *Dasyproctidae* genus: *ñeques*, *tinajas*, and *guatines*, all known in English as agoutis. If among most Amazonian and Mesoamerican societies hunting and the phenomenological context of predator-prey relations constitute the essential source for the conceptualization of jaguars as the archetype of power, in the Pacific coast Afro-Colombian societies seem instead to privilege the

figure of the prey as a means for conceptualizing autonomy and resistance in the face of an overwhelming power. Uncle Rabbit, as evidenced by the aforementioned tales, is the archetypal trickster: that figure which exhibits a great deal of intellect that is playfully used to deceive conventional authoritative figures and challenge established societal rules. The trickster, argues Lewis Hyde (1998) is “a boundary-crosser” but also a creator of new boundaries as he often “brings to the surface a distinction previously hidden from the sight.” (Ibid. 7) According to David Leeming (1991), the trickster is “at once wise and foolish [...] promiscuous and amoral; he is outrageous in his actions” (Ibid., 154). Joseph Campbell (Toms and Campbell 1990) states that these characteristics reveal “someone who is beyond the system”, someone who represents new possibilities of life since the trickster is “the breakthrough of the absolute into the field of controlled social orders.” (Ibid., 39) Trickery, deceitfulness, amorality, humor, and extreme inventiveness are the traits of a figure that like Uncle Rabbit succeeds through his cleverness rather than through his strength.

These and other tales in which Uncle Tiger and Uncle Rabbit are the main characters share an astonishing similarity with certain oral traditions from the African Bantu peoples. Such similarities have captured the attention of some Colombian scholars (Arocha 1999, Friedemann 1993, Machado 2012, Mama-U 2002), who see in these tales an irrefutable proof of the kind of African retentions that gave origin to the cultural identities of the black communities which flourished in the Colombian Pacific coast during the colonial diaspora. For example, I have found similarities between the story of the strength contest and traditional Dogon tales from Mali (Calame-Griaule 2006), and also with other Bantu tales from Zimbabwe and Zambia in Southern Africa (Werner [1933] 1993). The story of how the rabbit steals the tiger’s food also resembles the oral literature of the Mossi people from Burkina Faso, although the deceived character is a hyena rather than a tiger (Sissao 2002).

However, the tendency to highlight the survival of cultural and symbolic African elements among contemporary Afro-American societies has been criticized by several scholars (Mintz 1974, Mintz and Price 1977, Restrepo 2003) because it trivializ-

es the processes of innovation, flexibility, social change, and cultural diversification that characterized the history of enslaved societies in the New World. Some of these scholars argue that even if it is possible to track some African cultural elements in the Americas, the presence of said cultural elements has more to do with a set of “unconscious grammatical principles” (Mintz and Price 1977, 5) of various African societies, rather than with specific cultural retentions and formal similarities. One of the arguments allowing these scholars to call into question the apparent African cultural survival is the dissimilar geographical provenances from which enslaved people came. The so-called grammatical principles refer to a set of underlying cognitive orientations which work as, “basic assumptions and expectations about the way the world functions phenomenologically” (Ibid. 5), and which may have guided enslaved people as they established diverse social practices such as religious systems, kinship models, or gender relations. In this sense, such cognitive principles do not have to do with any kind of formal cultural heritage because culture is associated with the institutional forms to which these principles are closely linked, which were absent in the American colonies:

While immense quantities of knowledge, information and belief must have been transported in the minds of the enslaved, they were not able to transfer the human complement of their traditional institutions to the New World. Members of tribal groups of differing status, yes; but priesthoods and temples, no. Princes and princesses, yes; but courts and monarchies, no (Ibid., 10).

Therefore, when discussing the process which gave rise to Afro-American societies, authors like Mintz emphasize sociocultural change and innovation rather than continuity and retention: “[Afro-American societies] depended—needed to depend—on creativity and innovation far more than on the indelibility of particular culture contents. Such creative adaptation is, of course, a form of cultural change, in which the individual, or a whole mass of individuals sharing certain tradition and values, develops new forms.” (Mintz 1974, 14) In other words, Afro-Colombian oral traditions cannot be simply understood as a kind of African cultural heritage because the diaspora and the subsequent processes of adaptation, historical change, creativity, and innovation produced new forms. People from the African diaspora who arrived

in places like Chocó needed to develop new and authentic cultural forms, so Uncles Tiger and Rabbit's adventures should be interpreted as a sort of mytheme—that is, kernels of a theme which are reassembled and interpreted in various new ways.

Regardless of this debate, it is clear that Uncles Tiger and Rabbit's stories are important in the Bajo Atrato: they depict different relationships, validate and support existing values, and awaken a sense of awe before some animals and their possibilities of becoming. In sum, these stories make the world intelligible as they express assumptions of what kinds of things and relations do or might exist. Uncles Tiger and Rabbit also make evident the relational ontological constitution between predator and prey: one is what it is by virtue of the strategies the other unfolds, because of the capacity of one for interfering in the plans of the other. In this sense, the trickeries of Uncle Rabbit let us know as much about himself as well as about the forces he wants to overcome. These stories are important not only to Afro-Colombian communities, since indigenous peoples have also incorporated these tales into their own oral literary traditions. They are often told and enacted by storytellers during social meetings, informal gatherings, or even simply at home. What is important here is that these stories do circulate in the region and play an important role in the creation and maintenance of a particular sensibility about jaguars: they are strong but gluttonous, and they care little about the means they employ in order to get what they want.

Some other values attributed to jaguars are well-exemplified in the following story. Aunt Tiger was looking for someone who could help her to babysit her cubs because she was very busy harvesting rice and maize. After asking Uncle Paca, Uncle Deer, and Uncle Otter, who were also busy with their own housework, Aunt Tiger went to Uncle Rabbit's place. The rabbit accepted the job but only after negotiating an advantageous wage. After the first day, when Aunt Tiger returned home, Uncle Rabbit welcomed her with a succulent meat soup. Tiger was surprised because she had not left any kind of meat in her provisions. Rabbit told her he had set up some traps while the cubs were sleeping, and that he had been lucky enough to catch

a small prey. But what had really happened was that Rabbit had killed one of the seven cubs. Tiger thanked him and asked for her cubs because it was nursing time. Rabbit told her he would get them but that he would give her only one at time. Aunt Tiger agreed and after she finished nursing the first, the rabbit gave her the cubs one by one, giving her the last one twice. The next day Uncle Rabbit killed another cub, cooked a soup and offered it to Aunt Tiger, who was very satisfied with the taste of the meat. When it came time to feed the cubs, rabbit did as he had the previous night, but this time giving her the last cub three times. The situation repeated itself during the following days until there was only one cub left. When the tiger was nursing the same cub for the sixth time, she noticed that he was overfull and did not want more. She asked Uncle Rabbit about it, and he said that the cubs were probably gorged because of the food he himself had given to them earlier that day. On the eighth day and after finishing her soup, Aunt Tiger asked for the cubs and Uncle Rabbit revealed the terrible truth: she had already eaten all of them. Then, the rabbit fled at full speed.

This same story with some minor variants also exists among the Bantu peoples from both Western and Southeastern Africa (Prudhomme 2003, Werner [1933] 1993). Some other tales, which also share subject matter with African oral literature, tell stories of how a captured Uncle Rabbit deceives a greedy Uncle Tiger by making him believe that the leg he took is really a tree's root (Calame-Griaule 2002, Mama-U 2002, Pineda 2002, Vanín 1993, Velásquez 1959); or how Uncle Rabbit passes off a dead tiger he finds in the forest as a prey from his own hunt (Camawa 2005, Mama-U 2002, Vanín 1993, Velásquez 1959). As it can be appreciated, Uncles Tiger and Rabbit embody different possibilities of being. While Uncle Tiger is the archetype of strength—big, powerful, and capable of killing—Uncle Rabbit is the archetypal trickster—small but agile, able to make good decisions and act creatively in an array of different contexts. Being part of longstanding oral traditions, these stories contribute to preserving local knowledge, transmitting norms and moral values, and even promoting a particular sense of belonging. Some scholars (Losonczy 2006, Oslender 2004, Restrepo 1995 and 1996) see in these Afro-Colombian

traditions everyday cultural manifestations that challenge some mainstream moral assumptions and resist hegemonic representations of nature. Scottish scholar Ulrich Oslender (2004) calls these oral traditions “hidden instances of resistance” since although they do not openly challenge dominant powers or elitist appropriations of Afro-Colombian traditional lands, they are mobilized by Afro-Colombian social actors as a part of their political action, in their efforts to guarantee differential rights based on their cultural singularities.

I found this kind of mobilization in one of the few existing written versions of these tales. In a special issue of a magazine published by the Mama-U Cultural Centre (2002), a local institution which promotes art, music, and dance with the aim of valorizing the Afro-Colombian cultural identity, the aforementioned tales are examined in light of the violent and destructive changes resulting from both the armed conflict and extractivist development projects in Chocó. The tales are considered “experiences of resistance in war times” (Ibid., 15). According to the editors of this issue, Afro-Colombian communities may draw on teachings found in these stories in order to face the threats of the armed conflict and violent extractive economies. For example, Uncle Rabbit always avoids direct confrontation and is very resourceful when finding ways to be safe and sound—he demonstrates a profound knowledge of the territory by always being one step ahead of Uncle Tiger (he arrived first at the beach in the strength contest, he knew the path used by the tiger very well and was able to repeatedly get ahead of him in order to play dead). Most importantly, Uncle Rabbit does not only look for a deception or evasion, but in some instances, he intelligently fights against Uncle Tiger. He does so not directly, but through ruses that jeopardize the very possibilities that tigers have for accomplishing their own future existence, like when Uncle Tiger destroys his own testicles or when Aunt Tiger devours her own children (Ibid., 17-18).

In the violent context faced by the communities of Chocó, the two characters embody radically different values. On one hand, the editors argue, Uncle Tiger represents brute force, as well as lack of intelligence and imagination—he is then the

paws of private capital, wanting to raze land, steal natural resources, and destroy the lives that Afro-Colombian communities have patiently created in their territories (Ibid., 18). In contrast, Uncle Rabbit represents archness, and his mischievous character is proof of his ability to be creative and convince his enemies that his lies are true—he represents the capacity to dream and resist even in the most unfavourable situations (Ibid., 19). In sum, the editors argue that these tales recreate the historical situation of Afro-Colombian communities in Chocó, where war and annihilation have been the *raison d'être* of slaveholders and masters, and now of armed groups and greedy capitalists: “Uncle Tiger and Uncle Rabbit’s tales are the best synthesis of the means and experiences of resistance cultivated by communities that have learned to survive in their territories.” (Ibid., 17)

The trickeries of Uncle Rabbit are then mobilized within the frame of a large oppressive power. He disrupts and even reverses an overwhelming system: a subjugation first associated with slavery and colonial domination and now with war and extractivism. In the same way some literary critics (Gates 1988, Levine 1977, Savoy 1995) have found in the figure of Brer Rabbit in African American literature a trope of identification that allowed enslaved communities to create their “own symbols in defiance of the perverted logic of the oppressor” (Earl 1993, 131), the fragile but resourceful character of Uncle Rabbit would represent the possibility of overthrowing the violent programs represented by the devourer figure of the jaguar. Uncle Tiger, in oral literature, embodies a fool to be deceived, a greedy opponent to be taunted. However, the place jaguars hold in these traditions does not mean that people in the Bajo Atrato simply deride them. Actually, just as the armed conflict and rapacious capitalist development represent a danger in people’s daily lives, jaguars embody a permanent risk, one of those inherent perils permanently stalking in people’s territory.

Uncanny feeding habits

“Lucky,” pronounced “Lookie” in Spanish, was the name of a dog buried in a courtyard. He had lived in one of the houses located behind the town, that is, on the opposite side of the Atrato River, near the swamps and forests surrounding that part of Riosucio. That house was inhabited by four adults, six children, one cat, eight chickens, three ducks, one parrot, and Lucky, the only one of his kind. As a matter of fact, Lucky was the least lucky of all the inhabitants because he was killed at dawn by a jaguar that took him from the kitchen, the very place where the dog had chosen to sleep that night. I visited the place the day after the attack, and it was hard to believe that a jaguar had dared to go that close to people’s bedrooms. Like most houses in Riosucio, this one had two separate main sections: the first was enclosed by wooden walls and consisted of two bedrooms and a wide living room, while the second was a kind of appendage to the main building, consisting of an open kitchen and an improvised storage room without walls. In this latter section, which leads out to the courtyard, is also where the so-called *azotea* was located—a platform garden made of a rotting canoe and used for growing herbs and some medicinal plants. It was near the *azotea*, in a corner surrounded by floats, sinkers, gaffs, and fishing nets, where the unfortunate Lucky was assaulted.

According to Hugo, Lucky’s master, the dog had chosen that place to sleep because he surely felt afraid of something. Hugo told me that dogs, unlike humans, are always aware of what is happening and the day before the attack, he had barked constantly to an unseen presence in the forest. That morning before dawn, everyone was sleeping and all they heard was a curt squeak. When Hugo woke up and took the machete he usually keeps near the back door, all he saw was a jaguar fleeing with the dog in its jaws. Hugo hit the feline, although he did not manage to use the machete’s edge. Harried by the noises and the man’s presence, the jaguar ran away to the forest leaving the dog on his path. Lucky was mortally wounded in the neck and spent all day in pain. In the place where he was assaulted, I only found a clump of dog hair. Hugo was afraid that now that there was no dog at home, the jaguar

would come back to chase the chickens—this is why he decided to keep his sharpened gaff at hand at night.

Jaguar attacks in people's dwellings are extremely rare. Indeed, I had always heard that even if one must spend a night in the wilderness, the mere presence of a fire or a hanging mosquito net would keep jaguars at bay. I used to make the joke that if a tiny bug like a mosquito could not pass through the mosquito net's holes, a jaguar would be even less able to do so. According to some biologists, jaguars tend to favour their natural prey (neither humans nor dogs are among them), and attacks on domestic cattle or poultry reveal a kind of desperate last resort launched by the jaguars in order to survive. After some surveys conducted in Belize, Venezuela, and Brazil, researchers found that most of the jaguars killed while preying on cattle had previous shotgun wounds in their bodies (Rabinowitz 2014). Many had ossified wounds in their heads, others had damaged limbs, and still others had broken canines. In other words, jaguars causing problems with domestic animals were impaired jaguars, since shotgun wounds hampered their ability to hunt and kill effectively (Ibid., 105-110). This lends more evidence to the idea that jaguars are naturally reticent about confrontation and tend to avoid fights in which they can be easily wounded because, as has been said, such wounds may become a major problem to a solitary hunter.

To a jaguar, according to biologists, crossing large open areas, chasing in an open field, or going close to dwellings represents an unjustified risk—a desperate measure provoked by some kind of chronic pain or physical impairment. In the case of Lucky, people from the town speculated that the jaguar had to have been a female looking for food for her cubs. Others, pondering the reasons why a jaguar was stalking near the town, started to wonder if the animal was really a jaguar or a *mojano*. On the local radio, some warning messages were broadcast advising parents not to let their children wander alone. As this became the main topic of conversation during those days, I started to hear more and more stories about *tigres*, *panteras*, and *leones*. According to these stories, big cats are natural predators of people, but

each of them has their own manners: if you shoot a jaguar, he will run away, but panthers will chase you back no matter how or when you shoot. Scientists consider that panthers do not exist in the Americas and that what people take as a totally different species are really jaguars lacking melanin, that is, albino jaguars (Mahler 2014, Novack and Main 2012). However, to people in the Bajo Atrato, these animals are two different kinds of beings not only because of their physical differences, but also because panthers seem to be more dangerous and vindictive than jaguars. I have also heard that lions, the local name for cougars, are better climbers than jaguars because they are able to climb up very tall trees and then go back down facing forward, whereas jaguars must descend facing the same way they climbed up. I knew that jaguars are able to smell fear and that they apparently do so by putting their paws on their preys' footprints, that their weak spot is their nose, that they are equally able to attack on land as on water, and that their eyes shine like a glowing flame at night.

I have also heard about some fortuitous encounters with jaguars, most of them during hunting trips. In these encounters, hunters often aimed their rifles towards the jaguar's head and even if they hit the mark, jaguars did not die immediately but ran away. Hunters usually tracked the trail of blood left by their wounded prey, yet never found their corpses. I started to think that there was a place, in the most remote corner of the forest, where jaguars liked to go to die, and I thought that such a place would be the epitome of wilderness—a place beyond the reach of any human. However, it seems that wounded jaguars finish their lives in a less romantic way. Because of their massive skulls and muscularity, and also because of the kind of ammunition hunters use in the Bajo Atrato—mainly lead spheres and black gunpowder—jaguars often survive these shots, but not without a serious injury. According to some scholars (Kelly and Silver 2009, Mahler 2009, Rabinowitz 2000, 2014), these wounded jaguars are the ones that are more likely to go for easy prey like cattle, poultry, or malnourished dogs.

Attacks on people, although unusual, do happen, but the reasons jaguars may go after humans remain a point of dispute, both among the scientific community and according to people's experiences in Bajo Atrato. According to some researchers, jaguars only strike back or respond aggressively when they have been provoked, or when they feel threatened or trapped. During his work in Mexico, Aldo Leopold (1972) was not able to confirm any reports of man-eating jaguars: "Men undoubtedly have been killed by cornered or wounded jaguars, but unprovoked attacks are rare. In this respect, the jaguar differs from its relatives in the Old World. Lions, tigers, and leopards may all become man-eaters under certain conditions; the American cats fortunately do not." (Ibid., 469) Rabinowitz (2000) holds that, of all the big cats, jaguars are, "the least known to attack humans unprovoked and they are virtually undocumented as man-eaters." (Ibid., 201) According to him, jaguars pose little threat to humans because they often prefer to escape rather than fight. Mahler (2014) reports that during the last 100 years, he only documented three verified cases of jaguars killing humans in the wilderness, and that other cases involved careless zookeepers (Ibid., 84). Shepherd et al. (2014) claim that jaguars have rarely been reported to attack humans in the wild, and that only one trainer in an animal menagerie died as a consequence of neck and spinal cord injuries (Ibid., 223). It seems that, despite all the man-eating mythology existing in places like Bajo Atrato, jaguars do not regard humans as prey and are, according to biologists, the least likely of all the big cats to attack humans.

Cases of man-eating big cats have been well-documented in Africa and India. Perhaps the most well-known case in Africa is that of the Tsavo River lions during the construction of the Kenya-Uganda railway in 1898 (Frank et.al. 2006, Patterson 2004). It is believed that about 135 railroad workers were killed by two lions, and that this man-eating behaviour was provoked by a particular set of circumstances—namely, the decimation of game like buffalo and zebra because of a disease spread by domestic cattle, the disruption of lions' habitat due to human settlement, and the presence of inadequate human burials: it seems that Hindu railroad workers performed some kind of abbreviated cremation for the people who died during the

railway construction and that the hungry lions were attracted to those improperly buried bodies, thus acquiring the taste for human flesh (Patterson 2004). In any case, the switch from these animals' habitual prey to humans was but an accommodation to the loss of their usual food sources.

A more recent case is one of a lion that was responsible for the deaths of at least 35 people in Southern Tanzania in 2004 (Dickinson 2004). The Rufiji Lion, as this young adult of three and a half years was later known, made these 35 killings in an extraordinary short lapse of time—20 months—and it is suspected that such behaviour had been taught to him by his mother when he was young. What astonished the researchers who examined the lion's body was that he had a large abscess behind one of his molars—probably the reason he switched from hunting buffalo to hunting humans because the meat was less painful to chew (Ibid., ¶2). The issue of man-eating lions is not banal in Africa—some recent figures show that in Southeastern Tanzania alone, at least 600 people have been killed by lions since 1990 (Frank et.al. 2006).

In India, home of the world's largest population of tigers, it has been estimated that about 85 people are killed or injured each year by tigers (Mazoomdaar 2014). When a tiger becomes a man-eating creature, that is, when it has been confirmed that the same individual attacks several people in quick succession, the law allows residents to hunt tigers down. However, it is difficult to determine when a tiger might be considered an actual man-eater, since most attacks are accidental rather than willful (Beveridge 2014). Very few individuals turn to human prey, and the ones that do so are either old, injured, or young tigers that have not yet attained typical adult characteristics (Mazoomdaar 2014, ¶31).

Jim Corbett, a famous British-Indian hunter who hunted down several man-eating tigers and leopards in Northern India during the first half of the twentieth century, noticed that most of these predators were suffering from wounds or disease. According to him, "A man-eating tiger is a tiger that has been compelled, through

stress of circumstances beyond its control, to adapt to a diet alien to it. The stress of circumstances is, in nine cases out of ten, wounds, and in the tenth case, old age.” (Corbett 1946, xiii) In his memoir *Man-Eaters of Kumaon* (1946), he describes how, after examining the skull of the so-called Champawat Tiger, a female credited with more than 400 human deaths in both Nepal and India, he noticed that she had been shot in the mouth some years before he actually killed her and that her teeth were practically destroyed. Hence, she had been unable to chew on natural prey (Ibid., 28-29). He made a similar discovery after having hunted down the Chowgarh Tigress responsible for 64 killings in five years (Ibid., 101). Also, in the case of the so-called Mohan Man-Eater, Corbett discovered that at least twenty-five porcupine quills were severely embedded in the tiger’s right foreleg. As porcupine quills do not dissolve, the tiger’s wound had deteriorated to the point that his leg muscles and bones had rotted and were cratered with signs of infection: “[C]ause enough to have made the poor beast moan when he walked, and quite sufficient reason for his having become—and having remained—a man eater” (Ibid., 148). Between 1907 and 1938, Corbett was credited with having killed about twelve man-eating big felines, “who were collectively blamed for more than 1,500 human deaths” (Bellows 2008, ¶10). Even among these twelve well-confirmed man-eating tigers and leopards, Corbett believed that only when they have attacked humans, “on at least three separate occasions should it be declared a problem animal that needs eradication.” (Rabinowitz 2014, 109)

Although it seems incredible that so few tigers could be responsible for such a large amount of human casualties, that figure—twelve felines—is consistent with what is known about problematic jaguars killing domestic livestock. In a five-year study conducted in Mexico and Venezuela, researchers found that out of all the cattle kills attributed to jaguars, 90% of them were attributed to only three jaguars (Rabinowitz 2014, 108). That being said, not all jaguars killing livestock were problematic animals at the outset, but had rather become so after repeating the problematic behaviour continuously. Also, as has been pointed out, this behaviour is usually associated with impaired jaguars, although there have been cases in which jaguars

had learned the problematic behaviour from their livestock-killing parents. Those animals, and only those, were the individuals who, according to specialists, should be removed from the wild.

To sum up, all cases involving big cats killing humans, or even domestic livestock, have to do with a drastic switch of diet from natural prey to easier ones. This change is associated with a failure to recover from wounds, a severe decrease in access to game animals, or simply even the feline's age—either too old or too young. Specialists agree that there is nothing in such a behaviour—tigers, lions, or jaguars feeding on people—that resembles natural animal instinct, but rather, these big cats are trying to adapt to a set of abruptly changing circumstances which leave them with little choice but to go after unusual prey. Yet, it might be exceptional circumstances that would trigger their relish for human flesh, like when they have previously learned from their parents how to hunt people (the Rufiji lion) or when they have previously tasted human flesh by other means (the Tsavo River lions that found corpses buried in shallow graves). In both cases, they have lost an indispensable trait: their fear of people.

Prominent pets

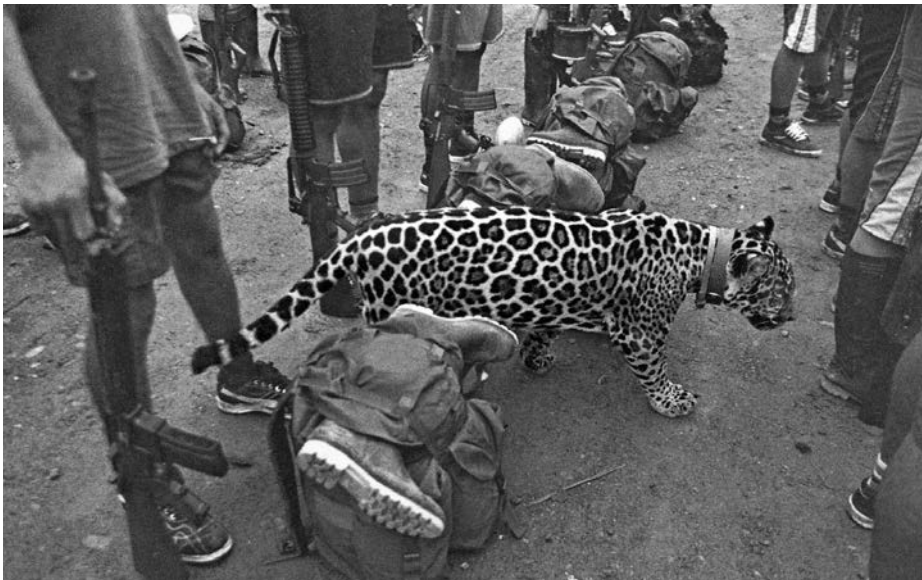


FIGURE 35.
A prominent pet
Photo by Jesús Abad
Colorado

In 2004, Colombian photojournalist Jesús Abad Colorado took this photo during the training of paramilitary soldiers in Tierralta, Department of Córdoba. A jaguar cub, no more than a few months old, walks among the backpacks and semi-automatic rifles of soldiers standing in line formation. The men and their military equipment are all perfectly aligned as if an inspection of the troops is taking place, yet the uniformity of such a formation is interrupted by the carefree walking of this juvenile jaguar. Weapons, as well as military gear and stance, contrast with the presence of a wild animal wearing two wide, thick leather collars: indications that taming has been attempted. The cub has been adopted as a pet, and yet something of that unsubduable jaguar's character is revealed in this photo as it is walking and sniffing at its ease and not, for instance, like the disciplined military dogs one can see in parades. Of course, the paramilitary are not an ordinary army, just as jaguars are not common pets. The jaguar had surely been captured when it was younger, probably taken away from a hunted female, and indisputably moved away from its own kin in order to be kept in an alien environment. The cub's presence among these soldiers may reveal a particular relationship, one in which even fearless armed soldiers show some kind of need to cherish and care for a pet, since there is no doubt that they looked after that particular jaguar.

Stories of pets kept by people directly involved in armed conflicts are not rare in Colombia. The image of the kidnapped police officer walking along with a peccary when he was released by the FARC after more than twelve years in captivity is famous.

FIGURE 36.
Out of captivity
Source: de Santa'anna
2012



The peccary's name is Josefo, and he now lives in a zoo, after having been the tender companion of sergeant José Libardo Forero during the four months that preceded his liberation (Forero 2014). During his captivity, Libardo Forero also owned a frog that, according to him, foretold some crucial events, and many of his fellow kidnapping victims kept monkeys, parrots, and other birds as companions as well. Former presidential candidate Ingrid Betancourt, who was kept in captivity by the FARC for six and a half years, relates how some *guerrilleros* take wild animals and look after them as pets. Even she became somehow attached to a little female monkey that a *guerrillera* had captured and adopted, but which ended up as meat for the dogs of a commandant (Betancourt 2010). Monroy Álvarez (2013) tells the story of a former paramilitary soldier who managed to raise a hen and a rooster in the forests of the Bajo Atrato region. For a year and a half, he was constantly moving from one camp to another and engaging in fights against the guerrilla without ever leaving his tactical gear, his AK-47 rifle, and, of course, his chickens.

These stories say something about the kind of life combatants and their victims live in the forest, or as I like to put it, the kind of relationships that the forest propitiates. All of these stories also tell something about the caring relationships one may cultivate with animals even in the most hostile conditions and circumstances—or perhaps it is precisely because of these circumstances that one needs to engage in such relationships. Yet, unlike monkeys, parrots, and even peccaries, jaguars do not seem to be the best companions as they are not only very independent, but also unreliable creatures. According to most researchers (Brown and López 2001, Hosey et.al. 2009, Mahler 2009, Rabinowitz 2014), the bond created in relationships between humans and jaguars is usually one-sided: the human is attached, but the jaguar not so much. In some cases, keeping a pet like a jaguar may not be a mere matter of companionship, but some kind of display—a demonstration of one's status or wealth, or an opportunity to enhance one's image. This was the role of private royal menageries, for instance: demonstrations of an emperor or king's power and wealth (Berger 1980) since after all, who can afford to care for and to provide for such an animal? I think that to keep a jaguar as a pet might also say something about the

kind of masculinity these soldiers want to project, considering the circumstances necessary to capture a predator like a jaguar. What kinds of skills are needed to do this? In the case of paramilitary soldiers, the presence of a jaguar is symbolically powerful since the animal becomes a type representing particular values with which the paramilitaries identify themselves. The jaguar is the quintessential dangerous predator, the ferocious hunter that embodies the attributes that soldiers and the army need: stateliness, bravery, and strength. However, what if these jaguars' traits are not just used to symbolize desirable values, but are also mobilized as a weapon of war? If we take another look at the picture, we find that there—among soldiers, rifles, and military backpacks—the jaguar also seems like another war device—but what kind of device?

In May 2003, the very first time I set foot in Apartadó, I saw a caged jaguar in the headquarters of the 17th Brigade, the military unit operating in the Urabá and Bajo Atrato regions. One could say that the jaguar was on public display since when driving from the airport to the city, you must cross in front of these military headquarters. At that time, the jaguar's cage was visible just beside some buildings and assault training fields. I asked about that jaguar, and the first answer I got from several taxi drivers was that it was the Brigade's mascot. A questionable mascot indeed, but it was not rare at all for a battalion trained to wage war in the forest to keep such an animal in order to be shown in military parades. When I asked other local residents about that jaguar, it came up several times that the animal was used by the army to get away with some dubious things, which I learned were connected to the sinister allegations hanging over that particular military unit—namely, its connivance with the paramilitary death squads that “pacified” the region. The jaguar, some people whispered, was used to get rid of the corpses of people secretly imprisoned and tortured in that military unit. I was shocked to hear this, but later realized that such a terrible thing was not unrealistic, given the dirty war that had taken place during the 1990's in this region when massacres, forced disappearance, tortures, and killings became the norm. Militaries raising a man-eating jaguar? Perhaps. Nobody will know for sure. But I did see that caged jaguar every time I crossed in front of the

17th Brigade's headquarters until one day, at the end of 2005, when the cage was empty. Nobody was able to tell me anything about the jaguar's whereabouts.

In 2014, shortly after the fishermen were devoured, another formerly encaged jaguar was pointed out as the perpetrator. According to several people in Bajo Atrato, one of the paramilitary commanders used to have a jaguar on one of his ranches, and he released the animal back into the forest before his property was confiscated by the authorities. That confiscation was part of the agreements paramilitaries had accepted during their demobilization process, and its aim was to contribute to the Victim's Reparation Fund. The rumours were that the paramilitaries had habituated that jaguar to eating human flesh: the bodies of the people they considered undesirable.

Impaired predators

Like other big cats in captivity, jaguars need to be appropriately fed. Their daily dietary intake has been calculated at 1.2 to 1.5 kilograms per day (Azevedo and Murray 2007, Polisar et.al. 2003), and in order to adequately fulfill this need, muscle meat is not enough. In the wild, they gain nutritional benefits from other parts of their preys' carcasses including bones, organs, fat, blood, and even hair or feathers (Azevedo and Murray 2007, Brown and López 2001). In most zoos, for instance, lions and tigers periodically receive carcasses because different parts of these provide different kinds of essential nutrients: bones and fur provide minerals and keep the animals' teeth and gums in good condition (Hines 2016), organs such as the liver provide vitamins and fibre (Azevedo and Murray 2007), and muscle meat is rich in fats and proteins (Hosey et.al. 2009, Polisar et.al. 2003). Some zookeepers prefer to feed their big cats with packets of frozen prepared meat as they consider giving them live animals to be a risk, especially since some prey sometimes fight back and may injure their predators (Wolchover 2011). However, it is predictable that when these big cats are kept as pets, their less-than-professional keepers might prefer to feed them with live animals like goats, chickens, turkeys, sheep, calves, or any other meat at hand.

What happens if, for some reason, a wild jaguar that has been caught and kept must be released back into the wild? That is, for instance, the case faced by some zoos or wildlife rehabilitation centres when they rescue cubs from wildlife smugglers or illegal hunters (Kelly and Silver 2009). Such animals face a dilemma: they are not capable of successfully living in the wild because they have not learned all the necessary survival skills from their parents, but at the same time, they need to be kept in captivity in order to be protected. The problem is that the longer they stay in captivity, the harder the return to their natural habitat will be. According to Jule et al. (2008), species reintroduction projects using wild-caught animals are more successful than those using captive-born animals (*Ibid.*, 361), but in the case of individuals that have been captured at a very young age, such as the cub kept by the paramilitaries for example, their odds of surviving in the wild tend to decrease and be almost the same as those of captive-born animals. Mate choice preference or diet preference are some of the changes that these animals may experience in captivity, and that could have serious implications once they are reintroduced into the wild (Slade et al. 2014). According to some researchers (Jule et al. 2008; Slade et al. 2014), these animals underperform socially in the wild, being less likely to mate and breed. Because they also lack social influence from conspecifics, these animals do not appropriately develop key socially learned skills such as hunting. The lack of these kinds of survival techniques, which are often passed down from parents to offspring, constitutes a major disadvantage to these individuals once in the wild (Jule et al. 2008, Mathews et al. 2005). Above and beyond these deficiencies, captive-born animals and young wild-caught animals have less natural fear of both other large carnivores and humans, which makes them more likely to be killed because they tend to venture into areas populated by humans or depend on anthropogenic food sources (Clark 2009).

The reintroduction or translocation of jaguars is particularly difficult because they usually need to spend time perfecting their hunting and killing skills (Kelly and Silver 2009, 197-198). In the case of the so-called problem jaguars—those accustomed to feeding on domestic livestock—translocation programs have not been successful

because jaguars begin to prey on cattle shortly after being released (Ibid., 2009; Rabinowitz 2000). This is why, before releasing jaguars into the wild, it is important to assess whether a suitable habitat is available and check for the presence of desirable prey species, as well as some kind of prerelease training that might allow jaguars to improve their hunting skills and adjust to their new diets (Kelly and Silver 2009). Failure to take these measures might lead to dreadful consequences.

A devourer of men

According to Corpourabá (Teleantioquia Noticias 2015, February 24 2015), the man-eating jaguar killed three people. People who had seen the animal corroborated that he was not alone, but had a female and a cub with him. This alarmed everybody because a jaguar that had developed a taste for human flesh was now teaching his conspecifics. While the regional environmental authority was not able to confirm if the deaths were all provoked by the same animal, there was no doubt about it to the people I talked to, and some local hunters acted in consequence: in February 2015, the man-eating jaguar was hunted down by some local hunters. This provoked anger and indignation in some media sources that reported how the body of an endangered species ended up as a children's toy first (the skull was used by some children to play), then as dog food (dogs were fed with the jaguar's flesh and bones), and finally as a hunting trophy (the fur was hung on a wall) (Ibid., 2015). The reaction of the local inhabitants was quite the opposite, since they had found relief after learning about the death of a jaguar that had caused so much trouble and fear.

I remember the conversation I had with a friend about this. He is the owner and driver of a boat that travels regularly between Riosucio and Turbo, which makes him a very informed person. He told me that three hunters had succeeded in tracking and trapping the jaguar, but that people were now concerned that the animal had left a female and three cubs that they believed had developed the same propensity for human flesh. The proof was that, after the supposed man-eating jaguar was

killed, the attacks on poultry and dogs did not end. When I asked my friend why the original jaguar, which had been killed, had developed such behaviour in the first place, he grabbed my arm, took me to one of the empty rooms of the house we were in, and told me, almost whispering, that the *tigre* had belonged to a paramilitary chief who had kept the animal on one of his ranches and tried to raise him as a pet. I had heard a similar version of this story from someone else who had told me that the paramilitary chief had entertained himself by setting the jaguar loose on people to attack them, so that the animal had learned to not be afraid of humans. However, my friend went beyond these stories and explained to me that that the *tigre* was used to do away with the bodies of the people the paramilitaries had kidnapped and tortured. Apparently, the jaguar was kept in a cage and did not kill people, but was fed with pieces of human flesh. Therefore, in order to better get rid of these bodies, the paramilitaries would cut up corpses and throw the pieces to the jaguar, who had been starved for several days in advance. This is how the jaguar became accustomed to human flesh, a diet which he could not give up once he was set free.

There is no doubt that a hungry jaguar could devour meat and bones without leaving a single trace, but to make a whole human body disappear would require a significant and systematic effort because, among other things, jaguars do not eat their prey all at once but often leave it and eat the parts at different times (Brown and López 2001, Novack and Main 2012, Rabinowitz 2000). Moreover, they eat neither guts nor teeth (Mahler 2009, Shepherd et.al. 2014). Therefore, to deliver a human body in one piece may not be a good idea, and this fact seems to be corroborated by the idea that the jaguar kept by the paramilitaries was systematically fed with pieces of human flesh. Such a ghastly method, although not very sophisticated, becomes plausible once we examine other methods set in motion by paramilitaries throughout the country. In 2009, several former fighters started to confess that in regions of Antioquia and Norte de Santander, furnaces were built to cremate the bodies of their victims (El Espectador, May 9 2009; El Tiempo, May 20 2009)—their idea was to avoid having mass graves in their controlled regions, as well as to eliminate any evidence that could be used by prosecutors. Mass murder is a business that requires a lot of inventiveness.

Thus, the jaguar killing and devouring people in the Bajo Atrato was, so to speak, a paramilitary jaguar. He literally became one of the *mochacabezas*—a beheader, as paramilitaries are often called in the region. The jaguar was accustomed to eating human flesh and this is why, once in the wild, he was more likely to go after people. A paramilitary jaguar represents an even greater danger than an ordinary jaguar, and if this particular jaguar had hunted down people and was even teaching its cubs to do the same, then the danger was clearly becoming greater than with a normal jaguar. These circumstances have changed jaguars' appetite for humans, and the ferocity of their attacks and boldness in going so close to human dwellings reveal traits exceeding those of ordinary, wild jaguars. Such changed jaguars have, sadly, turned into war devices, and their behaviour is an extension of the evil that people attribute to paramilitaries: strength, lethality, greed, lack of compunction, and caring little about the means for getting what they need.

A jaguar accustomed to eating human flesh as the result of the training of a paramilitary commander is, after all, a jaguar involved in the armed conflict. It seems that the Municipal Secretary of Turbo was right indeed: the jaguar was killing civilians, and this was but more proof of how forests and their sylvan inhabitants may run amok because of war.

A jaguar and a half, or half a Jaguar?

Among the many conclusions which can be drawn from the incidents with the jaguar, I retain the instances in which some people failed and others succeeded. A warlord somehow succeeded in designing a more or less efficient “device” for the disposal of bodies—a design that, once released in the forest, the people of Bajo Atrato experienced as a ravenous, evil jaguar. Environmental managers failed to recognize that creatures such as man-eating jaguars can indeed exist, although they succeeded when pointing out the troublesome impact that human affairs may produce in the life of jaguars. Biologists, zoologists, and ethologists tend to see jaguars simultaneously as kin and kind, that is, as token and type. When they study par-

ticular jaguars, they infer things about them so that when the traits of some tokens do not fit into what is known about the type, what remains is just an anomaly: a man-eating jaguar is but an aberrant behaviour that cannot be derived from what seems to be a unitary jaguar nature. That kind of single natural order, which determines a limited set of relationships, is opposite to the way people in Bajo Atrato settle the differences between jaguars: they are what they are, and they become what they become mainly, “in flesh and in sign” (Metcalf 2008, 124)—that is to say, by virtue of their material-semiotic encounters with people (Haraway 2008). In this sense, a jaguar is rarely a taken-for-granted jaguar whose possibilities of relationships are foreshortened beforehand by a sort of predestined natural plan.

For their part, local communities have always encountered jaguars and have learned in their daily lives to cultivate what Jacob Metcalf (2008) calls an intimacy without proximity. Jaguars and people participate in a social entanglement—they know each other as they have a shared history and place, and yet such a mutual recognition attains better results without actual spatial proximity, given the fact that during close encounters, each one might prove dangerous to the other. In Bajo Atrato, people know how they can participate in the lives of jaguars, and their awareness of the edibility of their own bodies surpasses the possibility of becoming the master of one. Dominion seems to be an option discarded for those who have been close to jaguars, and it is precisely in this respect that the warlord and the paramilitaries who adopted the jaguar as a pet have failed: they forced a proximity without intimacy, without co-habitation, without mutual knowledge and recognition. They tried to bring into their own all-too-human domain a being with an innateness which is but, and here I prefer the words of the poet, “wildernesses of freedom.” (Hughes 1957, 4) Finally, those who failed the most, if failure can even describe their lamentable fate, were those who died in the forest under the paws and fangs of a creature indifferent to the laws that regulate war. They were victims, although a veil of indeterminacy will always cover that condition: Victims of what? Were they victims of “feline attack” as described by media, the unlucky prey of an apathetic endangered species? Or did they experience the outrageous aftermath of a perverse plan perpetrated by some armed actors?

In my attempt to make sense of these events, a question about the jaguar still haunts me: was this a “jaguar and a half” as I suggested in the title of this chapter, or was it the “half of a Jaguar”? A jaguar attracted to the taste of human flesh after being used by paramilitary armies as a device of war is no longer the kind of jaguar people in Bajo Atrato recognize as an ordinary jaguar—is it something more than a habitual animal? A jaguar belonging to a warlord is more dreadfully rapacious than one living in the forest—a jaguar turned into a weapon is greedier than the jaguar playing the gluttonous role of Uncle Tiger, for example. Yet, these key features make me consider that the jaguar was actually something less than an ordinary animal. Let me explain with the following images.

