

MAKING SPACE IN THE “TERRITORIAL CRACKS.” AFRO-CAMPESINO POLITICS OF
LAND AND TERRITORY IN THE COLOMBIAN CARIBBEAN

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ABSTRACT

Eloisa Berman-Arevalo: Making Space in the ‘Territorial Cracks’: Afro-Campesino Politics of Land and Territory in the Colombian Caribbean
(Under the direction of Gabriela Valdivia)

In the Caribbean mountains of Montes de María, Colombia’s ‘post-conflict’ is a particularly contested political conjuncture. Dominant narratives construct the present as a moment of dramatic transition from a past of violence, statelessness, and victim’s invisibility, to a future of peace, development, or rural justice. Conjunctural agrarian politics, in turn, are frequently framed as peasant ‘resistance’ that reflects the ‘re-emergence’ of peasant struggle after decades of violent silencing. This dissertation provides an alternative account of post-conflict campesino politics in Montes de María. Based on ethnographic fieldwork in Paloaltico, a village of black campesinos in the region’s predominantly afro-descendant north-western piedmont, it inquires about the politics of land and territory that unfold “below the surface” of what is legible through a simplified understanding of post-conflict’s geographies, temporalities, and politics.

Attention to practices of storytelling through which locals revisit the past in light of present conditions of oil palm encroachment extends the temporal scope of post-conflict politics beyond the last decade of peace interventions and diminished violence. I argue that throughout conjunctures of agrarian reform, armed conflict, and present-day oil palm expansion, women and men from Paloaltico have navigated ‘extraordinary’ events of violence, recognition, occupation, dispossession, and enclosure through an ‘ordinary’ politics of making space and “stitching together” the social and spatial relationships that sustain everyday life (Das 2007). Engaging the

‘ordinary’ as an epistemological register allows me to attend to how bodies, emotions, personal relations, intimate life events, and everyday practices of social reproduction shape political positions and practices. Rather than organized resistance that confronts and attempts to transform power relations, the ways of making and claiming land and territory revealed by this dissertation are subtle, unexpected, and often clandestine political practices that emerge “in the cracks” of dominant territorializations (De Certeau 1984). Hence, a politics of seeking continuity, exercising everyday refusals, and collectively making and sharing knowledge, unfolds in an ambiguous location both *within* and *against* dominant spatial and political regimes, neither openly resisting nor acquiescing to the dominant power orders.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

ACCU	<i>Autodefensas Campesinas de Córdoba y Urabá</i>
AUC	United Colombian Self-defense Groups (<i>Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia</i>)
ELN	National Liberation Army (<i>Ejército de Liberación Nacional</i>)
FARC	Revolutionary Colombian Armed Forces (<i>Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia</i>)
INCORA	Colombian Institute of Agrarian Reform (<i>Instituto Colombiano de Reforma Agraria</i>)
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
UNICE	United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund
IOM	International Organization for Migration
USAID	United States Agency for International Development

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION. A FRAMEWORK FOR NAVIGATING THE CONJUNCTURE OF POST-CONFLICT

The agrarian past continues to affect the agrarian present, but what does the future hold for resource productions, agrarian relations, and the smallholder slot...? It is hard to say, as unexpected outcomes and contingent complexities abound.

(Peluso 2017: 865)

On January 19th 2015, over 200 people gathered in Cartagena's luxurious Convention Center to discuss the prospects and possibilities of "post-conflict rural development" in the agricultural region of Montes de María. Just 90 miles away from the coastal state capital, these mountains are one of the Colombia's most emblematic sites for the tragic effects of the country's armed political conflict on campesino¹ lives and livelihoods (Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica 2010). The uniquely diverse group of attendees included CEOs of agri-business corporations, representatives of international aid agencies, regional and national state officials (including the peace commissioner, the vice minister of rural development, and the director of the regional Victim's Unit), NGO representatives, and more than 50 community leaders from the 15 municipalities in Montes de María.

Organized by the Semana Foundation, a corporate-funded NGO, and by the US Agency for International Development (USAID), the event's aim was to present the results of a participatory exercise of development planning, the 'Roadmap' for Montes de María

¹ The Spanish idiom *campesino* is an identity category that denotes a historical relation to land, small-scale farming and rural life. While its particular meanings are historically and geographically specific, *campesino* identities in Latin America generally reflect a particular political position vis-à-vis the state and agrarian elites through a language based on class antagonisms (Boyer 2003). In this text, I use peasant and *campesino* interchangeably.

(<http://www.rutamontesdemaria.com/>), and to secure institutional alliances between private corporations, state, donors and NGOs for the Roadmap's implementation. In a seemingly anxious quest to make sense of the initiative and ensure its viability, event organizers insisted on the need to define present-day Montes de María as a region "in post-conflict." Sustaining this purported new reality was the idea of a conjuncture of dramatic historic shift: a 'new beginning' that would leave behind a violent past and offer unprecedented opportunities for communities to be agents of peace and development. 'Post-conflict,' in this script, not only evoked a horizon of post-war that would reverse histories of violence and marginality but, more importantly, promised prosperity to local communities by way of agricultural modernization, capital investment, and democratic participation (Kirsch and Flint 2011).² Such promises were further upheld by a particular imaginary of post-conflict rural space. Defined by an immediate past of chaos, statelessness, and population displacement, Montes de María was rendered 'empty,' 'unproductive,' and open to being re-made through institutional interventions, capital investment, and community development (Ojeda et al. 2014; Grajales 2011).

I attended the event both as a PhD student and researcher, and as collaborator with NGOs and peasant organizations in the region. My position as the former allowed me to participate in the rumors and gossip that originated in reaction to the post-conflict narrative described before. The shared sentiment among campesino leaders and NGO collaborators, myself included, was of generalized outrage. We were appalled at the event's concealment of the ongoing reverberations of violence on the ground, its denial of the structural constraints that prevent this purported historic renewal and the cynical endorsement of 'peace' and 'community participation' in order

² Transcript of Foro Hoja de Ruta para el Desarrollo Rural en los Montes de María, US Aid- Fundación Semana, January 19, 2015.

legitimize a capitalist re-ordering of agrarian space in the aftermath of war (Kirsch and Flint 2011).

For most rural communities in Montes de María, hopeful narratives of change are a mirage. After more than 10 years of institutional interventions, broadly framed as “peace and development” initiatives (PODEC 2011), levels of poverty continue to be among the nation’s highest (Aguilera 2013). Moreover, although confrontations between armed groups have diminished since paramilitary demobilization in 2005, smaller “post-demobilization” groups continue to operate in the region, participating in local cocaine micro-traffic and exercising intermittent acts of symbolic or physical violence against community leaders (ILSA 2012; SAT-Defensoría del Pueblo 2015). Locals suspect that these groups protect the interests of the region’s nascent agro-industrial economy, which expands over lands that were abandoned or dispossessed during armed conflict and which continue to be purchased from campesinos through a combination of force and economic coercion (Li 2009).

This dissertation is about the everyday spatial politics- the ways of claiming and making land and territory through everyday life- exercised by men and women in a village of black campesinos in Montes de María. This Introduction situates the analytical framework through which I examine such politics and connect them to the the ordinary spaces of post-conflict politics. An ethnographic exploration of everyday spatial politics in the village of Paoaltico in the north-western piedmont of Montes de María pushed me to depart from narratives of post-conflict development. I depart also from narratives that consider a ‘re-emergence’ of agrarian struggle in Montes de María in the aftermath of violence (MIC-OPD 2014), based on the increasing visibility of agrarian and territorial claims during the past decade. Both narratives rely on a gaze that reads the conjuncture through linear temporalities, bounded moments, ready-made

spatial categories, and visible instances of ‘politics’ through ‘participation’ or ‘resistance’. This gaze enables a particular construction of a post-conflict conjuncture as a dramatic transition from a past of violence, statelessness, and victim’s invisibility, to a future of peace, development, or rural justice. It not only allows institutions like the Semana Foundation to construct a post-conflict present that occludes the continuation of armed violence and structural inequalities in agrarian spaces, but also conceals alternative conjunctural politics that operate through different temporalities and spatialities beyond those that are readily legible through a detached gaze.

Instead, I propose an alternative analytic frame that allows me to situate this dissertation’s ethnographic present within the entangled temporalities, geographies and politics of a post-conflict conjuncture, while capturing the nuances and complexities of communities’ political practices and subjectivities. The project’s temporal scope not only extends beyond the last decade of peace interventions and diminished violence, but in fact privileges a selective revisiting of moments of the past over an exploration of everyday life in the present. Focusing on the past allows me to tease out the politics of space that unfolded in past moments of intense and violent change. More importantly, this engagement with the past reflects an epistemological, methodological, and theoretical concern with the role of *stories* as an exercise in politics.

In Paloaltico, men and women’s stories of the past open possibilities for understanding agrarian politics in nuanced ways. Stories not only reveal complex politics of land and territory, but storytelling itself constitutes a political-epistemological practice (Gibson-Graham 2008; Bird Rose 2008; Nagar 2013) whereby locals re-make histories and geographies through the register of ordinary life, a register which allows them to claim and exercise their voice in a context in which public narratives of rural space, politics, and histories frequently erase rural subject’s everyday agencies (Das 2007). As signaled in Peluso’s quote at the beginning of this chapter, in

a conjuncture of complex and contingent transformations, the future of agrarian worlds is uncertain. Exploring campesino's practices of storytelling is a politically relevant endeavor that sheds light on how communities inhabit this uncertainty and how the past "haunts" present struggles and shapes imaginations of the future (Valdivia 2012).

Liberal Peace in Montes de María

The integration of post-conflict, capital investment, community participation, and development is not new in Montes de María. Rather, it further deepens a vision of "liberal peace" (Richmond 2009) that has materialized in the region for at least ten years. Generally resulting from peace negotiations between elite actors, liberal peace integrates capitalist development, democratic participation, and the welfare of victims through reparations and community development (Stokke 2011). Montes de María is an exemplary laboratory for liberal peace and post-conflict development. After peace negotiations between the Colombian government and the national paramilitary organization AUC in 2005, a series of laws, institutions, and programs was created for providing state attention to victimized rural populations. These include the Law of Justice and Peace (2005), constitutional court decrees for attention to displaced persons (C-370 of 2006) and the Law of Victims and Land Restitution (1448 of 2011), among others, which prompted the creation of National Victims Unit, National and Regional Victims Forums, the Office for Land Restitution, the National Commission for Historical Memory, and the National Commission for Reparation and Reconciliation. Between 2002 and 2010, the Colombian Government, through a cooperation agreement with the European Commission, invested over 343, 000 Euros in social development in the region. Between 2004 and 2010, 123 development aid projects were implemented in just four of its municipalities. Donors included USAID, European Commission, UNICEF, UNHCR, IOM and development agencies of Switzerland,

Spain, Canada, Japan, Sweden, the Netherlands, Italy, and Belgium (PODEC 2011). More recently, Montes de Maria was one of Colombia's five regions selected for USAID's USD \$67, 500,000 Land and Rural Development Project, implemented between 2013 and 2018 (USAID 2017). Together, these 'peace-making' projects and institutions aim at reversing the effects of armed violence among victimized rural communities and generating conditions for longstanding peace in formerly conflict-ridden regions.

Alongside these forms of victims-centered development, state and private actors are promoting a model of rural development that favors export-oriented industrial agriculture, land concentration, and capital-intensive production (Haugaard et al. 2013; Castillo 2016; Ojeda et al. 2015). The state has explicitly attributed a strategic role to agro-industry in the implementation of victim's restitution and reparation policies (Government of Colombia-DNP 2010, 154), calling on agri-business entrepreneurs to participate in the formerly conflict-ridden region's post-conflict era through private-community partnerships and the generation of jobs (Portafolio 2016).

In Montes de María, official plans and policies include support to both large-scale plantations *and* to individually titled peasant lands, collective titles for afro-descendant communities, and a collective Campesino Reserve Zone (Zona de Reserva Campesina). However, agribusiness are the most influential actors in Montes de María's post-conflict spatial ordering. This is evidenced, for instance, in unprecedented rates of oil palm expansion (CINEP 2012), the presence of three of Colombia's most prominent agro-food conglomerates, and a dramatic process of land grabbing by mid-range agro-industrial firms 2007 (ILSA 2012).

The recent peace agreement between the Colombian government and left-wing guerrilla FARC, signed in 2016, adds yet another layer to the already complex panorama of institutional efforts at peace and post-conflict in the region. Agrarian issues figure centrally in the Peace

Accord. Its negotiated Policy for Agrarian Development promises to reverse the effects of armed conflict in rural areas and generate structural transformations towards greater justice and equality (Gobierno de Colombia- FARC-EP 2016). It includes a massive land titling scheme and the implementation of campesino-centered participatory Rural Development Plans, among others. At the same time, the Agreement promotes a vision of rural space based on capitalist modernization and fails to question the parallel policies that promote export-oriented agribusiness (Latorre 2017). Montes de María is one of the country's 16 priority regions for the Accord's implementation and one in which the viability of the integrating pro-peasant policies, agribusiness and a generalized vision of modernizing development for rural spaces will be tested.

Peasant politics beyond 'resistance'

As suggested by community leader's reaction in the Convention Center, the entanglements between peace, post-conflict, and agrarian capitalism³ in Montes de María have not gone uncontested. Organizations of peasants, victims and afro-descendants focus on the defense of land, territory and smallholder economies, articulating a vision of 'peace' that can only be attained through the subversion of structural inequalities in agrarian society. By failing to support small holder agriculture and territorial autonomy, they argue, certain forms of peace-making enable the continuation of dispossession, which now occurs not through massive displacements or direct armed force, but by economic coercion, subtler forms of violence, and the erosion of peasant modes of production (MIC-OPD 2014). Such critiques are becoming

³ Following Valdivia (2010), agrarian capitalism here is defined as agriculture based on a combination of wage labor, informal labor practices that generate income to family economies, privately owned lands used for production, the use of technology to extract value from land and labor, and dependence on national and international markets to sell the commodities produced (415).

increasingly visible in regional and national-level media, influencing public opinion on the role of corporate interests in post-conflict rural space.⁴

The growing visibility of agrarian and territorial claims after decades of violent silencing has led academics and movements to consider a ‘re-emergence’ of agrarian struggle in Montes de María (MIC-OPD 2014), focusing on the agrarian and territorial claims put forward by movements and community organizations (Avila 2015; Rodríguez 2016; Herrera et al. 2016). Indeed, over the past fifteen years, diminishing levels of armed confrontation and increased presence of state and NGOs, have opened spaces for the configuration of a diverse and numerous mosaic of organized political initiatives. Some of these build on longer traditions of peasant struggles, for which the region is emblematic and whose trajectories had been truncated by political violence. Engaging this ‘re-emergence’ re-considers peace and post-conflict not only as imposed discourses that conceal capitalist entanglements but also as political scenarios that open opportunities for the recognition of rural subjects as political actors with territorial, economic and cultural projects that are fundamental for the construction of long- term peace in the country (CNA-CINEP 2014).

While useful for understanding the contested politics of post-conflict in the region, narratives that underscore the ‘re-emergence’ of agrarian struggle are limited by a narrow understanding of “peasant politics” that foregrounds organized forms of political mobilization or ‘resistance’ (Borras et al. 2008; McMichael 2006). Recent literature in agrarian studies highlights the importance of widening the spectrum of possible forms of resistance to contemporary agrarian change (Wolford 2009; Hall et al. 2015). Moving beyond ‘resistance’ as the only or most likely response of rural people to agro-industrial expansion or increasing land concentration

⁴ See, for instance, El Tiempo (2011) or Bermúdez (2015).

(Hall et al. 2015: 470) and questioning the assumption that peasants have a coherent ideology regarding a “peasant way of life” (470), scholars now envision an ample repertoire of peasant political responses to agrarian change. A perceived romantization of peasant social movements, based on their purported rejection of agrarian capitalism has been countered in recent ethnographies of agrarian change (Li 2014) and peasant politics (Wolford 2010). These works reveal, on the one hand, the emergence of complex subjectivities and ambiguous positionings as communities encounter capitalist agrarian relations (Li 2014); and on the other, the importance of individual and collective experiences of agrarian relations in shaping particular perceptions of space and power, moral economies, spatial practices, and particular ways of exercising politics (Wolford 2010).

This dissertation draws on these insights in order to engage afro-campesino’s responses to past and present perceived injustices, situating them in ‘shadowy continuum’ between open rebellion and quiescence or enrollment (Edelman 2005: 332; Scott 1985). Similar to James Scott’s “everyday forms of resistance” (1985), I am interested in widening the spectrum of what is considered ‘political,’ considering a diversity of ways of *becoming political* in concrete historical moments and in the context of the concrete socio- cultural and geographic conditions of a black peasant society in Montes de María (Secor 2004).

Story-ing the everyday spaces of post-conflict

Based on ethnographic fieldwork in Paloaltico, a village of black campesinos in north-western Montes de María, my dissertation project inquires about the politics of land and territory that unfold “below the surface” of what is legible through a simplified understanding of post-conflict agrarian politics. Rather than argue for the inexistence of a conjuncture of post-conflict, I consider post-conflict beyond dramatic events and historical shifts (Li 2014) as the coalescence

of a “particular set of elements, processes, and relations” that come together in a particular time and place (Li 2014: 4). The specific configurations that constitute this conjuncture are not structurally determined, nor are its futures predictable (Hall 1986). Instead, conjunctural constellations are contingent, creating a complex, multi-faceted, and always unstable political terrain (Moore 2005; Gramsci 1971). Conjunctures, moreover, are also spatial, not only because they are historically *and* geographically specific but because their politics often involve conflicting and overlapping spatialities, which bring together diverse ways of producing space through discursive and material practices and cultural understandings (Moore 2005: 3). Hence, a conjunctural reading of the geographies of post-conflict refuses to conceive of ready-made and self-contained spaces, rather envisioning dynamic process of space-making that always involve territorial conflict and whose trajectories are contingent (Hart 2004). For black campesinos in Montes de María, space-making in the midst of conjunctural territorializations by state, armed groups or agro-capitalism, is also an everyday practice of worlding- of struggling to exercise “ways of knowing, practicing, and making distinct worlds” (De la Cadena 2015: 4). Hence, the spatial politics of a conjuncture constitutes a realm of encounters, conflicts, and negotiations between forms of living and knowing. This dissertation conceives afro-campesino’s spatial politics as unfolding through such encounters and contingencies, further exploring how people navigate ‘extraordinary’ moments of violence, recognition, occupation, dispossession and enclosure through ‘ordinary’ practices. In this way, practices of making and defending land, territory, and afro-campesino worlds are conceived as operating within the web of relationships that sustain everyday life (Das 2007). What emerges are subtle, intermittent, unexpected, and often clandestine forms of making and claiming land and territory “in the cracks” of dominant territorializations (De Certeau 1984). Therefore, rather than organized resistance that confronts

and attempts to transform power relations, politics exist in an ambiguous location both within and against dominant spatial and political regimes.

My interest in stories and alternative forms of politics emerged through a fieldwork trajectory marked by disillusionment, doubt, and ethical-political conundrums. A brief recounting of this trajectory helps understand how a project of ‘post conflict agrarian politics’ resulted in a selection of stories of land, territory, and politics in different moments of Paloaltico’s past, which attends to the ways in which they are reanimated in the present.

This project was originally conceived as a multi-scalar and multi-actor exploration of the contested politics and geographies of post-conflict in Montes de María. I was interested in understanding the tensions, conflicts, and articulations between liberal peace, agro-industrial expansion, and the re-emergence of agrarian struggle in the region. I would combine institutional ethnography, collaborative research with regional moments, and village-level ethnography. Paloaltico, a village of 500 black campesinos in the municipality of Marialabaja, in north-western Montes de María, seemed like an ideal place to study the everyday experiences of liberal peace and agrarian capitalism, and to explore the revival of peasant politics as it unfolded on the ground. Its inhabitants had experienced a recent history of violence and massive dispossession. In the present, oil palm plantations surrounded the village, limiting spatial mobility and access to land and resources. Like many other villages in the municipality, Paloaltico had a history of land struggle and violent silencing of peasant claims during paramilitary violence. Asopaloaltico, its recently created community organization was surely an indication of vibrant community politics in the aftermath of war.

It took only a few weeks of living in the village for my analytical framework to tremble and new questions to emerge. ‘Liberal peace’, ‘resistance,’ and ‘post-conflict’ hardly captured

the complex operations of power, politics, memory, and space as they unfolded in everyday life. Material conditions in Paloaltico were extremely precarious. Oil palm plantations encroached on spaces of everyday use and limited access to common resources such as water, fruit, or animal feeding grounds. Land for cultivation was increasingly scarce, and peasant economies were clearly under threat. Families could no longer sustain themselves through local commercialization of crops; non-monetized exchanges were insufficient to ensure livelihoods; and neighboring plantations enrolled most men in precarious wage labor. Youth grew increasingly frustrated with the lack of opportunities for college education or formal labor. Many migrated temporarily to cities to work in construction or commerce. Some joined urban gangs in Cartagena. Drug abuse, alcoholism, and teenage pregnancy in the village were ever-present social concerns. Mothers spent sleepless nights worrying about how to pay for school supplies, tuitions, or graduation attires. Every year, families waited anxiously to receive their “humanitarian aids,” state cash transfers for registered victims aimed to alleviate the economic effects of armed conflict. People spoke about armed conflict as part of the past. However, I heard rumors about nightmares or nervous conditions, which people attributed to the fear that they had endured.

Organized resistance to state or agro capitalism was nowhere to be found. The village Association was hardly operative. Critical voices in the community complained that collective endeavors, such as building a community water well or organizing village saints festivities were threatened by preoccupations with individual gain or simple skepticism of the benefits of collective work. Following dominant institutional narratives, state and NGO officials attributed this apparent lack of politics to the effects of violence on communities’ “social fabric.” I heard other explanations, like the one by 22-year old Duván from Paloaltico, who suspected that people

had “grown accustomed” to injustice, marginality, and being “run over” by power. Sofia, a 36-year old community leader, suggested that agro-industrial entrepreneurs purposefully depoliticized their work force through hiring practices that discriminated against “those who spoke up” or by making them work on Sundays- the community organization’s meeting day.

I could hardly refute these explanations. However, I could not take for granted the assumption of an absence of politics, based on an expectation that ‘politics’ should take particular forms and unfold in particular ways. I knew intuitively that Paloaltico’s men and women were far from powerless. I refused to think of them as lacking agency. The following excerpt from my field notes after months in the village captures my reflections:

It seems like throughout its history, Paloaltico has always lost. It has never been favored by the state, nor by local clientelist networks, nor by the economic system. Nothing has acted in their favor. This reality materializes in concrete ways and also seems to permeate the collective sentiment. My friends in Paloaltico have been like family. Their reality hurts. It hurts that the force and intelligence of women, the creativity and skill of men, the wisdom that comes from patience, are slowly corroded by injustices. Sexual abuse in the schools, frauds in the municipal administration’s distribution of humanitarian aids, six months with no water supply because the water is taken up by the plantations.

And why would we denounce? If nothing ever changes? These questions are common answers at my indignation. Is it possible to simply ‘get used’ to injustice and accept it? Or could it be that the soul becomes scarred, ever deeper and hardened? Violence: physical, symbolic, institutional, psychological, it always leaves scars. It can become ordinary, perhaps, but it never goes unrecognized. Even Mrs. Eloisa, a 59-year old grandmother with the sweetest smile, lost her temper one morning because the neighbor complained that the kids were stealing his tamarind, even though the fruit fell on Eloisa’s yard. She was furious. She even let out the most improper curse words in regional slang. That morning she had woken up with her cables crossed, she later explained. She spent the night thinking about how her daughter had called her to asked her for 100,000 thousand pesos (approximately UDS\$ 35) for tuition and she had no money to give her. It broke her heart.

....

I spent all day peeling tamarind. Sofia and her sisters made the world’s most delicious *bollos* (patties) out of yucca and coconut. The kids went looking for corn leaves to wrap the bollos at Mr. Santos’ who had been harvesting these days. The yucca came from Sofias mother-in-law who lived in the neighboring municipality. Her in-laws had planted the yucca almost two years ago but decided not to harvest cause market prices were so low that it wasn’t worth the effort. We got the strings for tying the *bollos* from a sack that

a neighbor gave us. This collective endeavor took all afternoon and into the night, to the rhythm of urban African music, the most beautiful music in the world. Many listen to it to bring joy to the heart. So do I. Although who knows if my own sufferings are comparable.

(Personal field notes, January 31, 2015)

My field questions around the political emerged through the intimacy of vital encounters like these and were haunted by the embodied perception of the power and agency of the ordinary. Suffering and vitality, passivity and sudden rage, individualism and collective work, beauty, power, the conscious realization of injustice, all ran through the fabric of everyday life. I was faced with a methodological and ethical dilemma. Was I to set on the task of *finding* politics in unexpected places? Could I detach myself from the intimate space of the ordinary to which I had been welcomed and ‘read’ politics through an ethnographer’s gaze?

What led me out of this tangle was, again, intuition. Haunted by these questions, I let myself be carried away by the rhythms and contingencies of everyday life. Despite the anxieties about the future and the experience of present vulnerabilities, everyday life continued and in this realm, people were powerful. They posed critiques, found ways to make ends meet, subverted state rationales and capitalist logics in small and imperceptible ways, and sometimes they engaged in actual protest, individually or collectively. What I realized by continuing to partake in the ordinary was that there was nothing to *look* for. I simply had to *listen*. And what emerged were stories.

In kitchens, plots, paths, and back yards, people told stories about Paloaltico’s past. Paloaltico’s origin in the highlands, its resettlement during agrarian reform, and armed conflict, among others, were reanimated in the present through lively and often humorous storytelling. Although narrating experiences of up-rootedness, disavowal, and dispossession, stories were far from tragic. In fact, as people’s voices articulated memories of the past in light of present

circumstances, what stood out were not extraordinary events or narratives of “violence,” “state,” “land,” “territory” or “resistance,” but the ordinary ways in which men and women continued to “stich together” life- and worlds- through everyday social and spatial relationships (Das 2007: 161). Watching crops grow after enduring the hardships of landlessness; the birth of a child as a reason to stay in place during violence; abandoning a plot after countless nights of hearing the sound of guerrilla’s boots; fighting with paramilitaries over where they left their dirty uniforms; perceiving a ‘good’ landowner on the basis of friendly conversation; keeping one’s word as the foundation for a successful land occupation; being able to ‘let yourself go’ as you harvest rice; or women gathering to tell stories by the water well- these embodied experiences, common sense interpretations, everyday activities and moral negotiations revealed the agency required to maintain relations of everyday life throughout times in which taken-for granted worlds were under threat (Das 2015, 71).

By engaging the ordinary as a site of knowledge production, the stories presented in this dissertation suggest an afro-campesino spatial politics that is often subtle, ambiguous, indirect, and anonymous, but which has allowed the people from Paloaltico to continue to create spaces and relations of life - or to “make worlds” (De la Cadena 2015: 4)- throughout spatial-temporal conjunctures of state, armed groups, or agro-capitalist territorialization. In the present, men and women’s storytelling in Paloaltico itself constitutes a spatial-political practice that re-inscribes people’s lived experiences onto contemporary spaces of exclusion and re-tells history through a register in which ordinary men and women are active protagonists- subjects of power and agency. In this sense, storytelling shapes political subjectivities, performs spatial-political claims, and re-signifies space and history from the perspective of those who dwell *within* a conjuncture of change and uncertainty.

The following chapters aim at opening the register through which we read the conjuncture of post-conflict in Colombia's agrarian spaces and its political challenges- and thereby how we understand rural spaces, subjects, and politics more broadly. The consequence of this opening, I hope, is not that more guests are invited to Cartagena's Convention Center and locals have an opportunity to speak at the podium. Rather, my hope is to successfully join the voices of Paloaltico's storytellers by offering the reader the possibility of an intimate connection with the ways in which Paloaltico's men and women read the world, make life and exercise power.

Outline of chapters

I have divided the dissertation's structure into six chapters plus my conclusion. Following this Introduction, Chapter Two offers a descriptive narrative of geographies and histories that come together to form the present in Paloaltico. It is an intentional selection of spatial, economic, political, and cultural moments- Agrarian Struggle, the Black Piedmont, Agrarian Reform, Armed Conflict, and Oil Palm Plantations- intended to contextualize the 'post-conflict' moment in which the subsequent chapters unfold. Unlike the following chapters, the historical narrative of this chapter emphasizes actors, events, and linear trajectories of change. Similarly, village, municipal and regional geographies are viewed from a "window"- a metaphor intended to signal a particular epistemic perspective that differs from grounded accounts of the ordinary, lived, and embodied geographies of Paloaltico's inhabitants, but which nonetheless connects the reader with the social and spatial textures of place and history.

Chapter Three focuses on INCORA # 1, Colombia's first large-scale project of agrarian modernization and land titling in the context of the 1961 Agrarian Reform. INCORA #1 resulted in the flooding of the village of Palo Alto Hicotea and the creation of present-day Paloaltico as

its residents' were resettled in the lowlands. At the same time, it marked Paloaltero's first encounter with a form of state territorialization that offered opportunities for black campesinos to be enrolled in the logics and practices of agricultural modernization and development. The chapter untangles the negotiations around Paloalteros' enrolment in *parcelaciones*- government schemes of land titling and campesino recognition. Thus far relatively autonomous and recently uprooted and tricked by the state, the experience of people of Paloaltico reveals the contested and incomplete character of state territorialization in the context of modernizing agrarian reform. It further shows the complex political responses of black campesinos to state recognition and agrarian change. Campesinos navigated the state's disavowal of *afro*- peasant practices and histories through the overt refusal of titles; attempts at inclusion; and subtle re-appropriations of the meaning of *parcela* and *parcelero*, which ultimately allowed them to re-create social and cultural practices of traditional agrarian life within the spaces of agrarian modernization.

Chapter Four offers an ethnographic account of the ordinary geographies of political violence as they were experienced, perceived and actively shaped by the people of Paloaltico- a community that resisted displacement and remained "in place" during armed conflict. The voices of "those who stayed" question the widely accepted narrative that armed actors conquered Colombian rural territories (Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica 2010; 2015) and local communities were "de-territorialized" (Restrepo and Rojas 2004; Oslender 2008). The chapter argues that rather than producing "geographies of terror," spatial exclusion, expulsion, and dispossession (Oslender 2008), violence produced complex space-making processes in which both armed actors and community members were active territorial agents. This productive capacity of violence is revealed through the register of ordinary life and attention to embodied experience. Based on women's stories of plot abandonment, everyday spatial movements, and

the micro- territorial struggles over the “homeplace” (hooks 1991), the chapter shows how the spaces of village, homes, paths, and *parcelas* in their material and imaginative configurations became arenas for the exercise of politics.

Chapter Five continues to discuss the spatial politics of political violence. However, rather than focusing on ordinary territorial struggles, it engages the relationship between land, violence, and politics by analyzing the transformations of Marialabaja’s land orders produced by armed conflict. Almost 20 years of political violence not only produced land dispossession, but also created favorable conditions for a wave of unprecedented land occupations enabled by guerrilla intimidation to landowning elites. I use a moral economy framework to understand the strategies that shaped land occupations in the context of armed conflict and to situate land politics in the morally-mediated web of personal and social relations of agrarian society. Based on an ethnography of collaborative mapping, I offer a textured analysis of land occupations in the early 1990s and of the dispossessions that followed. This analysis not only disentangles the complex and ambiguous politics that emerged as campesinos attempted to gain greater access to land *through* and *within* traditional power relations, but also sheds light on the moral and emotional dimensions of land dispossession and how they continue to shape political responses to post-conflict agro- capitalism in the present. The chapter reveals how the tragic lessons of war underlie campesino’s refusal to openly challenge the current order of land and power. At the same time, it suggests that contemporary political positions and actions constitute intermittent and silent refusals to this order.

Chapter Six continues the discussion on contemporary responses to agrarian transformations exploring how gendered knowledge, agrarian politics, and territory come together through women’s stories and storytelling. It argues that, while escaping coherent

knowledges and public narratives of “territory,” women’s stories are profoundly territorial. On the one hand, stories reveal the many ways in which women’s bodies and social practices formed and operationalized “alternative territories” (Giesecking 2016) by inhabiting places through everyday movements and sociality. These practices symbolically and materially transformed spaces where dominant territorial regimes inhibited local spatial agencies. On the other hand, stories themselves produce territory: storytelling is an emplaced and embodied activity that responds to the conditions of agro-capitalist expansion. Through stories, women claim their role as “knowers of the land” and inscribe personal experiences and ordinary practices of care and reproduction onto contemporary spaces of exclusion. The chapter adds to current theoretical debates around “territory.” Drawing on Latin American intellectual-activist understandings of territory, it emphasizes the creative potential of everyday socio-spatial practices in nurturing and protecting territories of collective afro-campesino life (Escobar 2008; Porto Goncalves 2012). However, rather than emphasizing the use of “territory” as a claim to rights based on cultural difference, it draws of feminist geographies and geographies of storytelling to discusses the territorial agency of bodies and stories in everyday life.

Finally, the conclusion summarizes this dissertations findings and offers a reflection on the “rhizomatic” politics that are not manifest at the surface in coherent or complete form.

CHAPTER TWO: A WINDOW INTO PLACE

This chapter describes the geographies, and histories that come together to form the present in Paloaltico, a village of approximately 500 people located in the north-western flanks of the Caribbean mountains of Montes de María, where I conducted the majority of my study. The chapter situates “the present” as relations between village, municipal, and regional geographies, as well in relation to histories that date back to colonial times and include periods of intense violence. It is not a comprehensive history nor a detailed account of the physical and social geographies of Marialabaja and the north-western piedmont. Rather, it is an intentional selection of spatial, economic, political, and cultural moments -Agrarian Struggle, the Black Piedmont, Agrarian Reform, Armed Conflict, and Oil Palm Plantations- intended to contextualize the ‘post-conflict’ moment in which the subsequent chapters unfold, and to situate Paloaltero’s memories, experiences, and spatial politics in place and history. Unlike the following chapters, the historical narrative of this chapter emphasizes actors, events, and linear trajectories of change. Similarly, as its title suggests, its geographies are viewed from a “window”- a metaphor intended to signal a particular epistemic perspective that differs from grounded accounts of the ordinary, lived and embodied geographies of Paloaltico’s inhabitants, but which nonetheless connects the reader with the social and spatial textures of place and history.

Paloaltico was founded in 1968 as a result of the flooding and resettlement of the former village Palo Alto Hicotea, a highland community of black campesinos. The village is adjacent to the Reservoir of Arroyogrande, inaugurated in 1969 after engineering works repressed over six

downward flowing streams of the north-western piedmont, flooding Palo Alto and 1, 200 hectares of cultivated lands (INCORA 1968). Elders in Paloaltico remember seeing how water slowly covered plots of plantain, rice and yam. Today, when reservoir waters are low, they can sometimes see the tombs of the old town's cemetery standing out above the surface.



Figure 1. Reservoir of Arroyogrande and north-western mountains. Source: Author photo.

The reservoir is one of the two artificial bodies of water that source the Irrigation District of Marialabaja, an area of 19, 600 hectares of fertile lowlands covered by a network of 3, 7 Km of irrigation canals (Figure 2). Like the Reservoir, the village lies exactly where the agricultural mountains of Montes de María's north-western piedmont meet the District lowlands in the municipality of Marialabaja. This location makes it a 'hinge' site between high- and lowlands, a condition that has symbolic and material importance and which has shaped Paloaltico's history since its resettlement.

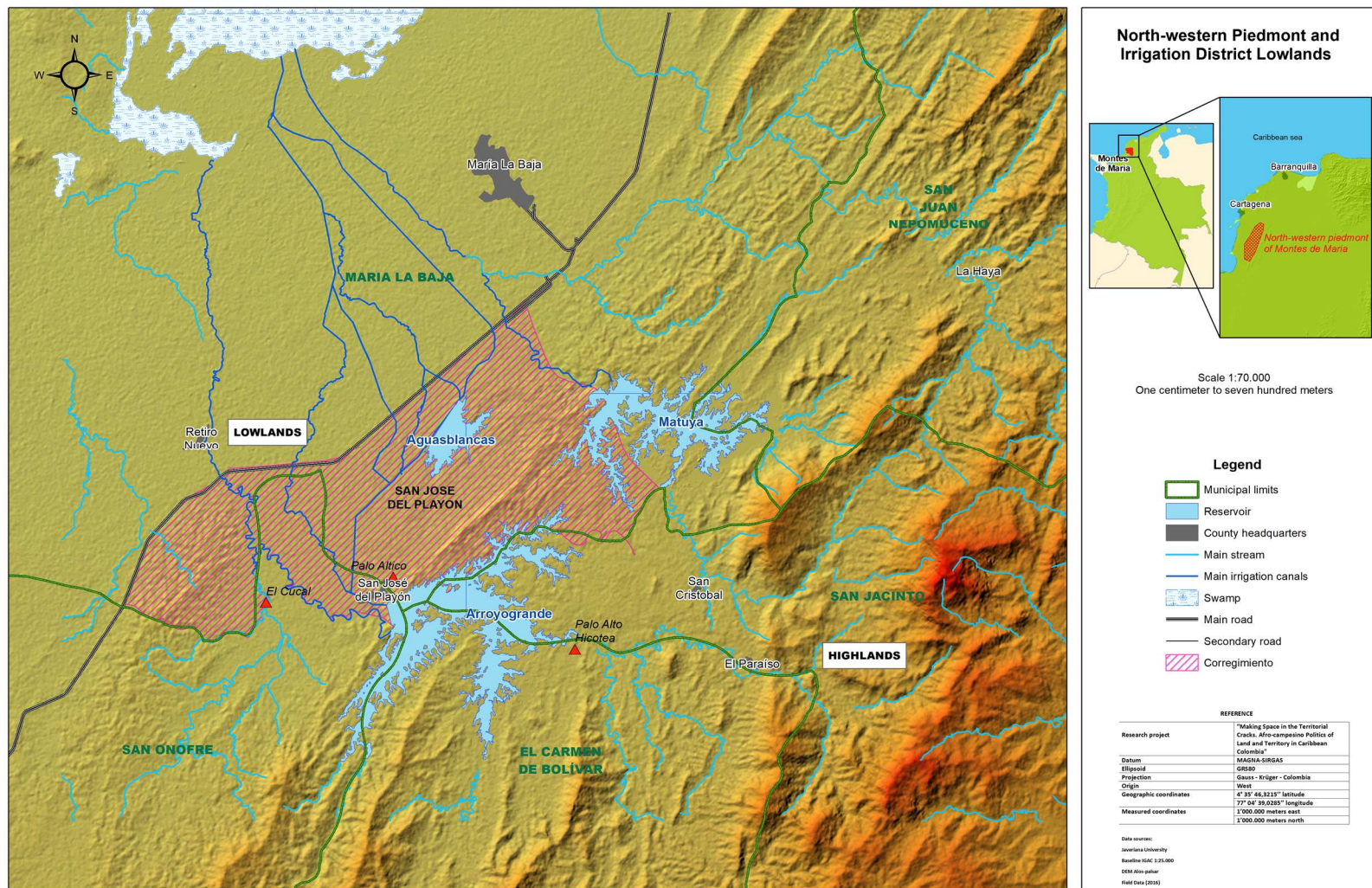


Figure 2. Map of north-western Piedmont and Irrigation District lowlands

Paloaltico is close enough to lowland roads, paths, and canals to be integrated to social, commercial, and political networks of lowland Marialabaja, an area that in turn connects Montes de María to the Caribbean coastline and the state capital Cartagena. It belongs to the lowland county or *corregimiento* of San José del Playón and neighbors the county's main town (Figure 2). For many 'playoneros,' Paloaltico is merely a neighborhood of Playón. But the people of Paloaltico have a different opinion. The story of Paloaltico's origin is alive in the collective imagination of its inhabitants, old and young. This story shapes the village's distinct identity as well as its imagined and material geographies. Paloaltico is a 'piedmont' village. Its inhabitants frequently cross reservoir waters to cultivate in the mountains; exchanges of people and goods with highland villages are frequent; and the memories of life in the highlands are alive in everyday stories.