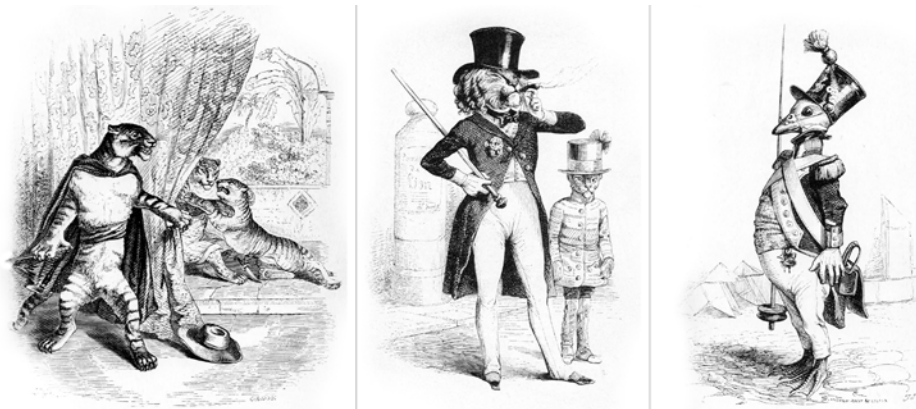


FIGURE 37.
Press-ganged animals
Source: Grandville (1842)

In his analysis of J.J. Grandville’s engravings published in *Scènes de la vie privée et publique des animaux* (1841-1842), John Berger (1980) argues that, unlike some traditions in which the purpose of portraying a person as an animal was to reveal a particular aspect of their character—i.e. a lion to represent courage or a donkey to exemplify stubbornness—in these illustrations, animals are not moral metaphors. Instead, “they are being used *en masse* to ‘people’ situations” (Berger 1980, 17. *Italics in the original*), and have become prisoners of social situations that are not of their own. This overlap of animals and populace epitomizes, according to Berger, the process of the cultural marginalization of animals so characteristic of the 19th and 20th centuries. Similarly, the man-eating jaguar provoking so much havoc was press-ganged to resolve the sinister business of people involved in a dirty war. It is

this involvement in too-human worlds which makes me think that the jaguar is actually “half a jaguar”: imprisoned in the situations of men and perverted by human affairs, his jaguariness faded away.

Perhaps the jaguar is neither more nor less than a Jaguar. I feel that, by framing the question in such terms, I am taking away his own agency. After all, it is through his own acts—hunting in manners that are both efficient and impeccable, raising and feeding cubs, successfully evading hunters who, like the soldiers in the beginning of this chapter, equated hunting and warfare—that the jaguar participates in the transformative relations which people in Bajo Atrato have experienced. Perhaps the jaguar is simultaneously both: a being exceeding the drives of his own condition, and a being halfway from his own jaguariness. Perhaps it is by affirming this hybridity and this multiplicity that we can better understand both war and forests running amok.

CHAPTER 5



In the tropical rainforest of Bajo Atrato, home to about 5% of all reptiles worldwide (Proyecto Biopacífico 1998, Rangel 2015), poisonous snakes are not a trivial concern. They are the most feared creature of the forest and considered to be, as told to me by an elder, the principal threat for humans:

The most dangerous thing in this region are snakes. Not the jaguars, not the panthers, but snakes. Not even the paramilitary nor the guerrilla soldiers. We have learned to not be afraid of those people because if they are in fight, at least you know where to hide, how to protect yourself from their bullets. But with snakes, you never know where you'll encounter them. (Egidio, in conversation with the author. Riosucio)

You never know. They might be found in the mornings in the *balsas*, travelling with some *palizadas*, sneaking around houses and gardens, hiding in the stacked firewood, sharing burrows with game animals, creeping on the forest ground, climbing trees, or mimicking the shapes of small branches. Some people maintain that even if deforestation has forced some animals to retreat, this has not been the case for snakes—the quintessential wicked being. As a matter of fact, in places like the Curvaradó River, the clearing of forests which preceded the development of oil palm plantations was favourable for the abundance of snakes. These snakes, according to the communities that returned to these lands after several years of forced displacement, represent a major danger since their bites have become more lethal than ever. Let me explain.

Under certain circumstances, a snakebite might become an even more delicate matter than usual. For instance, for those who had sexual intercourse the previous night before being bitten, the venom might prove lethal, or at the very least, the recovery might be more difficult. Or, if one has been bitten and needs to cross a river, the venom will act faster. Or, if you managed to kill the snake that bit you but it dies face up, your treatment will be more complicated. All of these types of events are considered a *trama*, that is to say, something that renders one's recovery more difficult. The word *trama* might simultaneously be translated as both woven thread and plot, in the sense of a storyline. A *trama* is then an event or a behaviour-per-

formed either voluntarily or involuntarily—which might render a snakebite fatal. It amplifies the effects of the poison, making any healing treatment more difficult by somehow twisting, deviating, or transforming a snakebite’s possible outcomes. A *trama* might also be conceived as a weft which has not been appropriately woven over and under the warp yarns—it is then a knot, a tangled thread capable of altering the warp and woof of one’s life. The image of the *trama* as a knot is an apt description because those in Bajo Atrato who are considered the best healers are the ones capable of untying or undoing *tramas*.

A snakebite can be *tramada*—knotted on account of one’s behaviour, such as having sexual relations before going to the forest or wearing clothes inside out. A *trama* can also originate from someone else’s witchcraft. In that case, the *trama* is conspired during the patient’s treatment, making the healer’s work more challenging. One can also *tramar* herself if one does not follow the restrictions prescribed by a healer. Some older snakes may have a poison which proves to be stronger than usual, while others may become more poisonous because they have bitten several dogs or persons. In those cases, their bites easily become *tramadas*, so that the *trama* is not necessarily the consequence of one’s actions, but instead an intrinsic feature of particular snakes.

Since 2005, communities inhabiting the Curvaradó River basin have noticed an increase in the snake population and in the bites’ *tramadas*, which means that these snakebites are difficult to heal with the treatments normally used by traditional healers. As I have mentioned, this increase is associated with the presence of large swathes of oil palm plantations developed by companies that formed criminal alliances with paramilitary groups. Some inhabitants of the region assert that palm poisoned the land and that this poison is now, through the snakes, polluting people’s bodies. What do these *tramas* say about the effects provoked by war and forced displacement? Are they illustrating some kind of cultural representation of suffering? Or do they express the way in which a collective experience of violence can alter the qualities of places and beings that constitute the territory? Using this

example as a starting point, this chapter will examine how some of the damage inflicted upon indigenous and Afro-Colombian territories might be understood within a framework that decentralizes the human rights granted to these communities. The seed of this frame has been sown by the Decree-Law 4633 of 2011, also known as the Victims' Law for indigenous peoples. Concretely, this law incorporates the notion of territory as a victim:

The territory, understood as a living entity and foundation of identity and harmony, in accordance with the very cosmovision of the indigenous peoples and by virtue of the special and collective link that they hold with same, suffers a damage when it is violated or desecrated by the internal armed conflict and its underlying and related factors (Congreso de Colombia, Decreto-Ley 4633, Art. 45)¹.

Dealing with “the special spiritual relationship that indigenous peoples have with their territory” (Ibid., Art. 8)² as well as the “special and collective link that connects them to Mother Earth” (Ibid., Art. 3)³, the law recognizes the importance of the territory for the cultural survival of these peoples. There is no doubt that this law is a very progressive and sensitive legal approach for considering the effects that war has produced in the relations which indigenous peoples cultivate with their land. In this sense, the recognition of the territory as a victim might be considered a kind of legal fiction, that is to say, a proposition or a “technique of make-believe” (Moglen 1989), through which certain facts are assumed or created in order to apply a legal rule. The classical example of a legal fiction is the way in which corporations are treated as persons by many national laws in order to affirm that they have the same legal rights and responsibilities as a natural person. In this case, the Victims' Law establishes the territory as a victim in order to advance public policy and preserve the territorial rights of indigenous peoples. However, it does so in a way that what is rendered a matter of legal concern is the respect for both the already recognized property ownership of collective lands

¹ Original text: “El territorio, comprendido como integridad viviente y sustento de la identidad y armonía, de acuerdo con la cosmovisión propia de los pueblos indígenas y en virtud del lazo especial y colectivo que sostienen con el mismo, sufre un daño cuando es violado o profanado por el conflicto armado interno y sus factores vinculados y subyacentes.”

² Original text: “[...] la especial relación colectiva y espiritual que tienen los pueblos indígenas con su territorio”

³ Original text: “[...] el vínculo especial y colectivo que los une con la Madre Tierra”

and the beliefs of these communities, not the idea that the territory might be considered a sentient person.

Based on what I have described in the previous chapters, I propose a slightly different interpretation of the law. If the presence of a wickedness poisoning people's bodies, the madness of jaguars, the release of evil spirits, *palizadas* and the impossibilities of taking the journeys that bring the territory into existence, the haunting of places, the presence of wandering spirits, and the disappearance of *feras* are taken into account, the inclusion of the territory as a victim of armed conflict might go hand in hand with the possibility of recognizing the extent of the damage that goes beyond humanity. This recognition would also imply the possibility of seeing the territory as an agent, or in legal terms, a "living entity" (Congreso de Colombia, Decreto-Ley 4633, Art. 45). In other words, the law and the consideration of damages beyond the human have created a scenario which might make possible the recognition of the territory itself as being subject to rights.

In this chapter, I argue that considering the territory as a victim might enable a series of actions for the protection of not only the cultural frameworks with which certain ethnic communities derive their relationship with the world, but also for the recognition of diverse groups of beings and forces whose existence transcends the realms of what, in law, is usually considered to be cultural worldviews. Therefore, I wonder if the inclusion of the territory as a victim could tell us something not only about the harm caused to certain worldviews, but also about the very nature of the destruction caused by war, its impact on the world, and possibilities for reparation. The current socio-political environment—characterized by the peace agreement reached by the government and FARC guerrillas in 2016, as well as the ongoing demobilization of other illegal armed groups—has paved the way for the Colombian state to undertake policies of truth, justice, and reparation regarding indigenous and Afro-Colombian communities. In this scenario, I am interested in the kinds of actions which may result from considering the territory as a victim, on the part of both these community groups and the Co-

Colombian government. How could an agenda of rights which go beyond humanity be implemented, and what type of policy is possible? That is the leading question guiding this and the following chapter.

I start this chapter by briefly describing the social context in which the Victims' Laws were created, focusing on the differences between the laws for indigenous versus Afro-Colombian communities. It should be noted that indigenous organization, on one hand, and Afro-Colombian organizations, on the other, formulated two different laws and that each of these laws was formulated with the help of the State, with each community addressing the concept of territory in different terms. I explore the origin of such differences in the first section. Later, following a perspective identified as political ontology (Blaser 2009a, 2009b, 2012), I present what I consider to be an emancipatory feature of the recognition of the territory as a victim: the possibility of bringing into the public sphere a set of damages that transcend the traditional scope of human rights. By using this particular framework, I describe what I consider to be a set of political and theoretical implications of the law, not the socio-legal effects. Some of these actual effects, as well as the way the recognition of the territory as a victim is being interpreted in Bajo Atrato, will be addressed in the next chapter. In the third part, I explore how the idea of the territory as a victim may also challenge the very notion of damage. I argue that even if environmental degradation is an important impact of war in indigenous and Afro-Colombian territories, the armed conflict has provoked long-lasting and profound harm which possibility of reparation challenges current assumptions regarding restitution of territorial rights. The last part explores the type of ontological challenge implied in the conceptualization of the territory as a victim. Although that legal recognition is explicitly present only in the law regarding indigenous peoples, I argue that exploring the effects that war has provoked in dissimilar sets of human and non-human existences should not be conflated with nor reduced to the existence of certain ethnic identities. Bearing this in mind, I then propose some questions that should be taken into consideration now that victims throughout the country have claimed that reconciliation and reparation are conditions for the achievement of a long-lasting peace.

A common thread

On June 2011, the Colombian president signed the Victims and Land Restitution Law (Law 1448), commonly refer to as the Victims' Law. This law aims to provide reparations to victims of human rights violations and to restore the stolen lands of the millions of families that have been driven away from their homes during the armed conflict. Although the law was a major step toward addressing the legacy of violence, it was strongly criticized by indigenous and Afro-Colombian organizations because the government did not undertake any prior and informed consent during the formulation of this set of policies, which directly concerned these ethnic communities. Given the fact that the armed conflict has hit these communities the hardest (UN 2004, 2010), indigenous and Afro-Colombian organizations argued that they have been affected in disproportional ways and that the damages inflicted upon their unique ways of being required measures of reparation different from those adopted for other victims. Before the evident risk of unenforceability⁴ which this law ran, the National Congress granted faculties to the president so that in six months his government would both carry out the processes of consultation and issue decrees to regulate the rights of victims belonging to these ethnic minorities.

In order to do this, the government turned to two organizational entities which, in theory, represent and defend the interests of the indigenous peoples and Afro-Colombian communities: the Permanent Panel for Agreement with Indigenous Peoples (MPC)⁵ and the High Level Consultative Commission of Black and Afro-Colombian Communities (CCAN)⁶. Separately and through their respective technical teams, each entity drafted the legal documents in which they expressed their objectives in terms of assistance, attention, reparation, and restitution of rights. The result of this process were the Decree-Laws 4633 and 4635 of 2011: the former intended for

⁴ Unenforceability is an act whereby the Constitutional Court declares a rule nul and void because it goes against the Constitution or the principles set forth therewithin.

⁵ The Mesa Permanente de Concertación was created in the decree 1397 of 1996 and has as its mission to evaluate and forge with the state the execution of legislative and administrative policies capable of affecting these peoples.

⁶ The Comisión Consultiva de Alto Nivel was created in article 45 of the Law 70 of 1993 (the law that granted territorial rights to rural Afro-Colombian communities). The Commission has as its key role to keep track of the legal provisions contained in this law.

indigenous peoples and the latter for Afro-Colombian communities.

To some extent both decrees share the same spirit: they recognize the degree of vulnerability of these peoples in the context of the armed conflict, they consider them subjects of special protection, and they recognize that due to their historical and cultural characteristics, these peoples have suffered dispossession of their collective lands and damages that require specific measures of reparation. There are, however, substantial differences in the content of both decrees. These differences reflect both the type of organizational entities that took part in the drafting of the decrees and the way the two processes of free, prior, and informed consent were undertaken. In short, Law 4633 for indigenous peoples assumes a perspective of rights with a differentiated approach, which can be seen reflected in themes such as the definitions of concepts like victims or damages, the measures of protection and reparation to women or the clauses defining assistance in issues of housing and humanitarian aid in the case of forced displacement. In contrast, Law 4635 for Afro-Colombian communities frequently follows the provisions contained in the criticized Law 1448, particularly in matters such as reparation or protection; moreover, it presents either very vague or ambiguous definitions with regard to key concepts such as victim or damages, all of which calls into question the ethnic and differentiated approach that such a law should have assumed.

In terms of territorial rights, both decrees recognize the special regimes with regard to collective land ownership and the importance that territory has as a fundamental support for the physical existence, cultural survival, and autonomous development of these communities. However, each decree does so in a qualitatively different way. In the case of indigenous peoples, the decree mentions in its purpose and scope the “*protection, integral reparation and restitution of territorial rights*”, while the decree for Afro-Colombian communities mentions “*assistance, integral reparation and restitution of lands*” (emphasis added). The differences between protection and assistance or between territorial rights and restitution of lands are not semantic but rather of approach. In the case of the territory, the law for indigenous peoples

makes reference to “special and collective links” with “Mother Earth” (Congreso de Colombia, Decreto-Ley 4633, Art. 3), to the “spiritual life” (Ibid., Art. 9), to the “harmonious coexistence in the territories” (Ibid., Art. 29), to the “sacred and ancestral character” of these territories (Ibid., Art. 33), to “living entity” (Ibid., Art. 45) or to the connection between indigenous peoples and their territories as an “essential factor of balance and harmony with nature” (Ibid., Art. 8). For its part, the law for Afro-Colombian communities only recognizes their fundamental right to the territory “by virtue of the close cultural link that they hold with it” (Congreso de Colombia, Decreto-Ley 4635, Art. 40) and establishes the damages either in environmental terms (“impact upon ecosystems”, Art. 9) or in terms of ownership alone (“abandonment, confinement, and land dispossession”, Art. 110). The terms used serve not only to describe the substantially different relationships that indigenous and Afro-Colombian communities supposedly have with their respective territories, but they also point to the type of expectations each collectivity has within the framework of restitution and reparation of their rights. It is precisely the difference in the terms evoked what permits the inclusion of the territory as a victim in the case of indigenous peoples but not in the case of Afro-Colombian communities.

Why does such a difference exist between these laws? I will outline two possible responses but they are hypotheses that would pose their own research agendas— which I cannot cover here. The first one is of political and institutional order and it has to do with the organizational entities that participated in the drafting of the laws. The second hypothesis is historical and legal, and it is related to the different ways in which the ethnic identities of indigenous and Afro-Colombian communities have moved into the institutional structures that deal and recognize ethnic otherness. I now explore each of these hypotheses.

1. The negotiation undertaken by the MPC and the CCAN. The hypothesis of political and institutional order has to do with the fact that the laws were drafted by very different organizational entities. Although in theory the Permanent Panel for Conciliation with Indigenous Peoples (MPC) and the High Level Commission of Black and

Afro-Colombian Communities (CCAN) have similar functions, they have dissimilar origins and modes of operation, being each made up of people who, as in every organization, act as agents with specific experiences and interests. For example, the MPC led the whole methodological process for the consultation of the Decree 4633, establishing clear rules for the participation of indigenous organizations from different regions of the country and carrying out at least 24 departmental meetings and 9 macro regional meetings (CODHES 2013, 104-105). For its part, the national government decided unilaterally to exclude an important group of Communitarian Councils and organizations of Afro-Colombian victims upon assuming the CCAN as the exclusive entity of dialogue with Afro-Colombian communities. The CCAN carried out just 13 consultation meetings in which it did not even include Chocó, the region with most Afro-Colombian rural population in the country. Moreover, in these meetings the CCAN presented a document already drawn up by the national government (Ibid., 104-105). While the MPC carried out its own version of the decree, which was nourished with the contributions received during different regional forums, the CCAN prepared its proposal with the technical teams designed by the government, and this was not taken for consultation with the regional organizations until it was ready for presidential approval.

In parallel, this exclusion led to a network of social organizations and Communitarian Councils—the National Board of Afro-Colombian Organizations⁷—presenting their own version of the law. This process turned out to be more participative than the one carried out by the CCAN and the government as in it more than 81 organizational entities among regional organizations and Communitarian Councils participated (Mesa Nacional de Organizaciones Afrocolombianas 2011, 5-7). However, the results of this autonomous process were not taken into consideration in the final document submitted by the CCAN for presidential approval.

The legitimacy of the CCAN has been called into question by different organizational entities such as the National Board of Afro-Colombian Organizations, who stated publicly that

⁷ Composed of the Process of the Black Communities (PCN), the National Conference of Afro-Colombian Organizations (CNOA), the National Association of Displaced Afrocolombians, and the Cimarrón National Movement.

the government has determined in an arbitrary and restrictive way a route of consultation which begins and ends in the CCAN, an organization that includes some Afro-Colombian representatives but that is led and presided over by the government [...] Likewise the national government disregards the serious reservations that some Communitarian Councils and Afro-Colombian organizations have about the CCAN representing the real interests of the Afro-Colombian communities and their victims (Release 002 of the 22nd of September 2011, quoted in CODHES 2013, 65).

More than 68 Communitarian Councils and Great Councils from Chocó have spoken out in a similar tone. The Communitarian Council of the Yurumanguí River, for example, has explicitly pointed out that they do not “recognize nor validate the CCAN as a representative with the national government” (Ibid., 67). Besides the problems of the CCAN’s legitimacy and representativeness, the way in which it carried out the process of free, prior, and informed consent left also many doubts. For instance, through the CCAN the government decided to carry out in a period of just 40 days and at a national level not only the consultation for the Victims’ Law but also the consultation for the Royalties Law and for a regulatory decree of access to genetic resources and traditional knowledge (Ibid., 137). The government wanted to simultaneously carry out these same three consultations with the indigenous peoples but the MPC firmly opposed this and dealt exclusively with the Victims’ Law. An example of the discontent caused by the whole process of design and consultation of the Decree 4635 for Afro-Colombian communities is that of the 42 members that make up the CCAN, only 15 of them signed the final document—eight were high level officials directly appointed by the government and two more belonged to the House of Representatives, elected by means of a special constituency (Ibid., 61). In sum, while the MPC carried out its own version of the law, which was nourished with the contributions received during the departmental and regional forums that it carried out with other indigenous organizations of the country, the CCAN drafted the proposal of the law with the technical teams designed by the government, and regional grassroots organizations were not consulted until the law was finalized and ready for presidential approval.

However, the criticisms regarding the legitimacy and representativeness of the CCAN are not enough to explain the way in which the territory appears described in the decree for Afro-Colombian communities. The proof is that even the most liberal version of the law—the one created by the National Board of Afro-Colombian Organizations (2011)—mentions nothing about the eventual recognition of the territory as a subject of rights. While this version recognizes in the territory the fundamental basis of “culture, spiritual life, and autonomous development” (Mesa Nacional de Organizaciones Afrocolombianas, 2011: Art. 29) and introduces the notion of environmental damages with cultural impacts (Ibid., Art. 45), this proposal continues talking about “restitution of lands and territories” (Ibid., Art.1) or of measures of protection, restitution, or clearing of land titles for the protection of collective property (Arts. 10, 29, 30, 115). Furthermore, the repeated use of concepts such as habitats (Art. 30, 110, 122, 134), ecosystems (Arts. 45, 121, 135), natural resources (Arts. 111, 116, 121, 135, 149) or biotic and abiotic elements (Art.122) tends to validate people’s engagement with their territories with a language borrowed from both natural sciences and political economy. Although this type of language allows Afro-Colombian organizations to carry out before the state certain political transactions in matters of legal recognition, this gap between the laws for indigenous and Afro-Colombian communities in the way they refer to the territory leads us to the second hypothesis, the historical and legal, that is to say, the differential way in which indigenous and Afro-Colombian communities have been recognized within the multicultural Colombian laws.

2. Indigenous and Afro-Colombian ethnic identities have been differently recognized by the state. The differences between the Victims’ Laws for indigenous and Afro-Colombian communities reflect the fact that historically and legally these peoples have been recognized with different ethnic identities, and this has connected them in a differential way with the Colombian state. As several authors have pointed out (Bocarejo 2011, Chaves 2011, Del Cairo 2011, Restrepo 2011) one of the trademarks of Colombian multiculturalism is the over-spatialization of cultural difference, that is, the conception of ethnic identities as deeply anchored in particu-

lar places. This spatial dimension of ethnicity and cultural difference has created a strong juridical arrangement that anthropologist Diana Bocarejo (2011 and 2015) describes as the typology/topology binary, that is, the relationship between, on one hand, someone classified as a legitimate ethnic subject—and therefore grantee of minority rights—and the enclosing of that cultural difference, on the other hand, within particular borders such as reservations. This binary becomes particularly true in the case of indigenous peoples as the purported ancestral and harmonic relationship they keep with their lands have turned them into special political subjects with differentiated rights. But rural Afro-Colombian communities have not been articulated in the same way within the Colombian multicultural regime.

For example, during the Republican period (1820-1886), there was a type of formalization of the historical ties of indigenous populations with certain territories. The idea that indigenous peoples have always belonged to particular lands resulted in a set of legal measures that recognized a particular type of citizenship based on racial considerations. For example, the Law 89 of 1890 recognizes the indigenous reserves and their own forms of government. This law finds its *raison d'être* in a series of liberal ideals of progress that aimed to deal with the existence of some groups of racially different people who inhabited some lands that had not been integrated into the nation's model of civilization (Safford 1991). Since the 19th century, race and territory have helped to materialize certain fundamental tenets of cultural distinction—the former in physical terms, the latter in spatial terms—and this distinction makes up the basis for recognizing the existing ethnic identities upon which many modern Latin American states construct their legal multiculturalist frameworks (Ng'weno 2007, Wade 1997).

One important point is that in the case of indigenous peoples the relationship with the land is assumed as primordial, that is, going back to a time by far preceding the rise of the modern Colombian state (Ng'weno 2007, 427). But that is not the case for Afro-Colombian communities. The history of the African diaspora and the occupation of the lands along the Pacific Coast that were later recognized as their collect-

ive territories is seen as part of a relatively recent past. It forms part of a modern history in the sense that it is indistinguishable “from the rest of Colombian national history” (Ibid., 433). This is why until before the Constitution of 1991 the treatment given by the state to rural Afro-Colombian communities did not fit into the same logic of ethnic and cultural distinction as existed in the case of indigenous peoples. The arguments about the supposed originary links with the land, or the absence of such links, work as a kind of circular reasoning in which certain relationships with the territory allow “claims of ethnic identity and to culture, and thus to a differentiated legal treatment that in turn legitimates claims to land” (Ibid., 418).

This way of interpreting the historical links between indigenous and Afro-Colombian communities with their respective territories proves crucial in the understanding of the nuances present in the Victims’ Law. Moreover, identities of indigenous and Afro-Colombian communities have been differentially treated into what Peter Wade (1996) calls the institutional structures of otherness. As many authors have pointed out (Chaves 2011, Hoffman 2004, Restrepo 1997, Wade 1997), up until the Constitution of 1991, Afro-Colombian society participated in these structures in an ambivalent way, that is, as more or less ordinary citizens who, although having racial differences in regard to mainstream society, did not possess the sort of unbreakable tie between ancestral lands and cultural authenticity that the legislation—and even certain anthropological discourse—did trace in the case of indigenous peoples. Afro-Colombian citizenship was marked by the worldly fate of imperfection—the persistence of certain religious, linguistic or kinship expressions that were not completely Hispanic—but it was, at the end of the day, a type of citizenship that fitted with the liberal ideals that accompanied the French revolution and that materialized in the emerging Colombian nation-state with the abolition of slavery in 1851. Unlike indigenous peoples and their pronounced otherness that obliged the state to adopt measures for their integration and civilization (Safford 1991), Afro-Colombian communities did not pose a substantial challenge to the legal equality typically hoisted by the liberal states of the 19th and early 20th centuries (Restrepo 1997).

In legal terms, the participation in these institutional structures of otherness has consequences as much in the type of alterity and rights recognized for Afro-Colombian communities as in the type of discourses of self-identification that they themselves promote. One example. After the recognition of Colombia as a multicultural and pluri-ethnic nation in the 1991 Constitution, the discourses of development, economic integration, political participation, and class identity present in the actions of the Afro-Colombian social movements from Chocó turned into demands that started to mobilize traditions, culture, territory, and ancestrality (Escobar 2008, Restrepo 2011 and 2013, Ruiz Serna 2006).

In summary, the historical hypothesis has to do with the fact that the demands of indigenous peoples for cultural recognition have been closely linked to the recognition of certain links with ancestral lands, links that only very recently the state recognized for Afro-Colombian communities. In this way, the relation between ethnic typologies and topologies, that is, between purported cultural identities and imagined ancestral territories has produced a differentiated articulation of both indigenous and Afro-Colombian communities within the legal multicultural framework. Consequently, it has helped set up particular legal fields that, like in the case of the Victims' Law, mark out different regimes of recognition: the territory is a victim in one law but not in the other.

A seed disrupting hegemonic divides

If one must interpret the Victims' Laws through a substantialist framework, one shall then consider that they are describing, at least to some degree, ways of relating to the territory which are very different between indigenous and Afro-Colombian communities. For instance, while the law for indigenous peoples describes some of the damages to the territories in terms of "violations or profanations" (Congreso de Colombia, Decreto-Ley 4633, Art. 45), the law for Afro-Colombian communities associates territorial damages with "affectation of natural ecosystems" or "environmental damage" (Congreso de Colombia, Decreto-Ley 4635, Art.9). That difference

in the language would mean, for example, the existence of a radical ontological difference mapping onto determined ethnic identities—for indigenous peoples, what one would consider to be environmental damage would turn out to be something rather attuned to the sphere of religious experiences. That conflation between ethnicity and ontology is quite problematic, and in the case of the law, would produce a sharp effect. For Afro-Colombian communities, the state would only recognize some limited kinds of damages to their territories, which would be substantially different from the type of damages susceptible to being mobilized by indigenous peoples. While this is not new in historical and legal terms, the terms invoked by the law—terms which are never neutral, as with them, reality is disputed and the world is enacted—bestow upon indigenous peoples certain identity attributes and forms of territoriality which are somehow denied to Afro-Colombian communities. Yet, as I have demonstrated in the previous chapters, the aftermath of war involving and affecting the set of relationships people cultivate with both the places they inhabit and the beings these places harbour is not an experience circumscribed to indigenous peoples, and is not even restricted to those ethnic groups that the Colombian state recognizes as legitimate Others.

Nonetheless, I need to clarify something else before pursuing my analysis. While the differences between both laws mark a major distance in the type of territorial ties and damages the Colombian state would recognize for indigenous and Afro-Colombian communities, such differences do not mean that the former have won more rights than the latter. For example, Afro-Colombian communities can still invoke international treaties on the subject of human rights such as the International Labour Organization Convention 169, or even national legislation which recognizes the unbreakable links between ethnic communities and the territories they have historically inhabited (i.e. Law 70, Rulings T-955 or the Auto 005/09 of the Constitutional Court). The point being made is rather that the Victims' Laws widen the gap between the type of Otherness which indigenous and Afro-Colombian communities can embody vis-à-vis the state.

The kinds of damages experienced in Bajo Atrato by indigenous, Afro-Colombian, and *mestizo* communities alike challenge the role that social categories such as ethnicity, ancestry, or more broadly speaking, indigeneity, play at the moment of considering the territory as a victim. The described damages do not necessarily map onto assigned identity categories, mainly because these events are rendered possible through the set of practices and experiences people share. Practices within a shared territory rather than group ascription is what makes the experiences of the territory as a victim intelligible. This is the main reason why I prefer not to describe my work as an ethnography of Afro-Colombian communities, but rather as an ethnography of the effects provoked by war in a place cherished by some particular peoples. By underscoring practices, I point out to their performative power. Practices, which a great deal of anthropological literature has showed (Blaser 2009a, De la Cadena 2015, Escobar 2016, Latour 1999, Law 2007, Mol 1999), enact worlds which are made up not only of human meanings, but are also co-constituted by an assemblage of human and non-human beings and, I add, their contingent, historical interactions within given places. The world does not precede practices, but rather, practices have worldly consequences.

The focus on practices and engagements within particular places becomes a means of seeing wandering spirits, wicked *madres de agua*, or *tramas* not so much as beliefs or something belonging to how certain people represent the world, but rather as a set of possibilities and existences which arise when people engage in a particular way with their territories. In this way, the experienced damages that communities in Bajo Atrato ascribe to their territories need to be understood not only as the outcome of particular cultural representations about reality, but also as the resulting conjunction of both people's experiences and senses bestowed by the world. These kinds of damages might then be conceived as something arising through the constant back-and-forth between, on one hand, a world or a territory which exists out there and under conditions that are not always the people's choice and, on the other hand, the social and historical practices which people and non-humans enact in their territories. In this way, damages to the territory, like the territory itself, can

be better understood through a semiotic framework in which objectivity and subjectivity, environment and culture, people and places, as well as humans and non-humans “are entangled with each other in an indissoluble knot” (Blaser 2009b, 11). In other words, such damages “are both real and done—or, better, they are real because they are being done.” (Ibid., 11)

If what defines an event as damage to the territory is its worldly effect, then group ascription is not a condition for backtracking a set of damages extending beyond people and their integrity. That is at least one of the premises of this dissertation. Such a premise is connected to the possibility of extending our understanding of war and of our destructive human acts beyond the scope of human rights, which is somehow a virtue of the Victim’s Laws—even if the inclusion of the territory as a victim takes place only in the case of indigenous peoples. Aside from the actions that compromise some inalienable human rights such as those to life, health, family, shelter, food, liberty, literacy, or security; military and political violence also take place at the level of values, places, meanings, beings, knowledges, and identities. To show this was the attempt of the previous chapters, as they presented a wide range of damages caused by war in a myriad beings and relations in which the human was merely another agent.

Given the possibility of including non-humans in our understanding of war, I consider the Victims’ Law as an act which might propel a kind of diplomatic agreement. By diplomatic, I mean something different from allowances made for the state about the way in which indigenous and Afro-Colombian communities think of themselves as actors in the world, or about the possible kinds of selves they believe can or do exist, or of the actions they believe they themselves and these beings can perform. Instead, diplomacy, following Isabel Stengers (2005a), is an agreement reached by parties that represent radical ways of understanding the world, who yet compromise in accepting the absence of an ontological sovereign (Ibid., 194). In such an absence, I argue that to redress violence against the territory means to recognize the diversity of selves and existences which have been affected by war. A

corollary of such recognition, I later discuss, is that most of the reparations to the territory cannot be undertaken by the state.

Diplomacy, holds Stengers, is a kind of “positive pluralism” (Zournazy 2002, 261) –an achievement in which parties are able to entertain their own version of an agreement without undermining their own practices and values. The well-known example of the wasp and the orchid discussed by Deleuze and Guattari (2004) might help us to understand the outcomes of this kind of diplomacy. According to them, the encounter of the wasp and the orchid is not just one of imitation–the flower mimicking the wasp’s shape for the propagation of its species–but of becoming–through a mutual capture of code and trace, both entities create a new reality, a rhizomatic association in which the boundaries of one cannot be thoroughly distinguished from the boundaries of the other. Stengers holds that as such an encounter does not create any sort of wasp-orchid unity, “wasps and orchids give each other quite another meaning to the relation that takes place between them.” (2010, 29). A diplomatic event would be exactly that–a mode of connection in which each party entertains its own version. As a potential diplomatic event, the Victims’ Laws would allow the state to protect the rights of indigenous and Afro-Colombian communities, while also allowing these communities to advocate for the protection of the other-than-human beings which are part of their territories.

However, such a diplomatic agreement has not yet been reached because the law still operates within an epistemological framework in which what is at stake is the protection of the worldviews of certain peoples, not the kind of world that can be known. Although I will discuss this issue in the last part of this chapter, I would now like to point out that the inclusion of the territory as a victim in a law aimed to redress the violence experienced by indigenous peoples challenges the kind of politics with which we are familiar. Such inclusion sets in motion relationships, practices, and entities which call into question the radical separation that modern states actualize between the realm of nature–with science as its legitimate representative–and the realm of humanity–with politics as its principal ally (De

la Cadena 2010, 341-342). In this way, the public sphere of law might find itself inhabited by *jaïs*, *fieras*, or masters of game animals with concerns which need to be readdressed. The problem is that for the state, such selves belong to the private sphere of particular worldviews, not to the world itself. Therefore, state reparations will operate only at the level of peoples' beliefs.

As highlighted in the introduction, the process through which the territory is included in the Victims' Law shares similarities with the struggles undertaken by indigenous peoples in countries like Ecuador and Bolivia, where nature or *Pacha Mama* has become a subject of rights granted and protected by their respective Constitutions. It also echoes the disputes between the state and indigenous peoples in Brazil, Canada, or New Zealand where the demands for the recognition of rights upon lands—or what the state considers to be natural resources—adopt a language that does not favour ownership but kinship, or even the subjective attributes of certain places (Blaser 2013a, De la Cadena 2015). In this way, the demands to include indigenous territories as victims of the armed conflict, along with the possibility of recognizing the damages experienced by non-humans, highlight an inherent tension of multiculturalism and the modern epistemological framework which accompanies it: as a public policy regulating and affecting cultural diversity, multiculturalism and modern epistemology are instrumental in the way nation-states divide the public or universal—the interests, practices, and values promoted in the name of secular, scientific knowledge—and the private or particular—the interests, practices, and values attributed to the so-called sociocultural constructions of reality embodied by certain peoples.

Therefore, in the inclusion of the territory as a victim, I see something similar to what Stengers (2005b) calls a cosmopolitical proposal: an opportunity to understand the divergent, but always partially connected realms of *kósmos*—the universe, or in its large sense, the given, the immanent, the objective, the natural—and *politikós*—the particular, the instituted, the transcendent, the subjective, the social. I thus interpret that inclusion as a seed liable to disrupt the way in which the state

has been regulating relationships between what it considers to be “reality” and what it considers to be beliefs or cultural representations of that taken-for-granted reality. In Colombia, that kind of seed is somehow present in some reasoning included in its multicultural legislation. For example, in 2011, the Constitutional Court—the judiciary institution responsible for determining the constitutionality of laws and regulating the protection of rights recognized by the Colombian Constitution—warned in one sentence regarding the processes of free and prior consent of ethnic minorities that the privileged meanings of concepts such as development, progress, and even culture were “those of the State and mainstream society, because the criteria of definition and measurement stem from the State legislation and from the concept of a common good which is *exclusive* of and *excludes* other *epistemologies*” (Corte Constitucional de Colombia, Sentencia T-129-2011, §59. *Emphasis added*). Similarly, in 2016, the Court recognized the very Atrato River as having rights to “protection, conservation, maintenance, and restoration” (Corte Constitucional de Colombia, Sentencia T-622-2016, §9.25). Although this verdict is a watershed, meaning a critical point marking a change in policy, the extending of rights to the Atrato River is based on an approach that, as noticed by geographer Nick Mount (2017), privileges rationalism rather than existentialism. This means that the rights awarded to the river have to do with “what it provides for human life” and not the fact that its very existence “should be equated with human life” (Ibid., ¶ 4). In this way, the main argument of the Court was that the most effective way to protect the human rights of the communities living in Chocó is through environmental restoration and biodiversity conservation. What I want to highlight is that in both cases, the underlying assumptions—the need to consider other epistemologies and the need to enlarge environmental rights to redress some human rights issues—somehow reinforce the way in which the state regulates the relationships between “reality” and cultural beliefs, since the terms invoked are related to how different people define what is to be known—an epistemological concern—rather than the very nature of what is being known—an ontological one.

Another remark is indispensable before proceeding with my analysis. So far, the inclusion of the territory in the Victims' Law has not meant, strictly speaking, a legal recognition which confers on the territory a formal distinction as a living entity and an eventual subject of rights. That was not even the case when the Court discussed the rights of the Atrato River. In this sense, what I am suggesting here is a framework of political possibilities, not socio-legal effects of the Victims' Law. What will probably happen within the current Colombian multicultural framework is that the inclusion of the territory as a victim will end up defining a set of legal obligations on the part of the state for the protection of the already-recognized rights of ethnic communities, being the territory, or more accurately, ownership of the land, one of the fundamental collective rights to be protected.

From the perspective I have adopted, both the inclusion of the territory as a victim and the recognition of some damages extending to a variety of non-humans pose a series of challenges to the policies promoted under the banner of multiculturalism as well as the implementation of appropriate policies of truth, justice, and reparation for indigenous and Afro-Colombian communities. I will now explore some of these challenges from a perspective that, following the work of Mario Blaser (2009a), I identify as political ontology: a political and conceptual framework which can account, on one hand, for the type of politics that gives meaning to and shapes the set of practices that sustain a given world or ontology, and on the other hand, for the type of conflicts and negotiations that take place when different worlds or ontologies meet and strive to maintain their own existence and framework of intelligibility (2009a and 2009b).

Ontology, in the sense that Martin Heidegger (1998 [1927]) gave to the term, has to do with the beings that can exist and the way in which these beings become intelligible (76-85). Following the work of Descola (2006), ontology can also be understood as "the system of characteristics that humans attribute to other beings" (Ibid., 139) and the definition of the type of possible relationships between humans and non-humans. For the purpose of my argument, and following Latour (2013) and

Kohn (2015), ontology refers to the set of premises and practices through which one defines what worlds and what types of beings exist or may exist, the conditions which make such existences possible, and the set of obligations or relationships these beings may report. In summary, and using some of the arguments of Escobar (2015 and 2016), political ontology is the “analysis of worlds and processes through which they are made up as such” (2015, 34), as well as the struggles undertaken to maintain such worlds—an aspect this author identifies as “political ontological practice”. In a place like Bajo Atrato, the effects of the armed conflict assume disputes of an ontological form when, for example, certain indigenous communities describe the consequences of the paramilitary presence in terms of the fleeing of masters of game animals, or when some Afro-Colombian communities express their intention to no longer return to their lands because, amongst other reasons, they are now inhabited by the spirits of those who suffered a bad death.

From the perspective offered by political ontology, the inclusion of the territory as a victim sheds light on three different but interconnected aspects of political violence. First, it paves the way for understanding a range of damages that war has caused in a myriad beings in which the human is merely another agent. Second, it calls into question the way the state tends to conflate certain experiences with places and particular ethnic identities, as if the experiences of the territory as a victim were exclusive to certain peoples that the state recognizes as legitimate Others. Third, the recognition of the territory as a victim would also constitute an occasion to consider policies of attention and reparation that might be consequent with such a diversity of existences and experiences. I will now turn my attention to this latter matter.

Damages to the territory

Although the Victims’ Law regarding indigenous peoples has an ambiguous definition of the concept of territory (sometimes it appears as a place embedded with certain cultural values, other times as an entity provided with agency, and others

simply as property), in this section I would like to focus on the multiplicity of experiences that might be at stake when the territory is invoked as a victim. To that end and building up on what I have exposed in previous chapters, I understand territory not so much as a material entity, discreet, limited, external, and independent of people, but rather as a type of experience generated in specific places and that helps to produce senses, meanings, and feelings (Kenny 1999, Oslender 2008, Tilley 1994). Understood as a form of deeply emplaced experience, the territory can be compared to what Raymond Williams (1977) calls structure of feelings, that is, a set of perceptions, lived experiences, and values shared by those who live in a particular moment, or in this case, a given place. As a structure, this set of experiences shapes the relations people have with the places they inhabit (Basso 1996) and are shaped in turn by the qualities that dissimilar sets of human and non-human groups possess (Latour 2004). In other words, the territory is not simply a set of places upon which social, cultural, and economic practices unfold, but it is also a series of relationships and forces which are embodied by the people that live there and that are reflected in their bodies, habits, feelings and senses (Casey 1996, Escobar 2008, Hirsch 1995, Nazarea 2006)

Perhaps one of the virtues of the ambiguity of the law regarding the definition of territory, is that upon invoking it as a victim, the law does not get away from the manifold experiences that different communities cultivate with the places they inhabit. And yet this multiplicity makes it difficult to categorize the kinds of damages a territory could suffer: what for a given community may constitute a severe violation of their territories, for another community may not be interpreted at all as a damage. Despite these imponderabilia that render difficult the valuation of some harms, there is a series of territorial impacts that are more or less measurable: environmental damages. As will be explained in the next chapter, it is precisely these kinds of damages that are emphasized by people in Bajo Atrato when considering the impacts provoked by the armed conflict to their territories. But as I have argued in previous chapters, such kinds of damages are only one side of the coin.