Social, economic, and material conditions in Paloaltico are similar to most lowland villages in Marialabaja. This predominantly Afro-descendant municipality⁵ is amongst the poorest in Colombia's Caribbean region. 87% of its inhabitants live below the multidimensional poverty line, 59, 9% have unmet basic needs and 93% have no access to potable water (DANE 2005). Whereas in highland and piedmont areas, economies are predominantly agrarian, lowland family economies are mixed, labor is intermittent and people move permanently between urban and rural worlds. Men combine temporary agricultural wage labor with autonomous production for subsistence and commercial purposes; male youth help in family plots and also work as "mototaxi" drivers or wage laborers. Women engage in petty commerce of fish or agricultural products, in addition to activities for the family's social reproduction. Motorcycles flow

⁵According to the national census of 2005, 97% of Marialabaja's population identifies as afro-descendant (DANE 2005).

constantly from villages to the municipal center, which offers markets, health services, municipal state offices, and higher education institutes. Buses leave every half hour from the town center to the state capital, Cartagena. Most families have close relatives in Cartagena, visit the city regularly and sometimes stay for months or years for temporary work in businesses or domestic labor.



Figure 3. Women in Paloaltico carrying water from the reservoir. Source: Author photo.



Figure 4. Martín combines wage labor and moto-taxi driving. Source: Author photo.

Agrarian struggle in Montes de María

Just 95 Km south of the coastal city of Cartagena lie the Caribbean mountains of Montes de María, an area of 6,300 Km² of mountainous agricultural lands, cattle-ranching savannahs, and flooded plains. Its 596,914 rural inhabitants are ethnically diverse, with afro-descendant, indigenous and mestizo populations (INCODER, 2011).



Figure 5. Map of Montes de María in the Colombian Caribbean. Source: Made by author.

Dominant descriptions of Montes de María underscore the region's tragic agrarian history, making it an emblematic case of the imbrications between peasant struggle, armed violence, and land dispossession that characterize the past forty years of Colombian political history (Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica 2010; Palacios 1995). This narrative, while reflective of a general regional trend, diverts attention from Montes de María's longer and heterogeneous histories of settlement and their resulting ethno-racial diversity (Rodríguez 2016), and occludes unique sub-regional political histories. This chapter includes both regional-level dynamics and the particularities of the north-western or 'Black Piedmont,' the municipality of Marialabaja and the village of Palolatico.

Three interacting elements condition political- territorial dynamics in Montes de María: an agrarian structure historically biased towards land concentration; a political elite that holds on to a semi-feudal political patronage system based on *hacienda* labor; and a class of small holders whose political claims have been violently silenced either by landowning elites or armed groups (Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica 2010). An agrarian history marked by the inequalities and oppressions of *hacienda* economies established since the 18th century (Van Ausdal 2009; Reyes Posada 1978; Fajardo 2002) set the conditions for recurrent peasant uprisings since the 1930s and made the region the epicenter of the Colombian peasant movement -ANUC⁶- in the second half of the 20th century (Zamosc 1986; Fals Borda 1986). Between 1971 and 1973 more than 400 *haciendas* were taken over by ANUC and as a result, over 300 titles were allocated to peasants, along with loans that aimed to intensify small-scale production and export-oriented cash crop production (Reyes Posada 1978). This scheme was followed by the backlash of landed elites, who attempted to reverse land allocations and ensure the economic and political subordination of the peasantry through the combined application of violent force, political patronage, and legal means for land appropriation (Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica 2010; Zamosc 1986). Land politics between the 1970s and early 2000s were intertwined with armed conflict between left-wing guerrillas supportive of peasant claims, right-wing paramilitaries protecting elite interests, and the Colombian Army. However, as occurred in other parts of the country, the territorial dynamics of armed conflict in the region did not only follow ideological motives, but also geo-strategic and economic ones. The latter were particularly important for creating different sub-regional and municipal trajectories of conflict, as will be discussed further in this chapter. Similarly, the relationship between armed actors and local populations was

⁶ Asociación Nacional de Usuarios Campesinos- National Association of Peasant Users.

ambiguous and complex. Not only did armed groups' territorializing strategies differ greatly between each other, but strategies shifted in time and each group was internally heterogeneous.

The Black Piedmont of Montes de María

The north-western piedmont and its adjacent lowlands, while sharing elements with the regional-level account above, are also quite distinct. Inhabited by a predominantly afro-descendant population, they constitute a 'black' Montes de María that resulted from histories of marroonage and spontaneous settlement of free blacks during colonial times, which made this part of the region a "frontier of resistance" to the colonial authorities' attempts at ordering space and rural peoples (Helg 2004).

The term "Black Piedmont" is not one of official academic or institutional usage. It is also not an informal local toponym. I suggest this term based on my own research into the region's ethno-cultural and racial dynamics, its histories of settlement and the memories of its inhabitants. On the other hand, the term signals a political gesture aimed at acknowledging this area's distinctiveness, in contrast to institutional imaginaries of Montes de María that homogenize its population as simply "campesino"- a class-based category traditionally associated with mestizo populations. Below, I offer a brief description of the Black Piedmont's unique history and geography.

Located between iconic Palenque de San Basilio, one of the most important maroon settlements in the Spanish Americas and the only to maintain a live Spanish-bantú language (Cassiani 2014; De Friedeman and Patiño 1983) and the mountainous areas of the municipality of San Onofre (Figure 2), the Piedmont connects the central mountains and eastern flanks of Montes de María to the lowlands of the municipality of Marialabaja. In turn, the Marialabaja

lowlands connect rural Montes de María to the roads, canals, and marshes that connect this rural space to Cartagena, the coastal state capital.

During colonial times, Marialabaja's waterways constituted natural escape routes for runaway slaves or "maroons" from the 16th to the late 18th century (Navarrete 2003). During that time, maroons formed fortified settlements, *palenques*, in lowland and piedmont areas, creating a regional network of autonomous black settlements (Cassiani 2014). Upon recurrent attacks and eventual destruction of *palenques* by the Spanish military, maroon families and individuals continued to populate the fertile and forested mountains, this time through smaller, disperse communities, *rochelas*, where blacks, mestizos, and mulattoes refused to be incorporated into colonial settlement schemes (Conde 1999: 45).

After the abolition of slavery in 1851, such population patterns continued, with communities now joined by free blacks and mestizos coming from central and eastern areas. Hence, through centuries of maroon and post-emancipation settlement, this sub-region was characterized by the presence of relatively autonomous black peasantry, which engaged in intermittent and selective relations of labor and commerce with lowland haciendas in the state of Bolívar and the broader Caribbean region (Conde 1999).

For instance, during the 19th century, men worked intermittently as wage workers in lowland sugar and cattle estates of the state of Bolívar. In the early 20th century, many migrated seasonally to work in other agricultural areas in the Caribbean region, such as the banana plantations of the state of Magdalena from the 1890s to the 1950s (Olivero 2004) or the cotton plantations of the state of Cesar in the 1950s and 1960s. Even before the abolition of slavery, free blacks from mountain settlements engaged in commercial exchanges of agricultural products with lowland haciendas (Navarrete 2003).

This was unlike southern and eastern mestizo-indigenous areas of Montes de María, where the Spanish crown's campaigns of forced resettlement between the 1740s and the 1780s effectively concentrated dispersed indigenous and mestizo population into towns and villages (Conde 1999). In those areas, colonial control over agrarian space and populations enabled the later expansion of agricultural and cattle-ranching estates since the early 19th century (Hernandez 2008).

According to oral accounts obtained in participatory mapping sessions in Paloaltico, by the mid-20th century, piedmont villages such as Palo Alto Hicotea, Paraíso, and San Cristóbal, were relatively dynamic agricultural, commercial, and cultural centers where flows of people and goods from the broader afro-descendant area of piedmont and lowlands came together. Although not all inhabitants owned land, access through different social arrangements was relatively widespread, and landownership was distributed among a relatively large group of local families.

Small and mid-scale agricultural production co-existed with intermittent wage labor through seasonal migrations to different parts of the Caribbean. In addition, *intra*-regional movements were particularly dynamic. Indeed, it was the flow of people and goods that *made* the Black Piedmont, as people from different afro-descendant villages came together for baseball games and village festivities; seasonal workers came from the lowlands to harvest rice; and women walked the land and gathered to prepare traditional foods.

The Black Piedmont was territorialized as black space through movement, encounter, and exchange. By engaging in cultural, agrarian and commercial relations, black communities of the piedmont differentiated the area as an afro-peasant territory that was distinct from lowland sugar and cattle estates. The most emblematic of these was the 50, 000 hectare Hacienda Sincerín, owned by one of the richest white families of the state of Bolivar and source of significant

capital from large scale sugar production in the first half of the 20th century (Meisel 1980).⁷ This differentiation also operated with respect to mestizo, indigenous, and white populations lying to the east. Although commercial and political relations with predominantly ‘white’ towns lying to the east were relatively dynamic, and despite the existence of inter-racial marriages, the population remained distinctly afro-descendant and identities as black villages were recreated through cultural practices that differed from neighboring non-black populations. In this way, the Piedmont remained part of a broader cultural and demographic afro-descendant network that extended from the coastal city of Cartagena all the way to this precise area of Montes de María.

Agrarian reform in Marialabaja and Piedmont villages

The arrival of the Colombian Institute for Agrarian Reform (INCORA) in 1965 marked the beginning of a drastic shift in the Piedmont’s agrarian history, marked by intense state presence and a dramatic re-ordering of space for agrarian modernization. INCORA was a national level entity in charge of implementing the 1961 Law of Agrarian Reform. Its presence in Marialabaja and Piedmont villages was related to the implementation of Project INCORA # 1, the first large-scale state intervention for agrarian reform in the country. The Project entailed a massive modernization scheme which involved the construction of a 25, 000 hectare irrigation district⁸ for small-scale rice production and cattle grazing, as well as land titling, credits, technology, and the creation of peasant cooperatives (INCORA 1968). INCORA # 1 embodied the failed promises of mid-20th century rural development in the global South (Shiva 1993). Between the early 1970s and mid-1980s, hundreds of campesinos received land titles, credits and

⁷ See Chapter Five for a more detailed description of Hacienda Sincerín.

⁸ The district was originally designed to cover 25,000 hectares, but technical difficulties limited its area to 19,600 hectares.

technological inputs, turning this region into a ‘successful case’ of land reform (CINEP 2012).⁹ But despite its promises to improve campesino livelihoods, agrarian modernization also led to social and spatial fragmentation, class differentiations among the peasantry, and credit-induced debt (Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica 2010). The piedmont landscape was drastically transformed, as the construction of two massive reservoirs for the lowland irrigation district repressed downward flowing streams, flooding several towns and entire agrarian landscapes. The two reservoirs created a physical border between the highland municipalities of Carmen de Bolívar and San Jacinto, and the lowland municipality of Marialabaja, which was now traversed by a network of lowland district canals.

⁹ The perception of land reform’s ‘success’ in Marialabaja is widespread among contemporary peasant organizations and activists and is part of a broader historical narrative in which a period of flourishing peasant economies was interrupted by the start of armed conflict in the late 1980s.

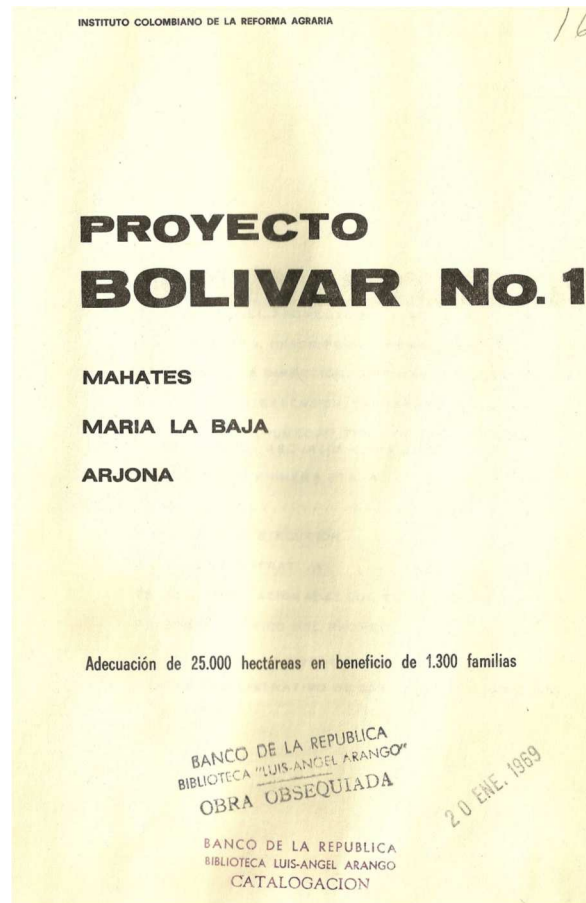


Figure 6. Front cover of INCORA publication on Project INCORA #1. Source: INCORA #1 (INCORA 1968).

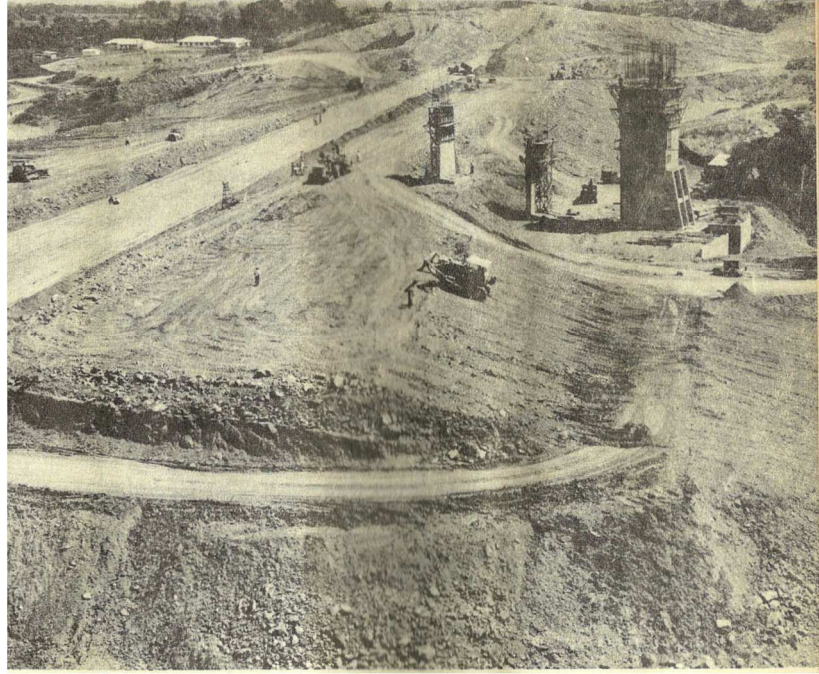


Figure 7. Construction of the Reservoir of Arroyogrande. Source: INCORA #1 (INCORA 1968).

The irrigation district displaced several villages and disrupted traditional patterns of afro-descendant settlement along the piedmont streams. Re-located to the lowlands, locals were partially enrolled in land titling and agricultural production schemes that underscored productivity and efficiency, and disregarded traditional *afro-campesino* agrarian practices, a topic explored in Chapter Three. Despite short periods of economic success, commercial rice-growing projects failed with the difficulties of imposed cooperative schemes and the opening of the agrarian economy to the global market in the early 1990s.

The history of Paloaltico is exemplary of modernizing development's "collateral damage" (Martin 2011). The village was created in 1968 as a result of the flooding of the former highland town of Palo Alto Hicotea. Upon negotiations with the state, the town was resettled in an area adjacent to the district reservoir in the county or *corregimiento* of San José del Playón. Despite monetary compensation to those who owned lands in the highlands, locals argue that negotiations were highly imbalanced and perceived resettlement as a violent and abrupt

disruption of what is today imagined as ‘the good life’ in the mountains. Landlessness became widespread and without an established network of social relations with lowland landowners, Paloalteros’ access to land became almost exclusively dependent on state recognition and the possibility of land titling. Of the more than fifty families, only seven obtained titles in 1973. This occurred after a process in which most families refused to be enrolled in titling schemes. According to popular knowledge, refusal was based on the perception that titling entailed bondage to the state, a position informed by a complex coalescence between cultural memories of enslavement and discourses that linked agrarian reform to communist state totalitarianism put forward by local agrarian elites. After some years Paloalteros came to regret this decision, but land was no longer available for all.

Since then, Paloalteros have engaged in continuous attempts to search out land within dominant spatial orders from which they were, and continue to be, recurrently excluded.

Armed conflict in Marialabaja and Playón

In the 1980s, the arrival of Colombia’s armed political conflict to the municipality of Marialabaja *again* drastically changed agrarian life for black peasants in Montes de María. Although insurgent groups existed in Montes de María since the early 1980s, local accounts date the first direct experiences of guerrilla presence in the municipality of Marialabaja to 1989. Armed forces included several different actors with shifting territorial strategies and spaces of operation. In Marialabaja, two guerrilla groups were protagonists: the Ejército de Liberación Nacional (ELN) and the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia- Ejército Popular (FARC-EP).¹⁰ Their operations were followed by counter-insurgency efforts on the part of the

¹⁰ Other guerrilla groups operated in Montes de María, including the Movimiento de Izquierda Revolucionaria (MIR Pátria Libre), the Movimiento Unido Revolucionario, the Partido Revolucionario de los Trabajadores (PRT), the Corriente de Renovación Socialista (CRS), as well as the Ejército Popular de Liberación (EPL). However, these

Colombian Army the paramilitary group Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia (AUC), positioning locals in the middle of violent territorializing strategies (Figure 8).

In 1989, the ELN, with strong influences from the Cuban Revolution and liberation theology, installed mobile campsites in lowland *corregimientos*, including San José del Playón. The ELN dominated lowlands adjacent to the northwestern Piedmont from 1989 to 1999. Through a strategy that emphasized social and ideological elements over militaristic territorial control, this guerrilla group was able to operate as a social and political force, exerting pressure over large land-owners and enjoying relative support from the local *campesino* population, albeit one that was limited by local rejection of their use of arms and fear of landowners retaliation.

ELN's presence had important implications for local land relations. In the early 1990s, it influenced a second wave of land titling by INCORA. Contrary to the state-led titling schemes of the late 1960s and early 1970s, these were a consequence of landowners' abandonment of lands due to guerrilla harassment, which was followed by campesino occupations. ELN not only pressured landowners but mediated negotiations between campesinos and INCORA, leading to the redistribution of over 2000 hectares of occupied lands.¹¹

In the late 1990s, the ELN started retreating from the Marialabaja lowlands, due in part to the appearance in 1999 of the organized paramilitary forces Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia, described below, and to divisions in their national-level organization. After its retreat, the Marxist FARC-EP (from now on, FARC), a *campesino*-based guerrilla created since 1967 in the country's interior, advanced over the lowlands of Marialabaja. Until then, FARC's presence in

groups demobilized in the late 1980s and had little military capacity. It was FARC-EP and ELN that had most influence in the region and would become protagonists of armed struggle in Marialabaja.

¹¹ The topic of land occupations in the context of political violence is developed in Chapter Five.

Marialabaja had been indirect. Its Front 37 had arrived in the highlands of neighboring municipalities El Carmen, San Jacinto and San Juan Nepomuceno (Figure 8) in 1985, slowly increasing its dominance over the north-western Piedmont bordering upper reservoir waters. There, dense forests and difficult access allowed them to use this location as a place of refuge and rearguard.

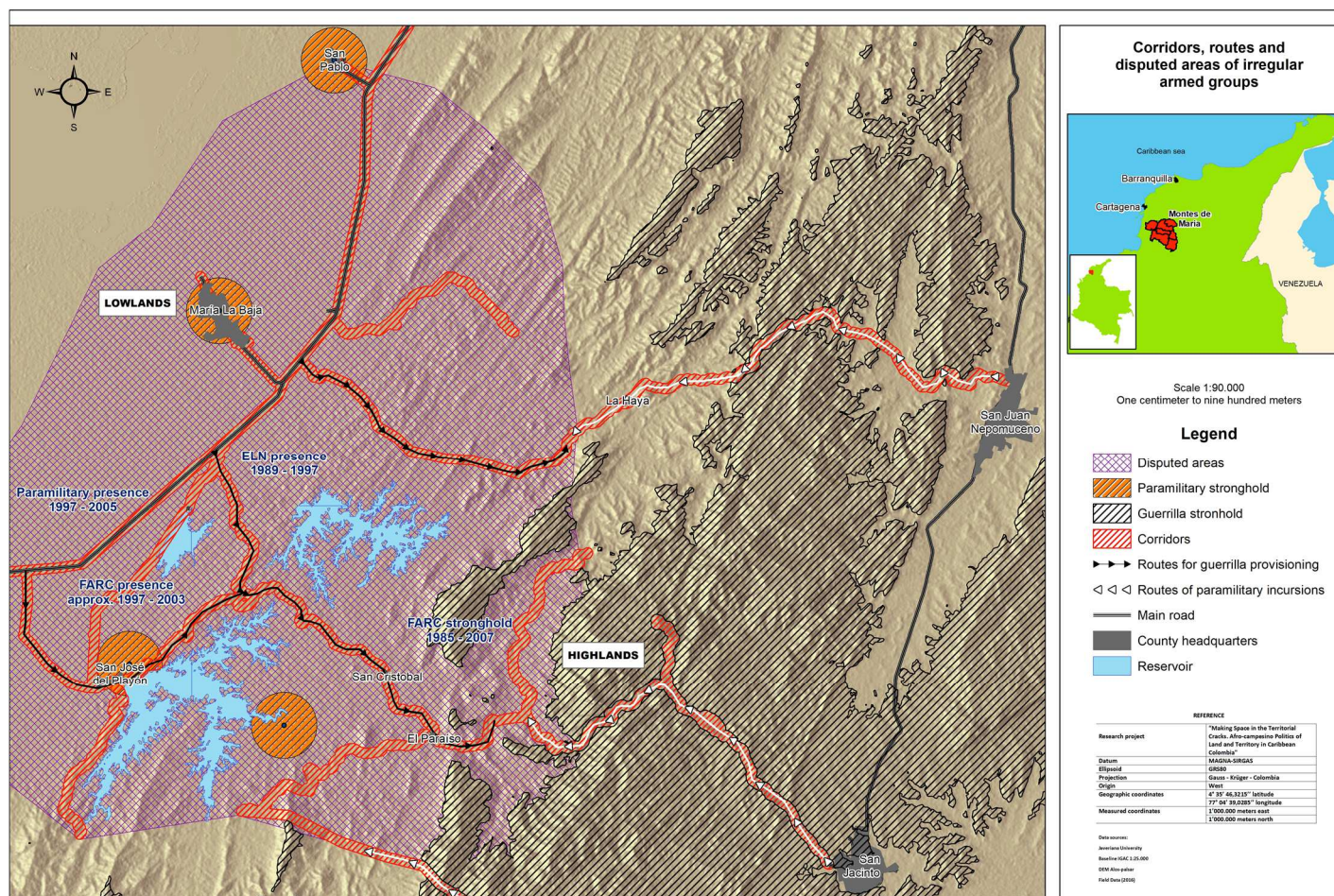


Figure 8. Map of armed actors in Marialabaja (1989-2005).

As the ELN gave way to FARC, social and political involvement of guerrillas in lowland agrarian relations in shifted dramatically. While in the highlands FARC had attempted communities' ideological enrollment and influenced community organizing since the mid 1980s, in Marialabaja, by contrast, FARC prioritized military strategies of intelligence, defense, and procurement of basic goods. This difference was due in part to Marialabaja's location, closer to main roads and coastal cities, making it a strategic site for provisioning. It also obeyed the shifting context of armed conflict: while in the mid 1980s, FARC had little military opposition, by the late 1990s, the paramilitary threat was imminent and the defense of highland refuge sites a priority.

Today, campesinos, state officials, and agrarian elites all agree that FARC was more interested in the self-procurement of goods and finances than in land redistribution and social justice.¹² FARC was not involved in community-level affairs and did not attempt a political mediation with INCORA or local government in favor of campesinos. At the same time, FARC continued to harass landowners through cattle robberies, extortions, and kidnappings, which resulted in the abandonment of landholdings.

For middle- and large- scale landowners, political and commercial elites in the region, guerrilla presence was experienced as a physical, economic, and political threat. Some responded with fear-based acquiescence and flight. Others supported an armed counter-insurgency strategy, which not only targeted guerrilla members but also campesino and civic leaders (Millán 2015). First accounts of hitmen (*sicarios*) and private armed forces date from the early 1990s, when elites hired *sicarios* for selective assassinations of civic leaders and individuals perceived as

¹² Local interviews indicate that while FARC was not engaged in an ideologically-driven strategy of support for land distribution, it did become involved in particular cases of land occupation in the late 1990s. In such cases, FARC offered campesinos their armed power to threaten, extort, or even assassinate particular land owners and managers.

possible guerrilla collaborators.¹³ Landowners also used armed security guards to threaten land occupiers, often acting in collaboration with local police.

In 1997 a national-level federate paramilitary group, the Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia (AUC), first appeared in Montes de María, responding to a national-level strategy of organization and intensification of paramilitary violence. Operating through Front Héroes de Montes de María, AUC not only had the military objective of defeating FARC Fronts 35 and 37. Rather, like in other areas of the country, paramilitaries sought to create a long-term social, economic, and political regime. This regime was based on the repression of social protest, the installation of conservative social values, and the defense of agrarian social hierarchies (Bolívar 2005; Romero 2000). In regions like Montes de María, the latter included the appropriation of land and resources by new agrarian elites coming from the country's interior (ILSA 2012; Gutiérrez Sanín 2014).

Marialabaja was a center for paramilitary operations in Montes de María. Its location, the support of economic and political elites, and the potential productive value of the district's irrigated, fertile lands, made it a strategic space for integrating military, social, and economic goals. The mountainous north-western piedmont and 'hinge' sites neighboring the reservoir, such as the *corregimiento* of San José del Playón, were part of a geostrategic corridor between the central highlands of Montes de María and lowlands of Marialabaja (Figure 8). Controlling the reservoir meant controlling the flow of arms and goods between low- and highlands and was therefore a military priority for all armed actors. Paramilitary interests in the area were also economic. Marialabaja was important for paramilitaries' participation in narco- trafficking

¹³ Selective assassinations were also committed by ELN and FARC guerrillas at the time, targeting those suspected of supporting military or paramilitary forces, including *campesinos*, leaders, politicians and merchants.

economies, their most important source of funding (Duncan 2006). Its position along the main roads of communication between the country's interior and the Caribbean coast made it a strategic corridor for illicit drugs coming from the interior of the country and exported through the coastline of the Gulf of Morrosquillo, south of Cartagena. In addition, arms flowed in the opposite direction coming from the coastline ports, and the entire region constituted a commercial corridor of agro industrial products and cattle (ILSA 2012; Borja Paladini 2009).

Marialabaja also was a potentially profitable reservoir of irrigated agrarian lands. Paramilitary control over irrigation district lands not only helped reverse the process of peasant land occupations and state titling, enabled by guerrilla presence. It also enabled an "agrarian counter-reform" (Grajales 2011), a nation-wide massive process of illegal land transactions whereby thousands of peasants were forced to sell their lands (Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica 2010). In midst of paramilitary violence in Marialabaja, lands acquired through land reform, many of them carrying decades-long debts, became an easy target for dispossession by economic or physical coercion. By threatening and murdering peasant leaders, de-mobilizing peasant organizations, and creating a generalized regime of terror among Marialabaja's rural communities, paramilitaries enabled the rapid appropriation of lands by a new agrarian elite suspected by local campesinos to be linked to narco-trafficking economies. Hence, paramilitaries not only protected the interests of traditional landowners, but supported the establishment of a new elite of "faceless landowners"- an expression used locally by campesinos- whose identities remained largely unknown.

As occurred in other parts of Montes de María and the country, land transactions were used for narco-paramilitary money laundering (Ballvé 2013). Moreover, the combination of coercive and juridical strategies through "the rifle and the title" (Grajales 2011) enabled the

rapid legalization of land transactions and the titling of newly acquired lands through the illegal actions of local and regional Notary and Public Registry offices (Ministerio de Agricultura de Colombia et al. 2011). The integration of these lands into the market set the conditions for a second wave of purchases between 2005 and 2010 that ultimately allowed the establishment of large scale agri-business (Ojeda et al. 2014). In Marialabaja, most of the lands acquired forcibly during paramilitary domination have been sold ‘legally’ to oil palm entrepreneurs from regional capitals and cities in Colombia’s interior (ILSA 2012).

Paramilitary incursions to Marialabaja’s counties and villages started in the early months of 1999, with the arrival of men of the Bloque Canal del Dique belonging to the national-level confederation AUC. Groups of armed blocs followed an east-west route from municipal centers of San Juan, San Jacinto and El Carmen to the lowlands of Marialabaja via the highlands of the Serranía de San Jacinto, an area historically dominated by FARC (Figure 8). Upon their arrival to the piedmont, paramilitary groups typically joined larger headquarters in Marialabaja and participated in surveillance circuits, diverse criminal actions, and routine incursions into villages for the purpose of social control by terrorizing the population. Through a combination of symbolic assertions of terror, brutal acts of physical violence such as massacres and selective assassinations, and the permanent occupation of villages, by 2005 paramilitaries had achieved almost absolute territorial control of the district’s lowlands and piedmont areas.

With the arrival of paramilitaries, the county of Playón reached its highest levels of violence, serving as a site of bloody territorial disputes between paramilitaries, guerrillas, and the Colombian national army. A key event in the collective memory of its inhabitants is the burning of the two wholesale *bodegas* that belonged to the town’s ‘cachacos’¹⁴ on August 17th, 1999.

¹⁴ Informal name given in the Caribbean to people from the interior/ Andean region of the country.

After burning the stores, paramilitaries brutally killed the owner, his brother, and his pregnant sister-in-law by cutting them into pieces with machetes. The following day, paramilitaries burnt three trucks and a bus loaded with agricultural products. These events are exemplary of a widespread strategy used by paramilitaries in points of purported guerrilla provisioning, where a common military tactic of blocking the enemy's procurement of food and basic goods was combined with a strategy of terrorizing local populations through brutal and arbitrary acts of violence.



Figure 9. The 1999 killings in Playón reported by Cartagena newspaper El Universal. Source: San José del Playón Collective Reparation Committee.

Despite the effectiveness of these strategies for instilling fear among locals, paramilitaries did not accomplish complete territorial domination. While guerrilla refuge sites continued to be pushed up the highlands, Playón and other places located between high-and lowlands were still a scenario of demonstration of guerrilla power. One week after the events of August 19th, two

brothers accused of being the ‘snitches’ behind the burnings were assassinated by FARC. This occurred by the reservoir shores while men, women, and children, many from Paloaltico, were washing clothes or selling produce and prepared foods. As an immediate consequence of this series of bloody events, 95% of the population abandoned the central town of the county of Playón and headed towards the municipal center of Marialabaja, Cartagena, or Barranquilla.



Figure 10. Playón's displacement, reported by Cartagena newspaper El Universal. Source: San José del Playón Collective Reparation Committee.

Without the monetary means needed for surviving in the city and still marked by their “first displacement” from Palo Alto Hicotea thirty years earlier, none of the families from Paloaltico left. Terror in Paloaltico was constant between 1999 and 2005. Singular events of

extreme violence, e.g., massacres, individual assassinations,¹⁵ the burning of commercial boats and trucks,¹⁶ and forced community gatherings used to threaten locals, occurred intermittently in a context of everyday terrorizing through surveillance, threats, physical abuse, and the occupation of spaces of family and community life. This violence intensified between 2002 and 2003, when approximately 100 men belonging to AUC settled permanently in the village, and residents of Paloaltico were forced to live through eleven months of paramilitary occupation, a topic explored in Chapter Four.

Between 1996 and 2005, the entire region of Montes de María had one of the country's highest victimization indexes, with over 215, 000 individual forced displacements, 82, 000 hectares of abandoned and dispossessed lands, 6,000 selective murders and 56 massacres (Acción Social 2009; Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica 2010). Marialabaja was one of the region's most affected municipalities, with 117 selective homicides (Vicepresidencia de Colombia-ODDHH 2010), 18,000 displaced persons (CINEP 2012), and 18,000 hectares of dispossessed land (RUPTA 2005).

Armed conflict in Marialabaja had devastating effects on campesino lives and livelihoods (Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica 2010; 2015). As mentioned above, paramilitaries in particular enabled a process of massive land dispossession, which was rapidly followed by the legalization of purchased lands and the start of dynamic land transactions that resulted in the

¹⁵ Between 1998 and 2002, paramilitary groups committed six massacres in Marialabaja, including three in San José del Playón (Noche y Niebla-CINEP, 2008). The neighboring highlands of the municipalities of El Carmen and San Juan Nepomuceno were the stage for some the countries' most atrocious massacres by the AUC between 1999 and 2002. Sixty women and men were massacred in the *corregimiento* of El Salado (El Carmen) in 2000 and between February 16-21 of 2000 12 campesino men were massacred in Las Brisas-San Cayetano on March 11th, 2003 (San Juan Nepomuceno).

¹⁶ Another key event in Playón's collective memory was the massive burning of all motorboats used for commerce and public transportation on reservoir shores in early 2001.

appropriation of lands by mid and large-scale agribusiness (Grajales 2011; Ojeda et al. 2014).

Marialabaja's dramatic expansion of oil palm plantations over the past two decades makes it an emblematic case of the connections between land dispossession and agro-industrial expansion in Colombia (ILSA 2012).

Life in an ocean of oil palm plantations

Oil palm plantations now dominate the spaces of agrarian change and armed violence, an “ocean of oil palm,” in the words of campesino leader Wilmer. Marialabaja is one of the municipalities with the highest rate of expansion of oil palm plantations in the country (Fedepalma 2011). Between 2001 and 2012, the area planted in oil palm plantations in Marialabaja grew by 1,358%, expanding from 570 hectares in 2001 to 8,310 hectares in 2012 (Secretaría de Agricultura de Bolívar 2012), while the national-level rate of growth for the same period was of 174% (Fedepalma 2011). By 2015, this area had almost doubled to 11,022 hectares. Originally destined to small-scale campesino production of rice, corn, sorghum, and cattle raising pastures (Vermilion & Garcés- Restrepo, 1999), today more than 60% of Irrigation District lands are covered by oil palm plantations (CINEP 2012) (Figure 11).

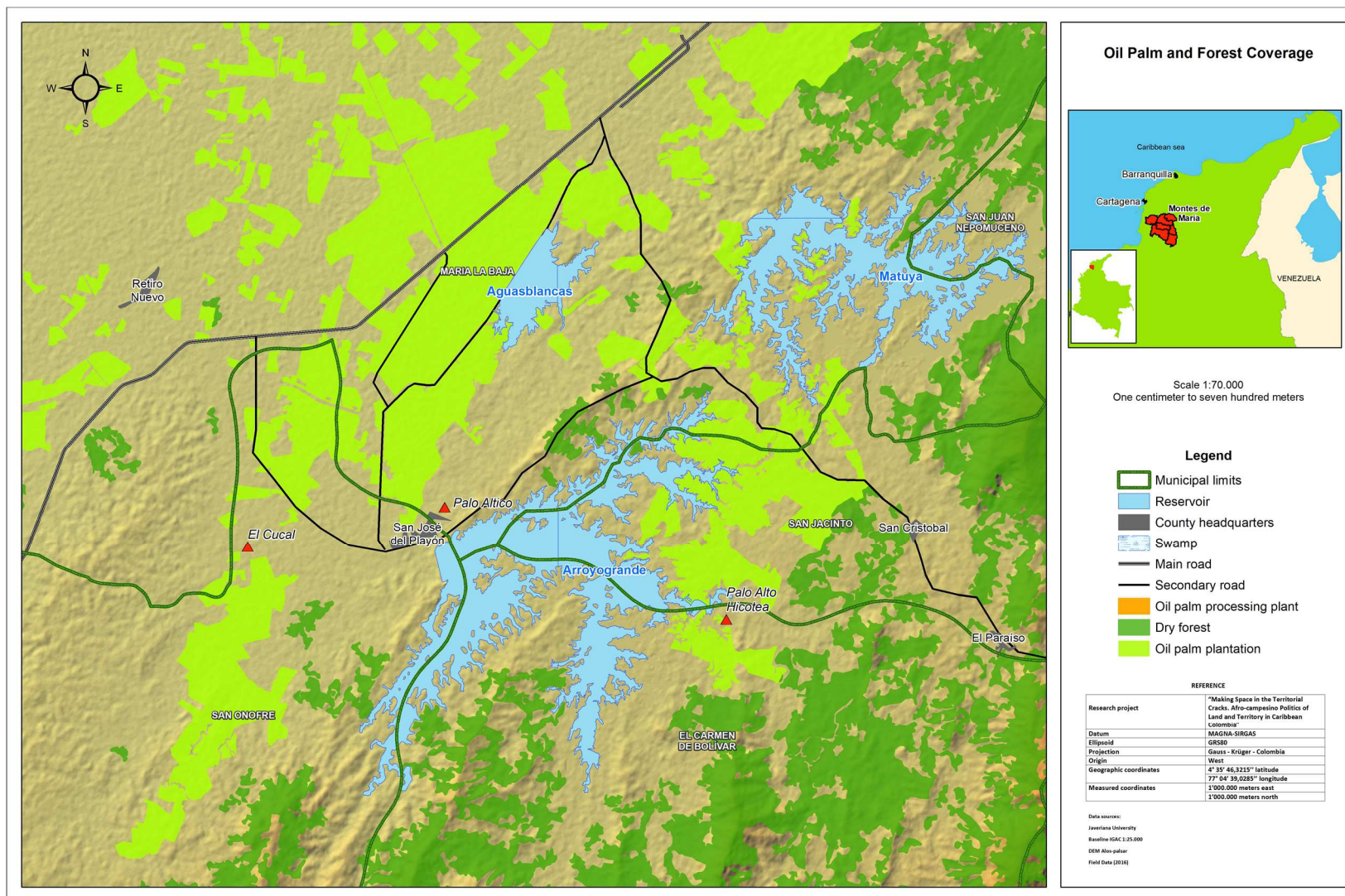


Figure 11. Map of vegetation coverage.



Figure 12. Oil palm plantations surround the village of La Suprema.
Source: Courtesy of Corporación Desarrollo Solidario.

Palm was first planted in 1998, a moment in which the District's agrarian economies entered into crisis due to the effects of trade liberalization and neoliberal restructuring on agricultural production (Aguilera 2013). As a response to the significant reduction of rice and plantain production, which resulted in widespread economic loss among small, middle-and large-scale producers (Aguilera 2013), state and national governments initially promoted the cultivation of oil palm through a pilot model of private-community partnerships or "alianzas productivas"- "productive alliances"(Gómez 2010; Herrera and Cumplido 2015).¹⁷ Participation of small scale producers in oil palm economies has decreased progressively. Between 2009 and 2014, the area of large-scale plantations (over 100 hectares) has grown by 98%, while the area planted by small and middle scale producers has diminished by 40% and 80% respectively

¹⁷ Support of the national government has been decisive in the consolidation of the country's biofuels economy, including palm oil. Biofuels production was the principal objective for rural components in National Development Plans during the government of president Álvaro Uribe Vélez (2002-2006 y 2006-2010). In 2004, Law 939 created investment and credit incentives for biofuels of animal and vegetable origin. The oil palm industry in particular has received different fiscal and tributary incentives.

(INDEPAZ 2013).

Oil palm in Marialabaja is entangled with armed political violence in complex ways. It was precisely in the late 1990s, parallel to the establishment of the first plantations, that armed conflict in Marialabaja hit its highest levels with the incursion of paramilitary groups. Much of the lands used today for palm oil production were purchased from campesinos below market prices in a context of fear and massive displacement. More recently, since 2007, entrepreneurs from the country's interior have purchased land for palm oil cultivation through a process of fraudulent 'land grabs', based on the legalization of dispossessed lands (Grajales 2011; Ojeda et al. 2014). Despite the (now marginal) incorporation of small-scale producers into palm oil economies, generalized imaginaries around oil palm associate the crop with paramilitary violence, dispossession and displacement.

Oil palm conditions Marialabaja's inhabitants' everyday geographies. Plantations encroach upon crops, homes and even elementary schools (Figures 13 and 14). They exclude villagers from spaces of everyday use and circulation, effectively privatizing common use areas such as water wells, animal feeding grounds and village paths. After lands are planted in oil palm, they cease to be spaces that can be potentially accessed by campesinos for small-scale cultivation; the possibility of rent, sharecropping or *pasture rent*¹⁸. Such social mechanisms that had allowed land access to the landless are now foreclosed. Palm further threatens campesino access to land by significantly increasing land prices in the municipality, thereby increasing the cost of rent and creating incentives for small-scale owners to sell (Herrera and Cumplido 2015). The rise of prices has been dramatic: lands sold by campesinos in the 1990s and early 2000s for

¹⁸ The system of pasture rent dates from colonial times and continues to be widespread in Colombia's Caribbean cattle grazing areas (Van Ausdal 2009). Through this mechanism, landowners allow peasants to occupy and use land for one or two years, in exchange for their labor in clearing forests or fallow areas for future cattle grazing.

approximately USD \$40 per hectare are sold today for USD \$7,000.



Figure 13. House lying between a district canal and an oil palm plantation in the corregimiento of Matuya.
Source: Author photo.



Figure 14. Elementary school surrounded by oil palm. Source: Courtesy of Sergio Latorre.

The expansion of oil palm economies is not only experienced as a spatial phenomenon. Oil palm's capitalist relations of land and labor condition everyday social, economic, and political life in Marialabaja's villages. As the main source of wage labor for village men, palm is an important source of income for families' mixed economies. At the same time, it contributes to the demise of subsistence farming by limiting men's availability for agricultural work and makes families increasingly cash-dependent. Ordinary matters such as the level of spending in village cantinas any given weekend or a family's possibility for paying electricity bills are determined by oil palm labor. According to community leaders, palm labor affects organized community politics by limiting men's availability for collective work or for attending community meetings, and by positioning both workers and their families in ambiguous positions with respect to palm itself.

For Marialabaja's inhabitants, "life in an ocean of oil palm" is not only a political-

economic matter explained through relations of land and labor. It is also symbolic and emotional. Despite community members' enrollment in its economies, palm also materializes the structural and symbolic violences of rural life in the aftermath of war and embodies the paradoxes of 'post-conflict' development.

'Post-conflict' in Marialabaja

In 2005, peace negotiations between the Colombian government and the national paramilitary organization AUC resulted in the demobilization of 31.671 men. In 2007, the head of FARC's Front 37 alias "Martín Caballero" was assassinated by the Colombian army in the highlands of the municipality of San Jacinto, effectively putting an end to guerrilla operations in the region. Since then, violent confrontations between armed groups has diminished significantly. However, smaller 'post-demobilization' groups continue to operate in the region, participating in local cocaine micro-traffic and exercising intermittent acts of symbolic or physical violence against community leaders (ILSA 2012; SAT-Defensoría del Pueblo 2015). Locals suspect that these groups protect the interests of the region's nascent agro-industrial economy, which expands over lands that were abandoned or dispossessed during armed conflict and which continue to be purchased from campesinos in the present through a combination of force and economic coercion.

Paramilitary demobilization prompted a series of legal and institutional measures towards the recognition and reparation of victims. Since 2005, laws, state offices and programs were used to secure state attention to victimized rural populations.¹⁹ The 2016 peace accord with the FARC guerrilla provides further impetus to such measures, in addition to programs aimed specifically at transforming structural inequalities in agrarian societies (Government of Colombia-FARC-EP,

¹⁹ Chapter One details state and NGO presence in Montes de María over the past decade.

2016)). After decades of weak state presence and failed attempts at military control, the state has become the central agent of a purported “historical renewal” in rural areas, evoking a horizon of post-conflict that purportedly reverses histories of violence and marginality (Kirsch and Flint 2011). Non-governmental organizations, international development agencies, and private corporations join the state by participating in victims-centered development framed by discourses of peace and post-conflict. As explained in Chapter One, these interventions have made Montes de María an exemplary ‘laboratory’ for peace and post-conflict development.

Thus far, in Marialabaja’s villages such measures materialize in monthly payments of “humanitarian aids”, temporary cash transfers for registered victims aimed to alleviate the economic effects of armed conflict. Additionally, community development projects for housing, family gardens or education, among others, are implemented sporadically by NGOs and state entities; and individual community leaders assist to meetings and workshops for the participatory planning of ‘victim’s policies,’ which have yet to materialize on the ground. While community members generally welcome institutional presence, such interventions are hardly perceived as signaling a significant historic shift towards peace, prosperity, or social justice. In villages like Paloaltico, families struggle to make ends meet in a context of increased cash-dependency, landlessness, and emergent social concerns such as drug abuse, teenage pregnancy, and intra-family violence.

Marialabaja’s inhabitants exercise a wide array of political responses to agro-capitalist expansion and growing precariousness. These include, but are not limited to, direct confrontation and organized resistance (Zibechi 2012). While at the municipal scale, hundreds of grassroots organizations representing “peasants,” “victims,” “afro-descendants,” “women,” “indigenous peoples,” or “youth” mobilize claims for the “defense of territory” or “peasant economies”

(MIC-CDS 2014; Avila 2015), in villages like Paloaltico subtle, spontaneous, and intermittent political practices take prevalence over organized resistance or direct confrontation. These include everyday and subtle forms of resistance (Scott 1985); individual or collective refusals to participate in state or capitalist relations (e.g., refusals to sell the land, engage in palm labor or participate in state and NGO projects and programs); partial enrollment; or simply “living differently” by attempting to preserve relations of solidarity, reciprocity, and care (Rocheleau 2015: 79).

Histories of resettlement and agrarian reform, of violence and dispossession, and of the more recent consolidation of palm oil economies, shape Paloaltico’s geographies, politics, and social relations. However, the ways in which this past operates in the present cannot be explained through the bounded occurrence of events, linear historical trajectories, or abstract geographies of actors, movements, and spatial strategies. Rather, the past - in its ongoing durations- “folds itself” into ordinary life (Das 2007), shaping subjectivities and political agencies through the “un-eventfulness, the silences, and the escape from coherent public narratives” of the everyday (218). As people’s stories articulate memories of the past in light of present circumstances, what stands out are the ways in which men and women continued to “stich together” everyday social and spatial relationships throughout different moments of violent change (161).

The chapters that follow tease out such moments through a narrative that is grounded in Paloaltero’s knowledges. By foregrounding the everyday and the ordinary, the chapters disentangle how common sense interpretations, embodied experiences and practices, everyday activities and moral negotiations, constitute the grounds for an afro-campesino politics of land and territory that exceeds frames of ‘resistance’, ‘acquiescence,’ or ‘incorporation’ (Hall et al. 2015). Although often subtle, ambiguous, indirect, and anonymous, these ‘ordinary’ spatial

politics have allowed the people from Paloaltico to continue to create spaces and relations of life -- or to “make worlds” (De la Cadena 2015: 4)-- throughout spatial-temporal conjunctures of state, armed groups, or agro-capitalist territorialization.

CHAPTER THREE: FROM REFUSAL TO REGRET: LAND TITLING, RECOGNITION AND THE POLITICS OF AGRARIAN REFORM IN PALOALTICO

Introduction

On August 18th, 1969 president Carlos Lleras visited the municipality of Marialabaja to inaugurate the Reservoir of Arroyo Grande. The start of the reservoir's operations would initiate the workings of the Irrigation District of Marialabaja, an area of 25, 000 hectares irrigated by 45 Km of canals and sourced by two reservoirs, Arroyo Grande and Matuya, each with storing capacity of 126 million cubic meters and flooded areas of 1, 200 and 950 hectares respectively. The District's massive infrastructure was of unprecedented proportions in the country. It was the material foundation for Project INCORA #1, the first large scale project implemented by the Colombian Institute for Agrarian Reform (INCORA), created in 1961 to administer the use and distribution of agricultural lands and promote rural development. INCORA's establishment of permanent headquarters in the municipality of Marialabaja in 1965 signaled the importance of Project INCORA #1 as a laboratory for the government's vision of agrarian reform, characterized not only by land distribution but by the commitment to modernize campesino production and promote peasant's participation and empowerment (Zamosc 1986).

The day of the inauguration, the Cartagena newspaper El Universal welcomed president Lleras and reported that the Arroyo Grande Reservoir would be "a redemption for the Coast,"

revealing imaginaries of Colombia's rural Caribbean region as poor and backwards and endorsing the liberal government's modernizing impetus (Figure 15).²⁰

As with many other rural development schemes of the 1960s in the global South, INCORA #1 materialized liberal ideologies of modernizing 'development' and social improvement (Escobar 1995; Li 2007). Regional elites and representatives of INCORA were present at the inauguration, eager to see the project's promises of economic growth, technification of small-scale agriculture, and social uplifting of the population fulfilled.



Figure 15. Front page of Cartagena newspaper El Universal, August 18th, 1969. Source: El Universal Historical Archive.

Local positions towards discourses of modernization and improvement were heterogeneous and ambiguous. On the day of Lleras' visit, excitement in Marialabaja was widespread; many received with enthusiasm the municipality's newfound national importance and believed that "things would get better" with the irrigation infrastructure and INCORA #1's

²⁰ Diario El Universal, August 18 1969, consulted on September 9, 2015 in El Universal Historical Archive, Cartagena.

provisions for land titling and organized peasant production. Others were more skeptical. The reservoir repressed downward flowing streams of Montes de Maria's north-western piedmont, flooding entire agrarian landscapes and forcing two communities to be re-settled on the reservoir's lowland shores in less than ideal conditions. Former inhabitants of Palo Alto Hicotea, whose upland village had completely disappeared as a consequence of this process, lay ambiguously between the promises of modernization and integration into lowland economies, on the one hand, and a traumatic experience of forced resettlement, on the other. Moreover, ongoing negotiations with the state generated doubts about the potential benefits of their enrollment in *parcelaciones*, schemes for land titling and technified peasant production based on local's recognition as "*campesinos parceleros*" – peasant parcel-holders. For Paloalteros- the people from Palo Alto- recognition not only involved access to land, but incorporation into an unknown, state-sponsored agrarian order that differed substantially from traditional agrarian relations among upland black peasants.

The people from Palo Alto faced a contradictory repertoire of technologies of state territorialization in which recognition co-existed with displacement and spatial fragmentation (Coulthard 2014). Likewise, their responses were varied and complex: those who owned land in the uplands accepted state compensation; once resettled, some families decidedly refused state recognition and incorporation into land titling schemes; many of those who refused later regretted this decision and sought enrollment in *parcelaciones*; most felt deceived by the state, yet partially believed in promises of modernization and improvement.

This chapter untangles the negotiations that took place as Paloalteros encountered state technologies of titling and recognition. Relatively autonomous, recently uprooted and feeling tricked by the state, their experience offers a unique perspective from which to analyze the

contested and incomplete character of state territorialization by way of agrarian reform. It further reveals the complex political responses of black campesinos, who navigated the state's disavowal of black peasant histories and territorialities both by overtly refusing enrollment in *parcelaciones* and by re-appropriating state-sponsored schemes through everyday practices and common sense re-significations of identity- and spatial categories (Wolford 2010). The chapter centers on the dynamics of recognition, refusal, and regret. It argues that state recognition disavowed peasant's *blackness* by privileged a purportedly a-racial campesino subject. Refusal, in turn, was not an explicit or coherent collective political strategy against the state, capitalism, or the racial underpinnings of recognition. It was a reassertion of blackness as a lived cultural practice related to particular relations with the land (Mollett 2016) and to a long-standing, everyday politics of refusing *bondage*- now manifest as a rejection of the bondage entailed by a contractual relation with the state (Simpson 2014; 2016). Local's later regret of refusal sheds light on the unstable and complex character of the politics at stake: regret, I argue, was not merely an indicator of the state's success in the production of modern campesino subjects, expressed by black peasant's enrollment in ideologies of recognition and modernization. Rather, it was a tactical response to hardship and a realization that black peasant life- and everyday refusals of bondage- could continue within state-led spatial and social orders.

The dynamics of recognition, refusal and regret allow us to think through the relationship between land and political subjectivity in complex and dynamic ways. The formation of political subjects through technologies of recognition was closely linked to particular understandings of land as *parcela* –a state-sanctioned category that defined land as formal property and an economic asset. As *parcelaciones* encountered both overt resistance and the subtle, everyday 'excesses' signaled by the continuation of afro-peasant practices and socialities within

government schemes (Li 2007), the meanings of state-sanctioned categories of land and identity became relative subject to complex re-significations and re-appropriations. As Wolford has argued, the meanings of ‘land’ and ‘peasantness’ are historically produced and socially embedded in relations of land use and labor; these meanings shape political subjectivities and the construction of self, informing property claims and positions towards the state (Wolford 2010: 93). State interventions for social improvement further add to the constructions of new meanings of land, as they shape desires and subjectivities and condition subject’s political re-alignment along lines of class or ethnicity (Li 2007). Personal stories of *parcelaciones* reveal that the meaning of land was less a matter of articulating coherent political positions, identities, and claims. For Paloaltico’s black peasants, land’s affective, cultural and political meaning was related to the continuity of agrarian life and to a long-standing politics of existing in relative freedom from the bondages of the state. Refusal of titles was an expression of such politics as its arguments explicitly reanimated memories of enslavement and intersected with the regional politics of agrarian reform. Regret, in turn, signaled the possibility of continuing to make black agrarian life through everyday relations, thereby continuing to exercise a politics of everyday refusal albeit within the political, ideological, and material spaces of state power.

The chapter starts by describing Paloaltero’s first encounters with Project INCORA #1 and situating the project in relation to notions of territorialization, recognition, and disavowal. It then offers a general context of President Lleras’ reformism at the national and regional level, which reveals the contestations surrounding the implementation of agrarian reform and indicates the ambiguities of peasant recognition. After describing the technical specificities of INCORA #1 and the process of *parcelaciones* in Marialabaja, the chapter addresses the negotiations that took place between the people of Paloaltico and the state. The politics of “becoming a

parcelero” are discussed through the story of Paloaltero’s refusal of INCORA’s titled lands and the retrospective regret of this decision. Personal memories of historical events position community members as active agents in the unfolding of agrarian reform in Marialabaja, revealing the incomplete character of state territorialization and shedding light on political responses that exceed the binary between refusal and enrollment and extend refusal to a tactical politics of everyday life (De Certeau 1984).

State encounters: deceit, recognition and the disavowal of blackness

Black peasant societies in Montes de María’s Black Piedmont, where Palo Alto was located, were the result of processes of marronage and spontaneous settlement through which a free black peasantry had slowly formed since the 17th century (Meisel 1980; Conde 1999; Helg 2004). At the time of agrarian reform, afro-peasant societies of the piedmont continued to be semi-autonomous with respect to state and market (Meisel 1980). State-sanctioned property rights were limited to a few families, but access to land was widespread, mediated through informal social arrangements. According to oral accounts, vibrant small-scale agrarian economies served as the basis for dynamic networks of cultural, commercial, and labor exchange both within Montes de María and in the broader Caribbean region.

Three years before the presidential event described at the beginning of the chapter, Paloalteros had witnessed the unexpected arrival of government officials “looking around their town in fancy cars,” followed by excavating machines that made many of them run off in fear. For Dominga Manjarrés, 80 years old, the decision to flood and re-locate Palo Alto was an arbitrary demonstration of state power and an irreversible loss. “The people didn’t agree with moving from their place,” she explained as she told stories of life in ‘Old’ Palo Alto “but since it was *a matter of the government*, what could we do. We had to leave whether we wanted or not”

(Personal conversation, Paloaltico, February 4). Those who had titled lands received minimal monetary compensation; many left for Venezuela, Barranquilla or other state capitals in the Caribbean coast, and most of them re-settled in a village they named “Paloaltico” on lands neighboring the town of San José del Playón.

As elders tell stories about Palo Alto’s resettlement today, they recurrently refer to a transition from a “good life” in the uplands, characterized by the abundance of land, food, and a vibrant cultural life, to a life of “*pasar trabajo*,” or “enduring hardship,” in Paloaltico.

Accompanying this sense of loss is the idea of being deceived by the state, enrolled in uneven negotiations, and tricked into delusions of a better life in the lowlands. Local encounters with the state were more complex than the arbitrary imposition of sovereign power. Under the banner of agrarian reform, INCORA #1 constituted a form of state territorialization in which the state claimed control over land and territory not simply by forcibly transforming and controlling physical space, but by attempting to manage the relations between subjects, space, and authorities (Peluso and Lund 2011; Foucault 2007).

A new state-led agrarian order was materialized through the process of *parcelaciones*, a massive program for land titling, small-scale production, and commercialization through peasant cooperatives. *Parcelaciones* involved granting campesinos parcels of land (*parcelas*), which would be destined to particular forms of high-input production for commercial purposes. Titling, moreover, was based on the state’s recognition of the “*campesino parcelero*,” or peasant parcel-holder, who was expected to embrace modern technologies, join peasant cooperatives, and operate under the logics of efficiency and productivity. Together, these technologies served to legitimize a project of liberal government that meant to improve the well-being of the population

(Foucault 2007) through the materialization of modern-liberal values of property, productivity, instrumental rationality, and entrepreneurship (Escobar 2010: 12) .

Local incorporation into the new order of space and subjects created by *parcelaciones* was shaped by the state's disregard for *afro*-campesino cultures and histories. INCORA's dismissal of blackness operated not through overtly racist tropes or pejorative representations of black people's land use practices (Mollett 2016: 415), but through the productive power of liberal recognition (Brown 1995). By assuming the campesino as an a-racial subject who operates through the universal logics of agrarian modernization, peasant recognition in Marialabaja was, in practice, a form of "cultural whitening" (Wade 1993) that erased local black population's territorial histories, land use practices, and customary tenure arrangements (Mollett 2016).

Despite the state's disregard for their cultural and historic particularities, black peasant's encounter with INCORA #1 was also accompanied by a sense of opportunity. State recognition partially shaped subjectivities and desires in line with the promises of modernization (Coulthard 2014). *Parcelaciones* offered the possibility of access to land in the lowlands and promised a better future by way of agricultural modernization. These opportunities were particularly cherished by a community who had been uprooted and had become landless, but also reinforced imaginaries of progress and improvement that circulated among local communities before INCORA #1.

The concept of *disavowal* is useful for understanding the ambiguities of state recognition and its "bracketing" of the spatial and social relations that cannot be fully read by the liberal state's gaze (Povinelli 2006). Disavowal requires a double movement: a simultaneous acknowledgement and a denial. Rather than silencing the existence of particular events or

phenomena, this movement “strategically locates the event and rejects its relevance, knowing full well that it occurred” (Roberts 2015: 29). In Marialabaja, INCORA #1 disavowed afro-campesino cultures, histories and knowledges, while offering opportunities for land access through the limited scheme of *parcelaciones* and the recognition of “peasants.” Afro-peasantness haunted the unfolding of INCORA #1, but was denied as a legitimate argument to question the limitations of INCORA’s universalizing expectations about *parceleros*. As will be discussed below, histories of slavery, and the particularities of semi-autonomous black peasant societies became important limitations to the legitimacy of *parcelaciones* both among campesinos and in the broader context of the regional politics of agrarian reform. Locally however, the recognition of blackness was not articulated explicitly as an identity-based claim. Instead, blackness was embedded in social-spatial practices, histories and knowledges, implicitly informing a politics of refusal and ways of understanding and practicing agrarian life.²¹

In this chapter, blackness is understood in two senses. On the one hand, following Shelby, I underscore a cultural dimension of blackness, which entails “an ensemble of beliefs, values, conventions, traditions, and practices” (Shelby 2005: 211). Blackness in this sense shapes afro-campesino social and spatial relations and particular understandings of land, labor, and campesino production. On the other hand, blackness is related to an “acquired historical consciousness and praxis of what it means to be black” (Costa Vargas 2008: 137). As will be discussed below, Paloaltero’s refusal of *parcelas* constitutes an instance in which a collective

²¹ In Colombia, explicit identity-based claims among black communities are a relatively recent phenomenon that took force with the 1991 Constitution’s framework for multicultural recognition. The historic erasure of blackness and the subtle imposition of cultural whitening that characterized the making of the nation (Wade 1995) and of the Caribbean region (Helg 2004; Bassi 2012) influenced the subtle ways in which blackness was articulated among local populations in relation to the reformist state of the 1960s and 1970s. Today, the ‘ethnization’ of black communities (Restrepo 2013) in Montes de María and their adoption of afro-descendant political identities is a growing phenomenon. However, among most black peasants of the region, a collective and explicitly ‘black’ consciousness that mediates political relations with the state is still an incipient phenomenon.

black consciousness emerged on the basis of a rejection of bondage associated with memories of slavery.

Lleras' 'radical' reform and peasant recognition

INCORA Project #1 promised economic growth, agricultural modernization, and social uplifting in a place imagined by the Cartagena elite as an uncivilized and backwards “land of blacks” (Múnera 1998). The ideological context of INCORA #1 was president Carlos Lleras’ ‘radical’ agrarian reform, which sought to address the agrarian question by empowering and modernizing “the peasant,” a subject whose recognition would help to subvert entrenched land inequalities, class hierarchies and semi-feudal social institutions (Zamosc 1986).

During the 1960s, agrarian reform unfolded under three conditions: the growing social and political contradictions of capitalist expansion of the mid- 20th century; the political tensions between popular unrest and the interests of capitalist and landowning elites; and the circulation of ideologies of development, modernization and liberal democracy (Zamosc 1986). Between 1958 and 1970 two moments of agrarian reform took place: a ‘meager’ reformism from 1958 to 1966 and a ‘radical’ reformist period from 1966 to 1970 (Zamosc 1986: 34). This period also corresponded to the National Front, a 16- year coalition government between Colombia’s two main political parties, the liberals and the conservatives. Broadly, liberals endorsed free market economies, industrialization and the modernization of agrarian production and social relations. Conservatives, in turn, favored landowning elites and protected traditional social values related to religion, family, and social hierarchies.

In the mid-1960s, a period of economic recession began as a result of the inability of import substitution industrialization to stimulate the internal market and generate sufficient employment to absorb a growing urban population. Under these conditions, the liberal

government of Carlos Lleras Restrepo (1966-1970) advocated for increased state intervention and made “binding the peasant population to the land” a central aim of its political-economic program. Rather than signaling a leftist turn in Colombian state politics, Lleras’ reformist thrust was aimed at revitalizing the national capitalist economy. It was carried out within the contradictions of preventing the dissolution of the peasantry while attempting to transform peasant agriculture itself through technological modernization and market integration. Lleras’ renewed agrarian reformism was resisted by the landowning classes, who had by now grown peacefully accustomed to “rhetorical reformism” of previous government interventions. In order to absorb popular demands and deal with the urgent socioeconomic problems of the late 1960s, the Lleras government circumvented the rigidity of the National Front with a strategy of alliance between “bourgeois reformism” and the peasantry. In this context, a massive peasant participatory project was initiated by the state in 1967, which culminated with the formal constitution of the National Association of Peasant Users on July 7th of 1970.

INCORA #1 began in the late 1960s at a moment of transition between ‘meager’ and ‘radical’ reformism. INCORA had to confront the opposition of local cattle-ranching elites, supported by the conservative party, but was also willing to negotiate with them on a case-specific basis. In Marialabaja, the state allowed large landowners to fragment their holdings to areas that were not subject to redistribution and to later distribute them among their kin or sell them in the land market. More importantly, INCORA enrolled former large cattle ranchers in mechanized rice production schemes, in order for them to benefit from the improvement in productivity enabled by the Irrigation District and the stable, state-regulated price of rice designed to guarantee profitability for peasants.

The relations between INCORA and local campesinos embodied the ambiguities of the state's recognition of peasants and its intentions for social improvement. INCORA opposed what it considered were semi-feudal social hierarchies and promoted a left-leaning liberal ideology of "campesino-centered development" which was based on organizing and uplifting a (productive) campesino subject. The promotion of peasant organizing and the aim of increasing peasant's bargaining power through cooperatives indicated an intention to recognize campesinos as political subjects. At the same time, INCORA perceived campesinos as "vulnerable others" (Li 2007: 97) trapped in the false consciousness of patronage, prey to conservative brain-washing or even incapable of understanding the logics of state- citizen relations and organized production. According to former director of INCODER,²² "some campesinos were very politicized, but others never broke with the mentality that they had a '*patrón*'²³: now it was the State. I'll never forget the day the campesinos showed up in my office after they had sold their *parcela*. They were demanding their pension, as if INCORA was really their *patrón*. *Some of them just never got it*" (personal interview, Bogotá, May 13, 2013). Ospina's words exemplify the patronizing gaze through which INCORA officials erased campesino agency and misread cultural difference. In the Caribbean region, this misrecognition entailed the disavowal of black peasant histories and affected INCORA's social legitimacy. In a context of elite opposition, the maneuvers of recognition and disavowal gained importance in INCORA's regional politics.

One of INCORA's main difficulties in Colombia's Caribbean was the promotion of anti-reformist discourses by members of the regional cattle ranching elite. Elites constructed

²² Decree 1300 of 2003 dissolved INCORA and created the Colombian Institute for Rural Development INCODER, which took over the functions and responsibilities of INCORA and three other related Institutes.

²³ Master, employer.

narratives of agrarian reform as linked to communism and tried to convince campesinos of the violence and evils of the latter. Anti-communist narratives were re-appropriated by black campesinos and coalesced with memories of slavery, resulting in some campesino's refusal of titled *parcelas* out of fear that titles would entail bondage to the state and violent enrollment in forced collective work. This phenomenon was not unique to the people from Palo Alto, but became widespread among black peasants in Montes de María's north-western region. This story will be discussed later through a discussion of Paloaltero's memories of state encounters. For now, it is sufficient to say that both nationally and regionally, INCORA # 1 navigated a difficult political terrain which entailed constant struggle for social legitimation and appeasement of opposition.

INCORA # 1 in Marialabaja

INCORA # 1 attempted to re-order space and agrarian relations in Marialabaja. The process of *parcelaciones*, in particular, aimed at campesino's 'improvement' not only by enabling greater access to land, but by educating desires and shaping aspirations and beliefs in line with logics of efficiency, productivity, and cooperativism (Li 2007: 5). In this sense, INCORA attempted the creation of a particular rural subject, the "*campesino parcelero*," whose identity was inextricably linked to the titled parcel of land and to successful enrollment in the scheme of production and commercialization that accompanied land titles. This section describes some of these technologies of campesino formation, including administrative procedures, legal technicalities, and forms of labor and market organization.

INCORA # 1 combined large-scale infrastructural works with micro-level procedures for the modernization of peasant agriculture and campesino's social uplifting. The project entailed the transformation of 25, 000 hectares of land with irrigation, drainage, and flood control works

aimed at “the intensive exploitation of land” (INCORA 1968: 2). It was designed to benefit 1, 300 peasant families and promised to grant 427 titled plots to local campesinos, upon state purchase and redistribution of 4, 977 hectares of land. INCORA would implement an integral program to “better the living conditions of the population” (ibid, 3), promoting agrarian productivity and commercialization, and the cultivation of new crops that would generate regional and national economic growth. For this, the project contemplated technical assistance, supervised credits, and infrastructural developments such as roads, schools, health posts, and housing.

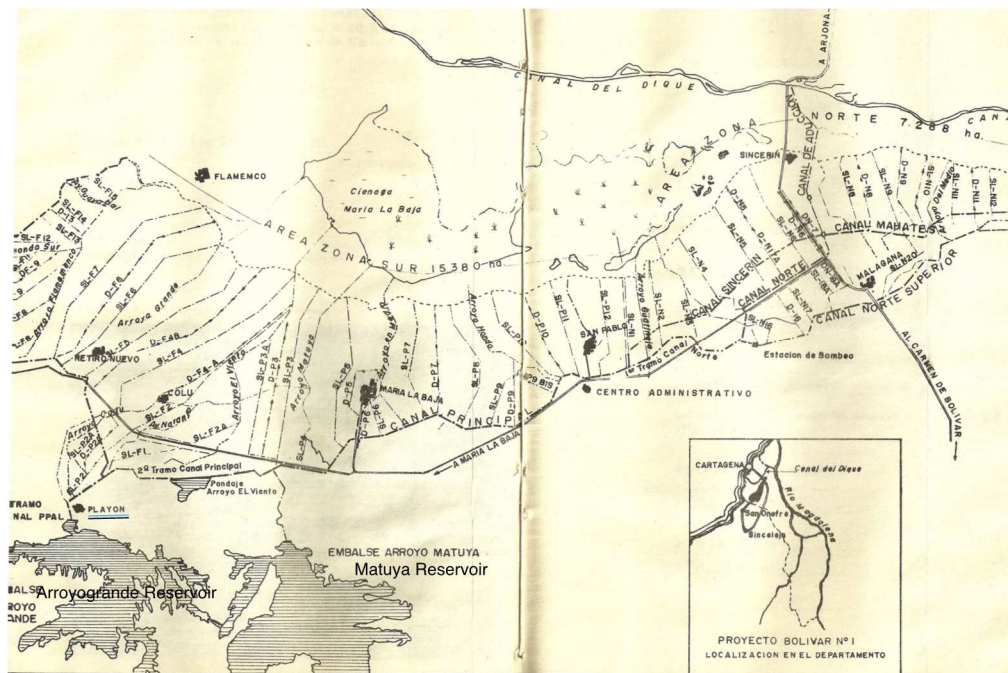


Figure 16. Irrigation District of Marialabaja. Source: INCORA #1 (INCORA 1968).

Official documents underscore meteorological and topographical criteria for the site’s selection. During the rainy season, streams flowing down from the northwestern piedmont flooded the lowlands. For INCORA’s experts, these hydrological sources were both a hindrance to modern agriculture and an unexploited resource that could become the key to the region’s development. According INCORA’s official description of the project, floods “made agriculture

completely impossible,” while in the absence of rainfall, an “unproductive draught created a landscape of desolation” (1968: 4). These statements contrast with local accounts of Marialabaja’s agricultural productivity and its dynamic agrarian economies before the 1960s. Campesinos used cultivars adapted to the region’s weather and soil conditions, combined agriculture with seasonal fishing, and used piedmont lands to take advantage of their optimal drainage during the rainy season. Discursive constructions of agrarian spaces as “desolate” and “unproductive” justified the project’s drastic physical intervention on the landscape and enabled INCORA to emphasize technical means for social improvement and wellbeing.

Marialabaja’s land order also made it an ideal site for a relatively simple project of land democratization through *parcelaciones*. Law 135 included the figure of “*afectación voluntaria*,” the voluntary affectation of private property, whereby property owners willingly offered to assign property rights to the state upon previous monetary compensation. Making use of this figure, Family Velez Danies from Cartagena offered its 1, 000 hectare sugar *latifundio*, Hacienda Sincerín, to INCORA. After a relatively simple negotiation, INCORA purchased the majority of the land in terms that were agreeable to both parties. Other landowners were less willing to negotiate with the state. Rather than voluntarily offering to sell their lands, many used the law’s figure of “zones of exclusion,” which allowed non-peasant landowners to own holdings of up to 100 hectares. They divided their property and distributed it among kin so it would not be subject to negotiation. According to former INCORA official Enrique Arévalo, due to these maneuvers, INCORA was not able to grant *parcelas* to all interested campesinos: “INCORA did what it could. It bought off all the land it could from terratenientes, but they were not easily convinced. There was not enough land for everybody” (Personal interview, Cartagena, February 6 2015).

After purchasing large land-holdings, lands were redistributed to local campesinos as *parcelas*. Following Law 135, the land was not granted freely but sold to peasants through a scheme of land allotment in which campesinos had to cover the total cost of the plot at a state-subsidized price in a period of 15 years. Before then, *parcelas* could not be sold or expropriated. After that period, the land was open for transactions, but potential buyers could only be family members or fellow small-scale campesinos (Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica 2010:131).

The organization of the district's spaces and relations of production around the unit of the *parcela* went hand-in-hand with attempts to transform traditional campesino practices and identities. Both the spatial category of the *parcela* and the social category of *parcelero* centered around ideas of state-sanctioned property, productivity, and organization, and required long term enrollment in government-sponsored modernization schemes. Thus, becoming a "*campesino parcelero*" involved being expected to engage in particular forms of organized and mechanized production and to appropriate logics of productivity, efficiency, and growth as drivers of agrarian life.

Land use was determined by INCORA: campesinos received either a "rice *parcela*," which averaged 7 hectares, or a "cattle *parcela*," which averaged 22 hectares. In addition to the area planted in pasture or rice, they were allowed to cultivate a maximum area of one hectare of mixed subsistence crops. Schemes for land tenure, production, and commercialization had an important organizational component that required *parceleros* to implement and formalize collective arrangements. Cattle *parcelas* were granted as part of a collective land title. This type of *parcelación* demarcated each family's individual land within the collective title and could be divided after the 15 year period of restrictions. However, credits were granted to the collective

and it was at the group level that the volume of milk production was quantified and commercialized.

The title and the new form of organization were requirements for “supervised credit schemes,” in which INCORA ‘accompanied’ campesinos in formulating and implementing projects along particular lines of credit, generally related to agricultural production. Cattle-ranchers and rice-growers cooperatives were in charge of collecting the produce and selling it to the regional Cattle-ranchers Cooperative or the National Rice-growers Federation, respectively. With INCORA mediating to guarantee a stable market, participants were expected to use their earnings to pay for the land and the credits in 15 years.

Parceleros received the credits, inputs and technical assistance needed for a high-technology production process. Rice cultivation involved preparing the land with machinery, cultivating with improved seeds, and implementing chemical-intensive weed and pest control. Milk production, in turn, centered on requirements of disease control, improved pastures, and increased efficiency in milking techniques.

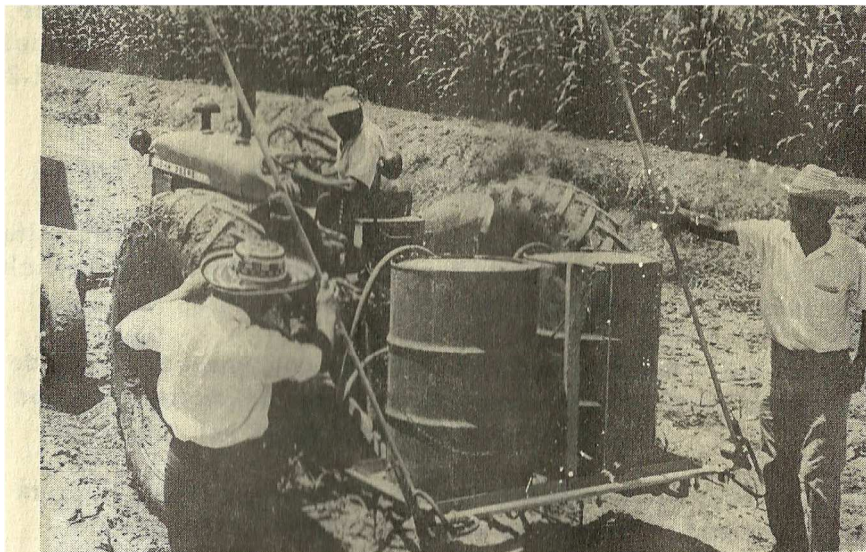


En la Granja "Aguas Blancas" los campesinos reciben adiestramiento y capacitación agrícola de agrónomos colombianos.