From the replacement of large swathes of natural forests with thousands of hectares of oil palm plantations in the collective territories of the Curvaradó River, to the depletion of forests in Jiguamiandó and Truandó rivers, these kinds of interventions highlight the existing conflicts around the full enjoyment of the rights to ownership and property that have been granted to ethnic communities in Colombia. In this way, the environmental impacts that occur from the abusive and illegal exploitation of indigenous or Afro-Colombian territories—damages that are marked out within the material destruction of their collective properties—can be repaired within a framework that, only in theory, does not drastically challenge the traditional paths that characterize legal reparation within a restorative justice's frame: either the communities are redressed by re-establishing the disturbed patrimonial balance of their lands (what is known as ecological restoration) or they are redressed by restoring their property with a satisfactory compensation. In the context of armed conflict, many of the demands upon territorial impacts have to do with severe transformations of the landscape, with the damages to which the territory has been exposed in its character of material substratum enabling the identity and cultural expressions of indigenous and Afro-Colombian communities. In other words, the environmental damages expose a series of disputes regarding the rights of use and enjoyment of the property but they do not contain, strictly speaking, the recognition that the territory can be an agent, a live entity or victim in its own right.

In this line of reasoning, that section of the law regarding indigenous rights that stipulates that if indeed the territory is a victim “the rights holders [...] are the indigenous communities and their individually considered members” (Congreso de Colombia, Decreto-Ley 4633, Art.3)⁸ becomes meaningful. Of course the territory does not have its own voice to denounce the damages to which it is subject and even if it did, would surely be an instance of the Wittgensteinian lion: nobody would understand it. It is for this reason that only the communities affected by the damages inflicted upon their territory can speak on its behalf. That is also why it is these

⁸ Original text: “[...] se entenderá que los titulares de derechos en el marco del presente decreto son los pueblos y comunidades indígenas y sus integrantes individualmente considerados.”

communities who, within the legal framework, become subjects of restitution and reparation of territorial rights. However, if we consider, for example, what indigenous and Afro-Colombian communities are experiencing in Bajo Atrato, the issue is that, on many occasions, the territory does have a voice, a voice that not all of us can comprehend, a voice whose understanding depends on people such as *jaibanas*, traditional healers or spiritual leaders who may act as privileged spokespeople.

The point is that the inclusion of territory as victim opens a plethora of possibilities that are not limited to the environmental damages nor to the reparations to which these impacts can give rise. Everything related to the restitution of rights over the enjoyment of the property speaks more about the *rights* that these communities have over their territories but, from the ontological perspective that I propose, the inclusion of the territory as a victim speaks rather—or also—of the *rights of* the territory. This nuance, this loophole makes all the difference since it creates a framework of possibilities for recognition that might even dispute the terms with which certain damages are interpreted, either locating them in the “real” (what from a certain point of view would be described as damages to the environment or to nature) or in the “cultural” (what from another point of view would be described as damages to the representations that certain peoples have of nature). In order to clarify my point, I distinguish as *territorial damages* all those actions that, like land dispossession, confinement, depletion of natural resources or forced displacement, limit the effective enjoyment of ownership rights. And I call *damages to territory* all those actions that jeopardize the very relationships that communities cultivate with the myriad non-human beings that constitute their territories. Let us examine some examples of damages to territory and possible routes of reparation.

During 2003 there was in Bajo Atrato a spate of suicides of Emberá girls and boys which some *jaibanas* attributed to a monstrous spirit that devours the souls of people. This and other evil spirits usually live in the deepest and most hidden parts of the forest but the unburied dead caused by war cause this spirit to run amok, to the extent that neither the traditional rites nor songs proved sufficient to appease them.

In another case, the Emberá and Tule peoples from Unguía, also in Chocó, speak of the damage to the territory caused by the presence of mass graves in the forests. According to them, these graves have spread harm among the people since the *jaïs* that inhabit certain places got angry and made it difficult to obtain decent harvests or to access game animals. In both cases the damage is located in non-human entities and is triggered by unusual events (unburied combatants, mass graves) that in some way challenge traditional ontological frameworks: neither the Emberá nor the Tule had rituals to cope with these situations, which has not stopped them from carrying out actions upon their territories with the aim of harmonizing these forces inhabiting the forests. Upon locating the damage in the spirits that inhabit the forest or the territory itself, both communities are calling attention to the fact that war has transformed not only the life of people but also the life of different non-human beings and the characteristics of the places they inhabit. These series of dramatic transformations in the relationships that people have with a network of dissimilar non-human entities are elements subject to invocation when the territory is considered a victim.

Let me return to the case of the snakes and their bites becoming *tramadas*. As I described in Chapter 2, people who returned to the Curvaradó basin following several years of forced displacement found their lands occupied by oil palm plantations. Such plantations require remaking the landscape, creating a *terra nullius* through both the felling of huge patches of natural forests and the violent displacement of inhabitants. Plantations severely transform a forest's native entanglements, both human and not human. Following Anna Tsing (2012), I understand oil palm plantations as a model for scalability, that is, as a design intended to maintain its immutable structural composition regardless of changes in size or scale. A scalable project is one that expands or grows without allowing any change in the relationships of its constituents. As the goal is to keep at bay transformative relations among project elements, scalability becomes a feature through which said elements do not form "relationships that might change the project as elements are added." (Ibid., 507) In other words, scalability is the ability to move components across scales

without changing their form. Under normal conditions, any change in scale or size requires a minimum of qualitative transformation in the form of things, that is, in the kind of relationships that elements are capable of. But that is not the case with scalable projects such as oil palm plantations and many other industrial monocultures. Designed as scalable projects, palm plantations must remain uniform, autonomous and separate from other organisms, and from relationships that might modify their intended outcomes. Such a goal is only possible by excluding diverse transformative relationships. In the Curvaradó basin, paramilitary armies undertook this task literally, taking away both biological and cultural diversity so that neither people nor forests could transform palm plantations. This kind of occupation, Escobar argues (2015, 2016), not only replaces the diverse, heterogeneous, and entangled world of forests and communities but entails an ontological occupation of territories: palm erases relationality as a condition of possibility for humans and non-humans and instead exacerbates a domain of relations in which ‘nature’ is but an assortment of resources to be exploited by certain people. However, in a location like the tropical rainforest, where transformative relationships between species are the very foundation of their diversity, the violent transformation of forests and the replication of controlled landscapes does not function without consequences. Snakes might explain part of this story.

Research conducted in Guatemala (Escalón 2014) and various regions of Colombia, including Meta, Santander, Nariño and Bolívar (Lynch 2015), demonstrates that snakes appear to be adopting the oil palm plantations as their new habitat. For example, herpetologist John Douglas Lynch (2015) has reported up to 38 different species, of which about 33% are poisonous. He believes that palm leaves retain higher levels of humidity when cut and gathered into piles, attracting lizards, frogs and their natural predators: snakes. Evidence suggests that oil palm plantations augment the densities of snakes well beyond the densities found in natural or relatively transformed habitats (Ibid., 169). Therefore, it seems that oil palm plantations have not fully succeeded in removing diversity, they have just transformed the representation of such diversity. Palm monocultures have not fully dismantled

forests but instead created new kinds of relationships between their amphibian and reptile inhabitants.

There is no doubt that the violent transformation of the forests of this region has provoked irreversible environmental damages. Deforestation, the clearing of huge patches of one of the most biodiverse hotspots in the world, the demise of critically endangered species, diversion of rivers, declining water quality and quantity, pollution and soil erosion are only some of the consequences associated with the conversion of natural forests into oil palm plantations. But I argue that the snakes now teeming in these territories are more than environmental disturbances brought on by war. Consider this. People in Curvaradó are well aware of the existing correlation between the presence of the *Elais guineensis* monoculture and the abundance of snakes. However, when these communities describe the effects of this correlation in terms of an increased number of snakebites now being *tramadas*, it is not simply that they are using a variation of cultural language to achieve the same conclusion already reached by biologists and agronomists—i.e. because snakes are so abundant in palm plantations, they are more likely to bite people. Changes in the landscape have led to significant transformations in the potential associations that snakes and other animals may make, a shift that is more than metaphor. *Tramas* not only describe the evils of the paramilitary and capitalist forces that stole and ravaged the lands of communities from the Curvaradó basin, *tramas* are evidence of the fact that there remains a lethal poison stealthily destroying these territories.

From this perspective, what is at stake when examining the aftermath of violent environmental transformation in Curvaradó is that communities from this region are pointing to a very different phenomenon than the one environmentalists might witness: the effects of a poison that was, according to inhabitants, planted by the palm growers and now invades their bodies through the snakes. That such a phenomenon materializes in a similar way that some scientists have observed—primarily, overpopulation of poisonous snakes—is quite another thing. The point being made is that the new *tramas* are symptomatic of a violent shift in the relation-

ship between people, their territories, and the other beings that live there, which is not limited to environmental endeavors. I argue, then, that cases such as these *tramas*—which involve existential relationships between different assemblages of beings—are an example of what I understand to be damage to the territory, whereas the transformation of landscapes—which jeopardizes the sovereignty communities have over their lands—is a characteristic of what I consider territorial damage. In Curvaradó, for example, the difference between these damages stems from the fact that people describe the damage provoked by the palm as not just the violent transformation of their lands and their rights over their territories, but as the ominous repercussions of a poison capable of polluting their own bodies. Therefore, the inhabitants' major concern is not only the control of snakes through the eradication of palm but rather finding methods to properly deal with this poison and heal both the territory and their own bodies.

One last example. In Eyákera, an indigenous reserve located in the municipality of Unguía, Northern Chocó, in the face of game animal scarcity, Emberá leaders have requested the plantation of certain trees as a measure of reparation. According to them, the spiritual masters of these trees can help *jaibanas* negotiate with the masters that protect game animals. As in the case of Curvaradó, the harm associated with drastic transformations of the landscapes form part of a logic that does not describe its effects in terms of environmental damages. It is not that the communities of the Eyákera reserve do not know that upon permitting the regeneration of the natural forest, certain plants attract some insects and pollinating birds, which in turn permit the growth of species whose fruits eventually feed large rodents and other potential game animals. The point is that people are pointing to a very different phenomenon that even if it plays out in a similar way biologists or agronomists have described—absence of game animals—the harm provoked is not limited to what might be considered just an environmental damage. Due to the fact that in this case the affected communities point to a different phenomenon, the reparations that can take place cannot be exclusively limited to environmental reparations since it would be pointless, for example, to let the forest grow if the *jaibanas* cannot carry

out the vital acts of negotiation with the masters of game animals. In this way, the actions of reparation to the territory would point to the recovery of relationships between people, their territories, and the beings that inhabit them and not simply to the restoration of a disturbed environmental balance: what is intended is not a recovery of symbiotic relationships between animal and vegetal species, but rather of relationships of exchange and reciprocity between spiritual masters.

These examples shed light on what Eduardo Vivieros de Castro (2004) calls uncontrolled equivocations, that is, misunderstandings that come about when two different interlocutors (in this case indigenous or Afro-Colombian communities on the one hand, and the state and the institutions that deal with the restitution of rights to victims on the other) are not speaking about the same issue (the nature of the damage and the possibilities of reparation) but are unaware of this. This difference of terms also proves what Blaser (2009b) considers a conflict of ontological type, that is, disputes that take place not because different speakers have different representations of the world but because “the interlocutors are unaware that different worlds are being enacted (and assumed) by each of them.” (Ibid.,11) I would like to point out that the state actions of reparation to a territory that is considered a victim cannot aim exclusively to re-establish rights of people, nor protect their cosmologies or their cultural representations of reality, but rather repair ties with non-human beings which form an integral part of their respective territories or worlds.

These examples lead me to consider two more things. First, war and its effects on many communities cannot be fully understood if the experiences and relationships these communities maintain with the places they inhabit are not considered. Second, the intimate relationships indigenous and Afro-Colombian communities maintain with their territories and the myriad non-human beings presuppose that war causes damage that extends beyond humans and that its destruction and suffering are embodied not only individually but also intersubjectively and collectively, involving people, non-humans, and even places. If the effects of the armed conflict are so far reaching and they affect a miscellaneous assemblage of beings,

is then the framework of human rights sufficient to think about reparations? From my point of view this is precisely one of the possibilities that Victims' Law opens up: that non-humans may be included as eventual subjects of rights.

Either through the restitution of rights to the use and enjoyment of the land, through measures that reverse environmental impacts, or with symbolic actions that help restore the relationships these communities maintain with their territories and the myriad beings that inhabit them, all definition and measure of reparation established by the state will necessarily target people. So even when the territory is included as a victim, the state reparations will always revolve around human rights and their most recent political subrogate: multiculturalism. Both—human rights and recognition of cultural diversity—are the only terms with which the state is capable of recognizing the damages that indigenous and Afro-Colombian communities place on their territories and the beings that inhabit them. To recognize these damages outside these frameworks would mean that the state would be accepting the “real” and not only “cultural” existence of spirits, *fierras* or masters of game animals. In other words, it does not matter how progressive the Victims' Laws may become, they work within a legal multiculturalist framework where what is at stake is the protection of some cultural forms of representing the world but not the nature of the world itself.

Political Ontology

In one of the official editions of the Victims' Law regarding indigenous peoples, Paula Gaviria (Director of the Unit for Attention to and Integral Reparation of Victims) and Gabriel Muyuy (Director of the Presidential Program for the Development of the Indigenous Peoples of Colombia) make a presentation in which they point out that during the formulation of this law government officials and indigenous authorities held a *diálogo de sabers*, a dialogue among different knowledges or ways of knowing (Presidencia de la República 2012, 8). One of the main teachings resulting from this dialogue, both officials claim, was the inclusion of the territory as a victim.

For them “this inclusion accounts for the sociopolitical recognition of the diversity of epistemologies and relations between man and Mother Earth that, with their different versions, take precedence in the indigenous way of thinking” (Ibid., 9).

The term Mother Earth is important here since it appears in the chapter dedicated to the purpose and scope of the law, specifically in the definition of victim: “For the indigenous peoples the territory is a victim, taking into account their cosmovision and the special and collective link that connects them with Mother Earth” (Congreso de Colombia, Decreto-Ley 4633, Art. 3). Mother Earth is a blended concept, somehow similar to those portmanteau words that Humpty Dumpty describes to Alice when he explains the meaning of the absurd poem *Jabberwocky* included in Lewis Carroll’s *Through the Looking Glass*. Like portmanteau words, Mother Earth has (at least) two different meanings bundled into a single expression. I say at least two because what happens with this type of expressions is exactly what Humpty Dumpty says happens when he uses a word: “It means just what I choose it to mean—neither more nor less.” Mother Earth is a blend, polyvalent term carrying a range of different meanings depending upon who uses it. Bearing in mind some of the aforementioned effects of the armed conflict, from an indigenous point of view Mother Earth would account for a series of beings—human, non-human, super-human—, for the set of links that these beings share, and for the way they express their existence in particular places. Mother Earth also serves, especially for a non-indigenous person, to describe the “spiritual”, “symbolic” or “cultural” ties that indigenous peoples cultivate with what in modern terms is called “nature”. The conception of nature as a mother has found its way into public discourse on account of the association that began to take form around the 1960s between environmentalism and indigenous identities, an association that re-invented indigenous peoples as people closer to nature and full of ancestral wisdom to steward the environment (Nadasdy 2005, Ulloa 2004). Through environmentalism, Mother Earth has been positioned as a concept capable of describing a range of relationships that nation-states now consider possible.

Going back to the idea of Vivieros de Castro (2004), in the case of the Victim's Law, Mother Earth is a uncontrolled equivocation, one of those events that take place when the state and the indigenous peoples are not speaking about the same thing but are unaware of this. As such, Mother Earth can account for the connections that some communities maintain with an intricate network of beings endowed with agency, for the sense of places they cultivate, or for the "respectful", "sustainable" or "spiritual" relationships that they have with the places they inhabit. The term, in the context of the Victims' Law, is therefore a translation, a sort of equivalence that allows certain mutual comprehension between structurally dissimilar realities. This does not mean that through its use the indigenous peoples who participated in the formulation of the law were not capable of conveying some of the meanings they experience in their territories, which led these peoples to include their territories as victims. Therefore, Mother Earth works as a type of term (expression) that permits indigenous people to express demands of recognition in terms (conditions) intelligible for the Colombian state.

Something similar occurs when in the law certain damages to the territory are compared with desecrations or profanations (Art. 44), or when the defense of the collective territories calls upon international conventions that protect "cultural property" (UNESCO, Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict, 1954: Art. 1), or international laws that condemn the hostilities "directed against places of worship which constitute the cultural or spiritual heritage of peoples" (Second Protocol Additional to the Geneva Conventions, 1949: Art. 16,). The use of certain religious language—desecration, places of worship, veneration, sacred sites—to describe the expressions of care, reciprocity or respect that underpin certain relationships between communities and the places they inhabit, seeks to make understandable a set of experiences that modern states only recognize within a religious domain. This language would facilitate the understanding of some of the experiences that indigenous and even Afro-Colombian communities draw from their territories but by no means does this language exhaust the sense that gives support to these peoples' relationships and practices. The religious lan-

guage cannot always account for the potential consequences the armed conflict has inflicted upon the territory. Thinking in terms of desecrations or profanations of sacred sites, for example, sets in motion a number of distinctions between humans, non-humans, spirits or gods that may not necessarily exist in many societies, or may simply reify non-existent boundaries between sacred and profane spheres. The point is that if indeed the comparison between the relationships with the territory and religious experiences can turn out to be useful in order to account for experiences that in another way would prove unintelligible to the so-called modern societies, the religious language does not erase the existing differences between diametrically opposed forms of experiencing certain places (De la Cadena 2015).

The inclusion of the territory in a law conceived for the attention, protection, and reparation of victims would offer a new field of dialogue and transaction with the state, one that would make it possible to describe the damages and impacts that go beyond the human in terms that are, I reiterate, socially recognizable. This brings us back to how Gaviria and Muyuy describe their learnings during the consultation of the law: “the sociopolitical recognition of epistemologies.” (Presidencia de la República 2012, 9) This type of recognition, no matter how well intended it may be, works within some formal and very well defined limits in which modernity and multicultural politics function as matrices that constitute horizons of possibility, setting boundaries—no matter how porous they may be—between the real and belief, the natural and the cultural, the objective and the subjective, or the public and the private.

My interpretation is that the inclusion of the territory as a victim represents a political triumph for the indigenous organizations but when it is wrapped up in concepts such as cosmovision, it adopts a tone in which the Colombian state simply adapts a multiculturalist respect for the worldviews embodied by particular social actors recognized as legitimate Others. The issue, as I hope I showed in previous chapters, is that when those who experience a certain type of damage caused by the conflict in terms of *feras* that have disappeared, jaguars that have gone mad, snakes that have become more aggressive, or ghostly spirits inhabiting places, what is happen-

ing is that these people are not just representing facts but rather presenting them in the way those facts are experienced (Holbraad 2008). The idea that these experiences correspond to a particular worldview emerges in the epistemological process through which those experiences are translated, in the task of turning these facts into something comprehensible for those of us who do not inhabit the worlds of *jaïs* or *madres de agua*.

When invoking spirits that have gone mad or *fieras* that have disappeared, communities of Bajo Atrato are calling upon different logics of how the universe is constituted (Handelman 2008, 181) and principles “of a being in the world and the orientation of such a being toward the horizons of experience.” (Kapferer 1988, 79) In other words, they are making reference to ontic and ontological questions—the constitution of the world and the logic of relationships among the beings that it comprises—and not merely epistemological questions. The turn of the epistemological towards the ontological could help us to consider not so much the way in which certain communities represent the world but rather the nature of the world that can be known. That is why the dialogue of knowledges that has been invoked in the Victims’ Law is somehow asymmetrical and it is so not much for the conditions in which the laws were elaborated but rather because the power relations that make this dialogue possible are never called into question, that is, the type of world and of reality sanctioned by the modern state.

Due to the fact that the difference between knowledge and belief continues to be actualized and reified by the state through certain multicultural policies, the type of damages to the territory invoked by many indigenous and Afro-Colombian communities continue to be confined to the world of their beliefs. In other words, these kinds of damages would say something about how certain communities use a cultural language to describe their inner experiences but the damages, as they are described, would say nothing “real” about the suffering of the territory and much less about the impacts upon *fieras*, *madres de agua* or *jaïs* since none of these entities “really” exist, at least not in the way state assumes. Nonetheless it is precisely here

wherein lies the great potential of the recognition of the territory as a victim, as said recognition could even open a dialogue about reality and its legitimate representation. This argument forms part of what has been described as political ontology (Blaser 2009a, 2009b, 2012, 2013a and 2013b). What exactly is at stake, for example, when members of the Emberá community report that the paramilitary groups have put the masters of animals at risk? What possibilities of negotiation with the state are possible when some communities from the Curvaradó River express their intention not to return to their former villages because these places are now inhabited by the souls of those who suffered a bad death? Are the invoked dialogues of knowledges or the sociopolitical recognition of epistemologies enough to understand the predicaments in which different experiences of the armed conflict come together and strive to maintain their own intelligibility?

As mentioned earlier, political ontology makes reference to the type of conflicts and negotiations that take place when diverse ontologies or worlds meet and strive to maintain their own existence in a political domain (Blaser 2009a and 2009b; Escobar 2015 and 2016). Here political should be understood in the wide sense of the term, namely, as the arrangement of relationships between different classes of beings that inhabit a given world. As analytical tool, political ontology emphasizes this tenet: there exists no single reality or nature to which different groups have access through their particular cultural representations. Political ontology adopts then the multinaturalist approach described by Vivieros de Castro (1998): the assumption that rather than a multiplicity of representations of a single world, what exists is a set of different realities that can be known only through particular embodied points of view. Multinaturalism inverts the regular formula of modern multiculturalism—“the oneness of nature and the multiplicity of cultures” (Vivieros de Castro 2010: 34)—and in its place assumes nature in the form of the particular, situating the kind of alterity that different societies embody in the type of world that can be known more than in the representations these societies create about reality. In short, a notion of multiple natures or worlds overlaps the notion of a unique nature (Ibid., 2010).

As an approach, political ontology assumes that the conflicts involving dissimilar perspectives have nothing to do with what vision of nature is the closest to reality—that is an epistemological conflict—but rather with the very nature of what exists and can be known—an ontological conflict. In the case of the territory as a victim, political ontology would serve to account for those disputes involving the very definitions of damage and its possibilities of reparations, particularly in a post-conflict context and in the definition of adequate policies of truth, justice, reparation, and guarantees of non-recurrence for indigenous and Afro-Colombian communities. How can the spirits of the ancestors be repaired? Or the rivers? Who can speak on behalf of the territory and the damages that render it a victim of the armed conflict? Under what conditions?

From the perspective of political ontology, the inclusion of the territory as a victim opens up not only the possibility of recognizing other types of being and reality, but above all a way of understanding the armed conflict: a way in which human rights or the impacts upon people are not enough to account for the series of damages invoked by the indigenous peoples but, as I have showed, by Afro-Colombian and mestizo communities as well. The inclusion of the territory as a victim can be considered a major political event or, as described by a lawyer I once met who accompanied the processes of formulation of the Victims' Laws, "a goal that the indigenous organizations scored against the government". From a perspective of cultural politics, this inclusion can be understood exactly in the terms described by Gaviria and Muyuy: recognition by a multicultural state of the variety of worldviews embodied by indigenous peoples. From that point of view, one would feel tempted to recognize the important advances of the national legislation and to interpret said inclusion as an achievement of the indigenous organizations in the recognition of their rights. Indeed, within the framework of cultural politics there would be no more to do but to recognize the way these organizations managed to challenge the dynamics of state power and to contest the initial scope that the government wished to give to the victims' laws. From a perspective of political ecology, the inclusion of the territory as a victim would account for the disputes over the control, use,

and protection of rights of ownership on collective lands and territorial resources, as well as of the conflicts that emerge when nature is conceived and experienced in radically different ways. Even if one adopts a certain political economy approach, this recognition would serve to problematize the type of social relationships that enable the production of meanings about the territory and its uses. However, all these analyses do not call sufficiently into question the nature of the world that can be known since the distinction “between the world (Nature) and its representation (Culture) continues to be affirmed as a universal” (Blaser, 2009a: 889). Moreover cultural politics, political ecology or political economy would add little to the understanding of those effects of the conflict that communities in Bajo Atrato tend to register on their territories as living entities. Hence the importance of what political ontology can offer since the inclusion of the territory opens possibilities of recognition of entities and effects that go beyond the human, gaining the power to destabilize the boundaries that state and politics have mapped out between the realms of nature and culture. That is why I tend to agree with the lawyer I met, except that for me the inclusion of the territory in the Victim’s Law is not the scoring of an ordinary goal but rather one that would enable the winning of championships.

Approaching the victimization of the territory from a perspective centered on the ontological is a way to highlight the disturbing character of the demands made by indigenous organizations since what enters the equation is not simply respect for certain cultural rights but rather a set of definitions that go beyond apparently stable categories such as human/non-human, animate/inanimate or nature/culture. Therefore, the inclusion of the territory in the law cannot be considered a conflict of cultural type since, as Blaser (2009a) and Escobar (2015) point out, ontological conflicts refer essentially to the existence of worlds otherwise that cannot be reduced to the unequivocal world enacted by moderns. Ontological conflicts also raise questions about the very definition of what is visible, legitimate, and comprehensible before a state endowed with the power to differentiate between the “real” and the so-called cultural constructions of that reality. Besides creating certain political awareness, political ontology can be a tool of analysis that in the context of the

Colombian armed conflict and the current policies of truth, justice, and reparation may draw attention to various questions: What type of damages are comprehensible to the modern state and why? What other kinds of damages caused by the conflict are ignored or sidelined? To what extent might a selective recognition of those other damages be functional within a certain political perspective about justice or reparation? In short, what ethical concerns would arise from the inclusion of the territory as a victim and from the eventual recognition of a set of entities whose existence stands beyond the human? These questions will be addressed in the following chapter.

As I mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, the political ontology analysis that I propose of the Victims' Laws does not mean that the state has accepted right off the bat the existence of a range of non-human beings that must have their rights recognized. In fact, nothing could be further from the truth. While according to the Victims' Laws non-human beings must technically have their rights recognized, the State's priority is to protect human rights, which are also protected by international laws. In this way, what I am presenting here are a set of possibilities of recognition and of political demands that are implicit in the very notion of the territory as a victim. My own interpretation is that in the Victims' Laws there is a loophole through which we can glimpse a set of possibilities that oblige us to see far beyond the inclusion and respect of certain cultural interpretations about the damages provoked by war. When indigenous organizations managed to get territory included in this law, they undoubtedly had in mind very specific interests and needs, and not necessarily the aim of calling into question the set of technologies of power through which the state produces regimes of truth. My own presumption is that the framework of the Victims' Law is a platform upon which these organizations could articulate demands under terms that were at the same time consistent with the realities experienced on account of war and attuned with the very language of the rights that have been already recognized by the multiculturalist state. Therefore, it is only under these terms—expressions and conditions—that spirits, *feras* or *tramas* could enter the public arena.

Before finishing, I would like to point out that the (potential) entrance of these beings by the pathway of victimization generates impacts that cannot be overlooked. First of all, the law is not celebrating the full and meaningful existence of these beings but rather it is exposing their fragility, their state of powerlessness. Put differently, it is not an existential or positive recognition in the sense that it publically extols their agency. On the contrary, it reinforces their vulnerability: what is recognized is what the territory is “ceasing to be” and not “what it is”. That is why the attention to rights is more within a framework of land ownership and humanitarian assistance than around the inclusion of a diversity of beings affected by armed conflict. This of course is coherent with that approach of the law according to which the holders of rights are none other than the indigenous communities, which makes of the recognition of the territory as a victim a negative right in the legal sense of the term: it sets out that these communities cannot be deprived of what “in exercising their human nature, they have legitimately acquired in the past and to which they are legally entitled” (Auping 2004, 1). In other words, the territory and its victimization are set out as a negative right that these communities have to not be deprived of their lands or their cultural traditions. In this sense, the inclusion of the territory as a victim has so far outlined a type of assistance policy that privileges the restitution of certain rights more than the recognition of new ones, which is not devoid of certain risks: for example that the reparations to the territory take on highly institutionalized forms in which the state itself sets its conditions of protection, or that victimization, as analyzed by Pablo Jaramillo (2014) in the case of the Wayuu indigenous peoples in Northern Colombia, can become a catalyst for a limited agenda of land ownership claims.

Through the discourse of victimization and vulnerability, the Victims’ Laws recognize only a certain type of agency in the territory: one that can limit politics to actions of assistance and restitution. However, politics, if we pay attention to the possibilities of relationships that the inclusion of the territory sets out, is not limited to the social contract within which human relationships are regulated. Rather, politics encompasses also other set of agents and beings beyond the human, agents

towards which the state cannot act as a legitimate regulator for the plain and simple reason that within the state's regime of truth, these other beings cannot even be thought of as real. As a result, the recognition of the territory as a victim should promote a type of politics that will not be confined to the restitution of some rights already acquired but rather it should pluralize the very framework of these rights, or at least invite us to consider a legal framework in which the existence of *fierras* and *jaís* is taken seriously.

Rights of the territory

The Decree-Law 4633 or Victims' Laws for indigenous peoples is a powerful tool in the struggle of these communities for the recognition of their differentiated rights. It sets a major path in relation to the policies of truth, justice, and reparation that should be implemented in Colombia. My interpretation of the inclusion of the territory as a victim draws attention to possibilities of recognition of the effects of the armed conflict that extend beyond the human. Whether this recognition should come from the establishment of new rights (including those of non-human entities) or from an adequate adjustment of the current multiculturalist framework are questions of philosophy of law and of legal anthropology that are yet to be resolved. In terms of recognition of rights for ethnic minorities, Colombia has exceptional legislation and although the Victims' Laws for Afro-Colombian and indigenous communities are in themselves portentous, when these rights are seen within the context of the multicultural politics of the country they seem to endorse a liberal vision in which what is at stake is the protection of the epistemic diversity of certain social groups but not the type of world that can be known.

The recognition of the territory as a victim may destabilize certain conceptualizations and practices around collective damages and reparations. But when such a recognition is made through the filter of victimization, the state would also constrain certain possibilities of political action. There is therefore a big challenge in relation to the valuation of the damages that have been caused to the territory as

communities experiencing such damages might describe a certain range of events that might not fit within the state regimes of truth. In these cases, the damages of the territory may be treated just as the cultural interpretation communities make of the effects of war, which suppose from the state measures for the protection of the beliefs and cultures embodied by these communities. Such are the terms in which the multicultural state can recognize the suffering of *jaïs*, *madres de agua* or even certain places but as I have discussed, the victimization of the territory can take on overtones of an ontological more than an epistemological conflict.

The inclusion of the territory as a victim in the decree for indigenous peoples but not in the one concerning Afro-Colombian communities speaks of the dissimilar paths that the cultural identities of these groups have taken within the historical and institutional structures recognizing ethnic Otherness. Although the law that concerns Afro-Colombian communities does not contain something similar to the inclusion of the territory as a victim, it does not mean, as I showed in previous chapters, that many of these communities do not experience the impacts of the conflict in similar terms to those recognized in the case of indigenous peoples. In fact, the emphasis on the ontological tracks how certain meanings and experiences arise as a consequence of certain practices (Blaser 2009a), of the cultivation of certain sensitivities and of certain ways of relating with places and with the natural world, which are not necessarily confined to certain ethnic identities (Blaser 2012). Lastly and although the law does not consider it, the possibility of having an experience with a territory which is also considered a victim, transcends any of the social, cultural, and historical conditions that the state has recognized for only certain ethnic affiliations.

The rights of the territory—including the recognition of the plethora of entities that inhabit it—has not necessarily been one of the priorities in the agenda of the indigenous organizations that participated in the design and elaboration of the Victims' Laws. However, such discussions would prove fundamental in order to consider the framework of ethical and political relationships that mainstream society can estab-

lish with these peoples. These discussions are also essential in order to consider the type of measures of justice, truth, and reparation that can be implemented. Until now the recognition of the territory as a victim has activated a set of multicultural policies that aim to protect the cultural constructions of reality embodied by certain peoples. But as I have discussed, that recognition might also prove to be useful to underscore the limitations of a rights framework that does not question the epistemological hegemony adopted by modern states. My own belief is that the disappearance of sylvan spirits, *fieras* or *madres de agua* says as much about the values and sensibilities cultivated by those who describe war damages with these terms, as about the world itself and how it can be known.

CHAPTER 6



Policies and the Unkept Promises of Law

Equipped with rain boots, a hat, a water bottle, a camera, a notebook, mosquito repellent, and a poncho to protect me from the mosquitos not put off by the repellent, I was on my way to Villanueva, a hamlet located on the banks of the Tamboral River in the mountains of the Darién Gap. I tried to keep up with the group's pace as we walked in single file through the humid, muddy forest that someone described to me as the ruins of some abandoned fields. Before the aerial bombings of 1997 and the paramilitary attacks of 2002 that led to the forced displacement of its inhabitants, Villanueva had been a clustered settlement of about 35 houses around a school and a facility that served as community and health center. In 2016, the hamlet was populated by nine families. When the first families managed to return to their lands in 2009, they found the hamlet had practically disappeared because the river changed its course as a consequence of constant damming or *palizadas* downstream. The former hamlet, or more accurately, what had survived the plundering and abandonment of war, had simply been swallowed by the river. The new hamlet was a set of scattered houses with the remains of the former school as its center.

I went to Villanueva in 2016 with a group of people who wanted to determine how many families were living there and how many of these families had completed the so-called *caracterización*, an assessment or survey intended to gather information about the victims of the war waged in the region. Our group was composed of an Afro-Colombian community leader who had taken responsibility for the project, two young men and a woman who had been hired by the parish of Riosucio as survey-takers, and myself—I volunteered to do surveys. The assessment or *caracterización*, as it was repeatedly referred to by my companions, was undertaken by ASCOBA (the Great Communitarian Council of Bajo Atrato), the Claretian priests of the parish of Riosucio, and Corporación Jurídica Libertad (CJL), a nongovernmental human rights organization. The goal of these organizations was to use the collected data to help local communities formulate a plan for collective reparations. The surveys of Villanueva and the rest of the communities belonging to the Salaquí River basin intended to collect data regarding the socioeconomic conditions of the victimized families, their versions of the events of the armed conflict, and the effects

of war in terms of both material losses and individual and collective damages. The questionnaire, which included more than 70 questions that each family, with the help of the survey-takers, had to complete, also contained a section with queries regarding the proposals each family would formulate to redress their harm.

Formulation of plans for collective reparations began in 2013, with an assessment of the afro-descendant communities living in the Domingodó basin. Because of a lack of financial resources, however, the project stopped for two years until 2016, when the parish of Riosucio obtained some grants from international cooperation to pursue the assessment process in other zones, including the Salaquí River. The morning of our trip to Villanueva was preceded by one of those heavy rains that seems to have no end. One of my colleagues suggested that the rain was the way the place was welcoming me because this was the very first time I had set foot there. In Villanueva we found five families, four of whom had already completed the questionnaire. And yet all the families were happy to see our group in their hamlet as not many institutions tended to visit them. We decided to complete the questionnaire with the remaining family and to spend the entire day in the village because its inhabitants wanted us to verify their living conditions. Although they were aware that we were not a humanitarian institution capable of assisting them with their many material needs, they saw in our visit an opportunity to raise awareness about the state of the hamlet. For example, although most families had managed to rebuild their houses, they lacked roof tiles and wood to finish them. They told us they urgently needed at the very least water tanks, water filters, cookware sets, and a school teacher because fourteen children were receiving no basic education. As they thought more about this last request, they realized they had neither school nor desks and that they had no means of providing a place where the teacher could live. We also learned that the families who had returned to their former homes had done so without the support of any governmental institution. Except for a small amount of food supplies furnished by a public agency as a part of a humanitarian assistance project, they had not received any material aid whatsoever to facilitate their return “in conditions of safety and dignity”, as stipulated by the law (Congreso de Colombia, Ley 1448 de 2011, Art. 28).

I was assigned to the task of completing the questionnaire with the only family that had not previously been surveyed. The family was composed of a couple in their late twenties and their six children, aged between nine months to ten years. The man and provider of the household was not at home because he was working in a logging camp located in another hamlet. The woman, wearing a tattered spaghetti strap-dress that did not hide an infected reddish rash on her back, told us she would not feel very comfortable answering the questionnaire because she was illiterate and she did not consider herself intelligent enough to understand everything we wanted to know. We reassured her by telling her that we only wanted to know about her experiences and that she knew many things that could help us in our work. She finally agreed. Although the questionnaire had to be completed in confidentiality, she asked us if someone from the other families could sit with us in order to help her answer the questions. Then two women decided to stay with us and one of them explained to me that the young mother was not right in the head because during her last delivery she did not get adequate care, and because her husband was obliged to make her do hard work in the fields in order to earn enough money for the family. The young woman, while holding and breast-feeding her little baby, patiently answered our 70 questions. Sometimes she turned up her head, sometimes she just opened her black eyes and raised her eyebrows with a little lost look, sometimes the other women answered for her. Most of the time she simply answered with a blunt “I don’t know”.

While we were completing the questionnaire, I saw the bloated, swollen bellies of three of her children who played around us. They also had dry hair and pale skin, signs that I interpreted as indicative of malnutrition. I could not help but think that the questions I was asking about forced displacement, homicide or forced recruitment reflected only a part of the violence she and other people from places like Villanueva had endured. We wanted to collect information about the armed conflict, but our survey did not address questions about that silent, slow, daily, less spectacular and yet overwhelming violence that has been confining people to a permanent state of poverty, vulnerability, and abandonment. We were there collecting

data and conducting interviews in order to design a collective plan of reparation, but how to talk about reparation in a place that, even before the staggering toll of war, was already full of inequality and injustice? How to address reparations in a society in which social exclusion and structural discrimination are not only persistent but a fundamental cause of the armed violence these communities experienced? Even if it is true that in Bajo Atrato the armed conflict destroyed many life projects and undermined people's livelihoods, before the war the local economic, health care, and educational opportunities were far from ideal.

In this chapter I depict some of the challenges associated with the implementation of the Victims' Laws. In particular, I focus on the "collective reparations plans", a set of measures designed by the state to redress human rights abuses among indigenous and Afro-Colombian communities. If in the previous chapter I focused on the content of the law and on the set of ontological and political possibilities that the recognition of the territory as a victim has opened up, here I turn my gaze to the ground, that is, to the effects these laws have had on the daily lives of people, to how communities and local grassroots organizations are appropriating and contextualizing the tenets of these laws, to the means used for its implementation, and to the difficulties communities find in understanding it. In sum, I focus on what Sally Engle Merry (2006) defines as vernacularization: the process through which human rights discourses are appropriated and customized in ways that are consistent with the ethos and customs of a particular local setting. In the first part of the chapter, I discuss the place the proposed collective reparation programs have in a transitional justice framework. In the second part, I present the particular institutional context in which these plans are being formulated. I then proceed to describe the work undertaken in Bajo Atrato in relation to these plans, placing particular emphasis on what I learned through my participation in two different stages of their formulation: first, in a set of workshops and courses designed by an NGO to teach local communities about different aspects of the law; second, in the *caracterización* or assessment process I have described in the previous paragraphs. Finally, I examine the place that the notion of territory as a victim has in these collective reparation plans and

in the way people addressed both the damages inflicted upon their territories and the substantive reparations they envisage.

In order to better understand the importance of these collective reparation plans, two things should be borne in mind. First, although the Colombian state has set different procedural and institutional instruments to promote reparation of victims, in Bajo Atrato the design of these collective plans is in the hands of local communities. Government institutions that were to implement collective reparations had not yet begun their work, but local organizations took it upon themselves to begin the process. This gives certain autonomy to communities because they can decide the concrete measures to be implemented, but at the same their actions are limited because the creation of these plans requires resources and financial support that are not always easy to obtain. Second, the formulation of these plans is just one of the tasks communities undertake in their aim for achieving justice and reparation in their territories. At the time of my fieldwork, indigenous and Afro-Colombian communities were working on the first stages of formulation of said collective plans. This is what I document in this chapter. At the end of 2016 the plans for the Domingodó and Salaquí river basins were about to be completed but their implementation, which is the state's responsibility, has not started. As of 2018, the setting in motion of the reparative measures designed by local communities is increasingly uncertain because new presidential elections took place and the new government has not backed any of the initiatives that are part of the current transitional justice framework.

Transitional Justice and Collective Reparations

As explained in the previous chapter, the Victims' Laws aim to redress issues of human rights abuses by establishing measures of assistance, reparation, and restitution for victims belonging to indigenous and Afro-Colombian communities. These laws were formulated based on three basic premises. The first is the recognition that armed conflict has affected these peoples disproportionately and that the dam-

ages inflicted on their unique ways of living require specific measures of reparation. The second premise is recognition that these peoples are eligible for both collective and differentiated rights, which mean that, besides being entitled to the same human rights everyone has, they are also granted specific rights to protect and strengthen their own cultures, institutions, and traditions. The third premise is the principle of interdependency and inter-relationality of the aforementioned collective rights, which means that, given the fact that these communities are entitled to rights such as collective lands, self-government and the practice of their own customs and traditions, the violation of any of these rights jeopardizes the very conditions of their existence. In the context of the transitional justice process in which these laws were formulated, the ensemble of these premises makes indigenous and Afro-Colombian communities eligible for collective reparation.