"AGUAS BLANCAS": Es una granja de 70 hectáreas, 40 de las cuales están dedicadas a la agricultura y las 30 restantes a la ganadería. Frecuentemente se hacen en ella reuniones demostrativas sobre cultivos, ensayos de fertilizantes y otras técnicas a las que son invitados agricultores de la región.

"PASO EL TIEMPO": Creada para la siembra y propagación de frutales. La granja abarca una extensión de 350

Figure 17. Campesino receiving technical assistance through INCORA #1. Source: INCORA #1 (INCORA 1968).



Técnicas nuevas . . . agricultura mecanizada.

Figure 18. Campesinos from Marialabaja being instructed in the technologies of mechanized agriculture. Source: INCORA #1 (INCORA 1986).

Despite the imposition of complex technicalities as pre-requisites for accessing titled lands, the formation of “*campesinos parceleros*” was a partial, unstable, and contested process. For the people of Paloaltico, *parcelaciones* involved the negotiation between the continuity of customary arrangements of land, labor, and social relations on the one hand, and the “opportunities” offered by the liberal state in a context of hardship and newfound landlessness, on the other. The next section focuses on these negotiations as they unfolded in practice and are told through the personal narratives of those involved.

Paloaltero's refusal

Upon resettlement, the people from Palo Alto became landless. Returning to the highlands and land ownership in the mountains were no longer possible after the flooding. The majority of their lands were now under water and though the actual volume of the reservoir did not meet its projected goals, people from Palo Alto decided to respect the compensation agreement with INCORA and refrain from occupying their former lands. Traditional tenure arrangements, which relied on inheritance, kinship-based access to croplands, and open access to common pool resources such as water, timber, and fruit trees, were not available for newcomers to the lowlands. Facing such dire conditions, the people of Paloaltico were forced to make ends meet using the money that some of them had received from land compensations, engaging in intermittent wage labor and petty commerce, and migrating temporarily to work in coffee or cotton fields on the northern Caribbean region.

In Paloaltico, local versions allege that compensations received for flooded lands were “*un engaño del estado*,” a deceit by the state, and that resettlement was forced and traumatic. At the same time, stories underscore Paloaltero's active role in deciding their own fate upon resettlement. The burden of responsibility for Paloaltero's landlessness after resettlement is

carried by the event of refusal: when faced with INCORA's offer to be enrolled in *parcelaciones*, most men from Palo Alto chose to refuse a binding agreement with the state.

The event of refusal emerged as a result of the complex coalescence of memories of slavery, rejection of unfamiliar and binding state schemes and the re-appropriation of anti-communist ideology. According to 78-year old Dago from Paloaltico:

INCORA had an obligation to give us each a parcela, but what happened? We didn't accept it because they said INCORA was born out of a trip that Dr. Carlos Lleras did to Cuba. We heard stories that in Cuba, Fidel Castro's people whipped the people and did them harm. They even killed them.

(Personal interview, Paloaltico, April 12, 2015)

In the words of 80-year old Eduardo Díaz, "People thought it was slavery again." As will be discussed below, anti-communist ideas reflected the influence of right-wing opposition to liberal reforms, mobilized locally through fear-based anti-communist propaganda. Campesinos believed that by participating in *parcelaciones*, families would be enrolled in "communism." The local meaning of "communism," however, was shaped by memories of slavery and afro descendant cultures and cosmologies. In communism they would be whipped, marked with an iron like cattle, and offered to the Devil. Whipping, human branding and demonic offerings, as Michael Taussig documents, are recurrent elements in afro-descended oral histories that tell of the bondage and potential evil of encounters with the state and capitalism (Taussig 1980).²⁴ For example, among black communities in Marialabaja, stories of pacts made between the devil and rich landowners are widespread and entail sacrificing workers as payment or allowing devils - generally embodied as white males- to dwell in their property. The incorporation of these

²⁴ Crossroads and pacts with the Devil are common elements in Afro-diasporic cosmologies. Taussig integrates cultural-ethnological accounts with Marxist critique, showing how this symbolism plays a role in imbuing capitalism with cultural meaning.

elements in afro-campesino's justifications for refusal are indicative of a generalized sense of mistrust towards the state and of its identification with the values, practices, and power of white society.

The event of refusal did not occur in isolation from the regional politics of agrarian reform. Detractors of Lleras' liberal reforms, mainly large cattle-ranchers and conservative regional politicians, were responsible for mobilizing an anti-reformist propaganda that associated agrarian reform with communism and circulating narratives of communism as coercion and violence. Their strategy was partially successful: although hardly an absolute consequence of anti-communist discourse, refusal became widespread in several of Marialabaja's villages. For Enrique Arévalo, former INCORA official, refusal was indeed a result of conservative political positions, which in turn were an expected reaction to INCORA's utopian project of unsettling agrarian orders:

At first, people didn't want to join, they said it was communism, this or that bogus. It was a big mess. But that was the political part. We knew what we were attempting to do was kind of utopian. The governor at the time, Alvaro de Zubiría, accused us of instigating occupations. It was all pressure of the right-wing. Owners sold but they took time to give it, so people invaded for a while! Those are anecdotes that happened there because of politics. In general, small campesinos accepted agrarian reform because they would get land. But the ones from Palo Alto missed that chance, because later when they wanted parcelas, there was no more land to give.

(Personal interview, Cartagena, February 6, 2015)

For Arévalo, refusal was an unfortunate anecdote, a consequence of locals' failure to understand the utopian character of reform. Afro-campesino's unique ways of understanding the state or the re-appropriation of anti-communist propaganda in light of their own histories of slavery, were absent from Arévalo's explanation. Rather, the case of Palo Alto was a politically-induced mis-calculation which became an irreversible 'missed opportunity' given the limitations of bureaucracy. "They later came and lamented so much to us," he explains, "but at that point

there was nothing to do about it, we had already given out the lands to others. It was the kind of thing where if you didn't take it when it was offered, you were screwed." In this case, state bureaucracies became instrumental to the disavowal of black cultures and histories, enabling responsibility to be transferred from state to subjects.

Arévalo's dismissal of local refusal as politically-induced "bogus" indicates a short-sighted understanding of the particularities of a black peasant society. Blackness, expressed both as a particular set of cultural practices and forms of sociality and as a political position that sedimented histories of slavery, was purposefully left out of the explanations of local refusal and of the process of *parcelaciones* more broadly. In the name of a 'utopian' project of social justice, blackness was "bracketed out" of the recognition of a universal class based category of "campesino" as subaltern agrarian producer.

INCORA's dismissal of the role of slavery and the particularities of afro-peasantness in explaining local refusal of *parcelaciones* was partially successful in spreading the idea that locals had been brainwashed. However, disavowal did not simply enhance the territorializing power of the liberal state. Instead, situating refusal and disavowal in the broader context of the regional politics of agrarian reform reveals how the disavowal of *afro-campesinidad* was seized as an opportunity by anti-reformist conservatives to explicitly and openly retort to blackness as a means to question *parcelaciones* and the reformist state itself. As the story below reveals, in a complex political game of representation, conservatives purposely re-appropriated afro-campesino agrarian practices as a critique to the limitations of subject recognition, while at the same time misreading black communities through racist stereotypes.

Considering Blackness: Conservative's re-appropriation of refusal

Senator Emiliani Román was one of Agrarian Reform's most adamant opponents. A member of the conservative party and distinguished member of Cartagena's white elite, senator Román represented the interests of the Caribbean Coast's large scale cattle-ranchers. His anti-reformist views were condensed in the book "The Ruinous Failure of the Agrarian Reform", which contained the senator's speeches and congressional addresses between 1969 and 1971. In them, Emiliani Román articulated the reasons why Lleras' reformism in general and INCORA's programs in particular would lead the country into a financial ruin and social disintegration (Emiliani Román 1971). The excerpt below reproduces one of Emiliani's speeches to national congress, in which he speaks on behalf of the people of Palo Alto, using their case to denounce INCORA's inhumane social impacts and re-appropriating local explanations of refusal as indicators of INCORA's failure to attend to the particularities of black campesino culture.

In Bolívar, honorable men, the irrigation district No. 1 evicted 60 to 70 families who lived from their lands. A ridiculous sum was given to them for their small plots, where they lived more or less happily, where they at least had a subsistence base that they complemented with wage labor elsewhere. They were taken to an inhospitable terrain where absolutely nothing can be grown and where they were made to build houses in a truly inhumane dump. Since they didn't have any other income, they ate up the little money that they were given, and under the scourge of misery, most of them migrated to Venezuela. The others ruminated in their poverty working for wages intermittently and nomadically roaming from one place to the other. They have been offered to be part of INCORA's cooperatives in Marialabaja, but they have rejected this offer. Honorable Minister, on my last visit I asked them: why don't you enter a cooperative or claim a parcela from INCORA? Those proud black men with gleams of dignity, gave me this surprising answer: We do not accept it because that is slavery.

(Emiliani Román, 1971: 67, own translation)

Later in his speech, Emiliani explained the "active black men's" refusal on the basis of a purported "individualist campesino temperament." Because of INCORA's forceful enrollment into collective forms, Emiliani claimed, cooperative schemes would be doomed to failure in a

black society that would rather “live free, wandering for daily wages from one place to the other” (Emiliano Román 1971: 69).

Emiliani re-appropriates the event of refusal in order to ground his critique of INCORA #1 in local’s own customs and desires. He articulates racialized mis-interpretations of kinship-based land and labor arrangements, and of the practices of labor migration that were prevalent in the region since the 1940s (Olivero 2004). Nonetheless, his recognition of Paloaltico’s dire living conditions and of Paloaltero’s memories of slavery as a grounds for refusal of state bondage make his speech an interesting counter-perspective to Arévalo’s perception of the case of Palo Alto as an unfortunate anecdote.

The disavowal of *afro-campesinidad* was seized as an opportunity by Emiliani to explicitly and openly retort to blackness as a means to question the reformist state itself. His representations of campesino individualism, while a mis-representation of black campesinos’ generally kinship-based, but flexible norms for organizing access to land and labor, addressed INCORA’s limitations in assuming a universal campesino subject that legitimized titled property and followed a predefined ethic of organized cooperative production and commercialization.

Re-thinking refusal and regret

Refusal can hardly be understood as solely a consequence of an anti-communist ideological position or as explicit opposition to state-led agrarian modernization. Instead, in the event of refusal, longer histories of enslavement intersected with conjunctural political conditions and events, producing a complex re-appropriation of discourses and ideas. In a region that had seen the development of a semi-autonomous black peasantry descended from maroon slaves, the idea of communism’s bondages intersected with memories of slavery and perceptions of state power. Locals re-appropriated and re-signified both anti-communist ideology and the

liberal state's notions of titled property and productivity. Hence, communism was rejected not as ideology but in relation to a particular meaning of state rule as inflexible, arbitrary and coercive. Despite the promises of modernization and progress, locals suspected that the requirements of productivity, financial administration, and organization of labor involved in *parcelaciones* did not reflect their flexible norms for accessing property and organizing labor, nor their strategies of labor migration and re-location. Accepting the title and agreeing to "become a *parcelero*" involved signing a contract, thereby sacrificing autonomy and fixing their position in a structurally disadvantageous power relation. As locals rejected the "bondage" entailed by a contractual relation with the state (Simpson 2014; 2016), they reaffirmed a *praxis* of blackness (Costa Vargas 2008) as lived cultural practice related both to particular relations with the land (Mollett 2016) and to an everyday politics of refusing *bondage* informed by a past of enslavement.

Conversations with Paloaltico's adults and elders in the present indicate a general recognition that INCORA's proposals were foreign to local ways of managing work, land and money, and that it was therefore natural to be suspicious and unsatisfied with the alternatives offered. However, what stands out in the re-casting of refusal in light of the present is that, rather than an instance of black resistance, refusal is unanimously perceived as a regrettable mistake.

Telling stories about resettlement, Tía Celia, 68, explained:

This town was also gonna be "*aparcelado*" but this town made the craziest, most brutal mistake (...) *Gustoe' la gente!* Capiricious! "The government, the government," that's what they said, that it was "communism," that they would do like in Cuba or whatever! Now we've more or less accommodated, but I'm telling you, "*el trabajo que pasamos*" (the hardship we endured) was too much.

(Paloaltico, May 15, 2015)

Celia's words define refusal not as a response to the state's arbitrary actions or as a defense of afro-peasant ways of life but as a "brutal mistake" and a capricious decision. How and why did a politics of refusal come to be regretted as a "brutal mistake"? Approaching this question requires us to ground refusal in the material conditions of life upon resettlement and to broaden understandings of refusal beyond overt resistance. Celia's retrospective rejection of refusal is not indicative of a legitimization of state power or an adscription to the logics of modernization entailed in recognition. Rather, it is based on a tactical – and practical- calculation aimed at ensuring the continuation of afro-campesino life within the spaces of state territorialization. What she rejects is a particular form of refusal: an overt, collective and formal disengagement from the state at the level of community politics of land negotiations (Coulthard 2014). For her, this form of refusal was not only unviable in a context of hardship and landlessness but also a foolish misunderstanding of state power as a limitation for the everyday practice of afro-peasant ways of life.

Local narratives of "missed opportunity," such as the one expressed by Tía Celia, incorporated INCORA's construction of *parcelaciones* as unique state offers. But despite the influence of INCORA's perspective, the retrospective regret of refusal can only be partially conceived as an effect of Paloaltero's embrace of state narratives. Regret did not indicate the state's triumph through the successful production of a modern campesino subject attached to a particular meaning of land. Rather, it signaled a re-signification of *parcelaciones*- and thus of state, land and subjects- that allowed the everyday work of re-creating afro-peasant socialities, practices and subjectivities under a new spatial and political order.

Several years after refusing *parcelaciones*, political conditions had shifted. Parcelaciones were operating widely, state presence was now part of everyday life in Marialabaja and right-

wing opposition was no longer centered on campesino's mobilization against the state.

Paloalteros, on their part, continued to "*pasar trabajo*"- endure hardship. Conditions of hardship made them aware that their options were limited: a radical politics of refusal was not viable when what was at stake was survival itself. What emerged were unstable and ambiguous political positionings, which sought the continuation of afro-campesino social life both *within* and *against* the logics and practices of agrarian modernization and state territorialization. Refusal was re-signified as a missed opportunity. Its antithesis, enrollment in *parcelaciones*, went from being a sign of bondage to the symbolic and material grounds for the continuation of black peasant life. In this way, a binding agreement with the state was re-interpreted as an opportunity whose limitations could be overcome, and the state's expectations on *parcelero* subjects were silently dismissed to make space for traditional agrarian practices and social life through everyday practices and common sense re-significations (Wolford 2010).

In the next and final section, Tía Celia illustrates these points through her memories of a life of hardship upon resettlement and the transformations that occurred when her family obtained a *parcela*. As she narrates everyday life as a *parcelera*, she questions the binary between refusal and enrollment, instead pointing to the continuation of afro-campesino agrarian life within and against the limitations of the *parcela* and *parcelero* recognition.

Becoming "parceleros": a politics of everyday life in the spaces of agrarian reform

Tía Celia "came from up there with nothing." She gave birth to her first daughter 40 days before moving and remembers carrying her in her arms on the journey down the mountains. When she arrived in the new town, she had "no house, no bed, no nothing." With the money received from selling his three plots of land in the uplands, her father Jacinto helped her and her husband Alberto buy a lot of land and make a small house with adobe walls and palm-thatched

roof. Work was scarce at the time, and those who stayed did so “*pasando trabajo*”. The most common work was cutting timber, an activity still remembered as both their salvation and as a downgrading of social position with respect to life in the uplands. The owner of the lands surrounding the village allowed children and women to harvest timber on his fallow lands. Every day they would send the kids into the fallows and load their mules with timber off to Playón and surrounding lands to sell or exchanged for plantains. A few families learned to handle canoes and fished in the reservoir.

For the families from Palo Alto Hicotea, the conditions in the lowlands were both precarious in a material sense, and had important social and symbolic dimensions. After what they remember as a fairly egalitarian “good life” in the mountains, Paloalteros became Playón’s ‘poor,’ forced to harvest timber, wash clothes for families in Playón, and migrate seasonally to work in plantations throughout the Caribbean region. “That was my misfortune, that’s how I stood up for myself, *hasta que salió la parcela* (until we got the parcela),” concludes Celia as she describes the times.

In 1973, approximately six years after resettlement, Celia and Alberto were one of the six families from Paloaltico to obtain a *parcela*. Aguasblancas was located some 2 miles away from the town and was a collective “cattle *parcela*.” Celia remembers the adjudication of Aguasblancas as a matter of men’s decisiveness: “They said: we’re gonna take it; if they’re gonna mark us, then mark us.” Other *parceleros* included her father Jacinto Julio, her uncle Agustín Julio, Ramón Rodríguez, José Inés Tovar, and Jesús Morao. Below, Tía Celia tells her story of life in Aguasblancas:

Parcelas were for rice or for cattle, but we got cattle. The first year we went to live there. At first, *pasamos trabajo* there too because we had nothing planted there. So the men went, fenced and cultivated. We planted our plantain, our yucca, our things. When the

crops started giving birth, my life started to change. The cows started giving birth, and my life started to change.

We sold the milk to Codegán, the cooperative. There were good people there, spending all that time just meeting with us. In a week we could have up to three meetings. They went around teaching us this and that, how to vaccinate a cow, how to cut the calf's bellybutton, how to do this and that.....ayyy, we had to bear all that!

But I'm telling you, when that cattle started to give birth, I received sacs of plantain and exchanged them for milk in my house, then my life started changing. I was peaceful in that *parcela*, taking care of my animals, because each year INCORA came to gather the money for the cattle, because we had to pay for all that, you know. But we did it, little by little, we were able to pay all our debts. At first they were all together, but years later they divided the *parcela* and they became independent. They each got 15.5 hectares, and they divided the cattle.

We had all kinds of food there. Rice, beans, yucca, corn, squash, plantain, home gardens. People from the village came to work the land there too, and they planted all kinds of stuff.

INCORA sent us these young women, I remember one of them was a great friend of mine. They prepared us so we could tend the gardens, and they brought us hot pepper, eggplant, tomato, the prickly one...radish, white people's food, hahaha. They came to my house and we made that crazy salad that they liked. They ate that stuff, we ate your yucca and our own food. Daughter, I was happy in my *parcela*.

(Paloaltico, June 10, 2015)

Aguasblancas lives in the collective memory of Paloaltico as the material, social and symbolic space that allowed the continuation of agrarian life after the traumas of resettlement. Rather than a symbol of bondage, the *parcelas* became the basis of the village's material and social survival. State-sanctioned schemes of tenure, organization and production conditioned everyday activities, created new social and power relations, and partially shaped new campesino subjectivities, particularly through the introduction of new standards of 'success' related to the ability to pay off loans and properly follow technicians' instructions. At the same time, *parceleros* recognized the limits of state recognition and exceeded them through the continuation of traditional forms of production, labor and land access in the *parcelas*.

Despite being a titled property, initially under a collective title and later under individual ones, access to land followed social and kinship ties and was generally based on reciprocal labor and solidarity. Most families in Paloaltico today remember being part of the *cuadrillas*- a traditional, kinship- based labor unit- that organized work in rice cultivation and harvest, or being able to grow their own crops in one of the *parcela*'s subsections borrowed from its owner. Fruit trees, wells, timber, and fishing canals were open to all families and served as a subsistence basis for the community as a whole.

As Celia mentions in her story, INCORA supervised production and tried to induce women to plant home gardens and improve their eating habits. However, women maintained a sense of (humorous) difference with respect to INCORA's expectations, as indicated by Celia's laughter at the cultural differences in food preferences.

Memories of everyday life Aguasblancas hardly indicate enrollment in logics of property and productivity, nor complete transformation of practices, values and desires corresponding to state-sanctioned campesino identities. Instead, as Celia's story suggests, state disavowal coexisted with local's work of re-creating themselves- their socialities and subjectivities under new the new order created by parcelaciones. This was done through practices of putting together relationships in everyday life. Through such everyday "counter-conducts" (Foucault 2007) both the category of a "*campesino parcelero*" and the space of the *parcela* itself were inhabited in ways that exceeded the limits of state recognition.

The story of Aguasblancas thus questions the binary between refusal and enrollment, and further sheds light on the grounded practices that constituted Paloaltero's response to state and agrarian modernization. Rather than a coherent, collective, oppositional strategy of refusal, this

was a tactical- and practical- politics that also *refused* the bondage of *parcelaciones* through the everyday recreation of afro-campesino socialities, practices and subjectivities.

Conclusion

INCORA #1 was a form of state territorialization that transformed the physical landscape of the northwestern piedmont of Montes de María and forcibly uprooted local populations. As a part of a broader project of liberal government, it also embodied ideals of progress and social uplifting and attempted to improve the population's wellbeing by enrolling black peasant communities in agricultural modernization. This new state-led agrarian order was materialized through the process of *parcelaciones*, which created the spatial and social categories of "*parcela*" and "*campesino parcelero*," respectively. Both categories involved particular requirements and limitations. *Parcelas* enrolled locals in land titling schemes and served as the spatial foundation for projects of technified, credit- based peasant production and commercialization. "*Campesinos parceleros*," in turn, were expected to embrace technological inputs, organize in cooperatives, and operate under the logics of productivity and efficiency.

For the people of Paloaltico, INCORA # 1 represented arbitrary state power and the irreversible loss of what is imagined as a "good life" in the uplands. Encounters with the liberal state also entailed complex negotiations around the terms of incorporation into the new order of space and subjects embodied in *parcelaciones*. *Parcelaciones* were fraught with the limitations of dismissing black campesino culture. In the name of a 'utopian' project of social justice, the particularities of a *black* campesino society, with a history of enslavement, maroonage, and semi-autonomous peasant economies, were disavowed in the recognition of a universal category of "campesino."

Paloaltero's negotiations around *parcelaciones* reveal the contested and incomplete character of liberal state territorialization in the context of agrarian reform. They further shed light on the ambivalent political responses of black campesinos as they navigated both disavowal and opportunity. One of these responses was radical refusal of titling schemes. The event of refusal was partially connected to anti-reformist discourses that linked reform to communism, but also signaled the re-appropriation of both anti-communist ideology and of liberal notions of titled property and productivity through a broader refusal of binding agreements with the state. Rather than opposition to agricultural modernization as a whole or disengagement from state, market or property per se, this was a *refusal of bondage* informed by a collective black consciousness that emerged through memories of enslavement as afro-peasants encountered the state.

INCORA dismissed black histories as possible grounds for refusal. For local officials, refusal was a sign of brainwash and a missed opportunity. Refusal not only signaled local resistance to the bondage of state recognition, but was taken up by right-wing opponents to question the liberal state's agrarian reform more broadly. In both cases, the state's disavowal of blackness became an important limitation to the legitimacy of *parcelaciones*.

As the people of Paloaltico were forced to endure the material and symbolic hardships that followed resettlement, they became aware that their options were limited and that a politics of refusal was not viable when what was at stake was survival itself. In 1973, six families "became *parceleros*" and received the *parcelas* of Aguasblancas. Rather than enrollment in logics of agrarian modernization or complete transformation of afro-campesino practices, Tía Celia's memories of Aguasblancas reveal a process of re-signifying the identity and spatial

categories of *parcelero* and *parcela* (Wolford 2010) and reaffirming land's affective, cultural, and political meaning as related to the continuity of agrarian life.

Through the everyday work of re-creating afro-peasant socialities, practices and subjectivities under a new socio-spatial order, the new *parceleros* sought the continuation of afro-campesino life both *within* and *against* the logics and practices of agrarian modernization and liberal state territorialization. *Parcelas* were no longer bondage but an opportunity for re-making black agrarian life. The transit from refusal to “becoming *parceleros*,” along with the everyday practices that later took place in Aguasblancas, indicate a form of politics that exceeds the binary between refusal and enrollment, rather revealing everyday political tactics that attempted to overcome the limitations and bondages of state recognition and titling.

Stories about INCORA # 1 are told recurrently in Paloaltico. They construct and hold on to a sense of origin and collective identity in times of inexplicable and unpredictable change, and constitute attempts to make sense of the present by defining a point in time when it all began. Situated in the present context of agro-capitalist expansion and uncertainty about the future and requiring direct or implicit social legitimation, stories are vehicles for the ongoing making of collective memory. In this sense, INCORA #1 continues to shape political subjectivities, practices, and perceptions of state power and landed relations. This sedimentation of the past in the present is not simply characterized by a perception of arbitrary state power. Rather, what persists is a sense that disavowal continues. Overt critiques and refusals, partial enrollment and subtle subversions of power through everyday practices and common sense re-significations still co-exist in Paloaltico today. Through a broad repertoire of spatial-political responses, locals navigate disavowal and continue to recreate agrarian life and make space in the midst of territorializations of state, capital or armed actors.

Twenty years after the *parcelas* of Aguasblancas were adjudicated, the people of Paloaltico witnessed the arrival of two left-wing guerrillas and the start of counter-insurgency operations. This was the start of what would become a brutal territorial war between paramilitaries, guerrillas, and the Colombian army in Montes de María (Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica 2010). Like most *parceleros* in Montes de María, Celia's family left the fields, moved to the village and eventually sold its land for extremely low prices (Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica 2010). Between 1986 and 2005, the people of Paloaltico were caught between armed actor's struggles for territorial control and subjected to physical and symbolic violence. The following chapter narrates the period of armed conflict as it was experienced and contested by women and men in Paloaltico. Their stories ground abstract geopolitical accounts of armed conflict in the spaces and social relations of everyday life, revealing the ways in which communities continued to make life and territory, within and against "landscapes of terror" (Oslender 2008).

CHAPTER FOUR: ORDINARY GEOGRAPHIES OF ARMED CONFLICT

One night the ‘paracos’²⁵ organized a meeting in the park by the church. They forced the whole village to attend. They said they were going to find the ‘rat’ and were going to kill him right there in front of us. And it must’ve been God who sent the rain. And in the middle of that rain you didn’t know what was pee and what was poop and what was water. That’s the fear. People thought the paracos would choose their sons. That rain must’ve boggled them, because in the end they didn’t kill anybody.²⁶

(Sofia Carrasquilla, community leader, 35 years old.
Paloaltico, January 22, 2015)

Introduction

1999-2005 were years of terror in Paloaltico. Men from the Frente Héroes de Montes de María, belonging to the paramilitary group Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia (AUC), held political and military power in the municipality of Marialabaja. Terrorizing acts like the one described above were used to instill fear among locals and conveyed the message not only that guerrilla collaborators would be punished, but that this violence was arbitrary and unpredictable. Through a combination of symbolic and physical violence, paramilitaries established effective territorial control of the entire Irrigation District’s lowlands between 1999 and 2005 (Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica 2010). The mountainous north-western piedmont, a geostrategic corridor between the central highlands of Montes de María and lowland roads and coastal ports, became a site for bloody territorial disputes between paramilitaries, guerrillas, and the Colombian national army in the early 2000s. Acting as a zone of transition between highlands

²⁵ Popular name for paramilitary forces, used with a derogatory connotation.

²⁶ “Una noche los paracos organizaron una reunión en el parque frente a la iglesia, a todo el mundo lo obligaron a ir. Decían que de ahí iban a encontrar al sapo y que lo iban a matar ahí delante de nosotros. Y debió ser Dios que mandó un aguacero. Y entre esa lluvia no se distinguía entre el meao y el popó y la lluvia. Todo el mundo pensando que iban a escoger al hijo suyo. Esa agua como que los embolató y al fin no mataron a nadie.”

and lowlands, the *corregimiento* (county) of Playón was a space of encounter between these three actors (Figure 8). Locals were subjected to threats, stigmatization, and restricted access to food, roads, and spaces of everyday circulation from all competing forces.

Living amidst regimes of fear and terror, entire communities in Marialabaja and the larger region of Montes de María migrated massively to regional capitals. However, in other villages, the majority of families refused to be displaced. These communities identify today as “*comunidades resistentes*” (resistant communities). The term has a two-fold meaning. On the one hand, it refers to resisting displacement and remaining “in place,” thereby struggling to retain a rural way life against forces pushing them towards the city. Remaining in place could also entail living through months or years of permanent occupation by paramilitary, guerrilla, or military forces,²⁷ or being forcibly enrolled in the dynamics of political violence through threats, harassments or armed group’s intervention in community matters. Enduring and surviving the violence constitutes the second meaning of being *resistente*.

Paloaltico is a community of *resistentes*. For eleven months between 2002 and 2003, approximately one hundred paramilitary men occupied the village. Paramilitaries established campsites in backyards, plazas and street corners, subjecting the population to constant surveillance, threats of physical violence and the imposition of social and spatial restrictions. Based on the narratives of the *resistentes* from Paloaltico, this chapter presents an ethnographic account of the local geographies of armed conflict as they were experienced, perceived, and *actively shaped* by the people of Paloaltico.

²⁷ Exact years and numbers describing armed conflict at the scale of *corregimientos* and *veredas* (villages) have not been published. The information presented in this chapter, which pertains to such micro-level scales, is based on the accounts of women and men in Paloaltico, Playón and neighboring villages, obtained through qualitative interviews and participant observation. As is common in ethnographic research on armed conflict, subjects’ memories rarely contain precise dates. Rather, the narrative unfolding of accounts of armed conflict is marked by meaningful events as experienced by narrators.

The voices of “those who stayed” reveal particular narratives from a place-based position. Unlike abstracted narratives of armed conflict’s geopolitics, this perspective questions the widely accepted narrative that armed actors conquered Colombian rural territories (Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica 2010) and local communities were “de-territorialized” (Restrepo and Rojas 2004; Oslender 2008). Rather than producing “geographies of terror,” spatial exclusion, expulsion and dispossession (Oslender 2007; 2008), violence produced complex space-making processes in which both armed actors and community members were active territorial agents. Indeed, throughout the years of armed conflict community members positioned themselves in relation to armed actor’s spatial threats and devised ways of protecting and re-creating spaces of everyday life. As violence became part of the everyday, its material, social, and emotional effects on local populations became entangled with ordinary practices, personal lives, and social relations. Therefore, experiences of violence and responses to violent territorialization were mediated by social context, personal and family circumstances, as well as by embodied perceptions and emotions.

Grounding the geographies of armed conflict in everyday life and addressing their material, symbolic and emotional dimensions ultimately allows us to rethink the relationship between violence, space, and power. Violence becomes more than a destructive force that victimizes, de-territorializes, and destroys political possibilities. Instead, through the register of the ordinary and through attention to embodied experience, the productive capacity of violence comes to the fore. War’s “creative destruction” is materialized in complex space-making practices and assertions of agency that add layers to understandings of territorialization and communities’ spatial politics in the context of war (Cohen and Gilbert 2008). In short, engaging alternative registers through which communities experience violent territorialization, reveals

their active role in participating in the space-making of violence and making territory (Springer and Le Billion 2016).

The chapter is organized as follows. First, it provides a theoretical discussion on the relationship between space, territory and violence, underscoring the possibilities offered by feminist geography and an ethnographic approach for understanding community's territorializing practices in a context of war. This chapter's theoretical proposition is based on a revised version of the conceptual framework of the "geographies of terror" (Oslender 2008), which offers important insights for understanding the effects of armed conflict in communities' everyday geographies. While drawing on this framework, my approach incorporates elements of feminist geopolitics (Pain and Smith 2008; Sharp 2009; Massaro and Williams 2013) and of ethnographic accounts of violence that focus on the subjective operations of power and agency through ordinary life (Das 2007; Das and Kleinman 2001). Next, the chapter offers textured account of the geographies of conflict in Paloaltico and its surroundings as they were experienced and re-made through ordinary events and everyday practices. This section is organized around three 'storied' themes: plot abandonment, everyday spatial movements, and the micro- territorial struggles over home space. Each one of the themes is narrated from a particular spaces: the *parcela*, the paths along the Irrigation District canals, and the homes in the village itself.

The stories presented took place between 1986, when guerrilla groups first arrived to Marialabaja, and 2005, when paramilitaries of the Front Héroes de Montes de María gave up arms. Stories are primarily based on women's experiences. Rocío and Tía Celia provide embodied accounts of plot abandonment of the *parcelas* of Aguasblancas during guerrilla presence in the late 1980s. Sofia, Mercedes, Pocho and La Mella, all *vendedoras de pescao* (fish vendors), talk about encounters with armed groups while walking-and-selling fish and the *spatial*

tactics (De Certeau 1984) that allowed them to continue circulating through space in the context of territorial disputes between guerrillas, paramilitaries and the national army. Finally, Rocío and Tía Celia return to narrate their confrontations and negotiations with paramilitaries as the latter attempted to cross the boundaries that protected the “homeplace” from the broader geopolitical dynamics of violence (hooks 1991). Each of these stories is accompanied by a description of armed actor’s territorial strategies as they conditioned Paloaltero’s experiences and spatial-political responses in *parcelas*, paths and village, respectively.

Theoretical discussion

De-centering the gaze from the discourses and actions of elite actors such as the state and armed groups allows a more detailed and accurate account of the complex geographies of Colombia’s armed conflict in their material, symbolic and emotional dimensions (Ojeda et al., 2015; Oslender 2008). The everyday geographies of violence in Paloaltico and its surroundings unfolded through what Pain and Smith (2008:13) refer to as “ordinary social geographies” and were conditioned, but not determined, by the “extraordinary geopolitics” of Colombian political violence.

In this chapter, the “ordinary” refers to the repertoire of practices, relations, spaces and events that constitute the world in which people “dwell in a taken-for-granted way” (Das 2015: 71). Violence threatened to disrupt people’s taken-for-granted worlds, those which ensured the continuity of everyday life. However, this threat to the ordinary operated not through singular and bounded “events,” but precisely through the *continuous* eventfulness of the everyday. Similarly, threats to the ordinary occurred through the intimate spaces of ordinary life itself. Engaging the realm of the ordinary allows us to envision this “descent” of violence into the everyday as well as the *agency* exercised by women and men as they sought to sustain everyday

life throughout armed actor's violent territorializations (Das 2007). The birth of a child as a reason to stay in place during violence; abandoning a plot after countless nights of hearing the sound of guerrilla's boots; paramilitaries' coercive requests for coffee and women's resistance to serve them; quarrels with paramilitaries over their dirty uniforms on a family's front porch; "looking away" at the site of armed groups; or firmly standing by your child as he was violently harassed- these ordinary practices, experiences and events reveal alternative operations of power, space and agency as they unfold through and shape everyday life in the midst of war.

The idea of ordinary geographies hence signals both an alternative temporality of violence beyond "events" and a geographical scaling down of narratives of violence that considers plots, homes, villages, paths, and bodies as sites of territorialization. I read these geographies through analytics that allow me to highlight the connection between territory-making and ordinary life, focusing on how spaces were shaped and negotiated through ordinary relations, practices, and experiences, and therefore became sites for local's intimate *territorialities*. Analytics hence include contestations over public/private divides; the tactics of everyday encounter and exchange; the re-creation of spatial imaginaries; and the emotional and moral dimensions of relocation and displacement.

Similar to what occurred in other black rural communities in the Colombian Pacific, armed conflict incorporated local spaces into regional and national cartographies of armed conflict (Oslender 2007; 2008; Restrepo and Rojas 2004), while transforming the geographies of everyday life for local inhabitants. Armed actor's territorial strategies were not only aimed at controlling and conquering enemy spaces, but at limiting local population's access and use of space, restricting spatial mobility, and attempting to control spaces that community members used on an everyday basis.

Despite partial accomplishment of local's physical exclusion and subjective or "mental de-territorialization" (Oslender 2008), armed actor's territorializations were not absolute nor unidirectional. Understood as attempts to manage spaces, subjects, and social relations, territorialization was a piecemeal and relational process beset by constant struggle over the meaning and materiality of space (Delaney 2005). In Paloaltico and its surroundings, territory was negotiated and made on an everyday basis, often through ordinary events and actions like the ones mentioned before.

The conceptual framework of the "geographies of terror" (Oslender 2008) provides important elements for understanding the operations of territory and violence through an ethnographic approach. Oslender examines the relationship between geography and armed conflict through the lens of ordinary people's experience of fear and terror on an everyday basis (2008: 81). The relationship between geography and violence must be approached as "complicated set of spaces, emotions, practices, movements, and materialities," he writes, "that work at a range of scales from the body to micro- geographies of the (lost) home, street, river, forest, and region" (84). This points to the diverse and multidimensional spatial manifestations of violence on local populations. Key ideas include a generalized process of physical and mental/subjective "de-territorialization," armed groups' restrictions on local's everyday mobilities (82), the creation of "landscapes of fear" (81), and the transformation of the "homeplace" (hooks 1991) from a place of nurturance to one marked by a "terrorized sense of place" (83).

Despite its usefulness for grounding violence in communities' everyday geographies, this framework fails to thoroughly untangle the spatial-political responses exercised by communities on an everyday basis. These responses are not separate from armed groups' territorializing

practices, but are constitutive of the process through which violence produces space (Springer and Le Billion 2016). For *resistentes*, remaining in place involved the need to re-create social life, spatial practices, and a sense of self in response to violent territorializations (Delaney 2005: 10). Beyond creating “geographies of fear” (Oslender 2008), violence generated complex micro-territorial dynamics in which villagers were both victims and active agents in protecting, making, and re-signifying the spaces of everyday socialities, economies, and family life. While generally avoiding direct confrontation or collective resistance, locals positioned themselves towards armed groups and calculated the strategies that would allow them continue using and inhabiting space in the ways that they desired. Living within disputed spaces where they were permanently subjected to fear and terror, *resistentes* found ways of being and becoming political “in *place* and through *space*.” (Dixon and Marston 2011: 1). Bodies, homes and ordinary spaces like paths, street corners, or back yards were important sites of inter-subjective relations and grounded experiences through which political positions were crafted (Cohen and Gilbert 2008: 19; Stacheli and Kofman 2004) and political practices took place (Dixon and Marston 2011).