A particularity of the transitional justice process in Colombia, and more specifically of the Victims' Laws, is that they were formulated and implemented before the actual end of the armed conflict. This means that victims who make claims are at high risk because often they are denouncing the very armed groups that are still engaged in violent repression against the civil population. The state then faces the challenge of implementing policies to redress victims' damages in a context that allows their re-victimization. Some scholars consider it unrealistic to set up reparations processes when peace agreements had not even been completed (García-Godos et al. 2011, Illif et al. 2011, Summers 2012). Despite the risks involved when procedures of reparation are undertaken before the end of the conflict and despite criticisms questioning the Victims' Laws compliance with international human rights standards (Summers 2012), the Colombian case shows that the end of conflict and the complete demobilization of armed forces are not indispensable conditions for starting victims' reparation (García-Godos et al. 2011).

In traditional transitional justice processes, reparations aim to recognize the loss and suffering of victims by providing material and symbolic compensation to them. The classic reparative scheme comprehends restitution (the return to pre-existing

conditions before the victimizing acts), compensation (economic means to remedy material, moral, and physical harm), rehabilitation (medical and psychological treatment), satisfaction (reestablishment of victims' dignity), and non-repetition (prevention of further violations) (Teitel 2000). All these measures aim, in one way or another, to help victims retrieve what they had before the gross violations of their rights. This scheme worked relatively well in post-authoritarian regimes such as Chile, Argentina or South Africa, where violations of human rights commingled with violations of civil and political rights (Hayner 2000). These countries set up paradigmatic processes of transitional justice and yet their models are not fully applicable in developing countries such as Colombia, where the original situation of many victims was already characterized by poverty, marginalization, and discrimination. Clearly, this is not a state of things that ought to be restored.

In light of such conditions, some scholars, lawyers, and human rights activists (Diaz et al. 2009, ICTJ 2009, Illif et al. 2001, Uprimny and Saffon 2009) advocate a transitional justice framework capable of integrating the traditional restorative justice approach—restoration of losses suffered by victims and recognition by offenders of the harm they have caused—and a distributive justice approach—fair distribution of economic and social rights, which may not have been appropriately distributed even before the conflict. Such a transitional justice model may address victims' concerns, facilitate their social and economic inclusion, and remedy structural problems like extreme poverty, social marginalization, and discrimination, which are understood as both causes and consequences of the systematic oppression experienced by large victimized communities. Since in any transitional justice process, the general goal is to strengthen democracy and peace by fostering a durable resolution to conflicts (ICTJ 2009), it has been proposed that the integration of restorative justice and distributive justice approaches are important means to link peace-building, access to justice, and the fight against poverty (Kalmanovitz 2010, Saffon and Uprimny 2010, Uprimny and Saffon 2009).

The implementation of this kind of model represents, however, several complex challenges. For example, in developing countries emerging from armed conflict, “the impact of human rights violations on the most socially and economically vulnerable victims overlaps with the state’s obligation to address the social and economic need of citizens in general.” (ICTJ 2009, 9) Given that the state has the obligation to respect the rights of all its citizens, how then to differentiate the specific needs and particular rights some communities have as victims from the rights they already possess as Colombian citizens? How to draw the line between social services or policies to reduce poverty and victims’ reparation? In a peace-building scenario, where the legitimacy of the state is at stake and where rebuilding trust between a government and its citizens is crucial, these questions are not minor issues, particularly because the effective differentiation between these two lines of action—the state’s obligation to afford reparations to victims, on the one hand, and to address the economic and social needs of citizens in general, on the other—is necessary in order to achieve accountability of the state, redress for victims, and acknowledgement of their dignity, all crucial steps toward reconciliation and long lasting justice (Kalmanovitz 2010).

Another question regarding transitional justice processes integrating restorative and distributive approaches is the feasibility of their ambitious goals. Often, they pursue broad transformations that do not respond to the specific concerns of victims. Sometimes states simply lack political will to eradicate poverty or implement reparation policies. And in many cases, states do not always possess enough financial resources to make effective reparations to large victim communities and to implement broader economic policies to fight against widespread poverty and inequality, which are already major issues concerning victims and other citizens equally. An alternative solution are the so-called collective reparation programs, broadly defined as initiatives of reparation targeting groups that have experienced systematic violations of their rights (Díaz 2009, ICTJ 2009, Londoño y Oyaga 2016). These kinds of programs have been set in motion in countries like Peru, Morocco and now Colombia. In Peru, for instance, collective reparations were used as a means to rebuild

ties between the state and those marginalized rural indigenous communities most affected by decades of both The Shining Path guerrilla group and state terror (Theidon 2004). This program aimed at the reconstruction of economic and productive infrastructure in marginalized communities, as well as the recovery and expansion of health and education services for said rural communities (ICTJ 2009, 28-32). In Morocco, in the light of the mass repression experienced in regions considered centers of dissent and political resistance by the governments that ruled the country in the post-independence period, a community-based reparation program was adopted aimed at the social and economic rehabilitation of said regions (ICTJ 2009, 12).

Collective reparation programs may follow different approaches and respond to different concerns, according to who the beneficiaries are. Collective victims might be bound together in a group because of a common cultural identity, a place-based identity, or a shared experience of victimization (Díaz 2009, Londoño y Oyaga 2016, OIM 2012). Reparation programs, therefore, will vary accordingly. As mentioned earlier, indigenous and Afro-Colombian communities are considered eligible for collective reparations both because of their shared cultural and social ties, and due to the nature of their granted cultural and ethnic rights. Thus, collective reparation programs have a double purpose as they aim to redress the impacts of specific human rights violations experienced by collectivities, while at the same time remedying some of the historic and structural injustices these peoples have endured. In the context of transitional justice processes, collective reparations seem to be an appropriate means to bridge the divide between restorative and distributive justice approaches, as they may provide compensation and reparation to victims and redress, at the same time, structural issues such as poverty and social exclusion.

Though collective reparations are consistent with the idea that peace and development are interdependent and interrelated processes, the dual purpose of these programs may prove not enough to remedy the specific concerns of victims' groups—i.e. truth, justice or the redress of specific damages—especially if reparation measures are not discernible from broader development policies. Some examples illustrate

this point. The governmental agency responsible for collective reparations in Peru undertook some projects aimed at the recovery of basic education, sanitation, and health services without making explicit to the beneficiaries the rationale of these projects, which were seen by the targeted communities as another developmental initiative rather than a reparation measure (ICTJ 2009, 31-32). In Sierra Leone, the agency carrying out collective reparations programs changed the name of its program from “reparation” to “humanitarian assistance” and yet it continued executing the exact same policies (Ibid., 46). In Colombia, the town of Bojayá in Chocó was rebuilt and got a school and a medical center as part of reparation measures. Many of its inhabitants, however, complained that they had to go through the death of their loved ones in order to get the services they had been demanding for many years before the events that destroyed their town, which are but the kinds of services they should have had as Colombian citizens (CNMH 2014, Lozano 2009). In a nutshell, these examples show that even if projects taking the form of humanitarian assistance or provision of basic services may be a legitimate way to undertake reparations, if collective reparations become just another means to carry out development projects, the very spirit of reparation policies—the recognition of human rights violations—may be undermined (ICTJ 2009, 40).

If, however, collective reparation programs’ dual purpose is clearly stated and not muddled—i.e. to address the losses resulting from war, and to help alleviate economic and social injustices in rural communities—they might become powerful means to promote human rights and state-building while addressing issues of poverty. Of course, there is the potential risk that they allow states to escape their inherent responsibility of providing social services and response to the basic needs of all their citizens, regardless of their status as victims (Ibid., 47). In addition, just as reparations may allow states to help only some of their citizens, communities may use their victim’s rights as a way to access basic human rights that they would otherwise not be able to. Some scholars wonder to what extent transitional justice scenarios are shaping a kind of restricted citizenship in which the exertion of rights has to be accompanied by people’s self-identification as victims (Jaramillo 2014).

Collective reparations cannot replace either development policies or individual reparations, but they certainly may become a constitutive step which helps strengthen the collective rights of certain victim groups. To succeed, such reparations must draw a line, even if it is a symbolic one, between reparation as such and development policies. At least that was one of the main conclusions of the Rabat Report, a document prepared in 2009 by the International Center of Transitional Justice—ICTJ—in which the collective reparations programs of seven different countries were evaluated. The representatives of these countries agreed that development actions such as the provision of basic needs might be effective reparation measures only under the following circumstances. First, if such initiatives are accompanied by an explicit acknowledgement of both the harm done to those who are the object of reparation and the state's responsibilities in said harm (be it because the state failed to prevent human rights violations or because its representatives committed said violations). Second, development may be effective reparation if there is recognition that the circumstances of the group that is the object of said measures are different from those of the rest of the population who are the object of similar development programs. Third, there must be a clearly established link between the measure intended to be reparative and the harm it is meant to repair. Fourth, adequate communication strategies that convey the actual meanings of the reparative measures are imperative. Finally, there must be some kind of symbolic recognition of the harm experienced by victimized communities through the preservation of its historical memory—i.e. the organization of commemorative activities or the development of sites of memory (ICTJ 2009, 40-48).

Thus, the difference between reparations and normal state obligations to invest in marginalized, impoverished, and excluded communities seems to lie not so much in the content of the projects themselves as in the way these projects are designed and implemented. The active participation of communities in the definition of their own reparation measures is very important. Moreover, if that participation is built upon principles that favor people's involvement in the different stages of the program, collective reparations may also constitute a means of empowerment:

Participation permits the collective of victims to move from a passive social and political role toward an active one and provides an opportunity to work with government agencies in improving their situations. It allows communities to determine what reparation measures are the most needed and meaningful to the community. (Ibid., 52)

In the end, the participation of collective beneficiaries proves to be key as it creates “a greater chance for these measures to be accepted for their reparative and transformative values and to differentiate reparations from regular development projects.” (Ibid., 49) In Colombia, where the current situation of indigenous and Afro-Colombian communities is embedded in a context of structural violence that preceded, and often favored, the flagrant violation of their rights during the armed conflict, it is very hard in practice to draw a line between reparation measures and development policies. In this context, transitional justice processes should not be compartmentalized and separated from broad economic and social policies. In Bajo Atrato, for example, the armed conflict exacerbated people’s poverty and vulnerability. To some extent, it also truncated the processes of economic and social development indigenous and Afro-Colombian organizations had already been struggling for. This reality renders the state’s overall goal to fight against poverty not only a desirable but an imperative component of collective reparation programs, which may also have a reparative effect if the authorities incorporate adequate measures of acknowledgment, symbolic reparation, and guarantees of non-repetition.

Some Institutional Aspects of Collective Reparations

In one of the passages of the unfinished novel “The Trial”, Franz Kafka describes the struggles of a man from the countryside who seeks to gain entry into the building where the law is kept. The building is guarded by a doorkeeper who denies him entry and who warns him not to try to get access without his permission: “I am powerful,” says the doorkeeper to the peasant, “and I am only the lowest doorkeeper. From hall to hall, keepers stand at every door, one more powerful than the other. And the sight of the third doorkeeper is already so terrible that even I cannot

bear to look at him.” (Kafka [1915] 1956: 267-268) The man waits vainly for several years before the merciless doorkeeper, but he never obtains access to the law, not even on the eve of his death. Kafka depicts a frustrating and overwhelming scenario in which the law, if it were not for the reluctance of that single doorkeeper, would be attainable. The story reminds me of the Colombian case. Despite its long tradition of violence, exclusion, and socioeconomic inequality—or perhaps because of it—the country has some of the most progressive legislation on the continent with regard to the rights of indigenous and afro-descendant communities. These rights, consigned in the Constitution and in an important body of laws, decrees, edicts, rules, ordinances, codes, treaties, and international agreements, are not the result of the state’s good will, but of the struggles undertaken by the unflagging grassroots movements of these peoples. Lack of legislation is not the heart of the problem. Instead, what has kept these communities from enjoyment of their obtained rights is not one but several doorkeepers, “one more powerful than the other:” armed non-state actors, drug-trafficking mercenaries, private capitalists following the designs of neoliberal policies, corrupt politicians, and also, sadly, the very granter of rights: the Colombian state.

As mentioned earlier, the Victims’ Laws were issued within a context of transitional justice, meaning they are transitory: these particular laws will be in force until 2021 only. To the victims from indigenous and Afro-Colombian communities seeking to be recognized under the scope of the law, that deadline implies a huge challenge because the law cannot be properly enforced due to the fact that armed conflict and rights’ violations continue. In addition, the deadline means that communities have a limited time to assert their rights as victims. To be recognized as victims, these communities need to undertake a set of different procedures at not only the local but also regional and national levels. Only after completing these procedures will these communities be considered a subject of collective reparation. Some of the established tasks, designed by different bureaucratic institutions dealing with victims, require that indigenous and Afro-Colombian communities familiarize themselves with the law, its language, and legal procedures; that individuals assert

their legal status as victims through their inclusion in the *Registro Único de Víctimas* (RUV) or Victims Single Registry, the official national record of victims; that they provide a judicial authority with adequate evidence of the harm suffered; that communities identify the local people to be considered subjects of collective reparation; that they document the kinds of harm that have had collective consequences; that they undertake whatever measures are necessary to design their own collective reparations plans. All these procedures, despite having been designed to serve as threads to help these communities navigate through the kafkaesque labyrinth of reparations, often become new gatekeepers preventing access to the law.

To indigenous and Afro-Colombian communities, collective reparation programs are a fundamental legal tool for asserting these communities' collective rights and formulating demands that fit with their experiences of war. Because they are legally recognized as receivers of special rights, they are subjects of collective reparation, which is an unprecedented legal measure in Latin America since Colombia is the only country that has implemented a differentiated policy for the reparation of ethnic minorities. In the context of the rights granted to these peoples, collective reparations programs aim to take into consideration these minorities' structural characteristics, their particular situation of vulnerability, and their social, economic, symbolic, political, ancestral, and customary perspectives. Ultimately, collective reparations to these groups have been built on the premises that war has caused harm that extends beyond that experienced by individual victims, that the collective life of this population has been affected, and that the damages inflicted on them require responses of a collective nature.

The Colombian jurisprudence may boast a set of measures for the protection and respect of the rights of indigenous and afro-descendant communities. Built according to the logic of the interdependency and inter-relationality of rights, these legal procedures establish that institutional attention to victims belonging to these groups must be based on an integral and differentiated approach, that is to say, it must take into consideration the fact that all rights are interconnected and at the

same time that indigenous and Afro-Colombian communities have economic, social, territorial, and cultural rights that not all citizens have. In particular, the jurisprudence establishes an indissoluble correspondence between the protection of indigenous and Afro-Colombian territories and the very existence of these peoples: “[T]he guarantee of the right to a territory constitutes the material possibility for ethnic groups to exercise their rights to cultural identity and autonomy, insofar as this is the physical space in which their culture can survive.” (Corte Constitucional de Colombia, Sentencia T-380-1993, §12). In other words, the jurisprudence makes of the right to territory the cornerstone of the other indigenous and Afro-Colombian collective rights. In the case of the Victims’ Laws, this recognition means that any damage inflicted upon collective territories is considered a violation of the other granted rights. Take for instance the cases of massive forced displacement that took place in Bajo Atrato in 1997 and 2002. Forced displacement is a flagrant violation of human rights: the rights to life, physical integrity or freedom of movement. It turns into a kind of territorial damage when it is accompanied by dispossession of lands for the purpose of large-scale cultivation of oil palm, as occurred in the territories of the Curvaradó and Jiguamiandó basin rivers.

Besides territorial damages as instances of collective rights violations, the Victims’ Laws depict other kinds of collective damages such as those inflicted on cultural integrity, damages issuing from racism and discrimination, or damages to the political autonomy and the social organizations of indigenous and Afro-Colombian communities. All these kinds of damages have been part of the experiences of war in Bajo Atrato. For example, the law describes cultural damages as violent transformations of traditional values, often in the form of the forced imposition of norms or authorities, the mistreatment of traditional healers, or prohibition of rituals or ceremonies. With regard to damages to political autonomy and to social organizations as violations of collective rights, the law recognizes that traditional councils and other representative bodies are legitimate, quintessential means these communities have to take political action, reinforce their rights, foster participation, and build their own forms of government. In Bajo Atrato, damages to indigenous

and Afro-Colombian organizations were brought about by multiple means used by armed actors and powerful entrepreneurs to co-opt leaders, divide Community Councils and convince vulnerable families to engage in economic activities like timber depletion or coca cultivation, which favored the interests of warlords, drug traffickers, and corrupt local elites. The harm done to local organizations in Bajo Atrato is so huge that the legitimacy of many of said organizations has been called into question by regional grassroots movements as well as by governmental authorities (Comisión Intereclesial de Justicia y Paz 2005, Corte Constitucional Auto 112/12). Finally, violations to rights of individual members of a community may produce collective impacts, such as when several members of a community are killed or when the life of an important leader or any traditional authority is threatened. For example, in 1993 members of the FARC broke the baton and bowl of a *jaibana*, both symbols of the authority and healing powers of this Emberá traditional figure. That attack was considered an explicit threat against Emberá communities living along the Truandó River and they included it in their account of the many violations they had experienced at the hands of armed groups.

On account of these forms of collective damages, the Victims' Laws recognize collective reparation as a fundamental right of indigenous and Afro-Colombian communities. As in cases of individual reparations, collective reparations include measures of restitution, compensation, rehabilitation, satisfaction, and guarantees of non-repetition. In order to enjoy these reparations, indigenous and Afro-Colombian communities have to undertake and participate in a set of procedures that have been designed by the state-created Unidad de Atención Integral y Reparación de Víctimas (UAIRV) or Unit for Victims' Attention and Reparation. These procedures are based on the principles of free, prior, and informed consent of these communities, a right granted by the Indigenous and Tribal Peoples Convention of the International Labor Organization (ILO 169), which was signed by the Colombian government in 1989. The procedures defined by the UAIRV are then the steps communities have to undertake in order to formulate their own collective reparation plans, which must contain the detailed account of facts, context, and intervening

factors involved in the infringement of collective rights, as well as people's assessment of the nature of the harm suffered, the characteristics of the victimizing events, and the people's aspirations for integral reparation, including material, moral, political, and symbolic components.

The formulation of these reparation plans is a long and complex process that involves, as I will further explain, searching for, selecting, interpreting, and evaluating information; that requires the participation not only of the affected communities but of multiple other actors, from governmental agencies to NGO's; that occurs in different scenarios, from offices in ministries to the very places where acts of violence were committed; that involves different methodologies in its formulation, a diverse set of strategies to promote people's participation, several forms of documentation, different frames of interpretation, and a constant process of monitoring and evaluation. A collective reparation plan is then a report carried out, at least in theory, by the UAIRV with the active participation of communities and their traditional authorities. It will be used as the official report and main input for the submission of a reparation lawsuit to specialized judges, as well as the main reference for the reparations to be implemented by the state.

The design and implementation of collective reparation plans is only one of the multiple tasks the UAIRV has as mandate but it is probably the most important measure regarding rights of indigenous and Afro-Colombian communities. The UAIRV has created a special department for collective reparations which had undertaken, until December 2016, 302 different cases including 73 regarding afro-descendant communities and 79 regarding indigenous peoples. Because these plans are part of a highly bureaucratized institution and a public program, they often face problems due to a scarcity of government resources and difficulties in accessing required information (Tobón Yagari 2016). Other challenges of these reparations plans are the large size of the communities and territories, as well as the difficulty of working in the midst of armed conflict (Mejía and Azcarate 2016, OIM 2012). It has been equally hard to set in motion programs ethnographically attuned to each local context,

particularly because the lack of awareness or training of some public functionaries about indigenous issues, customary languages, and local cultural practices (Tobón Yagarí 2016).

As mentioned, the UAIRV has defined a set of stages to be followed in the formulation of these reparations plans. These stages were designed after the implementation of a pilot program in 2012 (OIM 2012) and they aim to legitimize the entire process by rendering the formulation of reparations as participatory and democratic as possible. Participation of communities and their representative bodies is also seen as a means to reverse some of the effects the armed conflict had on local leadership, political capacities, and collective organizational agendas. These stages, referred to as the *ruta de reparación colectiva étnica* or reparation route for ethnic collectivities (UAIRV 2014) include activities of rapprochement between the state and the concerned communities, identification and registry of victims, preparation and training of targeted communities, assessment of communities and damages, the formulation of the plan itself, and, finally, the implementation of it. To provide an idea of the complexities of this process, I briefly describe each of these six stages and what they entail in a place like Bajo Atrato.

Rapprochement between state and communities: This stage does not seek just to inform and consult communities but also to generate relations of trust between these communities and the state, which is extremely important given that many victimized communities lack confidence in the government and its institutions, due to the fact that officials or military authorities were either directly responsible for rights violations or they simply turned a blind eye to these events. The rapprochement is important because it promotes a positive presence of the state, which has to set in motion the intended reparations amidst armed conflict and in a very precarious socioeconomic context.

Identification and registry: This is the procedure through which claimants are identified as victims and included in the aforementioned Single Registry Victims (RUV).

The importance of this stage lies in the fact that by being included in this official record claimants reach the official status of victims, which confers the possibility of enjoying certain rights. There have been problems with the registry since in the case of indigenous and Afro-Colombian communities it was only set in motion in 2014, three years after the law was issued, which delayed the formulation of the collective reparation plans. The registering of victims may sound like a simple bureaucratic procedure, but in Bajo Atrato it often entails difficulties for some indigenous people who do not speak Spanish or for the many adults who do not yet have a *cédula*, the government-issued official identification card. During this registration, claimants will make, for the first time, an official statement of the general context of violence and the forms of victimization that were suffered. The fact of re-telling might be a violent act in itself for some victims. Alan Feldman (1995) describes this as epistemic violence—the practice of framing such experiences in an institutional language that seeks to turn said experiences into a collection of facts intelligible to government officials.

Preparation and training of communities: This stage has as its goal to familiarize people with the law and more specifically with the legal procedures of reparation, as well as to raise awareness about people's rights in order to assure their participation in the formulation of the plans themselves. Although I will further elaborate on this stage, here I simply point out that this preparation and training resembles what Merry (2006) has described as vernacularization, that is, the process through which the language of transnational human rights discourse is customized and adapted to embrace the cultural, political and societal particularities of a given population. In Bajo Atrato, vernacularization means to make comprehensible the abstract ideas of the Victims' Laws in order to facilitate people's interpretation of the law and their engagement in further stages of reparation.

Assessment: This stands for the survey process that describes both the socio-economic characteristics of the population in question and the dimensions of their collective damages. It involves the use of methodological tools to gather sensitive

information, including memories of victimizing events. Rather than a strict documentation of verifiable facts, the assessment focuses on the way damages have been collectively experienced and on the meanings people assign to their experiences of suffering. The testimonies collected become part of the reparations plan itself although such accounts need to be accompanied by other documents—newspaper articles, official reports—that provide some independent evidence of rights violations. The process of collecting personal accounts becomes an exercise of reconstruction of local history that leads, to some extent, toward a revitalization of collective memory. These accounts may, however, end up being predominantly based on an interpretation of events in which concepts such as damage or loss become the main filter through which the past is examined. This issue could become problematic, but the UAIRV nevertheless fosters such an approach since the focus on damages makes easier the design of measures to repair what communities consider the most meaningful aspects of their collective life.

Formulation of the plan: This is the culminating point of all previous stages. It involves the set of measures, procedures, and policies proposed by affected communities for their material, moral, political, social, and symbolic restoration. Ideally, in this stage communities are accompanied by those governmental institutions responsible for the implementation of each reparation measure—i.e. in the case of measures regarding land restitution the presence of representatives of the Ministry of Agriculture, Land Restitution Unit, National Planning Department, the Institute for Rural Development, National Geographic Institute, Superintendence of Notary and Registry, Superior Judicial Council and Directorate against Antipersonnel Mines is indispensable. According to the logic of the Victims' Laws, the measures for reparation must be coherent with the nature of the violated rights, but they also need to operate in accordance with local customs and values since each community has the faculty of defining what has to be done in order to “reestablish balance and harmony” (Congreso de Colombia, Ley 4633, Art. 5) in their own territories. In legal terms, depending on the nature of the collective damages, reparations may be classified as measures of restitution, compensation, rehabilitation, satisfaction

or guarantees of non-repetition. Accordingly, each reparation measure designed in the plans should specify an institution responsible for its implementation, a schedule, and estimated costs.

Implementation: The implementation of the collective reparations plans is the adoption of concrete policies and measures to remedy damages caused by the armed conflict and “its underlying and related factors”. It is important to underscore that the expression “underlying and related factors,” constantly evoked in the Victims’ Laws, expresses the conviction of indigenous and Afro-Colombian communities that the violence of the armed conflict is but an expression of the historical and structural violence that has threatened their lives and cultures. According to the law, public institutions have to implement these collective plans by employing an “integral and transformative approach” (Congreso de Colombia, Decreto 4800 de 2011, Art. 252), that is to say, by not only addressing the direct damages caused by war or reestablishing the conditions that existed before the infliction of damages. This integral and transformative approach should help communities move toward the transformation of the structural conditions—poverty, social exclusion, lack of political participation, discrimination, inequality—that could lead to the recurrence of armed conflict and related events. In other words, the integral and transformative approach aims to integrate what I have previously described as restorative and distributive justice approaches: restoration of losses suffered by victims and distribution of economic and social rights.

The integral and transformative characteristics of these plans and the state’s responsibility to guarantee the non-repetition of abuses mean that the intended reparations not only concern the particular institutions responsible to implement transitional justice policies, but also the state as a whole and even all of civil society. The collective reparation plans also imply that policies regarding land and rights restitution are not isolated from other social and economic issues regarding indigenous and Afro-Colombian communities. This means that the measures to be adopted in these plans might extend far beyond 2021, the deadline established by

the law to address the complaints of all victims of armed conflict. Questions about the feasibility of these collective plans have arisen (see for instance Díaz et al. 2009, Londoño y Oyaga 2016, OIM 2012, Rodríguez Garavito 2010) since transformative and integral reparations imply a considerable amount of resources and of institutional coordination, which is without precedent in Colombia. Moreover, as previously noted, the goals of these collective plans raise questions about the distinction between, on the one hand, policies the state must ordinarily undertake in order to remedy current marginalization, dispossession, and vulnerability of impoverished rural communities and, on the other hand, those specific policies of reparation and restitution of collective rights violated during the armed conflict. Put differently, some measures of reparation might be indistinguishable from the economic and social policies the state should adopt for all its citizens. Even if it is true that the integral and transformative approach of these plans is a means to face inequality and to facilitate the social, economic, and political inclusion of these communities, the challenge is not to conflate restorative and distributive justices. To what extent has the reparation and restitution of rights become a means through which the state deals with historically marginalized and impoverished populations? To what extent do the demands these communities make as victims trigger a kind of limited citizenship, one in which damages and losses become a condition for the enjoyment of their differentiated rights?

Though the UAIRV is supposed to undertake and fund the entire process for the formulation of collective reparation plans, this has not been the case in Bajo Atrato. By the end of 2016, when there were only five years left before the law was to expire, ten different plans for collective reparations in Chocó have been formulated, but none had been approved or implemented, and none concerned the Bajo Atrato specifically. In 2015, communities belonging to the communitarian councils of two of the basins of Bajo Atrato (La Larga-Tumaradó and Pedeguita-Mancilla) were the object of a legal process of land restitution. This process aims to clarify issues of dispossession and displacement related to land grabbing. By so doing, the government assesses territorial damages from a legal and cadastral perspective, that is to say,

by redressing issues of land ownership mainly. Some measures of reparation are considered during these land restitution processes but they do not share, strictly speaking, the characteristics of the aforementioned collective reparation plans. Besides budget issues and lack of coordination among government agencies in charge of the reparations of victims, or the lack of political will to attend to the demands of local communities, one of the reasons why the UAIRV has not started to implement collective plans in Bajo Atrato is lack of security, particularly the continuing confrontation between paramilitaries of the so-called Gaitanista Self Defence Forces–AGC–and guerrillas from the National Liberation Army–ELN.

As of 2016, the formulation of these plans of reparation was not completed, and indigenous and afro-descendant communities begun separately conceiving their own plans. In the following section I describe my own experience regarding the formulation of such plans, paying particular attention to how the idea of the territory as a victim was understood and mobilized. My aim is to depict the process through which the Victim's Laws are being implemented, appropriated, understood, and even contested at a local level. If in the last chapter I focused on the content of the law and on the set of possibilities that recognition of the territory as a victim opened up, here I turn my gaze to the ground, I mean, to the socio-legal effects of the law and the ways communities and their grassroots organizations are adopting it.

The Challenges of Vernacularization

Given the fact that the Victims' Laws have a fixed time limit and that it could be too late by the time national authorities show political will to finally undertake processes of collective reparation in Bajo Atrato, both indigenous and Afro-Colombian organizations started to formulate their own plans. This is then a process started from below, in which local communities, with the support of the *chocoano* Catholic Church and a human rights organization, initiated the entire definition of the reparative measures they envisage for their communities. Although this is a task demanding considerable financial resources, this autonomous process has been, so

far, the most effective means these communities have found to take the lead in the formulation of an integral reparation. The plans have been the work of the local indigenous and Afro-Colombian grassroots organizations. These organizations have been closely accompanied by the Claretian Missionaries—a community of Roman Catholic priests and brothers that, guided by the principles of Liberation Theology, has focused its work in Chocó on carrying out projects in social and human development—and by Corporación Jurídica Libertad or Corporation for Judicial Freedom (CJL)—a Colombian NGO concerned to provide legal representation for victims of state crimes in their search for truth, justice, and reparation. The financial resources have come from international cooperation, particularly from Misereor, the German Catholic Church’s international development organization.

The Claretian Missionaries of Riosucio incorporated within their three-years strategic program the formulation of the collective reparation plans. In conjunction with the aforementioned Corporation for Judicial Freedom (CJL), the Claretians designed three different steps in developing said plans: first, a pedagogical process aimed to explain the contents of the Victims’ Laws and translate the formal aspects of this legal framework into everyday language. Second, the so-called *caracterización*, that is, the gathering of information about both affected communities and victimizing events. Third, the formulation of the plans themselves, which includes systematization of the collected information, the production of policy briefs to be discussed and validated with the communities, and the writing of a final document containing the collective reparation proposals to be submitted to the state. Due to some financial and logistic limitations, as well as the fact that the armed conflict took different forms depending on the region in which it occurred, grassroots organizations found that the formulation of a single reparation plan for the entire Bajo Atrato region was not viable. Donors and communities therefore agreed to undertake the formulation of these plans one basin at a time. Additionally, grassroots organizations wanted to formulate independent reparation plans for indigenous peoples and for Afro-Colombian communities. Over the course of three years, I participated in these projects. In 2014, the formulation of these plans consisted

of the training of Afro-Colombian leaders from the Truandó and Salaquí basins on the basic aspects of the Victims' Law. In 2015, the leaders of Wounaan and Embera indigenous communities, from these same basins, were similarly trained. In 2016, the project consisted of the assessment of the Afro-Colombian communities living in the Salaquí basin.

From the very beginning, CJL and the Claretian Missionaries wanted the training offered to local leaders to be different from the usual workshops led by the array of humanitarian and development NGOs that, over the course of the last fifteen years, have been present in the region. In such workshops, for example, short courses had been offered to people who only had to voluntarily attend some sessions in order to get a certificate. But in the case of the Victims' Laws, attendees had to demonstrate a full commitment. A team of lawyers appointed by CJL was in charge of the training. Along with other lawyers affiliated with the Claretian University Foundation, a private university located in Quibdó, the capital of Chocó, they designed the pedagogic material and the set of courses to be implemented over a period of six months. The course's sessions lasted an entire week each month and the training consisted of an advanced seminar (*diplomado*), which required both regular attendance and that trainees do the tasks assigned by the professors at the end of each unit. In addition, students were regularly evaluated and at the end of the seminar those who had met the requirements were awarded a university diploma as "human rights promoters".

The advanced seminar's main goal was to translate the legal concepts and procedures of the Victims' Laws into a language that could be understood by local communities. Profoundly rooted in the participants' own experiences, the goal of this process of vernacularization was to facilitate the dissemination of the law in order to produce a shared foundation in which concepts such as "victim", "damage", and "reparation" were successfully appropriated by the different communities. Vernacularization aimed to make the seemingly abstract ideas of the Victims' Laws comprehensible, and to adapt their precepts in the local context and language in order to facilitate their interpretation. This process relies heavily on the work of ex-

pert intermediaries, in this case the lawyers, who act as cultural translators, breaking down concepts and translating contents into understandable terms and actions.

Vernacularization is often compared to translation as, like translation, vernacularization is the process of choosing a language which can be understood by a specific population (Merry 2006). In the seminar's sessions with indigenous peoples, often such a translation was literal. During the activities intended for indigenous leaders, the Wounaan and Embera peoples used to sit in separate groups. Although everyone spoke Spanish, after the explanation of a concept or a given article of the law, the lawyer allocated some time for the students to discuss in their own languages what was just covered. Then, an Embera and a Wounaan student, respectively, took the floor and explained to the whole class in her own language the topic at hand. The rest of the group, even those who could not understand the Embera or Wounaan languages, listened carefully to this translator, who sometimes took chalk from the professor's hands in order to highlight particular texts previously written on the blackboard. These translations were not always systematic as it was up to the professor to decide when to allow these interventions, though every time she felt she was losing the students' attention, she let them proceed with their own micro lectures. Sometimes the translations took longer than the actual time spent by the professor discussing the topic, and sometimes, when covering very detailed legal procedures or concepts, the translations were incredibly short. But a common element I noticed in both the Embera and Wounaan languages was the untranslatability of concepts such as armed conflict, armed groups, legality and illegality, government, cultural and ethnic identity, natural resources and, of course, rights, victims, and reparations.

The lack of these concepts in the Embera or Wounaan languages does not mean, however, that these communities are not familiar with such legal language. In fact, discourses of multiculturalism and human rights have been at the forefront of the political agendas of indigenous and Afro-Colombian organizations since the 1990s, and more so in Bajo Atrato after the humanitarian crisis of 1997. What was new

this time was the importance that notions such as reparations, damages and victimhood acquired. As I mentioned before, after the demobilization of some paramilitary groups in 2003, the Colombian state designed a set of policies intended to bring the perpetrators of severe human rights violations to justice, as well as to recognize the rights of victims of these and other armed groups. In 2011 the government passed the Victims and Land Restitution Law, legislation concerned with reparation to victims of armed conflict. Since then and within a transitional justice framework that helped smooth the way for a peace agreement with the FARC, the rights of victims have been recognized as a condition for the achievement of a long-lasting peace and justice. By mobilizing the concepts associated with victims' rights, many individuals and communities have gained access to services, financial support, assistance or simply recognition of their dignity that otherwise would have been denied in their condition of "ordinary" citizens. In this sense, the victimization produced by the armed conflict and the reparations promoted by the state have become, according to some scholars (Jaramillo 2011, Rodríguez Garavito 2010), an appropriate shortcut used by individuals and some collectivities for exercising their fundamental rights. Colombian anthropologist Pablo Jaramillo (2014) argues that there has been a gradual shift from a political agenda based on cultural difference to a set of discourses and practices in which victimization becomes a new catalyst for accessing differentiated rights (see also Jaramillo 2011). In other words, the current transitional justice scenario and the discourses of vulnerability and victimization have become the framework through which these communities now mobilize their political agendas and collective rights.

Damages and victimizing events, victims and perpetrators, reparation, compensation, and restitution among others, are concepts of a language in which vulnerability, paradoxically, has led to a new form of political agency (García-Godos et al. 2011, Jaramillo 2014). What I have perceived in Bajo Atrato is that, at least during the first half of the 2010's, rather than invoking a politics of difference as a means to contest state power dynamics, indigenous and Afro-Colombian organizations have been privileging a politics of vulnerability that demands, through reparations,

a positive presence of the state (Jaramillo 2014). This subtle but transformative shift gives rise to some questions about the motives behind the actions of grassroots organizations. For example, does victimization and its legal framework co-opt political agency? Or does it instead produce new kinds of demands? Do these demands remain anchored in the language of cultural politics? Or are other terms being mobilized? These questions bring to the forefront the processes of identity formation of what Erica Bouris (2007) calls “complex political victims”. Criticizing some essentialist discourses of political victimization that portray victims’ identities in terms of suffering and willingness to end that suffering, Bouris argues that the identification of a group as a victim does not necessarily posit one single aspect of identity–victimhood in this case–as the sole determinant of social experience. Rather, she argues, to invoke the term victim “signals a context- and relation-specific position” (Ibid., 85), that is to say, a valued partial mode of identification that does not erase other core components of collective identity. Victimization is then one possible mode of identification and relation, one supported by a broader context in which many more relations and “other contours of identity and existence” are possible (Ibid., 81). In other words, even if vulnerability and victimization have become powerful tropes of current political agendas, the claims made on the basis of the Victims’ Laws are built upon a framework in which culture and ethnic identities, perhaps more than victimhood, structure the relations that indigenous and Afro-Colombian communities have with the state. Therefore, I see in the kind of agency fostered by the politics of vulnerability a possibility these communities have for vindicating rights that were violated during the armed conflict in a way compatible with their experiences of war in their territories. I mean, the new victimization discourse is not merely setting aside the kind of cultural politics or politics of difference that originally promoted the recognition of specific rights for indigenous and Afro-Colombian communities. Instead, victimization intersects with cultural rights and creates a new political space in which reparation claims are being articulated via demands that are attuned with the already existent multicultural framework. This is why, as I discuss later, notions such as collective damages, damages to the

territory or damages to social organizations are at the core of the reparation plans formulated in Bajo Atrato since those are the aspects that, according to these communities, distinguish their experiences as collective victims from the experiences of other kinds of victims.

Now I would like to argue that besides facilitating the understanding of the main concepts of the law and thereby paving the way for political action by indigenous and Afro-Colombian leaders, the seminars also provided an epistemic frame that, to some extent, shaped some of the lived experiences of violence. In this sense, the lawyers leading the seminar not only bridged the gap between legal language and local systems of interpretation but also, in the very process of making the law intelligible, created a common ground where legal standards and institutional conceptions of rights, on the one hand, and local concerns, on the other, met. This process was not exempt from difficulties as the following two in-class activities suggest.

The first activity I refer to is a timeline exercise. The drawing of this timeline was part of a session in which the concept of damage, as defined by the law, was discussed. According to the law, damages are all those actions that “in the frame of the armed conflict and its underlying and related factors” violate or undermine the recognized rights of indigenous peoples. More than adopting a perspective based on rights (i.e. how the rights to culture or the rights to the territory were compromised), the professors adopted a perspective based on damages (i.e. what were the actions of armed conflict that produced significant changes in people’s lives). Such a perspective, they argued, conferred on communities more flexibility to describe their own experiences since, rather than relating some particular violent events to a framework of legally granted rights, participants were allowed to describe in their own terms what they considered to have been the harmful actions perpetrated by armed groups. The timeline exercise consisted of drawing a long bar on which was indicated both the most important victimizing events in chronological order, and the kind of damage associated with each event. The students were invited to work in groups, Wounaan and Embera separately. The timeline had to include a starting

date. This turned out to be one of the most interesting parts of the exercise because each group situated the beginning of armed conflict at a different moment, and each one described the circumstances surrounding this starting point very differently. The Wounaan, for example, situated the beginning in the early 1980s, when guerrilla armies started to recruit youths from their communities. The Embera had the conflict starting in 1989, but they indicated as the first victimizing event the moment in which members of the FARC broke the baton and bowl of a *jaibana*, in 1993. This event was described with the following words: “The *jaibana* was endangered”.

Also on these same timelines, both groups mentioned other events including what they described as internal forced displacement and confinement. By “confinement” they meant that even if indigenous communities did not abandon their lands, as Afro-Colombian communities were forced to do, their access to game animals and medicinal plants from the forest was restricted, as well as their access to the cultivated areas located at a certain distance from their villages. In this case, students knew where to situate the starting point of such restrictions (for instance as a consequence of the airstrikes launched by the National Army in 1997) but they had some difficulties associating rights violations with these events and defining an ending point on the timeline, since even today there are many areas people prefer not to frequent. One of the groups described the damage provoked by confinement in these terms: “Those who used to do their daily tasks at a distance from the villages now prefer not to do so because of fear.” The attribution of exact dates to some events was not easy. In such instances, rather than a point located at a specific moment on their timeline, they drew small boxes indicating entire periods of time. For instance, the Embera drew a box labelled 2000-2003 in which they described the suicide of a young man who had been targeted by the paramilitaries as a guerrilla collaborator, the arrival of mules and chainsaws that were used by mestizo settlers for timber depletion, the sedimentation of rivers, and the threats against a traditional healer. Although the professor asked students to connect each of these events with a particular damage by describing what rights were compromised each

time, in most instances people only wrote down texts like this: “When leaders are threatened, the whole community is affected”.

Even if one of the purposes of the activity was to let students describe what they considered the most significant events of collective victimization in order to link said events with violations of particular rights, most of time the terms used by the students did not render the correlation between lived experiences and rights violations any easier. Take for instance the following responses: “The youth are not longer willing to learn about our own culture because they are more interested in armed groups”; “Armed groups killed our poultry and pigs”; “Some people had to flee barefooted to the forest”; “Children could not bear to hear the noise of a helicopter because they immediately ran to their houses.” Where can someone situate the moment youth started to show more interest in armed groups than in the teachings of elders? Was the killing of livestock a threat to the people’s right to feed themselves in dignity, or did it express a threat against their values and attitudes regarding life itself? Does walking barefoot into the forest describe a form of dispossession or a kind of trauma? The problem is not just the difficulty of relating certain experiences to the language of rights but also to accurately convey damages. For example, during the discussion of the timelines, the professor asked the students how the armed conflict affected leadership in their communities. Someone answered that because of the presence of armed people, their *jaibanas* lost their strength: “They can no longer communicate what they need to communicate.” I knew this answer was not just about the fact that leaders felt afraid of speaking up but also addressed the idea that the words of the *jaibanas*, and concretely their songs, could not convey the power they used to: a power that, as I explained in chapter 3, can heal, attract game animals or release spirits. The point I am trying to make is that the timeline implied a kind of abstraction and simplification that participants could not always follow: a huge array of experienced victimizing events had to be narrowed down to a legal language that privileged human rights. And although the exercise is supposed to be but a means of representation, the way it achieves this end has consequences with regard to how people come to interpret and remember some events. In this sense,

the most evident simplification carried out by the timeline is, as its very name indicates, a linear representation of time.

A timeline imposes a certain form of temporal reality rather than merely reflecting it. For example, in the proposed in-class exercise, the timeline aimed to portray events in a sequential manner, as if each event were inexorably leading toward something else. Locating victimizing events and damages from the past on a straight line was like imposing linearity onto something that, like violence, is not necessarily experienced as an accumulative sequence of things moving in one single direction. That created some confusion among the students who had, for instance, difficulties situating the consequences of certain events on the timeline and who debated a lot about the beginning of armed conflict in their communities. The location of events moving forward like dominoes knocking over dominoes was, however, in line with one of the professor's goals. She explained during the discussion that by comparing the different timelines drawn by the students, one could get a sense of how armed groups followed a systematic *modus operandi*, that is to say, an established pattern of actions that was not restricted to what happened to a limited number of communities but that extended to the whole region. The visualization of this logic through the drawing of a timeline introduced, then, a particular understanding of the sense of war. I refer to sense in its two meanings: as direction and as meaning. That arrow of time was somehow coherent with a conception of violence as a process and as a set of cumulative actions. Although this approach is useful to underscore some of the instrumental aims, strategic goals, and ideological patterns set in motion by armed groups, the underscoring of such drives did not necessarily render more intelligible the experiences of these communities. For example, the political economy behind the depletion of the forests carried out by paramilitary groups—an issue I described in chapter 2—might not explain why some commanders decided to threaten *jaibanas*—as I explained in chapter 3. Inversely, the clogging of rivers or the suffering unleashed upon some sylvan spirits by the presence of armed soldiers in the forests were not necessarily instrumental to strategic political goals. The problem here, as Neil Whitehead (2005) notes, is that instrumentality is

not the only source of meaning: “This does not mean that meaning is absent, only that the meaning that might make [some violent] acts more immediately intelligible to us is not given in the act itself.” (Ibid., 58)

The point I am getting at is that exercises such as the timeline are not mere metaphors; they are not abstract modes of representation used to portray things in a “let’s pretend” mode. Instead, such visual artifacts contribute to shape certain interpretations. In this particular case, the timeline places violence within a particular sense of time that often does not correspond to local temporal experiences. Even if the aim was to translate local experiences into the language of human rights, as a methodological tool a timeline also bestows particular meanings and values. The critique Feldman (1995) makes in relation to the representation of political violence in some academic accounts becomes useful to understand the kind of epistemic violence that this kind of representation can cause. Feldman describes three underlying “meta theoretical” premises found in interpretations of political violence: first, a Cartesian division of political culture into mentalist ideological discourse, on the one hand, and mechanistic, instrumentalist physical violence, on the other; second, a paradigmatic sense of historical time that tends to coincide with the idea that violence always pursues rational and instrumentalist goals; and third, “the silent premise that there is an inherent descriptive adequacy between official ideological representation and the experience of violence” (Ibid., 225). Such premises, Feldman argues, tend to assemble together an array of experiences often characterized by uncertainty, contradiction, silence or dispersion, conferring on said experiences of violence a linearity and continuity that do not always match people’s experiences. The timeline does exactly this: it portrays violence as something functional to the interests of particular actors, it situates the events within a linear timeframe with determined origins, trajectories, and ends. The timeline becomes the materialization of a particular version of history, one with a well-defined *telos*. It also reifies sharp boundaries between a “before” and an “after” armed conflict, favoring an interpretation in which violence is seen as an alien, perverted, subversive force overturning a given natural state of things. That supposed “natural

state of things” is none other than the full flourishing of culture, as if culture is the antipode of violence and the two can never co-exist.

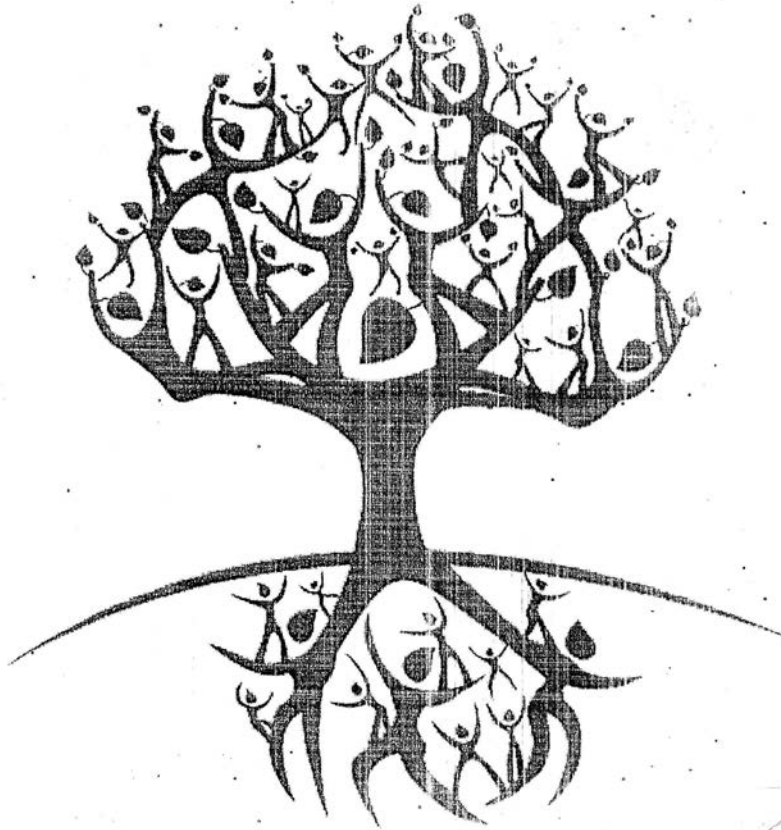
One of the goals of this ethnography has been to problematize this kind of reification of violence. War, as a huge array of anthropological literature has proven, (see for example Macěk 2005, Nordstrom 1997, Richards 2005, Robben and Nordstrom 1995, Taussig 1986, Zulaika 1995), is socially organized and as such it is deeply imbued in cultural contexts of meaning that shape its expressions and interpretations. This means that rather than preventing the flourishing of “culture”, violence intersects with local social practices and in some instances, as in the case of the *madres de agua* shows, even increases culturally shaped responses. To conceptualize violence in relation to patterns of social and ontological relations already embedded within a local context does not deny war’s overwhelming destructive drives; rather it helps us understand armed violence within a set of relations that involve humans and non-humans and in which communities and armed actors often share similar values. To sum up, the timeline reified violence and favored an interpretation of armed conflict as the irruption of an alien force overturning and perverting a given order of things. As a methodology, the timeline privileges a very modern mode of interpreting things. Through its abstraction, objectification, and differentiation, it embodies a sequential representation of events and a linear conception of time. More than a neutral visual device describing things as they apparently are, by virtue of its very design the timeline might also shape the way people come to interpret the violence they have experienced.

Some of the above criticisms apply to a second in-class exercise proposed by the lawyers during the seminar: a conceptual map that Afro-Colombian students had to complete as part of their assignments. The exercise presented a drawing of a tree with roots and branches equally visible. Students had to locate in its roots what they considered were the core elements sustaining collective life in Bajo Atrato; in the trunk they had to put the kinds of values associated with said elements; and in the branches they needed to situate the set of practices and customs that led

to the materialization of said values. I was invited by one of my friends attending the seminar to help him and other members of his village with this homework. As my friend served the customers that arrived one by one at his small store, we (I and two men from a community located in the Salaquí basin) were discussing what they considered the most relevant aspects of collective life. They enumerated things like respect, sharing, harmony and solidarity and located them in the roots. They pointed out that such values were present in practices such as labor exchange (*manocambiada*), reciprocity, and the way decisions were collectively taken. They said those were the things that should be put in the branches. Then my friend told us that respect and harmony were, in one way or another, present in every culture and that what made Afro-Colombians different from others was their territory. They all agreed and decided then to situate the word “territory” in the thickest root. They reasoned that a tree’s trunk is strong only if the roots are well-rooted. Then someone said that territory created a sense of belonging (and he wrote that word on the trunk) that materialized itself in practices such as hunting, harvesting of timber or medicinal plants. When he wanted to write those words beside the branches, someone else said the drawing was weird because in the real world a tree is never alone. He explained that in a tree converge many different kinds of plants and animals, that those other plants and animals were as important to the life of the tree as the tree to the existence of other plants and animals. He argued that a community, like a tree, always needs other trees to grow strong. Everyone remained in silence for a time and while looking at the drawing, someone concluded that what sustained the life of the territory (he pointed with his finger to the whole tree while he was speaking) was flora and fauna. He erased the word “territory” from the root and replace it with “flora” and “fauna”, saying that without them and without water the life of any tree would be impossible. They reasoned that collective life was only possible because there were animals, plants, and water in their territory. I told them that I fully agreed but that they should not forget that the drawing was a metaphor and that if they wanted to keep flora and fauna representing the territory’s roots, they needed to think about what the branches were. Then they said that branches were

exactly what they said before: the kind of work they accomplish in the territory, that is, hunting, cultivation of crops, logging, harvesting of medicine, fishing, etc.

FIGURE 38.
The tree model of culture
Source: C.J.L. 2015



The exercise of the tree is based on the well-known iceberg model of culture, an analogy developed by Edward Hall (1976) that has become a reference in all kinds of cross-cultural training programs, from international business to humanitarian aid organizations. The image evokes the idea that the culture of a given society is like an iceberg: only its tip, that is, the external or conscious aspects of culture are visible while a larger portion—the internal or subconscious aspects of it—are hidden beneath the surface. The tip represents observable behaviors, everyday cultural aspects such as the clothes we wear, the food we prefer, the laws we enact, the ways we communicate with each other. What remains below the waterline are the culture's core values, that is, the beliefs and thought patterns that underlie behavior and attitudes regarding, for example, concepts of time, gender roles, decision-mak-

ing models, concepts of self, world views, etc. The analogy of the seen and unseen parts of the iceberg also serves to distinguish, on the one hand, the conscious aspects of culture (what is explicitly learned, the elements more easily susceptible to change and interpretation) from, on the other hand, the subconscious constituents of culture (those aspects less intelligible and less contingent that are deeply rooted and passed from one generation to another). Within the proposed exercise, the roots of the tree represented those hidden cornerstones of Afro-Colombian culture while the branches were its visible aspects. Both features were connected through the trunk whose association with what the professor described as “collective shared values” remained somewhat confusing for the students. During the exercise, territory emerged as one of the core values of collective life, but as people thought about the image, they realized that territory, unlike the tree’s roots, was not invisible at all. In fact, territory was the most evident aspect sustaining the life of people since it was present everywhere. So it could not be situated in the roots. Here was when the image as a means of representation stopped being useful and different people saw the tree differently: sometimes as a tree and some others as the territory itself. The problem, as I interpret it, is not that people were not able to think abstractly or that they did not understand the idea of the tree as a metaphor. Rather, people are so familiarized with trees that the ideas they associated with them exceeded the simplified representation of the drawing. Merry (2006) argues that processes of vernacularization of rights often rely on the use of symbols and images that appeal to collective ideas and shared beliefs (*Ibid.*, 136). However, as the tree reveals, different societies place value on different symbols and thus the choosing of such symbols must be culturally resonant.

Through the tree, the purpose was to encourage students to think about how many aspects of their daily lives are rooted in a set of core values that the law is intended to protect: the right to life, the right to culture and identity, the right to territory, etc. The idea was also to let them realize that any change in the daily aspects of their lives inflicted by armed conflict was associated with the potential undermining of a deep cultural value. In this way, war has been cutting the branches and preventing

the roots from transmitting to the rest of the tree all of their strength and potentiality. As with the iceberg model of culture, the image of the tree conveys a rather deterministic approach: culture is a hierarchical system of congruent and interrelated beliefs and values that guide action and interpretation. In this way, each aspect of culture (a branch) is linked to something deeper (a root) whose relation is revealed only after close examination: any cultural manifestation is the mere reflection of a more profound value. The model is also positivist in the sense that it supposes the existence of a realm of transcendent values that are independent of people and their own interpretations. Similarly, the model is positivist in its take on culture: rather than a process through which people coordinate meaning and action, culture becomes an expression of things people have or do not. In using this essentialist model to interpret the violation of collective rights in the context of armed conflict, one of the starting premises was a kind of escalation or intended systematicity on the part of armed actors: a threat against any given cultural manifestation was but a threat to the core values associated with said cultural manifestation. From this perspective, violent actions were never random but they always pursued particular deterministic goals. The opposite assumption also becomes true: any people's action taken against armed actors was but a defensive reaction of the communities to the drives of war. In other words, the very life of indigenous and Afro-Colombian communities comes to be interpreted as an instance of resistance, as an attempt to subvert the external, violent forces surrounding them. As Marshall Sahlins (1999) highlights with regard to the role anthropology has served as a redemptive cultural critique in the era of late capitalism, to see instances of resistance everywhere is not too enlightening as it is as "if other peoples had constructed their lives for our purposes, in answer to racism, sexism, imperialism, and other evils of Western society" (Ibid., v). In this case, the values of collective life and their manifestations were inexorably assimilated into responses to the armed conflict, as if every single cultural trait were an instance of resistance to the evils of an alien violence.

One last aspect of this proposed activity I would like to mention is that the tree portrayed a model of culture in which violence was conceived of as a thing: an action, a

process that cuts branches and impedes the tree from growing. Rather than a force changing relationships or rendering possible the growth of other kind of branches, violence is simply reified as a denial of culture, order, and peace. In a context of collective reparations, such a model raises questions about what should be repaired: should collective plans address the very heart of the violations committed—i.e. the circumstances impeding the roots from transmitting all their potential—or the impacts of those violations—the effects on the branches? (ICTJ 2009, 47) Possible answers to these questions are connected to another component of the collective reparations plan: *caracterización* or the assessment of community concerns and needs.

Caracterización and its Discontents

During one of our trips to the Salaquí basin, we spent the night in a village that, according to some of its former inhabitants, was well-known for its collective celebrations and patronage festivals. Even people from Riosucio used to undertake the five-hour boat trip to attend these celebrations. But all that revelry ended after the forced displacement of 1997. Since 2015, however, the village has resurged as a logging settlement but only a few of its former dwellers have actually returned to their lands. Most of the people currently residing in the village are men who have reached agreements with the former inhabitants allowing them to cut and sell timber. Not surprisingly, in some regions forced displacement and land abandonment caused the regrowth of huge patches of forests where timber became available again. The new boom has given rise to concerns among several of the original villagers as they have seen how people who did not belong to their community are now taking advantage of the collectively owned woods. In other cases, even if the timber exploitation has been carried out on behalf of, or with the acquiescence of, some former inhabitants, the greed of some of the newly arrived workers has undermined the property rights of some other families who have watched trees located on their lands simply disappear.

We slept that night at the school, in the only classroom it had. We shared it with two women who had been hired as cooks for some loggers working in the village. It was in that same room that we conducted our surveys, starting very early in the morning because people preferred come to talk with us before going to work in the fields. One midmorning, when a large part of our work was already done, a woman in her late thirties came to ask us if we had a first aid kit to help her clean the ears of her deaf little son. The child had a severe ear infection with yellowish, thick fluid draining out of the middle ear. She did not seem worried. Seeing the expression that one of us made while cleaning the fluid from the child's ear, she calmly told us she knew these kinds of infections were common among deaf children. We told her they were not and I thought that perhaps an untreated previous infection had caused her son's deafness. She looked at us with a certain skepticism and then told us she would go to the hospital the next time she was in Riosucio. She thanked us and apologized because she could not stay and chat since she had to look for someone who could give her some plantains and rice to feed her three other children for breakfast.

After she left, one of the cooks explained to us that the woman was in a very difficult situation: her eldest daughter, who had a harelip, had been four years on a waiting list for surgery. Another of her sons was born with a gammy leg. The worst was that her husband had died the week before. The woman was now alone to provide for her family. We asked what had happened to the man and the cook told us that he had died of fever. She thought it might have been malaria, but she really believed he had died of hunger and hard work. In my field notes, I wrote down the exact phrase she used: "Having to endure mosquitos and long days of hard work, constantly sweating while you're poorly fed, it's easy to get anemia. That's what killed him." The woman was right: poverty had led to that man's death.

During my fieldwork in Bajo Atrato I was inundated with stories of this kind. On occasion I was confronted with great impotence but I also encountered powerful stories of resilience, particularly during my time conducting the *caracterización*. The

questionnaire used during the survey served as a portal to a whole universe of stories and experiences that profoundly marked the individual and collective identities of many people. The questionnaire we were using in the assessment process was jointly designed by leaders from the local grassroots organizations and by a team of lawyers from the aforementioned CJL, the national human rights NGO representing victims of the armed conflict. The questionnaire aimed to identify the families and individuals who experienced the war waged in Bajo Atrato, to collect their testimonies regarding losses and damages, and to document their own proposals for reparation. Although the questionnaire emphasized the impacts generated by concrete events such as forced displacement, disappearances, and homicides, it was easy to realize that the effects of war were not confined to these spectacular instances of violence. In fact, the more testimonies I heard, the more I felt the events were not historical in the sense of being emplaced in the past, but that they were constantly actualized, by one means or another, in people's everyday worlds. By this, I do not simply mean that people are still dealing with the long-lasting aftermath of the powerful acts of destruction carried out by paramilitaries, guerrilla armies, and the Colombian National Army alike. My point, rather, is that ongoing violence, though less spectacular and striking, still hinders the possibilities these communities have for being and acting within their worlds. But before coming to this point, I would like to briefly describe the main tool used for the community assessment: the questionnaire.

Divided into five main parts, the questionnaire had to be completed by each household with the help of an interviewer. The first part focused on the personal information and family composition of the interviewees. It included questions regarding ethnicity, self-identification, and the interviewee's involvement in local social organizations and community councils. This was the most formal part of the questionnaire and people had to present their government-issued ID and those of the members of their immediate family. This official information was required in order to verify later that they were already registered in the national Victims Single Registry (RUV). Though this may seem like an ordinary procedure, in the countryside it

proved to be an important requirement as those who did not have at hand their ID or the complete personal information of their families were invited to complete the questionnaire later or in the town of Riosucio. Several times, I saw people arriving with the precious, creased, and sometimes frayed or gnawed photocopies of the IDs of sons, daughters or siblings who were no longer living with them but who had been when the war had broken out in 1997.

The second part of the questionnaire contained a set of queries about the specific victimizing events interviewees and their families had gone through, specifying locations, and naming the perpetrators of victimizing acts. It also had a narrative component in which people were invited to describe their experiences in their own words. Interviewers had to transcribe as accurately as possible such accounts. I present one of these since it illustrates the kinds of terms people used to describe their experiences:

On February 19th 1997, my partner and I were harvesting maize in the morning when we heard the noise of aircraft flying overhead. Shortly after, we heard some strong bangs that caused the ground to shake and our hearts to rise in our mouths. We realized it was an attack bomber and that the strike was on nearby Tamboral. Out of fear, we just started running home leaving behind all our tools in the forest. We were worried because our children were alone at home. When we arrived, we found them afraid and crying, hiding under the bed. The rest of people in the village also were very scared. The bombing lasted all day long and we spent all that day without a bite to eat since we were really scared. We did not sleep the whole night because we thought the bombing would continue. The next day we decided to stay at home because we did not feel any zest to go to work in our fields. Then in the afternoon the paramilitaries arrived. They were mixed with the soldiers of the National Army and they commandeered our houses. They started to inspect everything saying that we were hiding the guerrillas. At that time, I had a little store and they stole everything. After they confirmed we were only civilians, they left but they stayed nearby. After that, my husband felt afraid every time he had to go to work because the paramilitaries were hiding in the forest. Because of this, we could not go to our fields anymore or look for food in the forest or navigate the river. We began to starve and we were forcibly displaced. We had to move to Riosucio, leaving our fields and house behind. The day we decided to leave we had to take a small dugout canoe. We were going downstream and the canoe sank. We lost our cutlery and all our pots and pans. We finally arrived to Riosucio at night, completely soaked and starving. We had to live in a small hut that was practically in ruins. My husband had to make many repairs in order to avoid it collapsing. In

Riosucio we suffered starvation, nakedness, discrimination, and humiliation from the people living in the town. We also suffered illnesses. My husband started to suffer high blood pressure, vision problems, and dumbness. All that finally led to his death. To this date, I still am a forcibly displaced person because I'm very afraid of going back to our territory and my farm.

With regard to these stories, I would like to comment on how the past, or more precisely, the act of remembering some events within the framework of the questionnaire designed for the assessment, became a coherent means interviewees found to make sense of their precarious present conditions. By this I mean that the questions not only served to retrieve past events but to retrieve them in a particular way: the recovered past was affected by the conditions of the present moment, but in such a form that the experienced violence helped to explain the present circumstances. In one of his theses on the philosophy of history, Walter Benjamin (1969 [1930]) wrote that "History is the subject of a structure whose site is not homogeneous, empty time, but time filled by the presence of the now" (Ibid., 260). Similarly, the presence of a "now" of precarious material conditions and unkept government promises increased a certain state of vulnerability and uncertainty that informed and shaped the very act of memory. This is another way, a subtler way perhaps, in which the violence of the past keeps reverberating in the present.

The shortest part of questionnaire was the third part. It contained questions to help the surveyors map out the kind of attention and support victims had received from different institutions, including public institutions and NGOs. The support received had to be characterized either as humanitarian aid (material assistance such as food, shelter, bedding equipment or kitchen utensils), social care assistance (any kind of program offering psychosocial, health or financial support) or individual indemnification (compensation from the state for the loss of a family member). Most of the time, when listing the aid they had received, people included the money they got from the conditional cash transfer programs they were part of. In Bajo Atrato, these programs consist of a small cash stipend to poor families with the condition their children maintain regular school attendance and go for some medical check-

ups. The transfers of funds started in 2003 as part of a broad national policy aimed at alleviating poverty. Although the interviewers were always careful to clarify that such programs were addressed to poor households in general and that they could not be considered a form of attention people received as victims, the confusion between these programs—those designed to fight against poverty and the assistance and reparations to which victims have a right—shows to what extent it was hard for people to differentiate between development policies and measures to redress the specificity of victims' concerns. The confusion was not easy to dissipate since a governmental program called "Families in their land" designed to assist victims of forced displacement made payments in a way similar to those of the conditional cash transfer program.

The fourth part, which included a total of 38 questions, dealt with the experienced damages. There were three different categories of damages: individual, family, and collective. Individual damages were described as physical, psychological or economic. Economic damages were always described in terms of material losses: "I lost a wooden house with all its goods and chattel, 12 hogs, 50 chickens, 60 ducks, 3 hunting dogs, 1 horse, 5 hectares of maize, 3 hectares of pineapples, 2 hectares of rice, 4 hectares of plantains." Sometimes people included seeds, dugout canoes, cattle, tools like chainsaws or machetes, and other cash crops such as sugarcane, manioc or fruit trees. I talked once with someone who told me he had lost a very valuable notebook when his family had to flee from their village. The notebook contained his *secretos*, a set of prayers he used to treat snake bites and for getting protection from other poisonous beings. But he did not want the notebook to be included in his declaration because he did not want to be taken for a sorcerer or charlatan. His story made me think how many other valuable things people lost but did not include in their accounts because they thought such things were not fitting for an official declaration. I also wondered to what extent these kinds of omissions reflected the idea that there were losses that could not be repaired at all.

The section of questions on individual physical and psychological damages had its own difficulties; it implicitly compelled people to differentiate between harms inflicted on their bodies and the emotional aftermath of their violent experiences. This divide not only reproduced some of the dichotomies of modern medical models but it also oversimplified: it intended to draw a clear distinction between what concerns bodies and what concerns minds, a distinction that did not always make sense to people, as the following answers about physical damages illustrate: “After I heard the explosives, I was left with terrible headaches and fear. That led us to suffer traumas”; “I still have some problems with my back that come from the time we had to run trying to save our lives”; “I was verbally aggressed”. In the first example, the explosions reverberated in the body, first as headaches and later as a form of fear that has persisted through time. That persistence, coming from time to time as a terrible headache, is what this person called trauma. Following a traditional definition (Allen 1995), the objective component of trauma would be the single shocking event of the air strikes, whereas the subjective component would be the experience of a latent fear materializing as headaches. But if the objective component has mutated, if it is still present in the form of clashes between armies, selective assassinations or in the impossibility of returning to one’s homeland, where to situate the harm? Outside or inside people? And if it is inside, does it make sense to draw a causal link between a painful experience and a past event if the pain still resides in one’s own body? This is why, ultimately, most people simply named symptoms of stressful experiences as a kind of physical damage. My point is that this sort of question in the survey facilitated the formulation of eventual reparation policies (i.e. the design of measures for medical attention and for psychological support), but they did not necessarily capture the experiences of people regarding the violence of armed conflict.

In regard to family damages, there were questions inquiring about the particular harms experienced by children (“Because of fright (*susto*), my children had headaches and fever”; “They also experienced nakedness”; “They were in fever when they heard the shootings”) and about changes of gender or generational roles. Based

on the experiences following forced displacement, the idea was to document how migration to urban settlements or the impossibility of working on their own land altered traditional gender roles. In many instances, men stopped being the main providers of their families as labor dynamics in the cities led women to work and to become heads of their households. In other cases, adolescents and children entered the labor force or families were fragmented as parents felt compelled to send their children to live with relatives outside the region. Another rather common scenario was that men preferred to keep their families living in a town while they went back to cultivate their land for long periods of time. In this way, families could access some basic food crops although it meant being separated. This situation has created a new settlement pattern in which families have one foot in a town such as Riosucio, Curvaradó or Domingodó, and the other in their former hamlet. In the aforementioned towns, security conditions are better and children can attend school and enjoy other facilities lacking in the countryside, while the former hamlets become temporary camps inhabited by adult men either cultivating the land or engaging in activities such as logging or hunting, which may help them to provide for their families.

The final set of questions about damages focused on collective damages. Because the questionnaire was the principal input for the formulation of the collective reparations plan, it was no surprise that a large portion of it was dedicated to these questions. The collective damages were broken down into four categories: damages regarding culture, damages regarding local organizations and community councils, damages to women, and damages to the territory and traditional practices of production. I briefly discuss the first three as damages to the territory are further explored in the next section of this chapter. Questions about cultural damages focused on changes to customary laws, especially aspects regarding internal disputes and traditional authorities; on the ban on collective rituals and celebrations; and on attacks or threats against traditional healers, herbalists (*yerbateros*) and midwives. When discussing cultural damages, people often described how armed groups installed their own systems of justice, how they acted as judges passing judgments upon the communities under their control, and how some local people took advan-

tage of this situation in order to settle old disputes or even make false accusations against neighbors. With respect to the work of traditional healers, it was pointed out that the services of those who knew how to treat snake bites or even leishmaniasis were often required by armed groups. I even knew of a case in which a healer had to assist the wife of a paramilitary commander during the delivery of her baby. In other cases, some traditional healers simply stopped performing their arts as accusations of witchcraft became commonplace and armed groups were always willing to punish those who had been accused.

The questions about damages to local organizations and community councils—the supreme local authority for the administration of the collective territories—had as a goal to depict the way armed groups undermined the political effectiveness of these collective organizations. Besides documenting the systematic wave of attacks and threats against leaders, there was some interest in describing, on the one hand, how other leaders and even some organizations were co-opted by armed groups and, on the other hand, the transformations some organizations had to go through during the hardest years of war. The underlying aim of this section of the questionnaire was to highlight the political impacts of war and how the prevalence of armed conflict prevented local organizations and community councils from pursuing their long-term plans for development and political self-determination. For the members of ASCOBA—the Great Communitarian Council of Bajo Atrato—who participated in the design of the questionnaire, it was clear that because of war they had to change their focus from advocating for government recognition of land and political rights for Afro-Colombian communities to the denouncing human rights violations and advocating for the respect of International Humanitarian Law. People's responses to the questionnaire made it evident that this hiatus in the work of local organizations for collective territories and political rights impeded the realization of the aspirations that communities in Bajo Atrato had previously formulated in their own ethno-development program or *planes de vida*, a chart depicting the main aspects of economic and social development through which they hoped to preserve and revitalize their unique modes of being.

Finally, the section on collective damages included questions about damages to women. It aimed to document gender-based violence and attempted to record particular cases of rape and other forms of sexual abuse. It also aimed to document the challenges women faced in terms of maternal health. It contained some questions regarding women's organizations since many villages had committees which organized activities and projects for women's economic empowerment. When answering the questionnaire, many respondents referred to the fact that during the long marches of forced displacement many women lost their unborn children. But there was always a suspicious silence regarding sexual abuses which, rather than indicating that the practice did not exist, showed the difficulties of discussing such sensitive topics during this kind of survey, even more when the questionnaire was designed to be answered by family groups rather than by individuals. Despite the people's willingness to contribute as much information as possible about different instances of victimization, the questionnaire was not the best way to collect information regarding sexual violence.

Territorial Damages

In this last part of this chapter I focus on how the *caracterización* addressed damages inflicted on the territory and how respondents described some of these damages. This section of the questionnaire contained the following questions: 1) What were the damages inflicted on the territory?; 2) What changes has the territory undergone as a consequence of violent acts?; 3) How have territorial rights been affected?; 4) Were there changes in the traditional practices of production?; 5) How was the traditional economy of your community affected?; 6) What sort of productive practices stopped being carried out and what are the effects of this?; 7) Has there been resettlement of new people in your community? When did this start? How is the relationship with these new settlers?

The first thing to bear in mind about this set of questions is the inclusion of damages to what was called "traditional practices of production" (questions 4, 5, and 6).

As mentioned in the introduction to this thesis, one of the principles of Law 70—the law granting collective property rights to rural Afro-Colombian communities—was the recognition of a set of unique cultural, economic, and social practices deeply emplaced in the riparian lands of the Pacific region. In particular, the law defined traditional practices of production as “the agricultural, mining, forestal extractions, grazing, hunting, fishing, and general harvesting activities of natural resources customarily used to guarantee the conservation of life and people’s self-sustaining development.” (Congreso de Colombia, Ley 70 de 1993, Art. 2) These traditional production systems are a complex set of knowledges and practices that are seen as an essential cornerstone of food security and of the subsistence economy, but also as what has favored environmental protection and conservation of the Pacific region. Indeed, Law 70 grants collective land ownership as long as communities “observe appropriate norms concerning the conservation, protection, and rational utilization of the environment’s natural and renewable resources.” (Ibid., Art. 14) Put differently, it is through the existence and preservation of these traditional practices of production that the law confers to Afro-Colombian territories “an inherent ecological function” (Ibid., Art. 6). The point is that the legal recognition of collective rights of Afro-Colombian communities is achieved through the intermingling of culture, economy, environmental conservation, and territory. From this perspective, territory is conceived of as a biophysical and cultural setting that favors, but that is also shaped by, particular traditional forms of production. The inquiry into the transformation of these traditional practices of production is built, therefore, on the logic that any abrupt transformation in customary economic activities hinders both environmental sustainability and collective cultural practices.

Questions 4, 5, and 6 addressed the main transformations of traditional practices of production. They revealed the difficulties that, on account of forced displacement and dispossession, people have been facing in their struggle for subsistence. Some of the answers were related to the loss of rice and maize varieties. People used to get these seeds through reciprocal exchanges and other non-market practices of distribution that were no longer performed after forced displacement. The loss of

these seeds points not just to the harm inflicted on traditional economies but also to the loss of biodiversity and of practices of reciprocity that once helped sustain and foster life in *bajoatrateño* territories. Other answers were related to the difficulties of transporting and selling cash crops due to the damming and blockage of rivers; and to the dangers of foraging, particularly of accessing game and medicinal plants as the presence of armed groups and military waste rendered the journeys to the forest harsh and dangerous.

The presence of war debris was sometimes referred to as another type of harm inflicted on the territory. While in the next chapter I describe some of the effects produced by military waste, here I want to point out that the presence of landmines, or the suspicion of their existence, is a powerful new constraint on patterns of land use. Another kind of damage associated with land restriction was the presence of mass graves and unburied corpses. Like land mines, the existence of these graves alters the quality of some places, rendering these places inappropriate for their regular uses and compelling communities, as I described in chapter 2, to find ways to deal with the undesirable presence of the dead.

Questions about territorial damages included issues of land tenure since there have been instances in which armed groups encouraged the arrival of new mestizo settlers who changed customary patterns of land use. Property rights, as discussed in chapter 2, have been at stake since the beginning of military actions in Bajo Atrato, as the expelling of communities was essential to the expansion of oil palm plantations sponsored by private businessmen who made criminal alliances with paramilitary groups. What I want to bring to readers' attention is that dispossession and the arrival of new settlers were violations of rights regarding territory as collective property. Accordingly, people linked the effects of forced displacement to the privation of their sovereignty and autonomy, that is to say, to the difficulties communities have had in their attempts to realize the social, cultural, and economic ideals depicted in their ethno-development plans or *planes de vida*.

Unlike the other questions, the first three (What were the damages done to the territory? What changes has the territory undergone as a consequence of violent acts? How have territorial rights been affected?) were rather open-ended and people often interpreted them in terms of the transformation of the landscape. Damages to the territory were associated with the physical changes of places which resulted from aerial bombings, the damming and sedimentation of rivers, and the abandonment and subsequent decay of hamlets, gardens, and forest trails. While I am going to describe these kinds of damages in the next chapter, here I am interested in showing how the physical transformation of places has hindered the practices through which communities have sustained a specific form of territoriality: one that defines the qualities of a given place and creates the conditions to make a place suitable for habitation or work. For example, the forest is considered a cold place and its coldness might provoke some illnesses that are absent in villages, which, by virtue of the labor and presence of people, are considered warm places. I associate the violent transformation of the qualities of places to three different but concomitant processes: destruction, abandonment, and ruination. By destruction I mean military acts such as bombing, shelling, raids, and looting, which annihilated villages or heavily altered land-use patterns or even the attributes of some soils. When discussing this kind of destruction, many people pointed out that areas where planes dropped their bombs became infertile, or that huge patches of fine woods were absolutely depleted by paramilitary armies.

By abandonment I refer to how the absence of people, which was a direct consequence of forced displacement, favored the damming and clogging of rivers, as well as the loss of trails and paths that became covered by the forest. In the absence of communities, the regrowth of forests favored the flourishing of non-human presences such as mosquitoes, wasps, and snakes, which are considered harmful. The abandonment of hamlets, houses, and crops gardens harmed the territory because the regrowth of forests changed the qualities of these places, in a sense ruining them. As a form of damage, abandonment is inscribed in two different time frames: it is both the immediate consequence of war and a process of ruination that in-

cludes the difficulties communities have been facing to retrieve the attributes of their inhabited places. Another way of considering this type of damage is by stressing what war did—it compelled people to leave their homes—and what war impeded people from doing —it prevented people from undertaking the activities that help bring the territory into existence: transiting rivers, maintaining and clearing forest trails, farming, keeping the forest from their villages and houses. The losses of gardens, hamlets, and routes as a consequence of forest recovery, along with the impossibility of accomplishing the array of tasks that render these places habitable, is what I call a process of ruination.

Ruination is then associated with the violent transformation of places, with what people are left with once they managed to return to their villages: roofless houses, decayed buildings, wormy walls, weedy fields, overgrown gardens. As I will explain in the next chapter, certain emerging forests are considered a form of damage since they epitomize abandonment and ruination, representing a negative image against which concepts such as labor or human habitation are defined. Communities are constantly struggling against the incredibly quick and overwhelming regrowth of forests which results from abandonment. Material ruination—as made manifest through an overpowering forest invading gardens, houses, and villages—makes it harder for people to retrieve what they had and enjoyed before forced displacement.

The transformation of traditional practices of production, land mines, military debris, and mass graves, dispossession, and landscape transformation—in the form of destruction, abandonment, and ruination—were how damages to the territory were characterized by the people who answered the questionnaire. These are damages to the territory conceived of as a physical setting. This physical setting renders possible the social life that indigenous and Afro-Colombian communities partake in. Damming of rivers, depletion of forests, destruction of soils or loss of crops might be included in these damages since they jeopardize the rights granted to these communities. From another perspective, these are damages to the territory conceived of as a set of relationships. The presence of mass graves and of the unquiet souls of

the dead, the loss of seeds through which biodiversity would be fostered, the impossibility of transiting some forest trails or the processes of ruination that transform the places formerly inhabited by people, are all damages that disrupt the relations and practices that bring the territory into existence. I would like to highlight that this relational way of considering damages to the territory puts on the table not only the well-being of people and their property rights but the maintenance of the relations that sustain a large community of life that includes humans, non-humans, and the territory itself. These relations not only take place in the territory but create it: the territory is what it is only by virtue of the kind of relations it favors. Military waste, the loss of forest trails, the infestation of weeds in gardens, the impossibility of navigating the rivers or the invasion of villages by undesirable species are all events that undermine the types of relations people usually have in their territories. The violent changes in these relations constitute, therefore, a form of harm inflicted not so much on people as on the territory itself, that is to say, on the possibilities of bringing it into existence.

The assessment of the harms inflicted on the territory allows Afro-Colombian communities to articulate, if not their concerns about the damages experienced by some non-human agencies—a possibility that, as I discussed in the previous chapter, was opened up by the law—, at least the recognition of a set of practices of dwelling and care through which communities foster a shared life with other agents, including rivers, crops, and spirits. By considering, for instance, damages to traditional practices of production or the drastic transformation of landscapes, communities are defining their territory as what emerges through particular relations, not just as the preexisting physical setting that enables said relations. In other words, their concerns, as revealed by the *caracterización*, indicate that they understand the territory in relational terms: it does not exist prior to the relations people keep with it, but rather as the result of the multiple relations in which people, forests, and other non-human agents participate.

In Bajo Atrato, Afro-Colombian and indigenous communities consider territory the mainstay of their collective lives. When asked about the damages war had caused to their territory, perhaps the most evident link people made was between territory as a reservoir of natural resources and the violent transformation in the use of and access to these resources. These are of course concerns related to the way war has been hindering the very livelihood of communities and the difficulties they have been experiencing in their search for adequate economic conditions. A less evident response, however, was explicit statements attaching some sort of agency or personhood to the territory itself, which, I must confess, I hoped to find once I decided to compare the ontological possibilities of the Victims' Laws and the implementation of these laws in the frame of the collective reparations plans. The survey showed that people were concerned with the relations of care that communities aim to preserve with both the places they inhabit and the beings these places harbor. In sum, after studying the *caracterización*, I came to realize that the understanding of the territory as a victim lies not so much in recognizing it as a sentient being as in the recognition of the co-constitutive relations between humans and non-humans the territory simultaneously favors and is made up of.

Reparation in Times of War

To conclude this chapter, I would like to briefly present the last part of the questionnaire used during the assessment: people's reparations proposals. In this section, respondents were asked to suggest the kinds of measures the state should adopt in order to redress individual and family damages, as well as the damages inflicted on women, local organizations, culture, traditional practices of production, and, of course, the territory. Not surprisingly, a large portion of the answers were related to the improvement of current material living conditions: agricultural subsidies, tools for work, home improvement grants, aqueduct and sewer systems, public electricity, construction of schools and health centers, better transportation routes. In this sense, their reparation proposals were no different from the kinds of demands impoverished communities are making throughout the country or the kind of de-

velopment policies the state has to undertake to remedy poverty. These kinds of proposals show how difficult it is to articulate reparations for redressing particular harms when the needs of victimized communities are so huge. This is due to the fact that, besides suffering the direct effects of armed conflict, these communities have been facing, even before war, serious issues of poverty, discrimination, and marginalization. Their current material needs and the precarity of their lives make it difficult to give importance to other kinds of reparation measures.

Other proposals regarding cultural damages and damages to women were articulated: construction of centers where elders and youth would meet, financial support for customary activities like patron saint festivals, and access to microcredit programs. Others supported projects that various NGOs had already begun implementing: workshops on entrepreneurship, sanitation, leadership training. And yet the only set of proposals that could be distinguished from more general development policies were the ones regarding individual and family reparations, as people asked for the economic compensation to which they, as recognized victims of forced displacement, homicide or forced disappearance, have the right.

In terms of reparations to the territory, the proposals resembled a list of environmental demands: cleaning and maintenance of rivers, reforestation, control of timber exploitation, monitoring of extractive economies. But more than examining these proposals, I am interested in underscoring the difficulties of undertaking most of the proposed measures because they suppose a set of structural transformations that extend beyond the willingness of some state agencies and even the scope of the Victims' Law. In the first place, armed conflict is, despite the peace agreement reached with the FARC guerrillas in 2016 and the demobilization of some paramilitary armies in 2005, a rampant reality permeating people's lives. In the Truandó and Salagüí river basins, paramilitary groups—labeled by the government simply as “criminal bands”—and the ELN guerrilla—which wanted to take control of the zones previously occupied by the FARC—are engaged in constant combats for the control of drug trafficking routes. In 2015, while I was doing fieldwork, new forced dis-

placements took place. Since then, different local social organizations have been demanding that the state take vigorous action to impede these communities from being left at the mercy of guerrilla and paramilitary groups. Until March 2017, an estimated 200 families belonging to the Embera, Wounaan and Afro-Colombian communities in the Truandó basin have been displaced to the town of Riosucio (Amnesty International 2017). In November 2017, Amnesty International issued a report about Chocó in which it explored the state of abandonment of indigenous and Afro-Colombian communities. Although the authors of this report could not visit Riosucio for security reasons, the report describes how illegal armed groups are wrestling for control of the region, how the government has taken no action to ensure that people are safe from these groups and their abuses, how thousands of families have been forced to flee their homes out of fear of the actions of guerrilla and paramilitary groups, and how human rights defenders and community leaders have suffered threats and even been killed (Amnesty International 2017). Despite what the Nobel Peace Prize-winning President has proudly announced, war has not ended in Bajo Atrato.