Moreover, rather than passive containers *acted upon*, bodies were active in the production and operation of space and territory (Dixon and Marston 2011). Embodied perceptions and emotions mediated the experience of violence, shaping spatial strategies and political positions towards armed groups. At the most evident level, the “emotional geographies” of fear (Bondi, 2005; Davidson et al., 2005) had a direct bearing on de-territorialization because it was out of fear that families abandoned their plots, avoided walking through particular places, or refrained from directly challenging paramilitary occupation. However, the relationship between fear, violence, and geography went beyond specific events or bounded instances of de-territorialization. For years, fear was inscribed in bodies and constitutive of ordinary life (Das

and Kleinman 1997; Pain and Smith 2008), shaping subjectivities and everyday spatial and social relations. In this “descent into the ordinary” (Das 2007), fear became part of a broader set of moral interpretations, everyday activities, and embodied emotions through which life unfolded. It existed alongside courage, humor, everyday economic and social reproduction, and different forms of resistance, negotiation, and adaptation to armed actor’s presence.

Similarly, the material and imaginative configurations of everyday spaces, as well as the practices, negotiations, and experiences that emerged through them, transformed these “ordinary social geographies” into alternative arenas of *politics* (Pain and Smith 2008). Everyday responses to spatial domination did not aim to transform the structures and strategies of political violence or the regional geographies of conflict. Rather, through bodies and ordinary geographies, men and women crafted territorial ‘cracks’ within the spatialized powers of armed groups (De Certeau 1984; McKittrick 2006). Acting within enemy territory involved, on the one hand, a careful process of maneuvering within public space - where bodies were exposed to armed actor’s presence – through anonymous and subtle spatial tactics (De Certeau 1984; Secor 2004). On the other, it involved reinforcing the boundary that separated the private space of the home from public spaces of village streets or plazas. While the former was a site of gendered power assumed to be protected from the broader geopolitics of war, in the latter, locals were more exposed to territorial disputes between armed groups and to public demonstrations of armed actor’s power. Paramilitaries frequently crossed the boundaries of home space through the occupation of homes and their enrollment in broader conflict geographies, effectively collapsing the limit between the “extraordinary geopolitics” of war and its “ordinary social geographies” (Pain and Smith 2008: 13) and hence between public and private spatial politics (Fincher 2004). However, women used their role as power agents in the home to confront and negotiate with

paramilitaries in order to protect domestic space from political violence. Hence, women imbued the domestic, private sphere with political life (Martin 2004: 17) while simultaneously attempting to protecting it from the public sphere of armed conflict geo-strategies.

The spatial politics illustrated by the accounts of *resistentes* was not organized, collective resistance that disrupted the everyday of violence, but spontaneous, subtle, often individual practices that allowed men and women to “secure everyday life” in the midst of fear and terror (Das and Kleinman 2001:1). Indeed, throughout a period of deep transformations of local geographies, the everyday--although imbued with fear-- always “spoke back” and modified the seemingly immutable forces of violence and terror (Pain and Smith 2008, 14). As the stories below show, it was not that the everyday was essentially a realm of security or a “taken-for granted world in which trust could be placed” (Das and Kleinman 1997: 8). The predictability of the everyday trembled with armed conflict, generating a feeling of extreme contingency and vulnerability in carrying out everyday activities (ibid). But even though the ordinary became intermittently uncanny, it was also subject to a constant work of reparation and reconstitution. Through the spaces, relations, and emotions of ordinary life, ordinary life itself was protected.

The following section develops these theoretical propositions through three ‘storied’ themes: plot abandonment, women’s everyday spatial movements and the micro- territorial struggles over the homeplace.

The everyday geographies of armed conflict: resistente’s accounts

Between 1986 and 2005, Paloaltico’s geographies were forcibly enrolled in the territorial dynamics of Colombia’s armed conflict. The spatial politics that unfolded within this period were quite heterogeneous. On the one hand, regional geopolitical configurations shifted with the arrival, departure, or spatial displacements of particular groups at particular moments. On the

other, the territorializing strategies differed between the Colombian army, the AUC paramilitaries, FARC guerrillas and ELN guerrillas. Each group privileged particular spaces as their main scenario of operations and used different spaces for different purposes. Space enabled unique social and political strategies. For instance, permanent paramilitary occupation of the village entailed constant surveillance and the exercise of physical and symbolic violence through everyday events and practices. For ELN guerrillas, on the contrary, settlement near farm plots were relatively isolated spaces where guerrillas established temporary campsites and permanently attempted to enroll community members in leftist ideology. The village, on the other hand, was perceived as a safer place than the farmlands with greater state presence and a more numerous population. Upon its permanent occupation by paramilitary groups in 2002, however, the village became a place of permanent surveillance and violent threats. Finally, roads and paths along district canals were spaces used both by locals and armed actors on a daily basis. For community members, circulation along the paths entailed the risk of encountering armed groups, witnessing their movements, and being subjected to interrogation and harassment.

The stories below narrate encounters, negotiations, resistance and adaption to armed groups' territorializing actions as they occurred through ordinary events and everyday practices in each of the locations described above. Together they reveal how "ordinary social geographies" in their material and imaginative configurations became arenas of politics (Pain and Smith 2008) and enabled the production of space and territory within the territorial regime of war.

Guerrillas in Aguasblancas: fear and plot abandonment

One of the most important forms of rural displacement produced by armed conflict was the abandonment of plots and the resettlement of families in nearby villages (Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica 2010). Rocío Caro, Chichío, 48, and her partner Rubén, 45, lived in a *parcela*

in Aguasblancas for over 10 years on lands that Rubén inherited from his grandfather. After the guerrilla killed Nando Pájaro, in December of 1989, however, Chichío realized she would have to leave. Pájaro was a former mayor of Marialabaja and member of Playón's most powerful political clan. His death in the hands of ELN guerrillas was a sign that "*la cosa se estaba descomponiendo*"- "things were going rotten." Chichío wasn't sure whether it was the sickness of her early pregnancy, the rumors that things would get worse, or the effects that everyone else's fear had on her own, but that December she didn't sleep one full night. "It was this fear, I looked around with fear, I had visions of coffins," she remembers, "I knew I couldn't live like that, but I couldn't leave without my partner Rubén and he didn't want to go, so I decided I'd wait until after the baby was born" (Personal conversation, Paloaltico, July 18, 2015).

Seven months later, she gave birth to her daughter Dayana at her aunt Celia's neighboring ranch. Chichío had to wait one month before she could go see her family in the village of Paloaltico. That was in September, during the village Saint festivities. After the festivities, she went back to the *parcela* and stayed with Rubén and her other children for a few months. In December, Chichío got scared again. This time, they had killed Rito Carrasquilla, Paloaltico's most renowned community leader and her own god-father. "I told Rubén: I'm not going to stay here. I'm scared. Rubén said nothing was going to happen to me here. Now I couldn't sleep at night nor during the day, because in the day I had to take care of my two babies." But Chichío found her way out. On December 31 of 1990, women from Paloaltico went to Aguasblancas to harvest rice. In the afternoon, when they were done, Chichío saw the women getting ready to leave. She too packed her "*cajetica*"²⁸ and told Rubén: "If you don't leave, I

²⁸ Little cardboard box.

leave.” He agreed to go, but only for New Years. “Ha! I came to Paloaltico and I never went back to ‘*el monte*’”.

“*El monte*” was Chichío’s way of referring to the space where peasant farmers have their agricultural plots or *parcelas* (Figures 19 and 20).²⁹ In Paloaltico, before the arrival of guerrillas, *parceleros* lived in the small houses neighboring the cultivated lands. Although a place of permanent residence, living conditions in the *monte* were also harsher than in the village; plots were relatively isolated from large settlements and state institutions were commonly absent. As the story below shows, guerrilla presence in areas surrounding agricultural plots made *el monte* a dangerous place to live in. The *monte* started being imagined as a place of risk and fear. Violence created new geographic imaginaries that resulted in forms of “mental de-territorialization,” as locals ceased to use and access these spaces because they were associated with violence and terror and became “landscapes of fear” (Oslender 2008). While this is partially true in Paloaltico, the story of the abandonment of Aguasblancas presents a somewhat more complex perspective on the ways in which social context, personal lives, and embodied experiences of violence condition decisions to leave a place and shape spatial imaginaries.

Rubén now admits that the situation in Aguasblancas was risky. Not only had the ELN established mobile campsites, but they had started to involve locals in conflict dynamics.

Tensions and silences persist today regarding community involvement in guerrillas.

Contemporary conflict dynamics no longer generate risk of deadly accusations. Nonetheless, the traumatic effects of paramilitary violence and the continuing legacy of over thirty years of anti-

²⁹ As Carse illustrates for rural Panama, *monte* among rural people of the Spanish-speaking Caribbean has a dual meaning (Carse 2014). On the one hand, it refers to a forested area that generally corresponds to the secondary growth forest within the swidden agricultural system known as ‘roza’ (30). On the other, *monte* is an agricultural plot where the farmer works. In the case of Paloaltico, *monte*, in its second connotation was both a place of labor and residence.

insurgent discourses by state and media (Rodríguez Pinzón 2006) limit local talk on collaboration with guerrillas. While Rubén remains cautious to circulate rumors about people's past guerrilla collaboration, him and others in Paloaltico agree that ELN recruited youth from the *parcelas* of Sucesión³⁰ adjacent to Aguasblancas, and that entire families became guerrilla collaborators.

In general, however, guerrilla actions generated local populations' moral rejection and made them vulnerable to their enemy's retaliation. According to Rubén, ELN extended cattle robberies "not just from the rich, but from those who were simply '*acomodados*,' people who owned some land and cattle, but weren't really rich." At some point, he claims, this made locals angry. They started denouncing them to the authorities "*por debajito*"- under the table. Furthermore, in Aguasblancas, guerrillas were asking *parceleros* for contributions and inviting them to their meetings. In meetings, guerrillas explained their ideology and, in Rubén's words, "tried to convince us that they were the best option." While they did not make direct threats, their arms and uniforms were subtle forms of intimidation (Personal conversation, Paloaltico, July 18, 2015).

Rejecting insurgent's strategies made *parceleros* subject to guerrilla harassment and suspects of being army collaborators. At the same time, contributing to guerillas and attending meetings, albeit out of pressure, made them potential targets of the army and private hitmen or "*sicarios*" that had recently started to appear in the region, selectively murdering purported guerrilla collaborators.

³⁰ The lands of Sucesión were formerly owned by cattle baron Tico Cabezas, one of Playón's richest landowners. Upon his death in the mid-1970s, his workers and other families from neighboring villages, occupied his land until decades later they became its legitimate owners, as his heirs never claimed rights to this land.

This situation made Celia's father, Jacinto Julio, become "ill from the heart" and ultimately have to leave the *parcela*. "He was weak of heart, he couldn't take it. Since those men started arriving there he started getting sick. We lived in anguish, because people were saying that Castaño's men were coming from Córdoba," explains Celia. Celia was referring to Carlos Castaño, one of Colombia's most powerful paramilitary leaders. He and his brothers, Fidel and Vicente, operated in the southern Caribbean region, and first formed the Autodefensas Campesinas de Córdoba y Urabá (ACCU), the main paramilitary group preceding the AUC. Celia continued, "Just hearing the sound of the boots: plun, plun, plun. That made him [her father] ill." Eventually, all the six families that had become *parceleros* in the 1970s abandoned the plots and settled in the village Paloaltico. This spelled the death of Jacinto Julio and the start of a life of hardship like the one they had experienced upon re-settlement from Palo Alto El Viejo. "My father loved his *monte*, he wanted to die there, but he had to die here with his heart wounded. He couldn't live without his *monte*. I miss my *monte* as well. It was a good life in the *parcelas* until things got ugly." (Personal conversation, Paloaltico, May 8, 2015)

For the *parceleros* of Paloaltico, guerrilla incursions - intermittent and mediated by what they agreed was a socially-sound ideology - were experienced as a form of violent territorialization with material, symbolic, and emotional implications. *Parceleros* agree that guerrillas "arrived with no invitation." The abrupt appearance of hundreds of armed men with boots and uniforms, as many remember, was met with shock and moral condemnation. In the context of the broader cartography of the region's armed conflict, any kind of relationship with guerrilla members, whether ordinary interactions, assistance to meetings, accusations, or collaboration, put *parceleros* at risk. Guerrilla pressure and fear of their enemy's retaliation, made everyday life in the *monte* unbearable. Abandonment of Aguasblancas was experienced as

expulsion from a land to which they not only had gained legal rights, but which had become a space of subsistence and social life for their families and the entire village.

Despite the realities of fear-based expulsion, de-territorialization - mental and physical- was not a one- way process in which locals became passive victims of violence. Fear and anguish permeated everyday life in the *parcelas* and were the main reason why *parceleros* left. However, fear was embedded in a larger set of social and spatial relations through which life continued to unfold. For years, families lived with guerrilla presence and struggled to adapt and negotiate their role in the midst of conflict, often confronting guerrillas, denouncing them anonymously and learning to avoid becoming involved in conflict dynamics. Others had greater degrees of involvement with guerrillas, not just out of pressure but out of ideological affinity. Decisions to leave the *monte* and to use particular exit strategies were mere mediated by embodied experiences or ordinary events in men and women's personal lives. The birth of a child, the opportunity leave with a group of visitors, sleepless nights in fear or the terror of hearing the sound of boots, were determinant in calculations of whether to stay or leave.



Figure 19. Rice crop in parcela. Source: Author photo.



Figure 20. Edwin, 22, and Yoiner, 19, harvesting manioc in el monte. Source: Author photo/

Violence in Aguasblancas made the *monte* a risky place. Despite the risks, life in this place continued for several years amidst the complex emotional, material, and social dimensions of violence. The event of abandoning the *parcela* as a place of residence and relocating in the village of Paloaltico marked a drastic shift in the ways the *monte* was experienced and imagined. The *monte* stopped being a place of residence and the site of important life events (e.g. the birth of a child) to a distant place of labor that could no longer be easily accessed. With physical distance, stories of Aguasblancas associated *monte* to fear and terror. However, *monte* was not only re-imagined as a “landscape of fear” and excluded from the spaces of use and circulation (Oslender 2008). Rather, in new imaginaries of *monte*, fear co-existed with nostalgia and longing. For Celia, *monte* became a place of terrorific sounds that made her father ill *and* the place that her father Jacinto most loved. Further, during the first 10 years after leaving Aguasblancas, *parceleros* continued to visit and work the land while living in the village. It

wasn't until 2001, with paramilitary occupation, that access was limited by strict curfews or restrictions on mobility to the *parcelas*.

The characteristics of the *monte* as a relatively isolated place made it particularly suitable for semi-permanent guerrilla presence. Using *parcelas* as sites of permanent residence, *parceleros* could hardly avoid guerrillas and were forced to decide the terms of their relationship with insurgent groups. This was not the case in open spaces of circulation such as roads and paths, where many community members transited on an everyday basis and where tactics of avoidance or anonymity could be used. The next story will focus on women fish vendor's encounters with armed groups as they went "walking-and-selling" along the irrigation district's paths.

Restrictions on spatial mobility and the spatial tactics of "vendedoras"

With the arrival of paramilitary, the territorial dynamics of conflict in Paloaltico and its surroundings changed dramatically. Terror was constant between 1999 and 2005. Locals now had to cope with two illegal armed groups in conflict with one another, both attempting to territorialize the same spaces albeit through different strategies. Paramilitaries used physical and symbolic acts of terror to keep the population under strict control. They instilled fear among the population on an everyday basis through surveillance, socio-spatial controls, threats, and the occupation of spaces of family and community life. For instance, paramilitary groups permanently patrolled the area in SUVs carrying names such as "*La Última Lágrima*" (The Last Tear), "*El Cajón*" (The Coffin) and "*No vas a volver*" (You're not coming back). In this context, singular events of extreme violence, such as massacres and individual assassinations, the burning

of commercial boats and trucks³¹ and forced community gatherings as the one described at the beginning of this chapter, occurred intermittently

At the time of greatest paramilitary control, ELN guerrillas had retreated from the region, giving way to FARC presence in the lowlands. Unlike ELN, which established permanent campsites on Irrigation District lands and openly attempted ideological enrollment of campesino populations, FARC's presence was intermittent. With strongholds in upland areas and increasingly pressured by paramilitary groups, FARC's actions in the lowlands of Marialabaja and in *corregimientos* such as San José del Playón were limited to intelligence, kidnappings, and procurement of basic goods. FARC was known for massive robberies of food and cattle, which they carried out by high jacking commercial trucks on the main road and driving them to their upland headquarters. And throughout the entire period of armed conflict in Marialabaja, the Colombian army's presence was intermittent and geared at counter-insurgency operations rather than paramilitary control. The army engaged in surveillance circuits and sporadically visited villages seeking information about guerrilla presence. In the final years of paramilitary presence (2002-2005), the army increased its operations in the area. According to both local accounts and recent investigations, the Colombian military was complicit with paramilitary violence (PNUD 2010).

These territorial dynamics made spaces of community member's everyday circulation sites of potential encounters with various armed actors. Connecting lowland villages with each other and with main roads, the paths that bordered the canals of the Irrigation District were important spaces for the circulation of people, goods, and information. For armed actors, paths

³¹ As explained in Chapter 2, a key event in Playón's collective memory was the massive burning of all motorboats used for commerce and public transportation on reservoir shores in early 2001.

were not only used for movement but as sites of control and surveillance of their enemies. For locals, walking along the paths entailed the risk of witnessing armed group's actions, hearing rumors about their operations, or being interrogated about what they had seen.



Figure 21. Motorcycle on canal path. Source: Author photo.

Such events interrupted the daily spatial itineraries of villagers who used paths to walk to plots or neighboring towns. For some, paths themselves constituted places of labor. This was the case of *vendedoras*, women vendors. Selling fish, corn patties, or fruits involved walking for entire days along the paths, stopping in farms and villages to offer their products. Since continued circulation was a fundamental condition for their daily subsistence, women had to creatively devise ways to continue walking-and-selling while protecting themselves from being enrolled in conflict dynamics. These included simply “running home quickly” or “looking away” to avoid identifying armed group identities, and “performing ignorance” in order to evade being used or accused as informants. Rather than direct confrontation, these practices constituted subtle and anonymous spatial tactics (De Certeau 1984).

Walkers maneuvered in the cracks of the territorial regimes of war, inhabiting and using space, and manipulating spatial encounters. Circulating through spaces of danger, their tactics were not open resistance to violence nor attempts to transform armed actor's strategies. Instead, they were instances of *becoming political* that prevented them from acquiescing to a regime of fear and terror that could potentially constrain their mobility (Secor 2004). The stories of four of Paloaltico's *vendedoras de pescado* (fish vendors) and Juan, a parcelero of the upland village of San Cristóbal, illustrate how everyday movements were affected by conflict dynamics, and how locals navigated this territorial struggle through tactical spatial maneuvers. Pocho, Sofía, La Mella and Marisela came from fishing families. Since the age of 18 or 19, these women were in charge of the family's petty commerce of fish and prepared foods. They walked long distances from Paloaltico through the entire network of irrigation district canals, sometimes reaching the center of Marialabaja. According to Pocho, now 38:

After the paramilitaries arrived, things got ugly for selling fish. We used to walk all the way to Colú, past that palm plantation that's there now. That was all big plantain fincas or rice fields. We exchanged fish for plantains, 200 plantains or even more, until the washbowl was full. One of those fincas down by El Florido was where the "claros"³² lived. The paracos killed all their children. The father went mad. The mother died of high pressure. That land remained abandoned and now is planted in palm. The father's brother was the one who sold, the one whose son was a paramilitary and then went crazy with drugs. After that happened, when we went down to sell, people told us to not even look. It's better not even to look cause then they'll say you've got something to do with the whole deal.

(Paloaltico, September 10, 2015)

"Looking away" was a common responses to a situation of perceived danger through which *vendedoras* refused to be witnesses. This refusal was a tactic to hide their bodies as they

³² Light-skinned

walked through sites where violent acts had been perpetrated. Refusal to witness prevented interrogations about violent events or rumors about potential complicity.

Tactics of invisibility and refusal of witnessing were not always viable. Given that armed groups' cars, trucks, and bodies circulated on the same roads and paths that were used by villagers for daily activities, direct encounters were often inevitable. Such encounters involved witnessing particular groups' movements and later being pressured by opposing groups to inform them of what they had seen. On such occasions, locals made use of several protection strategies. In the cases when groups hid their identities as a way to probe the walker, walkers learned to quickly identify particular markers of armed group's identities. Juan, an elder in the piedmont village of San Cristóbal described such encounters:

We'd meet them any morning, on the path to the parcela. If it was guerrillas, they identified as army to see what your reaction was. The way of telling them apart was that the army was the only group where everyone carried the same model rifle. That was it, because you couldn't even tell by the boots. They were so smart that the guerrillas used soldier's boots, and soldiers wore guerrilla boots to trick us. Oh, and of course guerrillas always had women fighting with them. If you saw a "gringa," that was the FARC for sure³³. With the paracos it was different. They didn't walk much, and those who did wore their berets or their AUC bands. But some paracos dressed as "civiles"³⁴. The police did this too. It was hard to tell them apart, but we knew by their attitude that it wasn't guerrilla or civil people. We had to be smart and try to figure out who they were, so we wouldn't screw up. But the truth is that it was always better not to risk it, not to say anything about who you had seen or what was going on in your village.

(Personal conversation, San Cristóbal, May 31, 2014)

Upon meeting a group along the way, "not saying anything" was indeed the most common response, which was part of another broader tactic of "performing ignorance."

³³ It is common knowledge in rural areas that urban-middle class and European women participated actively in guerrilla warfare. In Montes de María, local stories about encounters with "*gringas*" lie between fascination with these women's beauty and moral condemnation of guerilla's subversion of traditional gender roles.

³⁴ Civilians.

Ignorance did not only refer to having witnessed the enemy's movements, but to pretending to ignore who their interlocutors were. Accompanying this tactic was the careful observation and assessment of armed groups' attitudes and attires, which allowed walkers to identify who they were encountering. The double action of identifying the group and ignoring their identity allowed walkers to "not screw up" by revealing information or speaking in ways that suggested allegiance to one group or the other.

During actual encounters, performing ignorance required a special ability to hide the fear and speak with confidence. Once they arrived in the village, silence had to be managed, and it was best to refrain from telling anyone in the village what one had seen. This is better illustrated by Sofia, who tells a story of witnessing and silencing while selling fish:³⁵

One time we went out to sell fish, Mercedes, la Mella and I. We were coming back home from the main road and saw a car coming. When I looked ahead of us I saw green, green, all green coming on that road. *Guerrilleros*. I said "Sistah, don't look, don't say anything, don't get scared." They asked us where we were coming from and what we had seen and then said: "Ok then, '*boca cerrada*'"³⁶. From then on, wherever we walked by, it was just, *adios, adios. Boca cerrada*.

That day the guerrillas made a checkpoint on the main road. They kidnapped a woman and a young man and stole some cars. That same night, already in the village, we saw how 5 or 6 cars arrived around 7 pm. They were headed uphill, but they got lost and came in through here. Can you imagine the fear? Cause we had seen them before. It was two trucks of cattle, a couple of trucks of food, a couple of taxis. When people saw that, they ran into the "*monte*" or into their homes. Doors shut.

The next day we had to go sell fish again, but this time we ran into the army, also asked us if we'd seen anything strange, any strange cars. "Strange cars?," we asked, "we haven't seen anything around here, nothing like that has come by!" One of the commanders said to us: "That's why you get what you get, because you cover things up for them! Look at your faces, you're stuffed with yogurt, ice cream, all the food those bandits gave you!" Ha, ha, yogurt! Now it's even funny! But really, at that time it was all

³⁵ Further territorial dimensions of the itineraries 'walking-and- selling' will be analyzed in Chapter 6, not only in the context of armed conflict, but in relation to women's territorialities more broadly.

³⁶ Mouth shut.

about the mouth. Everybody who got killed by either of them was because he was a snitch, or they thought so. That's why the guerilla put grenades in people's mouths.

(Paloaltico, September 10, 2015)

As Sofia narrates, spatial movements entailed the risk of witnessing, which immediately made locals possible sources of information and targets of harassment and potential violence.

The stories above illustrate how village walkers made use of spatial tactics in order to continue to circulate through the spaces that were needed for their daily subsistence. Refraining from walking, that is, subjectively interpreting these risks as absolute spatial restrictions, or what Oslender would call “mental de-territorialization” (Oslender 2008), was not an available option for those whose families' subsistence depended on their commercial activities. Instead, locals carefully avoided being enrolled in conflict dynamics by managing what and who they saw, and how they spoke (or didn't) about their spatial itineraries. These forms of clandestine and non-confrontational spatial actions allowed communities to continue access and use of everyday spaces despite imposed spatial restrictions. While remaining with the spatial and political order of armed violence, these everyday actions allowed the subversion- albeit ephemeral- of dominant spatial-power regimes. This point is further illustrated in the stories below, which show how women in the village protected the space of the home from becoming a space of violence during paramilitary occupation.

Territorializing the home

Between 2002 and 2003, approximately 100 men of AUC's Bloque Canal del Dique belonging to Frente Héroes de Montes de María settled permanently in the village of Paloaltico. During the months of permanent paramilitary occupation of the ordinary geographies of the village and homes became potential sites of violence and harassment. Village spaces of yards, paths, plazas, and street corners were constantly monitored, and restrictions were imposed

around when and how they could be used. The home, traditionally a space of social reproduction controlled by women, became a disputed territory. Against the family's will, paramilitaries frequently entered homes for their provision of food and shelter, demanding that families, particularly women, attend to their needs. The invasion of the home space was also a symbolic territorializing act that conveyed the message that paramilitary domination had no borders. Even intimate spaces could become sites of violence or be enrolled in the geo-political dynamics of war.



Figure 22. The village. Source: Courtesy of Duván Caro.

Despite the fear, paramilitary presence in the home was met with women's resistance, as women struggled to counter this frontier of paramilitary territorialization through direct opposition or negotiation. For the sake of safety and protection, women attempted to maintain a "homeplace" as a space of nurturance and refuge for their families (hooks 1991) and to prevent paramilitary presence from making their homes a target for the group's enemies. However,

women also defied paramilitary power in the home in order to retain a sense of dignity and symbolically re-assert their power over a space where they traditionally dominated.

One of the two paramilitary campsites in Paloaltico was Celia's back yard, located immediately beyond her open kitchen: "From that fence you see right there, with the big sticks, all you could see was that 'greenery,' all those camouflaged uniforms. There they cleaned their guns, they hung their hammocks, they slept. It was practically their campsite. My backyard." (Figure 23).

When paramilitaries occupied Celia's home, they not only disrupted a spatial and symbolic order of homeplace as a gendered space of social reproduction, nurturance and care (hooks 1991). They also inserted Celia's home into the broader geographies of political violence. Physical markers of paramilitary presence such as back-packs or uniforms on their front porch were perceived as signs that gave the house a particular identity as paramilitary collaborators and thereby put them at risk of guerrilla retaliation. Celia explains:

What really made me angry was that they put all those backpacks on my front door. They left them there, dirty. Not only did they get all that porch dirty, but anyone could tell it was their bags. I imagined: my God, now that these people leave, these other people³⁷ are going to come and make me into pieces. I warned the kids that they had to watch out, cause maybe the others thought I was complicit, the ones from "up there"³⁸, they'd think that Alberto and Celia and the boys were taking care of the *paracos*.

(Paloaltico, May 8, 2015)

With this act, paramilitaries performed a double territorial move. On the one hand, they transgressed a culturally-sanctioned boundary that protected domestic space from public spaces of violent territorial disputes. On the other, they inserted this particular home into the public

³⁷ Referring to the guerrillas.

³⁸ By "the ones from up there", Celia is referring to the FARC guerrillas, whose headquarters were located in the highlands.

spaces of armed political violence by making it visible, and thereby vulnerable, to guerrilla retaliation. Celia's home became a site where the "extraordinary geopolitics" of war collapsed with its "ordinary social geographies" (Pain and Smith 2008, 13).



Figure 23. Celia's kitchen and backyard. Source: Author photo.

Paramilitary invasion of the home resulted in regular requests for food, water, or domestic services. Paramilitary men demanded families to give away whole pigs or hens. Women were commanded to wash clothes, cook and make coffee. Despite paramilitaries' intimidating behavior, families often refused to perform such tasks. In these cases, verbal disputes took place in which locals explained the injustice of "asking the poor for food" or simply asked paramilitaries to "show some respect." As managers of domestic space and acting under the assumption that their gender would protect them from violence, it was women who most frequently and directly challenged paramilitaries over domestic matters. Indeed, in the face of such vulnerability, women played a key role in re-establishing boundaries of protection and

care around the home, thereby reinforcing a sense of homeplace. For Celia, these fights were a matter of everyday life:

One of them noticed that I was scared of him. Frankly, he knew that I just didn't like him. Sometimes when he saw that I had my pot on the stove, he'd come and ask that I make coffee for them. I said: Coffee? What coffee? I'm making my food! And he'd make me take down my pot. But even so, I always acted 'guapa'³⁹.

(Paloaltico, May 8, 2015)

Although mostly ineffective in diffusing paramilitaries' requests, such responses constituted dignifying acts that served to symbolically assert some degree of power over domestic space. But whenever the possibility of violence increased and life itself was at risk, women shied away from direct confrontation. Such interventions, although more subtle, were effective in protecting family member's lives and making the space of the home a refuge from physical violence.

This was the case the day that Chichío intervened to protect her 14- year- old son Rafael from being killed right in her back yard. He had a lung disease, but that morning he had gone around the village for a walk and met a group of boys who were about to kill two sick dogs. Rafael witnessed the killing. When the paramilitaries heard of the killing, they decided to punish the boys. Rémulo, a 13-year old boy from Playón, led them to the homes of all those who had been present, including Rafael. Chichío tells the story of the events that took place in her home:

That morning I was parboiling a rice that I had just cut. Suddenly, I saw those people coming. I saw them coming and I made signals to Rubén. They came in without saying good morning or anything, standing next to my son. He was sitting here, with his foot up on the wall. One of them ask Rémulo: "which one is him?" And he said: "the one who is sitting." When he said that, I said to myself: "if they're going to kill my Rafael at my feet, they'll have to kill me too." One of them looked at me, the others were watching Rafael, walking back and forth with their uniforms and guns. I wanted to talk, but I couldn't. But when he asked Rémulo again, I asked: "what dog?" "The one he killed,"

³⁹ Local idiom for "mad" or "feisty".

said the *paraco*. So I said: “can’t you see that boy, that boy has no breath, no toughness to stand up from that chair. Even his color is gone.” So one of them looked at him and said to the others: “let’s go! That boy has no spirit to even get up.” The others had compassion towards him. The group left, but one of them stayed. He said: “I should do to him what they did to those dogs and burry him with those dogs.” The others kept calling him, telling him to leave him alone. He walked up to the fence, and then he probably thought: “I’m going to pick on them some more so they react, and then I’ll be able to fuck them over.” So he looked back and said: “gran hijueputa, perro hijueputa, malparido de tu mae!”⁴⁰ yelling at Rafael. I was standing next to Rafael. And Rubén was standing next to Rafael. That boy, that *paraco*, he left with the pain of not having done anything, he left so angry that I could hear him up until the house down the path. “Next time, you won’t get out alive. To teach you some respect!” He only watched those kids kill the dogs, but that’s why you can’t even stop to see. With violence can’t even stop to look when someone is picking up a stone.

(Paloaltico, October 18, 2015)

Unlike Celia’s response, Chichío’s intervention was non-confrontational. Nonetheless, both words and silence were actively used to protect her son in the face of paramilitary rage. Chichío persuaded paramilitaries to refrain from killing Rafael, but also simply stood firmly by him when he was being challenged to react. In contrast to public spaces, which were perceived as dangerous spaces where “you don’t even stop to look,” homes allowed more intimate contact with armed men; intrusion into a space that was traditionally under women’s control, was met with protection strategies in which women continued to exercise their role as caregivers in a space of their own.

The stories of Celia and Chichío illustrate how violence produced gendered counter-territorializations in the home through direct confrontation, persuasion, or silence. Rather than attempting to disrupt paramilitary power as it operated in the broader cartographies of armed conflict in the region, women re-affirmed the boundary between public and private space. Women’s actions attempted to symbolically or materially shield the space of home from the

⁴⁰ You son-of- a-bitch, fucking dog, bastard!

violence of public spaces. Whether effective or not, such practices had important symbolic meaning as they constituted claims to power over space within a broader territorial regime of terror. Rather than merely creating a “terrorized sense of (home) place” (Oslender 2008), these cases show how violence incited women claim their power over the home and make the homeplace a “home-territory.”

Conclusion

Based on the narratives of *resistentes* - those who remained “in place” throughout decades of armed conflict- this chapter addressed the ways in which armed groups’ violent territorializations folded onto the ordinary geographies of Paloaltico and its surroundings. The stories of *resistentes* question the widely accepted narrative that armed actors conquered Colombian rural territories (Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica 2010) and local communities were “de-territorialized” (Restrepo and Rojas 2004; Oslender 2008). Rather than just producing “geographies of terror” (Oslender 2008), violence generated complex space-making processes in which both armed actors and community members were active agents. Within the territorial regime of war, locals protected, made, and re-signified spaces of everyday socialities, economies, and family life.

As illustrated by the ‘storied’ themes of plot abandonment, everyday spatial movements, and the micro- territorial struggles over homeplace, spaces of village, homes, paths, and *parcelas* in their material and imaginative configurations became arenas of politics and territory-making. Through those spaces, villagers coped, negotiated, adapted, and resisted armed actors territorializing strategies. The particularities of each of these spaces not only enabled particular strategies by armed groups, but conditioned local spatial-political responses. Spaces were shaped and negotiated through ordinary relations, practices, and experiences, and therefore became sites

for local's intimate territorialities and for the exercise of local *agency* as women and men sought to sustain everyday life throughout armed actor's violent territorializations (Das 2007).

Through direct confrontation, persuasion or silence, women reaffirmed the boundaries of "homeplace" as a private space of care and nurturance (hooks 1991). In this way, the home became a locus of women's territorial agency. Those whose subsistence depended on continuing to walk the paths along the canals, sought the continuation of spatial mobility through careful management of words and behaviors when encountering armed groups. Clandestine and non-confrontational spatial tactics (De Certeau 1984) allowed women and men to continue to use these spaces that were fundamental for their family economies. Finally, rather than being passive victims of armed-actors territorialization, the families of Aguasblancas actively positioned themselves in relation to armed groups, made calculated decisions regarding plot abandonment, and re-created spatial imaginaries of the *monte*. Their responses were mediated by embodied experiences of fear and violence, personal life circumstances, and moral perceptions. These examples not only illustrate local's spatial agency in the face of violent territorialization, but the importance of the characteristics of each of these spaces in shaping local experiences and spatial responses to violence.

The spatial politics exercised by communities on an everyday basis were not separate from armed group's territorializing practices but constitutive of the process through which violence transformed and produced space (Springer and Le Billion 2016). This chapter revealed the productive capacity of violence through the register of ordinary life and attention to embodied experience. Embodied perceptions and emotions, particularly fear, mediated the experience of violence, shaping spatial strategies and political positions towards armed groups.

At the same time, personal experiences were part of a broader set of moral interpretations, activities and spatial practices through which locals sought the continuity of everyday life.

This chapter focused the production of spaces of everyday life in the context of armed conflict. The spatial politics of armed conflict in Paloaltico, however, could not be understood without addressing matters of “land.” As the basis of the social and power relations of agrarian society, land -in its material and symbolic dimension- was at the core of political violence in Marialabaja. While most studies of the effects of violence on land politics in Colombia’s rural spaces focus on land dispossession (Grajales 2011; Ojeda et al. 2014; Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica 2010) and exclusion (Machado 1999; Reyes Posada 2009), during armed conflict land also constituted the grounds for diverse political reactions “from below” (Hall et al. 2015). The terrain of campesino’s tactics and strategies for accessing land was and continues to be unstable and dangerous, involving dynamic and often ambiguous moral negotiations. The following chapter addresses the moral and emotional dimensions of land occupations and dispossessions during armed conflict and their ongoing effects in contemporary land politics.

CHAPTER FIVE: MAPPING THE MORAL-EMOTIONAL ECONOMIES OF LAND STRUGGLES

Introduction. Mapping the land

The mapping exercises got harder as we moved forward in time. It's not that there were smaller land-holdings or more complex tenure arrangements to draw but there was more debate, more tension, and more silences. In the last session, before mapping the present, Santos was bold: "Eloisa," he said, "you've gotta buy a bottle of rum. This is too rough to pass dry."

(Personal field notes, Paloaltico, November 12, 2015)

Mapping the land in Paloaltico is not simple. Fixing land tenure on paper is perceived as an intimidating exercise that requires memory and accuracy, but also as a practice of caution, courage, and trust. It was out of trust, coupled with the desire to communicate a silenced history, that old-time *parceleros* Santos, Santana, Chago, Danielito, Andrés, Eduardo, Alberto, and I gathered on Sunday afternoons for four months to draw the maps of land tenure in Paloaltico and its surroundings. Our goal was to track changes in tenure relations by mapping the land before and after key historic moments: 1962, before the construction of the Irrigation District and the resettlement of Palo Alto; 1985, after a first period of *parcelaciones* by the Colombian Institute of Agrarian Reform (INCORA) (Figure 24 and 25); 1995, after a period of guerrilla presence and a second wave of *parcelaciones* driven by land occupations (Figure 26 and 27); and the present, 2015, a moment of agro-industrial expansion enabled by massive land dispossession and paramilitary violence between 1996 and 2005 (Figure 28 and 29).

The excerpt from my field notes quoted above continued as follows:

Two bottles of rum were necessary for this last mapping session. More than any other, it was full of anxiety around accuracy and precision. *Parceleros* insisted that we get every

little piece right, that we avoid irresponsible mis-representations. The paradox was that landed transactions had been so complex and so mysterious in the past two decades that nobody had precise information. They disagreed on owner names, on property limits. Chago's insistence in "not talking about what they don't know" made me wonder if he was fearful. He was especially nervous when I asked who had bought the land, when and how, especially when we were talking about lands cultivated today in oil palm. We all knew that the transactions were fishy and that they were dangerous people, but eleven months in Paloaltico had taught me that sometimes this truth is openly shared and other times it's handled with caution.

Not everyone shared Chago's fear. In fact, the others expressed their anger at Chago for being so stubborn. It seemed that they actually wanted to talk about these things, insisting in letting out hidden truths: the fact that they had fought for the land, that these were stories of dispossession, that transactions were illegal and the current owners were criminals or at the least, complicit with criminals, that the things that happened here shouldn't have happened. I suspect, too, that anxieties increased with the tough truth to follow: that there might be no way out. That it might soon be "land's end" (Li 2014).

(Personal field notes, Paloaltico, November 12, 2015)

Mapping is a social practice where *parceleros*' narratives of landed politics are negotiated not only through rational or strategic calculations but through an emotional exercise of soothing present anxieties and making peace with a violent past, despite its material and emotional reverberations in the present. These emotional dimensions suggested that *parcelero*'s experiences of Marialabaja's violent history of land, as well as their current perceptions and narratives of this history, were marked by cautious political positionings in which moral arguments were entwined with fear and negotiated within the unstable set personal and social relations of this agrarian society.

Making the maps of 1995 and 2015 revealed the complex relationship between political violence and landed relations. Contrary to dominant accounts of the de-mobilizing effects of Colombia's armed conflict on land struggles (Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica 2010), the past thirty years of civil war produced dynamic land politics and transformed land's actors, structures, norms and social practices at the local level in unexpected ways (Wood 2008; 2010).

In the lowlands of Marialabaja, the pressure exercised by left-wing guerrillas on landed elites created favorable conditions for a wave of peasant land occupations that resulted in land redistribution by the Colombian Institute for Agrarian Reform (INCORA). Subsequent paramilitary violence put an end to the possibility of greater access to land for peasants, and further deepened land inequalities. Plot abandonment, assassinations of peasant leaders and generalized fear set the conditions for coerced land deals that resulted in massive land dispossession (Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica 2010). Parallel to the start of paramilitary violence, communities witnessed the arrival of non-traditional actors such as narco-traffickers and entrepreneurs from the country's interior who initiated the massive purchase of land. This new agrarian elite of "faceless landowners," a local name used to signal their anonymity and the impersonal nature of new agrarian relations, destined recently acquired lands to palm oil plantations. Marialabaja soon became one of the country's most important laboratories for the development of a palm oil economy⁴¹ (CINEP 2012; Avila 2015).

As we mapped the land, *parceleros'* stories not only revealed the contingencies and complexities of the political conjunctures of guerrilla and paramilitary violence, but grounded this history in the web of social relations that sustained a hierarchical land order. It soon became apparent that we were not only mapping land *tenure*, but broader land *orders*- the more or less stable arrangements of social and power relations that sustained particular agrarian political economies and conditioned land access and tenure. This 'order' not only referred to "access" and "property," but to the formal and informal institutions, social relations, beliefs and moral values that underlay power arrangements and rendered them "natural" (Valdivia 2010). As both

⁴¹ See Chapter Two for a detailed account of the connections between paramilitary violence, dispossession and agro-industrial expansion.

guerrilla and paramilitary violence attempted to change landed orders, the relationship between campesinos and landowners was subject to a complex interplay between rupture and continuity. The stories shared during the map-making sessions foregrounded the personal negotiations that shaped the trajectory of peasant-landowner relations, as well as the ambiguities, dilemmas and frustrations that emerged as campesinos drew on existing moral values and morally-grounded social institutions to seize a political opportunity and later come to terms with political closure. “Moral economies,” the morally-inflected arguments, norms and sentiments that condition social arrangements, economic relations and political actions and positions in agrarian societies (Thompson 1971; Wolford 2005; Scott 1985; Sayer 2000;), both shaped the trajectories of land politics and were in turn shaped by shifting political contexts.

The map of 1995 revealed *parcelero*’s responses to the political opportunities opened by guerrilla presence. Land occupations occurred through negotiations, mediations and alliances that not always confronted landed powers but unfolded *within*, not against, traditional power relations. In fact, campesino’s strategies were shaped by the anxieties of participating in a political conjuncture that could mark a rupture in a hierarchical land order. Paloalteros carefully navigated through change and continuity as they maneuvered for greater access to land while drawing on moral notions and morally-inflected institutions that sustained relationships with landowners and created moral common grounds across social differences. Honoring an “*acuerdo de palabra*” (word agreement) between peasants and landowners; carefully determining a landowner’s ‘goodness’; or seeking the continuation of relations of trust and dependence, were important part of the “moral economies” of land occupations. However, rather than upholding a particular group’s claims and deepening political opposition (Wolford 2005), these moral economies were inherently relational: they were crafted *through* personal relationships and

across social difference, thereby legitimizing the bond between peasants and landowners.

As we mapped the situation in 2015 it became apparent that the opportunity of political rupture offered by land occupations and guerrilla presence passed without fundamentally subverting a hierarchical land order. Not only were land occupations reversed with paramilitary violence, but a new agrarian political economy of palm oil plantations, consolidated through violence and land dispossessions, created a different order of landed powers in which existing moral economies could no longer mediate campesino-landowner relations. Underlying this break in relational moral economies lies a story of deceit: previous landowners betrayed *parcelero*'s trust, breaking agreements of word and forcing campesinos to re-evaluate existing understandings of 'good' and 'bad' landowners as they witnessed unprecedented 'evil,' in which violence was arbitrary and the social norms that previously mediated landed relations were broken.

This chapter untangles the relationship between political violence and shifting land orders from the perspective of *parceleros*' moral-emotional economies. Based partly on the maps but mostly on the stories, conversations, silences and tensions that emerged during the mapping exercises, it focuses on *parceleros*' accounts and understandings of the events and conditions of land occupations in the early 1990s and the dispossessions that followed. By situating moral economies in the context of agrarian relations and the changing conjunctural conditions of armed violence, this chapter reveals the heterogeneous, shifting and contested character of moral-emotional frames. It develops an understanding of peasant moral economies as inherently relational processes often based on moral common grounds, rather than ready-made values or beliefs held by a particular group; this understanding opens questions about campesino politics beyond opposition or 'resistance'. In incorporating emotions- particularly fear- into a moral

economies frame, the chapter finally addresses the relationship between violence, fear and social struggle beyond fear's de-mobilizing effects: rather, fear becomes part of political calculations and of the careful re-ordering of social relations (Pain and Smith 2008).

Today, the expansion of oil palm in lands surrounding Paloaltico threatens to put an end to small-scale campesino economies by drastically limiting access to land for cultivation and enrolling peasants as wage laborers. As campesinos map the land in the context of this post-conflict agrarian order, they are haunted by the possibility of "land's end" - and the end of peasants themselves (Li 2014). This possibility is embedded in a land order that sediments a history of violent land struggles. The anxieties of mapping the present are situated at the juncture between this history- and the complicated moral negotiations that underlay it- and the possibility of "no- future." Untangling the moral-emotional economies of occupation and dispossession sheds light on campesino's political responses to present conditions and on the ways in which the symbolic and emotional effects of a violent land history reshape the trajectories of agrarian politics in the present (Bobrow- Strain 2007).

The chapter is organized as follows. First, I define how I use the concept of moral economies to examine land politics in Paloaltico. The subsequent section offers a conjunctural analysis of actors and conditions of land occupations in the municipality of Marialabaja, providing examples of how occupation trajectories differed in the extent to which they attempted to confront landed power openly. Next follows a village-level ethnographic account of Paloaltero's occupation strategies and arrangements, highlighting the role of fear and the logics of an ambiguous strategy of occupation through and within relations of patronage. The section continues with a fine-grained description of the dispossessions that took place in the late 1990s and early 2000s. The personal stories of Andrés and the "unsuccessful *parceleros*" of Paloaltico

reveal a break of an assumed moral consensus between peasants and landowners. Landowner's violent deceit had important subjective effects in hindering future possibilities of land struggles. This leads to an analysis of the moral-emotional economies of the present, which underlie *parceleros*' decided refusals to sell the land and their poignant critique of agro-industry's effects on campesino's freedoms. While not openly challenging the current order of land, labor and power, contemporary political positions and actions do constitute intermittent and silent rejections of this order.

The moral-emotional economies of land politics

This chapter uses a broad conception of moral economies that includes the morally-inflected arguments, norms, obligations, values, and sentiments that condition social arrangements, economic relations, and political actions and positions in agrarian societies (Wolford 2005; Fassin 2009; Sayer 2000). In studies involving resources and power arrangements in agrarian contexts, moral economies are commonly explored as they are used by a *particular* group of people, who “define how society's productive resources (in this case, land) ought to be divided” (Wolford 2005: 245). Following James Scott, a “moral economy of the peasant” includes expectations about all sorts of entitlements, such as access to land for cultivation, the use of common goods within private property, rights-of-way across landowner properties, and redistributive mechanisms and forms of reciprocity that linked peasants with elites and with each other (Scott 1985; Edelman 2005). Moral economies are inherently political, shaping the types of political reactions that subaltern groups exercise towards a particular social, political, and economic order.

While generally used to explain instances of open rebellion or organized resistance (Thompson 1971; Scott 1976; Wolford 2005), ethnographic attention to the ‘micro-politics’ of

peasant resistance (Scott 1985) has broadened the use of a moral economy framework to understand how moral arguments unfold in ordinary life, influencing everyday activities, shaping evaluation of power relations, and helping peasants reconsider or legitimize their own position within them (Scott 1976; Sayer 2000).

I attend to this dynamic ‘unfolding’ of moral economies throughout shifting social, political and material conditions; and to the ways in which moral values and arguments shape legitimation and political positionings beyond bounded events of ‘resistance.’ However, I emphasize the *relational* nature of moral economies, situating them in the web of personal and social relations of agrarian societies and foregrounding the ambiguities and dilemmas that emerge as moral economies are negotiated at the juncture between a particular group’s claims and the search for moral common grounds across social divides.

The heated conversations during the mapping sessions of 1995 and 2015 made clear that *parceleros* confronted important moral dilemmas regarding occupation strategies in the early 1990s. While inconformity with land inequalities was the main prerequisite for land occupations, the conditions of that particular conjuncture, which included the demise of landowner’s power, indirect guerrilla support, and the re-organization of a regional-level peasant movement, generated complex moral negotiations among campesinos. Peasants faced the possibility of subverting an existing hierarchical land order while simultaneously respecting personal relations of patronage and legitimizing landowner power on the basis of moral evaluations of landowners themselves. They were also confronted with the moral dilemma of legitimizing the use of armed violence by guerrillas and joining them in the exercise of “illegal” actions. *Parceleros*’ moral dilemmas were further conditioned by the possibility of physical violence: not only could they be

subjected to retaliation by landowners, but they also risked being stigmatized as guerrilla collaborators and thereby targeted by private and military counter-insurgency.

Moral arguments, fear and a sense of opportunity together conditioned occupation strategies that took place *within* traditional land orders. My use of moral economies in this chapter attends to these complexities. I situate moral economies in the shifting material, political and emotional conditions of armed conflict, as well as in the social and personal relations of agrarian society.

Marialabaja's land politics during armed conflict could not be understood without addressing the shifts in agrarian political economies that ensued paramilitary domination. *Parcelero*'s accounts of the moral economies of occupation and dispossession not only attend to the effects of economic transformations on a particular group's moral values (Sayer 2000; Wolford 2005). More importantly, they point to how the shifts in personal and social relations produced by political- economic transformations challenged morally-based *agreements* across social differences, as well as to the moral ruptures that occurred with the advent of impersonal relations of land and labor.

In this chapter, "moral economies" encompass values, frames and arguments. Moral frames shaped evaluations of 'good' or 'bad' landowners. Evaluations not only served to legitimize (or not) landowner power but conditioned occupation strategies by determining the possibility of reaching personal agreements- thereby seeking access to land while operating through personal relations and existing informal institutions. Qualities of 'good' or 'bad' came from previous personal patronage relations and drew on morally-grounded personal traits such as generosity or greed, agreeability, or arbitrariness. 'Good' traits further grounded campesino's

assumption that moral values such as honesty, integrity and trustworthiness were shared across social difference, and therefore that landowner's word could be trusted.

Closely related to such moral frames were the moral arguments that upheld negotiated occupation strategies. Moral arguments, such as a landowner's legitimate right to property or campesinos' indebtedness to a landowner for his generosity, grounded campesino's strategies to access land without entirely subverting landowner power, and generated anxieties about the moral grounds of land occupations enabled by "illegal" and violent guerrilla intimidation.

Grounding moral economies in personal experiences of armed violence leads me to address the emotional dimensions of moral economies, exploring the interplay between fear, moral arguments, and campesino politics. Rather than simply de- mobilizing peasant struggle, fear interacted with moral evaluations in order to generate complex political strategies that allowed *parceleros* to navigate the risky terrain of land occupations in the midst armed conflict. In this chapter, I use the notion of moral-*emotional* economies to underscore the role of emotions- particularly fear- in shaping political actions and subjectivities and mediating spatial politics (Sharp 2007; Davidson et al. 2005; Sultana 2011). This chapter's attention to the emotional aspects of moral economies contributes to literatures that move beyond the separation between reason and emotions/bodies that characterized the original use of moral economies by E.P. Thompson (Fassin 2009). In order to argue for peasant's ideological/moral reasoning, Thompson (1971) suggested that riots in 17th and 18th century England were not mere "rebellions of the belly" (77) - the result of economic despair and irrational impulse- but were underlay by discipline and organization and conditioned by centuries-old moral values and arguments. He thereby assumed a binary between moral arguments, understood as rational calculations and social values, and 'irrational' impulses of the body such as hunger and emotions. In this chapter,

I re-evaluate this separation by positing that emotions such as fear and anxiety were an integral part of the dynamic crafting of moral arguments and morally-based political strategies.

Armed conflict and land occupations in Marialabaja

From the late 1980s to the mid- 2000s, landed relations in Marialabaja were reconfigured by powerful elites, armed groups, and by landless campesinos. Despite war's demographic effects on rural populations and the silencing of social demands produced by counter-insurgency activities, between 1988 and 1997, landless peasants, renters, *latifundia*⁴² workers, and small-scale owners occupied lands and negotiated their formal redistribution as *parcelas*. Land occupations, locally referred to as "*tomas de tierras*," and subsequent titling or *parcelaciones* by the National Institute for Agrarian Reform, (INCORA) were conditioned by the territorial, economic, and political dynamics of armed conflict (Millán 2015).

Occupations took place at a historical conjuncture in which guerrilla presence threatened to subvert a land order that had remained highly uneven despite land titling schemes of the 1960s.⁴³ Campesinos took advantage of the opportunities opened by guerrilla harassment to landowners, while guerrillas further pressured the state to title the lands. This historical moment offered the possibility of political rupture. However, occupations occurred through a complex set of negotiations, mediations, and alliances that not always confronted landed power but unfolded within, not against, traditional power relations. This section describes the political conditions of land occupations in the late 1980s and early 1990s, focusing on the complex set of actors and mediations that emerged. It provides examples of two occupations that followed very different

⁴² Large landholdings.

⁴³ See Chapter 3 for an account of land titling during the 1960s and 1970s.

trajectories as a result of different moral evaluations of landowners and different ways of navigating the risks and opportunities of political violence.

Guerrilla presence affected all landowners. However, while it initiated internal displacements among small-scale campesinos in the form of plot abandonment and re-settlement in small villages, the first decade of armed violence, between the late 1980s and the late 1990s, disproportionately affected middle and large landowners, as well as commercial and political elites. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, cattle rustling, extortions, kidnappings, and threats were strategies used by ELN guerrilla to intimidate landowners. As ELN gave way to FARC guerrillas in the late 1990s, FARC continued to exert economic pressure on landowning elites, many of which stopped visiting their *fincas* or migrated to regional capitals of Cartagena and Barranquilla.

In this context, Land Occupation Committees supported by national-level National Association of Peasant Users (ANUC),⁴⁴ occupied and legally claimed large landholdings. Direct support to occupations by guerrillas was and continues to be a contentious topic around which silence and contradiction exists. Interviews with former occupiers and written histories of occupations emphasize the disconnect between land struggles and guerrilla actions (Documento de Memoria para la Reparación Colectiva de Cúcuta y Cascajalito 2015; Millán 2015). Although ELN and FARC continuously offered support to occupiers, and despite ELN's active attempts at ideological mobilization of the peasantry, occupiers were careful not to establish collaborative

⁴⁴ Formed in the late 1960s, ANUC's main purpose was to "promote direct peasant participation in the provision of services and to help implement agrarian reform" (Zamosc 1986: 50). From the perspective of the state, ANUC was both an organizational platform that would allow peasants to advance their class interests and a strategy for state-control over a mobilized peasantry that would minimize the opposition to the ruling coalition. While initially acting in alliance with the state, ANUC's radical strategy of massive occupations was a response to their perception of state deceit due to right wing opposition. While in the Caribbean region the peak of occupations was between 1970 and 1973, in Marialabaja, occupations only became widespread between 1988 and 1997.

relations with guerrilla groups that could put them at risk. Notwithstanding this distance, informal interviews, rumors, and everyday conversations in Paloaltico indicate that the situation was much more complex. In addition to ideological affinities between ANUC and guerrillas, guerrilla pressure on INCORA was an act of support to occupiers, which required guerrillas to have some degree of knowledge about the occupation process and, in this sense, a certain proximity to occupiers. Further, with the start counter-insurgency actions and persecution of peasant leaders, guerrillas offered to protect occupiers' lives and, if necessary, to take action against landowners who opposed occupation.

Occupations resulted in substantial distribution of land to small-scale peasants by INCORA in Marialabaja. This was not the first time that INCORA engaged in massive land distribution in the municipality. As analyzed in Chapter 2, in the 1960s and 1970s the state implemented Project INCORA #1, which entailed an integral scheme of land distribution, support to peasant production and massive irrigation infrastructure. This first wave of land titling (*parcelaciones*) was integral to then President Carlos Lleras' vision of 'radical' agrarian reform, which emphasized land redistribution, state support to peasant organizing and the modernization of peasant production (Zamosc 1986). Land titling at that moment differed substantially from the *parcelaciones* of the late 1980s and early 1990s. While the former was fundamentally a state initiative, the latter involved a varied set of actors who negotiated amidst the risks and opportunities of political violence. According to the former chief of INCORA in the state of Bolívar, the main difference between the first and second wave of *parcelaciones* was guerrilla presence:

I am not pro-guerrilla, but I was there. It was practically a 'second agrarian reform'. There is no doubt that had it not been for the pressure of ELN and FARC, both on the landowners and on us, that reform had not taken place. It was a tough, tense time, we feared for our lives. But we were able to buy a lot of land. Nobody took the land from

landowners, those lands were purchased. And we paid good prices. Of course, nobody likes to be forced to sell. But they had to, for there to be a tiny bit of social justice. And in that area, agrarian reform is particularly significant, cause they're black. Former slaves! It's land justice to reverse the effects of slavery.

(Personal interview, Cartagena, May 20, 2015)

As the excerpt above suggests, the adjudication of occupied lands to peasants was enabled by a complex set of mediations. On the one hand, guerrillas mediated between peasants and the state, pressuring the latter to effectively title the lands. Former INCORA officials remember how members of ELN and later FARC frequently visited INCORA headquarters in Marialabaja demanding that the Institute find legal and administrative solutions for campesinos to gain legal ownership of occupied lands. Threats were frequent, officials were forcibly confined in the office, and meetings were so tense that, in the words of the interviewee above, "I didn't know if I was gonna come back home alive." Purchasing and distributing these lands became so urgent that regional level INCORA officials requested the support of the national level office to devise more efficient mechanisms for acquiring land in ways that were attractive to landowners. This was made possible with the support of then National director Carlos Ossa Escobar, who pushed forward several decrees to this purpose.

INCORA's mediation between peasants and landowners was ambiguous. In cases in which landowners resisted selling the land, it acted in favor of peasants by convincing landowners to sell. However, INCORA's offer to purchase the lands at reasonable prices also provided landowners with an opportunity that would mitigate the effects of violence on their economies.

Some landowners had migrated to large cities out of fear of guerrilla violence. In other cases, landowners remained in the region with limited possibilities of using the land because of guerrilla threats. In addition to guerrilla intimidation, the neoliberal reforms of the early 1990s

affected the profits of large and middle- scale agricultural producers of Marialabaja's Irrigation District (Aguilera 2013). Landowner's agrarian economies were hardly viable with guerrilla's economic pressures and the structural constraints of the country's agricultural imports. Economic factors, coupled with fear of guerrilla harassment, resulted in landowner's willingness to sell their lands to INCORA for its re-distribution to local peasants.

Alongside landowner's diminishing power, state mediation and guerrilla pressure, organized peasant politics was a key factor that enabled land occupations. In the late 1980s, Marialabaja saw a re-emergence of peasant mobilization through the re-organization of local and regional chapters of ANUC. While ANUC had been present in Marialabaja during the first wave of *parcelaciones* of the 1970s, it was in the late 1980s that appropriate political conditions allowed the effective enrollment of peasants in land occupations. These conditions included a weakened landowning elite, guerrilla support, and the fact that the state had ceased to adjudicate lands after the end of INCORA #1, despite the continuation of land inequalities.

Indeed, more than ten years after the end of Project INCORA # 1, land concentration continued in the counties surrounding the Irrigation District reservoirs. By 1985, the lowland counties of San José del Playón and Matuya were still dominated by *latifundios* of over one thousand hectares (Figures 24 and 25). Similarly, in the mountain slopes adjacent to the district reservoirs, few middle-scale land holdings were interspersed between two large *latifundia*. Most *latifundios* in the counties of San José del Playón, Matuya, San Cristóbal, and parts of Retironuevo belonged to five *terratenientes*.⁴⁵ Rafael Vergara Támara, José Pérez Pérez, Rafael Cantillo, Nelson Saldarriaga, and Eusebio Zúñiga. In addition to large landowners, there was a group of middle landowners with lands of approximately one hundred hectares; a few peasants

⁴⁵ Large land-owners

who obtained the land through hereditary succession; and approximately forty *parceleros* with lands of approximately fifteen to twenty hectares that had been allocated by INCORA in the early 1970s. The case of the lands of Tico Cabezas is significant in local geographic imaginaries of regional land structure, as indicated through the mapping sessions. Tico Cabezas is remembered as “the richest man of Marialabaja.” Having no known relatives to claim the land, his workers occupied the land upon his death in the early 1980s, and were soon granted titles as legal successors, founding a town named Sucesión.

Figure 24. Map of land tenure in 1985 made in participatory mapping session. Author's intervention.

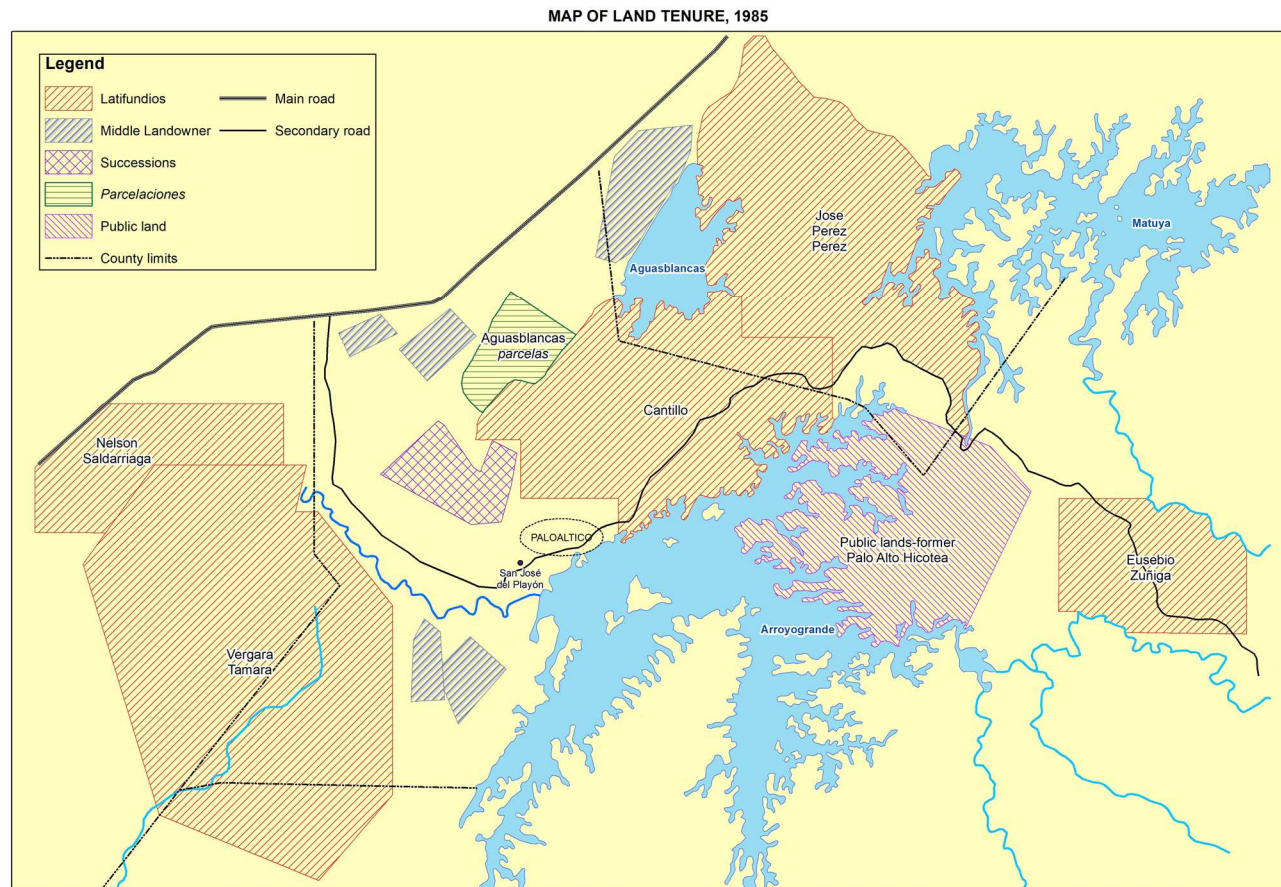


Figure 25. Map of land tenure in 1985, digitalized version. Source: Map by author and Elias Helo.

Starting in the late 1980s, land occupation committees operating at the scale of the village or county began to occupy the lands of large-scale landowners. They were supported by Marialabaja's ANUC Municipal Committee and by regional ANUC leaders. Regional leaders helped local occupation committees strategize negotiations with landowners and INCORA and aided in the legal and administrative process towards formal land titling. At the local level, occupation committees acted as a network. As was discussed in Paloaltico's mapping sessions, committees sustained regular meetings and helped each other navigate the risks of landowner retaliation and devise cautious strategies regarding relationships with guerrillas.

The political strategy of each process was unique. Occupations differed mainly in the extent to which both peasants and landowners were willing to challenge the entrenched hierarchies of land ownership. The case of Cascajalito, the first *finca* successfully parceled in the municipality through a strategy of occupation, followed a peculiar trajectory: the owner, Nelson Saldarriaga, offered his workers an exchange of "vote for *potrero*."⁴⁶ He parceled out small lots of his hacienda and gave them out in exchange for workers' support to his candidacy for municipal major. In his view, this was a modified version of the traditional scheme of "pasture rent," in which landowners allowed peasants to use land for a period of one or two years in exchange for their labor in clearing the lands from secondary growth and making them suitable for pasture. In this case, instead of labor, peasants provided votes. After elections, *parceleros* notified Saldarriaga that they were seeking formal titling. They had contacted INCORA and were supported by ANUC. Occupiers insisted that they were not 'taking' the land but rather looking for INCORA to help purchase it from him. With INCORA as mediator, Saldarriaga finally

⁴⁶ Small plot of pastureland.

agreed to sell the land and *parceleros*, in exchange, agreed to refrain from occupying the remainder of his properties (Millán 2015).

In this case, direct dialogue between peasants and landowner, along with INCORA's work in convincing Saldarriaga to sell the property, allowed the dispute be exempt from violence. For *parceleros*, this was largely a result of negotiating with a 'good' landowner. This quality was not acquired as a result of peaceful negotiations, but came from previous relations of patronage in which Saldarriaga was perceived as 'generous,' 'treatable' and "understanding" *patron*.⁴⁷

Land negotiations were not always free of confrontation and violence. In the case of the 960-hectare *finca* El Cucal, occupation without the landowner's consent led to attacks by the police and military and permanent attempts to expel occupiers by destroying their crops. El Cucal belonged to one of the region's most powerful men, Rafael Vergara Támara, twice governor of the state of Bolívar and member of Bolívar's right-wing cattle ranching elite.

Vergara's reputation as a 'bad' and violent *patrón* conditioned the struggle that directly challenged landowner power. With the participation of over one hundred families from the committees of Pueblo Nuevo, Los Bellos, Marialabaja, Retiro and Sucesión, land occupation was meant to alleviate the "overpopulation" of Cascajalito, where each lot was being shared by 2-3 families, and to cover families from other committees as well. Starting in 1991, the families gathered in a sector of the *finca* and cultivated transitory and permanent crops. Families endured Vergara's retaliations for three years until the land was purchased by INCORA and parceled in 1993. Despite its success in obtaining the land, the struggle for Cucal evidenced the risks of challenging landowner power in a context of armed political conflict. Military intimidations and

⁴⁷ Master, employer.

temporary incarceration of *parceleros* was accompanied by direct accusations of being guerrilla members and by the military's articulation of categories of "*campesinos limpios*" ('clean' peasants), "*campesinos cuatreros*" (campesino thieves) and "*campesinos guerrilleros*" (guerrilla peasants) (Millán 2015: 112). These distinctions aimed to divide the peasant movement and legitimize the use of violence against those classified as either thieves or, worse, guerrilla insurgents. Although Vergara Támara's negotiation with the state forced him to stop direct violence, Cucal's members continued to be stigmatized as guerrillas for many years, which led to the eventual assassination of two of its main leaders with the advent of organized paramilitarism.

Cascajalito and Cucal are two examples of the differences in the trajectories of land struggles during the initial years of armed conflict in Marialabaja. Both occurred with the support of ANUC and in the context of guerrilla presence, but each showed different strategies for navigating traditional relations of patronage and different degrees of confrontational resistance. Nascent counter-insurgency introduced a new dimension to risk calculation. Not only must *parceleros* consider direct retaliation by landowners, but they also were positioned in a discursive field of counter-insurgent politics that made them subject to stigmatization and criminalization as guerrilla collaborators and thereby targeted by private and military counter-insurgency.

After 1997, the political context that had enabled occupations shifted dramatically. Intimidations and assassinations of peasant leaders by paramilitaries between the mid-1990s and 2003 made most *parceleros* sell their lands, both those that had been recently acquired and those titled by INCORA during the 1970s. At that moment, the arrival of old landowners and new buyers, all of whom were perceived to have ties to paramilitary groups or to narco-trafficking economies, initiated a dramatic rise of coercive land transactions (Centro Nacional de Memoria

Histórica 2010; ILSA 2012). The next sections describe the process of land occupations and later dispossessions through a village-level ethnographic account and provide a fine-grained account of land occupations.

Negotiating occupation and dispossession in Paloaltico

Land scarcity and uneven tenure relations are at the core of Paloaltico's history. The village of Paloaltico was created in 1968 as the resettlement of the inhabitants of Palo Alto Hicotea, where the Irrigation District's main water reservoir was built. For the few families who became *parceleros* following resettlement, access to land involved a difficult adaptation to state-sanctioned regulations of private property and agrarian modernization, a topic explored in Chapter Three. Many others remained landless upon re-settlement and had to establish new relations of patronage in the lowlands, which allowed temporary access to land that was combined with seasonal labor migration to different parts of the Caribbean region.

With the arrival of guerrillas in the late 1980s, local landed relations became increasingly entangled with the violence and socio-political tensions of Colombia's armed conflict. Land politics took unexpected turns. A careful look at the map of 1995 (Figures 26 and 27) shows two apparently contradictory processes: land occupations and land abandonment. As explained in Chapter 4, in 1990-1991, the *parceleros* of Aguasblancas⁴⁸ abandoned their plots due to the risks posed by guerrilla presence. They sold these parcels three or four years later with the start of paramilitary violence out of fear of being associated with guerrilla groups. During the same years, as in other *corregimientos* in the municipality, groups of men from Paloaltico occupied large landholdings and negotiated their formal titling with landowners and the state.

⁴⁸ Chapter 2 describes how the *parcelas* of Aguasblancas were allotted by INCORA in 1971 as part of Project INCORA #1, the first project to materialize Law 1 of 1968 of Agrarian Reform. Due to local mistrust towards state-sponsored projects of land titling and agrarian modernization, only seven families from Paloaltico received *parcelas*.

Figure 26. Map of land tenure in 1995 made in participatory mapping session. Author's intervention.

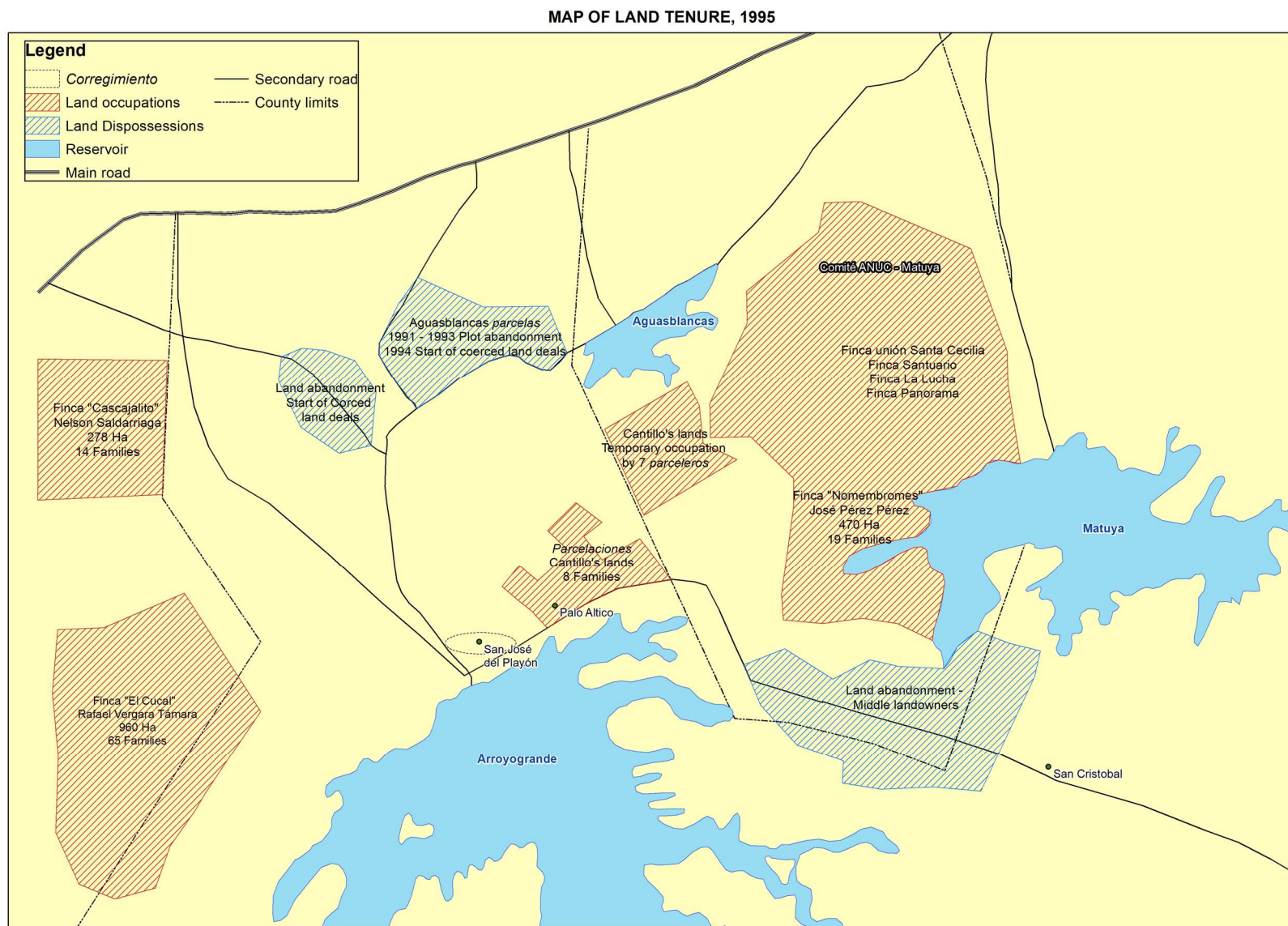


Figure 27. Map of land tenure in 1995, digitalized version. Source: Map by author and Elias Helo

Although part of the broader process of land occupations and subsequent titling in Marialabaja, occupations in Paloaltico followed a particular trajectory. Unlike Cucal and Cascajalito, and contrary to prevalent ideas of land occupations as organized attempts to confront landed power and subvert power hierarchies (Veltmeyer 2005; Wolford 2010), *tomas de tierras* in Paloaltico occurred as a response to landowners' own request. This phenomenon was not unique to Paloaltico. Several occupations led by the Land Occupation Committee in the neighboring *corregimiento* of Matuya were also a consequence of landowners' interest in abandoning the land and selling to INCORA.⁴⁹ In these places, entrenched relations of patronage and local perceptions of landowners as 'good' and trustworthy, made this possible.

However, unlike the *parceleros* of Matuya, the *parceleros* of Paloaltico were particularly cautious in how they positioned themselves with respect to ANUC, to the organizational strategy of land occupation committees, and to the concept of 'occupation' itself. Adopting a strategy that was ideologically ambiguous with respect to municipal level struggles, Paloalteros never created a formal committee and were careful not to frame their actions as "occupations." This revealed a careful calculation of the risk posed by identifying as "occupiers" in the context of stigmatization of land struggles, as well as the strategic maintenance of traditional relations of patronage, and the respect of notions of rightful ownership. Instead of "occupying," Paloalteros *entered* the land upon previous agreements with landowners, making use of traditional informal institutions such as "*acuerdos de palabra*" (agreements of word) and "*acuerdos de hombres*" (agreements between men). Grounded on moral values such as trust, honesty, and integrity, these informal

⁴⁹ As documented by Elizabeth Wood for El Salvador, campesino occupation of large landholdings during armed conflict, led to a re-peasantization of the land, as land use shifted from cattle grazing fields to small-scale peasant agriculture (2008).

agreements were fundamental institutions that mediated peasant-landowner relations and sustained land and labor arrangements outside of the formalities of the law.

The story of Paloaltero's negotiation of "Cantillo's lands" illustrates this process. In 1991, a moment of heightened guerrilla presence, Víctor Cantillo, the son of Rafael Cantillo, one of the richest men in the region and the owner of over 2, 000 hectares of lands, made an offer to 15 campesinos from Paloaltico and its surroundings: they could enter an area of his land, divide it in equal parts, and establish their crops. Cantillo would contact INCORA and offer to sell the land so that the Institute would formally adjudicate it and grant them individual titles. According to local accounts, the Cantillo family had "practically abandoned" the land because of guerrilla intimidation. As was the case for many other middle and large landowners in the region, ELN was stealing his cattle, forcing him to pay a war tax, and threatening to kidnap him and his family. Rafael, the father, had been kidnapped by ELN and released after the family paid a ransom. He died shortly after from heart failure. After his father's death Víctor Cantillo approached Paloaltico's men seeking what they perceive as a "friendly dialogue."