Another difficulty when creating the reparation plans is the strong climate of mistrust of local communities toward the Colombian state. As I pointed out at the beginning of this chapter, the ambitious goals of collective reparation imply the setting in motion of structural policies that require political will and coordination among many public institutions, which has no antecedents in the country. Mistrust was apparent in people's skepticism toward the *caracterización* itself. Many people complained that the information to be collected had already been part of the official declarations they had made before the national authorities responsible for the RUV (Victims Single Registry), and that to date no reparations had been implemented. The mistrust was not totally unfounded, for as of 2018 no public institution had yet undertaken any of the multitude of activities named in the design of the reparation plans. One of the arguments these institutions use to justify their absence has been, paradoxically, the current situation of insecurity. Moreover, in a place like Bajo Atrato, the legitimacy of the state was undermined by the fact that many high public

functionaries and officers from the police and the army were involved with the very armed groups, especially the paramilitaries, responsible for massive human rights violations. The ongoing armed conflict, the broken promises of the state, the lack of institutional will to undertake the reparation plans, and the current precarious material conditions of many rural communities have created an atmosphere that leads people to perceive that what they are facing is not a transitional period in which the paths toward justice, peace, and reconciliation are being paved, but that they are bearing witness to the continuation of poverty, discrimination and marginality by other means.

Both the presence and expansion of new armed groups and the reticence of the state to remedy this situation and provide security to those who, despite the lack of appropriate conditions went back to their villages, have accentuated a state of uncertainty: uncertainty people have about what will happen to their land and their lives in the coming months; uncertainty about what the plans of armed groups will be; uncertainty about conflict escalation. In this case, uncertainty is not a matter of lacking information about what will occur. Instead, it stems from the opposite: from knowing, based on their past experiences, the outcomes of war. Can people even take for granted that they will be on their own land for the next harvest? Will it be worth the effort of reconstructing their houses and their villages once again? Or will they be victims of a third or, even for some, a fourth forced displacement? This uncertainty permeates everything and it becomes a sort of “ontic horizon” (Monroy 2013, 8), a force mediating how people engage with their ordinary worlds: to cultivate only what is needed, to raise few animals or only those one can actually carry in case of one has to run away, to keep family and children settled in town rather than in the villages, to make of the former farms a place for provisory crops or of their former houses just temporary shelters. Following Monroy (2013), by uncertainty as ontic horizon I mean a sense of temporality that orients people not so much in terms of how they see the world as in terms of how they make their decisions. In a context of latent or permanent violence, this horizon of temporality constitutes a daily actualization of existence (Ibid., 8-9), that is, a permanent renewal of the daily

and more basic struggles one has to undertake in order to survive. Monroy calls this horizon a permanent present tense (*el presente permanente*), meaning a pervasive effect of violence that impinges a mode of acting in which only the immediate, actual conditions matter. This is a submissive mode of being since it is deeply dependent on the actuality of war and the state of unsettledness and permanent incertitude war fosters. In a permanent present tense, life turns into a raw expression of actuality, a constant focus on daily concerns, a simple drive to survive.

Uncertainty as a mode of being is not a choice made by the people of Bajo Atrato. Rather it is created by a specific violent context. Being an ontic horizon, uncertainty shapes peoples' expectations, demands and needs, which are reflected in the kind of proposals most of them made in relation to their reparations: what is required is the means to ease their current struggles for survival, what they demand of the state is to cover their basic needs. In such a precarious context, where violence is constantly hindering the possibilities of, to borrow Kohn's words, being in *futuro* (2013, 208), the formulation of reparation measures other than economic compensation becomes difficult. Perhaps once these communities secure their basic needs, perhaps when these people stop struggling with poverty, perhaps then other forms of recognition, truth, and reparation will rise in importance (ICTJ 2009, 46).

Conclusion

The collective reparation plans represent, at least in theory, an opportunity to obtain transformative justice and positive peace, which means the redressing of often-neglected issues of structural violence as well as a positive presence of the state. Therefore, the achievement of peace and justice in Bajo Atrato cannot be understood apart from the injustices of poverty, land dispossession, racism, and social inequalities experienced by Afro-Colombian and indigenous peoples. These are, as a matter of fact, the roots and breadth of violence (Nagy 2013) and cannot be neglected in the current transitional justice process. Through the definition of their own reparations, local communities are generating new ways of getting involved in politics with the

hope of speeding up the government's work. More importantly, with these reparation plans, they have put flesh on the bones of the Victims' Laws, while igniting a process that sets the conditions under which their territories can heal.

Although social participation has been at the heart of the formulation of said plans—communities have actively participated in the identification, contextualization, and mapping of the events that produced harm—a true territorial peace will be achieved only if the state respects and implements these local initiatives. So far, this has not been the case, and the future of these plans remains uncertain because the new national government has promised to revert some of the fundamental agreements achieved in the peace process with the FARC, and because its promised development policies (foreign direct investment, extractivism, privatization, reduction of the role and capacity of the state) are at odds with the policies that might redress the root causes of poverty and marginalization (i.e. access to education and essential health care, social protection, respect of territorial rights).

In a country like Colombia, where the state remains an unfulfilled promise of order, regulation, and well-being, perhaps victims invest too much faith in the law. “The law”, in the abstract, still represents the most privileged constituent of relationships between the state and its citizens. Although some authors see in the law another form of social control and enforcement of power relations (Hirst 1975), others highlight its emancipatory potential (De Sousa Santos 2002). Through the examination of the collective reparation plans, in this chapter, I have depicted both aspects of the Victims' Laws: it has opened the possibility of attuning policies of truth, justice, and reparation with the experiences of indigenous and Afro-Colombian communities; but it has also set up a specific epistemic and ontological framework through which said experiences are rendered intelligible to the state. As I have discussed in the section on vernacularization, the process of translating local experiences into the language of rights is not exempt from controversy and contestation. Without ethnographically attuned interventions and frameworks capable of strengthening the realities of the beings that comprise *bajoatrateño* territories, we are at risk of not bringing justice to the experiences of violence in this region.

The Victims' Laws became an important framework for collective claims regarding assistance and reparation. Though victimhood is a transitory category in theory (Bouris 2007, Malkki 1992), it has been successfully mobilized by local organizations in their struggles for collective rights regarding territory, culture, and socio-political organization. Through collective reparation plans, we are bearing witness to a new process of political agency in which indigenous and Afro-Colombian organizations are not simply obviating the special rights derived from the politics of multiculturalism. Rather, they are enhancing these rights by making them compatible with their own experiences of the conflict waged in their territories. This means that by incorporating notions such as collective damages, damages to the territory, or damages to social organizations (all key components of the *caracterización*), these peoples are decolonizing some dominant conceptual paradigms of transitional justice systems (Izquierdo and Viaene 2018). As the proposals of reparation indicate, the challenge is to reflect this conceptual shift in the practice, meaning, in the measures intended to redress the damages inflicted upon indigenous and Afro-Colombian territories.

The power of a law like the Victims' Law relies on the ideals it represents, but mainly on the way in which local people appropriate and re-interpret such ideals. I have shown to what extent the collective reparation plans have become instrumental to the demands communities have historically made in their quest to remedy the structural problems of poverty and marginalization which have characterized Bajo Atrato. In this sense, the political concept of victim becomes a new mechanism for the recognition of rights, although these rights are limited since what communities seem to expect most from reparation policies is the alleviation of poverty rather than the redressing of specific damages armed conflicts have provoked in their territories. At least this is what the *caracterización* reveals, which does not mean, as I have explored in the previous chapters, that communities have not undertaken concrete actions to repair the relations which allow their territories to live. Most of the people's reparation proposals aim to alleviate the despair which stems from the material conditions of the present. These material conditions, as I explore in the

following chapter, are closely related to processes of abandonment and ruination, which constitute some of the powerful, lasting effects of violence. I argue that these material conditions do not only reflect the destructive drives of war, but rather actualize vulnerability and precariousness.

CHAPTER 7



Absences and Disappearances. An Imagistic Essay



FIGURE 39.
The smoke of life
Photo by author

The smoke of life

“An abandoned house is doomed to die away because there are no people inhabiting it. It needs smoke, the smoke coming out of the kitchen is what keeps it up. That smoke drives off cockroaches and vermin. Without smoke, spider webs appear, the weeds surrounding the house grow up and, therefore, there is less sunlight lighting the house. Fallen leaves are stuck in the roof and they deteriorate the roofing sheets. An abandoned house is also invaded by wasps. Wasps are always present, but when a house is inhabited people keep them at bay: one may burn their nest down and one does not let them take over the house. Wasps are like burglars: what they find without a keeper, they take. But an inhabited house is kept from falling. The warmth of people helps houses to stay standing.” (Egidio, in conversation with the author. Riosucio)



FIGURE 40.
Ruined houses
Photo by author

The warmth of people



FIGURE 41.
The warmth of people
Photo by author

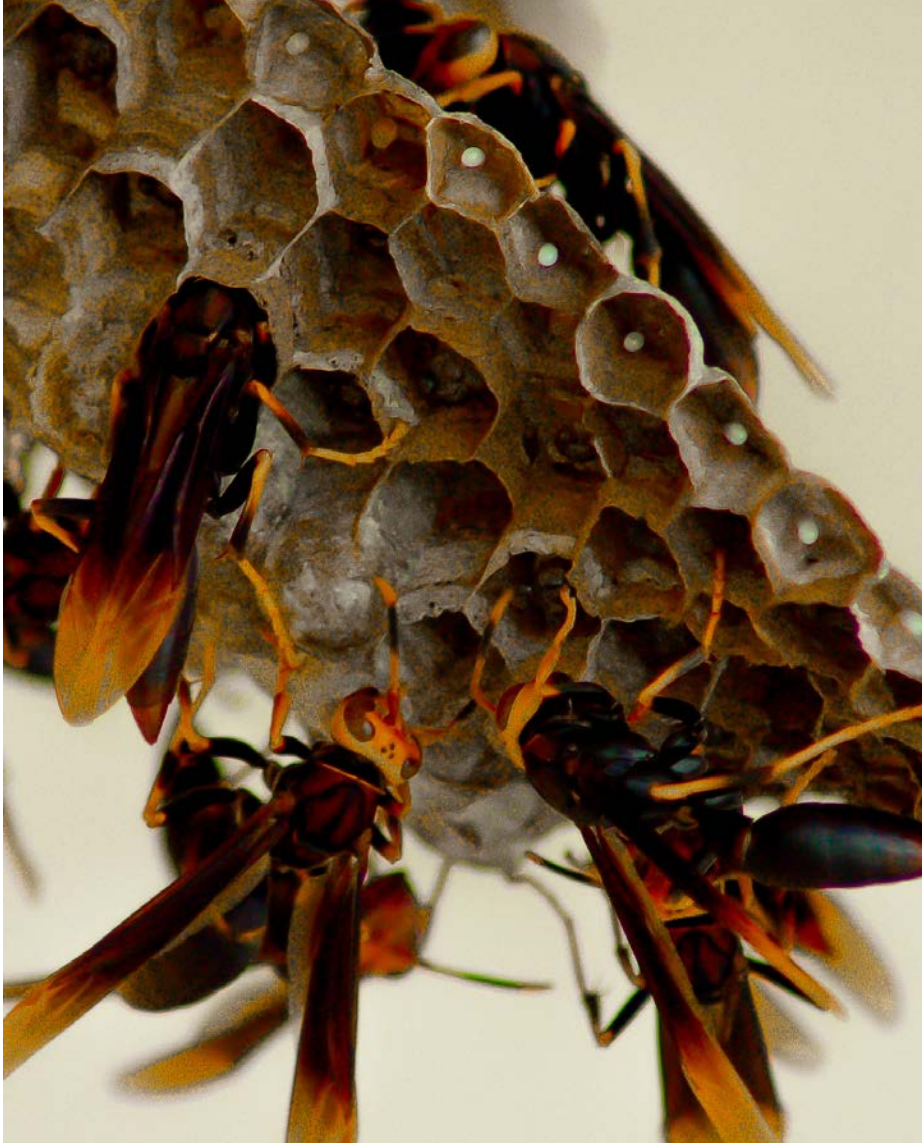


FIGURE 42.
Wasps
Photo by author

Intrusive *avichuchos*

Known in English as the red paper wasp (*Polistes canadensis*), this *avichucho*—a local taxonomic category that includes flying insects, small lizards, and some arthropods such as spiders and scorpions—is an undesirable, recurrent visitor of people's houses. These wasps have the gift of turning wood into paper: females scrape wood fiber and break it down in their mouths with their own saliva. Wasps look for sheltered, dry spots to hang their nests, which are entirely made of a water-proof, soft paper pulp. It is often the queen who starts the work by building a petiole—a tiny but powerful stalk from which the rest of the nest will hang. Once this pillar has been

erected, the queen along with approximately nine female wasps build an umbrella-shaped comb featuring hexagonal cells of identical size and shape in which eggs are laid and larvae develop (Giray et.al 2005, Jeanne 2004, Polak 1993, West-Eberhard 1986). The egg takes about 40 days to fully develop into an adult, a period during which the queen and their female kin enlarge the comb (Giray et.al 2005, Polak 1993, Sumner et.al. 2010). A characteristic of these wasps is that only one generation uses a comb, so the brood is constantly moving and founding new combs. It has been argued that this is a strategy they follow to avoid their combs being infested by moths (Jeanne 2004). Moreover, as these wasps do not depend on any seasonal resource for their development (Polak 1993, Sumner et.al. 2010), they are building and abandoning nests throughout the whole year. Multiple comb building and constant itinerancy is what makes them “burglar-like”: they are always at work, going and coming, looking for the opportunity to seize a suitable spot to build their paper towns—the name that identifies their genus (*Polistes*) means “founder of a city”.

These burglars are armed. Red paper wasp stings are very, very uncomfortable. The venom they transmit is not life-threatening but it is indeed painful: it lasts for about fifteen minutes, causing burning and swelling at the sting site. Justin Schmidt, an entomologist who created a sting pain index describes the venom as caustic and burning: “Distinctly bitter aftertaste. Like spilling a beaker of hydrochloric acid on a paper cut.” (Schmidt 2016, 229) I have not experienced the corrosive effects of hydrochloric acid, but I do know what it feels like to get stung by this wasp. Rather than addressing the pain itself, which Schmidt characterizes at a level of 3 out of 4, my own description would have focused on how much I regretted going into a place where I had not been invited. Because the presence of a wasp comb is actually the opposite of an invitation. Even if their colonies might not be big, wasps are dangerous as they can sting more than once during a single attack: their stingers, unlike those of bees, remain intact. In Bajo Atrato people use the verb *clavar*, literally to nail, to describe when a wasp stings. Perhaps the wasps’ nailing of people is part of their process of nailing down their paper towns.



FIGURE 43.
Polistes canadiensis
Photo by author

If there is something that characterizes a deserted building in Bajo Atrato it is the presence of these wasp nests. These *avichuchos* are indicative of how abandonment favors the proliferation of other presences. Another way of saying this is that wasps create another kind of place: when building their combs inside people's houses they are not just manifesting their natural adaptive strategies; they are, in the very process of crafting these nests, contributing to the emergence of places of abandonment. Wasps are then participants in processes of ruination, a concept I borrow from Ann Stoler (2008, 2013) who emphasizes the idea of ruin as a verb rather than a noun, which means that ruination is a tangible active force affecting the life of people. While ruins are sites that "condense alternative senses of history", ruination is an "ongoing corrosive process that weights on the future" (Stoler 2013, 9). Following Gordillo (2014), I see the durable, material traces created by violence as 'rubble,' a concept this author uses in order to deglamorize ruins so often depicted as alluring, romantic sites of the past. If as a modern concept "the ruin" establishes a kind of break of the present from the past, an object or situation that is not to be disturbed but rather to be preserved; rubble highlights instead the materialized ongoing outcomes of destruction and the effects these grim instantiations produce on both the material environment and people's lives (Ibid., 6-11).



FIGURE 44.
A web of relationships
Photo by author

If the absence of people's warmth provokes the settlement decisions of wasps, we are not just bearing witness to the way the destructive driving forces of war produce empty spaces to be inhabited by unpleasant insects. Instead, what I want to underscore is the fact that war materializes itself negatively in the form of debris, rubble, abandoned objects, certain non-human presences and, as I will proceed to describe, in the changing shape of forests. This is a process of "destructive production" (Ibid., 81), another concept I borrow from Gordillo and that captures the two-fold movement of war—destruction and production—"without recoding destruction as creative." (Ibid., 81) Through some ethnographic and imagistic vignettes, my aim in this chapter is to show how war has violently transformed the qualities of some places, leaving behind traces of destroyed and destructive objects that challenge the conditions of sociality that would ordinarily define such places.



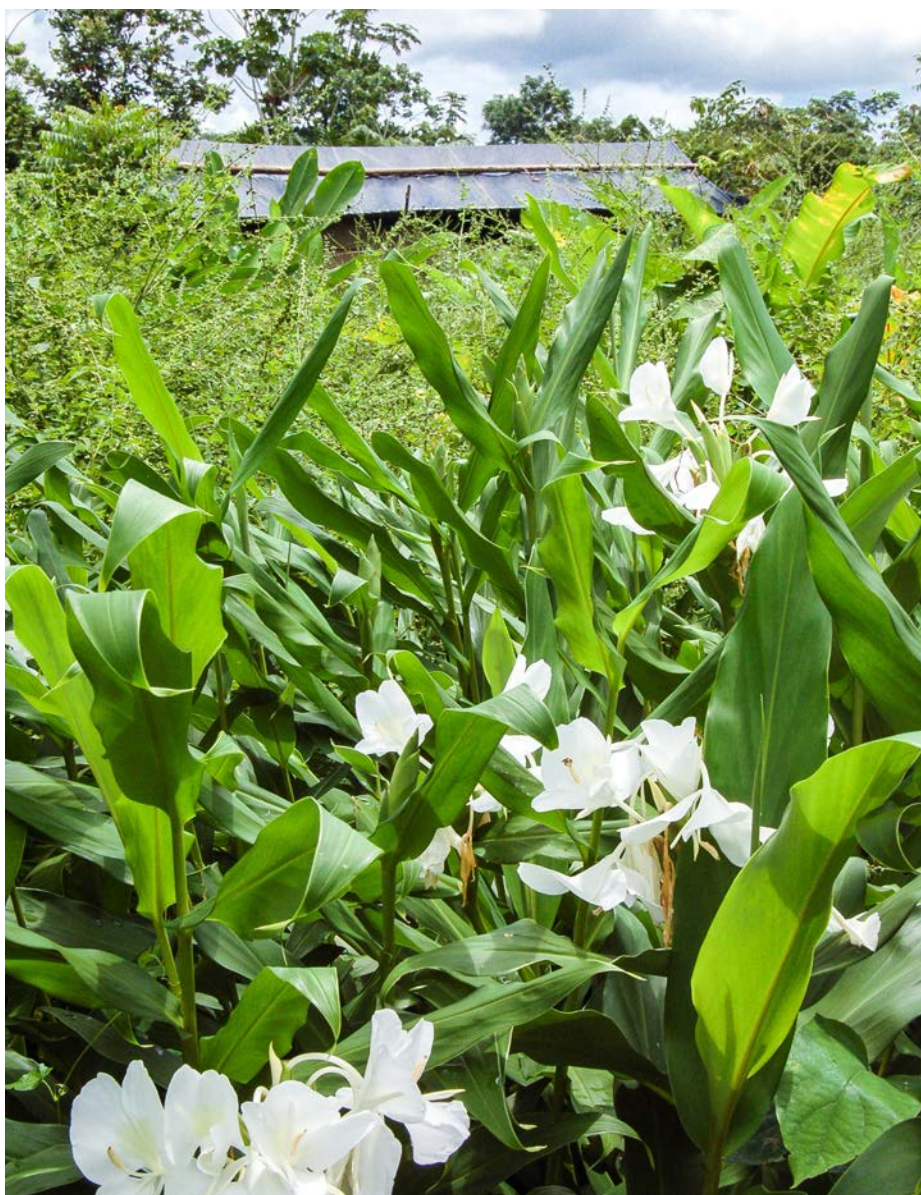
FIGURE 45.
The shape of corrosion
Photo by author

The shape of corrosion

In the absence of people, things tend to rot and wear away faster than usual. These are the kinds of effects provoked by the coldness of forests. If houses and villages materialize the warmth of people, the forest, many people hold, exudes a form of coldness that can even provoke illnesses. Both the cold air of forests and the absence of the warmth of people leave their traces in the settlements: rotten walls, collapsed roofs, broken floors, ruined courtyards, invasive weeds, filthy fields, grey gardens. What sprouts after abandonment is *rastrojo*. *Rastrojo* is the wild vegetation that precedes the growing of forests. *Rastrojos* are thick and invasive. In the

case of villages, the verb *enrastrojar* describes the process through which the rot sets in, a process that in tropical rain forests occurs in an extremely accelerated way. *Rastrojo* is the form many villages took when they were abandoned because of forced displacement. Those that came back found their houses *enrastrojadas*, that is, full of shrubs, weeds, stalks, brushes, scrubs, and brushwood. But as not everybody could or wanted to come back to their lands, many houses—and in some cases entire villages—were swallowed by the forest. In the forests of Bajo Atrato, one might be struck by the apparent absence of ruins, but in fact these ruins are there; it is just that their form is not that of decaying buildings but of flourishing *rastrojos*.

FIGURE 46.
Enrastrojada house.
Photo by author



The loneliness of marooned livestock

When the paramilitary violence began and compelled people to leave their homes, most of these people left behind not only their houses and belongings but also their pets and livestock. In their accounts of their multiple losses, many people included dogs, poultry, swine, pack animals, and cattle. Claudio, a traditional healer in his late sixties, told me that when he and his family had to flee from their village, they packed their dugout canoe with as much stuff as they could but there was not enough space for their dog, an animal he had received as a gift from someone he had treated. The dog was such a good hunter that he felt very sorry for having no choice but to leave him: “A mí me dio un guayabao!”, he told me, meaning he felt the kind of woe one feels when one loses a loved one.

While cattle were stolen and swine and poultry were slaughtered by the paramilitaries, other animals were left to their own fate. They went to the forest and they *se encimarraron*, they became marooned or feral animals. A couple of friends described to me their surprise at finding several of these animals alive when they returned to their villages after several months of forced displacement. Mules, horses, dogs, and some pigs managed to survive in the wilderness. But when the first families came back, these animals gave up their feral status. Someone I interviewed said that the warmth of people brought them back.

Six years after the massive forced displacement, during a trip I made up the Quiparadó River, I saw one of these marooned animals: the most imposing cat I have ever seen. He was on the bank of the river, four or five bends upstream from an abandoned hamlet. I was struck by the presence of such a magnificent cat in the middle of the forest and relatively far from any human settlement. Not only his size was unusual. There was a kind of nobility exceeding the usual dignity that only cats know how to display. Someone in the boat explained to me that the cat belonged to one of the families that used to inhabit the hamlet we had just passed and that he probably came to the riverbank attracted by the sound of our outboard motor. The

cat's shape was proof of how fine he was doing in the forest, but his presence there and the steady look he gave us while the canoe passed by was a reminder that he was, after all, a creature whose sociality was shaped by human presence.

The figure of the maroon—that runaway slave who retreated from the colonial world and immersed himself in the forest—is often associated with rebellion, resistance, and defiance of authority. In the case of the cat, he did not escape captivity but became marooned as a consequence of abandonment. And yet, this solitary, feral cat shared a characteristic with these runaway slaves: their lives in the forest set them apart from their own kin and kind. Let me explain. In 1966, Cuban anthropologist Miguel Barnet published the testimony of Esteban Montejo, a runaway slave who spent several years in the forest before joining the army that fought in the Cuban war of independence (1895-1898). Montejo describes how he lost all contact with people not only through the act of escaping from the sugar plantation but also during his time in the woods. Out of fear, he avoided encounters with both the officials of the colonial order and with other enslaved people: the former could bring him back to the plantations, the latter could betray him and indicate his location: “I didn’t even allow other cimarrones to spot me: cimarrón with cimarrón sells a cimarrón” (Barnet 1968, 47). A true cimarrón learns to live in the wild in the absence of his own kin and kind. Similarly, without human caretakers, the cat learned to survive in the wild but once in the forest he did not have the chance of finding kin or any other creature of his kind. The cat was then a unique creature of the forest, the only one of his kind, which leads me to understand that the forced displacement led him to the loss of his kin too; I mean, the people with whom he had previously coexisted.

These kinds of losses are somehow depicted in the map drawn by some women from a village on the Salquí River (Figure 47). It represents how their village looked before the forced displacement. Besides a soccer field, several houses, and some gardens, the map includes two different kinds of forests and the names of some trees used for timber. Along with some fruit trees (mangos, guavas, lemons, and



FIGURE 47
The inhabitants
of the village
Source: Cinep 2004

coconuts) and some medicinal plants found in the gardens women used to keep (*siteamañas*, *llantén*), the map also shows horses, poultry, cats, and dogs—the typical companion species of peasant life. Plants and animals are included because they are constituents of the village and, to some extent, part of the community. Through this map and the stories of marooned animals, I have realized that because of war people lost many of their non-human companions just as many of these beings had to learn to reconstruct their lives in the absence of people.

Where do fish come from in new ponds?

A loud noise that made the ground shake and the roofs budge. This is how many people remember the impact of the bombs dropped by the army on the morning of February 19th, 1997. Witnesses mention a very loud noise that caused great apprehension and fear, a noise that ‘made their heads bigger’. *La cabeza se le pone a uno grande*: this is a local expression describing experiences of apprehension and fear. The equivalent in English, perhaps, is something like having one’s heart in one’s mouth. But in Bajo Atrato, it is said that your head widens, as a result of your becoming aware of something unexpected and stressful. I have also heard this ex-

pression used to describe grief and hardship. However, in the case we are currently describing, that of the bombs dropped in 1997, a head-widening is one possible literal effect of an earsplitting blast that left a rough trace in the landscape. First it was an explosion crater in the pastures.



FIGURE 48.
The explosion crater
Photo by Jesus Abad
Colorador

Now it is a bowl-shaped pond in the forests of Salaquí River.



FIGURE 49.
The afterlives
of an explosion
Photo by author

This is the same place twenty years after the airstrike launched by the army. Although some of the best-documented ecological impacts of warfare include destruction of landscapes, plundering of natural resources, spreading of parasites and diseases, and violent transformations of land use (see for example Bennett 2004, Le Billon 2001 or Tucker 2004a), in some cases, ironically, war has given a reprieve to forests from human pressures (Tucker and Russell 2004), while in other cases it has created vast zones of “no-man’s lands” that, like the Korean demilitarized zone, have become wildlife sanctuaries (Brady 2008, Kim 2016). This suggests a somehow counterintuitive aftermath: under certain circumstances war has enabled the recovery of some species and some environments. Through the images above, I would like to highlight how war might lead to a double process of negative transformation: first of all, the abandonment of places previously inhabited by people; secondly, the flourishing of some non-human presences that, in this case, are not fully appreciated by people. This flourishing is often interpreted by local communities as a form of ruination. Consider the two aforementioned images.

The heliconia plants and the trees surrounding the pond are evidence of a forest claiming its dominion. This is a claim made in the absence of people. This recovering forest has covered the grass a family previously sowed for their cattle (the same cattle that were raided by paramilitaries shortly after the attack). If the bombs started the process of undermining people’s livelihood, the forest completed it. The pastures of the first photo represent the work of those for whom the raising of cattle was a means of subsistence, an activity that required keeping the forest at bay in order to let domesticated animals flourish. In the second photo, the forest is no longer in the background but is now front and center. This recovering forest points to a process of ruination, it epitomizes the abandonment to which some places were subjected. If the explosion crater and the military raids triggered the exodus of people, the growing forest represents the hardships they have been facing in their attempt to render their villages habitable again.

In the absence of people, the forest brought other beings, including fish. However, the new pond is not close to the river and it dries up during summer. And yet with the rains the fish arrive. During our journey to that place, one of the locals asked how fish managed to come to the pond. Someone else answered that some fish hatch from the eggs of frogs. I asked about it. It was explained that what really happens is that all are born frogs but some may become fish in the process of growing up. It is a matter of behavior: some learn to behave as frogs, others as fish and in the process their bodies change. I told them I had heard about frogs that estivated: they bury themselves in the muddy ground and are capable of staying dormant to survive periods of drought. I also talked about fish that lay eggs capable of surviving long spells of drought. But my comment was in fact complementing and not contradicting what locals had been explaining: it described a very effective survival strategy, but it did not explain how fish had originally arrived in the pond, at least not to someone like me who has interiorized that evolutionary principle according to which like begets like. After some research, I learned that birds such as herons, which abound in Bajo Atrato, may incidentally transport eggs stuck to their feathers or feet. I also learned that feet and fur of some terrestrial animals might play host to fish eggs. To someone endorsing the idea that all members of any species always produce their own kind only and that fish, therefore, are a kind of unambiguous organism that can be differentiated from other life forms, these explanations shed light on how fish had come to the pond. But such explanations stem from a particular form of knowledge that defines fish and frogs as species whose clearly identified boundaries are prior to and transcend the specificities of space and time (Lien and Law 2011). Consequently, they miss a beautiful component of that interspecies transformation pointed out by locals: the form of some beings (fish in this case) is defined by the relations they undertake (they were born from frogs, but they learn how to be fish) and not the other way around.

The idea that fish hatched from the eggs of some frogs is also compatible with the notion of *renacientes*, that principle according to which beings are in eternal rebirth, being each one an ontological extension or instantiation of a prior and continuous

form of life. Under such a tenet, life becomes an incessant birth, and rather than a pre-ordained world of pure actuality with well-demarcated species representing a fulfillment of possibility, one faces something akin to what Ingold describes as a world “on the verge of the actual” in which life “is not an emanation but a generation of being” (Ingold 2006, 11). In other words, species are not already existent in the world but rather species become what they are by virtue of the relations they sustain. In Bajo Atrato the aforementioned generation of being is possible not only as a transition from frogs to fish but also vice-versa, as well as between species that one tends to ascribe to different kingdoms. That is the case of the *chitra* or *morrongo*—the local name of some hematophagous insects from the *Psychodidae* family—which are begotten from the fruit of the *higuerón* tree; of some bullet ants that become vines; of the larvae of some beetles that bloom as plants inside rotten trunks; of bats that transform into *chules*, a rat-like rodent; or of wasps that become fungi after death.

This constant generation of being presupposes a principle of flux, of constant actualization of the proprieties that make up a given being. And this process bears similarities to the form in which territory is experienced: it does not pre-exist the relations and practices that constitute it. In other words, places like pastures or ponds are instantiations of specific processes in which human and non-human beings participate. Just as *chules*, *chitras*, fish or frogs become what they are by virtue of their relations, places are an array of activities, I mean, they are brought into existence through specific practices. Then, the ruination of villages, gardens or houses is not only the outcome of their physical destruction, it is also what results from the transformation of the relations these places enable: a house becomes a refuge for *avichuchos* because therein it is not possible to maintain the practices that generate warmth, the forest extends itself over the pastures because the constituents of the latter give place to other presences and other relations.



FIGURE 50.
Thick absences
Photo by author

Green and thick absences

How to know when one is surrounded by rubble and ruins? I started to consider this question after a trip to an indigenous reserve located up the Arenal River. During that trip we navigated upstream via three different rivers. It took many, many hours to get to Alto Yarumal, an Emberá community of about 25 households. On our way, we passed through some other small villages, including the abandoned hamlet where Patiño, my friend who was driving the boat, was from. As the Arenal River began to narrow, I started to feel happily overwhelmed by the thick trees growing on the banks and by the shape of their canopy covering the river's course. It was as if the forest were closing in upon us. Then Patiño pointed out a dense, green spot behind some shrubs and told me that that used to be the very location of his *plataneras*, his plantain gardens. While my gaze had been focused on an unrestrained forest, Patiño was noticing the process through which his former swidden plots had disappeared at the hands of the *monte*, or to be more precise, through the advancement of branches, vines, lianas, foliage, and roots of the bush. Patiño's gesture made me realize that the existence of that exuberant forest was in fact favored by

the forced displacement brought about by armed conflict, bringing into focus the historical and social context of a landscape that I otherwise would have taken for granted. To put it in other terms, that particular forest stands to someone like Patiño in some negative way: it materializes the abandonment of villages, crops, animals, and livelihoods. Once Patiño showed me the traces of his former fields, I became aware of the trajectories a forest could take. Then, instead of seeing well-defined contours in the shape of forests, I started to attach to them other historical and social values. Under such premises, the romantic qualities I associated with what I had previously considered an overwhelming nature gained a different meaning.

Some forests might then be interpreted as places of abandonment, as the materialization of the violent process that led people to forsake their hamlets, houses, gardens and fields. In many cases, war just accentuated those other processes through which forests are constantly either disputing stewardship of the land or disrupting people's labor. What I mean by disputing is simply the effort people make in order to keep the forest at bay from their gardens and crops. What I describe as disruption is the subtle but constant task of maintaining houses, villages and trails; that is, of preserving them from the dominant process of forest regeneration. Let me explain.

During the conversations I held in Bajo Atrato about the effects provoked by forced displacement and confinement, one of the topics raised several times by my interlocutors was the loss of *caminos*, of trails or forest tracks. These trails had been opened in order to connect villages, to allow people to go to work in their gardens and fields, and to make it possible to enter the forest to access game and timber. I use the verb "to open" to describe the work of creating such trails not only because this is how people conceive of this task—*abrir caminos*—but also because it captures what this work entails in a place like a tropical rainforest, where the perpetual growing and quick sprouting of plants often obstruct said trails. To open trails is then to make the forest accessible to the circulation of people and their pack animals, it is to trace a thin line on the ground that allows people to traverse the thick growth of trees and shrubs. "To open a trail," someone explained to me, "is to give

warmth to the forest.” Trails actualize people’s presence in the forest, they render possible their transit among the other beings and forces that also move there. I interpret trails not as an attempt to occupy nor transform forests but as a request to safely move through them and let the warmth of people flow inside the coldness of the forest. A trail allows people to live next to and to travel across the forests. Trails are transitory and transit is part of keeping them alive: when people use trails, they are cutting the vines and removing the fallen trunks and branches that impede pas-

FIGURE 51.
A request on a bridge
Photo by author



sage. Without maintenance, trails will disappear. Trails, in short, are possible because of the transit of people; otherwise the forest would easily cover that tenuous line made of footsteps. The importance of actualizing or renewing what I consider a request to the forest is somehow captured in Figure 51.

Like trails, a bridge without transit is doomed to ruination. Though it still works as a bridge, allowing us to cross the creek, its surface looks more like a lot full of weeds than a piece of human engineering. The presence of these plants is indicative of the absence of people transiting and, therefore, maintaining those trails. Where does the bridge start and the weeds end? This is not just an aesthetic question since these plants are helping decompose the bridge's wood and rendering it dangerous to be crossed. In another setting, perhaps in Chinese or Japanese gardens, the aesthetics of the bridge would seem the masterpiece of a skillful gardener as it would synthesize the spontaneity, roughness, and rusticity Buddhist philosophy associates with nature. But here the presence of the plants, at least from the perspective of the people using the bridge, does not give life to the bridge but subtracts from it. The weeds in the wood epitomize decay and the abandonment of trails that war had already made impassable.

The resilience of plantain

Plantains are the quintessential staple in the diet of Bajo Atrato: roasted, fried, steamed or even dried; green or ripe; for breakfast, dinner, and supper. To have plantain is to have enough food. The opposite is somehow true: a meal without plantains lacks something, perhaps spirit. The presence of plantains in the local culinary arts is so pervasive that they have become a synonym for having a meal: if someone says she has eaten plantain, she means she had a meal. Similarly, a *platanera*, that is to say a plantain field, is a way of describing a crop garden, even if plantain is not the only planted crop. Just as to eat plantain is by antonomasia to have a meal, a *platanera* has come to mean a crop garden. Because in the process of clearing new land, plantains are used as pioneer crops, *plataneras* epitomize the

time and efforts required to transform patches of forests into crop gardens. Their semi-perennial nature means that once plantains have been established, a field may be productive for many years (Price 1995). Compared with other staples like maize or rice, plantains require little land preparation, care, and maintenance. This and the relatively high yields that might be obtained from a single harvest make of plantains one of the cheapest and most efficient food staples to produce (Ibid., 9).

FIGURE 52.
Plantain
Photo by author



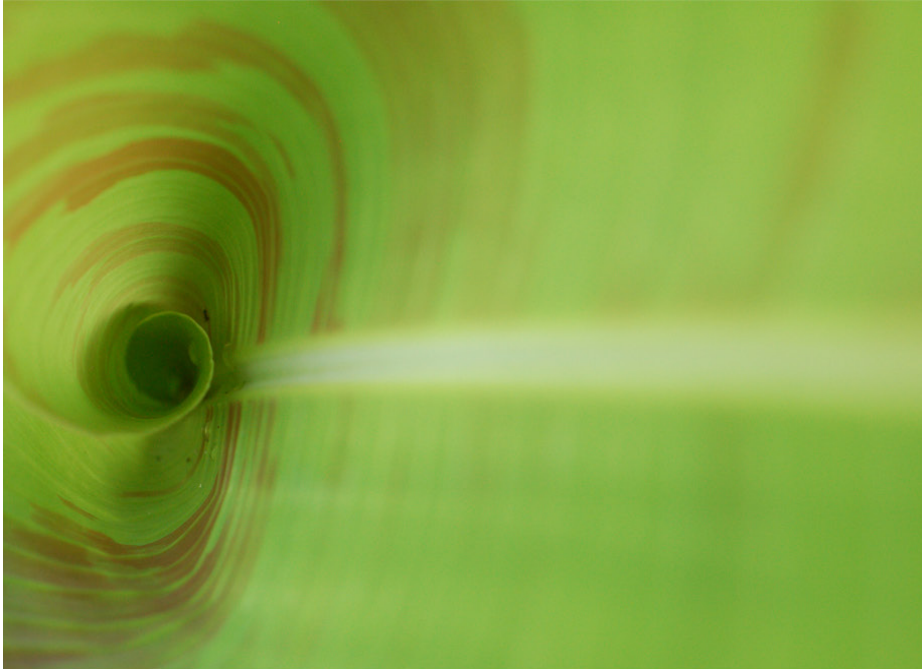


FIGURE 53.
The shapes of plantain
Photo by author



Plantain is not only the most important food source in Bajo Atrato; it also helps create and maintain a certain version of the territory. The existence of a village or a house is often signaled by the presence of a nearby *platanera*. Plantain fields determine different kinds of boundaries: between the lands of neighbors, between gardens and forests, between land that has been occupied and land that remains unworked. *Plataneras* make evident a certain sense of place too. If epistemologically to have a culture means, as suggested by Casey (1996), to inhabit a place sufficiently intensely to cultivate it, “to be responsible for it, to respond to it, to attend to it caringly” (Ibid., 34), then to plant plantain is one of the best ways communities in Bajo Atrato have found to take care of, and be responsible for, their territories. Let me explain. During the time communities spent away from their villages because of forced displacement, they often organized teams of workers in order to clean and maintain their abandoned *plataneras*. Even in the absence of people, plantain fields kept growing and producing, not as much as when they are appropriately maintained but enough to allow people both to have some food and to travel regularly between their native villages and the towns where they were confined. To put it differently, during the worst peaks of violence and displacement, plantains were the reason behind journeys that allowed people be in touch with their lands and villages, and in the process, make actual the existence of the territory.

Plataneras participate thus in the creation and maintenance of territory. This ability of plantains became evident to me during my first travels to Bajo Atrato. In 2003, when many communities in Riosucio were planning the progressive return to their lands in the Salaquí and Truandó basins, some humanitarian aid organizations offered tools and seeds, including plantain, to help communities recover their crops and food security. At that time, many villages were occupied by paramilitary armies but there were others to which people felt they could go back in security. These villages welcomed many families that could not return to their own territories but that were in an urgent need to work the land in order to overcome the precarious situation they were facing in Riosucio. The offer of plantain suckers was not very well-received by everybody, in particular by the families that were welcoming the

others that could not go back to their own villages. They feared that by allowing these families to sow plantain, they could later claim some kind of compensation for agricultural land amelioration. At the same time, some of the families that were being welcomed in villages that were not their own found it pointless to plant plantain in lands that were not their own. In both cases, the reluctance to accept the humanitarian aid in the form of suckers shows to what extent plantain is so important in the creation and maintenance of a sense of place and how *plataneras* are deeply constitutive of the practices of care of the territory.

Plantains are seedless. This means they do not reproduce sexually but propagate by vegetative means: new plants grow from corms, underground bulbs known as rhizomes and which are the plant's true stem. The rhizomes send out roots from multiple nodes and produces shoots that are in fact clonal plants. These clones or suckers might be considered baby plants; they grow at the bottom of each mature plant and are used to start new plantain plants (Price 1995). This form of reproduction means that *plataneras* might be in production for many years, the only necessary care being the removal of weeds—which in Bajo Atrato is seldom done through the use of herbicides. *Plataneras* only expire after a very long absence and their resilience is somehow captured in the following images.



FIGURE 54.
Platanera enmontada
Photo by author



FIGURE 55.
The resilience of plantain
Photo by author

These are some abandoned *plataneras* we found during a journey searching for some fine timber trees. They have not been adequately maintained as evidenced by the size of the trees and other herbs growing around them. And yet they are still productive. During this journey I remembered the stories I had heard about the state in which people found their villages once they arrived after their forced dis-

placement: looted houses, ruined buildings, lost trails, weedy gardens. But the *plataneras* were always there, more or less *enmontadas*, by which I mean, surrounded by the resprouting forests and yet still yielding. They eased the return of people to their territories but also, it must be said, during the absence of these communities they were an important source of food for the armies that occupied said territories. Plantain has made the prospect of returning home not only possible but even desirable in Bajo Atrato. Many times, I heard men expressing their willingness to going back to their abandoned villages because they wanted to recover their gardens and crops, which is but to take care of their *plataneras*. Unlike the growth of the plants that destroy bridges, erase forest trails, and make difficult human presence, the growth of *plataneras* attracts people and their warmth: the warmth of their stoves and houses, the fervor of their labor.

Witness Trees



FIGURE 56.
Witness trees
Photo by author

Trees respond to inflicted damages in an incredible way: they wall off the affected tissue. Agroforestry experts say that, at least technically, trees do not heal. Rather they seal (Clatterbuck 2011, Shigo 1985). Unlike many other living creatures that heal by repairing or replacing the damaged tissue, tree cells seal off the wound in an attempt to impede decay or the spread of disease. This process, known as compartmentalization of decay in trees (Shigo 1984), is how they respond to the impossibility of reinvigorating a wounded part of their bodies. Trees literally embrace the wound, they seize it eagerly and enclose it by building healthy tissue around it. This is exactly what these trees have done with the bullets lodged inside them.

The trees were heavily pocked from gunfire. The calluses in the trunks are the scars of past violent encounters between guerrilla and paramilitary armies. Each bullet provoked a wound that opened the tree up to bugs and decay. But tree cells halted the spread of damage by forming a strong tissue that encapsulated the bullets. And yet, the immediate surroundings of each embedded bullet are dead. But it is just that tiny zone encircling the metal that these iron pellets succeeded in killing. The bulgy forms emerging from the trunk are made of new layers of wood and bark. They bear witness to a story of military violence, death, and resilience, but also of coexistence of the living and the dead.

In land surveying, a witness tree is a tree used as a reference point to define a boundary. Witness trees is also the name given by some historians to trees that, because of their location, bore witness to key historical events. Often located on former battlefields, these trees are commemorated because they hide within their trunks the material traces of historical combats. In both cases, trees are considered witnesses because their presence establishes and bears out some kind of truth. American poet Robert Frost dedicated some verses to a “deeply wounded” beech that “has been impressed as Witness Tree and made commit to memory” (Frost 1942). But it is not just memory what is encapsulated in these *almendros* trees. I mean, they are not just wooden tenacious symbols of the past, instead they retain, expose, and even amplify the material traces of war. The ordnance embedded within these trees’



FIGURE 57.
Trees do not heal
but seal
Photo by author

bodies discharges some emotional effects of war: it retells tales of suffering and woe, it reminds us that armed violence can happen again. When the forms of trees emerge as a result of mortal encounters between enemies, perhaps some of that violence remains alive. I think that attention to these emergent forms may shed light on how the presence of military debris sustains a certain state of vulnerability and uncertainty. As noticed by other anthropologists documenting the material left behind after war, to people who live amidst the rubble and waste which remains af-

ter conflicts, these traces actualize distress and fear (Henig 2012) or even emit other forms of material melancholy (Navaro-Yashin 2009, 2012). Wartime does not cease because bullets are not ripping through the air anymore. Military waste, even in the form of exploded ordnance embedded in trees, is a constant reminder that even if armed confrontation has stopped, violence is a state of things not fully overcome: it is after all part of the material form of trees planted in the very front of the village.



FIGURE 58.
Scars
Photo by author

Quiebrapatas or the suspicion of their existence

If stories of military conflicts can remain preserved as rubble inside vegetal forms, the ground may hide war debris which is even more dangerous: land mines. These mines are illustratively called *quiebrapatas*, literally leg-breakers: the perfect name for an artifact designed to rip off toes, feet, and legs. *Quiebrapatas* are uncertain but potent presences due to the fact that no one knows for sure where they are, but the mere suspicion of their presence compels people to make decisions behind a veil of ignorance: facing the impossibility of asserting whether they are or are not in a particular place, it is better to assume their potential presence and to act accordingly, that is, to avoid spending time, transiting or working in suspected areas. This entails a negative transformation of places since the presumptive existence of mines ultimately restricts movement and land use (Unruh et al. 2003, Tucker 2004). But at the same time, such presumptions produce unintentional new environments: resprouting forests that might render places “safe for non-human flourishing” (Kim 2016, 173. See also Russell and Tucker 2004, Unruh et al. 2003). In this way, more than merely disrupting or degrading nature, war—and its material remnants—forces different relations between local communities and land resources (Unruh 2003, 845), becoming co-constitutive elements of the environment (Kim 2016, 182) or even, as Simo Laakkonen (2004) ironically puts it, “an ecological alternative to peace” (Ibid., 175).

In her article on mine fields in the Korean demilitarized zone, Eleana Kim (2016) suggests that the understanding of land mines can go beyond the humanitarian approaches that depict them as dangerous remnants of war threatening defenceless civilians, as well as beyond the postcolonial critiques that interpret them as imperial debris actualizing colonial forms of violence. Instead, she suggests that a relational ontological approach may be useful to understand how local communities deal with the presence of mines and how these artifacts, along with potential victims, partake in a kind of distributed agency. For example, land mines might be perceived as anti-humanitarian political agents, powerful weapons, useless waste

or military property. More importantly, by virtue of having a longer than average lifespan and being embedded in shifting ecologies that render their activation unpredictable, land mines often exceed “expected technological and political determinations” (Ibid., 166), while stubbornly retaining their long-term perilousness (Russell and Tucker 2004). Mines, in other words, may acquire a life of their own and often it is up to people living among them to decipher under what conditions will they or will they not explode. The unpredictability of mines, therefore, accentuates people’s vulnerability: mines take some agency from local communities because their presence forecloses the social, economic, affective, and even aesthetic possibilities afforded by forests (Kim 2016, 171).

The way this war debris—or the suspicion of its existence—becomes part of everyday life is somehow illustrated in the following image.

FIGURE 59.
Playing dominoes
after work
Photo by author



The poster dominating the wall behind the domino players is pedagogical material distributed by the Colombian Red Cross and it is a reminder of how the lives of these people are constantly vexed by danger and uncertainty (Henig 2012). The poster describes some basic measures to be taken in case one finds land mines or some kind of explosive remnants of war: to stop and remain still if one finds suspicious

material, to retrace one's footsteps to avoid the danger, to mark dangerous areas, and to inform authorities and warn other people. The poster also depicts the most commonly mined areas: places occupied by combatants; battle positions; any areas with abandoned or unexploded ordnance; bridges, dams, and surrounding areas; abandoned houses. Perhaps the size of this poster, when compared with the others hung on the wall, reflects how dangerous military waste can be. Perhaps it is not by chance that the torn poster next to it is about Decree 4635, the very law recognizing the rights of Afro-Colombian victims. The wall would then be a micro-version of the reality of Bajo Atrato as the threats against these communities are bigger than the measures implemented for protecting them.



FIGURE 60.
Quiebrapats and ordnance
Photo by author

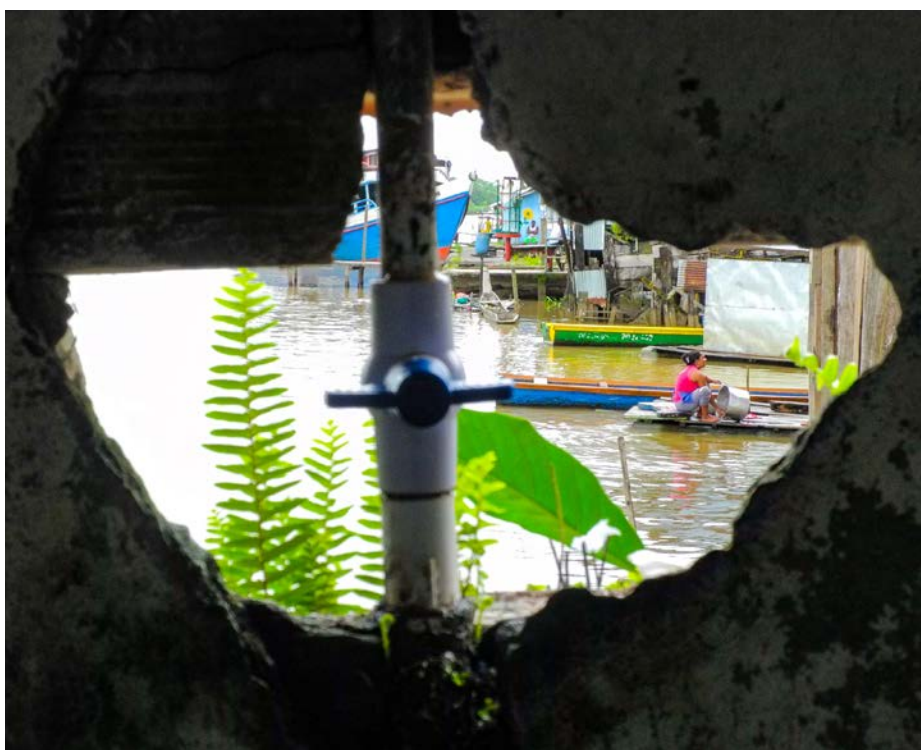
Chop-up houses

There is a place in Riosucio whose name has become associated with slaughter. During the cruelest years of paramilitary terror (1996-2003), it was a hostel named El Bacanal, The Bacchanalia. People informally called it el *deshuesadero*, the wrecking yard. According to the stories I heard, people captured by paramilitaries were tortured and dismembered in this place. The victims were chopped to pieces, put in

bags and dropped in the river. Sometimes, when performing their daily activities on the rafts, people came across different body parts, but they could not take these remains out of the water because paramilitaries had forbidden them to do so. Corpses drifting slowly in the lazy river: the dead were punished in their very death, as their decay became public and in the process the public learned that they had been acted upon, in what ways and by whom.

A paramilitary wrecking yard: a place to systematically remove and dismember people with total impunity. In Spanish the word *deshuesadero* is literally a place to debone, to pit, to remove or to dismantle. Even more creepy was its original name: The Bacchanalia. A name that refers to those Dionysiac festivals often depicted as drunken and uninhibited revelries. What a terribly appropriate name to describe the events that took place there! After all, what else is a massacre but an orgy of excess? Feasts and violent death are more closely related than one usually thinks. Colombian philosopher Estanislao Zuleta (1999) described war as a collective drunkenness: “A feast to reaffirm oneself without shadows and without doubts against the wicked enemy.” (Ibid., 2) He called such an inebriated state the happiness of war: a

FIGURE 61.
The washroom in
el deshuesadero
Photo by author



happiness that reverberates all existent differences and oppositions, leading to the sublimation of one's fear and internal conflict in order to reduce opponents to the figure of the enemy as an Absolute Other.

That hostel was a place of unspeakable terror, a place where absolute power and absolute impotence met (CNMH 2009). Bystanders and neighbours could hear victims screaming and pleading for mercy as they were chopped up alive with chainsaws. It is said that even today, some nights, one can hear the gloomy wails of those who were murdered there. Today it still functions as a hostel, the cheapest one in town. It has new owners and a new name. It is mainly frequented by peasants coming from the rural areas and who have no acquaintances capable of lodging them while staying in Riosucio.

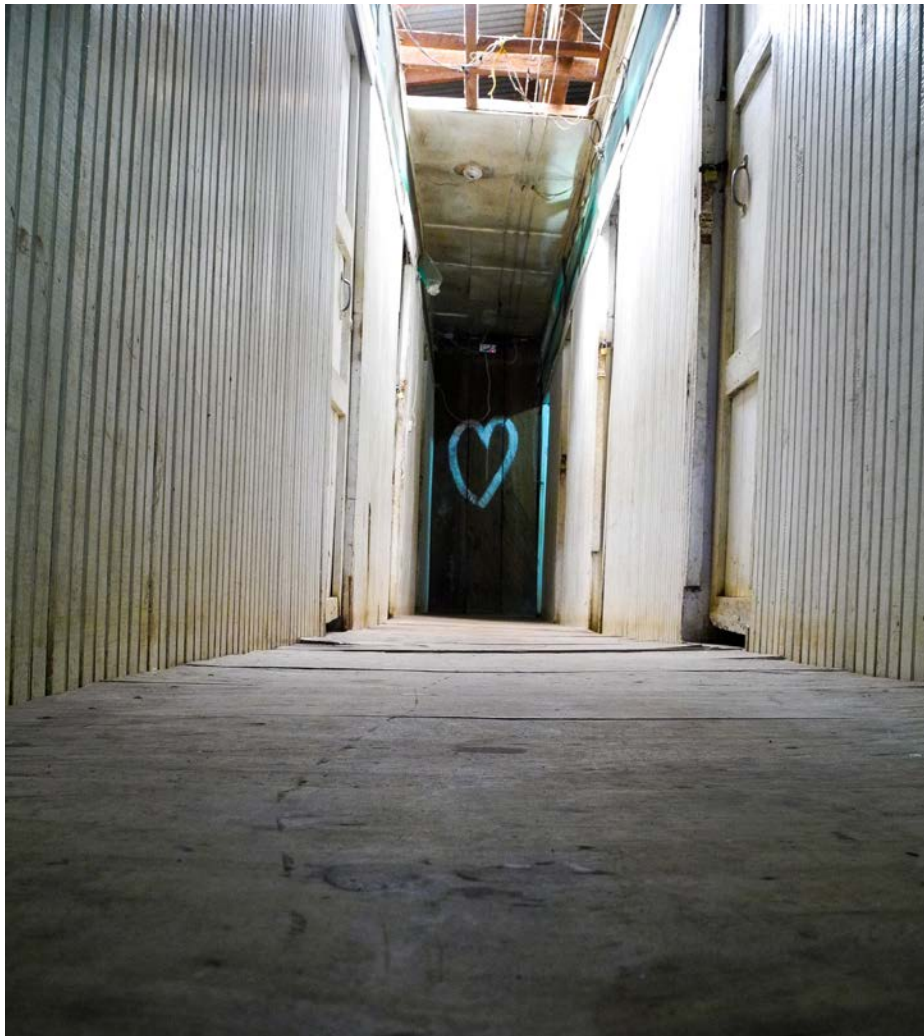


FIGURE 62.
Former El Bacanal
Photo by author

After too much reflection and a lot of advice not to do so, I took my courage in hand and I spent one night there, allowing my heart and guts to feel the place, to be affected by it. I was assigned to a windowless room in the middle of a narrow corridor. There, as I did when visiting abandoned hamlets, graveyards, and ruins during my fieldwork, I tried to let the place “intrude” me, to “bestow” its sense. Fortunately, that night my body was not attuned enough and besides the dirty walls covered with the blood stains left by crushed mosquitoes, I did not feel any hint of the death that, according to some witnesses, still pullulates that place.

FIGURE 63.
My room in El Bacanal
Drawn by author





FIGURE 64.
A river or a grave?
Drawn by author

A river or a grave?

“And death shall have no dominion
Under the windings of the river
They lying long shall not die windily”
Dylan Thomas. And death shall have no dominion

Pavarandó



FIGURE 65.
Displaced people
in Pavarandó
Photo by
Jesus Abad Colorado

Pavarandó, Urabá. 1997

March 30, 1997. "Four women gave birth in the inhospitable jungle of Chocó, while a group of 2000 peasants were fleeing from the clash of subversion members and the Army in several rural settlements of Riosucio Municipality. However, given the poor sanitary conditions of their care, two of the newborn died and the other two are in critical condition." (El Espectador, p. 11A)

"People keep fleeing from Chocó. Another 2000 displaced people arrived. The refugees walked for a month until they reached Paravandó [...] This peasant population includes 600 children and 30 pregnant women." (El Mundo, p. 9)

"There would be another group of about 1500 peasants missing in the jungle, as stated by a displaced person before the local authorities." (El Colombiano, p. 10A)

March 31, 1997. "At least eight children have died due to physical exhaustion, malnutrition or unpotable water consumption, and some adults remain ill, after the grueling several-weeks journey of people displaced by violence in Urabá, Chocó [...] Chocó's Governor, Franklin Mosquera, recognized that the breach of peace in Riosucio is 'quite delicate' since even the number of victims from armed clashes is still unknown. However, Mr. Mosquera clarified that, according to reports, dozens of corpses float down the Atrato river, but they have not determined yet whether they are victims of violence or people who drowned in the rush to flee [...] Seminarian Jorge Gómez affirmed that he talked to a lady with four children and she stated one of her children got lost during the journey, eight other minors had died along the way and a woman died after giving birth." (El Espectador, p. 6A)

"Sucking her mother's dark-skinned breasts, Yuber Perea crossed the bridge over Paravandó River yesterday at noon. There he travelled the last 100 meters of a journey through rivers and narrow paths of Urabá, Chocó; he left with his parents when he was 7 months old. He is eight-months old now. His mother, unconcerned about the baby's pressure on her breast to suck the last drops of milk, crossed the bridge that in an instant led her from Urabá, Chocó to Urabá, Antioquia (...) Colonel Rómulo Mosquera from the 17th Army Brigade had counted 2228 people at 9 a.m., 1291 were children. However, several welly boots were heard marching over the bridge after 9, announcing the arrival of new farmers holding barefoot children on their shoulders." (El Tiempo, p. 12A)

April 4, 1997. "More displaced people continue arriving [...] Despite the promises of no more bombings in Chocó rural settlements made to displaced people by generals Iván Ramírez and Rito Alejo del Río –top military authorities of the Urabá Army– farmers continue to flee [...] Another group of 700 uprooted people, mostly children and women, expect to join tonight the 3000 displaced people huddled together in Paravandó [...] They are farmers who started their journey in the first week of March and arrived in a rural settlement 12 hours on foot from Paravandó yesterday [...] 'They were coming with us, we arrived on Tuesday, but they were not on time because the path is hard and challenging for old people, and two of them are blind. The first people to arrive to Paravandó got a lift by trucks in some sections, but the last have experienced more hardships; our bodies have a hard time to keep on going as our clothes seem to be heavier every time.' Said Luz Marina, mother of three children, who stated to be living her worst nightmare." (El Espectador, p. 9A).

April 6, 1997. "The day bombs fell from the sky [...] Moisés Perea has a leader's spirit, but unlike the Biblical patriarch, he has no staff to lead the uprooted people from 30 rural settlements of Rio-sucio into the promised land. Like his displaced companions, this shiny, dark-skinned, very tall man with fire in his eyes and his back burnt by the sun, dared walking 40 days through the wilderness of jungles and cross the water of Atrato and Truandó Rivers to save his life, his wife's life and his 11 children. This time the God of Israel did not speak leading them through the exodus, nor even were promises of a new land full of fruits made [...] Under 35 centigrade, families of up to 20 people crammed into small improvised shelters made with black plastic and sticks, as they waited the day to end after a journey full of uncertainty and hunger." (El Espectador, p. 6A)

April 19, 1997. "The arrival of 700 new people displaced by violence from Chocó yesterday and the expectation of 1600 more people turned Paravandó into an actual refugee camp full of misery and malnutrition [...] According to reports made by speakers of the Local Healthcare Head Office's Air Program (Programa Aéreo de la Dirección Seccional de Salud -PAS), the greatest concern is that both people who look after displaced people and displaced people themselves are suffering from hunger. They warned that nearly 6000 displaced people have survived since Wednesday with two tons of bananas sent by the Red Cross. Children are naked and there is no healthcare staff to address this emergency." (El Espectador, p. 11A)



FIGURE 66.
Showing the photo
to the protagonists
Photo by author

La Negra

“We had been in Paravandó for three days when that picture was taken. We arrived on Good Friday and the first person who bumped into us was that journalist. I don’t recall the date, but I know it was on Sunday. I remember because Pérez was shattered. He wanted to leave and work at a farm, harvesting plantain. Tocayita and I were advising him not to go because anybody going to that farm would be caught and killed. Pérez was upset we wouldn’t let him go.

Our bed used to be laid there, where you see us sitting, on the stones. We had to sleep on top of each other. We used to pick up our stuff during the day and family members would sleep on top of one another at night. Sleeping on stones is very uncomfortable. I used to hang around by day, but then night time came! The back-pain next morning was killing me. Being displaced is very hard. There are plenty of hardships. I’d never wish displacement on anyone.

We left our houses thinking it was for a couple of days. We left with two blankets and two changes of clothes each. And the mosquito net. That was everything we carried. We didn't even pack any *chocoros* (housewares). Each one carried a container with some lunch. Tocayita had some *envueltos* (cornmeal wrapped in plantain leaves) and chicken. We had roast chicken, smoked chicken and chicken soup. We took them because they said we were travelling far away. I told Tocayita 'I don't eat chicken, but you have just given birth, you need to eat. So, have your lunch ready.' She made her lunch with some coconut rice. We didn't take anything else with us. The rest was all lost. I don't want to be a displaced person ever again.

The Army has been with us ever since we got to Paravandó. We had to ask for permission to leave, they had some lists and we had to sign some papers the day we left. They took care of us for a while. There was a colonel called Mosquera; he was from Chocó. This guy would never sleep, he was always walking around and visiting the improvised shelters. He used to call the roll at 12 noon, always asking around whether everybody was there and whether everybody was OK.

The hardest part was having no *liga* (meat). If no cattle were killed there would be no meat. Humanitarian aid institutions gave us lentils, beans, peas. During our 11 months there, humanitarian institutions gave us lentils. I hate lentils, but that was the only thing available. They brought big trucks full of plantain. Pregnant women were given milk, sugar and *panela*. For better or worse, we always had something to eat, we could not complain. But there was no meat.

People from Paravandó were pretty nice to us. Some families made room at their houses to host some of the newcomers. They were initially astonished by the number of people, but they didn't frown on us.

After 11 months in Paravandó, we went back to Domingodó. We had to stay in a town for a while, before going back to La Madre. But people used to travel from La Madre to Domingodó for plantain to distribute. People travelling with us said we had to go back to our communities, since the wilderness was quickly advancing, I

mean, it does grow up fast when people are not there to clean it constantly. We and a bunch of families then left to La Madre to work. We sowed rice, sugar cane, and resowed *colinos* (plantain suckers). *Plataneras* were running out. That was our job until 2002, when we were displaced again. This time we left to Montaña. The paramilitary forces arrived in La Madre. They hurt no one because there was no one left, but they destroyed everything in their way.

We found our housewares completely broken and useless. The things they didn't damage rotted away. The houses disappeared, fell apart. Only two houses were standing. The cold of wilderness tears them down. When you keep things clean and operational, they last. But when you abandon them, animals like frogs, snakes, etc. go inside, and the moisture slowly wears them out."

FIGURE 67.
La Negra
Photo by author



A song dedicated to Pavarandó

Les voy a contar una historia, esta se las digo yo.
Ay! Yo salí desplazada del río Domingodó.
De noche sale la luna, de día sale el sol,
nos sentimos agotados de comer yuca y frijol.
Los médicos que nos Mandan, ya no tienen qué mandar,
nos manda ampicilina y que beban suero oral.
Para ellos los enfermos tienen todos el mismo mal,
esa bendita ampicilina ¿a quién diablos va a curar?

Please allow me to tell a story.
Oh! I was displaced from Domingodó river.
The moon came at night, the sun during the day,
we were fed up with yucca and beans.
The doctors they sent had nothing to prescribe,
they prescribed ampicillin and some oral saline solution.
They say sick people suffer from the same illness,
but who will ever be cured by god damn ampicillin?

A place that furnished a ground for an experience of uprootedness

A place, a big deal of phenomenological literature has taught us, is more than a location or position in space. It is more than a taken-for-granted area occupied by an assemblage of things. “Places,” says philosopher Edward Casey, “not only are, they happen” (1996, 27), which means that more than being one definitive set of physical, symbolic or social attributes, places are characterized by openness and dynamism. When considered events, places might be seen as favoring particular experiences “with some measure of groundedness (however, unstable), sense of boundaries (however, permeable), and connection to everyday life” (Escobar 2001, 140). By virtue of being occurrences, places generate and organize memories, beliefs, actions, and practices in a topological manner, that is, in terms of specific localities (Malpas 1999). What I am claiming is more than an awareness of

the historical, social, and cultural construction of place. Rather, I am attempting to characterize places as existential and not just contingent forces: they orchestrate sense, provide a horizon of meaningful encounters, and participate in our experience in the world (Hirsch 1995; Lefebvre 1991; Tilley 1994, 2006). Places, in other words, gather things, thoughts, and memories in particular configurations (Escobar 2001). Casey calls this configurative trait the “hold of place” (Ibid., 25), meaning the ordering and gathering actions that underpin not only epistemological possibilities—the ways one knows the world—but ontological ones—the very possibilities of expressing the interrelation between self and world, between self and other (Malpas 1999). The eventfulness of place is then a sort of holding force through which selves, bodies, time, and space become interwoven. Pavarandó offers an opportunity for exploring these ideas.

Despite my long-term relation with the people of Bajo Atrato and my familiarity with the history of the region, I was never in Pavarandó. It was a place constantly referred to in both the narrative built by local grassroots organizations and the personal accounts of many of the people I met. Pavarandó was a trope used to evoke, on one hand, an experience of suffering and uprootedness derived from violence but also, on the other hand, a sense of collective engagement and political awareness: it was from the experience of forced displacement that communities configured their philosophy of defending their right to life and to live in their territories. Pavarandó, to paraphrase anthropologist Carlos Castaneda (1972), was a place that allowed people to balance the terror of being humans with the wonder of being humans: people arrived fleeing a terrible violence but they left with a deep sense of political commitment. Even before I set my foot in Bajo Atrato, in my imagination Pavarandó had already reached a sort of mythical status: it stood as one of those symbolically significant places that embody and are able to tap into the collective values, qualities, emotions, memories, and beliefs of people. I knew I had to visit that place and I decided to go in the company of people who, back in 1997, found themselves living there in an unknown land.

I went with Gonzalo and Rafael, two men now in their early sixties who had arrived in Pavarandó after leaving everything behind in order to protect their lives and the lives of their families. They stayed almost a year but they had not been there in nineteen years, since the time the communities organized the collective return to their lands. They accepted my invitation because they wanted, as each of them later put it, “to know again” that place. I found their words conveyed a sense of wonder that made of our journey not a kind of return to a familiar location but an act of “recognizing once again” a place that, nevertheless, was deeply embedded in their personal lives. To “know again” Pavarandó also conveyed the eventfulness of places: as they happen by virtue of the relationships that make up them, to go back is always an openness to know them again. From a methodological point of view, our journey might be described as an ethnographic ‘go-along’ interview: an in-depth qualitative interview conducted while people move through, and interact with, their physical and social settings (Kusenbach 2003). Besides allowing us to explore some memories grounded in place, this walk-along interview was the best way to let my body “walk through” my friends’ lived experiences of place (Carpiano 2009, 264).

Neither the place nor my friends were the same as they were in 1997. And that was one of things that struck Gonzalo and Rafael the most: the big trees under which they had previously found shelter were no longer there; the police station to which we were driven upon our arrival had not existed in 1997; the bridge over the Pavarandó River was broadened; several new houses were now erected on both sides of the main street. They barely recognized the materiality of the place and they did not find any of the local faces they had met in 1997. And yet, despite this strangeness they knew that it was a familiar place because, as Rafael put it, “No matter how different the town looks now, one knows we were here because of the nostalgia one feels. I think that when I tell the others what we have found, no one will believe it.” They also emphasized how different our travel conditions were from what they had experienced on their former trip to Pavarandó: “Today we arrived by car, we traveled relaxed. We didn’t arrive in fear. But when I think about how we arrived back in 1997, I feel something.” Gonzalo and Rafael’s comments seem to indicate that

the “knowing again” in which we were engaged was in essence an emotional act, or better, that the knowing of places involves affective ways of knowledge.

The violence that had compelled them to leave their homes had made of Pavarandó a place of refuge. At one point, while we were seated in a small restaurant drinking beer and eating some snacks, Rafael told me he never imagined being in Pavarandó under such nice conditions. Gonzalo agreed and added that for him it was hard to reconcile his memories of this place with what we were doing at that moment: “Could this be the same place? It has a new atmosphere, one does not feel any sort of rebuff anymore.” I realized to what extent an activity as apparently banal as being served beer and food on a counter stood at the antipode of what they had previously experienced. During our stay in Pavarandó, I nevertheless bore witness to instances in which the place displayed its own “gathering power” (Casey 1996, 46) and how it triggered some emotions and interpretations that my friends usually kept to themselves. For example, while we walked through the streets that were formerly the camps where they had built their plastic shacks, Gonzalo and Rafael started to count how many people had been killed during the more than eleven months they spent there. Rafael even told me, for the very first time, about the killing of his elder son. Despite our closeness and the many years of friendship we have cultivated, I heard stories they had never told me before. But during the days of our visit the materiality of memory became evident; it was as if the streets of Pavarandó released those memories. In a sense that was not merely metaphorical, the town was holding these memories within its contours, as if waiting for our presence in order to emerge. During our visit, I started to wonder how much of those memories belonged to my friends and how much to the town itself.

This is in fact one of the concerns of phenomenologically-minded anthropologists: the way places both participate in and contribute to our experiences, which leads us to consider the distinctions between subjective and objective aspects of reality or between what is of the mind and what is of the world (Desjarlais and Throop 2011, 89). In dealing with places, phenomenology aims to understand how the

places we inhabit shape the existential organization of relations between people and things. Let us consider, for example, the way our minds are often overrun with memories when we revisit some places. As my friends wandered through the town, memories of past events overtook them. Memories are of course cognitive and embodied processes, but from a phenomenological point of view, it is not merely that our consciousness stores information from the outside world. Instead it is that our consciousness, along with our bodies and the places we inhabit, participates in an intricate and enmeshed manner in the generation of meaning and the real. Thus, it is not just that Pavarandó became a mnemonic means for recalling past events or that the streets triggered their personal histories; rather, the place holds these memories for them: it held them and then it released them as these memories become alive only as a result of their presence there. If indeed it is by means of our emplaced experience that memories emerge, how much of our memories come from inside us and how much are really embedded in those places?

During our walk-alongs I also realized to what extent Gonzalo, Rafael, and I were inhabiting different places, even if we were walking together through the very same streets. The Pavarandó I was seeing was overlooked by them: they were seeing an uncomfortable spot to sleep and cook where I only saw dusty ground; they were seeing people organizing their shacks in neighbourhoods where I only found the playground of a school. The here and now of our shared walking was anchored in very different historical trajectories. What appeared to me as a milking shed, a store or a manioc field was designated by them in terms of what is no more. Those landmarks evoked not only their biographies but also possibilities of being-in-place that were absolutely closed to me. To them, these places were somehow filled with the presences of burdensome absences.

Besides providing access to the intimate connection between place and the life histories of my friends, our journey shed light on the meaning assigned by some *bajoatrateño* people not only to Pavarandó but to their territory as well. Following Gordillo (2001; 2004), my underlying premise is that the spatialization of identity

and memory has contributed, to some extent, to the production of Bajo Atrato as a place of life, and more concretely to the definition of this region as an ethnic territory: it has been in tension with other places like Pavarandó how, in part, the notion of territory has emerged. In opposition to Pavarandó and the dispossession and precariousness this town brought into being, Bajo Atrato emerged as the place where autonomy, livelihood, culture, and healing were possible. This negative dialectic has been constitutive of practices of memory but has also guided the political struggles *bajoatrateño* communities undertake (Gordillo 2004, 253). In this way, the eventfulness of Pavarandó is revealed: it is where people found refuge and also the sum of violent circumstances that compelled them to arrive there; it was where they experienced great uprootedness and deep estrangement but also where they successfully mobilized their collective identities and their own sociopolitical institutions in order to set the conditions for the return to their lands.

Tocayita

Tocayita has the same name as her mother, the same she passed down to the daughter she breastfeeds in the black and white photo (Figures 65 and 68). The baby was nine days old when they left La Madre and undertook the four-week march to Pavarandó. Tocayita had to spend her *dieta*, that is, her postpartum period, traveling. That provoked in her a sort of disorder she has not fully overcome and that actually gets worse during some phases of the moon. “I was on my *dieta*,” she told me, “and I had to walk for a very long time. After that and to this day, I have not been able to work and help my family.” According to her family and friends, Tocayita is not right in the head because she did not get appropriate care during the postnatal period. Proper care in Bajo Atrato means to rest; to have meals at the right time in order to not let the womb accumulate air; to avoid sereno, the cold air of the mornings and evenings; and to not make any kind of physical efforts including laundry, carrying water, lifting heavy stuff, and even walking. But during the exodus, none of this was possible for Tocayita. Her condition is described as a *desmande*: “Ella se desmandó”, which might be roughly translated as “she overstepped her bounds”.

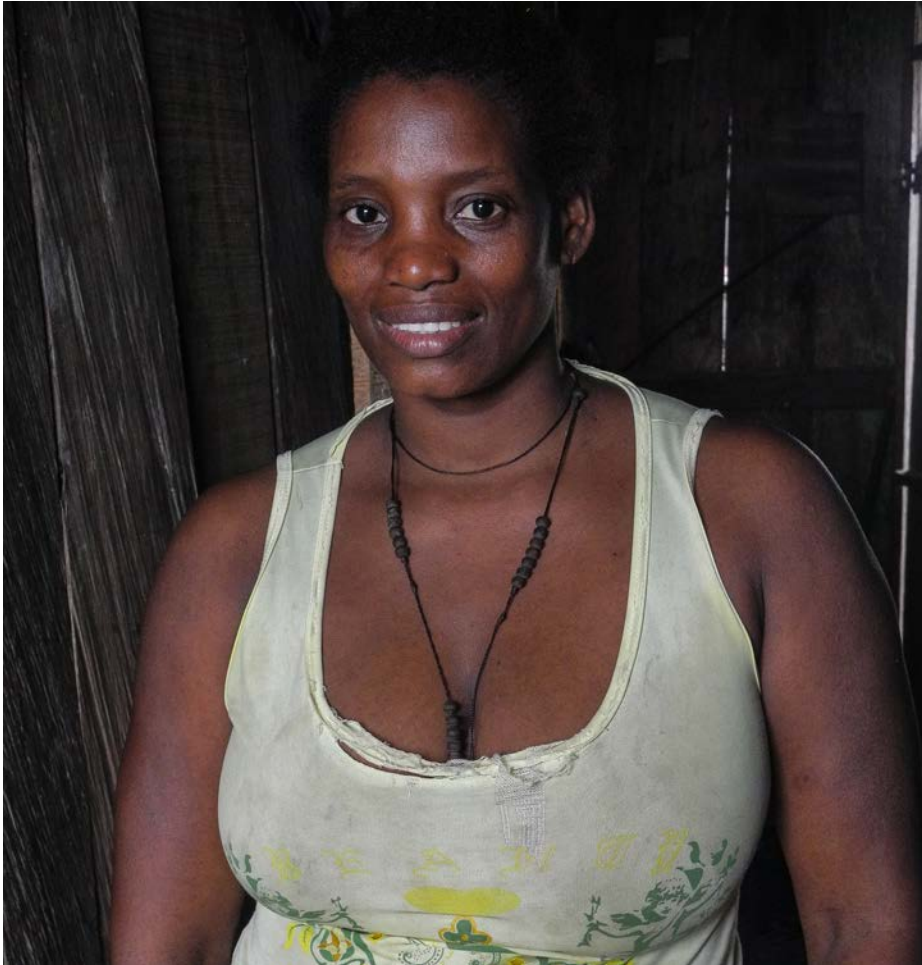


FIGURE 68.
Tocayita
Photo by author



The Spanish verb *desmandar* has indeed different meanings: it means to overstep but also to countermand. It also means to draw away from companionship, or to make a mess of oneself. In some sense, all this happened to Tocayita during the time she stayed in Pavarandó. She *se desmandó* because she had to exceed the efforts a new mother needs to make; the displacement itself was a situation that overstepped or pulled everyone too far beyond their limits but that in her case made her lose some of her judgment and emotional self-control; and the loss of her good

sense drew her away from her kin. A *comadre* of Tocayita told me that in Pavarandó she used to scream suddenly in fear and to run away from some unknown presence that was supposedly after her. According to La Negra, her mother, Tocayita's condition could not be revoked or treated because she could not find the traditional plants they use to treat these cases. Lack of adequate treatment along with the overwhelming fear and uncertainty experienced during the time of forced displacement rendered Tocayita mentally unwell.

Tocayita lives now in Riosucio. I showed her the photo of Pavarandó. She barely recognized herself. She explained that she was 22 when Pavarandó happened. At that time, she used to live in Bogotá, where she worked in a kindergarten as a cook. "Sometimes," she explained, "I took care of the children too. The people of the kindergarten trusted me because I was so obedient." During the holidays of 1996, she went back to La Madre to pay a visit to her family. She remembered she arrived with a bag full of new clothing for everyone. Then she met Pérez, the man in the photo sitting beside La Negra, and she decided to stay a little bit longer. But war arrived and she could never leave Chocó again. She remembered that during the days previous to the displacement they heard the sound produced by *la marrana*, a military aircraft used by the Colombian army in their counterinsurgency operations. This aircraft can fly very slowly and to low altitudes, and its sound, described by Tocayita as the buzz of a giant mosquito, scared everyone.

She explained they had a very hard time in Pavarandó since they were often starving: "The government gave us food, but it was not enough. All we ate was manioc and rice." I asked her about her daughters and she explained that thanks to God they did not get sick, that what they really lacked was clothing. Then she wept about that bag full of clothing they had had to leave in La Madre. She told me she could not tell me a lot about Pavarandó because given the fact she was in her postpartum period, people avoided telling her everything that was going on in order to not provoke her fear and render her unwell. Tocayita is now a single mother of seven. Her oldest daughter, the one who appears sleeping on the ground in the photo, lives in

Bogotá. She works as a housemaid and belongs to an Evangelical church. Tocayita is very proud of her because unlike herself, she has not let herself get pregnant by irresponsible men. Tocayita's youngest son is two years old. He was born with a shortened arm. La Negra says that the boy was actually born dead because after the delivery he did not breath for almost one hour. It was Isabelina, Tocayita's grandmother and a very respected traditional midwife, who helped the baby come to life. Isabelina assisted Tocayita in the delivery of her other babies, including La Gorda, the baby being breastfed in the photo. Because of her condition, Tocayita only lives with her two younger children. La Negra and Isabelina are raising the other three, just as they did with La Gorda.

La Gorda



FIGURE 69.
La Gorda4
Photo by author



I met La Gorda in 2006 in La Madre. At that time the village was inhabited by three families only: seven adults—most of them in their late fiftie—and four kids. These people were the first to permanently return to La Madre after the second forced displacement that took place in 2002. La Gorda lived with La Negra, her grandmother, and with Isabelina, her great grandmother. Like the other two families, they were cultivating corn and rice, taking care of the *plataneras*, raising some poultry, and trying to rebuild their houses and their village. Despite her young age, La Gorda skilfully performed every task assigned by the other women: husking rice with a wooden beater, eviscerating and cleaning fish, feeding chickens, taking care of the gardens, collecting maize and plantains, splitting firewood, cooking, doing laundry. Her presence, like the presence of the other kids, proved to be essential in the great task of rebuilding La Madre. They not only worked shoulder to shoulder with the adults, they also performed crucial tasks like *pajarear*, that is, to keep guard on the corn and rice fields in order to prevent birds from landing. Besides being a sort of custodian of these crops, La Gorda was learning a big deal about healing and plants as she also had to help her great grandmother take care of the incredible garden full of all kinds of medicinal herbs that she kept.

Isabelina and the other elders were very proud of what they had accomplished since they returned to La Madre. They had cleaned the village and snatched it back from the forest, they had retrieved the *plataneras* and planted new crops. Now that they had enough food, they could motivate other families to return. To show me how well they were doing, Isabelina asked the kids to take me to the forest in order to collect some breadfruits, a nut that, once cooked, tastes like freshly baked bread. She told me that on our way to the breadfruit trees, we could take a look at the gardens and the crops and bring some fresh corncoobs. We went and it was then when I took this photo.



FIGURE 70.
Renacientes
Photo by author

Yoncito, Murillito, El Cholo, and La Gorda. They were the perfect example of the *renacientes*: new generations being immersed in the ethics, aesthetics and arts of life in Bajo Atrato, youths taking over from the elders the task of making life resprout, *renacer*—the task of rebirth. With the corn we brought, Isabelina prepared the meal I took for my trip the next day. She prepared some steamed rolls wrapped in corn husks that she called *cojoca*. She gave me two and told me that these cakes were a kind of ‘way bread’, a special travel-food that in the old times parents gave to their sons when the sons decided to leave home in order to travel the world.

Ten years later, when I paid a visit to Isabelina and La Negra, I met La Gorda again. She was not a child anymore. This time the three of them were living together in the town of Domingodó rather than in La Madre. La Gorda had had two children. Like her mother, she lived in a big city: Cali. It was there that she finished school, but she did want to pursue her studies and decided to go back home. Then she met the father of her children. And just like her mother, and her grandmother, and her great grandmother, she was a single mother. When I showed her the photo of Pavarandó, she recognized her kin but not herself. La Negra told her that she was the little baby. Surprised, La Gorda called her elder son and showed him the photo: “This is your mom when I was littler than you.” She kept looking at the photo, trying to recognize

the people gathered around her mother and her sister. She then asked why everybody looked so needy. It was a rhetorical question rather than one demanding a straightforward answer because La Gorda, like most of the youths that came to see the photos I brought, had heard the stories of Pavarandó. But knowing through the act of listening and witnessing through the act of looking, even at a photo, are quite different experiences.