The Cantillos were from the neighboring village of Nuevo Retén, members of a local black landowning elite. Paloalteros knew them well. Rafael Cantillo's lands surrounded the village. Upon their arrival from Palo Alto El Viejo, they worked for him as day laborers or guards. At that time, Cantillo let them harvest timber in his land, so that families were able to make a meager living from selling the timber in neighboring Playón in a moment of extreme need. According to 78-year old Dagoberto:

The *finca* that most favored us in that time was Cantillo's. He tilled with tractors, but he left the woods around the streams, so it was trees, fruits everywhere. Cantillo never denied us access, he even gave us a well for drinking water.

(Personal conversation, Paloaltico, April 12, 2015)

When the Cantillos abandoned these lands, the *parceleros* from Paloaltico did not simply take it over. Rather, they perceived Victor's offer as a sign that, like his father, he was generous and trustworthy, a man who would keep his word. Moreover, Paloalteros felt indebted to the Cantillos for their perceived generosity and consideration when they first arrived to the lowlands. Through an "agreement between men," they committed to respecting the landowners' right to property, making sure that it was still his until it was bought by INCORA. Cantillo, on his part, committed to pursue INCORA to buy the land. For *parceleros*, the possibility of such agreements being met depended on the landowners' moral standing. Rafael Cantillo, like Nelson Saldarriaga, was considered a 'good' landowner, one who was approachable and considerate of people's needs. Generally, 'good' landowners had constructed solid relations of patronage with the community and were perceived as generous, considerate, and 'approachable.' 'Bad' landowners, like Vergara Támara in Cucal, were perceived as arbitrary, violent, and distant. Landowners' behavior during the process of occupation and *parcelaciones* became an additional factor in calculations of who was considered a 'good' or 'bad' *terrateniente*. *Parcelaciones* of the early 1990s relied on previous standards, but also challenged them: some 'good' landowners eventually broke agreements and became 'bad,' and 'bad' landowners' repertoire of actions widened to include threats and murders associated with armed political conflict.

The trajectory of the *parcelaciones* of Paloaltico suggests a struggle that occurred not despite or against, but *through* traditional power hierarchies of patronage and notions of land ownership. Strategic calculations and moral evaluations were crafted through these uneven power relations, while also shaped by a context that generated risks and instilled fear and caution among *parceleros*. Personal relations with *terratenientes* and moral evaluations as 'good' landowner's enabled agreements, which prevented campesinos from openly and arbitrarily

subverting landed power hierarchies. However, occupying lands with landowners' consent was not only a result of relations of patronage but also calculated strategy aimed to shield themselves from the possibility of violent retaliation, given the risky political context.

The events that ensued land occupation, narrated below, showed that the success of a negotiated approach to land claims could only be partial, as landowners' moral integrity trembled in a violent and unstable political and economic context. While some *parcelero* families obtained legal rights to land upon negotiation with INCORA, others were deceived and coerced to give up their rights of possession after 17 years of occupation. In both cases, *parceleros* persisted despite constant threats and made consistent efforts to gain property rights through administrative and legal procedures. Unlike common narratives of peasant resistance (Moyo and Yeros 2005), these land struggles were not the result of a direct challenge to power, but the result *parcelero*'s attempts to navigate the terrain of traditional power relations and the political ruptures brought by armed conflict.

A few years after the agreement with Cantillo, Paloaltico's *parceleros* remained confident that negotiations with INCORA were close to an end. But after occupying, planting and harvesting for several cycles, the process took an unexpected turn. What had thus far been a peaceful land deal became a conflictive situation that put *parceleros* at risk. They soon found out that the land was being negotiated between Cantillo's heirs and an Italian man called "Salvita" (short for Salvatore), suspected to be involved in narco-trafficking. After the original landowner's death, the remaining lands were in the hands of his children and siblings; while Victor had wanted to negotiate the lands with *parceleros*, his siblings now opposed this decision and debated whether selling to INCORA was the best option. *Parceleros* were notified of these

complications, and INCORA promised that the rest of the *parceleros* would soon be given land from a different land purchase.

Notwithstanding the lack of formal tenure recognition, *parceleros* remained on the land, claiming the validity of the “*acuerdo de palabra*” made with Victor Cantillo. Salvatore subjected them to threats and harassments and, in 1994, burnt three of the *parcelero*’s ranches, forcing them to settle in the village. Santos, one of the seven that were left out of the title, tells the story of how this vulnerability forced him to contact his cousin in San Cristobal asking for his help. His cousin was friends with “*los del monte*” (“the guys from the bush”), a colloquial way of referring to the FARC guerrillas, who he knew would be willing to harm Salvita and pressure a land deal on behalf of *parceleros*. Understanding the risks of direct alliances with guerrillas and fearful of potential stigmatization as guerrilla allies, *parceleros*’ instead chose to seek help from ANUC leaders Estualdo Villadiego and Máximo Ariza, who advocated a negotiated solution. Santos took back his request and they instead signed two agreements: a bailment contract in which Salvita transferred the custody of the land to *parceleros*; and a promise to sell, in which he committed to sell to INCORA. This agreement was founded upon the recognition of Cantillo’s previous “*acuerdo de palabra*,” which was now being enforced by INCORA and other legal authorities involved in the process. However, the agreement did not apply to the totality of occupied lands. Throughout the process, *parceleros* found out that a portion of the land belonged exclusively to Victor Cantillo and was thus subject to his word; ownership of the remainder of the land was shared between Cantillo and his siblings and could therefore not be negotiated with *parceleros*.

Despite these legal technicalities, *parceleros* today agree that it was the start of paramilitary violence that truncated their process. The political context of land deals had changed

dramatically since Cantillo's first offer in 1991. In the case of the occupation of Cucal, counter-insurgency discourses targeted land occupation committees and *sicarios* (paid hitmen that preceded organized paramilitarism) started circulating in the region carrying lists with *parcelero*'s names. In 1997, paramilitaries tortured and murdered Máximo Ariza in front of his wife and ten other fellow *parceleros* of Cucal. Máximo's violent death instilled fear among *parceleros* in the municipality, many of whom left their lands and migrated forcibly to regional capitals. This tragic event signaled the demise of land struggles in Marialabaja and indirectly set the material and subjective conditions for a wave of land dispossessions through coercive land sales in the first decade of the 2000s.

Máximo's death signaled a drastic shift in the balance of power of armed conflict in the municipality. With paramilitary violence, attempts to transform landed relations were demobilized, reversing what was beginning to be a *de facto* local agrarian reform. Paramilitary violence against small-scale peasants was not related to counter-insurgency, but to a broader economic and political project grounded on a massive processes of coerced land deals (Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica 2010; Reyes Posada 2009). As structural vulnerability made *parceleros* an easy target of violence, displacement, and dispossession, it became clear that the opportunity of political rupture offered by occupations and guerrilla presence had passed without fundamentally changing a hierarchical land order. This change in political context also generated new moral and emotional calculations, marked by fear and by a violent break in the moral economies that mediated landed relations.

For the *parceleros* of Paloaltico, the possibilities of radicalizing their struggle through alliances with ANUC, guerrilla support or recourse to legal means, were stunted with Máximo's death. According to their accounts, when Danielito, the local head of the *parcelación*, found out,

he got so scared that he burned all the papers related to the case and decided to end all claims to Cantillo's lands. In this case, direct violence foreclosed the possibility of any sort of negotiation, fundamentally rupturing the foundations upon which peasant-landowner relations were built.

Parcelero's experiences and interpretations of dispossession through coerced land deals continued to be embedded in agrarian social relations, but the nature of these relations had shifted dramatically. Rather than a traditional landowning elite with whom they had long-standing relations of patronage, *parceleros* were now confronted with a new generation of potential landowners with little interest in gaining social legitimacy among locals, and whose repertoire of morally condemned actions far exceeded what was known to local campesinos thus far.

In the midst of negotiations between *parceleros* and absentee landowners, men from the country's interior, suspected to act in the name of narco-trafficking barons, started arriving in the region and offering to buy lands. Titled *parcelas* and lands under negotiation became one of the main targets. In 1994 one such intermediary known as "Alberto" or "El Paisa" bought the *parcelas* of Aguasblancas. He had arrived in 1990 to Hacienda Belén, near the village of Bolito in neighboring municipality of San Onofre. According to rumors, the Hacienda belonged to Gonzalo Rodríguez Gacha, a prominent narco-trafficker of the Medellín Cartel. According to Dermis from Paloaltico, whose step-father was the manager of the hacienda until Alberto arrived:

Alberto was a 'serial killer.' He arrived with a list of names of campesino leaders to kill. People were afraid of him. A couple of years later, around 1994-95, he came to these lands and started buying from the *parceleros*.

(Personal conversation, Paloaltico, October 25, 2015).

Alberto was later murdered and found to act in the name of “Tuercas y Tornillos” a money-laundering firm from Medellín.

According to *parceleros*, Salvatore, the man who interfered with the *parcelaciones* of Cantillo’s lands, was also a suspected narco-trafficker. Chago explains:

He walked the land and the village protected by armed men. They say he was deported for some years. After that, he returned to his lands, but was killed shortly after in a narco-related vendetta. Man, he was bad, like really a bad person.

(Mapping session, Paloaltico, September 26, 2015).

Salvatore embodied a form of threat that was unknown and unpredictable. Despite having signed written agreements with occupiers, *parceleros* related to him with fear and caution, as they associated him with the new narco-trafficking elite and the upsurge of paramilitary violence against *parceleros* exemplified by Máximo’s death.

Fear did not deter the remaining seven *parceleros* from seeking access to lands that remained un-used by their owners, who now resided in regional capitals. Upon their expulsion by Salvita, two of them, Piro and Emigdio, entered the lands of medical doctor E. Rocha, a man from Marialabaja now living in Barranquilla, who had bought 100 hectares of Cantillo’s lands. The remaining five negotiated again with Víctor and his siblings, who claimed to be interested in selling part of their remaining property to INCORA. The story of this land, narrated by Andrés, one of the five *parceleros*, indicates the tragic fate of this second attempt at gaining access to land in the context of armed conflict. It shows how the reversal of the process of land redistribution was not only related to paramilitary violence *per se*, but to the emergence of new agrarian economies enabled by paramilitary presence. His story reveals a violent break in the assumed moral consensus that had mediated landed relations and shows how landowner’s deceit changed notions of legitimate ownership and shaped future political reactions to dispossession.

Shortly after their expulsion from the lands that had been originally offered, Andrés and four others made another “peaceful accord” with Víctor Cantillo. They were told to occupy the land and usufruct from it while the owners, now living in Barranquilla, settled a deal with INCORA. Trusting that this time their fate would be different, they worked the land for 17 years, during which they did not receive any notice about its formalization in their name. However, in 2005, after paramilitaries had “cleaned” the region of guerrillas and landowners perceived that the situation was calm, the Cantillos came back to claim their land. Not only was it safe to return, but land prices were soaring with an already expanding palm oil economy. According to local accounts, when Víctor Cantillo spoke with the *parceleros*, he had already been contacted by A. Torres, former INCORA official and now a palm entrepreneur, who acted as an intermediary with a potential buyer from Cartagena. Below, Andrés describes an exchange with Víctor Cantillo that illustrates his experience of these events. In the conversation, Andrés is confronted by the fact that moral arguments on legitimate ownership that were previously shared with landowners are no longer effective. The exchange shows, ultimately, that the deceit of *parceleros* materialized through a break in the moral standards of patronage relations, enabled by the shifting balance of power of armed conflict.

He came back saying it was his land. I remember he told me: “Ajá Andrés, come here, let’s make a deal, I don’t want you to lose, and you know I’m not gonna lose either.” That was a soft threat right there. He wanted the land that me and Emigdio were cultivating, 44 hectares in the front, closer to the canals, so he called *me*, not the others. I said to him: “We’ve had this land for 17 years, it wasn’t that we *invaded*, you know you *gave us* this land cause you fled when the guerrillas were here. We stayed here taking care of the land, with the right that the land would be sold to INCORA and given to us in *parcelas*.” I said to the others, “Let’s move this claim right now in the district attorney’s office, let’s fight, this isn’t lost yet.” But later he called me again and he was direct: “Andrés, you know how it is with these things, you’re better off if you don’t get yourself into trouble.” So what was I supposed to do? Step back and accept the consequences. He said he’d give me 5 million pesos (USD\$ 110, 000) for 33 hectares. I said: Caramba, that’s miserable, there are 2 of us in those 33 hectares. And you know what he said? “Well, you split it!” (sigh) Oh man, I didn’t slap him in the face cause he was with his

people there and you never know. He threatened me upfront! Thank God people knew what was happening, people who know me, who know how things work here. If I'd been one of those people who doesn't know anybody, he would've had me killed. That's why I left those lands.

(Andrés, Mapping session, Paloaltico, September 26, 2015)

Shortly after this conversation, Torres spoke with all 7 *parceleros* advising them to leave those lands and assuring them that INCORA would parcel other lands for them. This promise never materialized. Santos' words express *parceleros*' interpretation of this deception: "Torres deceived us. And look at him now, there he is, with land and palm and alive and well. The big fish eats the little fish" (Mapping session, Paloaltico, November 12, 2015).

Santos' conclusion that "the big fish eats the little fish" illustrates Paloalteros' interpretation of the power relations of dispossession. After relying on a negotiated strategy based on respect to landowners' property, they became victims of threats and coercion and were deceived by both landowners and representatives of the state. In light of the wave of violent land deals that ensued guerrilla presence, morally sanctioned mechanisms such as "agreements of word," which relied on personal relations of patronage, became increasingly ineffective. Locals re-evaluated existing understandings of 'good' and 'bad' landowners as they witnessed unprecedented 'evil,' in which violence was arbitrary and the social norms that previously mediated landed relations were broken. In the midst of armed political violence, fear and the calculation of risk played a central role in shaping the moral economies of both occupation and dispossession. Faced with the possibility of subverting a traditional order, *parceleros* negotiated their position regarding personal relations with landowners through notions of legitimate ownership. At the same time, they confronted the dilemma of taking advantage of guerrilla presence, despite being against their violent means, and the risk of being stigmatized as guerrilla collaborators and thereby targeted by private and military counter-insurgency. Tragically, despite

parceleros’ careful negotiations of the moral-emotional economies of land, the end result of negotiated approaches to land occupation was violence, deceit and dispossession.

Santos’ exchange continues to shape interpretations of land politics in the present. Aware that those in power will go to any lengths to remain in that position, Paloalteros today hesitate to openly challenge the current agrarian order in which land is increasingly scarce and locals become increasingly dependent on exploitative wage labor. The final section describes the politics of land in Paloaltico today, emphasizing the moral-emotional economies that shape Paloaltero’s political positions towards land dispossession and restitution, and suggesting that an alternative politics of refusal and collective awareness unfolds on an everyday basis. Rather than ‘resistance,’ this politics could be better understood through the concept of “apparent quiescence” (Scott 1985).

Future anxieties and “apparent quiescence”

We had a right to that land, but we were tricked and we were scared, so we lost it. And now that someone bought the land, you can’t just take the land from him. If I knew the government bought the land from him, then I’d enter. If not, I can’t expect the land to be mine.

(Santos Rodríguez, Mapping session, Paloaltico, November 12, 2015)

Questions about the future haunted the last mapping session in November, 2015. The linear temporality of the maps had narrated, in retrospect, a tragic trajectory of land loss. The map of the present was not only discussed as a consequence of this trajectory, but was also a reminder of the everyday reality of an alarming ‘post-conflict’ oil palm expansion.⁵⁰ *Parceleros*

⁵⁰ According to the Secretary of Agriculture of the department of Bolívar, the area planted in oil palm in Marialabaja expanded by 830% between 2001 and 2010, from 570 hectares to 5.300 hectares in ten years (Secretaria de Agricultura, 2011). The national growth rate of oil palm for the same period was 141% (Fedepalma, 2011). Palm oil is one of the agricultural products that receives most government support; currently, oil palm plantations cover an area of approximately hectares in the country (www.fedepalma.org).

agree that Paloaltico may be soon facing land's end. Land prices in the Irrigation District have soared over the past ten years, increasing the prices of land rents and creating incentives for the remaining small-scale landowners to sell their holdings. As land becomes exclusively a means for capital accumulation, the new elite of "faceless landowners,"⁵¹ which arrived with paramilitary violence, is no longer interested in sharecropping or renting to poor peasants.

⁵¹ *Dueños sin rostro.*

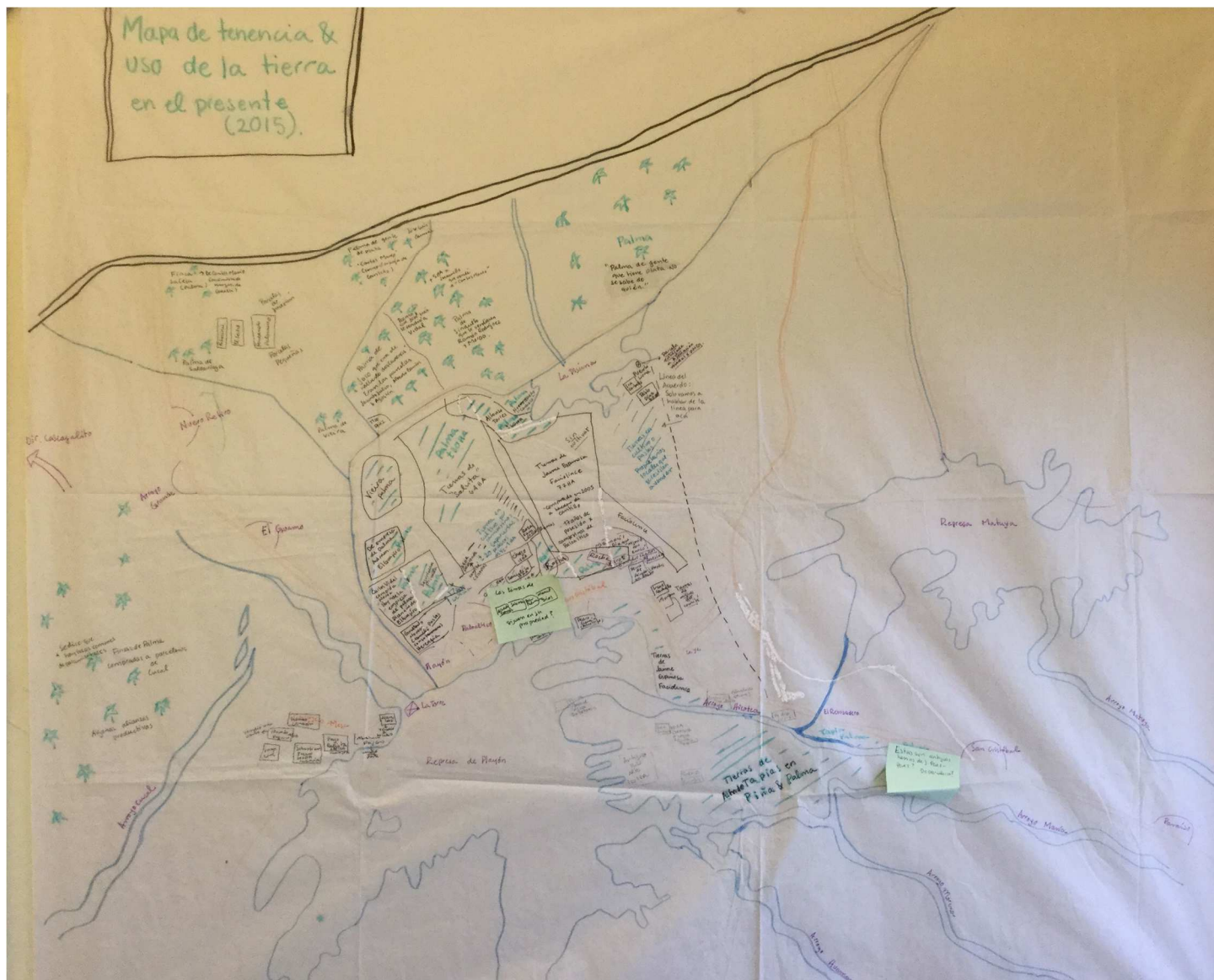


Figure 28. Map of land tenure in 2015 made in participatory mapping session.

MAP OF LAND USE AND TENURE IN THE PRESENT (2015)

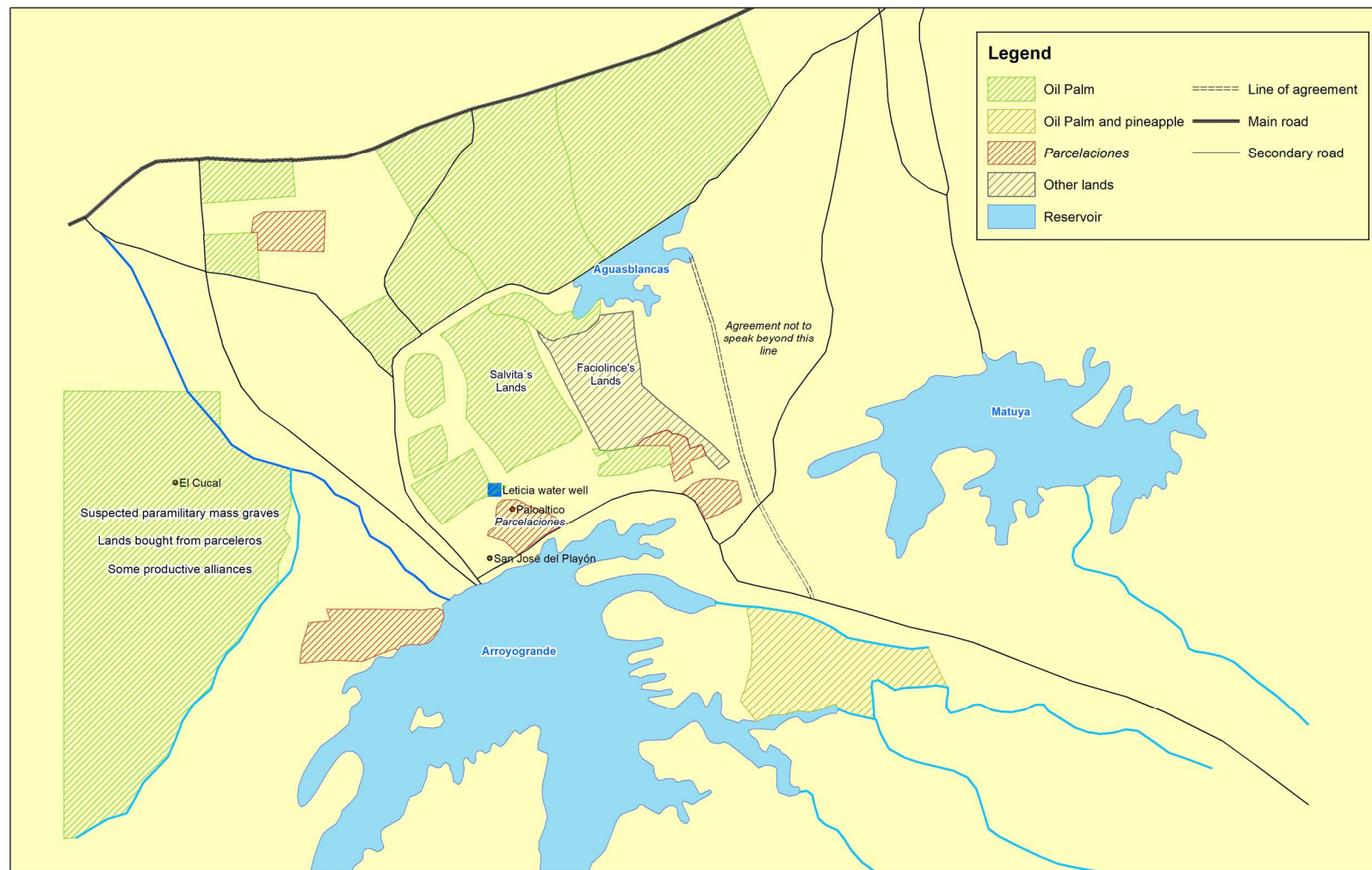


Figure 29. Map of land tenure in 2015, digitalized version. Source: Map by author and Elias Helo

Underlying the session was the unspoken suspicion that this situation is irreversible. However, rather than passive acceptance, the question of “what can be done” remained open and its answers uncertain. The lesson that “the big fish eats the little fish” is alive in *parcelero*’s memories, limiting the possibility of openly challenging present-day land inequalities. Alive too are the moral arguments that shaped a negotiated approach to occupations in the past, as indicated by Santo’s assertion that “you can’t *just* take the land away from him.” Rather than a clear set of moral arguments that give way either to oppositional resistance or to passive quiescence, a complex and contested moral-emotional economy continues to shape positions with regards to dispossession and present day land claims.

In the context of post-conflict state interventions, legal options for land claims are centered on the process of “land restitution.” In this process, campesinos apply for registration of their cases in a National Registry of Dispossessed Lands. If registration is successful, the Unit for Land Restitution verifies dispossession, and a special Land Tribunal decides whether to restitute property rights to campesinos or not. But for Paloalteros, restitution is simply not an option. Some, like Chago, refuse this option based on the fear that the history of violence will repeat itself if current landed powers are challenged: “It’s too dangerous. Too much has happened already.”

But fear and risk calculations alone are insufficient to explain Paloalteros’ refusal of land restitution. Others, like Santos, would consider this option only if current owners were compensated in agreeable terms, similar to what happened in the early 1990s. This position is based on moral arguments regarding the importance of respecting agreements: even as *parceleros* admit that land sales and monetary compensations occurred under direct or indirect coercion, they also conceive such transactions fundamentally as “agreements between men” in

which they *agreed* to sell and gave their word. For this reason, locals hesitate to call the events of the past “dispossession,”⁵² a fundamental conceptual requirement for restitution. “In any case, those who sold gave their word and took the money. It’s not right to take the land from its owner,” explains Danielito. Although “apparently acquiescing” to dispossession, in protecting the value of “giving one’s word,” *parceleros* are also re-affirming a deeply rooted moral stance regarding the importance of honesty, trust, and integrity as values that should mediate relations of land.

While these kinds of arguments play an important role in legitimizing the current land order, their articulation does not mean that Paloalteros uncritically accept and enroll in contemporary agrarian change. In the intimacy of mapping sessions and personal conversations, most community members are clear that “land’s end” is neither natural nor voluntary. Many attribute the present situation to historic race and class inequalities, coupled with the selective use of violence for the protection of landed hierarchies and enabled by a state that is unpredictable and untrustworthy. This kind of political reflection takes places every day among circles of friends and family. Rather than resulting in organized resistance, such discussions generate collective awareness regarding the structural dimensions of their recent history and the operations of power that enable the present state of things. As a response to the latter, some campesinos articulate acute critiques to agrarian capitalism’s effects on their everyday freedoms and the community’s long term autonomy. Based on these critiques, they enact subtle forms of

⁵² The term *despojo* in Spanish is generally translated as dispossession. However, in the Colombian context, the politics of the term are complex. Besides its academic use, ‘*despojo*’ can characterize peasants’ massive loss of land in the context of the country’s armed conflict, particularly during and immediately after paramilitary violence (CNHM 2010). The term is widely used in human rights circles and by social movements and victim’s organizations. It is also central in legal and policy measures for transitional justice and victim’s reparation. Despite this popularity, at the village level, peasants hesitate to characterize the transactions through which they coercively sold their land as *despojo*, as the term simplifies such transactions and imbues them with a meaning of illegality and accusation.

resistance, particularly in the form of refusing to sell their land and continuing to cultivate food despite the incentives to cultivate oil palm or sell and enroll in wage labor. Some who are landless also strive to maintain some degree of autonomy by accessing land for cultivation and combining small-scale food production with wage labor, or by willingly resigning from wage work until arrangements ensure that it does not undermine their freedom to cultivate their own plots.

To date, five of the eight *parcelas* acquired through the agreement with Victor Cantillo remain in the hands of community members (Figures 28 and 29). The three that were sold belonged to men from neighboring villages, but the five *parceleros* from Paloaltico maintain a pact that they will not sell, regardless of their monetary needs. Covering an area of seventy-five hectares, this land plays a fundamental role in sustaining the livelihoods of many families. Not only is it important for food production, much of which is sold or exchanged in the community, but it is also the space where most families gather common resources such as water, fruit and timber. The conversation between *parceleros* Manuel, Chago and Celia, Manuel's wife, illustrates the diverse logics behind their refusal to sell:

Manuel: Nobody from our group has sold. I've had people show me the money in my face and I have not sold.

Celia: I say that the (economic) situation in this village is getting tougher and tougher, so it's better that we take care of our little land. If any hardship comes, the land can give us some respite.

Chago: We struggled for that land. They even burned our houses. I was born in the land, raised in the land, and remain in the land today. My father received a *parcela* back in the 70s, but he lost it to rum and women. Now he's old and has nothing. I received that *parcelita*, but I'm not gonna sell it.

(...)

None of us enrolled in those projects for planting palm. People say that palm takes over the land and eats up the soil...and I'm the kind of guy who likes to use his land freely, why would I tie myself and later get into trouble?

Manuel: Yeah, we all refused the palm and refused to sell. But we're surrounded, that's for sure. And for the people here, that land in palm is useless. Not even the pigs eat it!

Parcelero's refusal to sell and grow palm is a rejection of the insecurities of landlessness and the bondages of wage labor and high-input mono-cropping. Chago's rejection of palm signals the perceived pitfalls of becoming a small-scale agrarian capitalist: to lose the freedom of cultivating whatever and whenever he pleases, which depends on access to fertile land. Furthermore, becoming landless and dependent on wage labor, or cultivating palm themselves, both take away the land as a source of basic survival. As Santos put it: "When you sell the land or you work in the palm, maybe you got money to buy cigarettes. So you can smoke. But smoke ain't food." (Personal conversation, Paloaltico, September 27, 2015)

Beside the threats to freedom and food security posed by an agricultural commodity such as palm oil, *parceleros* identify the power imbalances that underlie any agro-capitalist enterprise. Santo's following observations about the neighboring pineapple plantations illustrate this point, especially the exclusionary logics of agrarian capitalism and its perpetuation of deeply rooted social inequalities associated with mono-cropping and business agriculture:

That's not poor man's pineapple.⁵³ It's good of course to eat what you grow, but there's a big difference with the pineapple: since it doesn't belong to Joe, but to Don Joseph,⁵⁴ that pineapple is not for poor people. That land up there where it is planted, most of it has been bought by this new guy. The land of Old Feliberto, Manuelita Teherán, Gabriel, the Trujillos. And from the land of Old Palo Alto, nothing remains.

(Personal Conversation, Paloaltico, September 27, 2015)

⁵³ "Esa no es piña pa' pobres."

⁵⁴ "No es de Juano sino de Don Fulano."

In Paloaltero's consciousness, present-day agrarian capitalism is linked to a political history of land that was enabled by violence and led to current uncertainties about their future survival. Collective reflections and discussions like the ones that took place during the mapping sessions underlie a dynamic negotiation of peasant political positions towards today's agrarian relations, based on a critical and emotive revision of the past. While they may not translate into collective, organized and overt challenge to the current order of land, labor and power, these political positions do, however, lay the foundations for intermittent and silent refusals to this order.

Conclusion

This chapter discussed the complex entanglements between armed political violence and shifts in landed orders in Marialabaja, focusing particularly on the wave of land occupations between 1988 and 1997 and their subsequent reversal through coercive land sales and the demobilization of land struggles. It proposed an analytical frame based on the idea of moral-emotional economies to understand campesino's trajectories of land occupation and land loss, as well as their "apparent quiescence" (Scott 1985) to agrarian change in the present.

A description of the political conditions of land occupations highlighted the complex set of actors and mediations that enabled land occupations. The cases of Cucal and Cascajalito exemplified unique trajectories of struggles, as occupiers navigated the risks and opportunities opened by political violence within particular peasant-landowner relations. A fine-grained account of occupation and dispossession in the village Paloaltico provided a case study of the embeddedness of moral-emotional economies in agrarian relations of power, the intersections between moral economies and the experience of fear, and the dynamic character of moral frames and shared moral values in response to shifting political and economic contexts.

This chapter added complexity to two generalized claims about the effects of Colombia's conflict on landed relations: one, that armed conflict resulted in the de-mobilization of peasant organizations in the Colombian countryside (Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica 2010; Zamosc 1986); and the second, that violence deepened landed inequalities through a widespread process of plot abandonment and dispossession (Centro Nacional Memoria Histórica 2010; 2013). It revealed how armed conflict's shifting power balances also created temporary opportunities to subvert a hierarchical land order. Through land occupations, *parceleros* seized the opportunities offered by a unique historical conjuncture in which guerrilla presence threatened to subvert the traditional land order.

Occupations occurred through a complex set of actors, negotiations, mediations and alliances that often occurred within and sustained existing land orders. State mediation between peasants and landowners ambiguously supported peasant claims while mitigating the effects of armed conflict on landowners. Occupiers, in turn, hesitated to subvert traditional relations of patronage. In the case of Paloaltico in particular, moral arguments, frames, and values, upon which occupation strategies were grounded, upheld- instead of subverting- social relations of property and patronage. Hence, this chapter revealed that, while moral-emotional economies can underlie a subaltern group's claims, they are inherently relational processes. Hence, the moral value not only of notions of social justice or legitimate occupation, but also of relational and binding social institutions such as word agreements or "*acuerdos de palabra*."

The case of Paloaltico further showed the shifting and dynamic nature of moral-emotional economies. These shifts were, too, embedded in social and personal relations and conditioned by changes in political and economic context. As the political context shifted with the advent of paramilitary violence, landowners failed to honor agreements and gave way to a

process of dispossession through coerced land deals. *Parcelero*'s deceit materialized through a break in the moral standards of patronage relations. However, interpretations of dispossession continued to foreground agrarian social relations, as signaled in *parcelero*'s insistence that (coerced) land deals must be respected because they ultimately accepted the transaction and "gave their word." With the shifts in agrarian political economies, however, the relational nature of moral economies was challenged, as a new generation of "faceless landowners," generally palm oil entrepreneurs, no longer seeks to sustain the moral codes upon which patronage relations are founded.

Finally, I provided an alternative analysis of peasant's political responses to contemporary agro-industrial expansion. For Paloaltico's *parceleros* "land's end" is not exclusively experienced in terms of the advancement of agro-capitalist relations of land and labor (Li 2014), but part of a land order that sediments a history of violent land struggles. As indicated by collective conversations among Paloaltico's *parceleros*, today's rejection of land restitution, founded both on fear and on moral arguments that serve to legitimize coercive land transactions, does not indicate that Paloalteros acquiesce to the current land order through the piecemeal and imperceptible adoption of capitalist principles into individual subjectivities and social relations, as Li suggests (2014). Rather, quiescence is only apparent and is embedded in a more complex moral-emotional economy that also generates acute critique and silent refusals to the current order of land and power.

The next chapter illustrates a different form of spatial- political agency through which Paloalteros respond to contemporary agro-industrial enclosures. Based on women's stories of walking the land and performing everyday rural activities, it discusses women's production of territory through every day agrarian practices and through the political-epistemic practice of storytelling itself.

CHAPTER SIX: STORY-ING TERRITORY. WOMEN'S STORYTELLING AND THE EVERYDAY MAKING OF TERRITORY IN SPACES OF AGRO-CAPITALISM

Leticia

“Who is that Leticia?,” I asked. Sofia, my friend and hostess, laughed. “Leticia is a well, not a woman. That’s where we get our drinking water from. You’ve gotta go to Leticia.” She was right. After visiting Leticia for the first time, I felt compelled to go at least 4 or 5 more times during my time in the village of Paloaltico. Leticia was a breath of cool air under the shade of the rubber trees, a place where one could smell moist soil, have a drink of fresh water, and hear it running in the background of women’s voices. The spring was the most important gathering place for women, where the daily task of fetching water became a time of coming together in laughter, gossip, and memories of past rural life (Figure 30). Its name itself was symbolic of the relationship between women and the spaces of everyday social reproduction in agrarian settings. As the story goes, many years ago, a woman from the town of Playón named Leticia, discovered the well while she was harvesting rice in the neighboring fields. After realizing she had forgotten her bucket of water, Leticia walked and walked until she ran into the spring’s humid walls. She was so thirsty that she dug and dug until the spring started ‘crying’ crystal clear waters. Upon her return to Playón, Leticia told others in the community about the well’s existence. They decided to name it after the woman who had discovered it with great effort as she walked the land.



Figure 30. Women in Leticia. Source: Author photo.

On my first visit to Leticia, Tía Luz María, 65, was the lively protagonist of that day's storytelling. Speaking about the place, she told us:

My dad had a plot right here in this land we're sitting on. He planted corn or rice. Higher up, he planted plantain. Further uphill lay the plots of Carlitos Blanco and Danielito. This land here was real pretty before. So many of us used to come here: Eloisa, Margarita, Pocho, a bunch of us women, cutting creole palm and timber. Not this (industrial) palm, no, but the creole one, the kind that we use for our hair.

(Leticia spring, February 2, 2015)

Luz María went on to talk about her adventures as a young woman. She and her friends would spend hours "in the bush" gathering oil and timber, or fishing in the small springs. Memories took her back to life in Palo Alto Hicotea. She remembered how women from

different villages of the Piedmont came together to mill corn and make *bollos*- traditional patties- in nearby corn plots, and how much she enjoyed washing clothes in the clear streams that surrounded the village. Other women chipped in with stories about encountering supernatural beings- “*aparatos*”⁵⁵- along the paths, who confused them and made them lose their direction despite being “knowers of the land.” Stories of everyday life were invariably accompanied by detailed descriptions of the plots, paths, wells, fences, and forests through which life unfolded, producing detailed knowledge of local micro-geographies.

Storytelling in Leticia was an “emplaced” and relational practice that was deeply conditioned by the well’s material and symbolic geographies (Riley 2010; Elwood and Martin 2000). Located approximately 1 Km away from the village and surrounded by palm oil plantations,⁵⁶ Leticia was under threat. The well lay on lands that had once been occupied by Paloaltico’s *parceleros*, but after the advent of paramilitary violence the land was claimed by a new landowners who immediately planted oil palm.⁵⁷ The new owner allowed locals to continue using the spring. However, palm roots now covered the spring’s natural walls and threatened to dry out its water (Figure 31). Once measuring 2 meters in diameter, Leticia was now less than half its original size. Women suspected that this important living space of stories and social life would soon disappear.

⁵⁵ Other Spanish idioms for supernatural beings include “*apariciones*” or “*espantos*.”

⁵⁶ See Chapter Two for a description of the expansion of palm oil plantations in Marialabaja.

⁵⁷ See Chapter Five for a detailed account of the process of occupation and dispossession of the lands surrounding Paloaltico.



Figure 31. Palm roots over Leticia's walls. Source: Author photo.

This chapter explores how gendered knowledge, agrarian politics and territory come together through women's stories and storytelling. Unlike men's conversations about "matters of land" ("*cuestiones de tierra*"), which describe struggle, violence, and relations with the state and landowners, women's stories are accounts of mundane and joyful experiences while walking the land, and while performing everyday rural activities like harvesting and milling rice, selling fish, preparing foods, and fetching water. Stories of ordinary events of care and reproduction, of which women are most responsible for, do not express coherent "knowledge" about violence or uneven agrarian power relations (Das 2007). Rather, women's stories articulate an alternative epistemological stance that foregrounds the life-making practices that unfold in contexts of violence, inequality, and oppression.

It is precisely through this escape from the bounded and extraordinary events of violence and agrarian politics that women's stories make the spaces and relations of everyday life sites of agency and political meaning (Das 2007). Everyday practices, relations, and knowledges structured political space (Reyes 2015) and produced collective political subjects (Courtheyn 2017). In this way, while escaping coherent knowledges and public narratives of "territory," women's stories are profoundly territorial. On the one hand, the practices, events and relations narrated in stories reveal the ways in which women's bodies and socio-spatial practices produce "alternative territories" (Giesecking 2016) through a spatial politics that does not aim to control space or set boundaries. Rather, by *inhabiting places through everyday movements and sociality*, women symbolically and materially transform those spaces where dominant territorial regimes of agro-capitalism, violence, and state limit local spatial agencies. On the other hand, in light of the tangible conditions of enclosure and spatial exclusion, storytelling itself constitutes an everyday political practice that responds to the material and symbolic geographies of agro-capitalist expansion. Stories re-inscribe women's personal histories and ordinary events onto contemporary spaces of exclusion and claim women's epistemic authority to re-signify and repopulate such spaces in the context of agro-industrial expansion. Therefore, storytelling *makes* territory by symbolically re-claiming space and politicizing spatial experiences.

This chapter shows the ways in which women's everyday practices make territories of collective afro-campesino life both within and against the spaces of agrarian capitalism. In doing so, it contributes to emerging literatures on "territory" that are creatively expanding the concept beyond state sovereignty and practices of boundary-setting and spatial control (Courtheyn 2017; Smith et al. 2016; Reyes 2015; Escobar 2008; Zibechi 2012). By recognizing stories and storytelling as territorial practices, this chapter underscores the epistemological dimension of

territory and discusses the production of territory through women's collective and emplaced knowledge production.

The chapter is organized as follows. First, I present an overview of the concept of territory. I briefly spell out the contributions of Latin American social movements for re-thinking territory beyond traditional perspectives in political geography and discuss how I bridge this alternative scholarship with feminist perspectives on territory in order to ground territory in everyday practices, relations, and epistemologies. Next, I present a story of women's everyday making of territory. Narrated by Eloisa, 59, this is a story about *tongueo*, the gleaning and processing of the rice that escaped mechanized collection by tractor, and about local manual harvesting of *morqueño*, a lower-quality non-commercial grain produced in second harvest. Through *tongueo* and *morqueño* harvest in the 1980s and early 1990s, the bodies of women, children, and landless peasants occupied and transformed Marialabaja's mechanized rice fields, taking advantage of landowners' quest for social legitimacy and of the possibilities offered by modern rice production. Stories of harvesting reveal how women's "embodied territorialities" transformed the landscapes of agrarian modernization and re-territorialized private spaces beyond capitalist logics of waste, property, and the production of value. The chapter concludes with a return to Leticia to discuss the political implications of grounding stories in Leticia's disputed geographies. Conceiving a threatened place like Leticia as a site of territoriality reveals a preemptive political response to its eventual disappearance that does not openly challenge agrarian change, but has contingent political potential and contextual importance in everyday life (Secor 2004, 363).

Story-ing territory

In political geography, territory is typically understood as a bounded space controlled or claimed by a particular group (Storey 2012; Elden 2009). Territories involve the inscription of particular meanings to physical space, generally referring to the significance of being included and excluded (Delaney 2005: 14). Territoriality, in turn, is the “spatial expression of power,” or the ways in which different dimensions of power come together or different forms of power are wielded in order to delimit and assert control over a geographic area (Storey 2012; Sack 1986; Delaney 2005).

Recent works in political geography have attempted to de-naturalize “territory” as a bounded space defined by sovereign authority, pointing to the historical production of the *idea* of territory (Elden 2013). In approaching territory as a historically and geographically situated discourse, scholars point to its historical construction as a *particular* way of calculating and thinking about space (Elden 2013). In this sense, territory and territoriality extend beyond physical control over space and implicate “ways of world-making informed by beliefs, desires and culturally and historically contingent ways of knowing” (Delaney 2005: 12).

Notwithstanding this broadening of territorial thinking, political geographers continue to privilege the modern nation-state as the most recognized form of territory and territoriality (Cohen and Gilbert 2008, 16; Elden 2009). Indeed, Elden’s recent “genealogy of territory” (2013) disentangles the historical production of a particular modern European notion of territory inextricably linked to the political history of the modern nation-state. Beyond this euro-centric territorial genealogy, Indigenous and Afro-descendant social movements in Latin America have developed an alternative tradition of territorial thinking for over twenty years. In this tradition, conceptions of territory not only de-center the nation-state, but subvert spatial rationalities and

practices of exclusion, bordering, and sovereign domination (Escobar 2008; Zibechi 2012, Porto Gonçalves 2002; Offen 2003; PCN-Gaidepac, 2013).

The territories that emerge through this intellectual-activist genealogy of territory are not bounded spaces of control or even fixed physical sites (Courtheyn 2017; Rocheleau 2015). For instance, social movements in the 1990s proposed a concept of territory that articulated a “place-based framework linking history, culture, environment, and social life” (Escobar 2008, 62). Movements’ territorialities can involve “sites of refuge, security, and autonomy,” (Rocheleau 2015, 78) as well as “common territories of circulation, encounter, expression and belonging,” (ibid) which extend beyond particular locations and can be better understood as “rhizomatic tangle of living threads running through broader territory” (86).

For some authors these subaltern territories are in fact expressions alternative ontologies and epistemologies (Escobar 2008; Porto Gonçalves 2002). In this line of scholarship, recent works spell out a non-modern spatial ontology of territory based on a relational territoriality between humans and nature (Escobar 2008). Such territorialities involve “new forms of *signifying* our being-in-the world” (Porto Gonçalves 2002: 227, own translation, emphasis mine), which are articulated through the knowledges produced by social movements. Such knowledges are often not reduced to words or meanings but are imbricated in “worldings” – involving not only knowing but practicing and *making* worlds (De la Cadena, 2015: 4). In this sense, movements and communities re-invent epistemic and ontological territories together with material, cultural and social territories.

Despite the celebrated potential of these conceptions of territory for enhancing subaltern alternatives to modernity (Porto Gonçalves 2002), the translation of grounded territorial practices and relations into claims to territorial rights and social movement’s discourses have been subject

of scholarly critique. Notably, this translation runs into the paradox of reproducing abstract representations of bounded space and naturalizing a notion of territory as constitutive of ‘difference,’ implying the drawing of fixed boundaries of space and identity (Bryan 2012; Bocarejo 2009; Bocarejo 2011; Wainwright 2008; Asher and Ojeda 2009).

Informed by social movement’s conceptualizations of territory as multi-dimensional, moving spaces and relations that exceed rationalities of exclusion and spatial control, this chapter underscores the creative potential of women’s socio-spatial practices in making, nurturing, and protecting territories of collective afro-campesino life. The forms of territoriality revealed in this chapter are far from coherent expressions of bounded cultural difference and do not lend themselves to simple abstractions into categories of ordered and bounded space. While grounded in place-based experiences, territories are conceived beyond particular physical sites (Courtheyn 2017) as everyday re-enactments of spatial practices, relations, and knowledges. These processes constitute living threads that come together in “rhizomatic tangles” that extend beyond fixed borders and run “not only in safe, fully occupied areas but in places that needed *crossing* in order to connect people and places” (Rocheleau 2015: 86). Through these threads women can collectively exercise autonomous forms of “being in space” (78).

Hence, rather than establishing boundaries of difference, territorial practices allow women to re-create collective “forms of being-in-the world” in articulation, but not determined by territorial regimes at different historical moments (Porto Gonçalves 2002: 227, own translation). This form of territoriality unfolds *through* the spaces of agrarian modernization, armed conflict, and present-day agro-capitalism, but also involves alternative social, material, and epistemic practices that structure afro-campesino political space (Reyes 2015) and produces collective political subjects (Courtheyn 2017).

While I draw on social movements' understandings of territories as multidimensional spaces and practices of collective political meaning, I also depart from the focus on movement's territorial discourses and representations. This "scaling down" of territory engages women's agrarian micro- practices and relations (Moore 2005) and the making of territory in everyday life.

In order to understand the everyday dimension of territory, I draw on feminist political geography, which provides theoretical frameworks that recognize the importance of the mundane and the ordinary in making territory and structuring territoriality (Wastl-Walter and Staeheli 2004; Smith et al. 2016; Moore 2005). Feminist insights move beyond the territorial discourses of political actors such as the state and social movements. Instead, the focus includes embodied and grounded experiences of commonly marginalized actors and their ordinary political spaces and practices (Sharp 2007). Attention to the geographies of ordinary life reveals the existence of alternative ways of producing space- materially, narratively and symbolically- that unfold in articulation to territorial regimes of state rule or capitalist production (Moore 2005, 4). Moreover, ethnographic sensitivity to these micro- territorialities allows us to locate power and agency beyond visible, legible, spectacular 'events'. What is revealed, among others, is the work required in "stitching, quilting, and putting together relationships in everyday life" (Das 2007: 161) and the agency that is exercised in order to protect and make everyday spaces within broader regimes of power (Moore 2005: 3-4).

I conceive bodies as active spatial-political agents (Fluri 2011; Dixon and Marston 2011; Smith et al. 2016) and engage the territorial dimension of embodied practices such as women's labor, walking, or storytelling. The analytical work of bodies in this chapter is two-fold. On the one hand, embodiment brings the focus back from the *thing* that can be held or gained- in this

case “territory” or “knowledge”- to the *subject* who is socially positioned and who acts, experiences, feels, makes and *becomes* with and through the relations and practices of territory (Rocheleau 2015) or storytelling (Das 2006; Gibson-Graham 2006: 137). On the other hand, bodies are at the core of women’s territorialities and of their experience of the geographies they inhabit: places of sociality like Leticia are experienced through the senses; landscapes of agrarian modernization are occupied by laboring bodies; territorial stories are embodied knowledges based on experiences of walking, working, and feeling.

Grounding territory in bodies and ordinary spaces not only reveals micro-level spatial practices, but also opens possibilities for engaging alternative epistemologies of territory. Building on a long-standing feminist critique that unveils and destabilizes masculinist conceptions of disembodied and abstract space (Hanson 1992; McDowell 1993), I argue that women’s storytelling enacts an emplaced and embodied epistemology of territory. Exploring these epistemologies involves moving beyond “cultural difference” and recognizing the subjective, situated and embodied nature of knowledge production (Haraway 1988).

I use stories both as a qualitative method that reveals cultural, political, and emotional geographies and as social events that constitute ‘data’ in and of themselves (Cameron 2012). As the former, stories are expressions of spatialized experience and socio-spatial practices through which women make territory. As the latter, storytelling grounds women’s narratives in the immediate spatial and social settings in which storytelling takes place. “Emplacing” stories allows for an exploration of the material and symbolic dimensions of the “micro-geographies” and micro-politics of storytelling (Elwood and Martin 2000). It is at this micro-scale of Leticia’s tangible encroachment by palm oil that stories ‘make’ territory by inscribing women’s personal histories onto contemporary spaces of exclusion.

Stories' re-telling of space and history through the register of the ordinary further makes political subjects by asserting women's role as "knowers of the land." Knowledge becomes not a ready made 'thing' but an active political practice grounded in *knowing* bodies and enabled by embodied experiences of walking through the land. In becoming knowers of the land, women exercise epistemic authority over space and re-claim contemporary spaces of exclusion through memories of inhabiting place. In this sense, stories are live spatial-political practice that shape collective political subjectivities and grant political meaning to space. Eloisa's story of rice harvesting, presented below, illustrates these points.

Eloisa's story of rice harvesting

The practice of *tongueo* and the harvest of *morqueño* rice took place in the region from the mid-1970s until the mid-1990s. Directly related to the expansion of large-scale, mechanized rice production, these harvesting practices shaped the way those most marginalized experienced and adapted to newly arrived agrarian modernization schemes in Marialabaja. Accustomed to small-scale rice production in the Piedmont, the people from Paloaltico were new to mechanized production and the social relations that mediated it. However, soon after the arrival from upland Palo Alto Hicotea to lowland Paloaltico, many women became *tongueadoras*, a label that is carried with pride today.

Tongueo involved the collection with large metal washbowls of the rice that was left over after mechanized harvest. The *morqueño*, in turn, was the local name for the second, non-commercial blooming of rice, which some landowners left open for women, children, and landless peasants to harvest. Both types of harvest occurred inside large private landholdings and were part of the morally-mediated strategies for landowners to gain social legitimacy examined in Chapter Five. By allowing locals to cross the territorial boundaries of property, landowners

not only got rid of rice that was considered unproductive ‘waste’ but converted waste into social value. In this case, waste was not antithetical to property or to property’s production of capitalist value (Gidwani and Reddy 2011: 1626; Locke 1681). Rather, waste and property worked together to allow landowners to re-capture the value of waste and transform it into social legitimacy.

Told through personal memories of elder women’s adventures, stories of *tongueo* and *morqueño* harvest emerge recurrently in collective conversations in Paloaltico. Grounded in the contemporary geographies of palm oil expansion, women’s stories provide an alternative narrative to that of landowner’s double gain. Stories of harvesting underscore how women, children, and landless peasants occupied and transformed the spaces of agrarian modernization and imbued them with cultural, affective, and personal meanings. Women construct rice harvesting practices as joyful social events and skillful collective labor that re-territorialized private spaces beyond capitalist logics of waste, property, and the production of value.

The techniques and the organization of labor involved in harvesting, milling, and cooking rice constituted an adaptation of African and Afro-diasporic women’s practices to the new landscapes and relations of agrarian modernization (Carney 2001; Carney and Rosomoff 2009). Hence, *tongueo* and *morqueño* harvest revitalized cultural memories of the African diaspora and contributed to create territories of black rural life within capitalist spaces of productivity.

For Eloisa, *tongueo* started when she came to the village and started having children. That’s when she “made herself a *tongueadora*.” One afternoon, in the presence of her four daughters, Eloisa told stories of *tongueo* in Leticia. Below, she explains these practices and describes how spaces of technified rice production were re-signified and re-inhabited by black women, making territory through embodied cultural practices.

After they cut their rice, they shouted '*campo libre!*' (fields are open!). That rice was for the people. If you found a row with good rice, you put it in that washbowl and just let yourself go, let yourself go till the row was done.

In the time of the big rice plantations this place was left empty. The fields looked like a town. People started heading over there since four in the morning, each one with her washbowl, her sac and her knife. That's how we went there, me, my sister Luz María, Maria Enrique, Flora and other girls from further up in the mountain. All of those women went in one lot. And from Playón went another group. If you stood on the main road and looked over, you saw all those people, it really looked like a town.

I'm telling you, that was a lot of people. You got there and all you saw was people walking and bending down to harvest. It was beautiful seeing all those people there. In the afternoon, you saw everybody leaving with their sacs on their heads, everybody, everybody, women and kids and a few men all along the long road. Cause you know, in that time there were no motorcycles, you had to walk or rent little cars in a group. The things that us women used to carry... imagine, all the way from over there, carrying those big washbowls on our heads with the rice sacs in them. After spending all day cutting rice, what was left was to put on your sac and head home. And the next day, hit the road again.

If you were cutting morqueño, you held your bowl on one side of your hip and the sac on the other so you could empty the rice in sac right away. When the sac was full, you put it on your head and took it to where we had our campsite, where everybody was. The campsite was far away sometimes. I always cut about two sacs cause I was a little slow, but sometimes people said: 'Eloisa only cuts a sac and a half, but it seems like three!'. That's because I was careful as I went along the row, cutting the rice real clean, with hardly any leaves.

When my daughter was old enough, I took her with me and said: 'I cut it, you pound it'. I had to teach her cause needed her help. I'm telling you, when we came back from cutting, that pounding was tough on the back. That's why you need your girls with you, you can't do it alone.

After harvesting, everybody got to the campsite where we tended open sacs the ground. Everybody put their pots there with food, their jars of water, everybody, everybody. In that little campsite is where we 'stepped' the rice with pestle. That's when you saw those women get at it, like we know how. One here, one there, one there. We'd get at that milling with that long pestle, bri-brá, bri-brá, then turn it over, and then take it up again, bri-brá, bri-brá, till that straw was clean and the grain covered the quilts that we made with the rice sacs.

Comparing with the present, Eloisa remembers with nostalgia:

You know the rice that I cut right there where the palm oil plant is now? There was a big, big plot right around the oil processing plant. Every time I drive past that place on the

motorcycle, I just look at it and say to myself: ‘boy, how I loved to go in there’. Every time it breaks my heart, cause those rice plots were a relief for us poor people. It was a beautiful thing that harvest.

(Leticia spring, June 24, 2015)

Eloisa’s story presents us with a borderless, moving territory of entangled practices, relations and geographies. The “living threads” of this “territorial tangle” (Rocheleau 2015: 86) extend from fields to roads to temporary campsites to imagined ‘towns’ that evoke the birth of a collective; they run across generations through knowledge-sharing and into ancestral times through memories of rhythmic milling; they include skillful and arduous labor, alongside joyful sociality and interdependence; and they are permeated by affective, ethical and moral assessments of labor and property.

Eloisa’s knowledge is part of a system of women’s territorialities that render agrarian micro-practices- and their narration in the present- territorializing forces. Her story performs an “embodied territoriality” based on experiences of walking, working, feeling, and being socially positioned within an uneven and exploitative system. Embodied territorialities emerge through her evocation of spaces that come to life as they are inhabited by the bodies of *tongueadoras*, transformed through lively collective work and social life, and remembered today through aesthetic and affective qualities that contrast sharply with the exclusionary spaces of oil palm. Bodies, moreover, are sites for the performance of ethical assessments that become part of women’s territorialities. As Eloisa “lets herself go,” labor becomes a practice of freedom enabled by the rhythmic release of the body. Eloisa’s laboring body becomes a territorial *agent* rather than a passive site where territorial power is inscribed.

Through *tongueo* and *morqueño* harvest women made territories of black rural life both within the socio-spatial structures of capitalist agrarian modernization and against them.

Harvesting practices did not attempt to transform rationalities of private property and the production of waste and in fact contributed to landowner's "double gain" in getting rid of waste and generating social value. At the same time, these practices constituted everyday subversions to the logics of property and productivity and re-territorializations of spaces that were usually outside of the reach of those most marginal. Indeed, through the register of embodied practices and experiences, and informed by socially-positioned moral and ethical assessments, uneven systems of exploitation become enjoyment, beauty and affective labor, as well as opportunities for women to exercise specialized gendered skills and reproduce black women's knowledges. In short, by physically occupying space, preserving solidary work, revitalizing cultural memories of the African diaspora, and re-signifying mechanized rice plantations as spaces of joyful collective work and cultural reproduction, women's agrarian practices made territories of black rural life within territorial regimes of agrarian capitalism.

Today, African cultural heritage continues to be present in black women's relationship with rice. Women are in charge of preparing rice dishes that are important staple foods for the region's black communities and typical of afro-Caribbean cuisines (Cassiani et al. 2014; Carney and Rosomoff 2009). However, women's territorialities around rice have changed dramatically since the times of *tongueo*. With the demise of both small-scale agriculture and technified rice production, gendered practices of milling and harvesting rice are increasingly disappearing. Consequently, territorialities of rice are now limited to the household. Hence, Eloisa's nostalgia is not only about the transformation of rice landscapes but about being able to participate in the making of territories beyond domestic space while reproducing practices of cultural, social and material importance.

Leticia's demise: storytelling as political practice

In August of 2015, when I returned to Paloaltico after a two-week absence, Sofia informed me that Leticia had disappeared. Her apparent lack of astonishment was cynical: “Just like that. It’s gone. Now it’s full of sand and excrements, and the truth is, it has nowhere to replenish. The water is dry. It was probably all contaminated anyway.” There were no protests, no village meeting and, to my surprise, collective conversations about the possible causes Leticia’s end retorted to individual ill intentions rather than oil palm encroachment.

As with many other tragic events in times of post-conflict agro-capitalist expansion, the end of Leticia appeared to be taken-for-granted. For some of Paloaltico’s community leaders, this reaction was a sign of the community’s failure at resisting palm oil because people had “grown accustomed” to such losses. However, looking back at the stories told by the well, it became apparent that rather than passively accepting Leticia’s loss, women had preemptively responded to its imminent demise through the political practice of storytelling. Tía Luz María’s memories of Leticia’s past at the beginning of this chapter were not only a longing for times past, but a recognition of vulnerability and an instance of women’s territoriality.

Like the stories about rice, stories about Leticia were also accounts of collectively occupying, transforming and using space in ways that had important personal, social, and cultural meaning. Having once been spaces of everyday use and circulation for Paloaltico’s women, Leticia’s micro-geographies were claimed as their own by inscribing them with stories of their personal experiences. By telling these stories, women recognized Leticia as a disputed territory and made Leticia a site of territoriality. Stories’ iteration of the ordinary was a way of inscribing this threatened space with the familiar, thereby claiming a world in which they could dwell in ways that were known to them and that enabled their material and cultural sustenance.

This was a politics of continuity- of attempting to prevail by continuing “being and becoming themselves, individually and collectively” (Rocheleau 2015, 79).

Grounding stories in Leticia’s material and symbolic geographies allows us to understand the production of territory as a lived political-epistemological practice that responds to the conditions of time and place. Women do not passively accept palm oil encroachment, neither do they resist through open confrontation or the articulation of explicit and coherent territorial claims. Rather, as their everyday spaces and social-spatial practices become threatened under an agro-capitalist territorial regime, women enact alternative ways to “become political” (Secor 2004). Although ineffective for preventing Leticia’s end, their embodied politics of knowledge production is a silent struggle for the continuation of life that reanimates past ‘ordinary’ experiences and practices in light of present circumstances. Beyond *what* is known, the politics of stories is about what women can *do* in producing knowledge, namely constitute themselves as political subjects (Nagar 2006: 154) and re-claim the power to define and make space, thereby producing territory. By telling these stories, I participate in this politics of knowledge production by interrupting narratives that conceal women’s alternative territorialities and render their politics inexistent.

Conclusion

Social movement scholars and activists have argued for a conception of territory as the foundation for autonomy, collective life, and the assertion of cultural, epistemic and ontological difference (Escobar 2008; Zibechi 2012; Porto Gonçalves 2002). Much is lost, however, in the abstraction from the spatial practices and experiences of territory to ‘territory’ as a concept that is mobilized through claims and a space that is acquired through territorial rights. Drawing on feminist political geography, this chapter focused on women’s territorial practices and

experiences, emphasizing a politics of territory that is articulated in the present through everyday storytelling. Through this lens, “territory” was (and is) formed and operationalized through women’s bodies and social practices, inhabiting places through everyday movements and sociality, and thereby symbolically and materially transforming spaces and subtly subverting dominant territorial regimes in order to ensure the continuation of

Eloisa’s story of *tongueo* and *morqueño* harvest revealed how embodied practices and knowledges of rice harvesting became powerful territorial forces through which women made territories of collective afro-campesino life within private spaces of capitalist production.

In the present, women’s stories make territory in relation to contemporary agrarian transformations and concrete material and symbolic geographies. This chapter focused on storytelling as an emplaced, embodied, and relational everyday practice that re-casts personal and collective experiences of agrarian transformations in light of present-day vulnerabilities. Understanding the relationship between storytelling and territoriality revealed women’s production of territory as a live political-epistemological practice. Beyond the mobilization of territorial claims, this politics of knowledge production claims a world in which women can continue to “be and become themselves” through ordinary and embodied spatial practices (Rocheleau 2015: 79).

CHAPTER SEVEN: CONCLUSION

This dissertation examines the politics of land and territory exercised by an afro-campesino community in Montes de María. I argue that political responses to agro-industrial expansion in the current conjuncture of Colombia's 'post-conflict' cannot be understood without looking into past moments in which ordinary life and everyday socio-spatial practices were threatened by state or armed groups' territorializations. Throughout conjunctures of agrarian reform, armed conflict, and present-day oil palm expansion, women and men from Paloaltico have navigated 'extraordinary' events of violence, recognition, occupation, dispossession, and enclosure through an 'ordinary' politics of making space and "stitching together" the social and spatial relationships that sustain everyday life (Das 2007: 161). I provide an alternative reading of "post-conflict peasant politics," beyond narratives of peasant resistance and the 're-emergence' of peasant struggle, while at the same time questioning discourses of post-conflict capitalist rural development in which campesinos participate uncritically. Rather than organized resistance that confronts and attempts to transform power relations, the making and claiming of land and territory described in this dissertation are subtle, unexpected, and often clandestine political practices that emerge "in the cracks" of dominant territorializations (De Certeau 1984). Politics exist in an ambiguous location, both *within* and *against* dominant spatial and political regimes, neither openly resisting nor acquiescing to the dominant power orders.

My arguments are enabled by two methodological moves. First, by extending the temporal frame of the present conjuncture of 'post-conflict,' I include longer histories of state and violence as they are locally re-cast in light of present circumstances through storytelling

practices. Second, by engaging the ‘ordinary’ and the ‘everyday’ as epistemological registers through which locals tell stories about the past, I provide accounts of local geographies, histories and politics which foreground Paloaltico’s men and women’s spatial-political agencies.

In this dissertation, “land” and “territory” frame how black communities’ geographies- in their physical, symbolic, emotional and narrative sense- become a political terrain. *Territorial* struggle underlies the unfolding of agrarian histories in the Black Piedmont of Montes de María, the region where present-day Paloaltico and its predecessor Palo Alto Hicotea are located. Black peasants’ spatialities and spatial practices have been re-worked in the face of territorializations of state, economic, and armed actors. Such territorializations are understood not only as attempts to control space through physical exclusion and the imposition of sovereign power, but also as processes that involve the “governmentalization of space” (Peluso and Lund 2011).

Territorialization occurs through particular social and power relations and involves struggles over the meaning of space and politics (Delaney 2005). This dissertation shows how imposed territorial regimes have always been accompanied by community member’s attempts to re-create social life, spatial practices and a sense of self in response. It is by enacting material, symbolic, epistemic, and embodied “oppositional geographies” to these forms of geographic domination (McKittrick 2006) that black peasants “become political” in and through space (Secor 2004).

Chapters Three and Five grounded such territorial struggles in the specific social and material conditions of “land” in agrarian society. They disentangled struggles and negotiations regarding land’s meaning and materiality. In Chapter Three, struggles over land intersected with liberal technologies of recognition and ancestral memories of slavery to shape a politics of refusing bondage both within and against state-led regimes. Chapter Five grounded land politics in the conjunctural conditions of armed conflict and revealed their embeddedness in hierarchical

land orders sustained by personal relations and moral values shared across social divides. In both cases, land's symbolic and material dimensions lay the grounds for the continuation of afro-campesino life and underlay campesino's social and political positions and moral values within agrarian society. As landed relations, uses, and meanings were subject to drastic re-orderings during agrarian reform and armed conflict, "land" became an ambiguous terrain of encounter, negotiation, partial enrollments, and conflict between forms of dwelling in agrarian space and knowing and practicing agrarian life.

Chapters Four and Six, in turn, addressed a "politics of territory" through analytics that expanded a binary between territorial domination and/or "de-territorialization," on the one hand, and public territorial claims based on coherent conceptualizations of "territory," on the other. Rather, centered on women's spatial practices and stories, the chapters revealed the everyday and embodied production of territory in contexts of violence and agrarian change, respectively. By considering bodies as active producers of territory and by foregrounding women's everyday practices of social reproduction, both chapters challenge abstract accounts of "territory," instead showing how territory is made through the intimate territorialities of emplaced storytelling, embodied labor, the protection of the "homeplace" (hooks 1991), or by continuing to circulate through disputed spaces despite armed actor's threats.

Decades of armed conflict between left-wing guerrillas, right-wing paramilitaries, and the Colombian army had devastating effects on the lives and livelihoods of Montes de María's rural inhabitants. In the municipality of Marialabaja, political violence drastically re-ordered landed relations and instilled fear and terror among local communities. This dissertation addressed the relationship between violence, space, and politics through an ethnographic lens that grounded violence in ordinary life, embodied experience, and in the social and personal relations of

agrarian society. Through this lens, and by attending to the internal heterogeneity of “armed conflict” according to particular periods and actors, it challenged simplified accounts of the effects of Colombia’s armed conflict on rural communities’ geographies, which center on dispossession, displacement, de-territorialization, and the de-mobilization of land struggles. Alongside these devastating processes, violence generated material and imaginative space-making processes on the part of local communities; produced complex and dynamic land politics; and transformed land’s actors, structures, norms and social practices at the local level in unexpected ways (Wood 2008; 2010). The spatial politics of violence were mediated by embodied perceptions and emotions, particularly fear. However, rather than simply ‘demobilizing’ communities, fear became embedded in a broader web of relations and moral assessments that shaped political positions and strategies. Similarly, as violence became entangled with agrarian power relations and political economies, transformations in local land orders were conditioned by moral and emotional economies that sought the continuity of traditional social relations of property and patronage, while adapting to the possibilities of change and rupture offered by guerrilla presence.

Politics “below the surface”

At the place where trees meet land, we can open the soil and see roots and tendrils of the fungal mycelia, the crazy tangled underground thread of bodies and fungal organisms that keep the forest fed. The mushrooms we see are the fruit, the reproductive organs that rise, reproduce, scatter spores and fall back. What really matters here is under ground: it precedes and survives the eruption into mushroom form. It is a living lesson about our legibility problems with long-running stories and beings below ground.

(Rocheleau 2015: 77).

I began this dissertation with a brief recount of the doubts and dilemmas I encountered as I tried to engage ‘politics’ that are not manifest on the surface in coherent or complete form. The chapters above teased out particular moments in time and place, presenting us with a view into

the “mycelia” that run below ground of visible instances of organized resistance: the connections, relations, and efforts that sustain everyday life; the embodied perceptions of violence, power, or freedom; the moral and ethical assessments of domination and resistance, of land and labor; the memories- both recent and ancestral- that are reanimated through material practices and stories, and which sometimes “erupt” into visible events of refusal. This dissertation engaged the ‘ordinary’ as an epistemological register and attended to how bodies, emotions, personal relations, intimate life events, and everyday practices of social reproduction shape political positions and practices. What comes to the fore is a rhizomatic politics of land and territory that cannot be disentangled from the broader web of life-making practices- or practices of “worlding” (de la Cadena 2015, 4) through which the people from Paloaltico have sought the continuation of collective life throughout spatial-temporal conjunctures of state, armed groups, or agro-capitalist territorialization.

Continuity is one of the threads than runs through the diverse set of practices and political responses put forward in this dissertation. Instead of political ‘rupture’ or structural subversions, politics are related to attempts to collectively *prevail* in times when life, as it is known thus far, is under threat. As argued in Chapter Six, in times of uncertainty, a politics of continuity is expressed in storytelling practices that inscribe spaces and historical events with the ordinary and the familiar. In this way, locals re-claim worlds in which they can dwell in familiar ways that secure their material and cultural existence. Everyday efforts at keeping alive afro-campesino socialities, such as those revealed in the material and symbolic re-appropriation of *parcelas* as spaces of social life (Chapter Three) or in the social event of coming together to tell stories, are also instances of political agency aimed at the continuation of collective life. Similarly, the work entailed in protecting the home as a space of nurturance or in continuing to walk through spaces

of violence, expresses ordinary ways in which women seek the continuity of family and social life when the everyday is threatened.

Practices of knowledge-making and knowledge-sharing are another thread that runs through afro-campesino politics. Whether by sharing stories of the ordinary or through intimate and casual conversation, live knowledge practices shape collective political subjectivities, make political claims and, as signaled above, themselves enact a politics of keeping social life alive. As suggested in Chapter Five, *parceleros*' conversations generate collective awareness regarding the structural dimensions of their recent history and the operations of power that enable the present state of affairs. Stories, in turn, re-claim contemporary spaces of exclusion and re-appropriate a history in ways that make locals agents and protagonists, rather than passive victims; they also generate a sense of origin and collective belonging in times of unpredictable change.

Finally, a politics of *refusal* extends through different moments, subjects and spaces in this dissertation. Whether explicit and overt (as in the refusal of titling and state recognition in the 1960s) or subtle and diluted in everyday practices and unstable political positions, refusal permeates Paloaltero's relationship with power. Chapter Three explored refusal in relation to blackness, arguing that afro-campesino's refusal of *parcelaciones* reflected a *praxis* of blackness (Costa Vargas 2008) as lived cultural practice related not only to particular relations with the land (Mollett 2016), but to an everyday politics of refusing *bondage*. Understood in this sense, refusal can exist within state-led spatial and economic orders, running below the surface of the official categories and logics of state recognition and agrarian modernization. Refusal allowed Paloalteros to endure decades of violence. Not only did the community as a whole refuse to be displaced, but refusal became an everyday tactic that allowed men and women continue to

inhabit disputed spaces: women's refusal to speak, witness, or care for paramilitaries in the home, were instances of agency required to sustain life in a violent context. Disengagement from dominant logics, practices, and relations continue today, as *parceleros* refuse to sell the land, participate in wage labor, or be enrolled in the logics of oil palm entrepreneurship, as explored in Chapter Five.

Such political stances are hardly stable and absolute. They do not disrupt dominant powers through open opposition or confrontation. Rather, they are partial and intermittent rejections to dominant orders that run below the surface, holding together a tangle of underground relations, practices, sentiments, and political positions that allow the people from Paloaltico to "be and become themselves" (Rocheleau 2015: 79) with power and dignity even in the face of the most dramatic transformations.

The politics of this text

According to Katherine McKittrick, black geographies- the geographies of black subjects and black social life- constitute a "terrain of political struggle" involving an *epistemic* struggle to reveal commonly disavowed spatial logics, practices and narratives, and in fact, entire ways of being-in-the world through space and place (2006: 6). In this dissertation, I attempted to unearth Paloaltico's black campesino's rhizomatic politics of making space, life, and worlds, which are all too commonly concealed through simplified analytics and detached perspectives. I am unsure of the political effects of participating in the epistemic struggle suggested by McKittrick. I suspect, however, that as with the ordinary politics described in this dissertation, the question of how effective they are for the disruption of dominant regimes, may be secondary. I would rather situate this dissertation's politics in the personal encounters involved in storytelling, which extend from the field to the desks at which readers will encounter my own stories of Paloaltero's

stories. As Deborah Bird Rose (2008) suggests, the politics of stories lie in the intimacy of encounter, the “ethical self-exposure in which subjectivity lays bare its vulnerability, and opens itself consciously to others” (165). This dissertation is a story told not by an isolated individual but by a person in intimate connections to other persons. Its contingent political potential lies in the possibility of “awakening the listener to the speaker’s proximity, and thus to call others into responsibility” (Bird Rose 2008: 164-165).

Emergences and moving threads

In March of 2017, regional and national news featured massive protests in Marialabaja.⁵⁸ Community members from the *corregimiento* of Playón took over the main road demanding that the municipal administration address communities’ critical lack of domestic water provision. While some protesters walked to the municipal headquarters, others blocked the floodgates of the Irrigation District’s Reservoir of Arroyogrande, forcing District authorities to shut off the flow of water to oil palm plantations. Protesters argued with outrage that the district’s water was being used up by plantations at the cost of local’s lives and livelihoods. The action was met with violent repression by the riot police and the militarization of the area for several days.

Open protests also occurred during my time in Paloaltico in 2015: in June, women and youth took over the county high school for two weeks in protest for the school’s critical situation of absentee teachers and drug dealing within school spaces. That same year, a wave of land occupations occurred in several sites in the municipality, as displaced families from the north-western highlands demanded that the government address their precarious housing situation (Berman- Arévalo 2016).

⁵⁸ <http://www.rcnradio.com/locales/tension-maria-la-baja-bolivar-militarizacion-zonas-protesta-falta-agua/>

As I corroborated during my last visit to Marialabaja in October of 2017, none of these situations has seen any improvement. However, despite being short-lived and seemingly futile, such instances of politics in its “mushroom form” are not to be ignored. I now regret to having paid greater attention to the intermittent and ephemeral moments in which people openly challenged the status quo. What moved these emergences? How did they operate in individual and collective subjectivities? What happened in their aftermath? Such emergences are not unrelated to the quotidian. They open questions about the connections between ‘ordinary’ and ‘extraordinary’ politics and suggest the need to trace back the threads that lead people to perform a politics of open confrontation.

A similar potentiality exists with respect to the moving threads of “territory.” This dissertation developed a conception of territory that highlighted its moving and entangled nature, and the practices, relations, and spatial movements involved in its making. Since Palo Alto’s flooding, people left to Barranquilla, Cartagena and Venezuela; others migrated temporarily to work in plantations throughout the Caribbean region. These movements intensified with armed conflict and continue in the present, constituting threads that make up broader urban-rural territories that cross national boundaries. Just as the Black Piedmont was made through the movement and exchange of people and goods, broader black territories are in the making today. Engaging these networked and mobile territorial stories opens questions that were left unexplored in this dissertation, but which are relevant for the study of the spaces and politics of the black diaspora in the Americas: urban-rural relations; trans-local cultures, identities and politics; trans-national migration; and the multiple and shifting political subjectivities and practices that exist beyond afro-peasantness.

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