The question revealed a gap between the experiences and memories of La Gorda and those of her mother, her grandmother, and her great grandmother. The question pointed to what Cora Diamond (2008) calls “the difficulty of reality”, that is, the experience of “the mind’s not being able to encompass something which it encounters”, the experiences in which “we take something in reality to be resistant to our thinking it” (Ibid., 44-45). In this case, that difficulty lies, on one hand, in the astonishment the photo gives rise to, in the difficulty La Gorda has in reconciling what she thought she knew about Pavarandó with what she was now seeing: the remarkable vulnerability and impotence of her kin. While the photo works for La Negra as a vehicle that energizes memory, for La Gorda it is just a representation, an artifact deprived of that original context of production that led her grandmother, in the first place, to elaborate her own memories—and to include La Gorda in these memories in manners she was not previously aware of. On the other hand, that difficulty of reality is related to the differential effects the image provokes for witnesses and survivors and for their children and grandchildren, who try to wrap their own minds around, and attune their own bodies with, the actual memories of their families. This differentiated response of the second generation to the memory and trauma of the first is called “postmemory” by Marianne Hirsch (2001): a term that is meant “to convey its temporal and qualitative difference from survivor memory, its secondary, or second-generation memory quality, its basis in displacement, its vicariousness and belatedness.” (Ibid., 9)

Working with images of World War II and with the descendants of survivors of the Shoah, Hirsch argues that some emblematic photos are so powerful and monu-

mental that they become, to the children of survivors, memories in their own right: “Postmemory thus would be retrospective witnessing by adoption. It is a question of adopting the traumatic experiences—and thus also the memories—of others as experiences one might oneself have had, and of inscribing them into one’s own life story.” (Ibid., 10. *Italics in the original*) I cannot, however, argue that La Gorda and her contemporaries identify themselves with the public images of forced displacement, among other things because they were not familiarized with the images that circulated in the newspapers. Instead there were multiple reactions of strangeness towards these photos: some compared the scenes they were looking at with images they had seen of poverty and violence in Africa; others made jokes about how good-looking some of the women portrayed were and how much more uncomely they look now; others commented that people simply looked very indigent. In any case, the youths felt they were bearing witness to events either located elsewhere or in a very distant past. And yet as a concept, postmemory helps capture the nuanced engagements of different generations with past events of suffering and trauma, the gaps a photo might create between its connection with personal experiences, on one hand, and as an artifact mediating in the representation and appropriation of history, on the other.



FIGURE 71.
Postmemory?
Photo by author

I associate the reactions of the youths not necessarily with a kind of ignorance or lack of sensibility towards the recent local history. After all, young people like La Gorda have also experienced Pavarandó through the effects this place provoked in others like her own mother. Rather, the responses of youths are a result of what I have described as the difficulty of reconciling the stories these new generations have heard about Pavarandó with the actual evidence, no matter how intangible, of such events. Even if La Gorda and probably some of the other youths looking at the photos were some of the naked, malnourished babies described in 1997 by the press, the events of Pavarandó stand beyond their own experiences, by which I mean that the events are part of the collective memory but not of their personal history. While for them the forced displacement is just an event reactualized through the elders' stories, to people like Tocayita, La Negra or Isabelina, Pavarandó is a very tangible event: one that changed their lives forever and that continues inhabiting their memories and their bodies. One thing, I suspect, is true for both elders and *renacientes*: Pavarandó has reached a mythical status in the sense that the experience in that place has become a vehicle through which communities have found a new sense of collective identity. Pavarandó, like any foundational myth, has had the power of giving value, direction, and purpose to many of the collective endeavors communities currently undertake. Pavarandó allowed Afro-Colombian rural communities fighting for their right to live their unique lives in their ancestral territories to find their place in the political arena. Pavarandó is thus a reminder of suffering and dispossession, but also of the noble efforts undertaken for the sake of those who went through such an experience of uprootedness in order to stand up and avoid the recurrence of forced displacement in the future. And that is something the *renacientes* should not forget.

Between 1985 and 2012 there were

1,982

**massacres
committed in Colombia.**

60,630

**people have been victims of
enforced disappearance.
More than**

220,000

**Colombians
have lost their lives.**

**81% were
civilians.**

National Centre for Historical Memory

Between 1985 and 2012 there were
massacres
committed in Colombia.
60,659

"These are numbers that numb the mind. We have only one death of our own: we can comprehend the deaths of others only one at a time: in the abstract we may be able to count to a million, but we cannot count to a million deaths."

J.M. Coetzee.
The lives of animals

1,000
Colombian
has lost her life since.

81% of civilians
were victims of

National Centre for Historical Memory

292,000

3,820

CONCLUSION

I first met Lewis in 2003. At the time, I worked with a human rights organization and was on my way to a hamlet located in the Curvaradó basin, where communities were organizing a regional meeting to discuss political strategies for restraining the effects of armed conflict. We stopped at Carmen del Darién to announce to the local youth committee that we would be holding a meeting with them in the coming days. The committee was in the middle of a rehearsal, preparing their traditional dances for the coming festivities. Lewis was playing drums, leading the band while several youths danced around them. When we arrived, the music and the dance livened up. This was how they welcomed us. I was amazed by the rhythm and the swing of those sweaty bodies. When they finished, I was introduced to Lewis and shook the calluses and blisters of a proficient drummer and a hardworking fisherman. He was the leader of the youth committee, a role he had assumed shortly after one of his elder brothers was forcibly disappeared by the paramilitaries in 2000. That was not the first loved one that Lewis' family had lost because of war. Unfortunately, it was not to be the last one either. Some time before the disappearance of his brother, his elder brother had been taken away and his stepfather killed, also by paramilitaries. Eight years before this tragedy, guerrillas had killed his grandfather. Before that, his mother's brother and his father's cousin had been victims of the armed conflict, more names to add to a long list of deaths that continued after we met. In 2009, his brother Manuel, a social leader I was friends with, was tortured and killed by the guerrillas. Along with Manuel, his friend Graciano and a 14-year-old boy were also killed. Those deaths still pain me. The last time Lewis and I met in 2016, I gave him back a couple of photos I had taken of Manuel and asked him to give one to his mother. I was not in the mood to pay her a visit and bring a gift that would likely open a poorly healed wound.

The day of our last meeting, I noticed Lewis was no longer a young man. Neither was I. But I knew that his leadership qualities remained untouched. In an interview he granted to a journalist at the end of 2017, after having participated in a workshop

on reconciliation and transitional justice, he described the unflagging struggle his community and his own family have undertaken to stay in their territory. Despite their losses and the fear provoked by the two forced displacements they were victims of, they had always managed to return to their lands and rivers. They knew their presence in their homeland and in their *homeriver* was the only means to keep both themselves and the territory alive. “Our main victory,” said Lewis, “has been staying in our territory, because without people, everything will be at the mercy of obscure forces” (El Espectador, Dec. 26th 2017). What a triumph indeed! Without communities taking care of places, cultivating values, nurturing existences, and fostering worlds, there would not be territory at all. That has been the duty of Lewis, his ancestors and kindred as long as the rivers have flowed and the forests have grown. Without them, Bajo Atrato would be but a piece of land ready to be ravaged by obscure forces. But without territory, deprived of the care and nurture it provides and of the possibilities of being it enables, Lewis and all his kindred would possibly become simple folk, perhaps the kind of ordinary mainstream citizens imagined by the Colombian state before the right to ethnic and cultural difference was granted to them in 1991.

I see power in Lewis’ words because they convey the idea that territory is something verging on the actual, by which I mean something brought into existence through people’s presence and practices rather than a spatial setting that is taken for granted. This has been precisely the approach I have emphasized throughout the chapters of this text: territory is an aggregation of relations, it is an intersection of human and non-human assemblages rather than something that merely stands under or grounds human practices. More a “domain of entanglement” (Ingold 2006, 14) than a substance, more an event than a self-contained physical reality, territory is simultaneously constituted by human and non-human assemblages while providing a context of operations for the contingent relationships cultivated by humans and other-than-humans.

The obscure forces Lewis refers to are not just politically, economically or militarily related—even if economic, cultural, and ecological transformations are some of their most evident manifestations. Instead, the occupation of Bajo Atrato by state, capital, and illegal armed forces represents a series of practices that have overturned the possibilities of being that humans and non-humans have established in these territories. In this sense and as Escobar (2015, 2016) has pointed out, the most fundamental dimension at stake in the struggles of indigenous and Afro-Colombian peoples in defense of their territories is ontological. This ontological dimension is apparent when one examines the difficulties these communities face in enacting their own worlds—those that exist beyond the dominant world-building practices of modernity—but also, as I have described in this ethnography, when one becomes aware of the transformations war has unleashed among certain non-human beings in the region. The obscure forces that Lewis dares not name during the interview but that he knows very well, have ended up transforming the qualities of many beings that have, through their very existence, contributed to the creation and preservation of *bajoatrateño* territory. In this sense, one of the aspects most violently transformed by the destructive drives of war, extractivism, poverty, and terror is the relations communities and non-humans nurture with each other. These relations—often exhibiting care and reciprocity, sometimes animosity and contention, but always wonder and mutual recognition—come to define these places and the possibilities of being and becoming that humans and non-humans find there. If rapacious economic interests, discriminatory political decisions, and belligerent strategies have hindered the lives of people, they have also impacted spirits, rivers and jaguars since, as I have shown, violence has been an experience shared by different kinds of beings.

In this dissertation I have tried to be attuned to the kinds of realities created, but also disrupted, by the harmful forces of war. Moving beyond the violations of rights that indigenous and Afro-Colombian communities are entitled to, I have described what these peoples are left with in the aftermath of violence and terror. Living rubble, military remnants, wicked spirits, evil jaguars, endangered *fieras*, overturned

landscapes, poisonous snakes, wandering souls, and uncertain futures are some of what remains. Moving also beyond the most rampant and immediate effects of war, I have documented some of its pervasive and enduring yet often elusive effects. Like *palizadas* and decaying rivers, forgotten land mines or ruined forests, these “long dyings,” as Rob Nixon (2011, 2) would call them, and their postponed repercussions are inscribed in a slow-moving temporal frame that challenges the immediate and explosive visibility often associated with the violence of armed conflict. Nixon (2011) calls this phenomenon “slow violence”, meaning a violence of “delayed destruction” that is not instantaneous nor focused around one single event, “but rather incremental and accretive,” affecting human bodies and ecologies alike (Ibid., 2-4). Climate change, biomagnification, accelerated species loss, deforestation and the toxic aftermath of war are some examples of a form of violence that results in postponed casualties and exacerbates injustices of race, gender, class, and region (Ibid., 10-11). Affecting communities as much as the territory itself, this slow violence requires that attention be drawn to the myriad lives, human and non-human, entangled in forest and river ecologies (Lederach 2017, Lyons 2016). This is what I have tried to describe through my narrative and images: the afterlives of a violence that continues to influence the futures of diverse existences. Consider for instance some of the outcomes attributed to forced displacement. Without the warmth that human presence and labour created, places decayed and animals were marooned. Without communities taking care of their rivers, the waters diverged, the floods became a constant, and forests disappeared. In both cases the territory was left, as anthropologist Angela Lederach beautifully expresses it, “to cry out for her people.” (2017, 593) This cry, this urgent need for people, is but the realization of how communities and their territories, along with their different non-human constituents, become the possibility for each other’s existence.

The delayed effects that Nixon (2011) attributes to slow violence might be considered in relation to various other events extending beyond environmental transformation. The man-eating jaguar is a case in point. He forces us to consider the amplified aftermath that war entails in a place like Bajo Atrato and how its effects

still reverberate even after the demobilization of some paramilitary armies. This jaguar might also be considered one of those monsters of the anthropocene, that period of massive multispecies transformation triggered by human activities. He is a monster not just because he is a terrifying creature but more so because he is a figure dislocating borders: between human and non-human forces, between ecological and social processes, between predation and warfare, between the hardships of forest life and the deleterious drives of armed conflict. In summary, the man-eating jaguar forces us to look attentively at the wonders and terrors of a war deeply entangled in forests and forcefully entangling the forest's inhabitants.

Like this jaguar, uncontrolled *madres de agua*, wandering spirits, and *palizadas* are other long dyings. Their harms are difficult to source and even harder to reverse. They all express some sort of excess, or more precisely, a violence whose effects cannot always be attributed to the realm of human agency. Their intensities and manifestations continue long after the destructive actions triggered by armies. The damage caused by these long dyings also exceeds the kind of determinism often ascribed to the actions perpetrated by armed actors against indigenous and Afro-Colombian populations. Dammed rivers, restless ghostly presences, wandering evil spirits, and wicked jaguars are the aftermath of war, no doubt. However, *palizadas*, jaguars, *fieras*, spirits, and *madres de agua* were all present prior to the armed violence in this region. By this, I mean that these are presences that belong to the world of these people, that they inhabit the forests and rivers of Bajo Atrato and that they have shaped the kind of life lived by indigenous and Afro-Colombian peoples in these territories. These are presences people have learned to co-exist with, and in some cases, to keep at bay. These are also the kind of existences that without the presence of people—as Lewis's powerful statement suggests—would have made of Bajo Atrato a quite different kind of territory. What is new in the context of war is the amplification of their damaging capabilities. This amplification, this excess, is what provokes forest and river ecologies to run amok, and is what, ultimately, leads us to consider the territory as a victim. And it is here where concepts such as human rights violations or trauma account for only part of what people and territories are left with.

What are the means people have for dealing with what war leaves in its wake? This is a question that deserves deep ethnographic attention and whose potential answers I have only hinted at. There are instances in which communities have extended the repertoire of actions routinely undertaken during their daily lives to the domain of war. Some examples of this are when people care for the spirits of combatants that suffered a bad death or when *madres de agua* are mobilized against armies. There have been cases in which traditional practices are not enough to cope with what violence brings, like the snakes whose poison pollutes human bodies beyond what traditional medicine can heal. In any of these cases, it is important to bear in mind that the means communities have to deal with this destruction cannot be understood as pure and simple expressions of resistance against violence and domination. To do so would mean to assume that violence exhausts the repertoire of people's responses, as if indigenous and Afro-Colombian peoples have simply constructed their lives for the purposes of responding to the evils of war. Of course armed conflict is pervasive and overwhelming, but it is not the only driving force organizing people's lives. This is the critique I launch against some of the research on violence conducted among Afro-Colombian and indigenous populations, but also the way I have found for demarcating my work from other research that has made armed conflict the bread and butter of ethnographic inquiry. I hope my writing reflects my resistance of the temptation to reify violence, to make it the analytical starting point. What I have attempted instead is to render it manifest as only one of the possibilities shaping human and non-human relationships in *bajoatrateño* territories.

Not all acts of war are strategized and not all actions of armed actors are rational decisions guided by instrumental aims. That being said, not all the forces capable of overturning the qualities of indigenous and Afro-Colombian territories are external in their origin nor imposed by alien presences. *Palizadas*, *fierras*, evil spirits, and persistently resprouting forests, as I have pointed out, existed in one way or other prior to the structural and armed violence that has unfolded in this region. What war does is to amplify the power of these dangerous presences, which means that

there are always some remnants of human agency behind the destructive capabilities these non-human presences develop. Consider the expression “feline attack”, an euphemism used by one of the officials of the Colombian Navy to describe the response of a jaguar that almost devoured one of his men during a planned hunting expedition. The expression epitomizes the descent of armed violence into the ordinary (Das 2006). “Feline attack” normalizes the event, as if such things—jaguars devouring people—were part of everyday life. Of course jaguars and the danger of encountering them are an accepted part of life in *bajoatrateño* territories, but jaguars drawn by the taste of human flesh are not. Therefore, my aim has been to contest the idea of those deaths under the paws and fangs of that man-eating jaguar as caused by a “feline attack”, mainly because of the power and motivations of the warlords who provoked the jaguar’s rapaciousness.

The same can be said of *palizadas*. They are a part of river ecologies and communities have known how to organize in order to make rivers navigable, taking care of them. But ruinous versions of rivers emerge in the absence of people, an absence triggered when communities are victims of forced displacement. The progressive return of communities to their homelands and *homerivers* has been a means for people to retrieve some of their agency and exert their granted territorial rights, but it has also been the best way for taking care of the territory because it is the presence of people that is conducive to a version of rivers—and forests too—more attuned to the kind of life these communities want to cultivate. It is like the territory is the result of an intricate set of reciprocal practices of care between humans and non-humans, as if *bajoatrateño* communities were constantly creating new versions of the beings that make up their territories through their practices. Take the case of the spirits of dead paramilitary soldiers. Wandering spirits inhabiting the places where they experienced a bad death are not new in this region. For example, some of the *encantos* that live in the forest and guard hidden treasures are said to be the spirits of people who died protecting these goods. But the etiology of the spirits trapped in Caño Claro has no historical precedents. In this case, the main purpose of people’s actions is to regain the quality of their inhabited regions, to heal the land

in order to let peasant life flourish again. This healing process includes the establishment of conditions that help spirits enter into the flow of time and life. Far from being an attempt to simply get rid of undesirable presences, the goal is to support a less harmful version of these spirits, a version in which the living and the dead may continue sharing a common ground.

Given the fact that the territory consists of multiple emplaced relationships, one might state that beings—human and non-human—and the territory itself are in every relation and in every instance of that relation a different kind of entity. A territory that is not homogeneous but multifarious is therefore vulnerable to many presences on many scales. That is why *palizadas* and palm oil fields are not just producing environmental damages, or why the wrath of *madres de agua* and the restlessness of spirits are not only causing damage to particular worldviews. Failure to recognize this existential co-constitutionality or stubbornness to maintain the divide between humans and their surrounding worlds as two different ontological realms only makes it harder to appropriately redress the suffering experienced by indigenous and Afro-Colombian territories.

The idea of actions and relations favouring new versions of beings is connected with an assumption of life as flux, movement and renewal, which are the underlying principles of *renacientes*, that ontological category concerned with the constant flow of what exists. In a world of continuity that is on the verge of constant actualization, where relations are primordial and forms or substances derivative, what communities aim to repair are the relations that sustain the coming-into-existence of their territories. This is why flow and its reestablishment is a common thread throughout my arguments in this text. For example, I have argued that rivers are not merely symbols of flow but that flow is necessary for both the social life of rivers and the life of communities. The adequate flow of rivers, as established by human labour and care in the form of *limpieza de palizadas*, is what allows communities to embark, which means to participate through the act of traveling, in the relations the territory renders possible. *Palizadas* engender another kind of flow,

but one that floods lands and harms forests, one in which rivers cease to be an ally. Flow, as Hugh Raffles (2014) reminds us, is not “extraneous and abstractable from existence” (Ibid., 100), which means it is material too: flow is not only a condition of rivers but also their very form. Similarly, flow becomes a condition of the form of life communities cherish in their territories as it favours the social and material exchanges through which the territory comes into being. The flow of rivers is also the form of social and political mobilization in Bajo Atrato: organized in Communitarian Councils and represented by Great Councils that act on behalf of the villages that belong to a given river basin, the political action and representation of communities have to some extent taken the form of rivers (Oslender 2008). In this way, rivers and communities are not just caught in the flow—they are flow (Krause 2014). This is why the stagnation brought by *palizadas* constitutes a damage to the territory, understood as the co-constitutive or relational outcome of the interactions between people and non-humans. What is at stake when examining *palizadas* is more than concern over the fate of the environment or the collective rights of indigenous and Afro-Colombian communities. What is chiefly at stake is the harm caused to the forms of life and being that take place in Bajo Atrato.

Flow, or rather its absence, is also manifest in the ruination of forest paths and villages. Without people traversing trails or inhabiting houses, without the human presence that allows warmth to circulate within forests and buildings, the rot simply spreads, villages become rubble and trails are lost. The effects of inadequate flow are also exhibited in the case of combatants who experienced a violent death. I defined these spirits as aftereffects of these circumstances suspended in time and space. Their restless pain is nothing more than their impossibility of participating in the great flow of being, or in other words, their inability of leaving this world and reaching the great beyond. This is why the ultimate goal of proposals made by inhabitants of Caño Claro is to alleviate the stagnation of these spirits, inserting them back into the flow of life so that their existence will be untethered from the place where they died. People want this insertion to be accompanied by other procedures that, like the exhuming of abandoned corpses and their return to their respective

families, would help their lands heal. I have interpreted the concern of families living in Caño Claro for the fate of their former victimizers as an act of profound empathy. But make no mistake—this is an empathy arising from the experience of loss and mourning these very families have gone through, an experience shared with the families of these soldiers who, just like the victimized communities of Bajo Atrato, are still in search of their disappeared ones.

Perhaps the relational approach I have followed might be useful in discussing some of the manifestations that power and violence adopt in *bajoatrateño* territories. This is just a hypothesis but, what if the kind of violence focused on individuals, on the control and discipline of their bodies, on the displacement of communities, that operates through prohibitions and punishments, and that conceives of power as a sort of zero-sum game—someone has gained power because someone else has lost some—in short, the kind of power exerted by armed groups, embodies a mode of action in which entities, objects, things, individuals and substances are ontologically primary? How does this compare with a relational ontology and the means indigenous and Afro-Colombian communities have to make their own power explicit? Do these communities embody a form of power that privileges relations, properties, and events? While the power of armed actors is overt, coercive, identifiable, and expresses itself directly, the power of local communities is more elusive, ascribed to transcendental forces, and would work to incite, alter or even enable certain associations and connections. Here I am following Jean Comaroff and John Comaroff (1991) and their take on what they call agentive and non-agentive forms of power. According to them, in an agentive form of power there is an identifiable instrument of power: one that speaks openly, that reveals its presence and that can be, precisely because it is known, contestable. That would be the form of power armed groups represent. On the other hand, a non-agentive form of power accounts for the subtle influences that shape how social reality is experienced, seeming “to be beyond human agency” and perhaps not “experienced as power at all, since its effects are rarely wrought by over compulsion.” (Ibid., 22) That form of power, which might be seen as an opposite response to war, is demonstrated by the way Afro-Colombian

and indigenous communities resisted the presence of armed actors. This is an elusive form of power that is less amenable to opposition. Let me discuss these ideas with some examples.

Madres de agua are a form of evil which existed prior to war, brought into being by *jaibanas* as a form of shamanic aggression. These spirits are released to attack specific targets, but their source is uncertain as the agent that directs the attack always remains somehow elusive. Even if only *jaibanas* understand the art of conjuring these spirits, there are no means for establishing the ultimate authorship of a particular attack. When *madres de agua* were mobilized to protect indigenous communities from the presence of armed soldiers, the elusiveness of their primary source made retaliation from armed groups difficult, which was why they simply disciplined entire communities by either threatening their *jaibanas* or punishing every person suspected of practicing what they conceived of as witchcraft. Attacks from *madres de agua* exacerbated uncertainty among the paramilitaries: the doubt of not knowing who the enemy was. Local communities, on the other hand, did identify their enemies, who belonged, as I later explain, to the ontological category of *gente de monte*, people of the wilderness. Similarly, in the attacks described in Chapter 3, in which attempts by paramilitaries to shoot a deceptive presence ended up hurting some of their comrades in arms, it is possible to identify a response to war that avoids straightforward confrontation through the mobilization of non-human entities. More importantly, these enigmatic attacks are not an attempt to cause direct damage to the bodies of the combatants but to alter certain states of mind: the damage is provoked by the very weapons of the soldiers who shot at the deceptive presence. By deliberately misleading soldiers' behaviour, *jaibanas* do not only repel a coercive power but they do so by disrupting relations, principally the relation of soldiers with their own reality. After all, the soldier who shoots at his comrades is experiencing a presence that no one else can see. Another characteristic of the kind of power used to confront armed presence is that its means of expression are not systematic nor compulsive. The spirits' attacks do not take place on a regular basis, rather they are exceptional and exemplary, without being necessarily public.

Perhaps this is why they raised so much anxiety and fear among armed groups, and why they retaliated against the very bodies of *jaibanas* and other traditional healers.

I am aware that different forms of power, as Adeline Masquelier (2001) explains it in relation to spirit possession in Niger, cannot be simply defined by setting distinctions between open and subtle, explicit and implicit, or material and metaphysical, because power takes a variety of shapes “that may work simultaneously, together or against one another, often doing so in spite of their apparent mutual exclusivity.” (Ibid., 21) But as Foucault (2010 [1975]) taught us, power is vested not so much in specific agents but in the practices and the effects it produces, so it is not completely incongruous to suggest that in the context of war armed groups and *bajoatrateño* communities each embody different forms of power: the former centred on bodies, substances, objects; the latter focused on relations, properties, and events. A few more examples may illustrate my point.

Rivers are inhabited by *fieras*. Local communities avoid encounters with these beings and even adjust their routines to favour versions of *fieras* aligned with people’s modes of living: throwing glass and garbage, or spilling fuel or oil are means to tame *fieras*, not eliminate them. However, what paramilitary armies did, according to the accounts presented in Chapter 1, was to confront one of these *fieras* by dropping a grenade in the pool it inhabited. Not regulation but annihilation: to paramilitary groups the very existence of these beings implied a threat to the kinds of travels they undertake in the rivers. Local communities are well aware of the risks *fieras* represent but they do not attack them, much less kill them, because that would entail a series of transformations drastically altering river ecologies: the disappearance of a *fiera* will change the features of pools, meanders and bends, disrupting the very flow of the rivers and, of course, of communities and their socialities. But what paramilitaries did was to attack a being that they simply saw as disconnected from the river ecology, as having no relation at all with its surrounding world, and even less with the world paramilitaries think they inhabit. Perhaps this contempt for relations, property, and forest ecologies is at the foundation of logic that guides

the development of oil palm plantations or the depletion of forests, projects fueling the war that regional capitalists and paramilitary armies have waged against *bajoatrateño* territories.

Forms of power focusing on relations as a means to battle the logic of war can also be observed in the actions undertaken by communities in Caño Claro, specifically in their objective of appeasing the spirits whose mere presence pollutes their lands. As I have explained, the goal is not simply to get rid of these presences—spirits are after all part of the world itself—but to create conditions in which the living and the dead can co-exist. But when paramilitary soldiers arrive to a church searching for a priest to perform an exorcism, they aim to set sharp boundaries between their own selves and the spiritual beings inhabiting the forests. Perhaps that overemphasis on bodies and substances that characterizes the form of agentive, coercive power that armed actors enact might also be detected in the brutal materiality of corpses floating in the rivers. Even in the fiercest attempts by indigenous peoples to confront combatants—those involving *madres de agua* and deceptive spirits—the attacks ended with the death of the enemy. But in many cases paramilitaries were willing to administer a second death upon their victims, by which I mean they exerted an excessive violence upon their corpses as well.

Finally, other relevant elements of the power embodied by armed groups are present in the figure of the man-eating jaguar. As top predator, the jaguar possesses attributes such as fierceness, stealthy observation, strength, and deadliness. These distinctive predatory qualities are somehow shared by other dangerous beings: *la gente de monte*, that is, the soldiers from the guerrilla and paramilitary armies that, like jaguars, live in and merge with the forest. These people of the wilderness inhabit the forest in ways that are quite similar to those of the jaguar: even if you do not see them when you are in the forest, it does not mean that they are not there and that they are not aware of your presence. More importantly, the power represented by people of the wilderness resembles key features attributed to jaguars: brute force, obtrusiveness, ruthlessness. If the skills required for hunting tend to

overlap with the characteristics of irregular warfare, the dangers of a jaguar are amplified if the animal has been press-ganged into the gory business of certain war-lords. No matter how much people are aware of the danger a jaguar represents, the cruelty and insatiability of this man-eating jaguar were not of animal but human origin. At the end, people perceived that the ghastly and dauntless attacks of this jaguar were consistent with both the kind of war waged by paramilitaries and with the treatment they gave to many of their victims. Consider for example the state in which the corpse of one of the victims of “feline attack” was found: beheaded and eviscerated. The act of beheading, often symbolizing the exercise of absolute power, is strongly associated with the paramilitaries, who are pejoratively referred to as *mochacabezas*, the beheaders.

Gente de monte is a term used by communities to describe the armies that occupy their forests. This phrase sheds some light on how close the experiences of war are to the experiences locals derive from their territories. In Bajo Atrato, as well as in other regions around the world where irregular warfare has been waged—i.e. Guatemala, Cuba, Malaysia, Vietnam and Spain (Boot 2013, Chomsky 2010, Falla 1994)—the most evident connection between war and forests is that for guerrilla armies these landscapes represent not only a theatre of operations but the very condition of their existence (Che Guevara 1961, Zedong 1937). *Gente de monte* are recognized as people capable of walking in the forest for days without getting lost and without starving. As guerrilla warfare tactics involve great mobility, in a region like Bajo Atrato this mobility requires a deep familiarization and interaction with the forest. Soldiers are then recognized by their sense of direction, their knowledge of rivers and trails, and their knowledge about animal behaviour and use of wild plants. Guerrilla soldiers patrol, walk around, and know the forest very well, dealing with dangers such as poisonous animals but also with spirits. Given the fact that both guerrilla and paramilitary armies inhabit a place that, like the forest, is considered not fully human, Afro-Colombian and indigenous communities often attribute characteristics to these soldiers that represent in many respects the antithesis of social life: they neither work the land nor raise families as people are

supposed to do. Soldiers may also partake in some of the enchantment and powers that these forests bestow as they have been said to become invulnerable to bullets, transform themselves into animals, or merge with the landscape. Ontological attributes conferred to the so-called people of the wilderness also tend to materialize in the kinds of bodies soldiers are endowed with. Locals believe that these combatants are able to walk for days on end without stopping, that they can appear suddenly and disappear in seconds without leaving any trace. In some cases, the forest might radically transform their bodies, conferring upon them metamorphic powers, as when combatants are believed to be capable of turning into animals or plants. The point is that whether by depicting combatants with non-human characteristics or by highlighting their magnificent skills and powers, such representations intensify various features that local communities often assign to the forest itself: a landscape that exists simultaneously as a place of danger—it is inhabited by hostile spiritual forces—and of potential transformation—it is a place of healing where shamanic powers are enhanced.

In a place like Bajo Atrato, where forests and warfare seem to be intermingled, new avenues for research could emerge. One could explore armed conflict through its multiple connections with the materiality and affective pull of forests or rivers, meaning that these landscapes need to be considered not only as a terrain on which war is waged but also as “a medium through which military violence is conducted” and experienced (Gregory 2016, 4). Proceeding from the ethnographic premise I have maintained throughout this dissertation, according to which experiences of military violence cannot be dissociated from the places in which they occur and from the relationships people cultivate with their territories, some questions for further consideration arise. What role do forests play in the interpretations that certain communities make of violence and of the people that embody this violence? How is it that the forms of violence associated with armed groups seem to mirror the kinds of powers often attributed to forests? As I have demonstrated, war has transformed the way indigenous and Afro-Colombian communities relate to their forests and to the myriad non-human beings these places harbour. But the in-

verse would also be somehow true: the relationships people have with their forests and their non-human existences shape their conceptions about war and the kind of ontological otherness armed groups represent. Perhaps an exploration of the co-constitutive relations between armed conflict and forests might pave the way for thinking about the possibilities of reconciliation and coexistence between local communities and formerly forest-dwelling guerrilla or paramilitary members.

An interpretation of war following a place-oriented framework would consider violence not as a phenomenon unfolding in forests but rather as a force producing such places (Gordillo 2004, Gregory 2016, Riaño-Alcalá 2002), and would also pay attention to the role forest ecologies play in the creation and maintenance of certain experiences of violence. Equally important, this eventual “place-oriented” research would inquire as to what extent the presence of armies in regions like Chocó, which stands as an important hotspot of biodiversity, has facilitated or impeded its conservation and protection. As I suggested in the last chapter, in some cases forced displacement has triggered processes of abandonment and ruination that, in the long term, have given a reprieve to forests from human pressures, allowing the flourishing of many sylvan presences. While some research conducted in Colombia has shown that armed conflict has contributed to deforestation and the destruction of ecosystems (CIJP 2005, Espinosa 2012, Vargas 2016), other scholars have pointed out that the presence of armed groups has in fact limited the exploitation of natural resources and the expansion of agribusiness in several areas characterized by high biodiversity (Salinas and Zarama 2012, Tono 2015). What are then the types of ecologies that war renders possible? What other ecologies have been impeded? These are some questions that might guide further research.

To conclude, I would like to connect the dots that proceed from consideration of the territory as a victim to some recent legal advances taking place not only in Colombia but also around the world. The lines connecting these dots also cross over the struggles of some indigenous communities in countries like Guatemala who are calling into question the dominant anthropocentric paradigm of human rights and

transitional justice processes (Izquierdo and Viaene 2018). On March 15th 2017, after more than 140 years of struggle, a treaty settlement signed by the Crown and the Whanganui iwi, a Maori tribe from Northern New Zealand, recognized the Whanganui River as a legal person and granted it the same rights as a human. The agreement recognizes the status of the Whanganui River as *Te Awa Tupua*, that is, an integrated, living whole with its own identity. Although the members of this indigenous community have always considered the river a living being with whom they have kept a relationship of mutual co-existence rather than mere utility, the bill passed by the New Zealand parliament received international attention. It was the first river in the world to be granted legal personhood, which in this case meant that besides all the rights, duties, and liabilities of a human being, the river could be represented in court proceedings by two officials, one from the Crown and the other from the Whanganui iwi.

To the official head of the Treaty Negotiations Ministry, such a legal recognition should not be a cause for much surprise: “I know the initial inclination of some people will say it’s pretty strange to give a natural resource a legal personality. But it’s no stranger than family trusts, or companies or incorporated societies.” (National Post, March 15th 2017) The Minister is describing the recognition of rights to the Whanganui River as a legal fiction, that is, a well-known legal “technique of make-believe” (Moglen 1989) through which certain facts are created or assumed as true in order to apply a rule. Under the banner of legal fictions, companies are treated by some laws as persons, meaning they may enter into contracts, buy and sell land, sue and be sued or commit torts just as natural persons do (Schane 2006). However, to the Whanganui iwi people the personhood of the river is not just a matter of legal fiction. The river is considered an ancestor; indeed, the river constitutes the very essence of their selves as expressed in its own ethnonym and by one of their proverbs: “I am the river and the river is me.” (BBC News, March 15th 2017)

This new legal status represents a major change in terms of policies regarding use and care of the river. Significant amounts of money have been allocated to two

funds, one for financial redress and the other to improve the health of the river. But perhaps the biggest change is recognition of the inextricable relationship between Whanganui iwi and the river. The agreement not only acknowledges the river's importance for people living there but also seems to equate harm to the river with similar harm to a sentient being and to the people themselves. According to the lead negotiator for the Whanganui iwi people, the legal status of the river somehow conveys some of the meaning that his people associate with it: "We have fought to find an approximation in law so that all others can understand that from our perspective treating the river as a living entity is the correct way to approach it, as an indivisible whole, instead of the traditional model for the last 100 years of treating it from a perspective of ownership and management." (National Post, March 15th 2017) And later he adds: "It's not that we've changed our worldview, but people are catching up to seeing things the way that we see them." While the terms of the agreement satisfy the involved parties, each seems to entertain their own version of it. The Minister has not changed his worldview as for him the whole affair is but a legal fiction: the river is "a natural resource," after all. However, for Whanganui iwi people there is no doubt that the river is a living ancestor and the legal language only serves to help others understand what they already know and experience.

I see in the story of Whanganui River a beautiful diplomatic arrangement that compels us to reconsider the course of certain actions. Particularly, it "forces into visibility the antagonism that proscribed" (De la Cadena 2012, 346) the possibility of seeing rivers as other than a natural resource. As I have previously argued when I introduced the work of Isabelle Stengers, diplomacy is not a mere compromise intended to eliminate antagonisms; after all, antagonism is an inherent condition of politics, understood as the practices that seek "to establish a certain order and organize human coexistence in conditions that are always potentially conflictual" (Mouffe 2000, 101). In this case, the diplomatic arrangement produces a kind of "positive pluralism" (Stengers in Zournazi 2002, 261). It generates a specific set of practices and obligations under which each party, I insist, is capable of entertaining its own version. For the New Zealand state, the Whanganui River is still a natural

resource in need of legal protection, while for the Whanganui iwi it is a sentient being in need of recognition. In the agreement that was reached, at least two versions of the river and two different worlds were enacted, which is what makes it a beautiful act of diplomacy: both parties have found an approximation in the realm of law that allows them to forge a common ground for actions and obligations, without compromising the meaning they assign to their respective values, attachments, and rules of engagement (Stengers 2005a). This is precisely the power—and perhaps also the curse—of the law, as it may compel people to transform their practices without necessarily transforming, at least not right away, their worldviews. A diplomatic arrangement is not an end in itself but a means to establish a common ground in which different worlds may converge. The law necessitates a transformation of the obligations and practices of modern states and mainstream society, which is a crucial step to generating the conditions of possibility under which we humans may inhabit appropriately the world.

A similar but less publicized recognition took place in Colombia after the Constitutional Court granted certain legal rights to the Atrato River. Although the Court's ruling was issued in November 2016, it was made public only in May 2017, shortly after the aforementioned decision in New Zealand and another similar one in India, where the High Court of Uttarakhand State found that the Yamuna and Ganges Rivers were living entities and, therefore, legal persons with certain rights—a measure that was overruled four months later by the National Supreme Court because apparently it was legally unsustainable. In Colombia, the so-called Sentence T-622 specifically recognizes the Atrato River as a bearer of four rights: conservation, protection, maintenance, and restoration. I hold that this ruling follows the path initially paved by the Law of Victims when it considered the territories of indigenous peoples as another victim of armed conflict. The underlying logic is simple: that which can be described as a victim might therefore be considered a subject, one whose nature and rights are delineated by the Constitutional Court.

In its ruling, the Court recognized the close relationship between biodiversity and culture, calling attention to the ways local communities have developed sustainable practices with their natural environment. But it went a step further by adopting what the Court described as an ecocentric approach, meaning that nature does not belong to humankind but quite the opposite—that humans are but a species among many others. According to the ruling, this approach implies that

in no way are [humans] the owners of other species, of biodiversity or of natural resources, nor of the fate of the planet. Consequently, this [ecocentric] theory conceives nature as a true subject of rights that must be recognized by states and exercised under the tutelage of their legal representatives, for example, by the communities that inhabit it or have a special relationship with it (Corte Constitucional ¶5.9: 41-42).

This historic decision was a legal response to a suit presented by various Afro-Colombian and indigenous *chocoano* social organizations who demanded concrete actions for stopping the serious contamination and other environmental issues resulting from illegal mining in the Atrato River basin. The immediate outcome of this ruling was that the state was forced to take concrete measures to clean up the river and created a special commission to safeguard it. This commission of guardians is made up of local representatives who act on behalf of the river.

As observed by Mari Margil (2018), recognizing the rights of rivers, forests and nature in general, needs to be done by breaking “away from legal strictures that were never intended to apply to nature” (Ibid., ¶11). In this sense, both the New Zealand and Colombian cases overcome the legal divide between persons—capable of having rights—and property—unable to possess rights (Margil 2018). But even if recognition of the rights of the Atrato River seems to be the highest form of legal protection, this protection is still conferred only in terms of what the river provides to the communities inhabiting its basin, not by applying some kind of inherent personhood to it. In other words, as transcendental as this ruling might appear, the specific granted rights—protection, conservation, maintenance, and restoration—seem to actualize the nature-culture divide. The river is recognized as a key natural resource sus-

taining the life of *chocoano* indigenous and Afro-Colombian communities, not as a being whose very existence should be equated with human life (Mount 2017). Unlike the New Zealand case in which the Whanganui River was recognized as a living being with its own identity, the Colombian case assures the protection of the Atrato River only in relation to what it provides for human life. And yet, the most important part of considering the Atrato River a subject of rights is that the law delineates a path of actions that might slow down neoliberal and extractivist agendas while establishing a framework through which new ethical relations might emerge.

Even if there is no mention of the Victims' Laws in all the national and international jurisprudence studied by the Constitutional Court to justify its ruling regarding the Atrato River, I maintain that its recognition as a subject of rights goes hand in hand with the consideration of the territory as a victim, which, as I demonstrated in my analysis of the Victims' Laws, is a consideration concerning more the rights of the territory and non-human entities themselves than the rights that some particular peoples have over their territories. Even if the new legislation provides a limited legal personhood to a particular constituent of indigenous and Afro-Colombian territories—the Atrato River—it sketches out a series of rights that should be taken into consideration when defining any transitional justice policy in Bajo Atrato. If recognition of the territory as a victim was an important cornerstone in the decolonization of certain paradigms regarding transitional justice, allowing for the inclusion of damage that war causes to non-humans, the granting of rights to the Atrato River may help translate into public policy the actions necessary to redress the destruction inflicted upon *bajoatrateño* territories. We are thus on the verge of a historic opportunity to conciliate into a single frame of practices—by which I mean practices of reparation—what modernity has stubbornly maintained as two divergent ontological domains: nature and culture, *kósmos*—the inherent and objective—and *politikós*—the instituted and social.

Demands of justice for the damage caused to non-human beings have been articulated in contexts of transitional justice, as in Guatemala where Mayan Q'eqchi'

indigenous people blame the military for the failed corn harvests and the unhealthy poultry that followed the repressive campaigns carried out during the dictatorship of General Rios Montt (Viaene 2010). In Ecuador, the Inter-American Court of Human Rights accepted the testimony of a spiritual leader or *yachak*, who spoke on behalf of the spirits affected by seismic exploration in Sarayaku, in the Amazon, as evidence of the damages caused by oil companies to the living forest (*Kawsak Sacha*) (IACHR 2012, Kichwa indigenous people of Sarayaku v. Ecuador). In Colombia, the Special Jurisdiction for Peace (JEP), which is the post-conflict transitional justice system created as part of the peace agreement with the FARC, explicitly promotes “harmonization of the territory” as a means to achieve reconciliation and healing between victims and perpetrators (Jurisdicción Especial para la Paz 2018, General Regulation, Art 44). All of these are examples not of demands made in the name of respect for the worldviews embodied by historically marginalized communities, but attempts for promoting open discussions about the kinds of realities that are at stake once the human is decentralized as the only possible subject of law and rights.

In this ethnography, my aim has been to disrupt divides, to call into question the kinds of legal and ontological frameworks that tend to position the harms experienced by indigenous and Afro-Colombian territories within the apparently discrete domains of either environmental damages or violations of human rights. But this has not been simply an account of the profound and intimate relationships these communities preserve with their territories. Rather, this has been an attempt to describe “the lively relationalities” of being and becoming of which we humans are all a part (Lyons 2008, 121). The damages explored in this ethnography compel us to reconsider not only transitional justice frameworks but also the relations between what modernity considers “reality” and what it assumes to be beliefs or cultural representations of said reality. In this way, the possibilities of reparation for damages provoked by war do not necessarily carry over into the design of new measures to redress the rights of a portrayed “radically exteriorized Other”—indigenous and Afro-Colombian communities, in this case—but through the possibility of cultivating new forms of responsibility—by which I mean new abilities to respond (Haraway

2008)–to other forms of non-human distinctiveness. The path I have followed to understand the victimization of indigenous and Afro-Colombian territories is an invitation to address the differential experiences of war not in terms of the cultural frameworks with which different groups interpret the world but rather in terms of the kinds of worlds we humans are able to know and live within.

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